

Hey guys, and happy Memorial Day to my Fellow 'muricans!

Here is the finished part of the next chapter of *Fate*. Remember that there will be no Patron Only poll in June. Instead, there will be the second part of this chapter and another S.O.H episode. But I won't return to work on this until the large story is finished.

My priority going into this month will be: 1. Large Story. 2. Small story. When I ran into my Smaug-based writer's block this shifted in May, but I will try my darndest to keep to it this time. 3. Next portion of this chapter. 4. S.O.H episode. This should give my editors enough time to look over the various stories, and if S.O.H episode needs to be cut out, well, the Patron Only restarted rotation poll will be back in July, and we know how that normally goes LOL.

I also have the Bhaalson Remodel back from Justlovereadin' and will be going over it the rest of the night. Would have been done already, but hey, Memorial Day and I got veterans in my family who I was able to hang out with in person. Woo hoo!

Not named Tolkien or Rowling.

Chapter 12 part 1: Hidden Doors Are Hard To Find, Who Knew?

"I tell you I am more than capable of walking," Harry grumbled as he was helped up on to the donkey for the second day of their trek out from Lake-town.

"And I am telling you you aren't!" Oin said, shaking his head. "You don't see Balin or me arguing." The two of them used the second donkey, switching off every few hours. The two old dwarves themselves had been rather more battered during the trip down river than they had been willing to admit.

"To put it bluntly, neither of you are arguing with being forced to use the donkeys because you are of an elderly persuasion. The last time I checked, I wasn't," Harry retorted dryly.

That won a round of laughter from the dwarves, but Bilbo held up his hand, offering, "If Harry does not want to be up on his donkey, I would cheerfully change positions with them."

"Ha!" Thorin chuckled. "Master Baggins, we could put both of you on that donkey, and it would probably still count it as a very good day. But no, Harry. You'll stay up there until Oin says you are healed. I want you at your best when we get to the mountain."

Harry scowled at his friend. "I would've thought that you would begrudge the time my healing from this leg wound is taking from our sword lessons." They'd continued those here and there on their journey, and Harry knew that Thorin was still extremely disdainful of Harry's skill with the blade.

"I do, and when you are better, trust me that I will work you hard to make up for it," Thorin said, causing Dwalin to bark a crack of laughter and for Fili and Kili to shake their heads in commiseration.

"You're in for it, Harry. Best you rest up at while you can. My uncle's idea of training hard makes even most dwarves balk," Kili intoned dramatically, patting Harry on his uninjured thigh as he passed by, heading to the front of the column. With his bow he routinely moved ahead of the rest of the dwarves, while Bilbo and Fili were at the back of the column, doing what they could to remove any trace of the

dwarves' passage. Despite the fact that they had defeated the band of orcs and goblins that had been following after them, Thorin was unwilling to take the chance that another, similar band was out there.

"I will cheerfully take up that challenge if I can stand on my own two feet, rather than this admittedly robust animal." Harry replied dryly, patting the donkey on the neck. "If I spend any more time up here, you'll simply be exchanging the wound in my leg for another covering the entirety of my ass!"

Once more laughter came from all of the dwarves nearby who appreciated humor like that, and on the march towards the Lonely Mountain and their former homes needed it sorely. Harry had noticed since leaving Lake-town that one or two of the dwarves occasionally would stop their trek, staring ahead of them at the mountain as if mesmerized. It was only when Harry passed Gloin by that he realized that mesmerized wasn't quite the right word. Haunted fit better.

Seeming to have noticed the same thing, Bilbo had taken it upon himself to talk to anyone who would listen about his teenage years, when he and his friends had engaged in pranks and various adventures in an effort to keep the dwarves morale up. Harry had been particularly interested in tales which touched on the Brandybuck river and the lands next to the Old Forest, and now as they began their second day out from Lake-town, he asked for more tales about the forest itself. "Have you ever been inside?"

"Personally, no, although perhaps when I return I might explore within. After this journey, tales of the Old Forest hold scant fear." Bilbo chuckled, shaking his head, before smirking slyly up at Harry. "Although why the interest in the Old Forest, are you thinking of exploring its depths with a certain someone?"

"Ha! That just proves there something wrong with your head Harry!" Bofur shouted from nearby, ducking between Balin and Harry's donkeys, grinning up at the human before moving to the other side of the column and reaching for a series of berries he had spotted. "The only green thing that should ever be part of any courtship are emeralds!"

"That shows what you dwarves know about it," Bilbo scoffed, grabbing the dwarf's hand before he could touch the berries. "And I will be very careful picking those. The leaves of that particular bush tends to cause itching for quite some time." He then reached forward, being extremely careful to pluck at the various berries himself, and half of them to the dwarf. "Even if the berries are quite tasty."

"I keep telling you, that Tauriel and I are not involved. There is no courtship going on." Harry knew he was blushing a bit, and didn't like it, or the tone of pout he heard in his voice just now. "We're simply friends that's all, which is quite odd enough given everything that occurred since we all met the elves of Mirkwood."

"True enough my lad, but through all of that, your and Tauriel's interactions proved that you are both attracted to one another to anyone with eyes to see," Balin said from behind Harry, causing him to turn in the saddle to give the older dwarf a look of betrayal. But Balin simply shook his head with a chuckle. "Such things should be grasped my lad, not avoided, we dwarves know that all too well. I know you still have some... issues inside your own head, and I know you think that Tauriel's loyalty to her king will get in the way. But from what I saw, that last at least is not insurmountable. And the issues in your head seem to be fading out as we have travelled too."

"I am a human, she's Elvish. Aren't there are a lot of old cautionary tales and taboos against that kind of union?"

"No taboo. To have become a taboo it would have to have occurred often enough to be even seen as possible, which it hasn't." Balin shook his head. "Indeed, I can only think of one union of man and woman, and that's the one that resulted in Elrond, eventually."

