Broken Blade

by sifshadowheart

Summary

Grieving and alone, Harry had an unexpected visitor - with a most unexpected offer. Slash with Mpreg

Redone version of my work "Silence and the Soul"
Chapter 1

Broken Blade

A Harry Potter/The Hobbit/Lord of the Rings Crossover

By Sif Shadowheart

Warning! This story contains Slash!

Disclaimer: Harry Potter and the Lord of the Rings belong to their owners, publishers, etc. This is a fan-authored fiction with no monetary infringement intended.

Author’s Note: The title of this story comes from one of the most famous quotes/poems in Tolkien’s works:

All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.
From the ashes, a fire shall be woken,
A light from the shadows shall spring;
Renewed shall be blade that was broken,
The crownless again shall be king

Chapter One: In Shadows Deep

Harry James Potter – Harry to most – stared out with unseeing eyes over the Irish Sea from his hotel room balcony. Devastated to his bones by the dual blows dealt to his heart courtesy of the message carried by a Ministry owl in the cold words of one Percival Weasley. He’d left the warm confines of what until now had been his sanctuary in the chaos following his most recent battle against the ever-growing Dark Forces.

December on the Isle of Man wasn’t exactly balmy.

But it had been peaceful, and heart-wound soothing – which was what he’d needed after fight after skirmish after battle against the evil that seemed to ever-bloom in some magical hearts.

Dead, the owl read.

They’re all dead.

Ron.

Hermione.

The entire Weasley clan who had been gathered at the Burrow to celebrate Ginny’s engagement to
Dean Thomas after nearly ten years of waffling.

Percy, ever the workaholic, had been held up by his job with the Department of International Cooperation, trying to finish negotiations over the location of the Quidditch World Cup five years hence.

But it was the final name in the shaky-grief-stricken hand of Percy that killed the small spark he’d managed to rekindle inside himself in the few weeks he’d been whiling away in seclusion.

Teddy.

Just the sound of his name sundered his carefully built walls around his deepening grief.

His Teddy, his little Moonlet.

Harry sucked in a harsh breath, filled with an impotent rage that threatened to eclipse his grief.

He hadn’t even a villain to hunt down and bring to justice – no. Someone, likely a moment of collusion between Harry’s boss and the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement Gawain Robards and Percy, had kept him in total ignorance of the hate-filled crime until Harry’s own Auror forces had captured those responsible and the Wizengamot sentenced them to the Dementor’s Kiss. Well. At least it wasn’t the Veil.

Not one of those bastards deserved a chance of going on to an afterlife so easily.

Harry wished he could say he was surprised over the unilateral decision that had been made for him…but he wasn’t.

Not in the least little bit.

No, that was just par for the course for Harry, wasn’t it?

The Wizarding World had proven time and again that they can and will betray his trust, over and over and over again. The reason – invariably – being “for his own good”, though every once and awhile it would be down to simple greed, jealousy or envy over the “illustrious” position Harry “enjoyed” in magical society as the Man Who Conquered or He-Who-Slays-Dark-Lords. He believed his current body count of bona-fide “Dark Lords” was somewhere in the double digits as every megalomaniacal asshole in Europe tried to fill Voldemort’s decaying shoes.

It always ended the same – whoever it was got caught out in their betrayal, hells sometimes they don’t even realize that was what their actions were – and he got hurt.

After fucking dying for these people you’d think that they’d back off a little and actually trust him but this – keeping him from even attending the funerals of his fucking family – this proved that there was nothing he could ever do to break free from the manipulations and being treated as little more than a figurehead, no matter how many times he’s proven himself one of the most dangerous Aurors alive.

He cursed under his breath.

His presence probably wouldn’t have changed the outcome of the hunt…but maybe it would have kept a few more rookie Aurors alive.

They’d never know…because he didn’t have the trust and loyalty of his own Auror force.
How was he supposed to keep leading them if they didn’t even trust him?

Swiping roughly at the tears that managed to seep out from under clenched-tight eyelids, Harry shuddered with bone-deep weariness.

He didn’t even know where to begin continuing on as a regular Auror after this, let alone their Head. This latest…situation had driven home something he’d already been fighting all his life. As far as the Ministry was concerned, he was merely a figurehead. Someone to point out to the new Aurors and say: “he saved the world, so can you.”

Even Kingsley had become infected with the insanity after a dozen years as Minister of Magic.

With Ron, Hermione, and worst of all little Teddy gone…there seemed little point to even pretending at the game of Harry Potter: Head Auror anymore.

Everyone was gone, still he remained, cut off and sequestered from the only ones who might have managed to help pull him out of his own head and back into fighting the never-ending fight against the Dark.

His parents, now his friends. His godson, but first his own godfather, and so many more without end.

All gone.

Though of them all, only Sirius was perhaps the wound that would never heal.

There was simply something…unfinished about the whole affair with the Department of Mysteries that still bothered and chafed at him – a wound that scabbed over but didn’t even begin to close, even after all this time.

“Come now, pup,” a voice called softly from the shadows. “You can’t be cryin’ for an old dog like me, now can ya, Prongslet?”

Whirling, he gasped as the figure stepped out of the shadows, the weak winter sun shining brashly against raven’s-wing hair.

“Sirius?!”

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Lunging into open, wiry arms, he unbalanced them, sending them both crashing into the shaded wall beside the balcony doors.

“Shh, now.” He comforted his godson as he began to sob, Harry’s tears soaking his plain black t-shirt. Lifting one elegant, pale hand, he stroked Harry’s hair as he rested his chin on a wild-black-maned head, pulling him deeper into his embrace. “Calm now, Prongslet.” Sirius whispered, conscious of the time. “We don’t have long and there’s much for me to tell you.”

Nearly whimpering Harry pressed his ear against that tattooed chest, reveling in the steady beat he heard there.

“You’re really gone,” Harry whispered, as all doubted created by a slow fall into a Veil was wiped away, tilting his head back so he could look into piercing grey eyes and watch the light bounce off of the planes and hallows of his face – a face too smooth and young to be the result of anything but a long rest. “Aren’t you?”
It was as much of a plea to be wrong as it was a question.

“Aye, pup.” Sirius said, grieving for all that Harry’d been through and what had yet to pass. His sweet little Prongslet, the apple of his eye. He’d been through so much. If ever there was a Champion deserving of peace and rest it was him. But Siri didn’t get to make the rules and there are some that aren’t meant to be broken – even by an old Marauder like him. Damn Dumbledore and his manipulations anyway, even more than old Tom and his fear of Death. He’d known, even as he’d comforted his pup on his last walk, that there would be consequences for what was to pass. Only as ever it wouldn’t be the truly deserving who would have to deal with them. Not old Snake-Face or Twinkle-eyed bastard.

It was his pup.

All of them had argued the case with the, well, powers until they’d been exhausted. Him, Remus, James, Lily, not to mention all of the true friends Harry had lost. They all had sought any outcome besides the one that originally awaited his Prongslet.

Eventually…one was offered.

But it came with a hefty price tag and only upon the intervention of a different set of powers than those in charge of their universe. Powers called the Valar that have a soft spot for Champions and heroes.

Like Harry.

“I’m well and truly gone.”

Sighing, Harry steeled himself while snuggling deeper into strong, comforting arms.

“What’s the damage, then?” He asked knowing that the only way Siri could be here like this is as a messenger from Death or whatever deity had taken an interest in him now.

“When you came back to life thanks to old Dumbles’s elaborate fucking manipulations you did more than upset the Balance that you’d righted by your death in the first place. You broke some big fucking rules – as did Albus for plotting and piloting the whole thing. There’s always…”

“Consequences.” Harry bit off, just shy of a snarl hiding his face in Siri’s old leather jacket.

“Exactly, pup.” Sirius nodded. “Unless I’m mistaken you’ve already figured out the what of things if not the whys.”

“I can’t die anymore.” Harry whispered, voice broken and eyes bleak. “Can I?”

He’d taken a lot of wounds over the years, most notably a bullet to the chest from Vernon after the Dursleys crawled out of their safe house after the war and a stab wound to the stomach from an irate Bellatrix before she died and yet…he lived. The others who kept him “safe” and dumb in his isolated little bubble until they needed him never noticed but his scars – even the most famous of them – have slowly faded and disappeared as well. Harry was willing to bet it was either down to the Hallows or his minor case of death that had done it.

“No, Harry.” Sirius brushed away his tears. “You can’t. Once a hero’s soul leaves the reward that awaits them – and make no mistake, Albus manipulating the setting or not, that’s exactly where you were – for whatever reason it can’t return. And rather than sentence a Champion to damnation or the in-between the powers…well, mostly Death…they cheated pup. You can’t die, can’t be killed. You’re eternal now, immortal as ever Tommy or Albus or Gellert had wished to be. Truly
immortal. But…”

“I’m the only one.” Harry turned, even as he stayed tucked in his godfather’s arms, staring out across the desolate sea once more. Men all want to be immortal until they actually realize what that truly means. To be alone, set apart, a freak, forever. “Alone, forever.” He let his head thud back against Sirius’s chest. “Fuck, Siri. I’ll go crazy before the end of things, or will that not kill me either?”

“It wouldn’t.” He answered his godson honestly, no matter how much it hurt, locking his arms around the small – too small – form. Harry would drift, cut off from other life but completely aware. And it would not do. Not for his Prongslet. “This universe, this world, it wasn’t designed for one like you, pup.”

Harry rolled that around for a long moment.

This universe.

This world.

“There’s another that is.” He looked up into sad quicksilver eyes. “Isn’t there?”

“Yeah, pup.” Sirius sighed. “There is. But it would mean saying goodbye to everyone and everything you know. There’d be no more of these little chats, Harry. No seeing Neville and Luna’s lot grow and nurturing them. No more sparring with Kingsley or arguing with Percy. If you do this it’s a total disconnect. Absolutely cut off from this place forever and hurled into another. ‘m not allowed to tell you about that world. Part of the deal is you going on faith. But I can tell you one thing. They’ve a place there. A place where a not-quite-human Champion might be welcome. They call it the Undying Lands.”

“Might?” Harry arched a brow, ignoring the not-quite-human bit for now, thinking it might only be a nod to his magic or the Hallows.

“Have to be deemed worthy, pup.” Thunder cracked overhead and Sirius gave a wince. He was a smidge too close to saying too much. “By them.”

“You mean I have to fight someone else’s war all over again.” Harry heaved a soul-weary sigh. As if winning the last one, and the one before that, and the one before that, going back to his infancy wasn’t enough. Now because his one-time mentor set things up to tear him from his rest, his peaceful reward, he’s being made to choose between an eternity of loss and loneliness and the chance – however faint – of a new place of comfort and peace in some distant and strange world.

Sirius kept quiet, already knowing what his godson’s answer was going to be. A fighter he was, and always had been. A Black of the blood in all things. At least he’d been allowed this last goodbye.

“And what about…” Harry’s voice cracked. “What about love? Will I find that there as well?”

It was a rather pertinent question, given how no matter what he’d tried or who had made an attempt on his affections, Harry’s heart had remained untouched save by his chosen family.

Hermione…his breath caught even as his mind continued on. Hermione had had the idea that Harry had been meant for someone…but that for whatever reason had never met them. Harry had been willing to go one further. There was more than one meaning of equals after all.

And gods knew…there had never been anyone more like him – or more likely to understand him – than Tom.
Too bad he’d been corrupted, and his soul ruptured, before Harry’s father had even been a twinkle in Grandfather Charlus’s eye.

Sirius didn’t hesitate, not even for a second.

“A heart as big and loving as yours, pup?” Sirius gave his godson a big doggy grin, near to blinding in its brilliance. “I don’t doubt it in the least. The next bird – or bloke – might even be worth of such a priceless gift, not like little starry-eyed Ginny or noseless Tommy-boy.”

Harry winced.

“You knew about that?”

“He was a handsome bastard in the beginning, I’ll give him that.” Sirius said neatly. “It wasn’t a surprise after hearing about your second year that you had a bit of a crush on him – gods know enough people did over the years – and if you’re worried about a bad reaction to being bent…well.” Sirius rolled his eyes with a sheepish grin. “My hypocrisy doesn’t stretch quite that far.”

“At least I won’t have any hard acts to follow.” Harry sighed, thinking of his non-existent love life and pushing down his grief for a moment. “In this new place.”

“You’ll go then?” Sirius clarified, happy for him but sad for their former world all the same. It would be a much darker, drearier place without his Prongslet, that was for certain.

“Was there ever a doubt that I wouldn’t?”

They laughed together, then with a crack of light they both disappeared.

Harry felt his head spin and his stomach churn as the whiplash of shifting through time and space rocketed through his body. It was similar to the disorientation he’d felt the first time he took a Portkey or was Side-Along Apparated…but much, much worse. His eyes eventually cleared after the spinning stopped and his stomach settled…only instead of finding himself in his “new world” he was standing in a long-gone piece of his first one. A piece that he would’ve been thankful to never see again.

He was in the Riddle Manor in Little Hangleton, in the massive front room that he’d raided after the end of the Second Blood War, complete with a statue of a knock-off Michaelangelo staring down at him.

Two things were different from his memories, however.

One being the strong arms that still held him tight as Sirius traveled with him, and the cowl-cloaked dark figure that leaned nonchalantly against the towering statue that had been destroyed when detection spells had revealed it to hide a cache of Dark magical artifacts.

“Hey kid.” Death said with a grin, beaming down at the unsurprised form of Harry with a macabre grin. “You’ve done good.”

“What are we doing here?” He asked with a sigh, rolling his eyes for good measure at the apparent approval of his life-choices which he himself, personally, thought could have used quite a bit of work.

“Thought a familiar place would be better than – well – nothing, to explain the way this is going to
work.” Death said with a shrug. “It was either this or King’s Cross…and I think you’ve had enough of the latter.” The apparition nodded at Harry’s companion. “Sirius.”

Sighing himself, the dark-haired Marauder turned his godson to face him then cradled his face in his hands, placing a tender kiss upon his brow.

“Time for me to go, pup.” He said with regret. He wished fleetingly for more time but knew that no measure of time granted him would be enough with his pup. “Now listen to me, you dozy git.” He said with a teasing smirk. “Don’t go mourning me or your parents or even the Great Prat himself. Not even wee Teddy. Those of us that’ve gone on are together and those that haven’t are sure to join us, you hear me pup? Remember what you were told once pup?”

“The next great adventure.” He whispered brokenly.

“Yeah, Harry.” He captured him in a rib-crushing hug, determined to make his godson feel all of the things he didn’t have time to tell him. “All that and more, I promise.”

Sirius gave him one last kiss to his hair, as gentle as a butterfly’s wing, and cast Death a cautioning look, commanding the entity to take damn good care of his pup while he’s in the being’s charge.

“I love you, Prongslet.” Sirius gently stroked his cheek, wiping away a stray tear, before releasing him and stepping away. “All of us do – and we always will.”

“I love you too, Padfoot.” His eyes drowning in tears were the last thing Sirius saw as a portal opened and he cast one last brilliant smile over his shoulder before stepping through.

“I know you do, pup.” His voice echoed around him as Sirius’s form disappeared from his sight – this time forever. “I know you do. I’ll give your best to Prongs and the rest, yeah?”

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Bracing himself, Harry took a deep breath and turned once more to face Death.

“Lay it on me.” He said, squaring his shoulders and donning the “Head Auror/ Hero of the Wizarding World” persona, melding it into his “Harry” act and the “Freak” he’d always been until he was finally united. Wherever he was going, he was done hiding who he was – all of who he was. Tired to the bone of hiding his power and intelligence so others didn’t feel threatened, shielding himself behind his affable – but brave – facade. The time for Harry the Golden Gryffindor was gone. Freak was an extraordinary boy being punished by a jealous mundane world. Hadrian, Lord Peverell was still too heavy for him…hmm. Maybe not. It was a name for a leader and a general after all, both things he’d been for however short a time.

