

I am not Rowling, nor Tolkien.

Heyo, this was the winner of the small story poll this month. I honestly didn't think I would finish it in time, but here we are. I Grammarlied it, but no one else has seen it. Still, I hope there won't be too many small mistakes to bother your immersion.

Chapter 15: Grieving, Promises and Plans

The Aftermath of any battle was always a sad thing to contemplate. After a climactic battle such as this, it was a truly horrific thing. There had been far more orcs and goblins than the scouts had reported, something that all the remaining leaders put down to the fact it was always hard to analyze the numbers of goblins. If that had been the only issue, the defenders would have been able to win the battle with relative ease. But it was Azog's ability to change tactics and the trolls that had made the battle so deadly.

A smart orc was a shock. Seeing so many trolls active in the daytime, no matter how overcast some of that day had been, was far worse. Especially against the elves, it had been the trolls that had truly been the decisive factor. Indeed, this was such a concern that the first order Gandalf gave after the battle ended was to "Gather as many of those trolls together in one place! And do not put them to the torch! I must examine them closely. We need to know how these trolls were able to move in the daylight."

But that would need to wait. The wounded called to Gandalf, and Gandalf retreated from the battlefield even as dwarves and men moved to obey him. He moved back towards Erebor and, using a spell like a Sonorous, bellowed out orders so loudly everyone around the mountain could hear. "I will need large basins of heated water and alcohol. The purer, the better! Seamstresses report to me and bring up the bandages."

Before the battle, Thorin and Dain had prepared a large supply of what amounted to medical supplies in this limited age. Now the women, boys and elderly of Lake-town raced forward, carrying all they could to where Gandalf had set up shop, a place almost equidistant between the two hills behind the front line.

"Gather up the dead amongst the enemy," Thorin ordered Dori and Nori. "I know it is unpleasant, but if we let them simply rot, we will deal with disease and more in the coming days."

"Aye, My king," Nori, usually not the most respectful dwarf, replied, bowing his head deeply to Thorin.

Dori nodded as well and turned, grabbing up an orc body. "Should we do anything to Azog's corpse?"

Sometimes dwarves had taken prizes, the skulls of their enemies or some other such token, to show their victory. But Thorin shook his head as he wiped the edges of Orcrist off on Azog's corpse. "No. He isn't worth that honor. Simply put him with the rest of the dead, and make certain to light the fires in

such a way the smoke moves away from Erebor. Even the smoke from such foul corpses can cause those who breathe it ill.”

Harry nodded in his way, then gestured towards where Gandalf had just set off a bolt of light into the air, accompanied with the words, “Bring the injured here to me!”

“Go, Harry. While your levitation spells would be useful here, you will be more help to Gandalf,” Thorin responded to his look. He looked over at Bombur, shaking his head sadly before he knelt down and lifted Bombur into his arms. “I will see to it that our friend here, and Bifur, lay in respectful repose. They and the others here will be laid to rest in the depths of the mountain as is our custom.”

While the dwarves believed in reincarnation like the elves, they preferred to bury their dead under their cities in specially created mausoleums. Their armor and arms would be set with them, the totality covered in thick glass before being laid to rest.

Harry looked at Bombur and over at Bifur, ignoring the looks of shock from many of Dain’s warriors nearby at this show of strength from Thorin. He watched instead as Bofur picked up his brother, tears streaming down his beard to wet his beard as he followed Thorin.

Reaching forward, Harry touched Bofur’s shoulder, exchanging a wordless nod of support with the dwarf before Harry turned away, moving through the blasted battlefield towards the aide station. The two elven brothers appeared out of the milling men and dwarves, with Elladan looping an arm around the weary wizard’s waist, helping him along.

“Harry!” Looking up the manmade mound that had marked the real line of defense, Harry breathed a sigh of relief as he saw Tauriel standing there. Her body and face were splashed with the dark blood of orcs and goblins, but she looked uninjured and moved down the hill on fleet feet, at which point she began to fuss over Harry.

“I’m not hurt, Tauriel, just exhaustion. I took a hit to the side, but my mail turned it.” While not Mithril as the dwarves had no ready armor that could fit him and the one time Harry tried to resize the magical metal his spell fizzled, the scale mail that Thorin had gifted Harry was still of excellent quality. It had deadened the one strike that had gotten through Harry’s defenses, leaving naught but a heavy bruise and some mangled scales.

Calming down slightly, Tauriel looked at Elrond’s sons and Harry. “Good. We... Thranduil is dead. I need to find Legolas, but after that, I will join the medical efforts and see you there.”

Harry was shocked by that, not having heard of Thranduil’s death before this, while both elven brothers looked surprised as well, exchanging speaking glances. “I can’t say I’m altogether sorry to hear that. But I suppose he redeemed himself in this battle to a certain extent. Tell Legolas I’m sorry for his loss. I believe he is still leading your folk on the right flank.”

“I will, although I must admit to some ambivalent feelings myself. That is not something I would admit to most, nor is it truly in keeping with what society dictates I should feel, but my own interactions with Thranduil have been so negative since meeting you that I cannot separate my personal feelings from this matter,” Tauriel admitted.

“He imprisoned you,” Elrohir answered with a shrug. Imprisonment was a dire insult to any elf, and to be so kept for weeks by your king? No elf would be willing to deal with such an insult, regardless of race.

Tauriel’s lips quirked, and she bowed from the waist to the sons of Elrond before racing off with a final glance at Harry. There would be time enough for more later.

As Harry, the twins and Gandalf worked with the human seamstresses and those few dwarves on the wounded, the elven healers were also busy, although they didn’t offer much aid to their fellows among the other races. Not only did the elves have more wounded than either dwarves or humans to deal with, but like it or not, Thranduil’s disdain for the elves had not been all that unusual.

Still, the dwarves and men had Gandalf and Harry. Harry didn’t know much about healing, but he still had recourse to his magic, and it proved helpful in many ways. Whereas Gandalf’s poultices, tinctures and skill with a needle, as well as instruction, proved to awe many among dwarf and human, who had only ever heard of his magic before this.

The blood and screaming of the wounded began to get to Harry, and he had to take breaks several times. Once, as he did, Harry spotted Thorin nearby, carrying the body of young Ori. The King of Erebor was singing a song in Khuzdul as he went, Kili and Balin following him, their own faces twisted in grief as they helped a weeping Dori and Nori along. Ori’s older brothers were truly inconsolable, showing weakness and grief in public in a way that dwarves would only do in rare circumstances.

Harry moved to join them, walking slowly back to where the bodies of the other dwarves, both of Dain’s people and those of the company, had been laid out. Dwalin stood over them, his head bowed, and Bilbo sat nearby, just staring at the bodies of his friends.

Fili, Gloin and Oin soon joined them, and Harry stayed with the dwarves for a time, grieving for their friends, guilt rising within him as he stared at Ori, one of the youngest of the dwarves, whose whole life had been ahead of him. *If only I did more, if only I used that new spell better, earlier in the fight! This is my fault. I wasn’t strong enough.*”

“Do not,” a voice growled in his ear. Harry started and turned only to find Thorin staring at him, his thick brows furrowed in anger. “Do not take the burden of our honored dead on your shoulder, Harry. You did all you could and more. You are no Valar. Do not assume you could have saved young Ori from his fate or Bombur from Azog. Their deaths are no one’s fault but that of the enemies who slew them, and they have been avenged in our victory.”

Staring at Thorin, Harry made to open his mouth, but Nori turned away from staring at his brother to look at Harry. “Thorin is right, Harry. You did all you could. We, we should have ordered him to stay back when we went on the attack. Poor Ori, he just wasn’t ready for this fight, young fool. It, it’s no one’s fault, Harry. Just the, the way battle goes.”

While he didn’t really believe them, Harry said nothing, just nodding before looking back at Ori’s body. They all stayed there until a young boy came to ask for Harry’s help with the wounded once more. That seemed to signal a break in the grief for the rest of the company. The living still needed them, and soon only Dori and Nori stayed there, sitting beside the body of their brother.

The death toll among the dwarves and humans was heavy. Of the five hundred heavy infantry that held the main battle line, nearly two hundred had been slain. A further eighty would only live thanks to Gandalf, although Harry knew that if it wasn't for their insane amount of armor, the total would have been far higher, especially in the charge Thorin had led as the orcish host began to retreat. In contrast, the boar-riders had only lost sixteen of their riders, although they had lost a further eighteen boars, mostly due to the boars' reaction to Beorn and his horde of bears.

The humans had not contributed as many combatants to the battle as the dwarves, mostly the skirmishers that had worked with the Unseen Host to start the battle, and then the hearty men and few women who backed up the dwarven battle line with spear and arrows. This amounted to around four hundred. The humans had lost nearly a hundred men, with eighty-four wounded. They had not done nearly as well as the dwarves when they went over to the attack. But thanks to Gandalf's skill and their own seamstresses' needlework, most of those eighty-four would live without being crippled for life.