You're talking about Luthien Tinuviel and Beren," Bilbo said, and all the dwarves turned to him in surprise. They had forgotten since leaving Elrond's hall that Bilbo was actually quite incredibly well-read, especially in terms of history of the elvenkind. That was a tale that few dwarves knew. "And while their union might've been cursed, it was not cursed by they themselves Harry. It is known that they had many happy years together once given their second life."

There was some grumbling at that from the older, more learned dwarves, since during that second life was when dwarves had entered the tale of Beren.

One of the Simarils, the same Beren and Luthien had stolen from Morgoth had been placed in the necklace of Nauglamir but the Silmaril madness had driven the dwarves to try and claim it, killing the king in doing so and plunging Doriath and the dwarven nation of Nogrod into bloody war which had ended in the destruction of Doriath. Beren had come upon the dwarves with a force of men while the dwarves had been returning home, challenged and killed their king in single combat before the rest of the host had been annihilated by Ents.

Indeed, so complete had that destruction been that it was only through the tales of elves that the totality was known. Because of that, many dwarves, those who knew the tale at all, disputed the idea that they had been the villains in the sack of Doriath.

Thorin did not. As much as he loathed most elves, he knew that magic like the Silmarils was beyond his people's ability to cope with. So he quickly changed the topic. "Enough of that, now is not the time for such dark tales. Bilbo, tell us more of the Old Forest." His lips twitched. "We will leave off teasing Harry about his love life for now." His gaze then twitched over to his nephews. "After all, at least he **has** a love life. Which is more than I could say for some dwarves here, whose prospects should have enabled them to start attracting a dam if not for their attitudes. Or do you call my sister, your mother, a liar?"

Fili blushed rosily, and quickly ducked under one of the donkeys, heading towards the back of the column, while his brother just as quickly continued his aborted journey to the front of the column.

Despite a rueful twist to his lips, Harry nodded his head towards Thorin in an abbreviated thanks, knowing that the dwarves would set in on him again. With the shadow of the mountain looming ever larger as they continue towards it, all of them were more than happy to find what pleasure they could at poking fun at him or Bilbo or one another. But that was all right with Harry. It wasn't the first time he'd been made fun of. *And maybe they have a point about Tauriel anyway, much as I don't want to think about it until Smaug's dealt with.*

Bilbo's tales about the Old Forest took them meandering through the various interactions the Hobbits had with it and of course, its denizens, as well as the one time they'd been forced to fight off a wolf rider pack, intent on ravaging the Shire coming over the frozen Brandybuck. That garnered a lot of

interest from the dwarves, although what Harry was most interested were Bilbo's tales which touched on the old man of the forest, Tom Bombadil. Harry remembered that Gandalf had mentioned him in passing when they had spoken that night in the Shire, and now he asked Bilbo what he made of him.

Bilbo frowned thoughtfully, scratching at his hair for a moment, noting that he needed to get a haircut at some point. Alas, I'm not about to trust any of the dwarves, except for perhaps Fili with that task. Only Thorin and Fili seems to take much interest in their looks, and Thorin preferred a shaggier, if somehow still authoritative, appearance than Bilbo was comfortable with. "I don't rightly know I've heard many a tale about him, and yet the truth is often elusive."

"As is Tom himself!" The hobbit laughed shaking his head. "He might look human, but I rather doubt he is. Considering that none of the tales have ever mentioned any aging. My personal theory is that he is a Maiar of Yavanna who has taken up residence in the Old Forest to help control the fell trees there."

"Do they truly move?" Ori asked. "That sounds kind of terrifying!"

"Like the old tales about the tree folk," Dori, agreed. While few knew about how they had destroyed Nogrod's army, Ents were still something of a social nightmare to dwarves.

"I've heard of them, Ents," Harry murmured.

"So have I, and not just in a tale or two here and there. But no, these are most definitely trees. They don't communicate with one another verbally as the tree folk were supposed to, and they certainly don't physically attack most of the time."

"Which Ents certainly would,," Bombur muttered shivering. The idea of moving trees was just **wrong!** *Lumber shouldn't have an opinion of if it's time to be chopped.*

"Exactly. No these are trees, and they only move when they are not being looked at. They block trails, crowd the walls, grow over top of it, try to undermine it. According to the Brandybucks, they Willowindill is the center of it all, but as I said, old Tom Bombadil seems to be able to control them, or scare them, anyway."

Harry nodded, and was about to say something, when he noticed Bifur had stopped, staring ahead of them, his eyes shadowed and lost. He sighed, and reached out from the saddle, tapping the dwarf on the head. When Bifur turned to look at them, Harry gave him a concerned, commiserating glance and Bifur nodded back, shaking his head once before moving along the column, resolutely keeping his eyes away from a boulder set to one side of the route that they were following towards the distant mountain, as if trying to keep a memory at bay.

As the day continued and as the next day dawned, the morose, withdrawn attitude of the dwarves began to become more and more prominent. Even Harry and Bilbo's continued efforts to take their minds off of the Lonely Mountain and what they would find within began to fail, the dwarves just not taking part in the conversation any longer outside of Fili, Kili and Ori, who could not remember anything of the mountain, not having been born there. But eventually, those three too fell silent, affected by the gloomy, withdrawn air of the others.

Eventually their attitude even began to affect Bilbo, as he paused one day, staring around him, then moving away from the others, working his toes into the soil for a moment before kneeling down and doing the same with his hands. "There was a farm here," he murmured, staring around them.

Harry frowned, looking around himself, but couldn't see it. All Harry could see was a few blackened trees and a small, cleared area with nothing within it. Not even one stone on another.

"Aye, there was. And more than one. When most humans and even elves think of dwarven nations, they always think in terms of our tunnels, our underground cities. And while it's true that most dwarves would prefer to sleep with a real roof over our heads as it's said, even dwarves need the outside world for food. Most of our food admittedly came from trade with Dale but there were a few things that we grew on our own, and we always had enough farms of our own just in case," Balin answered a little bit happier than he had a second ago, eager to actually talk about their ancient nation without touching upon its fall.