Death watched the change come over his charge in blatant approval. He believed this new start and new world was just what the deity ordered. He was needed there. As for everything else…well. He wouldn’t be making any bets with Sirius or James, that’s for sure. Harry had a habit of defying all odds, predictions, and prophecies.

“The world you’ll be going to will be rather medieval to your eyes – even from a wizarding world perspective. They’ve no use or need for technology there, and it’s populated by many different sentient species with various lands and customs. You’ll be able to speak the three major tongues because the powers of this world can’t predict who you’ll meet first or where you’ll end up. We’ve ceded control of things involving you to the Valar.”

And Death had had one hell of a fight on his hands to push it through.
Fate had not wanted to let go of her favorite toy, and it was only through Magic’s intervention that Death had succeeded in the end.

Magic had always had a soft spot for Harry, not unlike Death itself.

“Valar?”

“Like myself and the other powers that rule this world but dissimilar at the same time.” Death explained with the patience gained of watching countless worlds wax and wane. “They rarely interfere, allowing free will to truly shape their world. If it wasn’t for your feats being so significant they likely would’ve stayed out of these events as well.” Death gave him a ghost of a smile. “But they love Champions and you,” Death shook its head in mock amazement. “You’re the best this world has seen in millennia.”

Harry barked a laugh at that, thinking of what those “feats” cost in terms of sacrifice and blood spilled and hearts broken – both his own and that of others.

“The gist is you’re being sent where you’re most needed. Just watch yourself and trust your instincts and you should do fine.” Death continued, ignoring any attempts at interruptions. “There’s a couple things you can take with you. Close your eyes and think of what clothes you’d like to wear, keeping in mind that you’ll probably be traveling on foot. Think…hunting.” Death tried to guide him as best he could without breaking the agreement between himself and the Valar.

Following the deity’s instructions, Harry chose with care starting from the skin out. Soft – and warm – thermal silk underwear and undershirt. Leather pants that laced up instead of having a zipper in tight-but-flexible matte black. Keeping Death’s words of a medieval society in mind, he chose a tight-woven Acromantula silk and unicorn hair tunic that was unfathomably soft but warm and nearly puncture-proof to hide his goblin-forged steel chain mail shirt, with the only color of his outfit coming from a basilisk-hide leather vest in the deep green of forest leaves over that and a long black basilisk-leather duster over that, both pieces giving him several layers of both warmth and protection – mundane and magical. Flat-heeled dragonhide boots laced up with laces made of dragon heart strings – unbreakable and would never wear out – and cover his knees to protect the joint from damage.

Before his eyes could open, he felt the air stir around him as silk and leather replaced his soft cotton casual wear, forming out from nothing but magic and his own will.

Death cracked another smile, pleased that the abnormally-headstrong man took his warning to heart. With a gesture Death conjured a small metal-bound booklet the size of one of Harry’s hands. Handing it over, the deity explained as Harry opened it, pulling back the protective waxed leather weather-proofing and started to flip through the pages.

“A few spells and mementos you’ll be needing.” Was all the deity said as he cast the being a curious glance. “Your powers can help or hinder as you well know, not to mention your heritage. Be very careful. That book should explain and help guide you. You should at least skim it while I finish preparations, before we leave this place.”

Harry nodded idly, splitting his attention between the script before him and the deity.

“You’re going with weapons – and you’re going to need them. And your clothes, boots, and chain mail undershirt have all been bespelled to stay clean and durable. It would take a magic blade like your Sword of Gryffindor to mar them, your own personal form of armor.”

Harry grinned at that news, no laundromats in his future, not that any likely existed in a medieval
world...so no scrubbing clothes in a cold creek or lake. He arched a brow as he understood what he was reading. Well...that was unexpected...

“The Sword is another thing.” Death’s serious tone drew his full attention. “You are the Heir of Gryffindor, though it was hidden from you in your life here. Your courage and your bloodline drew it from its rest and with you it belongs. But there’s no Death Eaters where you’re going, no need for a wand – a tool that would set you apart from others there. You have a few choices. I can bond the Elder Wand to you, giving you a true form of wandless magic, or I can bind it into the Sword or a staff. It’s up to you.”

Harry thought on that a long moment.

It was tempting – to say the least – to have it bound to his person. But part of him regretted that two great weapons were going to be removed from his home. Another part, the rebellious core of him that drove him to spurn both Tom’s offer of joining his cause and Scrimgeour’s of being a poster-boy rejoiced that his favored weapons – now at least – were going to remain in his hands.

Harry had never used a staff before – so that was out – and he’d never really picked up wandless magic well.

That really only left him with one option.

“The Sword can remain a sword.” He decided at last. After all, one of his most deadly fights hadn’t been fought with wand or magic at all...but with the Sword of Gryffindor, against an ancient basilisk. He’d have to suffer through training his body in wandless magic. It wasn’t like he wasn’t going to have the time to manage it after all.

Death snapped his bony fingers and a sheath appeared on his hip – black basilisk leather to match both his vest and duster, finely wrought with a silver mark of the Hallows – the same sign that now graced the pommel of the sword the sheathe held replacing the gaudy gold lion’s head and rubies with the smooth understated gleam of silver inset with deep emerald green from a polished gem inset as the “stone” portion of the sigil.

A deep burning flush of power coursed through Harry’s veins as Death coasted one long finger over the back of Harry’s right and left hands in turn, each becoming marked with the sign of the Hallows in glowing silver before fading away along with the red-hot wave of power that at last died away long moments later. Taking a deep breath, then another, Harry closed his eyes and focused. It wasn’t more than a minute’s work to tuck the remnants of power back away inside his core – a core that ached and burned like an overworked muscle at the sudden expansion having the Elder Wand bound to him forced him to endure. When it was done, he opened his eyes and squared his shoulders, tucking the book still held in one hand – if loosely – away in one of the duster’s pockets, he removed the sword, studying the deadly poisoned blade with a keen warrior’s eye.

Nothing else had been changed, the blade still the gleaming silver of goblin steel with the barest-there tint of venom-green from the basilisk’s venom sacks. Words were engraved in a strange script on either side of the blade – words that neither Harry nor anyone he knew had ever been able to decipher. It felt like his, the same as his wands always had, but more...his all at the same time.

“Why the Hallows symbol and what does it say?” He couldn’t help but ask.

“To remind you of who you were.” Death murmured, one hand gesturing to the pommel, and then to the words. “The other of who you are. The essence of you. Your words. You should be able to read them once you’ve reached your destination.”
Rolling their eyes, Death asked two more questions.

“Bow or crossbow, and where do you want your daggers and quiver?”

“Crossbow.” Harry said immediately. He’d never gained enough height to make a longbow plausible and a compound bow would stick out – to say the least – in an olde world setting.

“Daggers left thigh and small of my back, quiver center back, crossbow holstered at my hip opposite the sword.”

He resheathed the beautiful weapon as others appeared on his body according to his instructions. He smiled at the familiar and comforting weight, having gotten used to more “muggle” means over the years. A warrior at heart.

“That’s all I can do for you, Harry.” Death said, regret coloring their tone. Breaking character Death gave him a genuine, soft smile before bowing with a flourish. “You are a true Champion Hadrian James Potter, Lord of House Peverell.” He said rising from his bow. “It has been an honor and a privilege to have known you my dear.”

Gracing Death with a regal nod, Harry stepped through into the swirling vortex that had appeared, and into his new lift, a whimsical thought crossing his mind as the portal closed around him.

“I wonder if they’ll have chocolate…?”

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Joining Harry’s departed loved ones, Death studied those assembled – the gathered number would have no doubt shocked the humble warrior. Some like Cedric were those he couldn’t save, no matter how hard he tried. Others that he did save only to die by other means – Mad-Eye among them. Still others that were much closer and dear to him over these last years like Teddy.

And then there were the pains in Death’s ass.

Severus, the Twins, the Potters, Sirius, Remus, Tonks and others made up a ring and neatly boxed Death in.

“Well,” they demanded. “How did it go?”

“He took it better than I expected.” Death said honestly. Part of the deity was entertained by the almost petulant look on James Potter’s – and shockingly Severus Snape’s – face over Sirius getting to see him instead of others like his parents. Catching the questioning look on Fred Weasley’s face, Death grinned knowing what was on his mind. “Severus wins the bet about the Wand. He chose to bond. But he also took the Sword. Anyone who bet on a crossbow over a longbow wins as well.”

Once word of Harry’s possible future made the rounds, many that had known him placed bets of all kinds. If he would even go and what weapons he would choose being the most popular.

“How did you know?” Lily asked her first friend as the snarky former Potions Master pocketed his winnings.

“Know the brat, don’t I?” Severus arched a sardonic brow. “I’ve spent more than enough time in that messy-haired head to know how he thinks. He defeated a basilisk of all things with that Sword, then Longbottom used it to off Nagini. One of the hardest battles Potter ever faced. He likes to be reminded of hard lessons, it keeps him from making the same mistakes twice…which is also why even with his new status the scar from Umbridge’s quill has never faded.”
“And the crossbow?” Tonks asked James, Remus, Sirius, Teddy, and Severus, the only ones to bet on that over a bow — save Lily who abstained from betting on her baby at all.

They traded a glance before Sirius and James gestured for Teddy to explain.

“I almost died from a poisoned arrow shot by a were-hunter.” The pre-teen explained with a shrug. Several of the other newly-dead like the majority of the Weasleys were missing, all still reconciling themselves to being, well, dead. “He never used a bow after that.”

“He didn’t.” Hermione spoke up for the first time. “Couldn’t even take looking at them at the Auror armory from what Ron told me. Some wounds never quite heal, do they?”

Death interrupted the Q&A session before it could continue.

Turning to the gathered group, Death settled into a soft chair with a sigh, knowing this was going to take a while.

“Settle down, kiddos,” they joked. “And let Death tell you all about Harry and what choices he made before leaving for his new home…”

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Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

This chapter has some similarities to the chapter two of Silence and the Soul but after this the stories will completely diverge with the exception of using some of the descriptions of elves from Silence when Harry eventually meets some of the same characters later in this story.

Author’s Note: Here I’m going with the idea that Fangorn Forest before the Fellowship of the Ring and Saruman cutting his way into the forest to fuel his orc/Uruk Hai war machine used to expand all the way west to Isengard instead of starting at the eastern slopes of the Misty Mountains north of the Gap of Rohan.

Re: Harry’s age – he’s 31 give or take when he accepts the offer from Death and the Valar.

Broken Blade

Chapter Two: Fangorn

Elrond, Lord of Rivendell, found himself in a strange place as his sleep carried him into a vision. Strange things and dark omens have come to pass and he sought for a way to help this land before the sea-yearning made him seek the Undying Lands.

“Fangorn.” A melodious voice spoke at his back. A familiar and most welcome voice.

Turning he bowed with courtly grace towards the Lady of Lothlorien…and his mother-in-law.

“Lady Galadriel.” Lord Elrond greeted her with honest pleasure.

A glow broke through the dark woods, turning him at once from pleasantries. Whatever omen this was, it must be serious indeed to warrant both the Lord of Rivendell and the Lady of Lothlorien as witnesses. The glow became a vibrant, pulsing circle, taller than an elf and thrice as wide in a deep gold with threads of silver and red twining throughout. For a long moment it seemed to him as if all of Middle-Earth paused and waited with bated breath to see what strange happening this even stranger magic heralded. At last the circle parted and a slight creature stepped forth into their world.

Elrond gasped as he took it in – befuddled for a moment by it’s beauty before settling back in certainty – this being was a male, without a doubt for all its lithe grace and beauty.

“What is he, do you wager?” He asked the elder elf as the creature took in his surroundings with watchful eyes before loping off at a gait far fleeter and more graceful than any Man he’d ever met, even those of the Numenor who were blessed with grace and long-life from their elven ancestor.

Galadriel met his puzzled gaze with good humor, as the vision shifted around them.

“I am unsure.” Her voice was nearly a laugh. “But perhaps if we are patient we might be shown.”
Shown they were.

Elrond and Galadriel watched in silent contemplation as the scene around them shifted backwards if they were right, showing first the male bidding farewell to a handsome Man that shared features with him – but not enough to be his father or brother, a cousin perchance? – before biding a time with a hooded figure, his clothes and weapons changing and a gift appearing before entering the portal that brought him to Middle-Earth. They saw as he fought battle after battle with both arms and magic against other creatures like himself that were nearly Men or strange creatures the likes of which neither elf had ever seen, the man-like creature often wounded or taking losses. Elrond watched in disbelief and Galadriel in compassion as he gave his own life to save his world – and his return to life with its disastrous personal consequences.

They jumped all throughout his history, were shown many things. Ending at last with the single defining moment of his life – killing his soul-brother to save his world.

“That poor child.” Galadriel murmured. “So much pain in such a short life.”

Elrond nodded, thinking quickly.

“He is a warrior – of that there is no doubt – one with great skill and power. He would be a valuable ally against the Enemy.”

Elrond was in no way blinded as others were by Sauron’s long sleep. The Enemy would return.

Of that Elrond had never doubted for a moment, even when his faith in Men had failed him and all of Middle-Earth with the survival of the Ring.

His mother-in-law chided him with a glance.

“He deserves the peace long denied him.” She said firmly, still aghast that such a warrior would forfeit – however unknowingly – the reward of all good Men.

Elrond gave her a speaking glance, having been equally – though differently – effected by the young warrior.

“We shall see.” He said as the vision began to fade. “Whatever his path, it is up to him to choose it now. We can only help him on his way.”

…

Harry stepped into the portal, allowing it to close around him as it he was submerging himself in a warm bath. If any doubts about the path he’d chosen remained, they were dispelled by the essence of the portal’s magics.

It felt like coming home, entering Hogwarts for the very first time.

This new world he was joining was where he was truly meant to be.

But it wasn’t perfect.

Stepping out onto the forest floor, he sensed magic all around him as he studied what he could see in the darkness of the night. There seemed to be a pocket of dense magics off to his left but before he could investigate further his senses tingled, as he felt evil intertwined with another pocket of dense
magics heading towards him. Setting his jaw, he determined to meet it head-on whatever it was, and ran to intercept it at full, magic-enhanced speed. He wasn’t quite sure what Sirius and Death had been alluding to – his otherness – but now wasn’t the time to stop and figure it out even as he felt himself moving at speeds faster than normal.

His senses – and magic – led him to a glade not too far from where he’d stepped from the portal surrounded by the tallest and thickest trees he’d seen in his eyes the forest surrounding him from the moment he’d stepped forth into this new world almost seeming to whisper and groan and speak far above his head.

And in the middle of the grove a campsite with the grey-cloaked occupant – or so he assumed – being beset by a pack of creatures the like of which Harry had never before laid eyes upon: mutated four-legged creatures that might be something akin to wolves, several of which boasted humanoid riders that were monsters straight out of a nightmare or a video game.

Harry wasn’t on Earth anymore and if nothing else the monsters in the night proved it better than any welcoming party could have.

Throwing his left hand forward in a gesture long memorized to become instinctual, Harry drew his sword with the other as his blasting curse sent the nearest pair of not-wolf-and-rider crashing into the strong trees at the far-end of the glade whilst a swing of his sword at a rider-less not-wolf falling to the ground with a yelp.

The aged man – or maybe not, who knew? – wasn’t without skill himself, using a dagger and his staff in tandem to fend off the creatures before Harry’s intervention and actually making inroads into the group with it, the two of them between them managing to take out the rest of the half-dozen creatures and three riders before the grey-dressed man with his long grey hair, matching beard that even Dumbledore would’ve been envious of, and pointed hat turned to Harry with clever eyes and a considering expression on what Harry thought a pleasant-enough face.

“I must thank you for your assistance, stranger.” The old man told him, tucking away his dagger after cleaning it on the pelt of one of the creatures then bracing his staff on the ground and leaning on it.

A staff that now Harry had a moment had him raising a brow.