The elves had brought by far the largest number of warriors to the battle with two thousand infantry and five hundred scouts, the vaunted Unseen Host. While Harry had only the vaguest idea about their losses, he knew it had been heavy. Elrohir went among them at one point to pass along more of the heavy spirits that Gloin had somehow come up with and reported that the elves had lost hundreds of dead.

"Truly, it was not the goblins nor orcs who proved most deadly, but the trolls. With the walls broken, the trolls kept breaking the battle line causing chaos and death. As good as an elven warrior can be, few among the host of Taur-E Ndaedelos were real veterans, unlike within the Unseen Host, so they took losses they should otherwise have not."

"And the birds, brother," Elladan murmured, touching a new scar on the side of his neck gingerly. One of the crows had caused it, and he shook his head. "Truly against the speed and numbers of those dark wings, we had little defense. And again, when the trolls broke the shield wall, their lack of experience started to tell."

There was no joy or happiness at their victory that day. By the time the last of the wounded was seen to, everyone was just too damn tired, too stunned by the battle. Elves and men collapsed into their tents, set up well away from the battle while the dwarves continued the work of cleaning up after the battle with grim efficiency. As they worked, the dwarves sang dirges in Khuzdul, remembering past battles, past wrongs and triumphs.

This work continued the next two days, with Bard leading his people to bring in food, aided by Beorn at times. His army of bears had dispersed within minutes of the battle ending, but they came back every night, doing what they could to cut down on the number of dead among the goblins. They left the orc bodies untouched, while Beorn took great delight in joining with the others, lighting mounds of the dead on fire.

In this, Gloin proved to be a godsend. He brought out from Erebor several kegs of aged mead, and, although it physically pained him - and many other dwarves - offered its use. Dousing a pile of corpses with the mead made the pile light up far faster than just tossing several torches on the bodies, and though the smoke was still foul, the work on clearing the battlefield went much quicker.

While this was going on, Harry helped wherever he could during the day. His fire and condensed light spells proved amazing in dealing with the mounds of the dead, while his levitation spell was in constant demand as the defenses were taken down, the foxholes and ditches filled in by elves, dwarves and men.

Despite that, Harry spent the next few nights watching over the bodies of Ori, Bombur and Bifur with the dwarves of the company. They spent that time mostly silent, helping Dori, Nori and Bofur begin to recover from their grief by simply being there for them.

Bilbo joined them only, having taken up the task of cleansing Erebor of the Smaug's Taint once more. This was more about keeping the dwarves of Dain out than anything else – hence why he could not leave the task at night too often- but his touch with the trees lining the entranceway to the treasure room continued, and those trees flourished under his touch in those days in a way astonishing to all who saw it.

Meanwhile, Tauriel, the Unseen Host and Elladan and Elrohir helped the humans bring in food or scout the area, making certain none of the enemy had escaped. Although, they needn't have bothered. Beorn's host was most thorough in their hunt.

Yet, perhaps the most important work being done in those two days was done by Gandalf, who examined the trolls. He found evidence of a salve on the trolls and scrapped off enough to fill a few vials, which he set aside, thinking to run some tests on it. The salve didn't seem to have any magical properties, but then again, neither did Kingsfoil, yet it was the core of many a poultice.

Eventually, the work on the battlefield began to die down, and while the knowledge of what it had cost them was still within the minds of the defenders, they were finally ready to celebrate the victory. On the third day after the battle, fires were set that had nothing to do with burning the fallen enemy, and as evening began, so too did music rise from all three camps.

Watching as Gloin and Oin rolled barrels down from Erebor, Harry shook his head and turned aside, looking for a single, gray-bearded head. He found Gandalf sitting alone well away from the reformed camps around the entrance to Erebor, leaning against a bit of the mountainside that jutted out there. In his hand he had a pipe, and he was lighting it as Harry walked up to him, holding out a skin of elven wine.

In turn, Gandalf handed over his bag of pipeweed, whereupon Harry took out a pipe of his own, a gift from a warrior of Dain's whose life Harry had saved in the battle. The two wizards sat for a time silently, passing the wineskin back and forth as they smoked and stared up at the evening sky, watching the first stars as they became visible.

"Tauriel's told me about the stars here, the formations and so forth. Back where I came from, one of the classes we were forced to take at Hogwarts was the astronomy course. Some rituals you had to know the layout of the stars for. Now knowing what I do about Arien, I have to wonder if any of the formations up there are, well, real spirits."

"The stars were created by Varda, Queen of the Valar, loved and revered by the elves above all. The stars themselves hold the unblemished light of creation. I rather think that alone makes them worthy of reverence, " Gandalf answered, smiling as he too looked up at the stars slowly appearing

above them. "And yet while they are important to some social functions among the elves and man and are revered by elves, the term ritual sounds like it is implying something more involved than that. Were these rituals so normal in your world? You've not mentioned that before."

"Rituals were still around but not very often used. But there was a time when they were so, of course, Hogwarts had to keep teaching it. That, and my credulous fellows firmly believed in astrology. But frankly, it was a waste of time." Harry chuckled, shaking his head. "Unless you were into older women anyway. Professor Sinistra was an extremely good-looking lady. Not that as a student I could notice, of course."

Gandalf chuckled. "Heh, of course. Although I would be cautious about being so truthful about such things in front of Tauriel. Elves do not consider physical attraction in the same manner as humans do. They are far less enamored of the physical form and far less changeable than humans can be. Lust on its own rarely enters into their thinking."

Harry shrugged. "If it comes up in conversation, I will be more circumspect. Although I can't honestly see that happening."

"Hmm, just be aware that you might face some issues from the elven side of things, Harry," Gandalf warned. "Courtship among elves is different than among humans. Indeed, there is no difference among elves from courtship to betrothal. The betrothal period lasts from a year to a decade. And you might need to deal with Tauriel's family, although I do not know enough about her relationship with them to tell you how that might go."

"Heh, uh, probably not. Let's just say that Tauriel's relationship with her family is kind of chilly, and leave it at that, Gandalf," Harry snorted. "That is her secret to share. Regardless, I'll let Tauriel decide on that kind of thing. It isn't as if my society will care one way or another, after all."

The two of them blue smoke wrings for a time before Gandalf asked: "And what will you do now, Harry Potter?"

"I... I think I will be heading to Lothlorien at some point. I'll stay here for a bit until the next round of dwarves arrives, mayhap." The day after the battle, Thorin and Dain had sent forty of Dain's boar riders back with news of the victory. They would then help the rest of Thorin's folk travel from the Iron Hills to their new, or rather old, home. "But I, I feel compelled to visit the Lady Galadriel. While I think my head is now screwed on right now, it's best to get the expert's opinion."

Gandalf looked at Harry shrewdly but didn't respond to that. He honestly felt that mentally Harry still wasn't quite where he should be. From the glimpses Gandalf had of Harry in the battle, he still seemed a bit too willing to sacrifice his body. And even now, Gandalf could detect a new layer of grief within the young man, a new layer of guilt assumed when it should not be. But he said nothing, knowing it would not help.

"What about you?" Harry questioned quickly, not liking the penetrating look in the older man's eyes. "This was basically a sideshow to your primary concern, right? Sauron, and what could be going on with him is your primary concern, yes?"

For a moment, the warm evening seemed to chill at the mention of that name, and Gandalf shook his head, seeming to banish the feeling. "Aye, you have the right of it there, yet I do have other

duties that constrain me. For one, I would rather like to bring Bilbo home. I took young Mr. Baggins out of his quiet time in the Shire and would like to make certain of his return. But in truth, you are right, I probably cannot stay here to wait for him long enough. I will have to go and meet with Elrond and then seek out Saruman, who was in charge of chasing Sauron thanks to Lady Galadriel exhausting herself in driving the Dark One out of Dol Guldur.”

“If Saruman caught the Dark One, could he have killed him?” Harry asked, frowning pensively.

“I do not think so. Greatly weakened the Dark One perhaps, but not killed.” Gandalf frowned pensively. “Unfortunately, I am uncertain what manner of... of being the Enemy truly is any longer. While he began as a Maia of Aulë, he went through so many changes under the Greater Darkness and then lost so much of himself first in the drowning of Numenor and then the destruction of his One Ring, his greatest creation in the Second Age. And yet, and yet his spirit, his will, survived.”

Harry shook his head sadly. “Sounds like Voldemort. I never learned how the hell he had survived his death so many times, either. Bugger Dumbledore.”

“HAH! Yes, well. I believe that the Enemy can be killed, or perhaps better said, his spirit can be dissipated by applying magical power. Lady Galadriel hurt him for certain when she, Saruman and Elrond drove him from Dol Guldur. But...” Gandalf sighed, falling silent as he took a long draught of wine, before whispering, “But I fear he will keep on coming back unless the ring is truly gone from Middle Earth.”

“How certain are you that the ring is gone, then?” Harry asked, frowning faintly.