"I remember of a morning, watching from my guard post as the farmers left Erebor to head to their steadings," Dwalin opined. "A few of them would start a singing chant, I remember a few of the words even now. "For the sun has risen, and we must go to work the soil, for food on the plate is as good as a ring on the finger'."

For some reason that caused Bilbo to glance away even as he rejoined them, but his voice was normal as he replied. "Some of this soil could still be usable right away. Something to think about. But tell us more about your people, Balin. Not their end, but your own lives here. What was it like growing up in Erebor?"

From then on, one or the other of the dwarves would speak, talking about the area around the mountain, and a small childhood adventure they had. Many of them ended with "and when my father caught me, he thrashed me, but it was worth it in the end!" It appeared as if having teenage adventures was something hobbits and the dwarves had in common, even if the type of adventure varied wildly. Bilbo's adventures mostly dealt with sneaking up on people, playing small pranks, and stealing mushrooms. The dwarves spoke of campouts in the woods, stealing away real weapons to play fight with, and then wrestling matches whose violence always got out of hand to the point an adult was called for.

As they traveled on that third day, the hills began to become steeper, leading up into the side of the Lonely Mountain. The dwarves now were past their grief stage, they were still grim, but no longer seeming to have moments of complete disconnect. Yet Bilbo began to exhibit much the same attitude.

Harry looked at him, and reached down from the saddle, grabbing at his shoulder once when Bilbo seemed almost to be about to run into the rear of the other donkey. "Ho there Bilbo, you've been looking out of it all day. What's wrong?"

Bilbo looked up at him, one eyebrow rising in question. "Surely you can feel it too. You felt it when we reached Mirkwood."

His brows furrowing, Harry looked around them, then slowly shook his head. "I can't sense anything yet, Bilbo. But you are certain there is some kind of corrupting touch on the land here?"

“Not quite. It was far stronger, in the ground than in the trees or air as it was in Mirkwood. A lesser corruption but still something there, something foul I can feel through my toes.”

Thorin had been silent most of the day, staring ahead of him like a man possessed. Now hearing Bilbo speak like that he seemed to come out of it, moving back to Bilbo and Harry from where he had been talking to Balin who was riding ahead of Harry today rather than behind. He looked at Harry, then said slowly, “Elrond, he mentioned something. The dragon’s Taint. Do you think, Master Baggins, that you can fight this whatever it is?”

“If it is in the soil, yes,” Bilbo answered firmly. “With the blessings of Yavanna and my own knowledge of the soil, I can safely say that. Whether or not I can do it to something else, something the Dragon has touched, for example...”

“Like gold,” Harry interjected, unwilling to dance around the issue like Bilbo was.

“Yes that. I don’t know yet. I think a tree perhaps, a new sapling placed nearby and blessed to Yavanna and Aulë would work. Considering that Erebor is a dwarven nation, calling upon the smith for aid would no doubt help.”

“Here, here Mr. Baggins!” Thorin said, reaching out to clasp Bilbo on the shoulder, nodding his head up to Harry as well. “Thank you for that. Knowing that there is indeed something of a taint from the dragons staying in our city, will help all of us fight the influence of it I think.”

“So would humor,” Harry drawled, waving his hand towards Thorin.

Unlike the elves Harry had previously used this particular trick on, Thorin had no magical sense of his own. The first he realized what Harry had done, was when Nori, walking ahead of them, chanced to glance back, and then promptly began to heal over in laughter, shouting out “polka dots! I never would’ve thought you polka dots fan Thorin!”

“What?” Thorin looks down at himself, and then growled in anger, as he saw that he was indeed dressed now entirely in white, with a red and purple polka dots. Even his beard had changed, matching the colors of the rest of his clothing so well that it almost blended in, a travesty for any dwarf. “Remove this at once Harry!”

“The moment you acknowledge that you would find it funny if it was on anyone else, I will remove it,” Harry promised.

With the snickers and outright guffaws of his fellows, Thorin had to concede the point, looking down at himself, letting out snort. “Very well, I so acknowledge,” he said formally, his eyes twinkling dangerously. “Although, I will warn you, Harry. Oin did say you were but another day away from being let off that donkey. And you have been complaining all over about not getting enough exercise. I think I can give my fellow dwarves a laugh, without being the specific laughingstock of it...”

Harry however, simply grinned down at him. “When the time comes I’ll take my lumps with good cheer. Until then, all hail Thorin Oakenshield, Lord of polka dots!”

“All hail!” Said more than one dwarf until Thorin charged Gloin, who was the nearest dwarf, grabbing him up by the waist, and tossing him to the ground shouting out about how he still could

remember how to wrestle with the best of them. "If you want to laugh, you had best be prepared to pay for it!"

The next day, Harry was sore for an entirely new reason, as indeed, Oin had given the okay for him to start walking again. Thorin had instantly grasped with both hands and put Harry through the ringer, pushing him as hard as he could to basically restart his sword training, calling a few of the other dwarves to help.

Harry however hadn't taking this lying down. Instead he had tossed Bilbo and a few of the others under the bus with him. "I'm not going to do this alone! There are others here who could benefit from actual weapons training not just me. Bilbo for one, Ori, Nori, Dori and Bombur could use some training as well."

Most of those named protested, saying that they had gotten this far and they didn't need any training. Thorin and Dwalin disagreed, however, and soon had most of the dwarves began training every night, going through specific move withs swords axes or warhammer, while Kili and Fili kept watch.

Bilbo too was roped into things, although in his case, he was turned over to Balin who, despite his reluctance to fight was the third best swordsman among the dwarves and the only one who used anything that could be called a short sword. Of course, a short sword for dwarf was still a longsword for a hobbit, but he could teach Bilbo some exercises at least.

Still, despite his soreness, Harry was happy to be on his feet.