Well.

Death had told him a wand would stick out before giving him the option of a magic staff.

Given that they were once in wide-use before the first Ollivander pioneered the wand, Harry knew one when he saw one. A smile threatened to twitch at his mouth. Leave it to Death to drop him – almost literally – in the lap of another wizard.

Though the tongue the other spoke was strange to his ear for a moment before the languages he’d been gifted with along with his Sword kicked in, something whispering Westron in his mind.

“I heard the clamor from a way off.” Harry told him, speaking carefully at first but it seemed the languages were as well integrated to his mind as the Wand to his core, dripping flawlessly from his tongue but with an accent that spoke strongly of his homeland – or homeworld depending on how you looked at it. “I’m not the sort to run away from a fight.”

“No,” the wizard said contemplatively, stroking one hand down his beard as he took in the picture the other made from the fine sword – one of the finest he’d ever seen – to the ranger’s clothing that
was well-made and designed to not draw attention for all that it was finely made. A stranger indeed. More interestingly: a stranger with a type of magic Gandalf had never before seen. “No, I don’t imagine you are. Well,” he stamped his staff once before straightening up. “I am Gandalf the Grey and you have my thanks nonetheless for your help. Please allow me to treat you to some of my dinner – a simple stew and bread – in thanks, Mister…” He asked leadingly, part for the information itself and part to hear the strange accented Common again. Given all that Gandalf had traveled in his life, he refused to believe that there was a place he’d not seen but nonetheless he couldn’t place the twist and bite that the man before him put on his words.

Harry smirked a little, knowing at least part of what this Gandalf the Grey was after, cleaning his sword the same as Gandalf had his dagger before sheathing it in turn, giving the elder wizard a bit of a bow before announcing himself.

“Hadrian Peverell.” He decided on the spot. If this was an old world as Death had told him than a surname like Potter would have everyone he met thinking he was a potter…and that wouldn’t do at all even if that was how the Potter name came to be in the first place. “At your service Master Wizard.” He eyed the corpses around him. “And I’m sure that once we’ve piled these up outside the tree line and burned the bodies a bit of stew and bread will be just the thing.”

“Just so, Mister Peverell.” Gandalf agreed with a genial nod, already thinking the strange surname – another thing he’d not heard before in his life anymore than he had the given name – over as he set his staff aside and got to work helping the young Man drag the wargs and orcs outside of the edge of Fangorn Forest wherein he’d decided to stop for the night on his trip to gather up a hobbit to play burglar for a certain dwarven king.

…

Taking out his little metal book from the pocket of his duster, Harry sat down to keep watch as the grey wizard had insisted on sharing not only his food and drink with a stranger but also the warmth of his campfire for the night, dismissing Harry’s concerns of another attack as it was apparently exceedingly rare for a band of orcs – the riders – and their warg mounts to venture into what Gandalf had called “Fangorn Forest.”

Indeed, from the impression Harry got it was rare for anyone to venture into Fangorn Forest unless they were a wizard like Gandalf, one of the reasons the grey-bearded elder was surprised by Harry’s assistance.

Cracking open the book, after an arch of a brow at the expanded pocket he’d found it in, one that he wouldn’t be surprised to find extras within given the partiality it seemed Death had for him, Harry took to skimming it trying to get a grasp on what all it contained beyond pieces of information and spells from Harry’s old world. Bigger than it would seem from a glance at it when closed, Harry flipped through the pages with ever-growing shock as it never appeared to run out of pages. In the end it did eventually, but not before he found an index for around a thousand pages of lore, information, and random knowledge later.

Shaking his head, he let loose a forlorn smile.

He could just imagine whose idea an expanded book was, it was Hermione from start to finish even if the eclectic pages within spoke of knowledge found and shared by the wider group of loved ones he would never see again.

The index though…that was all Snape or maybe Harry’s mum.

Someone with Hermione’s brain and memory had never had need of such a thing in her life.
A tear escaping from his eye dripped down one inky lash onto his cheek before being swiped away, ever unknowing of the audience of one he had to his grief even as Gandalf did a damn good job of playing asleep right down to the snores.

Little did Gandalf know but the tiny tome gently held between a warrior’s hands contained knowledge of him as well as Arda itself, the two watchers in the night learning of each other – Harry from text of the tales of the Maiar including the one he’d fallen in with however unknowingly and Gandalf from watching Harry in his quiet study and ever-present grief.

The library at Saruman’s citadel in Isengard had done Gandalf little good in deciphering Thrain’s map.

However, perhaps his little trip south hadn’t been without merit after all.

…

That night, once Gandalf eventually fell into a true sleep, he found himself dreamwalking to a place he hadn’t seen in many a year: Valinor.

Surrounding him were the Valar and before him his lord: Manwë, Ruler of Arda and the Elder King with his wife and Gandalf’s lady Varda at his side, the King and Queen of the Valar flanked by Irmo and Nienna with the rest spreading out from there.

“You have met Our Champion, Olórin, second of Our Maiar.” Manwë’s voice was as soft and gentle as ever, a balm to Gandalf’s heart and soul having been so long from his Maker and Lord’s side and Halls. “Tell us, what do you think of him?”

“My Lord…” Gandalf blinked as he knelt before the Valar. “You speak of young Peverell?”

“Who else?” Varda asked with a tinkling laugh that made the very stars above dance. “He is a blade that was broken in becoming a Champion of worlds. It was agreed that should his quest end well and his heart remain true that Hadrian Peverell shall have a place in Our Halls.”

It took all Gandalf’s control not to fall to his face in shock at that.

The Valar rarely if ever appoint a Champion, the last being Lord Glorfindel after he sacrificed his life to defeat a Balrog.

That a young man should be the next…it was nothing less than mind boggling even for a Maiar to comprehend.

“He is grieving.” Gandalf decided in the end. “Though a good fighter nonetheless for it. He has a strange magic I have never seen before in a Man and doesn’t seem to shy away from either hard work or a fight. More than that I cannot say.”

“Young Peverell is many things, as you will come to find over the years so long as his fate doesn’t take him early from Middle-Earth to Our Halls.” Manwë said with a nod. “Let it be known Olórin among your brethren that to aid him is to aid your own duties so long as you walk the path before you in Middle-Earth…”

…

Waking the next morning to find his new charge – though he rather thought the young Champion would disagree quite vehemently with the description – already hovering over a cookpot and kettle, Gandalf eyed the slight form with new eyes.
“Testing me, Gandalf?” Harry asked, arching a brow. His voice was raspy from sleep and rough with thirst.

When Gandalf failed to answer, Harry rummaged through his duster rather than continue waiting on the tea. Finding the extras to the book last night was a welcome surprise and now that his mind had a chance to reboot, he wondered what other gifts Death or Sirius or whoever else had managed to smuggle him in the depths of his new coat. He had not even the slightest doubt that the little “extras” he was finding were gifts from his loved ones who had...gone on. Though of them all, Sirius was the most likely to deal a card from the bottom of the deck, with maybe the Twins and Severus joining him. Smiling in triumph, as he located a flask among pouches and other contraband, he studied it a bit before unscrewing the cap and taking a cautious sniff.

It was beaten silver with a monogrammed “SOB” for Sirius Orion Black…and a gag gift from Harry’s father after Lily had enlightened them to the common muggle epithet. What the flask contained was definitely magic, Mrs. Weasley’s cocoa, still as hot as the moment it was made. With a smile at the flask and a mocking salute towards his audience, Harry drank deep, feeling peace and comfort flow through him at the familiar taste.

Gandalf studied the verdant-eyed creature as he went about his morning business. With the sun close to rising his chance to watch this stranger would be gone unless he could convince the Champion to continue with him to the Shire. Harry moved fluidly, like a dancer or an Elf, making him wish he had observed the other more closely during last night’s skirmish. His steps were silent, if Gandalf’s eyes weren’t upon him, he could have no notion of Harry’s presence.

But he wasn’t as calm and serene as his expression and manner would have Gandalf believe. Gandalf had caught flashes of humor or temper in bright green eyes, and on that finely-etched face. A face too delicate and refined for a Man.

On a journey such as this, having a stranger along would normally only lead to disaster, let alone the effort it would take to get Thorin Oakenshield to allow the presence of another stranger. However, his dreams told Gandalf what Harry likely would not – whatever his cause for silence he knew he could trust the young one with pain and sorrow marring his eyes.

That was no small thing.

As Gandalf ruminated on the puzzle that was his newest companion, Harry returned from his ablutions in the forest, coming to lean upon the cart where Gandalf perched and looking up into bright blue eyes, caution on his face.

“Where do you go from here?” The Grey Wizard asked lowly as the sun peeked over the horizon, painting the ebony-haired creature in the colors of the sunrise. He’d never met a man to match him for pure beauty among other Men. Only the Elves in these lands could claim to match him.

“With you,” Harry answered with a small smile. “To wherever your journey leads. To you I was sent and with you I’ll stay. If you would have me.” He tacked on the last a moment late.

Allow it or not, Harry would just follow him anyway, something Gandalf seemed to sense as he gave a short nod.

“Your sword and your crossbow are most welcome.” Gandalf allowed after a long moment. Then he gave a wicked grin. “With a hobbit and thirteen dwarrow to shepherd once the Company is enjoined, I will take whatever help I can get.”

Harry gave a soft laugh and rolled his expressive eyes – which thanks to a potion long before his
arrival in Middle-Earth no longer required glasses – before turning to the cookpot to finish breakfast and take the kettle off the fire for tea.

“You’ll have to tell me of what sort of journey requires such a diverse party.” He noted, having read not only of Gandalf during the night but also the major species that speckled Arda. From what he now knew, dwarves or dwarrow weren’t the type to rub elbows with the other races of the land. Even hobbits which were, from what he’d ascertained, the closest-kin of the mountain-dwelling creatures.

“Only the best kind, young Peverell.” Gandalf beamed as he stood and shook out the cracks and creaks from advanced age. Sleeping – even in a cart – wasn’t kind to old bones at times. “One that ends in adventure.” He glanced at the Man with consideration. “Ponies will work well enough for the hobbit and dwarrow…” He thought then nodded. “But for a Man and a Wizard horses will be better. My grey,” Gandalf tilted his head towards his cart-horse that doubled as his mount when needed. “Will suit me but we’ll need another for you.” He beamed as he moved over to the fire and took the expertly-brewed mug of tea from his new companion. “Thankfully we are yet in the lands of Rohan, home of the mearas, the finest of all horses. If you don’t mind a bit of haggling I’m certain we can find you a fine mount for the journey.”

Harry nodded in silent agreement as he scooped porridge into bowls, Gandalf having already set up the oats and berries in the pot for easy cooking in the morning.

The tea on the other hand came from a pouch in his pockets.

Horseback riding. He gave a mental sigh. Well, at least between brooms, hippogriffs, and thestrels over the years he had a little experience in what to expect since it seems Gandalf’s cart was to be left behind.

…

They’re called the Valar…have a soft spot for Champions…he remembered what he’d been told before being sent here as he caught sight of Gandalf watching him with cautious eyes as Harry gathered greens to go with their dinner of rabbit stew a few nights later on their way to the trading village Gandalf knew of to get Harry a horse. A soft spot? He thought to himself with a sigh. More like a desire to try and stack the deck.

Well, at least there was a fight coming if he took the meaning of Gandalf’s promised “adventure”, of which he’d learned little beyond the parties involved wishing to reclaim their home though from what Gandalf still hadn’t shared.

For all his former desire to be “normal” and “just Harry” he’d long since come to terms with himself.

Kingsley was right about one thing in the end, one of the reasons he’d used to justify keeping Harry ignorant to the fate of his family until it was far too late to do anything about it. The older he got – the better, the more experienced – he stopped being so much an Auror and a hero. In his hands, magic wasn’t just a gift, it was an art form, one he’d used and wielded with vengeance against anyone daring to break the peace of Wizarding Great Britain. He’d become less law-keeper and more Death-Dealer. Part of him was still surprised days after seeing the words on blade of his words that Deadly or maybe Violent or even Mad weren’t among them.

Instead they’re a testament etched in goblin steel of who he once was – and who after having everything else stripped away but his self that he was trying to be again.

Honor.
Loyalty.
Courage.
Love.
Sacrifice.
Cunning.
Protection.

Of all the seven words it was the fifth that was the easiest and the hardest all at once to deal with. Sacrifice. Some moments it seemed like that was all he’d done since being born was give up one thing after another in the pursuit of some nebulous idea of a greater good.

His parents. His life. Sirius. His childhood. Remus. Fred. His ability to trust. Ron. His peace of mind that things were finally changing for the better. Hermione. His sense of self. Teddy. His second family. Countless innocents in a war that never ended were lost and allies dead. Tonks. Snape. And on the list went.

Only one thing had he refused to give and in the end it was the one sacrifice he had to make in exchange for this chance at another life – the hope that he would see them all again one day.

Yeah, Harry understood sacrifice better than anyone ever should.

He understood honor, loyalty, and courage just as deeply if not as painfully. They were three of his most annoying qualities according to Severus when he’d been alive. It was why the man had trusted him to make one – supposedly last – sacrifice to save their world in that dingy shack on the edge of Hogsmede. Harry’s honor could always be counted on.

And even he could admit that he was often loyal to the point of blind stupidity.

Courage, well, it takes balls to walk to your death and big brass ones to jump up and go back to fighting head-to-head against the wand that killed you after you came back to life. Courage had never been his problem, not even at eleven when he was terrified to his toes of disappointing everyone who revered him so highly. Courage enough to defy his own cunning and end up in Gryffindor.

Cunning was easy too. Without it he never would’ve lived long enough under the Dursley’s tender loving care to make it to Hogwarts, let alone what came after.

But love, and protection…those gave him some bad moments.

He’d never been in love, though he knew familial love to a point that others perhaps never would due to his mother’s sacrifice and his own to protect all he loved.

Protection…

That was perhaps the worst of it for him.

For so long he’d been both sword and shield for his loved ones…only to fail them utterly in the end.

“Your thoughts are dark tonight.” Gandalf noted with a puff of his pipe. “Tomorrow we make Angren village between the Gap and the Westfold. From there it will be another six days through the Gap of Rohan to the Fords of Isen and then a month, weather depending, to Hobbiton. A long
way to be alone in your thoughts, young Peverell.”

“Perhaps.” Harry allowed with a sideways nod of his head, finishing his gathering – between his book and Gandalf he’d learned a thing or two about the flora of Middle-Earth, even if using his crossbow for hunting instead of battle was taking a bit of getting used to – and moving back towards the fire and dinner. “But I have become accustomed to being alone, Gandalf. I’m afraid it will take more than a few days of company for me to break the habits of thirty years.”

“As you say, Mister Peverell.” Gandalf agreed. “As you say.”

…

On the trip to Angren, Harry had stolen moments here than there to take an accounting of the fill of his duster’s expanded pockets finding a few things he’d expected and a few he hadn’t.

Harry was less-than-shocked after finding Siri’s silver flask – which apparently had a Never-Out enchantment on it and rather explained why in the years he’d known his godfather that he’d never seen him refilling the thing with Firewhiskey, making it quite the expensive gift indeed – to locate several pouches filled with food though it was mostly oats, dried fruit and berries, or dried meats: all excellent road rations. Other pouches yielded carefully packed potions ingredients – Severus’s doing of that he was certain – or handy odds and ends like a handful of candles, waterproof matches (in case his magic was ever exhausted or he didn’t want to out his magic he supposed), and a little leather folio with potionering tools, plus another with a single set of carved oaken eating utensils along with a solid steel steak knife with a matching oak handle. It was the last pair of pouches that had him arching a brow and muttering about “cheaters” given the contents.

Each about the size of a large man’s fist and made of dragonhide with a laced mouth for closure and a button flap to secure them further, they were filled with coin.

One silver, the other gold, and each stamped with a strange tree on one side and the other a man’s face though Harry was the last person who could place it.