“...That has been in my mind a few times,” Gandalf said slowly. “And yet, all lore suggests that the ring was lost.

“I would make sure of that if I were you,” Harry said with a frown. “And I would cheerfully be willing to see you Bilbo home for you, Gandalf, so long as I am certain Thorin and the others will be safe here.”

“That would be a weight off my mind. And as for Erebor and Dale being safe, we just massacred the greatest threat in the north, Harry. With Bard and Thorin allied, they will be able to see off any roving band of orcs or marauding men,” Gandalf smiled. “Still, I wonder...”

He looked up, looking down into the dwarves’ camp, and in the light of the fires, spotted a head of curly hair with no beard to go with it. He held up his hand, and a small, iridescent butterfly made out of air appeared there. Leaning forward, Gandalf whispered into it, “Bilbo, come here a moment.”

Starting as the butterfly rested on his shoulder, Bilbo turned away from where he had been engaging one of the Iron Hill dwarves to stare over to where the two wizards could be seen as vague shapes in the darkness beyond the camps. He clapped the dwarf he had been talking to on the shoulder and murmured an apology. “But when a wizard calls your name, it's best to answer quickly.”

The dwarf laughed at that and watched as the young hobbit headed up the hill to where the two wizards sat. Turning in the other direction, the dwarf stared over the human camp to where the elven camp resided on the other hill looking down. For a moment, he snarled, but then another dwarf

smacked his back, shaking his head. "Let the blood spilled in this war end our animosity. We don't need to get along with the arrogant knife-ears to respect them."

"Feh." the first dwarf scowled but shrugged as the second dwarf handed him a mug of mead. "Well, if you put it like that..." they both guffawed and turned back to another nearby dwarf who had just begun to belt out a tongue-twister in Khuzdul, much to the amusement of those around him.

By the time the dwarf had messed up the tongue Twister, Bilbo had reached the two wizards and was looking over his shoulder at the sudden burst of raucous laughter.

"Mr. Baggins, how much time do you think you will take to cleanse the gold of Smaug's Taint?" Gandalf asked without preamble, grabbing Bilbo's attention.

Taking a sip from the wine, Bilbo thought about it for a moment, then shrugged. "At this point, I am nearly finished looking after the trees I placed. I honestly have no idea how long it will take for the trees to remove the taint from the gold. Months, mayhap? Really, it is more in Yavanna's hands than mine at this point. All I am doing is being a conduit."

Bilbo handed the wineskin back, then straightened his shoulders. "I will not stay that long. It's coming up on planting time, and I wish to see what good Master Hamfast has done to my garden in my absence. I trust him and his skills, but well, it is **my** garden, after all."

The hobbit looked down at his hands, noticing the dirt under his nails the number of calluses on his fingers, before smiling cheerfully up at the wizards, holding them up. "It might not be as grand or as flashy as the magic that you do, but there is a certain joy that one can have when working with the earth. I've actually quite enjoyed my little project of transparent planting trees into Erebor, and even before that with Thorin," Bilbo laughed, shaking his head. "Although, that it has to be the strangest bush I've ever dealt with."

Harry smiled too, not only at the imagery but at how Bilbo's words evoked the memory of Thorin thanking him before begging for forgiveness for his actions while consumed by the Taint. Others might've thought it odd, but Harry felt that that kind of action truly showed that Thorin had it in him to be a magnificent King. *A King who acknowledges when he is wrong and apologizes for it is a king worthy of his crown.*

Bilbo went on softly, now looking out into the distance. "I also think that a journey is not finished until you are back home. Until you are setting it aside, putting the thoughts into a book, the memories, the dreams and nightmares. I have had my adventure. Now I yearn for a simpler life."

The two wizards were quiet for a time while Harry attempted to blow a smoke ring, and Gandalf did so magnificently. Eventually, Harry simply nodded. "You paint a pretty picture, Bilbo. Make certain that whatever you have done to the trees will continue to work when you are gone, and I will see you home."

"**We** will see you home, I believe you meant to say," Tauriel announced, coming up out of the night and causing Bilbo to twitch, not having noticed her coming, something that startled Bilbo a great deal, given how used he had become to sneaking up on others.

Harry smiled widely when he saw her, stood, bowed, and created a soft plush chair for her with a wave of his hand. She looked at it askance, one eyebrow rising, and he chuckled, before changing it into simply another rock, albeit one with a blanket over it. She nodded at that, sat down, and held out a tray she was holding of meats and cheeses.

“And what of you, Tauriel? Harry asked. “I know that duty means you have to go back to Mirkwood for Thranduil’s funeral, but after that, do you still want to travel with me?”

“I could think of nothing better,” Tauriel replied with a smile for Harry before looking over at Bilbo. “And I rather think I would like to see your Shire. Although I do not know if I will be able to do so right away.”

Tauriel’s expression turned fierce in the light from the campfires below as she went on. “Legolas has yet to be crowned king in terms of the ceremony needed to take the crown, but he is prince, and there is no question of his doing so. And he has already decreed his first edict. The spiders are to be wiped from the face of Mirkwood. I am looking forward to that duty, as are the rest of the Unseen Host.”

“What were your casualties like?” Harry inquired, his tone somber. He also thought about volunteering his services in that effort, but he wanted to check with Thorin first. *After all, there were so many places here that could truly need a wizard’s touch, so to speak.*

“We actually didn’t lose all that many from the unseen host. It was our regular armies that lost heavily. The number of trolls they sent against us...” she shook her head, unintentionally reiterating something the Rivendell twins had said after the battle. “Without their continually breaking our line, the orcs alone would not have fared as well. To say nothing of those cursed birds.”

At that, Harry looked over at Gandalf. “And do you have anything to add on that score, ancient one?”

“Not yet, my young emerald-eyed fool,” Gandalf shot back instantly, causing Tauriel and Bilbo to laugh, even while Gandalf went on. “I’ll keep examining that oily substance I found on their skin for a few days, yet I fear whatever was allowing the trolls to survive the touch of the sun has worn off. But I had to prioritize the living in the wounded, obviously.”

“Obviously,” Harry said, no hint of anything but admiration in his voice as he raised a goblet to the older man. Tauriel and Bilbo also bowed their heads in deep gratitude to Gandalf, knowing how many dwarven, human and even elven lives the man had saved in the time after the battle.

At that moment, music began down in the dwarf’s camp, as well as a bellow of laughter. Harry looked in that direction and then back at Gandalf, who chuckled and waved him off. “Go on with you! We’ve spoken of the future long enough for tonight. Leave this old man here with his pipe, his tobacco, and the wine.”

“I wasn’t actually going to leave you the wine, but since you mention it, I suppose it can stay with you. I wouldn’t want you to throw out a hip trying to get your own,” Harry taunted, hopping to his feet dodging a smack from Gandalf’s staff before looking towards Tauriel, bowing formally towards her. “My lady, would you do me the honor of walking with me tonight?”

Tauriel smiled and gently rested her hand on his arm. "It is I who am honored, my lord."

They laughed together for a moment, then moved off, heading back down to the party as Bilbo did the same. The formal tone left their voice as they went, and they teased and joked with one another as they entered the dwarven encampment. As they moved on, Harry linked arms with Tauriel, moving through the dwarves, exchanging nods and greetings with those he recognized from the battle.

As he went, Harry noticed that the hints he had seen of disapproval for him, or rather, Harry's friendship with Thorin, was gone. In its place was admiration and respect, a change that Harry quite enjoyed. *And, I rather doubt that the dwarves will be so fickle as the students back in Hogwarts were* he thought, chuckling.

Moving deeper into the camp, Tauriel stopped. "Well, now I have proof that at least one stereotype about dwarves is right."

Pausing from where he had just exchanged a handclasp with Dain, Harry tried to look through the crowd of drinking and eating dwarves to whatever had grabbed Tauriel's attention. "And what would that be?"

"That dwarves can't dance," Tauriel nearly broke down into giggles as she pointed through the crowd. Looking in that direction, Harry saw Fili and Kili dancing a wild and quite uncoordinated jig while several other dwarves blew on horns or hammered on drums.

The sight nearly set Harry to guffawing, and with Tauriel still snickering as she held his arm, Harry moved in that direction, bellowing out, "You two couldn't dance your way out of a bag! In the name of the Valar, what caused you to want to humiliate yourselves like this!"

"Oh ho, if you think you can do better, show us how it is done, Longshanks!" Fili bellowed back, grinning at Harry over the heads of the dwarves between them.

I never said I could dance," Harry rejoined, "I just said you couldn't. It doesn't take someone who knows how to dance until that someone else is about as get ungainly as an orc!"

"That's fighting words, Harry!" Kili bellowed while the dwarves around them guffawed or laughed as they willed.

"No, it would have been fighting words if I said you smelled or looked like one. Just saying you dance like one isn't enough to come to blows."

"If Harry does not know how to dance yet, my good dwarves, trust me when I say I will see to his education at some point. Perhaps later tonight, so long as he is not so clumsy as to crush my feet," Tauriel teased.