That feeling stayed with him for half that day, until the trail began to become even steeper than it had been, the side of the mountain looming above them. It didn't happen smoothly at all, as had been the case when they had entered the mountain range. No, here, hills became mountain very suddenly, the entire environment around them changing as stone replaced scattered shrub and forest and the hill they were on led into a massive cliff face.

Harry stared upward, and upwards still more, shaking his head slowly as he took in the sheer immensity of the Lonely Mountain. "I thought I was prepared for this, from your tales about how the land around the Lonely Mountain changed. But that is entirely different from standing at the bottom of this thing! I feel dwarfed."

"Poor choice of words there, Harry," Bilbo muttered, as the dwarves all groaned, and Dwalin went so far as to smack Harry on the back so powerfully that he caused the human to stumble forward a few steps. "Yet I agree with the sentiment."

Since the trail ahead of them ended here, Thorin led them to the east, knowing the roughly on which side of the mountain they would find their entrance. Finding the trail that led up words took Thorin and Balin sometime despite that start, but eventually, they found a small, barely passable 'trail' leading upward. Here, they had to go in single file, and very slowly and more often than not, their left sides were completely open to a daunting drop off the mountain.

Because of this, and because of the difficulty of the trail, and occasionally the need to set up ropes and take breaks during the day, their speed dropped dramatically. And no more could they put out cook fires either. There just wasn't enough space for it on the trail, and no wood. All food was now eaten cold, and in smaller lots.

Yet as they did, and as Thorin started to search for the hidden door, Harry turned his mind to other matters. That evening he started to create small, scent-masking runic arrays. He and Bilbo had experimented with Bilbo's herbal concoction and decided it didn't work well enough to put their lives on the line with it. The herbs would still prove useful, but not enough.

Thus the runic arrays and Notice-me-Not arrays would hopefully keep them all from being spotted right away from the Dragon. Although Harry didn't know if they would continue to work once the dragon became aware of them since no one could give him a proper answer as to how magical a creature the dragon was. Considering it was a giant fire-breathing lizard that flew, Harry considered that the fact it was magical in the first place was pretty obvious. The question was, could it detect magic.

The dwarves quickly noticed what he was doing. "What is that you're working on now, Harry?" Fili asked, sitting beside Harry on the trail. "That doesn't look like the same configuration you've been doing the past few nights." Harry had begun to create Notice Me Not arrays when they left Lake-town.

"It isn't. The others are to make people not notice the user, this is to make your scent disappear, which isn't a sense that most people who use the first type of array tend to think of. The only problem is, I have no idea how to test it. None of us have the same level of knows that even a wolf might, let alone a dragon."

"That's simple enough," Dwalin snorted, looking over at Ori past his brother Dori. "You, you are famous for making stink bombs at one point weren't you? Make a few, toss them down the trail and then have Harry set this rune stone in the middle of them."

"That could work, although maybe we should try it on a moving person too. Any volunteers?" Harry quipped, to many chuckles.

"I thought we were all still hoping that Smaug would be dead," Bofur's voice came from somewhere around a twist in the trail, his tone confused. "Why are you making those Harry before we can even figure out if he's alive or dead. Seems a lot of effort."

"It's always better to be prepared, rather than scramble after the fact," Gloin intoned from the same direction. "Do you have any other ideas Harry?"

Harry looked over at Thorin over Fili's head. The two of them had talked about Smaug several times over the trip, in particular when they were in the cells of Mirkwood. Thorin nodded at him, indicating he could say whatever he wanted, and Harry began. "Well, like I said, this current runic array I'm working on right now, is to mask our scents. I have others that can mask movement and sound, if only for a given value of both. It wouldn't cover say someone walking across a room of gravel but it would cover someone whispering to someone else. That's half of my battle plan: keeping us all hidden as much as possible, not allowing Smaug to find a target."

"I like that idea," Bilbo called out from somewhere behind a number of the dwarves.

"As do I, but that is defensive. What about all offensive? It pains me to say it, but even my weapons won't do much against Smaug," Dwalin grumbled, staring around Ori to where Harry's sword lay beside him. "Are you certain we can't try to use that blade of yours?"

Of course, he hadn't been practicing with the sword of Gryffindor when he was being trained by Thorin, that would've been stupid. Instead, Thorin had created a wooden blade that was heavier than the sword, forcing Harry to work his muscles even more than he would if he was when his own sword, and thus helping him to train his endurance.

"Go ahead. If any of you can pick it up. I most certainly don't need to be the one to deal the final blow or anything like that. I like to think I don't have that large an ego," Harry answered, his tone dry.

With that, Dwalin eagerly stood up from where he had been shimmying himself around Ori and reaching down grab the sword. While he was not a swordsman, he was a hammer and axe lover through and through, there was something to be said about a blade that had such a deadly kick to it Harry's blade was supposed to.

But as he tried to lift it up, the sword didn't move. It steadfastly refused his efforts, not even shifting in place as he grunted and heaved, veins standing out on his neck. "What, what the?! It's so heavy I can't lift it!"

Harry nodded, reaching down to the blade and lifting it up gently. "I have no idea why, but when I was given this blade in the first place, I was told that you had to have a few special qualities, that only a person which held the values it's owner believed were important would be able to wield it. Honestly of all the dwarves here, you, Kili and Thorin would probably closest to that ideal, Dwalin, so I have no idea why it rejected you. Sorry."

"That's the problem with magical blades, they have magic in them," Balin mocked, causing his brother to laugh, losing some of the anger his face as he returns to his place between Balin and Ori, the younger dwarf grumbling at having to scrunch himself up to let the older, bigger dwarf pass.

"Smoke," Thorin grunted, leaning back from his meal, looking around at them, and dragging the conversation back to the dragon at hand. "In a cave or a mine, smoke can be deadly and even a dragon needs to breathe, although we will need to close all of the shutters leading outside. That was part of my plans of dealing with Smaug, the other part was attempting to pin it down by dropping the ceiling on him."