His family were a bunch of cheaters, that was certain.

That he wasn’t destitute in his new world however was more than enough tension-lifting to make him nothing but glad of it.

After all, while he’d come to like the barmy coot that was Gandalf the Grey, he wasn’t excited to be so thoroughly in his debt as the purchase of a horse would make him – far above and beyond the simple expenditure of sharing meals, especially once Harry had started managing to hunt and forage on the path to Angren.

Harry might not have any clue the cost of a horse let alone tack and supplies for it, but he knew without a doubt given the currency he was used to in the wizarding world that he could more than afford it now and more besides.

A worry lifted.

Still, he had every intention of discovering the going rate of things before he stepped into the haggling ring with a horse-trader.

That, he knew, was only good sense.

Just because his wealth – or at least a portion of it – had been returned to him was no reason to be frivolous with it.
If his early years with the Dursleys had taught him anything at all it was how to stretch a pence.

Or a penny, as the case may be after watching Gandalf bargaining with the inn keeper at Angren once they’d arrived in the village proper, a painted wooden sign of a rearing stallion swinging in the light spring breeze above the inn’s doorway.

A silver half-penny was the going rate for one person to stay in a room along with a morning meal and a bath, Harry doing a quick conversion in his head to get an idea from that for other expenses that in his former home had been of equal value before following the stable boy to the stables to help unharness Gandalf’s horse and tuck the cart into the overhang off the roof of the building. Gandalf had already snagged his bag – and the first bath, most likely – and Harry had yet to gain one on the journey. Several of the men lingering around the stable yard eyed his leathers and the sword on his hip while the stable boy chattered his ears off regarding traveling with the wizard and Harry’s being a ranger – an assumption that said wizard had warned many would make and that would be in Harry’s best interest all things considered to go along with depending on the circumstances.

With nothing better to do and knowing he’d need the information anyway, Harry wandered from the inn and through the market, listening carefully as various people bartered and bargained, gaining a better understanding of the currency and going prices of things.

He heard a pony being sold for three pennies, a proven mama goat for two, a quarter of a freshly butchered pig for one.

A slow crawl through the corrals had him eyeing the impressive horseflesh with consideration.

Harry didn’t know much about horses, had never had the need, nevertheless from films and telly he had an idea about them anyway…and these seemed, even the oldest among them, to be quite fine indeed.

Gandalf hadn’t been telling tall tales – about the quality of the Rohirrim’s horses anyway.

The old wizard arched a brow from where he sat in clean grey clothes with a tankard of ale before him and puffing on his pipe in the Rearing Stallion’s tap room when Harry came down from his own bath at the sight of his younger companion in the same clothes as always – though he’d at least deigned to leave his crossbow and quiver up in his room, which was beside Gandalf’s own, though while the clothes were as mind-boggling clean as ever, his hair and skin was markedly cleaner for the bath and the former weighted down with damp from its normal wild mane to drag near the collar of Harry’s tunic.

“Well, my friend.” Gandalf asked after Harry joined him at table, his own tankard – though from the smell being of spiced honey mead rather than ale – in hand as they awaited their suppers. He’d been surprised – but not shocked, after his dreaming there was little he thought about his companion that would likely shock him – to see Harry hand over a silver penny to the barkeep to pay for his tab for the stay. Unless Harry got spectacularly drunk or was revealed to be a glutton to rival a hobbit, he’d have part of that coin coming back when they departed. “What do you think of Rohan now that you’ve met its people as well as its wildlife?”

Harry looked up from his warming cider with a sardonic expression on his face.

“People are people everywhere, Gandalf.” His words carried more than a hint of bitter resignation. “That’s the problem.”
“People are people everywhere Gandalf…that’s the problem.”

Harry’s words lingered long between them, the heavy silence broken only by the serving woman bringing their trenchers piled with roasted potatoes, vegetables, and venison dripping with juices and hot from the cooking fire.

Both companions set aside their tankards to dive into the meal, a refreshing change from days of porridge, bread growing stale, or whatever Harry managed to hunt with supplements from either Gandalf’s travel rations or what greens and wild veg could be found this early in the season.

For his part Harry departed the tap room early for the bed calling his name.

It wasn’t the most comfortable sleeping surface he’d ever rested upon but compared to long nights under the stars with little but a spare bedroll from Gandalf to rest upon and a likewise spare blanket to keep him warm besides his duster he rested well nonetheless.

Charms for warmth and comfort only did so much after all and even someone with power to spare like Harry was wary of wasting magic on comforts in a dangerous land as it seemed most if not all of Middle-Earth seemed to be.

A hearty meal of eggs, bacon, toast, and fried potatoes saw the travelers breaking their fast and before long the pair were setting out for the horse traders.

“We could,” Gandalf told him with cheer renewed by a good sleep in a bed and a pair of hot meals plus the chance to replenish supplies – he was running a bit low on pipe weed. “Set off today however,” he winked at his younger companion. “My bones will be glad of another night’s rest under the roof of the Rearing Stallion.”

“Aye, I’m agreed with you there, Gandalf.” Harry gave a little laugh as he stretched his arms overhead. As with yesterday he’d left off his crossbow and quiver but had also shed his duster leaving it locked in his inn room. A bit of magical diagnostics had confirmed that none but he would be able to riffle through its pockets while a simple Notice-Me-Not on the coat where it hung from a hook beside the door ensured that none would think to simply make off with it altogether. Paranoia perhaps, but it was a fine garment and one he’d never be able to replace should it become lost, let alone what it contained. A handful of silver pennies along with a single gold coin had been tucked into the inside pocket of his basilisk hide vest over his tunic and Harry considered himself well-provisioned to provide the means for a horse and supplies. “And another meal that isn’t rabbit or whatever fowl I can down wouldn’t be amiss either.”

“Having a like-minded traveling companion is a wonderful thing, young Peverell.” Gandalf continued to call him by his surname, as that was what his Lord and Lady had done, despite Hadrian’s offer to use his given name or nickname. There were some things that even an old Maiar like himself couldn’t bring himself to do. “Which is excellent in this case as I’ve already paid for the night when we arrived.”

An exasperated glance from Harry was all that tidbit garnered him and before long the pair came to
the horse corrals on the edge of the village beside the sprawling fields filled with several distinct herds of mearas.

Gandalf braced himself on his staff, running one hand over his beard as he studied the horseflesh on offer in the corrals while Harry crossed his arms on the top rail of the corral, the two before long drawing the attention – and accompanying sale-pitch – of one of the traders who were just beginning their trading day after a morning of feeding, grooming, and preparing both horses and supplies for sale or trade.

A trader that apparently knew Gandalf.

“Gandalf the Grey!” The tall, though not as tall as the wizard, man sauntered over, his strong build pointing to a life lived on horseback or caring for the creatures or hauling hay and feed for them. “Welcome, welcome! How is that grey draught doing for your cart?”

Harry arched a brow and shook his head, not surprised in the least that Gandalf had taken him to the trader he preferred to patronize – though whether another might have been a closer journey he had no way of knowing.

“Edred,” Gandalf smiled and greeted the man cheerfully. He’d only known Edred – and his family – for years, back to when his great-great-grandfather had begun trading horses by selling a simple grey pilgrim his first cart horse. “Looking well as always and Grey is quite well, thank you. How is your family?”

“Blooming.” Edred told him with a stunning smile for a hardened man of Rohan whose hair had long since turned as grey as Gandalf’s hat. “My son has returned from serving in the Riders and is to take up the trade next spring.”

“Most excellent.” Gandalf beamed himself. It was always good news to learn that a young one had returned from serving in an army or militia – alive. “And any grandchildren forthcoming from our trader-to-be?”

“A granddaughter, last winter.” He was told. “With another or perhaps a grandson to follow in six months or so.”

Gandalf let out a delighted laugh at that.

“Now tell me,” Edred got to it. “If not another good, sturdy draught horse, what brings you to the corrals?”

“My friend,” Gandalf waved to Harry. “Is in need of a strong, reliable mount for a long journey and more besides.”

Edred studied the dark stranger with his fine, pretty looks and finer clothes and weaponry. He looked a noble, especially with the ring on his hand but…the look in his eyes said, “a ranger?” Edred guessed.

“After a fashion,” Gandalf allowed, nodding. “Which would you suggest: strong, steady of foot, and none of the flightiness that some horses are known for?” He cast his gaze over the horses inside the corrals already and those being led in that direction.

“Well…” Edred rubbed one hand over his bearded chin as he studied his stock, pointing out a few options that might suit the quiet man, but before any of them could be readied there came a commotion and a clamor of hoofbeats coming from the far edge of the village towards the east, a commotion that came closer and closer through the village as they stopped and stared down the
road. “What in the blazes is that noise?” Edred muttered in confusion, a scowl creasing his forehead. “Has someone spooked a cart?”

Harry, who had turned as well, stared in turn his eyes narrowing.

“No…” He said a few moments later as the hoofbeats drew near. “It’s a horse.”

Edred’s frown deepened, then a few moments later he saw what the quiet ranger had noted long before him: a horse, barreling down the main road of the village, hooves and pure-white mane flying.

“You must have the eyes of an elf to have spotted him, boy-o.” Edred snorted, shaking his head in wonder as he watched the runaway stallion draw near.

“Yes,” Gandalf murmured in consideration, eyeing the Champion. “Yes, indeed.”

The horse who tore through the village like a dervish ran like the wind towards the three of them, not a speck of tack to be seen on him or shoes on his hooves to give a hint towards his owner, coat, mane, and tail gleaming silvery-white in the sunlight of the new day. It was a stallion, as Edred had already noted with canny horseman’s eyes, with a devastating speed and the finest of forms. Even so, his mane and tail were ungroomed and his coat in need of a brushing.

He was as wild as the wind.

Plunging to a stop not more than an arm-span away, he reared with a trumpeting cry before crashing back onto four hooves, walking right up to where Harry leaned and watched him with startled green eyes and nudging Harry’s chest with his head.

Stunned, Edred and Gandalf watched this scene in silence even as Harry lifted one hand and rubbed softly at the stallion’s silver-white forelock to the sound of a pleased whicker.

“It seems, old friend.” Gandalf turned at last to look at Edred. “That we are no longer in need of a mount for my friend. The Valar have seen fit to provide.”

“I’ll say,” Edred at last shook off his stunned stupor and snorted a laugh. “That looks like one of the descendants of the Mearas, though how he came to be wild and running through our humble trading village I’ve no idea.”

The Mearas, a race of long-lived horses from the northern reaches of Middle-Earth, were the greatest of all horses and said to allow none but the Kings of Rohan and their sons to ride them, not to be confused with the simpler mearas raised and bred in Rohan that were still some of the finest horseflesh to be found anywhere if not as strong, intelligent, or long-lived as the greater Mearas, the lords of horses.

“I’ll need a saddle and tack.” Harry said from where he was getting acquainted with his new friend – and familiar. It was a bond he knew, one he was comfortable with, but one also that brought no little amount of pain no matter how long it had been since Hedwig had been killed trying to save his life. And now after more than a decade of pestering from all and sundry to take another, his new familiar had found him instead. Fitting, given that with his stubbornness Harry would’ve never sought one on his own. “Saddlebags, gear, all of it.”

“Well, it’s not a horse,” Edred laughed ruefully. “But I’ll take it nonetheless. Come, lad.” He waved towards the awning attached to the nearest stable that had wares for all sorts of horses and horse-related needs on display. “And we’ll get you outfitted.”

Twining the fingers of his left-hand into his familiar’s silver-white mane, Harry turned them towards
the awning and followed Edred and Gandalf towards the wares on display, Gandalf turning to ask:

“And what shall you call your new friend, young Peverell?”

Looking up into soft – but wild – brown eyes, Harry answered him softly:

“Shadowfax. His name is Shadowfax.”

Edred’s wares – or those he sold for the craftsmen in question – were excellent from what Harry could tell.

In the end after trying several versions of saddles meant for long journeys on the road, the pair of Harry and Shadowfax ended up with a saddle, stirrups, girth, and breastplate in a black leather that got a nod of strong approval from Gandalf after the wizard gave it a once over, telling his less-experienced friend that it was a good, sturdy set that would last him quite a long time without wearing out. Shadowfax as a *Mearas* and a wild one at that wasn’t about to let a bit anywhere his mouth but allowed a hackamore for riding easily enough, Edred having a set of hackamore and reins in the same leather as the saddle and accompanying gear, along with saddle bags. A halter and lead were purchased as well, Harry knowing that they could come in handy at some point even if they spent most of the trip in one of the saddle bags, and a woven saddle pad to cushion Shadowfax’s back in a plain grey finished their shopping spree at that portion of the corrals as Edred didn’t bother with the other gear Harry would need for a horse such as hoof picks and trimmers, curry combs, and the like.

Shadowfax garnered admiring glances everywhere they went through the market stalls as they gathered what Harry would need to take care of his new familiar, Gandalf suggesting that they finish one errand and getting Shadowfax groomed and settled at the inn’s stables beside Grey before they equip Harry himself and top off Gandalf’s supplies.

With the attention that his new familiar drew, Harry was very much in favor of such a plan, though he understood it. Shadowfax *was* a beautiful – and intelligent, as he nodded his great head or tossed his mane depending on the topics under discussion, such as a set of tack that he particularly didn’t seem to care for – creature.

The stable boy – Hobb – gave Harry a lesson in grooming and brushing down and trimming hooves, Shadowfax having never been shod, before Harry settled his new friend in for the day in the stable with a trough of fresh water and a flake of alfalfa…as well as an apple that Hobb had passed him for a treat for the great steed.

Harry returned to the inn’s tap room where Gandalf had settled in for lunch, joining his companion for the meal before the two returned to the market for the rest of their shopping, the pair gaining looks that had notably *sweetened* from earlier suspicion or concern after the free and easy hand Harry had shown with his purchases for Shadowfax’s tack and gear, even with the bargaining he and Gandalf had under taken.

Word, it seemed, had spread from the corrals where Harry had used the gold coin he’d brought along at Edred’s stall, the quality and amount of tack he’d purchased costing more than some horses themselves.

A simple oiled leather pack to carry necessities if/when he needed to travel on foot was his first
purchase, followed up by a hooded oilskin large enough to cover Harry and the pack in the case of bad weather from the same stall. Then came a bedroll. A flint and striker were added to the pack next, then a small pan and kettle for cooking. Water skins, a plate and bowl. More dried fruit and meat were added to his stores, along with oats and oatcakes that would keep well for the journey to the Shire, then they were adding to Gandalf’s own supplies: smoked and dried meats, cheese, ale for Gandalf and cider for Harry that could be stored in Gandalf’s cart, and though he knew he shouldn’t Harry handed over good silver for a bushel of both dried and fresh apples for Shadowfax along with a pair of eighty pound sacks of oats to supplement the Mearas’s upcoming diet of grass which could be scarce, or so he understood, in some areas that their path to the Shire would take them.

In the end it was with increased supplies and lighter pockets that Gandalf and Harry returned to the inn’s tap room – Harry after taking a detour to visit Shadowfax in the stable where the proud, beautiful creature was found lolling about in the soft, fresh hay his new companion had paid for him to bed down upon – to enjoy another trencher’s worth of roasted meat with sides, this time stuffed boar, and tankards of ale and cider.

“Our journey to the Shire will see you in good form upon Shadowfax by the time we arrive, my friend.” Gandalf told him idly between puffs of pipeweed. “Though one should be always wary upon the paths of Middle-Earth these days, the North-South road is one of the safest and well-traveled to be had between the Rohirrim guarding it to the South and the Dúnedain Rangers of the North.”

Harry gave the old wizard a crooked grin at that as there had been more than one or two comments from Edred about his uncertainty in mounting Shadowfax to test the various saddles for one that suited them both well, though the older man notably had little to say about his actual seat.

There had been a comment or two, muttered as they were, about his ignorance when presented a set of reins.