Fili and Kili laughed at that, as did the other dwarves around them, while Harry fell back, clutching his chest as if mortally wounded.

At that point, Gloin came out of the crowd of dwarves around him, shouting out, "Ah, there you are, Harry! I recall that you will enjoy a bit of a drink and that I promised you that you would taste some of my finest! Come and have a sip of this, the pair of you."

Tauriel looked a little concerned, but Harry went willingly, eager to try what Gloin thought of as a good drink. The few sips he'd had of the dwarf's special stash before this had been magnificent. Soon they were standing in front of one of the barrels that Oin and Gloin had been rolling out of Erebor over the past few days. "Isn't this the stuff we used to light the green skins on fire?"

"Indeed it is! Poor Smaug, he never knew what treasures lie within his mountain, aging gently over the years!" Gloin laughed wildly, smacking his hand down on the top of the keg. "My clan's brewery, it was almost completely intact!"

"We didn't want anyone to know," Oin interjected, "Not before the battle began, and we could show Thorin our deed of ownership."

And now, we'll have a monopoly going forward, ahaha!" Gloin chortled, tugging at his beard in delight before dipping the mug in his hand into the barrel, holding it out to Harry. "But it is good. Try it!"

Now with a bit of trepidation, Harry did so, lifting the tankards to his lips. He took a sip and then blinked in delight. Before coming to this world, Harry had only taken a few sips of fire whiskey and ale, and in this world, most of the time had been drinking camp water or wine. So he really didn't have anything major to compare Gloin's finest to. Regardless it was hot, burning his throat with a light tang as it went down. It tasted something like mild cinnamon with a woody flavor. And it was powerful too, causing Harry to gasp, blinking his eyes wildly. "WOoo!"

"Good grief!" Tauriel exclaimed, stepping back a bit from her own sip. "That is...." she smacked her lips, then smiled wryly, tipping the cup further into her mouth, drinking the rest of the mug down. "Mmmm... lovely!"

The dwarf gaped at her and then guffawed in laughter, slapping Harry on the back as the nearby dwarves thumped their chests with an open palm in token of appreciation. "Now, if she can hold it as well as she can drink it, my lad, that's a winner right there!" Dain bellowed from nearby.

Harry blushed, but with Tauriel's eyes on him, he dipped the mug back into the mead. With a smirk at Tauriel, he threw back his head, drinking it down. "WOOOh, that's nice stuff there, Gloin!" He announced, shaking his head wildly from side to side. "It is a horrible thing to do to a good drink, but you all saw it. Tauriel challenged me."

"Then take your time with the next one!" Gloin said, chuckling. He took their mugs and dipped them back into the open barrel before holding them out to Tauriel and Harry. "With my compliments, to the future. By the blood of Durin, may your beard grow long, and your workings of hand and eye be true."

"And to you good dwarf," Tauriel said, not realizing that that was a benediction on a betrothal among dwarves, something you could say when a dwarven female had chosen her One.

Harry nodded, clapping Gloin on the shoulder as he raised his mug to the crowd around them. "May you and your family live long, may you be prosperous, and may you continue to make a good drink!"

That won a round of shouts of 'here here' from the dwarves as Harry and Tauriel moved on. But they did take Gloin's advice and did not attempt to down their mugs of mead quickly, instead sipping

gently as they moved on. As they did, the two of them listened in on the conversations around, growing a little confused.

Harry had thought that the dwarves would be either bragging about their own deeds during the battle or about the deeds of the dead. Instead, they were exchanging tales of mishaps in the life of the dead, jokes at their expense, as well as, strangely, talking about money.

One dwarf opined, "I owed Cassus a hundred gold. Forty came from honest work I had to pay him do just before we started our trek to Erebor. But the lucky ass first took me for sixty gold from a wager!"

"Aye, Cassus was always lucky, enough to make one wonder about his dice. But no, I made him use mine, and he still won twenty gold off me!" Another dwarf shouted.

"Aye, but he has a family. Yet it is their good fortune that I do owe it, for I will look after them. I will be their KazDru'kal!"

That word didn't translate, and Harry looked at Tauriel, who shook her head as the dwarves around the speaker bellowed in approval. "Strange, I thought I'd gotten a decent handle on Khuzdul, but that one isn't in my vocabulary."

"It sounded like an oath, but I don't know what it is," Tauriel admitted, and with a shrug, the two of them moved on, still arm in arm, only pulling away from one another when they grabbed some of the food that was set up in small tables throughout the camp.

And as they walked, they heard that word several times. For all the jokes and laughter at the dead's expense, whenever the dead had a family to look after, a wife or children, the idea of owing money and looking after them came up. The dwarves made it sound much more like a contract than simply being good friends, but Harry quickly realized that was just their way of doing things.

At one point, they saw Thorin, who was holding forth to a group of dwarves about Bombur, and how the expedition to Erebor could not have happened without Bombur "putting both his girth and his purse where his mouth had long been."

As the dwarves around him guffawed at some moment where Bombur's love of food had gotten in the way of business, Balin took over, shouting out about some bet that he, Bombur and Bifur had made, which he would be paying in full to their families. "For are we not all rich, rich now in the lands of our kin once more!"

As the roars of approval died down and Thorin made to push his way through the crowd, Harry and Tauriel came up to him. "Thorin, can you explain what that word translates to in Common?" Harry said, pointing to another dwarf who had just used the term.

"Hmm... I think KazDru'kal means caretaker, I suppose. Although I don't like that term because it seems to imply that the relationship is that of a menial. That is very wrong. It is a connection between equals, between the owed and the dead. Bound by oath and social convention, a KazDru'kal looks after the family. A KazDru'kal will make certain his debt is paid in full by making certain the family is looked after in any way they need it, food, protection, training, anything. It is a deep connection, one only the best of friends make."

Harry nodded at that, while Tauriel frowned faintly. *It sounds very convoluted, but it seems to work for the dwarves.* So she simply shrugged and then turned to nod at Nori and Kili, who had just come through the dwarves around them, the younger dwarf asking her a question. "So, will the new King be able to, I don't know, reverse the darkness on the East Road?"

"I think so, yes. Legolas knows some magic already, and I believe there are a few tomes in Thranduil's room about the spells defending the path. Reversing the corruption within might be difficult, but I am certain he can." Tauriel's lips quirked, and she was about to say something pithy about Legolas also not being overly proud and willing to ask for help from Lord Elrond or Mithrandir, but she paused when Thorin continued to speak to Harry.

"And speaking of what is owed, Harry. I know you joined our trek for friendship's sake but you are owed more than any of my companions, more even than Bilbo, who I would make the richest Hobbit to ever exist." The two friends laughed at that, but then Thorin went on seriously, reaching up to clasp one of Harry's shoulders. "You will not turn down your fair share of the treasure, will you?"

"No," Harry shrugged his shoulders. "No, I won't be doing that, Thorin. You're right. The money will come in handy in many different different ways. And I will also be making a stronger deal than I would otherwise have with your rune scribes when they arrive. My knowledge is also something I should get my money's worth for, I think."

He looked down at Thorin, a wry smile on his lips. "At the time I arrived in this world, friendship really was worth more than gold. But now that our task has been completed, I need to start looking towards the future a bit, and a traveler always needs coin."

"And a home to wander back to," Thorin warned. "Do not think that you will be getting away from my people so easily, Harry. You are a friend of the Folk of Durin. So I have named you, so you will be. You will always have a home here, no matter how many centuries go by."

Harry tried to demure while twitching at the casual mention of centuries and making a mental note that he probably had to get used to thinking like that. "I'm not the kind to live under a mountain, Thorin. Erebor is glorious, and I have no doubt your people will make it even more so, but even so..."

"Then we will build you a human home somewhere. Perhaps on the lake?" Thorin persisted.

"That does sound nice," Tauriel mused, causing Harry to blush a bit as Thorin chuckled. "But it is also quite premature," she went on smoothly, amusement dancing in her eyes at the way her well-timed joke had gone over. But she was honestly pleased that Thorin understood how much he owed Harry. "While I know you helped Harry when he first arrived in Middle Earth, Thorin, but Harry has paid that back and more, so much so not paying him would be like take advantage of Harry's largess."

"You speak truly, Tauriel. This recompense merely makes us equal, equal as friends should be," Thorin said with a nod and a smile towards Harry, who returned the look.

However, both of them were not comfortable with such emotional moments, and after a second, Thorin changed the subject, saying loudly, Besides, this way, I can at least keep your sword lessons going. You still have a tendency to flail about with that sword of yours like it's a paddle in a boat!"

“That sounded dirty!” Shouted a nearby human, causing Thorin and Harry to blanch. The dwarves around them began to guffaw, and Tauriel held up a hand to her mouth, trying not to burst into giggles for the second time that night. She was embarrassed once to be sure, she was an elf, and their humor did not run in that particular vein. But that imagery needed no explanation whatsoever and was just hilarious.