"That would depend on where Smaug is, but it's certainly an idea. As is the need to stop it from getting out.," Balin opined, while many of the other dwarves made noises of shock, astonished at Thorin's willingness to talk about destroying segments of Erebor. But to Thorin, sacrificing part of the whole was something he was willing to do. Slaying Smaug and claiming the mountain after was the thing. "

"Is the main door the only way that Dragon can come in and out of the mountain?" Harry questioned.

"Indeed it is, and that too is where we would be most able to drop the roof down on him," Thorin answered with Dwalin and Gloin nodding in unseen agreement. "There is a final defense set there, a series of dead drops in the ceiling, which, if you pull them out will drop several tons of rock down onto the entrance hall. I just don't know if the mechanisms will still work."

“We’ve been talking about hiding ourselves from Smaug’s senses, but Thorin just talked about smoke, that’s a...” Bilbo paused trying to think of a word. “An indirect attack?” When the nearby dwarves all nodded indicating they understood, he went on. “And the herbs Ori and I have combined can surely make Smaug wish he didn’t have a nose. Is there some way of attacking Smaug’s ability to see? Above and beyond the smoke, I mean?”

“What about maybe using molten metal or something? I was a youngling when we left, but I worked in the smelters, and I remember how big some of those cauldrons were. Surely we could do something with them?” Bifur opined, his words attenuated by distance but still audible.

“Maybe, if we could get one of them right above his head,” Harry cautioned. “I don’t think anything less than that would work, considering that Smaug isn’t going to just stand there and take it.”

Balin “Indeed not. While against us he never needed really to use his brain, it is known that all dragons are fiendishly intelligent. Smaug won’t allow us to attack it like that.”

“These are all good ideas, but I think were missing one important point. We need more information on the environment within the mountain,” Thorin said. “Let’s put our heads together tonight and on the march tomorrow boys, see if we can come up with a map of the mountain. That will help Bilbo and Harry when they go ahead to scouting out. Only when we have all the information necessary, will we all move into the mountain to attack Smaug together.”

Over the next few nights, , the dwarves settled down and began to plan out the interior of the mountain as best they could. Apparently, interior maps of the place had been created at one point, but none of the survivors of Smaug’s attack had thought to take any with them. But together, the group began to recreate one debating on where bits of interior went in relation to one another, and where the secret tunnel would come out.

Meanwhile, Harry and Bilbo worked with the trio of youngsters on their swordsmanship as much as they could given the narrow confines of the trail, and Harry finalized his into the sand runic array.

Eventually, they reached an area of the trail where they were forced to leave the donkeys behind, tying them together and around a rocky promontory. One of the dwarves would come back down the trail after that to feed them on a daily basis, but it was too steep now to take them alone, Indeed, wthe dwarves Bilbo and Harry actually climbed up walls of stone to continue on their way. But the fact that those walls of stone had hand and foot holds carved into them was a sign that they were getting close to where the secret door might be.

On the fourth day after arriving at the foot of the mountain, they arrived at what looked at first to be a dead end. The trail opened, coming out on to an area that was almost as flat as a table, and was about a hundred yards wide to a side, one side of which opened out into a cliff face, while at the other side the end of the trail was marked by a rocky escarpment, the top of which none of them could see.

“It’s here,” Thorin announced, looking around him thoughtfully. “The hidden door must be here.”

“Lovely. Now, exactly how are we supposed to find a hidden door, with hidden runes on it?” Harry asked dryly.

“And the setting sun, of the last line of Midsummer will shine upon the keyhole’,” Bilbo quoted, looking around them. “We’re what, four or five days early for the last light? Unless you think you can find it, Harry?”

“Even if he could find the door, unless we blasted it open using his magic, which I don’t think we want to do, be rather like announcing our presence to Smaug after all, the keyhole would still not be there,” Bombur grumbled, laying out on one side. Harry had used another spell to lighten his load a bit, but even so, the fattest dwarf was feeling the burn from that last bit of the trail.

Harry nodded looking around thoughtfully. “I think I can sense something here, some kind of magic in the air. I can’t tell what it is though. Nor do I have any idea how I would go about finding a magically hidden keyhole which only responds to a certain type of light. I could play with the Lumos, but, if it’s a specific type of light and needing to shine at a specific place from a specific angle?” Harry chuckled. “The phrase, needle in a haystack comes to mind.”

“Agreed. Barring a miracle in that area, we will have to wait and be on our guard,” Thorin shrugged. “We got here in enough time, that is the important thing. We will continue to plan, continue to train, and eventually, we will be not only ready, but able to take the fight to Smaug and reclaim our homes.”

The dwarves all answered with a cheer, even as they cast wary glances at the opening to one side. Bilbo also nodded, although he looked up at another sound was heard nearby. As he looked around, to one side a thrush landed on a rock, looking at them with beady eyes, trilling a song.

Harry looked at it to, shrugged, and pulled out some jerky. He tore off a piece, and tossed it to the bird, who caught it deftly, nodding his head in thanks almost, and began to tear at it with its beak. “We have the thrush too, it seems.”

Thorin nodded firmly, then ordered the others to start setting up camp, while he told Harry to come over towards him, and they would begin their training once again.

Later, as the dwarves bustled around the camp preparing the evening meal and taking some oats back down the trail to the donkeys, Harry sat dangling his legs over the edge of the cliff. Several of the dwarves had looked ill at this, and even Bilbo shivered and turned away. To them, sitting like that was a sign of insanity, but to Harry, heights held no fears.

With the others busy behind him, Harry set aside his rune carving kit, staring out into the distance, specifically, the lake and beyond, where the forest lay. *I wonder, what is going on out there? Not just with Tauriel, but with Gandalf too. I thought he was supposed to meet us here and I can’t escape the feeling that something happened to... delay him.*

OOOOOOO

Those were two very separate questions, although it would not have surprised Harry to know that indeed, something had happened to Gandalf. Although by the time Harry was worrying about it, the aforementioned wizard had nearly 6 days to both recover and it on the trail again afterward since being rescued.