He was used to riding and keeping his feet in stirrups.

Reins and climbing aboard a massive stallion…not so much.

Still, as Gandalf said, the trip to the Shire would be more than enough time to learn what he needed to know and the journey to come afterward was sure to polish or gain what skills regarding riding that he needed to travel alone among the wilds should such a thing strike his fancy. There was a sense of immediacy to Gandalf that couldn’t be denied but when Harry sat a moment as the sun rose or set and felt the world around him it lacked the…held breath feeling that England had had that last summer before Tom returned. While a battle could be at the end of their journey, Harry thought that if so it wasn’t to be the battle.

No, whatever enemy haunted Middle-Earth they weren’t ready for war.

Not yet.

Preparing for one on the other hand…now that seemed most likely from the little Gandalf had told him and what he’d read of the histories of Middle-Earth in his never-ending (or so it seemed at times) book gifted him by Death.

“Shadowfax I think is eager for an adventure.” Harry told the other, his grin turning rueful. “I get the sense that he’s a bit…young and brash.”

“Edred estimated his age at only three years old.” Gandalf revealed. “From the look he got at his teeth. For a Mearas that does make him young, not quite fully matured and done growing for
another year or two.”

Harry raised his brows at that. “He’s going to get bigger?”

Gandalf chortled at his young friend’s dismay.

“Great,” Harry heaved a sigh and slurping at his cider, frustrated once more over his diminished height thanks to the Dursley’s tender loving care. His father had been over six foot and so was their cousin Sirius. Harry should’ve matched one of them or come close as neither Lily nor Petunia were petite. Instead Harry was stuck at a whopping five seven with Gandalf towering over him. “That’s just…great.”

…

Their first night on the North-South road brought a surprise.

As the light shifted and day began to turn to night, the bright silver-white of Shadowfax began to shift as well, blending seamlessly with the shadows around him until he was as inky as the night.

“His naming was well and truly done, my friend.” Gandalf told him with arched brows as the effect took place. “He surely is one of the great Mearas.”

Prancing a bit and tossing his mane, Shadowfax proved once more that he was more than capable of understanding the speech of men.

…

“That’s your plan, really?” Harry scowled at the unrepentant old coot that sat across the campfire from him somewhere along the plains of Dunland if Gandalf was to be trusted. They were just shy of two weeks into their trip and had a few more days to go before reaching Tharbad where they could rest and resupply before the last push to Bree and thereafter the Shire. “Show up, dump a dozen or so dwarrow on the hapless fellow, and hope for the best?”

Harry groaned.

More than once he’d thought Gandalf a bit barmy but nevermore than now as he finally deigned to reveal their mission in the Shire beyond “meet up with the Company”, said company apparently belonging to a displaced dwarven King which was journeying to rid their home of a fucking dragon.

Oh no, Gandalf, there’s no way this entire plot won’t fall apart at all.

“Well if you’ve any better ideas, speak up.” Gandalf huffed, lighting his pipe with a fussy motion as Shadowfax let out a laughing whinny from where he stood munching on a small measure of oats. “Hobbits never cease to amaze and surprise me however one thing in particular can be counted upon: their stubbornness. Rare is it a hobbit that changes his mind and rarer still one that is willing to change his ways. Other than the occasional Took, trying to nudge one out of the Shire and into adventure is a battle lost before it has even begun.”

Harry sighed, closing his eyes and saying a brief prayer to the Valar for patience.

“Show me the way to Hobbiton and this Bilbo Baggins.” He told the older wizard. “Give me a letter of introduction regarding your acquaintance to his mother, and then return to Bree or wherever you are set to meet your dwarrow Company. I’ll see what I can do to give our Mister Baggins a nudge out the door – I’m certain it’ll be more effective than dropping a party of dwarrow on his head and springing a mission to oust a dragon upon him and hoping he’ll change his mind regarding
scouting an ancient dwarven fortress to ascertain the presence and condition of said dragon.” Harry snorted. “It certainly couldn’t go worse.”

And in that, even a wizard as old and set in his ways as Gandalf, had to admit Harry was likely right.

…

Gandalf agreed in the end with the Champion, as his purpose had been made quite clear by the Valar.

He was to fight the contagion of Morgoth and His Servant Sauron in Middle-Earth and thereby was to assist the Champion They had selected in any way possible be it through being a guide and teacher and companion on the journey to the Shire as in the beginning of their acquaintance or any other manner that came to hand. Wisdom or advice could be offered. A free hand with coin or a willing staff or sword. But it was not Gandalf’s place to usurp or hinder the Champion’s quest in any manner, even if he’d rather take stock of one Bilbo Baggins for himself.

Smaug, after all, was surely quite well familiar with the scent of both the dwarrow and of men, requiring a distinctly unfamiliar companion on the quest for the Lonely Mountain than either race – and there wasn’t a race of beings in all Arda that a dragon of the northern wastes was less likely to have encountered in his life than that of a hobbit.

Still, Gandalf had known Bilbo Baggins to have a sense of curiosity and adventure – searching for fairies in the wood near Bag End for example or listening eagerly as a fauntling to tales of his mother’s wanderings with Gandalf – rare in most hobbits save the rare Took or even rarer Brandybuck.

Harry, however, from what Gandalf had seen of him in the villages and towns between their meeting in Fangorn and the Shire could very well be better suited to convincing all but the hardest hearted of hobbits to join the Company between his kindness to all but an enemy – as evidenced of his quick dealing with the orcs, wargs, and random bandits they’d met along the road – and his plain but passionate speech when he believed in a cause.

Such a belief as “one does not meddle with the lives of others when it could end in their death!”

A refrain that had rang in Gandalf’s ears for several nights when Harry had learned the fullness of the quest they were on.

As it rang with the bitter pain of one knowing of what they spoke, Gandalf made no further attempts to sway Harry towards his own thinking or plans should Master Baggins prove more intractable than expected.

Thankfully for Gandalf’s pastimes, Harry hadn’t forbidden meddling altogether merely in matters such as, say, going off to face a dragon upon its stolen horde as long as he traveled with the Champion.

The directions Gandalf gave as they approached Hobbiton where Gandalf would depart to visit the Great Smials at Tuckborough for a few days to find out more regarding Master Baggins from his cousin the Thain and likewise grandson of Gandalf’s dear friend Old Took before venturing on to meet the Company of Thorin Oakenshield on the road to the Shire, directions that led Harry quickly through the small village with its suspiciously scowling and glaring inhabitants to Bagshot Row and the smial at the end upon a hill with a ground green door that possessed a fine brass doorknob in the center.
Young hobbits, fauntlings or so Gandalf told him when they passed through Buckland, giggled and danced through the hedges at the sight of him mounted upon Shadowfax, the show-off of a Mearas prancing and tossing his mane to gasps and cheers from the fauntlings that had Harry smiling and winking at their good cheer even if they made his heartache for a young Teddy or his lost pack of Weasley nieces and nephews.

Looping Shadowfax’s reins around the fence rail beside the gate leading up to Bag End, Harry rubbed Shadowfax’s neck and handed over a piece of the remaining dried apples as bribery to behave himself with his admirers then patted his pocket to ensure that he had Gandalf’s letter of introduction before loping up the walk.

Taking a breath, Harry lifted one fist and knocked firmly but not too loudly, both Gandalf and Harry’s book seeming of the opinion that manners were a thing valued highly by hobbits.

“Coming, coming!” Sounded from within, the voice bright and smooth, and then the door opened revealing a handsome face as bright and smooth as the voice had been topped with a curly mane of golden-brown hair, matching the short locks upon hairy hobbit feet. “Oh, hello there.” Harry was greeted politely though with some confusion. “Can I help you?”

“Are you one Master Bilbo Baggins?” Harry asked, matching manners for manners.

A slight frown though of lingering confusion Harry thought rather than the suspicion of the hobbit’s neighbors. Thumbs hooked into the pockets of a fine waistcoat that stretched over a round hobbit belly, though not as round as others Harry had seen as he made his way to Bag End through the Shire from Bree. Blinking, the master of Bag End answered:

“Yes, that I am.”

Harry smiled, reaching in to his pocket and offering the letter. “Then, yes, I hope you can help me. My name is Hadrian Peverell and a mutual acquaintance as given me this letter of introduction to explain things to you, Bilbo Baggins.”

“Oh my.” Bilbo said, puzzled at the turn his quiet pre-luncheon late morning had taken, but reached up and took the offered letter nonetheless. “Please, come in and let us see what we can do to get this all sorted, yes?”

“Thank you, Master Baggins.” Harry smiled, pleased thus far with Gandalf’s selection as for all Master Baggins’s confusion he’d not shown an ounce of fluster. “That is most kind.”

…”

“I’m afraid you’ve caught me at luncheon preparations, Master Peverell.” Bilbo bustled into the parlor after divesting his unexpected guest of his pack and sword belt and leather — and it was, quite fine leather if Bilbo was any judge though not of a make he’d seen the like of before with the tiny scales that were almost invisible against the fine hide, though not as fine as the sword hilt he’d gotten a decent look of — coat and hung them on the coat hooks in the entryway, Master Peverell following a few paces behind, not crowding Bilbo at all which he was always thankful of whenever a Big Person was about as it took him a bit of time to get used to them once more, and moving with enough steady grace to avoid knocking his head on any of the chandeliers or low-hanging ceiling beams inside Bilbo’s smial. “Still, would you care for a spot of tea while I read your letter?”

“Thank you, Master Baggins,” Harry told him with a genial nod, sitting in the offered chair that was just a bit bigger than the others in the parlor as he continued to study the inside of the hobbit hole with keen interest. It wasn’t dank or dingy or dirty in the least, though given the cleanliness of the
hobbits he’d seen on his way and the relative prosperity the Shire seemed to posses he wasn’t surprised. Instead he was surrounded by fine furnishings and comfort on all sides.

Comfort, he supposed after another glance at his host, seemed to be the rule in Bag End.

With this to call home, he wasn’t quite sure what inducement could be brought to bear should Master Baggins not want to leave it?

If anything…Harry felt a strong twinge of painful memory as Bag End reminded him starkly of the Burrow’s warmth though even in the years after the War it had never been so finely furnished as Bag End, Arthur and Molly having gone so long living on little but love alone that possessions were of little importance to them.

“Oh, that’s lovely, thank you.” Harry smiled at the hobbit as Master Baggins returned from the kitchen with a tea spread that warmed his British heart, helping himself to tea with honey and cream as well as a few biscuits and a scone with jam as Master Baggins fixed a cuppa for himself to sip at as he read Gandalf’s letter. For the sake of the carpet beneath Master Baggins’s hairy feet he hoped that the older wizard hadn’t written anything too outlandish.

Thankfully for the late Mrs. Baggins’s favorite rug, Gandalf had – for once – restrained himself even if he had taken a few liberties in the telling.

Bilbo skimmed over the date and place, as it told him little beyond his unexpected guest having made good time from Bree though by the sight of the silver-white horse tied to Bilbo’s front fence that much he could’ve guessed at for himself even without the confirmation.

My dear Master Baggins,

You may not recall me as you were quite young the last time we met. My name is Gandalf, a wizard, and I have long been a friend of your family, your grandfather Old Took, former Thain of the Shire, and your late mother, may the Valar watch over her soul, the incomparable Belladonna Baggins neé Took.

Now that I have perhaps, jogged your memory, to my purpose:

Before you, or so it should be if you are reading this letter, is a dear friend of mine who has recently lost his home. His name is Hadrian Peverell and a finer man I doubt could be found in the castles of Gondor or the halls of Rohan or the forests of Arnor. Master Peverell has agreed to partake in a venture to assist a company of dwarves in reclaiming their own home though not for any promise of treasure or reward, simply because it is, in his own words, the right thing to do.

However, the company has yet to depart for the East from Ered Luin and will not reach Bree or the Shire for at least a fortnight. Rather than force such a man to bed down in a cold inn room for that time I thought of my dear friends in the Shire and hope that you might have it in your heart to welcome him at Bag End as he awaits the rest of his company for his upcoming journey. Recompense for his lodging and meals would, of course, be supplied should you or one of your kin be willing to host him for this time.

I thank you for any hospitality you are able to give my friend or introductions to acquire it that you can supply.

Regards,

Gandalf the Grey
Well. Bilbo blinked and took a large gulp of tea. Wasn’t that something.

Gandalf the Grey.

That was a name not heard in the Shire for some years, in that the wizard was right, and when it was it was in complaints about his unsavory habit of packing once-respectable hobbits off on unseemly adventures.

Still, now that Gandalf had mentioned it – albeit by letter – Bilbo could remember him. Or more to the point, his fireworks at Old Took’s birthday celebrations every year when he was young. That made sense, he supposed. The long absence anyway. With Old Took eventually passing away as all mortals do in time and his mother…Bilbo shook off the stinging pain that never seemed to go away when he thought of his mother. With Gandalf’s dearest friends in the Shire gone the wizard would have little cause to maintain his annual visits to the detriment of there being a whole generation of fauntlings not shown the wonderment of the Grey Pilgrim’s fireworks.

Moreover, Gandalf wasn’t snatching Bilbo up for a jaunt to Ered Luin or what have you, but simply asking for a kindness on behalf of a friend.

That was something that was well within the capacity of a hobbit to provide, especially one with a mostly-empty smial like Bilbo.

Though the mention of payment, no matter how stated, was one he would reject out of hand.

For a hobbit that lived in the comfort of Bag End, never would they need to do something so miserly and scandalous as charge for their guest’s comfort.

No, no.

Harry Peverell would be staying at Bag End in all the comfort the smial could offer.

And that was that.
“Well, it seems you’ll be my guest for the next little while, Master Peverell.” Bilbo announced after setting both letter and cup of tea aside, earning himself another of the gentle smiles that his new guest appeared to make a habit of – at least in polite company.

“Thank you for your hospitality, Master Baggins.” Harry nodded in echo of his thanks. “You said something about luncheon preparations before, if you show me where I should set my things and directions to a field or stable for my mount, Shadowfax, I can get out of your hair for a little while and let you finish your preparations in peace.”

“Oh, it’s nothing that can’t keep.” Bilbo waved that off. “Just some stew and bread with tarts for afters. Nothing much to fuss over with the stew on the hob. Come, come.” He rose, collecting the tea tray and striding from the parlor with his guest in tow, who made a quick detour for his pack before falling back inline with his host when Bilbo reappeared from the kitchen, the hobbit rattling off room names as they traversed the long hall of the smial. “The drawing room is across from the parlor and the dining room opposite the kitchen.” Bilbo pointed to doors both open and shut as he led the way. “My study, the cellars and pantries.”

Harry arched a brow at the plural but the one thing hobbits were well-known for it seemed was their appetite so he supposed it made only good sense to keep a full storehouse otherwise they’d be at the markets every other day.

“Sitting room, wash room,” Bilbo continued, then pointed out a trio of guest rooms across from his own room. “You’ll be needing the one at the end.” He smiled at his guest as he opened the correlating door, wrinkling his nose a bit at the bit of dust that always seemed to collect between cleanings no matter how stout or aggressive a rag was used on it during dusting. “With Gandalf being a friend, my mother always insisted on keeping a Big Person’s room.” Bilbo frowned a moment. “Oh dear me,” he muttered a moment, distracted. “If Gandalf comes with the company you’re waiting on I’ll be short a Big Person’s bed.” He shook his head. This wasn’t the moment to count cabbages before the harvest after all, instead a better use of his time was found by opening the window in the far wall and gathering the quilts for airing. “I’ll take these out to air on the line and then get you fresh linens as well.” Waving an amused – or so it seemed – and watchful Harry over to the window he pointed out a fenced-in field beside his kitchen garden. “That field is left fallow this year, if your Shadowfax doesn’t mind only having a garden shed overhang for shelter from rain it should do otherwise the stable at the Green Dragon in the village can accommodate you.”