Glaring around him, Harry spotted the man who had spoken and instantly took vengeance. Even as the man lowered his hands from where he had cupped them around his mouth, Harry pointed a finger at him. “One shouldn’t be so green with jealousy as all that,” he said, pointing a finger.

As he spoke, the man found that he was indeed green. Entirely green, a neon green from the top of his head down to his boots. Even his skin had turned that color, and everyone around him twitched away in shock, the neon green looking like a beacon in the darkening night before they all began to laugh loudly.

“Beware the anger of wizards, for they are quick to take offense,” one dwarf said sagely, his words only slightly shaky due to his laughter.

Chuckling a bit, Tauriel gently tugged at Harry’s arm, looking at him and then out towards the human-dominated segment of the camp. Understanding, Harry gave his excuses to Thorin, and the two of them moved off.

Within a few steps, they were leaning into one another, going from holding arms to holding waists. The mead was most decidedly having an impact despite their shared moment of bravado. Understanding that, they stopped at several of the small tables, grabbing up food as they went, although Tauriel shook her head more than once saying, “For once in a while, this manner of meat-heavy food is alright, but really I would prefer an even amount of vegetables and fruits to go with the meats.”

“And tell me, where we would be getting such around here, fair maiden?” Harry quipped. “Enough to go around, I mean. Lake-town barely had enough greens to get by on its own, let alone with several thousand more mouths to feed, and so far away from their original farms.”

“I wasn’t complaining, just commenting. When we do begin to travel, I would prefer to live off Lembas than so much heavy food.”

“... this is an elven thing rather than a woman thing, right?” Harry turned to give her a look. “Because from where I stand, you certainly don’t need to worry about your figure.”

Blushing, Tauriel released her arm from around Harry’s waist just long enough to slap him lightly upside the head. As she did, she noticed a brief flare of annoyance cross his face in the firelight and resolved to not do so again. Something about that had bothered him, although she knew not what. In apology, Tauriel looped her arm back around Harry’s waist, gently tugging him into motion again. “I am not worried about my figure no. I am more worried about what such a diet might do to my stomach.”

“Ah. Yeah, I can see your point,” Harry answered, knowing now she hadn’t been fishing for compliments or acting like Parvati and Lavender sometimes did at mealtimes. “So, can you cook?”

Tauriel instantly changed the subject, pointing ahead of them at a break between the crowds. "Look, is that not Bard over there? Let us go greet him."

Snorting at her, Harry allowed Tauriel to guide him into the area where the humans dominated the camp. It was far larger than the dwarven section, a little more haphazardly organized, with far more torches than central fires. The inclusion of kids and women also made it stand out, but the food here did include a bit of fruit and vegetables.

Seeing that, the couple diverted, finding a stew that both wizard and elf enjoyed. They stood there for a moment, their mugs on the table as they concentrated on the stew, looking around them.

Even with the inclusion of children racing around, the mood here was more somber than in the dwarven segment of the camp. Despite losing far fewer of their total population, the human settlement was not dealing with the loss as well. Harry put that down to the fact the dwarves were all warriors, trained and sent on this mission purposefully, while few of the humans had been trained soldiers. Hunters, guards, trappers, fishermen, few had experience before the orcish attack on Lake-town with real battle, and they hadn't lost more than a handful of people in that battle.

Yet there were still pockets of singing and minstrels playing, just a little softer than the dwarves. Tauriel noticed that, but when she lowered her arm from pointing one such group out, Harry gestured around them. "Is it just me, or are more of Bard's folk getting drunk?"

"I..." Tauriel paused, looking around, noticing the signs that, yes, many of the humans around her were getting quite drunk. *Despite the dwarves no doubt hoarding the stronger stuff for themselves*, she thought, before saying aloud, "I suppose though that drinking to excess among dwarves is not seen as much a part of drinking and partying as it is among my folk or the humans."

"Let's find Bard," Harry decided, setting his stew bowl down. "Alcoholism was a major problem of Lake-town for some time before we arrived."

Both of them remembered to grab up their mugs of dwarven mead. It truly was too good to waste. And better, when Harry broached the subject with Bard, he already knew about the problem.

"I know, and I will handle it on the morrow." Despite the overall somber mood of the camp, his eyes twinkled. "They will understand I am not the master of Lake-town in no uncertain terms, never fear. I have prepared buckets of cold water and lots of menial labor just for that purpose."

"Menial labor? Are you all going to start heading back to Lake-Town then?" Thanks to the number of goblins in Azog's horde, Lake-town had been completely abandoned, pushed out to float into the lake while the humans evacuated to Erebor. At the moment, there were far more humans living in the mountain than dwarves, something Harry knew would be causing trouble soon if the Taint wasn't cleared quickly enough.

"No. Oh, a few dozen men and women will be sent to use boats to get Lake-town back, but in the main, we will be moving into the old ruins of Dale. I've had a few of the oldsters surveying them for the last few days."

He was interrupted by a bellow of laughter echoing out of the crowd, and all three turned to see Beorn barreling past, with six children clinging to his shoulders and head as the massive man laughed

and pushed through the crowd as easily as he would in bear-form. They all smiled at the sight before Bard turned back, continuing his earlier thought.

“It will take time and effort to bring in enough wood to repair the ruins, but many of the buildings there were made by dwarven and human hands working together and still stand despite the fire Smaug released upon the ancient capital. It can house us all. However, I wish to request Mr. Baggins survey the land around it to make certain it is still suitable for farming. Food will be a major issue going forward.”

“Nay, it will not,” Tauriel shook her head. “Legolas has already announced he will be supplying you and the dwarves with food for a time. It will be elven fare, but..”

They were interrupted as one of the nearby men turned to Bard, holding a cup. “And what will you put in the cup for the Delphi family, Bard?”

“I will put in three gold, from what the dwarves owe me. Lord Thorin has acknowledged the debt,” Bard said almost in a rote tone of voice for some reason. “The families of the dead will be looked after as well as those crippled in this war.”

What is this?” Harry asked, gesturing to the cup while Tauriel slowly shook her head, bemused. She had thought it was only dwarves who cared over much about coins and such things, but it seemed as if humans were afflicted with that oddity too.

“It’s a whip-around.” Bard looked at him quizzically. ‘You do not have these where you come from? When someone dies in the workplace or on a battle, their comrades gather up money from everyone around equally, so that their families can be looked after.”

Harry nodded slowly. “I’ll put in three gold for every dead human then.”

Tauriel frowned thoughtfully, then shrugged her shoulders. “We elves do not use your concept of money when making dealings between us, so I have no money to spare. But I will pledge to create a bow for any hunter among them, along with full quivers for each. Arrows that will always strike truly. Beyond that, I am afraid I cannot offer much aid.”

That caused some gaping mouths, but Bard simply nodded his head and clasped forearms firmly with Tauriel.

He then whispered to the two that he would do much the same thing as Harry. “As leader, it falls to me to make certain that all of my folk are looked after as best I may. It is not a task I relish, but neither will I shirk from it.”

Harry nodded, and he and Tauriel moved through the camp, not engaging in any of the conversations, just talking to one another, smiling and waving at the children or the women, who seemed a bit overawed by the pair.

Or jealous, Tauriel noticed. Many of the women were making eyes at Harry, who didn’t seem to notice, thankfully. She wasn’t certain how she would have dealt with that kind of thing. *Humor to start with, but if they actually attempted to catch his attention, I am uncertain how I would deal with it other than calling it to Harry’s attention.*

Elven courtship was not based on looks overmuch, and it wasn't unusual for elves to know who they wished to marry long before their physical bodies matured to match their spirits. Very rarely were there situations where several women or men attempted to court a single member of the opposite sex. It just didn't happen and had never happened in her lifetime. So while human women being interested in Harry was somewhat predictable, if it proved to be a problem, Tauriel would quickly be at a loss as to what to do.

Luckily, Harry didn't seem to notice at all. Indeed, he seemed more interested in just watching the crowd around them. Harry didn't really have any friends among the humans beyond Bard himself, who Harry had come to know far better in the days leading up to the battle than he had when they were in Lake-town.

As Harry had precited earlier, the humans were telling tall tales of those who had died, building them up into heroes of legend. Indeed, it was so obviously embellished, Harry had trouble not laughing at the tales he heard about the dead and the living around them.

And yet, Harry realized thoughtfully, While the form is different, the substance is the same: mourn the dead, look after the living, and look to the future. A future they won in the Battle of the Lonely Mountain.

Like stories of Erebor among the dwarves, tales of Dale abounded in the discussions around Harry and Tauriel. Tales of its ancient glories were mixed with ideas about what the men and women around Harry wanted to do. Several of them professed to want to work with Bilbo, to learn farming from him. Others were eagerly speaking about Bard's plans for Dale, while still others were wondering about trade with the dwarves and if trade to the west would soon pick up if the elves could truly clean the East Road of its foulness.