At the same time Harry was staring towards Mirkwood, Mithrandir, and the two sons of Elrond were entering the lands of that forest claimed by Thranduil and his folk.

"I must thank you for your aid Radagast. You sped us on our way most effectively," Mithrandir thanked his fellow wizard, as he clung to the back of Radagast's rabbit drawn sley.

"It is no trouble at all, Gandalf. You, the Lady Galadriel and Elrond did what I could not: you cleansed Dol Guldur. My home will be much safer now," the brown-garbed wizard of forests and animals answered with a chuckle.

"That may be, but I will not say that that place is cleansed," Elladan said shaking his head. "The chief darkness within has been routed, but it is still a place of evil. I know that Thranduil's people resided there before the last war of Elves and Men, but I could not detect any hint of goodness there."

"Such is the touch of Sauron," Radagast replied. "But so long as the fell things, the orcs and such, can be convinced to move on, the forest and living things will eventually reclaim it." He paused, looking shifty. "Er, I hope anyway."

"How much further do you think before we start seeing patrols brother?" Elrohir suddenly question, his tone implying something that went over the two wizards' heads.

"I think we are already in sight of one, brother," Elladan laughed, and turned to the surrounding forest shouting out "Ho cousins, should you not be showing yourselves to welcome us? Are we unwelcome indeed, or has our odd conveyance stunned you so much that your manners have left you?"

"The second option, wanderer," said a voice, and four elves made themselves known all around the sley which slewed to a stop, the rabbits all rearing up and looking around ta. Three of them were staring at it, although one of the elves was looking with scant favor on the wizards and the two sons of Elrond half Elven. "What brings you to our lands?" That one asked almost brusquely.

Elrohir was off the sled and stepping forward quickly, so quickly that the other elves backpedaled quickly. But Elrohir stopped abruptly at the edge of sword range, holding up his hand in and Elvish greeting. "I think that your manners have yet to return. Perhaps we should start on our side then. I am Elrohir, this is my brother Elladan. We bring Mithrandir, to meet with King Thranduil, with tidings brought from lady Galadriel and our father Lord Elrond."

The man stumbled back, but eventually, with the two brothers watching him, raised his hand in equal greeting, intoning formally, "be welcome in the land of {check name}. Follow us, and we will take you to the king."

"Good," Mithrandir said sharply. "He and I need to have words, and then, we must be off soon after."

"As you say Mithrandir," the elf replied, now somewhat obsequious in comparison to his previous attitude.

The squad of elves moved ahead of the two wizards and the two foreign brothers, allowing Mithrandir after saying his farewells to Radagast. With that done and Radagast sked to keep an eye on Dol Guldur, he looked over at Elrohir and ask quietly, "And what was all about?"

“Nothing that need to concern you, Mithrandir. Let us just say that some in {} and the White Harbor still hold a grudge against our lineage for various reasons. At times, it is because we can trace our lineage through Elrond to a human, and many elves still resent the fact that because of Beren, they lost Luthien for all time. And some, resent the fact that Elrond our father has received such importance despite being half-elven.”

“Foolish, more than foolish.” Gandalf scoffed. “To harbor such divisions even in peace is beyond stupidity. Especially given the fact that Elvish power in this world has continued to wane since the time of the Last War of Elves and Men.”

“It has never gotten to the point where it will threaten that peace, just harsh words and harsher glares in times of local trouble,” Elladan replied quickly. “But Thranduil is...” He paused, thinking of a polite way to say what he thought of the lord of the {}.

“Not the leader his father is reputed to have been,” Elrohir supplied, once more letting his tone imply more.

Mithrandir frowned at that, scratching at his beard, noting absently that he desperately needed a shower. Not so much because of the state of his beard, but because he could still feel the touch of Sauron on his mind and hoped that a nice shower would at least let him rid himself of that. But his frown had much more to do with what the two brothers were saying that the memory of his confrontation with Sauron. “Tell me, how exactly do you think that Thranduil would respond to Harry and the dwarves coming through his territory?”

“As long as they stayed on the Eastern Road he would have to leave them alone. Although, come to think of it... Can you think of the last time we saw anyone coming from the East brother, elfen or human?” Elrohir questioned.

Elladan shook his head. “I can’t, and we skirted around the edge of the forest all the way down to Dol Guldur. Why?”

“The touch of Sauron his heavy in this forest, and may well have spread far enough north to perhaps pervert the spells on the path, unless Thranduil was being proactive about keeping them from being so tainted,” Mithrandir supplied his frown deepening.

To that neither brother had an answer and the group moved on in silence. Early the next day, they came upon the entrance to {}. The wizard and his guardians were left in quickly, through the city and to the halls of Thranduil. There, Mithrandir was greeted with a joyful cry of, “Mithrandir!”

Legolas, prince of the {}, moved towards the old man, clasping his Gandalf in a hug. The two of them had met before several times when Gandalf came through the forests. Gandalf returned the hug, but then Legolas pulled back, smiling wanly, and, surprisingly, somewhat warily at Mithrandir as if a thought had just occurred to him. “What brings you to my father’s halls?”

“A few matters. You will learn of them when I told him them, young Legolas,” Mithrandir retorted, although he was smiling at the young elf, who looked somewhat affronted at his use of the word ‘young’ as he did. After all, he wasn’t young, he was over five hundred. Which, while younger than many of his folk, certainly did not make him a stripling.

“And yet, I can sense a heaviness to you, and indeed, a heaviness to the air here. What has been going on? And does it have anything to do with my friend young Harry, and the dwarves I left in his charge?” Mithrandir asked shrewdly.

“So you truly were a friend of Harry’s then...” Legolas seem to pale at that, shaking his head. “Then your meeting with my father will be interesting indeed.”