Harry’s smile was a bit rueful, even as his eyes danced in amusement. Master Baggins was quite the whirling dervish when he set into motion for all he appeared to be quite the gentlehobbit on first measure. Hidden depths with this one, he was certain now after witnessing the determination take over the pleasant expression of the hobbit the further into the letter he’d read.

Having some idea of what was within, it seemed Master Baggins had the good heart Gandalf seemed so sure of in his conversations with Harry.

A good thing, that.

Harry had seen many a brave deed accomplished by one who married a good heart to determination
and the ability to see things done.

“As he was wild before taking up with myself, a garden shed overhang will please Shadowfax well enough.” Harry assured his host. “Though as the linens appear clean and I’ve been on the road for well over a month now I’m not certain a fresh set is all that needed, Master Baggins.”

“Stuff and nonsense.” Bilbo huffed a little, putting his foot down on the matter. “A guest at Bag End deserves nothing but all the hospitality its Master can provide and the Master of Bag End at this time is certainly capable of providing fresh linens, hot meals, and steaming bath water.”

The firm nod was nothing short of a wordless “and that’s the end of it,” Harry yielding with field with a chuckle and raised hands as he hung his pack on the hook beside the bedroom door.

“I’ll get Shadowfax settled then,” he conceded, eyeing the comfortable space in the bedroom. “Is there a closet or storage room I can use for his tack?”

“Certainly,” Bilbo bustled back out of the bedroom, Master Peverell on his heels once more. “There you are,” he pointed to a door catty-corner to the Big Person guest room. “There shouldn’t be much more than a few odds and ends in there, more than enough room for a Big Person saddle and such.”

“Thank you for everything, Master Baggins.” Harry peeked inside the closet in question, confirming that it was indeed large enough for the saddle and gear as all of it could use an oil and cleaning after consistent use for weeks on end. “I’ll leave you to your will as I see to Shadowfax, shall I?”

“Just so.” Bilbo nodded, “and it’s Bilbo, Master Peverell.”

“Call me Harry then, Bilbo.”

…

Eyeing up the remnants of the oats he’d purchased for Shadowfax back in Rohan, he knew he’d need to buy more, hopefully a couple smaller bags for ease of tying them to the saddle for Shadowfax to carry instead of the heavy sacks that had taken up space in Gandalf’s cart. Shrugging, Harry dumped the last of the oats in a clean bucket he’d found in the garden shed and hung it from the fence rail, Shadowfax bumping his shoulder with his nose in thanks for the meal before munching, ignoring the field of bright spring growth of wild Shire grasses around him the greedy thing. Shaking out the sack, he folded it in half and placed it on a pile of similar sacks in the shed before telling Shadowfax to behave and making his first load of hauling gear into the smial.

Saddlebags in his – temporary – room, tack in the closet offered, Harry rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck before heading to the water closet to clean up, having already spotted the clean sheets tucked tidily onto the “big person” bed, distinct with their light blue color versus the soft white that had been there before.

Shaking his head a bit at the insistent, if unneeded, display of hobbit hospitality, Harry shed all but his underwear shirt and tunic, tucking his armored vest/waistcoat and chainmail shirt into the guestroom which had been joined by his duster that Harry had liberated from the smial’s entryway.

Time to face his host once more and get more information about this hobbit that Gandalf hopes would be willing to face a dragon upon its horde.

…”

His host, Harry quickly came to find, was no simple gentlehobbit of leisure as Bilbo might appear at first glance.
Bilbo it seemed kept busy from dawn to dusk between preparing and serving the seven – **seven!** – meals that comprised a hobbit’s day, visiting his tenants and their farms, discussing his own gardens and personal fields with his gardener one Master Hamfast Gamgee, fending off nosy neighbors and relatives alike, and when there was a quiet moment to be found he spent them penning stories for the hobbit fauntlings and field guides alike from wisdom and knowledge he would collect from all and sundry.

Or at least, that was how the latter appeared to Harry after having gotten into several long discussions including but not limited to: basic horse care, Shadowfax, both lesser and greater *mearas*, the people of Rohan, hunting, and so on.

Master Baggins was a skilled interrogator, Harry would give him that, especially as for the most part it was all covered over with niceties, polite conversation, and an ever-present cup of tea.

However, he wasn’t an *inconsiderate* inquisitor as no sooner would Bilbo note a cast of grief come over Harry than he would change the current subject of discussion to one lighter such as the proper care and maintenance of tomatoes which the gentlehobbit had been beyond pleased to find that Harry knew more than a thing or two about the subject of gardening.

Which, considering all the years Harry had spent tending the Dursleys’s garden and then in Herbology, Harry would certainly *hope* he knew a thing or two even if it had been some time since he’d put any of it to practice, a lack which Bilbo had been pleased to remedy halfway through Harry’s stay at Bag End after hearing of the travesty from his guest’s own lips, the next afternoon finding them both happily puttering about in Bilbo’s tomato plants while Hamfast tended the rose bushes and Shadowfax kept a keen eye on them even as little fauntlings dared and darted and ducked into the stallion’s current domain with apples and handfuls of weeds and sugar lumps to offer in exchange for being able to pet a downy nose once Harry had assured them his second day in Hobbiton that so long as they treated the *mearas* with respect Shadowfax would never harm a young one.

Two weeks passed in much this same way.

Harry watched, and rested, and considered the matter of the Master of Bag End, and if at times his eyes turned dark with grief and his soul weighed heavy, well at least such times came less among the green hills of the Shire than they did on the cold ground of the path from Rohan.

The fauntlings of the Shire eventually grew bold enough when Harry proved himself congenial with Mister Bilbo’s company or that of Mister Hamfast to ask in sweet, piping voices if they could *ride* his pretty horsie.

Shadowfax, for all his proud bearing and friskiness, was as pleased with the suggestion as Harry and allowed fauntling after fauntling to sit before his Harry in the saddle and trot around the Hobbiton streets, prancing and tossing his mane to loud cheers and claps from his latest little riders.

It was a spectacle that quite scandalized the good gentlehobbits of Hobbiton but no matter how they protested to Bilbo regarding the behavior of his guest they found themselves stymied. Bilbo saw no harm and a great deal of good in it. Not just for the fauntlings that had yet to shed their youthful bravery and daring and curiosity but also for his guest who had come to be a friend in the weeks he stayed at Bag End. For, in the end, Bilbo Baggins was a hobbit that above all understood grief. He knew it when he saw it in another. And never in his life had he seen it weight as heavily as it did on the shoulders of one Harry Peverell.

If the antics of the fauntlings brought a bright smile to the man’s often weary face, then all for the
better no matter how much Lobelia Sackville-Baggins disapproves. In fact: that she disapproved would have been enough on its own for Bilbo to ignore the gripes. If the parents of the fauntlings wished to forbid their little ones a joyful event, that was their decision not anyone else’s as far as Bilbo was concerned.

He would not take it from them or his guest for all the scones in the Shire.

So loud and shrieking were Lobelia’s reprisals to Bilbo’s set-downs that in a moment of shared devilry a decision was made that found not only fauntlings taking turns on Shadowfax’s back but also Bilbo – though in the case of the grown hobbit he rode alone with Harry leading him in circles in the field at first, Harry’s stirrups shortened for Bilbo’s legs though even then it wasn’t quite comfortable even with Shadowfax being not quite at his eventual mature growth himself.

If the fauntlings taking rides on the great *Mearas* was shocking to the busybodies of Hobbiton, the sight of Bilbo mounted upon Shadowfax with reins in his hands and Harry walking beside was enough to cause Lobelia to collapse in a fit of vapors.

It was during one of these walks that Bilbo eventually brought to their soft conversations a matter that had begun to press upon him after he’d come to a decision regarding a theory that picked at him.

…

“Who are you really, Harry?” Bilbo asked, looking down – and hadn’t *that* taken getting used to! – at the Man who walked at his side as they made their way to the Great Smials, Bilbo in need of a meeting with his cousin the Thain of the Shire and Harry using it as more training for Bilbo’s seat upon Shadowfax, the miles between Hobbiton and Tuckburough the longest the hobbit will have rode the *mearas* yet in one go. “And why are you staying with me?”

He knew – *anyone* would know after a glance at his clothes, clothes that never changed, mind, or his weapons or his horse – that being gold-strapped wasn’t a viable reason for the Man to choose alternate accommodations than an inn while he awaited his company. Neither did the reason Gandalf had given in his letter to Bilbo ring quite true anymore either. There was something else. Something that Gandalf hadn’t seen fit to tell him and that Harry had been careful not to disclose, choosing his words with care when it came to the company he was joining up with and the journey he was to undertake.

It worried Bilbo.

Worried him deeply indeed.

For the only reasons he could think of for such secrecy was either grave danger or shady dealings and having grown to know Harry – at least he hoped – he couldn’t bring himself to believe it was the latter for all that it was press upon his care for his new friend less than the former.

In silent answer to the first question, Harry lifted one hand up to Bilbo’s view, palm up and hand flat and allowed a wisp of flame to form and dance within his grasp.

“You’re a wizard!” Bilbo jerked a bit in the saddle to Shadowfax’s disapproval, the *mearas* turning his great head and huffing a snort at the hobbit over his shoulder before turning back to the road as Harry closed his fist and snuffed the flame.

“You’re not quite in the way of wizards here.” Harry tilted his head in a sideways nod. “But that is a title I have held in my life, yes. I was sent to Gandalf in Fangorn Forest to help him deal with a pack of wargs and orcs that had set upon him some weeks ago so that I might gain his trust and be allowed
among the Company he has helped form for the venture that will soon be upon me.”

Harry winced a bit in his mind at the way his speech was changing the longer he was in Arda but it couldn’t be helped. He’d discovered the three languages gifted him and as each settled into his mind he found himself becoming more formal in his speech than a modern person of Britain would be in the normal course of things. But considering the complexities of Sindarin and Khudzul, that was to be expected he supposed.

Westron, at least, was somewhat easier to grasp and use as if it were his own native tongue for all that he had an accent that never failed to draw surprised looks.

Bilbo, he’d been pleased to learn, knew some of both Sindarin and the more formal – and scholarly – Quenya giving Harry a chance to practice his Elvish as well as a new topic of companionship between the two as the hobbit passed off his two books – one on each language – for Harry to study during his stay. Nevertheless, while they practiced simple things in Sindarin, most of their talks were in Westron, Bilbo becoming accustomed to some of Harry’s stranger saying and turns of phrase over time as well as his accented speech.

The hobbit turned Harry’s answer over in his mind for several quiet minutes of contemplation then asked:

“Sent by who?”

“That, my dear Bilbo,” Harry chuckled and shook his head, running one callused hand down Shadowfax’s shoulder. “Is a question both simple and horribly complex. More than that, the answer that follows is one requiring strict secrecy: I have not even spoken of it with Gandalf for all that I believe he knows somehow nonetheless.”

Bilbo snorted at that. “Gandalf always knows things he should have no way of knowing. My mother often complained of it.”

“I fear it’s a trait common to old wizards with long beards and twinkling blue eyes.” Harry noted with a snort of his own. “More’s the pity.”

“I won’t say a word, not even in my writings.” Bilbo promised eyes soft but with a hidden fierce ness. “I swear it. I won’t betray your confidence, Harry, not now that I have come to see you as a friend.”

There was nothing in the world that Bilbo would let force him into being one of those to add to the dark grief in Harry’s lushly green eyes.

“I believe you, my friend.” Harry smiled up at the smaller male. That fierceness of his was rarely shown off but Harry had seen glimpses of it before when he’d faced off with his neighbors and relatives over Harry’s befriending the children of the Shire. “The secret is this: I was sent by the Valar to be their Champion upon Arda and fight the battles among the Free Folk of the lands of Middle-Earth against the taint and servants of Morgoth.”

Bilbo blinked, his mouth opening and closing a few times in shock.

He’d thought…now he didn’t even know what it was he’d thought it was that Harry was keeping so close. That he was an exiled prince perhaps. Or a wandering lord’s son seeking adventure and respite in turns before he took up his duties. That Harry was noble – of some stripe – had never been in question to one raised as the Master of Bag End and grandson, nephew, and now cousin to the Thain of the Shire.
Hobbits may not have true Kings or nobility but that didn’t make them blind to the ways of other peoples. Bilbo knew how he’d be viewed by Men if they were aware of his holdings. Of his Took relations and their holdings in turn. Bilbo viewed himself as a landlord and administrator for Hobbiton.

Men would view him a Lord and cousin to a King.

He knew another like himself when he saw their clothes and watched their manners.

Harry was a much a nobleborn as any Man he’d ever met in Bree or coming to settle affairs at the Great Smials or Bag End.

Nobility, as far as hobbits were concerned, was no more than a conceit for Big Folk.

All that aside, the sword Harry left in his room unless they were going beyond the borders of the Shire and that golden signet ring on his hand were both dead giveaways that the Man wasn’t the humble Ranger he acted as.

Then Bilbo’s shock faded and his thoughts – and theories – caught up with him alongside the implications of the quest his friend was to set off upon.

“Harry,” he pressed, serious from the tips of his hair to the leather soles of his hard-worn feet. “What is this journey you’re going on?”

“I’m to venture out with the Company of Thorin Oakenshield, King-in-Exile of Erebor and King of Ered Luin to reclaim the Lonely Mountain from the dread dragon of the north Smaug the Terrible.”

“No.” Bilbo denied at once, hands tightening on Shadowfax’s reins as he shook his golden-brown curls furiously. His friend who rarely smiled more than that soft company smile unless he was playing with fauntlings or laughing at one of Bilbo’s jokes, off to face a dragon? And not just to face it…but to kill it? A thing not done or seen since Fram slew Scatha the Worm. “No, Harry you can’t! You’ve only just started to smile and laugh more and you’re going to go off on a dragon-hunt?! No.” He shook his head once more, resolution filling his small but sturdy body. “No, you simply can’t.”

“You see more than most would think, my dear friend Bilbo.” Harry’s voice was soft but tired as he stared straight ahead, not so much as casting a sideways glance towards his stout-hearted friend who rose so readily to his defense. “But I’m afraid a Champion has little choice, Bilbo. A bargain was struck with the Valar to give a soul forsaken by fate hope. A soul who had lost all they had loved to the hate of endless enemies who could not – no matter their schemes – kill them, instead choosing to kill their friends and family in hope of breaking their spirit if they could no break their body.”

“Harry,” he pressed, serious from the tips of his hair to the leather soles of his hard-worn feet. “What is this journey you’re going on?”

“‘I have weathered many trials to come to Arda, Bilbo Baggins. I will weather many more no doubt before the Valar are satisfied. This quest is one I must undertake or I forsake not only myself but all those I lost when I struck the bargain that brought me here, can you understand that at least my friend, even if this quest is a foolhardy one in your eyes?’”

“Oh, Harry.” Bilbo sighed, mouth turned down at the weights upon his shoulders. A good many of which he couldn’t have guessed at no matter the amount of time he was given to ponder them.

“You’re only one man? What difference can one person have against all the wickedness of the world?”
“All the difference, Bilbo.” Harry smiled, teasing. “One person can have all the difference. Whether tipping the scales of a battle, a lucky arrow that takes down a buck to feed a family, or a single hobbit who allowed a stranger into his smial and offered him rest and respite from the wickedness of the world so he might gather himself before a journey that will be hard and long. I tell you this: a single good soul can have as much impact on the world as a single wicked one.”

“It was nothing.” Bilbo muttered, blushing and focusing relentlessly on the road between Shadowfax’s ears. “Couldn’t have left you to the mercies of the Prancing Pony.”

“You could have, Bilbo.” Harry arched a brow, patting the hobbit on the leg. “You could have. Most hobbits would have. Just because your kindness isn’t some heroic victory in a battle or grand declaration of do-gooding doesn’t make it any less for its genuine sincerity. In my experience battle-lust is common and grand gestures smoke on the wind. Kindness, true kindness with no expectation of acknowledgement or reward, now that can be as rare as mithril.”