Harry was not the only one to notice this, and as the two of them moved on, Tauriel shook her head, setting her auburn hair to shift. "I am fascinated, truly. You dwarves and elves are far more upbeat about grief, and the future than we elves have been in my lifetime. Or rather, perhaps since the Second Age entirely."

"That needs some unpacking, my dear," Harry said, looking at her quizzically.

"You will see when we get to the Elven camp," Tauriel sighed but refused to elaborate.

As Harry and Tauriel made their way up the hill towards the elven camp, Harry did start to hear a difference quickly. While the shouts, tales and songs of the humans and dwarves had been different in timbre, the songs and tales had been, by and large, designed to push past the pain of loss. The songs he began to hear in Sindarin were about ancient times, ancient wars and heroes that had died in them. They were very much word sad songs, extremely sad songs, in fact. Despite the haunting quality, the amazing range of the voices he heard, the coordination of a chorus composed of fighting men and women, there was no escaping that simple fact.

When they reached the camp, Harry instantly noticed the same issue he had seen among the humans: there was also a lot of drinking but not much eating. It was all the watered-down wine of the elves, rather than the hard stuff that the dwarves had been drinking or even the regular ale of the

humans. And yet, the entire feeling was of loss and grief rather than a mixture of grief and promises for the future.

As Harry and Tauriel moved through the camp, they were acknowledged with nods and slight bows, but no one came up to speak to them. The majority of the elves who were not drinking seemed lost in the song. And many of the elves were also already drunk and laid out on the ground or sitting in clumps throughout the camp.

It was a stark contrast to the other two camps, and Harry realized with a jolt why that might be. "You elves," he said softly, "you're all grieving just as much about the past as about the lives you lost. About the glory found beyond the western sea and the heights your race once reached."

Tauriel shrugged her shoulders. "War and death to us are travesties, horrors which do nothing. Death itself is not as horrifying as the destruction wrought upon society and the world around us. We see no positive in bragging about the dead or thinking of the living. Their families will be taken care of by the whole without discussion. Not a single elf ever stands alone, so why talk about it? No, every passage of an elf's fae to the halls of Mandos is a tragedy, no matter how quickly he or she may be gifted with a new rhaw and must be bemoaned as such."

Those two words had not come out in Common, and Harry had to ask for a translation. The term rhaw was easy. It simply meant physical body. On the other hand, the idea that an elf's spirit, or fae, was bound to Arda by Eru Ilúvatar was somewhat shocking, although it did fit into some of the things that Harry had learned from

Still, it was a subject Harry wasn't willing to tackle right now, as Tauriel went on. "Further, there is no talk of the future or what might be. What might be, will be. And we elves know that we will never build as large, spread as far as we did in the past. Our communal spirit has not been up for such effort since the age of the Last Alliance."

"That's sad," Harry answered bluntly, causing Tauriel to snort at his understatement. "Humans, well, back in my old world, we've had empires rise and fall often. Humanity as a whole lives on, builds on bigger, better. I don't think any Empire has ever stated, 'oh, we will never build as good as our predecessors did', Call it hubris, call it pride or simply a desire to always strive, that has always been our way. Grieve the dead but move on and keep pushing."

Tauriel nodded, listening to the songs of her folk swirling around them for a while, observing the somber atmosphere. Then she smiled slightly. "You know, if not for the fact that I find human songs unworthy of the name, I might see something almost respectable in that outlook."

Harry snorted. "Judging by what we were listening to earlier, yes, human songs in this world are kind of barely ditties in comparison to the songs I've heard from you elves. I remember the songs I heard in Elrond's halls fondly. Even your use of instruments is better. But..."

He paused, the present-day conversation leading back to a past memory of a time when he had been with Hermione and her family on an outing to the opera, a present the Grangers had decided on for how well the two had done in their third year's exams. And as Harry remembered that moment, he felt a sudden upswell of grief and guilt. Not just at the sudden memory of leading Hermione to her

death, that was something Harry would feel guilt over for the rest of his days, just like the grief of her passing would remain, fading only slowly. No, this guilt came from a new quarter.

Bloody Hell, I hope someone thought about telling her parents what happened! They might just be non-magicals, but surely the ministry or Dim Bulb will have thought about contacting them. And not by owl!

He blinked, feeling Tauriel's hand on his shoulder. "Sorry, I um, I sorry I remembered something. I was, I was with Hermione once, with her parents. They took us out to see an opera. It's basically a play done with songs for the most part."

"My people have those as well, though we do not call them operas, simply plays," Tauriel said with a nod. "Many of our longest dirges and lays could be made into a play, and many traditionally are sung with accompanying dances."

"Well, I'd never been to one, and Les Miserable is a major cultural icon. It's... its kind of set in a time of revolution..." Harry broke off at Tauriel's confused look and tried to explain. "Well, a revolution is a kind of revolt by the people. Not slaves, really, but the lower classes after they have been pushed down and oppressed in some fashion."

"Lower classes," Mused Tauriel. "I assume that simply translates to poorer people?"

"Eh, sort of, but it's more complicated. Like you have nobles up top, peasants and so forth below that. At least among humans."

"We elves have nobility, it's true, and they command us, but they do not oppress us. Every elf has the same rights as others. It is just that some are born to command and others to follow," Tauriel mused.

"And you say that after Thranduil tossed you into jail," Harry grumbled before shaking his head. "Anyway, the main portion of the play is a kind of... well there are several plot points really, coming of age, romance, um redemption, and people attempting to change the status quo with demonstrations only to be violently put down. It's um, really hard to describe."

At Tauriel's somewhat bemused nod, Harry sweatdropped. "I wish I had a pensive, although the amount of time it would take me to make one..." he frowned, thinking about it that then shrugged. "Eh, it could be done something to do for those nights when we are taking Bilbo back home, I suppose. I'd love to show you some of the memories of my world, if only because I think your reaction to a lot of the things that you'll see will be amusing."

Tauriel's eyes narrowed. "I enjoy a sense of humor, Harry Potter, except for when it revolves around practical jokes played on me." She relented when Harry just gave her a smirk, smiling back at him. "Still, that sounds fascinating."

And if it will help you heal further, I am all for it, she thought, taking his hand. Tauriel had actually been trying to get Harry's attention for several minutes while he was lost in memory and had noticed how his face had twisted into a grief-stricken expression as he thought about whatever memory had just passed through his mind. Despite the progress he had made, Harry was not quite right in the head still.

As they wandered through the elven camp, they nodded respectfully to Legolas, who was holding forth with a few of the other commanders. Even now, they were planning out the March back home. Tauriel would go with them but would try to rejoin Harry and Bilbo on the road when they passed through Mirkwood. "We will have to train more members for the Unseen Host, and funerary rites take time in any event, so the campaign against the spiders will not yet have begun by the time you reach Taur-e-Ndaedelos."

They didn't stay long in the elven camp. With the example of the humans and dwarves, Tauriel decided that the overall mood of the elven camp was not to her liking at present, not with Harry taking her arm and a good drink to hand. "Although I maintain that our songs are far better than the cacophony humans and dwarves try to dignify with the term music."

"We will see what you think of Les Mis, or perhaps some Bach and Beethoven," Harry answered, even as he thanked her for letting them return to the other camp. The elven songs were not conducive to good memories for Harry at present.

They returned to the mixed camp, where they saw that the drinks had begun to make fools of men and dwarf alike. Several dwarves had begun to wrestle, which on its own was kind of amusing, while many of the humans had begun to laughingly call for Bard to shoot apples off of people's heads. Tauriel wondered aloud, "Why is that such a feat?"

"It is a drinking game, milady. Fire an arrow, drink a mug of ale," Bard supplied with a chuckle.

"Ah, I see." Lips twitching, Tauriel moved to stand beside Bard, taking the bow and arrow from the man, noting the arrowhead was blunt. It would leave a mark, to be certain, but it probably wouldn't penetrate.

Her victims didn't discover whether or not that was the case, thankfully, as Tauriel quickly proved that regardless of the amount of ale that had passed her lips, she could still outshoot practically any human, knocking arrows off of head while taking gulps from the human's ale after every shot.

The drinks kept coming, and Harry found himself dancing with Fili and Kili while Tauriel laughed nearby. And then Tauriel was in his arms, and they were dancing a sprightly jig even as Tauriel drawled into his ear, "Just because I think it has a good beat does not make this a good song, Harry. I still require proof that humans can sing, even if they know something about rhythm and percussion."

Harry laughed, and the two of them danced and drank the night away, saying farewell to the dead and reveling in being alive in one of the oldest was ever known.

scene break

Sauron was furious as the last vestige of the shadow-self he had left behind in Dol Guldur finally reached the unfinished fortress of Barad-dûr on the side of Mount Doom, rejoining his full fëa (spirit). As it did, Sauron's spirit blazed in agony. While Sauron could be in several places at once as a bodiless Maia, there was a limit to how much he could interact with the world around him. When he had been questioning Olórin, Sauron's full personality and will had invested the portion of his spirit he had left behind in Dol Guldur while the rest had retreated here to prepare Mordor for what was to come.