“What has happened?” Mithrandir growled pinning the young elf in place with a glare, as he stomped the butt end of his staff on the ground, causing a loud cracking noise, far louder than it should’ve made. “Speak.”

“If you wish to speak to anyone in my halls Mithrandir, perhaps you should show the common courtesy to speak to me first,” Thranduil’s voice cut off whatever answer his son might have made from the top of the staircase leading up to the royal quarters. Mithrandir looked in that direction, locking gazes with the king, who stared down at him, his expression one of cold aloofness, before he turned and moved away, heading into the same room where he had entertained Harry and Thorin months ago.

Gandalf stared after him, then looked over at Legolas who did not meet his gaze. “I am building an image, an image of events here. And I do not like what I am imagining,” he mused aloud, before moving towards the stairs, heading upwards, not even glancing side to side of the two guards stationed there nor the guards stationed outside the room leading into where Thranduil waited for him.

“Will you not offer an old man a drink?” He asked the king as he entered.

Scoffing Thranduil waved Mithrandir into a seat across from him at the table. “I will offer you a chair, and if what you have to say places me, I may offer you some of my wine. But I will hear your news first.”

“Very well. But before that, can you tell me when young Harry, and the dwarves with him passed through your lands? They had made excellent time over the Misty Mountains, I hope they did not lose it in passing through Mirkwood.”

Thranduil raised an eyebrow fractionally but otherwise did not react. “And why should I care for dwarves, or one lone human?”

“Do not play games with me!” Mithrandir growled. “Anyone with power can tell what Harry is. And I know him well enough to know he would mention Elrond and me if you the two of you ever met. I can tell something has happened. Legolas is looking guilty, and you are looking far too aloof and cold, even from the last time I saw you. So tell me what is going wrong.”

“The last time you saw me... that was a long time ago,” Thranduil kept his own tone light, almost jokingly but there was nothing joking about his face as he stared at Mithrandir. “I was newly come into my position then and you came requesting aid in telling the goblins of the mountains. I gave it. That was a long time ago.” He repeated. “Much has happened, much darkness has come into this world.”

“Indeed it has and indeed that darkness spread once more. News of that darkness was brought to the Council of wise thanks to my brother Radagast. Yet I wonder, given your own proximity to Dol Guldur, why we had to hear of it from him, when he lives far to the south of that ancient bastion. Why did you not send word of the vileness within when it began to spread once more?”

Thranduil did not respond, and Mithrandir shook his head. "It has often been said, 'beware the folly of Kings'. Perhaps it should instead read beware the pride. No matter the race, I have found you to be a foolish lot once you put a crown on your head!"

Thranduil surged to his feet, glaring angrily at the old man. "These are my halls Mithrandir, and I will demand you keep a civil tongue in your head."

The wizard did not respond at all, merely staring back at the elf coldly. "I may think about it when you stop prevaricating and answer me. Tell me, what happened when you met Harry and the dwarves?"

"When they trespassed on my lands, I had them seized as is my right. I became aware of Harry's power at that point, it is true. But he refused to help me learn how to use his spells and was quite rude. He and Oakenshield both. I left them to cool off in my cells for a time," Thranduil announced as if it was of no moment.

Hearing this, Mithrandir barely restrained his anger, leaning forward and placing them on the table, gripping them together tightly. "That was remarkably foolish," he said tightly. "And yet you say it in such a way that implies that you eventually let them go. That is good. Tell me at least that you when you did, you set them on the path to Lake-town, and allowed them to keep their weapons? The weapon of Harry Potter is of special significance, and Thorin came to wield Orcrist honorably."

Here, Elrohir spoke up. "Our father, Lord Elrond, agreed that blade should stay with Thorin, that it had come into his hand at this time for a purpose."

And if anyone should have had ownership of that blade, it was Elrond, who could trace his lineage back through Luthien to the last king of Gondolin. This neither of Elrond's sons said aloud, but they made it clear through stance and Elrohir's tone that they would not approve of the sword having been taken from Thorin. Elves of all sorts were very good at using tone to imply things, and the sons of Elrond were his messengers and agents well beyond the borders of his lands.

"They have their weapons yes, and they have made it to Lake-town at last report," Thranduil answered.

"And get your tone implies far more than your words." Mithrandir tugged at his beard, allowing a wide smile to appear on his face, almost a smirk as he looked at Thranduil. "They escaped didn't they? You didn't release them, they released themselves."

Thranduil's face was blank, but Legolas wasn't nearly as good as his father at being his emotions in check, and he smirked slightly back Mithrandir, nodding his head.

But instead of replying, the king went back to something Gandalf had said a second ago. "Yes, the weapon Harry Potter carried, which he went to great lengths to retrieve. Do you truly believe that his magic and that weapon will be enough to slay Smaug, a wyrm the likes of which has not been seen since Ancalagon himself? I have to question this. I question is most heartily. Especially since you no doubt will be somewhere else when the disaster comes calling upon my people who have suffered enough."

“They have suffered because of your pride!” Gandalf roared, standing up from his chair so hard that the chair flew backward and the table was pushed back into the king. Thranduil let loose a grunt of pain as it was propelled into his chest sending him and his chair backward in turn.

Thinking that their king was being attacked, the two guards at the door to this level quickly entered, moving towards Mithrandir, confusion play on their faces but also determination. Yet they had only taken a few steps before the tips of Elladan and Elrohir blades were pressed into their chests, and the two brother shook their heads, speaking as one. “We wouldn’t if we were you.”

“Let’s keep this talk between Mithrandir and your king,” Elladan added.

Slowly, the guards backed away, and the two brothers swiftly sheathed their weapons, also backing away from the confrontation to either side of the guards, leaving Legolas alone, who had backed away to one side.