…

That night tucked up in his warm and comfortable bed, it occurred to Bilbo that while Harry had told and confided many things to him on their way to the Great Smials, he never had broached the subject of just why he was staying with Bilbo in the first place.

…

Fists propped on his hips and a sulky scowl on his face, Bilbo confronted Harry in the kitchen the next morning even as his guest, who had become more and more relaxed and comfortable in Bilbo’s home as the two of them loosened on the reins of propriety as seen by Harry waking before Bilbo – as he’d done every morning – and not only seeing to Shadowfax as was his habit but also pottering around the kitchen getting breakfast on and starting a simple dough for Bilbo to turn into loaves of bread or platters of tarts or trays of rolls as the fancy took him.

“You sir,” he chided. “Are a sneaky sneak!”

Smirk tugging at one corner of his fine-shaped mouth, Harry ushered Bilbo over to his seat near the kitchen fire putting down a fresh cuppa before him and setting the platters of eggs, ham, sausages, toast, tomatoes, beans, and fried potatoes around him for the hobbit to fill his plate as he pleased, Harry having already helped himself to what he’d call a “Full English” and Bilbo merely called everyday breakfast.

Bilbo huffed and helped himself to the bounty Harry’d proven adept at fashioning each morning, taking a strong gulp of tea prepared just as he favored it, before revealing just what it was that had him in a strop.

“You told me about you.” He scowled down at his eggs before piling his fork with the scrambled mess of egg, cheese, and herbs. “You distracted me. I asked two questions yesterday but only received one answer no matter how…” He hesitated then finished his thought. “Ground-shaking an answer it was.”

“Wondered how long it’d take you to realize.” Harry shook his head, still smirking before drinking some of his own tea and sobering, setting the delicate china aside. “Gandalf sent me here, Bilbo. Can you think of no reason why the Grey Wizard might have done that aside from giving me a respite in the Shire?”

Since, as already discussed between them, Harry could’ve gotten his respite at the Green Dragon in Hobbiton near the market and had a stable for Shadowfax besides. Instead Gandalf had sent him to
Bilbo. Clearly, the hobbit wasn’t going to be distracted any further from why the wizard had made that decision – and without so much as a by-your-leave from the hobbit himself.

Half his plate disappeared into Bilbo’s stomach as he ruminated as much on the quality of breakfast Harry managed to provide, the like of which Bilbo hadn’t had in years unless dining at the Great Smials, and half on trying to pick out a clear strand of thought from the tangled knot of a wizard’s logic.

The world would be a much better place, was Bilbo’s considered opinion, if more beings simply had good hobbit-sense.

Then it struck him: Gandalf’s had made mention of Harry meeting up with a company but never where.

“Oh no.” He blanched. “He means to drag me along on this mutton-headed suicidal excuse for an adventure, doesn’t he?”

Harry gave a roaring laugh at the truly horrified expression that washed over Bilbo’s face, nodding as a tear of mirth escaped his eye as Bilbo sat and spluttered, dropping his fork and swaying in his seat for several long moments in his shock.

Well. Harry eyed him up as his laughter died down. Maybe three-quarters shock and one-quarter terror. Bilbo truly was a brave soul, even if the hobbit would never believe him if Harry said so.

“Calm down, Bilbo.” Harry patted him softly on the back, handing him a fresh, bracing cuppa and drawing him from whatever spiral of thoughts he’d been lost on. “Oakenshield was planning, from what Gandalf told me, to take a Company of fourteen. Thirteen dwarrow and a fourteenth to be selected by Gandalf. I’m sure you can tell Gandalf when he arrives that you won’t go and nothing will be harmed by it.”

Bilbo sucked in a breath then scoffed his tea.

“Maybe.” Bilbo allowed, setting the teacup aside and then met Harry’s gaze squarely. “But why would Gandalf want to bring a hobbit along in the first place, Harry?” He pressed. “I looked you know.” He informed his friend. “Last night, dug out my maps and charted the different ways to journey to the Lonely Mountain. It’s thousands of leagues from the Shire, over most of Arda in fact. Why try and take a hobbit that’s never been farther than Bree on such a trek?”

Harry chewed on his cheek a moment then conveyed what Gandalf had told him when Harry had asked a similar question: Smaug and his knowledge of scents.

If Harry had thought Bilbo’s face went washed-out before it was nothing compared to the deathly color it took at that.

“Bilbo, look at me.” Harry waited a long moment for his friend’s soft – and at the moment terrified – brown doe eyes to meet his own steady green gaze. “You do not, I repeat do not have to join the Company. There is no force on this earth that will induce me to allow you to be coerced or bullied into it. When death is on the table I will never stand for another to be manipulated in such a way. That said,” he sighed, closing his eyes. “For all the dangers we would face along the road to Erebor, let alone Smaug himself, having a friend along to lighten the days would be a boon, especially if that friend happens to move with a stealth and quiet step that would make him an asset dearly missed otherwise.”

“You truly mean that.” Bilbo blinked, shocked to the tips of his hair-covered toes. “You truly
would want me, me?, to come on a venture set before a Champion of the Valar, a Maia, and a dwarven King?"

“I would, Bilbo.” Harry nodded. “It’s a bit of a silly saying from my people but one I’ve found true enough: the mark of a true hero isn’t in the strength of his arm but that of his heart. And you my friend I think have one of the strongest hearts I’ve met in my life.”

“I’ll think on it, Harry.” Bilbo sighed, already half-certain what his answer was going to be but wanting to take time to think it over anyway. “That’s all I can promise. When will they arrive?”

“A week, give or take.” Harry answered. “I’ll have to go to the markets and lay in some food and ale since they’ll have already been on the road for a bit before they arrive.”

“Well.” Bilbo tucked back into his breakfast with a steady hand. That at least was something he could think on without panicking at the very thought. Hobbits, after all, were excellent hosts. Especially with advance warning. “We’ll have to make a plan for that. Air out the extra mattresses from the cellar, clean out the outdoor hearth and roaster, how many casks of ale to you think…”

Harry smiled as Bilbo set upon the offered distraction like a dog after a bone, assured that if nothing else he hadn’t lost a friend this morn no matter how underhanded he’d been about gaining the hobbit’s friendship under somewhat-false pretenses as he knew his clever friend would have realized and chose not to confront him over.

Better than a swift kick and being tossed out by his ear as he’d half-way expected after seeing Bilbo go after his cousin Lobelia when she’d been particularly grating on the hobbit’s nerves anyway.

…

While Bilbo’s natural inclination towards meals would have had him cooking for days and days, Harry’s steadying influence managed to rein him in from more outlandish ideas as since from what he could tell from his readings dwarrow were similar in feeding to Men, turning Bilbo’s nervous energy as he tried to think his way through the tangle Harry had set before him: stay or go, by cooking and preparing for his soon-to-come guests.

Oats and hay were purchased for the ponies dwarrow were known to ride on long journeys, ale bought by the casks, mattresses and linens aired, an entire hog purchased to be stuffed and roasted for dinner to serve the dwarrow as the leftovers could be used for breakfast and luncheon sandwiches alike.

Harry taught him some simple road-rations to prepare: oat cakes with honey and dried fruit or nut butter or dried berries and meat. They made up simple packs out of oiled cloth and filled them with the road-rations as well as plain portions of dried meats and fruits not used for the oat cakes and some nuts Harry had managed to bargain for – a rare find this far from harvest in the Shire. It was then the moment came as Harry hesitated before reaching for one last sheet of the oiled cloth.

“That’s fifteen.” He said softly, looking over at Bilbo who’d gone still. “Should we make another?”

“We’ll make as many as we have oil cloth for.” Bilbo decided after a long, tense silence. He hadn’t yet made a decision though to be fair, Harry hadn’t mentioned why they were making all these preparations again since the first morning where it was revealed. “I’m sure extras will be welcome on the road.”

“Ok, Bilbo.” Harry nodded, letting it go once again. “We’ll do that.”

Still, for all his quiet support, Bilbo wasn’t surprised that night to find a simple list in a steady hand
on his desk, in fact it gave him a chuckle.

It was a packing list for a long journey, written in Harry’s sharp lettering and contained more than one item Bilbo wouldn’t have thought of in a hundred years as well as a few notes on things that could be left behind without harm, the best materials for traveling clothes, and an estimate on the length of journey to the Lonely Mountain.

His friend truly was a sneaky creature, even if he was a man of his word.

After all, Harry hadn’t said another word about the matter.

…

As many preparations had been made as possible on a sunny Shire morning when Bilbo left the smial to go have a smoke in the morning sun.

Harry doubted others would ever not be shocked that Harry didn’t partake – even if some of the pipe weed he’d scented during his time in Arda had smelled more like marijuana than tobacco. It seemed every adult male he’d met smoked. And it seemed for the most part without harm. Even so, a lifetime of being warned of the dangers of smoking wasn’t about to go away despite both Gandalf and Bilbo assuring him that there were little health risks that came with it to the beings of Arda except if one already has a weakness of the lungs.

Bilbo had been outside for a half-hour or so when Harry heard it.

“YOU MEDDLING OLD GOAT!”

Laughing to himself, he ducked out the back to turn the pig sandwiched between a pair of metal grates in the massive outdoor hearth where it’d been roasting over low heat for a day already.

Gandalf had that coming for the old badger’s original plan to bully Bilbo into coming if nothing else.
Chapter 5

Broken Blade

Chapter Five: The Company of Thorin Oakenshield

“YOU MEDDLING OLD GOAT!”

…

Bilbo snuffed out his lit pipe weed, scowling up at the spluttering form of Gandalf all the while before tucking it away in his waistcoat pocket and standing. Gandalf clearly had no idea what was coming as rather than backing away from the irate hobbit he instead stood his ground, bracing his staff and squaring his shoulders…right up until Bilbo marched right up to him and gave him a swift kick to his right shin sending the wizard hopping back on one foot. Narrowing his eyes at the shocked wizard, Bilbo gave a fierce nod before spinning on heel and marching for his smial door.

“I take it young Peverell told you then.” Gandalf spoke to the – extremely rude – hobbit’s back. It was the only thing he could think of that would lead to such an attack both of his person and his character from Bilbo’s oh-so-welcoming shout.

“Dinner.” Bilbo announced, not pausing a moment. “Will be served at six o’clock sharp for both you and your dwarrow, Gandalf. Their mounts – if they have any – can join Shadowfax in the field.”

And with that he entered his home, slamming the door behind him and leaving a rather discombobulated wizard standing shocked in his front path for his neighbors to goggle at until Gandalf spun with a huff of his own and marched off to gather his wayward dwarrow.

After all when one is already out of favor with a hobbit it didn’t do to press them any further.

…

The irate hobbit in question found his long-term guest in the outdoor hosting area his father had built for his Took wife, the Tooks in particular being in favor of great gatherings beneath the stars. His outdoor hearth could – and currently was – roast an entire hog or a half-side of beef, while the table once assembled as he’d hired Hamfast’s young sons to do the day before could easily seat a party of twenty, let alone the thirteen dwarrow plus a wizard, champion, and Bilbo himself. Everything was in order.

Whether this Thorin Oakenshield or even Gandalf himself would go along with the plans Harry and Bilbo had made to ensure the Company was properly outfitted was another question as from what they both understood the dwarrow of the Blue Mountains were rather, well, poor and living on the sufferance of what little they could scrabble from the long-abandoned mines of Ered Luin or by working their crafts in the cities of Men.

While Hobbiton had never been big enough to draw the dwarrow craftsmen to trade in their Market, the occasional odd few would travel to Tuckburough, and as Bilbo well knew there was little hobbits loved so much as gossip.

He’d never paid much attention to said gossip pertaining to dwarves before Harry came to stay, but in the last week he had ventured to both the Great Smials and the Tuckburough markets to learn what he could of the dwarves of the Blue Mountains and if their circumstances were in fact as dire as
Harry had been led to believe by Gandalf.

Bilbo had found that if anything Gandalf had understated the case as save for a handful of dwarrow smiths whose craft was highly prized, all any of the dwarven traders ever sought from the Shire was food rather than the silver or gold their skills would otherwise demand in payment.

If nothing else, Bilbo would see the dwarrow Gandalf brought to his smial well fed.

“Seems like that went…well.” Harry was still chuckling even as he fixed the metal spit back into place after turning the roasting hog.

Bilbo eyed the hog. It would have to come off the fire a good thirty minutes before the dwarrow arrived for dinner for the skin to be removed, the meat broken down and the potatoes, onions, and apples it had been stuffed with removed and piled into large bowls for serving. Together with the loaves of bread they’d already formed and had rising, cheese, butter, and a salad for himself, Harry, and Gandalf as well as tarts for afters Harry had assured him it would be enough. The hobbit in him protested. However, given that Harry would know more about his own appetite than Bilbo even after living in the same home for several weeks he bowed to his friend’s insistence that anything more would be sheer overkill.

There was always tomorrow to continue feeding up the dwarrow anyway.

Bilbo sniffed in answer to Harry’s questioning statement, his friend merely laughing again before joining him in wandering into the kitchen.

Plans for dinner for their guests were all well and good but now it was time for elevensies and Harry at least had taken to filling his stomach as much as his system would allow in preparation for long days and nights on the trail.

Over a light meal of the last of yesterday’s baking along with fresh fruit, salad, and tea, they discussed their plans for the next day or so…which in Harry’s case meant his plans for an extensive nap before anyone arrives as he could very well see his sleep disrupted once Gandalf joined him in the Big Person’s guest room, not to mention the thirteen dwarrow spread through the other guest rooms and the dining room where they’d laid out the extra mattresses and linens for the dwarrow that weren’t so lucky as to rate a guest room.

The real sticking point was the washing facilities but, well, at least Bilbo had managed to make arrangements for his normal cleaning lass to stop by day after tomorrow once the Company had departed, plus an extra silver for what was sure to be quite the mess after sixteen males of various makes tromped about the place.

“You’re going to leave me in suspense of your answer until they broach it tonight, aren’t you my friend?” Harry asked, humor still rich in his voice and eyes as Bilbo had refused to discuss it one way or another and Harry had kept his word about not fussing at him or trying to sway him beyond answering any questions Bilbo put to him. And the hobbit had had more than a few once he’d recovered from the shock of what Harry had suggested.

“Consider it your punishment, my friend.” Bilbo told him with a wicked smirk that looked a bit out of place on his pleasantly-handsome face.

Groaning a bit, Harry sighed and nodded.

It was nothing less than he had coming after all, the wizard still considering himself lucky that Bilbo hadn’t simply washed his hands of him altogether.
Rising, Harry gave his friend a rueful grin before washing up his plate and mug then taking himself off for that nap.

He had a feeling he was going to need all of his wits about him to deal with the gathering of the Company that night.

…

It was rare that Gandalf found himself entirely wrongfooted however ever since the Valar had dropped their latest Champion almost onto his head he’d found himself growing more and more familiar with the sensation.

Never however, not once in all his years, had anyone had the sheer audacity to kick his shins.

A grin broke over his weathered face as he turned and looked back at the green door of the smial on the hill.

It seemed Bilbo Baggins would be an ever better fit for the Company than he’d thought.

Now all Gandalf had to do was wrangle over a dozen dwarrow and get them all to Bag End in time for dinner – and hope that none of them wandered off.

Well, that and convince Thorin Oakenshield to include a certain hardheaded Champion on his quest for Erebor.

Details.

…

“Now,” Gandalf warned the dwarrow once all had been rounded up, a job which had felt not unlike herding cats, and they stood before the green door of Bag End. “Master Baggins has a friend visiting. Young Peverell is quite fierce in his defense of friends therefore it would be in everyone’s best interest if you all used your manners when in his home and a civil tongue when speaking to him.”

To more than one snicker from a pair of younger dwarrow Gandalf had turned hard – but knowing – blue eyes on the leader of the company for that second stricture.