At the last, Sauron had let hubris guide him. Sauron knew it now. ***I SHOULD HAVE RETREATED WHEN ELROND AND CURUMO APPEARED. I WAS NOT PREPARED TO FACE ONE LIKE GALADRIEL.*** That confrontation had hurt him, had caused Sauron more pain than he had felt since the dissolution of his body when the ring was riven from his hand. ***BLAST THAT NOLDOR TO THE VOID! ONLY WITH MY RING BACK IN MY HAND COULD I FACE NENYA IN THE HANDS OF SUCH AS HER.***

AND CURUMO'S PURSUIT OF ME WAS PAINFUL AS WELL. THE FOOL NIPPED AT MY HEELS THE WHOLE WAY AND COST ME MUCH IN TERMS OF ENERGY. IT WILL BE YEARS BEFORE I WILL BE ABLE TO REFORM MY DISSIPATED NAZGÛL, LEAVING ME ONLY MY BLACK CAPTAIN, WHO I HAD SENT BACK HERE BEFORE THAT CONFRONTATION, LET ALONE EXTEND MY INFLUENCE THROUGH THE WORLD ONCE MORE.

Yet Saruman was somewhat philosophical about such things for all his current agony. He had learned over the ages that one truly needed to be able to recover from losses and not let them crush his spirit. If he did, his dream of coming to rule over Middle Earth as his Master once had hoped to would seem impossible. ***STILL, IT SHOWS THAT FOR ALL HIS OVERTURES, CURUMO IS STILL HIS OWN CREATURE. IF HE WAS TRULY WILLING TO WORK WITH ME, THEN HE WOULD NOT HAVE NEEDED TO HARRY ME SO. BUT THEN WHY HAS HE WORKED WITH ME IN THE PAST...***

As his fëa reformed into the all-seeing eye that was the only physical, and that barely, form he could truly take any longer, Saruman thought about that and then understood the mind of Curumo. ***CLEVER CURUMO, VERY CLEVER. YOU BELIEVE THAT SLAYING ME WILL DESTROY THE ONE RING, BELIEVING THAT IN CLAIMING IT, YOU WILL CLAIM MY POSITION OVER MIDDLE EARTH AND HAVE FLATTERED AND AIDED ME TO MAKE CERTAIN I SURVIVE UNTIL YOU CAN FIND THE RING. AND WEAKENED AS I AM, IF HE FINDS IT IN THE NEXT DECADE... THAT IS ALTOGETHER TOO POSSIBLE.***

I WILL NEED TO BE CAUTIOUS FOR NOW, FOR AT LEAST THE NEXT FIFTY YEARS OR MORE, BUT I MUST FIND THE RING BEFORE SARUMAN OR ANY OF THE WHITE COUNCIL! BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN THAT I CAN COMPLETELY IGNORE MY OTHER PROJECTS.

Finally his shape, such as it was had reformed to the point where he could reach out to his servant. ***"ATTEND ME WITCH KING."***

The form Witch-King of Angmar, now the dread captain of his Nazgûl, flowed up the stairs leading to the tower of Barad-dûr from which Sauron could see across the blasted, ruined landscape of Mordor. The creature who had once been a king of Men went to one knee in front of the All-seeing Eye, silently awaiting orders.

"WHAT HAS OCCURRED WITH AZOG AND HIS ARMY? IS EREBOR OURS?" Busy as he had been escaping from Curumo, Sauron had been unable to sense anything from that battle.

"My Lord, the battle turned against us. The stranger, the one who came from beyond the Void, has shown new powers, taken from Arien. While Azog led well and the salve performed as expected, the stranger and a coalition of beasts, men, dwarves and elves fought from a good position. Their losses were heavy, but Azog is slain. I was barely able to see that much before the last of the crows fled the coming of the eagles," The Witch King reported, sparing nothing.

Sauron snarled bitterly. Azog had shown all the signs of becoming an excellent tool. It was almost enough to make him wish the chariot riders, the Balchoth, had survived the war against Gondor and the Éothéod. With their chariots, they could have reached and attacked Erebor before it was fully recovered. But no, Sauron knew his power in Taur-nu-Fuin (Mirkwood) and the Hithaeglrir (Misty Mountains) were broken for now. The goblins of the mountains had taken catastrophic losses and would be slow to recover numbers and courage. And the fortress of Gundabad, isolated as it was now, would soon fall as well. Only Moria remained, and it was not powerful enough to strike outward.

IF I COULD BUT STRETCH MY HAND OUT, PERHAPS I COULD ROUSE THE EASTERLINGS IN THAT DIRECTION. BUT NOT FOR SOME TIME. BLAST IT! STILL, I MUST DO WHAT I CAN.

Turning his attention back to his chief lieutenant, he ordered, ***“LET THE WORD GO OUT TO ALL OUR HOSTS. I WANT INFORMATION PASSED TO US AS BEST AS POSSIBLE CONCERNING THE STRANGER. ALL EFFORTS ARE TO BE MADE TO TAKE HIM ALIVE. DOG HIS STEPS, HARRY HIM WHEREVER HE GOES. HIS POWERS WILL BE MINE.”*** He waited until the Witch King bowed in obeisance before going on. ***“AS FOR YOU, YOU WILL BE PERFORMING ANOTHER DUTY FOR ME. SEARCH FOR THE ONE RING. I MUST HAVE IT!”***

scene break

Alas, being a wizard did not make one immune to hangovers, something that Harry found the next morning, much to his chagrin. While he was not in direct sunlight, the sound of birds and people moving around nearby acted on his throbbing head like so many blows to the head.

Groaning, Harry pulled himself upright, staring around him, and then down to where Tauriel was laying on his arm. They were fully clothed and lay on what looked like a conjured mattress laid out underneath a tree. That was all to the good in many ways, to be sure, but pulling his currently fully asleep arm out from under Tauriel had Harry clenching his teeth at the pins and needles feeling.

Looking for a freshwater source, Harry found himself near the entrance to Erebor, where he witnessed an argument. “And I say, you will let me in!” an elderly dwarf bellowed. He didn’t look drunk or hungover, just angry, although his shouting was not doing anything for Harry’s own hangover. “I will have knowledge of my family’s holdings! That bastards Gloin isn’t going to get a monopoly on mead in Erebor, not if I can help it!”

“And I say no. I’m sorry, sir dwarf, but you are a little too old and already talking about owning, and money, and so forth. You also were in the mountain recently, meaning you could be susceptible to the Dragon’s Taint. Now, if you had companions to go with you, and waited a bit, that would be well enough. But as you wish to head in alone, I’m afraid you will have to wait,” Bilbo declared firmly.

“Curse you! Erebor is ours, not yours, Dughzah (foreigner)! I will have what my family owns in gold or deed!” The dwarf snarled, his face shifting into one of pure hate and anger for a second, showing that Bilbo might have been all too accurate about the dwarf’s susceptibility to the Taint.

Harry was about to step forward, hangover and all, when the dwarf reached for Bilbo, hands outstretched as if to choke him. But Bilbo dodged to the side, grabbed one of them, and pulled, getting the dwarf into a chokehold of his own, before hopping up and falling backward. This put all of his weight on that one arm as well as the dwarf’s throat, and both of them crashed to the ground.

Shaking his head, Harry moved to where the two could see him, shaking his head as he looked down at the two combatants.

“Hello, Harry,” Bilbo said, grunting a bit as the dwarf stilled, staring up at the wizard. “How are you doing?”

“I did not know you could wrestle, Bilbo,” Harry said, and the dwarf scowled before Harry gestured. Bilbo let him go, and the dwarf suddenly found himself floating. Bobbling really, Harry’s concentration on the spell was suffering mightily at the moment thanks to his hangover.

“We’ve had one incident with the Taint already,” Harry ground out, not because he was really all that angry, rather that speaking through the haze of his pain was quite difficult. “We’re not going to have any more. Listen to Dr. Bilbo over there, or else we’re going to have issues.”

He gestured, and the dwarf began to float away towards the camp, bouncing up and off the ground as he went. He wouldn’t float very far, Harry’s magic would cancel out soon, but he would certainly get the message that his action was not well-received.

“Would you like me to send some of the others up here?”

“Please,” Bilbo requested, wincing a little as he touched his shoulder and arm and then touched his back gingerly. “I came up here to start on planting the last two trees and tending the others early before the crowds started, and he was already trying to enter. If there are any more issues like that, I don’t think I will handle them. While I might have wrestled many another young hobbit in my youth, I haven’t practiced in decades, and even if I had kept up the practice, dwarves are certainly out of my weight class.”

Harry chuckled at that, remarking mentally that was only true in a physical sense. Bilbo had proven time and time again that when it came to willpower and heart, he was a lot stronger than his body might suggest.