Thranduil now stood up to, pushing the table away from him, but as he did Gandalf moved forward, seeming almost to swell with power and fury as he looked at the Elven King. “Pride!” he exclaimed bellowing the words into the king’s face. “Pride and arrogance. Arrogance and pride alone kept you from reporting the events of Dol Guldur. Worry about how it would affect your position to seemingly ask for aid. Aid that would’ve been freely given, aid that, had it come in time, could well have seen the death of Sauron well before he could have regained his strength!”

At the word Sauron, some of the fight seemed to flow out of Thranduil, and Legolas gasped. “It is true then, the enemy has returned?”

“The Great Enemy returned yes. But lady Galadriel, Elrond, Saruman and myself have since driven it out of Dol Guldur,” Mithrandir answered, calming down slightly. “You could not have stood against it on your own. You should have asked for help. The moment this influence began to spread, the spiders, the sickness in the woods, you should have said something to us. Not even one such as I or Saruman to be everywhere at once and even we thought that Sauron was dead after the last war of elves and men and the vileness in Dol Guldur gone after my initial investigation there. But had you told us, told **me**, we would have come.”

Thranduil looked away, unwilling to admit even now that had been his own pride that it stopped him from asking for help, and the fear of what would happen to him personally that kept him from fighting back against Sauron’s taint as it spread through the forest.. “If that is all that you have come to say, then consider it said. If you wish to chase after Harry and those dwarves, then I suggest you get on your way.”

“That is not all I have come here to say!” Gandalf boomed, once more looming over the king, his fury coming back. “I am willing to look past your arrogance and the wrongs that you have done. But only if you answer the call of all good people’s now! While Sauron was driven out, he had already sent his armies into motion. An army is even now marching to meet with Smaug. Hopefully, Harry and the dwarves will be able to deal somehow with Smaug. But an army is beyond them. You can redeem yourself, you can redeem your nation’s honor, if you stand with the dwarves against the storm that will break over the Lonely Mountain all too quickly.”

Looking back at Mithrandir, Thranduil shook his head, somehow pushing through the impact of the wizard's presence. "You come here to make that demand? What then do I get in return for risking my folk? Especially when I personally do not agree with you that they will be able to deal with Smaug. Marching out to fight a battle against the orcs and goblins is one thing, but it will simply remove us from this, a safe haven, and present on a platter to Smaug!"

"Even now, you speak from arrogance and fear! You have had your last chance, now be silent Thranduil!" With a crash of his staff, Mithrandir froze Thranduil as if he had become a statue, turning instead to his son, who stared between his now frozen father and the wizard. "But now that it has come to it, I do want to know the exact depth of your perfidy. Legolas, tell me what happened here, from the moment you all became aware of Harry and the dwarves."

Unlike his father, Legolas was almost eager to get it off his chest and confessed everything, from how they had captured the dwarves after the dwarves had exhausted themselves in a hard-fought battle against the same spiders that their king had forbidden Legolas and his people to battle unless they encroached on {}. How he and Harry had gotten off to a rocky start, but had become if not friends, then at least acquaintances over time. He smiled wanly then. "I wish I could say that I was an ambassador of normal Elven hospitality, but if anyone could even try to claim that, it would be Tauriel."

"Tauriel? Who is that? I do not believe I have met a Sindar {check} of that name." Gandalf mused.

"She is a captain of the Unseen Host and led the band that first met the dwarves. Tauriel and Harry started to exchange barbs almost at once. But eventually, I think true friendship and perhaps even something more developed between them."

Blinking, Gandalf was quite surprised that, and secretly pleased. He knew that Galadriel had done all she could in a single night's session for Harry's wounded heart and mind, but there was only so much that even she could do in such a short amount of time. A new love interest could perhaps move Harry's mental healing along. *But then again, his confinement no doubt created new issues and new hatreds. What is it about elves humans and dwarves that they continually search for reasons to hate one another?* "Continue."

Legolas did so, explaining how the party had escaped the cells due to adroit use of magic and perhaps some aid from one of their band on the outside. How they had then taken the river down to the lake, and then into Lake-town. Legolas described the battle there as he had seen it, finishing with, "And then, Tauriel and I returned here to report to my father."

"And were either of you punished for not bringing Bilbo, the dwarves or Harry back?" Elladan asked from where he and his brother had listened to this with growing revulsion at the treatment the dwarves and Harry had suffered, and then amusement at the battle and their escape.

Despite his being frozen, the king tried to glare Legolas into silence. But Legolas's last loyalties to his father had badly frayed over the past few days, and he resolutely did not look at him, instead shaking his head. "I was confined to my quarters until this morning, but Tauriel was imprisoned in the same cells which held, and remains there now."

“Release her, now.” Not even waiting for Legolas to move, which he did quite promptly racing towards the door, Mithrandir turned back to Thranduil. “Will your arrogance know no limit? Harry was brought here by the actions of the Valar, or perhaps an even greater power than they. He has my friendship, he had Elrond’s word, and you still imprisoned him! You still try to capture him again when he had escaped you. Your actions are not that of the King, they are that of a bandit Lord, hiding away in a hole, eager to clamp on to any power that passes him by, but too afraid to fight his even more fearsome neighbor.”

With a wave of his staff, he released Thranduil, even as his body began to grow, glimmers of power willing out of him. “As a servant of the secret fire, and representative of the White Council, I command you, Thranduil, to lead your armies out. March to the Lonely Mountain’s aid, make right the wrongs you have accrued on Harry and the dwarves. Or I will remove you, exile you, and demand your son do it in your stead. What will it be, Fool King?”

End Part 1

Hope you all like this. I decided to show the bit with Gandalf and Thranduil’s confrontation here, even if I am still wondering about time and army travel speeds. I can’t remember offhand how much time passed between Smaug’s death and the battle of Five Armies. I’m thinking a few days – which the dwarves spent searching for the Silmaril of another name – but I don’t know if it was directly mentioned. Time to find my old, dog-eared copy of the original I suppose LOL.