“I’m surprised you don’t have a hangover, Bilbo. I know you were drinking just as much as me last night. In fact, I think I remember a drinking game we got into, something about pebble tossing?”

“Actually, it’s only the humans who have to deal with hangovers so easily. It would take a lot more than that to put me in my cups,” Bilbo laughed. “And yes, we played a drinking game called sling stone. It’s like darts for when you don’t have any darts. Literally, that phrase is part of its description.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed, his fingers twitched before he stopped himself. “Right, I’m just going to ignore the envy that first sentence made boil into my brain. I’ll send Fili and Kili up here. They’re young enough to enjoy fighting anyone who comes by who shouldn’t and are royal to boot, so they shouldn’t have to. When they arrive, come and find me, I’ll treat you to breakfast.”

With that, Harry went in search of his other companions, finding Tauriel still lying there asleep, although slowly rousing herself from where they had fallen asleep near the edge of the camp, which had oddly spread out during the night in comparison to how it had been when they went to sleep. Finding a nearby fire pit, Harry relit the woodpile and went to work. *Bacon to start with, I think, and then some bagels. We have butter at least, if not cream cheese, more’s the pity. Hmm... I could transfigure some like*

I did the chocolate... hmm... best to keep that in reserve when Tauriel and I have a proper 'just us' type of date.

Soon, the smell of the cooking bacon had not only Tauriel but others waking up. She came up behind Harry, looking over his shoulder, a faint blush on her features as she remembered bits of the night before. While drunkenness was not new among her people, some of the dances Tauriel remembered from last night were a bit too suggestive. *Still, I cannot find it in me to regret it.* "Hmm, that smells good, Harry."

"Heh. Thank goodness that you elves aren't plant-eaters. I'm afraid that would be a dealbreaker," Harry quipped as he flipped some of the American-style bacon onto a nearby plate.

Tauriel chuckled at that, leaning against his side for a moment as she looked at what he was cooking before deciding to come clean. "And well, it is that you know how to cook. I can craft drinks, and I know of healing poultices and plants despite being a hunter by nature. Cooking, however, is something I have never done beyond making sandwiches."

"I will make you a deal then, Tauriel. Eventually, I will cook you a real meal rather than something like this over a fire. It will have chocolate as a desert to follow other delicacies, and you will be my taste tester." Funnily enough, Harry thought it would be quite fulfilling to cook for someone he was courting rather than someone who demanded he do it on pain of a beating. *And I think Tauriel will prove far more adventuresome than the Vernon fry-everything Dursley.*

"I think I would be delighted to try anything you would be willing to cook, whatever the circumstances," Tauriel smiled, leaning in to give him a small peck on the cheek.

A gruff dwarven voice nearby muttered, "Oh, give it a rest already. Some of us are hungry."

"Some of us need to display proper manners before getting any food, Dwalin," Harry retorted, chuckling a bit as Dain and Thorin came over. Using a spell to hold the pan in place over the fire, Harry exchanged hand clasps with the younger of the two. "Come and eat, friends. I think we've all got a long day ahead of us."

"We've all had our night of fun and frolicking. Now it is time to turn our hands to other things. By the time my people arrive from the Iron Hills, I want Erebor ready to receive them," Thorin stated authoritatively.

Beorn was next, dragging in a deer. "I hunted it down this morning, young Harry, and I was wondering if your spells could make preparing it all the faster."

Harry nodded and began to gesture with his magic, slowly peeling the creature before drawing out the blood with another spell. Cutting it into haunches and ribs was easy, and soon Beorn took over, cooking it over another nearby fire, letting Harry go back to his fresh bread and bacon.

Soon, other humans and dwarves were moving around their own cookfires, with a few elves cooking nearby.

As he did, he listened in on the conversations as Bard joined the others. He learned that Beorn would be leaving shortly but not alone. While his four-legged army had returned to their dens, Beorn would be accompanied by a full squad of humans and wharves. They would strike out from his lands to

scout the Misty Mountains and make certain that the orcs and goblin dens were truly empty. If need be, they would send for aid from Thorin and Bard. Both leaders were certain that once news spread of Erebor's revival, men and women would flock to their banners, which would let them root out such places.

"I wish we could do the same to Dol Guldur. but that is beyond our power," Thorin grunted. "Still, if we can keep the Misty Mountains clear, it will open up an entirely new area for trade for Beorn and his folk and for us."

Beorn nodded, and when Harry looked quizzical at a mention of 'his folk'. Understanding that the big man leaned down and whispered that his ability to shapeshift bred true. If he took a wife, their children would be shapechangers.

And it was only then that Harry realized that many of the human women who weren't already attached around them were looking at Beorn with approval. And Bard, too, although he didn't look as interested. *It looks like Bard's bachelor days will soon be numbered, whether he wants them to be or not. While Beorn seems fully willing to take part in that particular dance.*

Nodding in understanding, Harry looked up as several of the older dwarves he'd seen so far shouted his name. "Is it true that you be a Rune Scribe, Harry Potter? We wish to speak with you," one of them said, stepping forward as a spokesperson.

Having just pulled the last of the bacon out of the pan, Harry nodded before Thorin looked over the group, his eyes narrowing. "Remember one and all I named Harry Potter friend, and if any of my people attempt to take advantage of him, attempt to give Harry less in trade or gold than what your skill of hand and is worth, they will answer to me."

Harry laughed at that while the nearby dwarves who had indicated they wanted to talk to him twitched, carefully hiding flasks of powerful mead behind their bodies and discounting several of their plans going forward. No matter how much fame they could earn being the ones known for creating a whole new branch of rune magic, it would not be worth their young king's ire.

As they ate, Harry and Tauriel sat together, with Harry explaining some of his runes to the men ahead of them. That discussion quickly got rather scientific, the dwarves muttering about different metals, alloys, and material that could hold runes. Not Rune Scribes themselves, their families had still worked with Rune Scribes to create marvels in the past and wanted to make certain the same kind of materials could work for Harry's spellwork.

However, as nice as the morning was, the day went on soon enough. The elves began to depart, including Tauriel. The two of them would need to separate now, but not for a long time.

Before she left, Harry and Tauriel once more walked away from the camps, putting a small overhang between them and any watchers. "Perhaps by the time you and Bilbo are ready to depart, our campaign against the spiders will have begun, regardless of what I said last night. It will depend on how King Legolas will want to handle it," Tauriel said slowly.

Or maybe I will have decided whether or not to introduce you to my family. Sadly I am not certain which thought I find more daunting, Tauriel thought.

“If so, be careful,” Harry warned. “Those spiders are intelligent and have allies in low places. I don’t want to journey through Mirkwood again and find that you have bitten off more than you can chew.”

“Should that not be my line, Mr. Dragon Slayer?” Tauriel shot back tartly, reaching over and pulling at his nose gently, which she had learned last night that he disliked, although he didn’t react to it as much as being struck in the head.

Harry batted her hand away, then caught it, making Tauriel marvel again at how fast Harry could be when he wanted to be. He then leaned down and gently kissed her hand, first it's back, then the palm, and then the pulse point on her wrist. Tauriel felt herself flush but did not look away from his gaze as Harry looked up at her. “Until we meet again, my lady said, stay safe.”

“And you as well,” he said, leaning forward to kiss his cheek right beside his lips. . Then, she turned and raced out from under the overhang. Within moments she had joined the Unseen Host scouting around the rest of the elven army. Soon after that, the many host was on its way, devouring the miles as only elves could.

Harry stared after them for time, then shook her head his head and turned back towards Erebor and the work waiting for him. Even without considering his runes, there was a lot of work to be done here, and Harry knew they’d best be about it.

End Chapter

There you have it, folks. I had hoped to write up a full date-type evening with Harry and Tauriel, but as the captain of the Unseen Host, and one of Legolas’s primary advisors, I couldn’t really convince myself that she would set aside her duty to remain behind. Then too, I wanted to show the various races mourning and the differences therein. If anyone has any problems with how I showed each of the races mourning, remember Lake-Town wasn’t really a warrior community. The dwarves are, and they just scored a major victory despite their losses. They have Erebor back, and a new day is dawning for their people. Whereas the elves? Long before the Fellowship began, Elvish power in Middle Earth had begun to dwindle, not just because they never really recovered from the losses taken in the war against Sauron, but also simply because a lot of their people are passing across the ocean heading, leaving Middle Earth behind. I read on the Tolkien gateway that it was because their spirits are essentially wearing their bodies out, but I don’t think that was mentioned in the books unless it was near the end of the Return of the King as Frodo and everyone left Middle Earth behind.

As for Harry and Tauriel’s courtship, that will be slow and often interrupted affair. However, it will also be a certain thing. Both of them know and acknowledge they are interested in one another and are in it for the long haul, so to speak. Anyway, I hope you all enjoyed this. I will be posting the small story poll for March on the first.

Oh, and as for the American-style bacon... British style just looks... wrong.