Thorin Oakenshield wasn’t known for being the most gregarious dwarrow after all.

“Aye,” Thorin held in the urge to roll his eyes, even as he cast a meaningful glance of his own at his still-snickering nephews. “We hear you wizard.”

“Very well.” Gandalf turned and rapped thrice with the bottom of his staff on the round door of the smial before stepping back and waiting patiently, the dwarrow lined up behind him not unlike duckings behind their mother in some semblance of ranking with Thorin and his nephews at the back, their guardsman just behind Gandalf and the rest dotted in their family groups in between.

His patience was rewarded as moments later the door to Bag End opened – only instead of revealing the smiling face of one Bilbo Baggins it was the cool expression of Hadrian Peverell that met them as the green-eyed warrior studied the group before arching a brow at Gandalf in question.

“Ah, young Peverell.” Gandalf beamed at the sight of the young Champion. “It seems your respite here has suited you well.”
“Hello, Gandalf.” Harry smirked, at him for a split-second that only the most canny-eyed dwarrow noted. “Welcome all to Bag End. I’m afraid our host is still setting the table. Please,” he stepped back and waved them in. “Come in.” Pointing to the coat hooks, a rack underneath, and an empty table he rattled off Bilbo’s instructions. “Cloaks and coats on the hooks, boots on the rack, and weapons on the table if you please, Gandalf and company. My name as Gandalf already stated is Hadrian Peverell however introductions can wait until we join Bilbo.” Another pointed finger singled out the washroom. “A wash basin is through that door.”

“Are we dining outside, young Peverell?” Gandalf asked as after a stunned moment at the outpouring of orders disguised as pleasant suggestions the dwarrow came inside in clusters, stripping off as required even as Gandalf set his staff aside and his own grey cloak on a hook higher than the others. The wizard had noted that while the smial smelled of baking things that tickled at the belly the dining room’s door was closed.

“We are.” Harry nodded. “There was no where else large enough to host such a company but with the cooking hearth lit it is cozy enough for the purpose.”

Cautious now, as to a one the dwarrow had noted that Peverell’s clothing was in fact light armor, they followed his instructions before making their way outside where they found that cozy didn’t quite cover it. Torches ringed the paved patio bringing light to the outside space and between the stonework and the fire still glowing in the great outdoor hearth it was as warm as the interior of the smial under the stars. Great platters were filled with cuts of roasted meat or potatoes while bowls were brimming with onions and apples that had likely been cooked alongside the meat. Loaves of bread still steaming were laid between every other plate with pots of butter and preserves beside them and rounds of cheeses sat at each end of the large table. Small bowls of fresh greens got a nose-wrinkle or two from some of the dwarrow, but the sight of a tapped ale cask saw nothing but smiles along with the bottles of wine breathing on the table and the flagons of clear, fresh water.

It was a feast the like of which none of them had seen for years save for Gandalf.

More it was a welcome.

Standing at the head of the table and already greeting Gandalf was the one offering it with open hand to them:

“Ah, there you are.” Beamed a pleasant smile. “Bilbo Baggins, Master of Bag End, at your service.”

“Bilbo my friend,” Gandalf waved an arm to the Company as Harry came to stand at the Big Folk chair at the foot of the table, leaving the one at Bilbo’s left for Gandalf. “And young Peverell, allow me to introduce Thorin Oakenshield, King of Ered Luin and Erebor and his Company.”

At a nod from Thorin, the others stepped forward and introduced themselves, each moving to a chair at the table afterward.

“Balin, son of Fundin, at the service of you and your family Master Baggins.”

“Dwalin, son of Fundin…”

“Oín…”

“Glóin…”

“Dori…”
“Nori…”
“Ori…”
“Bifur…”
“Bofur…”
“Bombur…”

“Fíli, son of Víli and Lady Dís of Durin’s Folk…”

“Kíli…”

By the time all had been introduced only the seat at Bilbo’s right went unclaimed, with Balin and Dwalin beside him, the younger three dwarrow all clustered around Harry with Fíli to Harry’s left and Ori on his right, Kíli between his brother and who Harry thought was his elder cousin of some sort, the ‘Ri brothers and the ‘Ur family all on the same side of the table as Gandalf and the rest joining their King’s side of the table.

“Thorin, son of Thrain, son of Thrór, King of Durin’s Folk, at the service of you and your family Master Baggins,” then Thorin turned a bit and included Peverell which none of the others had done. “And yours, Master Peverell.”

Taking his seat beside the hobbit and their host did the same, he eyed how far down the table his sister’s sons were before deciding to leave it. They shouldn’t get up to too much mischief and if they did – such as tossing food around – at least they were outside. A serving fork passed his way by his host prompted him to begin filling his plate which was a signal to his company to do the same and shortly thereafter there was little by way of conversation or much else as they all fell upon the food like well-mannered, if starving, wolves.

Conversation rumbled here and there among the dwarrow, Bilbo and Gandalf carrying on a low-voiced conversation that at least appeared more congenial than their meeting earlier that day as Harry kept a canny eye and ear on the goings on.

Though at least he finally had an answer for his final gifted language as the strains of Khuzdul carried to his ear – much to the disgruntlement of Bilbo who was the only one at table who didn’t understand the secret language of the dwarves though Harry would give Gandalf kudos on his poker face especially considering some of the less-than-complimentary things being said regarding the wizard and his judgement of choosing Bilbo as the fourteenth member of their party, which kinda made Harry eager for what piles of muck would be heaped on Gandalf’s sanity, lineage, and person once they figured out that he’d also chosen Harry to accompany them even if they hadn’t had much to say regarding his presence in Bilbo’s home.

But if Harry were a betting man he’d say that one or two had an inkling of it particularly the King himself and the one called Nori that Harry – and Dwalin and Dori? – had all been keeping an eye on.

When bellies were filled, Harry waited for the signal from Bilbo and snapped his fingers, the dwarrow all to a one stumbling back from the table in a crashing of chairs, stomping of dwarven feet, and shocked expilitives and exclamations in Khuzdul as Harry banished the dirty dishes and platters to the kitchen. Another snap of his fingers had the dirty things clean and the food flying into containers and the cold storage, then another saw the table remade with clean plates and platters piled with the fruit and berry tarts, all of which only took a matter of moments and revealed that nearly to a
dwarf they had disobeyed the request to leave their weapons on the table in the smial as a variety of knives and daggers were brandished.

“Jumpy lot, aren’t they?” Harry snarked with a smirk lighting up his face and his eyes dancing in amusement.

“Showing off, young Peverell?” Gandalf scolded him lightly with a huff. “That wasn’t a kind trick to play on those unaware of your abilities my dear friend.”

“Considering that the dwarrow you have brought into my home without giving me advance notice – which would have left me quite put out and unprepared if not for Harry’s warning,” Bilbo broke in before the wizards could well and truly start snarking at each other while the dwarves slowly came to the realization that their startlement was just that – theirs – with none of the others at table showing even the slightest hint of surprise of the magical doings. “I think it was a trick well played especially since they have broken the simplest of the rules of guest-right by bringing weapons to a meal offered in genuine hospitality and peace.” He sniffed, helping himself to several of the small tarts.

“Recompense if anything. A smart to their collective pride in exchange for the insult offered to my home is quite suitable under the circumstances, Gandalf.”

“My word.” Balin, the second-eldest of the dwarves next to Thorin and his king’s advisor, was the first to break the tense silence by righting his chair and retaking his seat, the others following his example as soon as Thorin did the same a fraction of a second later. “Never before have I heard of such a young wizard, Master Peverell.” Then helping himself to pair of tarts, let that be that.

Fíli and Kíli were not so sublime regarding the subject even as the rest of the Company grumbled a bit to themselves, turning in unison to the young Man that seemed to have hidden depths – as well as a trickster’s inclination that they could appreciate.

“How did you do that?” Kíli asked, snatching up a tart before Glóin could take it. He knew strawberries when he saw them and that tart was his. “Just…” He snapped his fingers.

Harry chuckled, then flicked his fingers and levitated a pair of peach and blueberry tarts onto his plate. “Practice, Master Kíli.” He enlightened. “A lot of practice: years’ worth of it in fact to master certain magics and still there are others beyond that that I may never master now that I am come to these lands far from the masters and teachers of my youth.”

“You don’t need a staff then?” Fíli asked, eyes keen as he watched the simple movement of the tarts since before he’d been too startled to notice much but the acts themselves. “Or to snap?”

A glance at a watchful – and thoughtful – Gandalf had Harry answering but choosing his words with great care.

“I am a different…” He narrowed his eyes, struggling to choose the right word. “Breed of wizard you could say than that of Master Gandalf.”

“Tharkûn is Maiar.” Thorin broke his considering – brooding, others would say – silence to speak on the subject even as he enjoyed a plum tart. “This has long been known to the line of Durin.”

Gandalf tilted his head in silent recognition and agreement of that. It wasn’t well known in Arda but neither was it unknown either. Places like the Shire or the more remote of the villages of Men tended to be those that dismissed him as a curiosity while the rest – when they knew with whom they were dealing – tended to be both more respectful and wary than that in his presence.

“But the Maiar aren’t the only beings of Arda that have magic either.” Harry quirked a brow. “to
answer the underlying question: all living things have magic. Whether they possess the ability to use it and how that ability is expressed is where things get interesting.”

“He won’t tell you his origins.” Bilbo sighed, already having made his peace with this portion of Harry’s secretiveness. “Believe me: I’ve tried. Best as I can figure is Dunedain but he doesn’t have quite the right look for that.” And as Dunedain Rangers had been protecting the Shire for an Age, Bilbo would know one when he saw them.

“Númenorean, perhaps, might be a better description I should think.” Gandalf mused, already lighting his pipe and puffing on it after gobbling – though he would deny having done any such thing thank you very much – down a trio of tarts. “From the remote tribes of the far North.”

“Perhaps.” Was all Harry would say an enigmatic smile playing about his lips. “Perhaps not. But my origins – and my magic,” he arched a brow at the Durin brothers when they made to protest. “Is not what has brought us all together this night, is it Thorin son of Thráin? What of the quest?”

“What do you know of it?” Glóin scowled at the impertinent pup of a Man – magic or not!

Harry simply tilted his head towards the smoking wizard seated at Bilbo’s side in answer to a collective growl from the older dwarrow at table.

“The quest is secret, wizard.” Thorin glared fiercely at the grey wanderer. “It was not for you to mention it to any magic peddler you came across upon the road.”

“Was it not?” Gandalf puffed a smoke ring in the shape of a dragon. “Pity. As I owe young Peverell a life-debt to both his magic and his sword, else you would not be benefitting from the magic and knowledge of a pair of magics but absent any at all on your quest, Thorin Oakenshield. He is as fierce and capable a warrior as any I have seen in my long life. When I say he should come, you would do well to listen.”

“Not that it matters either way.” Harry spoke up, arching his brows at the glare that netted him from most of the dwarrow. None of them came even close to the abilities of Severus Snape to cow another so it would do them little good to attempt it on him. “If you don’t wish for my joining your company I will simply take Shadowfax and beat you there: likely by a great margin. As the only person at this table with any practicle experience doing more than running away from a dragon I’m not about to let one I consider a friend do it alone…that is if you have decided to come on the journey after all, Bilbo my friend?”

Bilbo huffed, rolling his eyes. “You couldn’t wait any longer to find out could you?”

“Considering that you’ve left me hanging for your answer for the better part of a week, a good half of which I knew from your behavior that you’d made it: no.”

“Aye, I will come with you.” Bilbo sighed, nodding. “Yavanna knows you haven’t the sense the Valar gave a fauntling at times, Harry, you’ll need a dash of good hobbit-sense to keep you in one piece if you’re determined to face Smaug.”

“I am.”

“Then it’s done,” Gandalf nodded pleased, though the dwarrow to almost the last – Bofur and Nori had all too understanding expressions on their faces – seemed a bit puzzled at the turn events had taken. “To Erebor we shall go.” Reaching into his pocket he removed a piece of parchment and a key, handing them over to a near-thunderous Thorin. “These were given to me by your father, Thráin, before his death to pass to you at the proper time.”
Opening the parchment with reverent hands, Thorin stared down in grieved shock at the map of Erebor, Balin and Dwalin peering over his shoulders.

“A secret door.” Balin breathed, shaking his head.

“And the means to open it.” Thorin confirmed having read the Khuzdul runes for himself, though instead of elation his face contained a frown. “Though no mention of exactly where the secret door can be found or how to open it.”

“The protocols have been read.” Óin announced. “We are not the only ones who would make for the mountain now that Smaug hasn’t been seen in decades. Hidden door or not: we must go.”

“Yes, yes we must.” Thorin nodded, then cut his gaze to Balin. “A contract for a hobbit burglar and a dragon-fighter, Balin. We make for Erebor.”

“You all are welcome to rest here this night and the next.” Bilbo stood with purpose behind every moment.

“We should…” Thorin started only to be cut off to his flabbergasted surprise at the audacity of the halfling.

“My cousin Dárho arrives tomorrow.” Bilbo carried on as if Thorin hadn’t tried to interrupt him “To train and take over duties as Master of Bag End in my absence with the blessing of the Thain of the Shire. I have affairs to settle, King of Durin’s Folk.” Bilbo’s soft doe eyes were remarkably firm as they clashed with the gleaming blue of Durin’s line that had bred true in the current Durin King. “And a mere week to see to them. Another day won’t matter one way or another in the end.” Nodding firmly when Thorin kept his mouth shut, even if it was by sealing his lips in a thin, displeased line and a hard clench to his jaw, Bilbo continued with his hostly duties. “There are two guestrooms made up and mattresses and fresh linens ready in the dining room for the rest: I leave it to your discretion how to allocate yourselves. Master Balin, my sitting room is available at your leisure for your work.”

And with that, Bilbo swept away, a chuckling Harry behind him who snapped his fingers and once more cleared the table of all but the dwarrow and wizard’s tankards and goblets.


“Shut up, Dwalin.” Thorin huffed before standing tankard in hand. He was going to need more than the single pour of ale he’d taken with dinner if he was to survive this stay, however brief, in the home of a high-handed hobbit.

…

“Oh dear.” Bilbo fussed inside his study as he and Harry sat before the lit fire with a pot of tea between them. “Do you think that was too much? He is a king…”

“But he’s not your king.” Harry comforted his friend, patting him lightly on the arm. “I have a feeling that dwarves are rather used to getting their own way through sheer stubbornness. It’ll do Thorin Oakenshield good to have a tipple of his own tonic for once.”

“Oh dear,” Bilbo blanched as a thought sudden hit him. “Harry…I don’t have anything to ride. Everyone else has a horse or a pony but I didn’t think…” With all the other preparations he’d been making and being accustomed to walking everywhere save for these last weeks where Harry had allowed him lessons on Shadowfax…which suddenly took on a whole new rationale, purchasing a mount had never even occurred to him in the wake of everything else like packing and locking his
family heirlooms away in one of the storage cellars to keep them from being ruined or Lobelia Sackville-Baggins from snatching them while only young Drogo was around to stop her.

Harry chuckled then gave him a wink. “You weren’t the only one planning for contingencies, Bilbo. I think you will find a sturdy bay mule waiting for you with appropriate tack at the Green Dragon.”

Bilbo blinked then joined Harry in his chuckles. It seemed for all Harry’s seeming uncertainty about Bilbo’s decision he’d been willing to bet on it nonetheless.

“You’re a good friend, Harry.”

Sobering, Harry looked into the flames of the study’s fireplace.

“I try.”

…

“I know you don’t want to hear it, Thorin.” Balin said, a heavy sigh in his voice. “But the grey wizard has the right of it: better all of them than none of them.”

The pair were encamped in the hobbit’s offered sitting room as the others of their company set about sorting out who would stay in one of the guest rooms – one given over without question to Thorin and his nephews – and who would sleep in the surprisingly well-appointed dining room, all save Thorin, his closest advisor, and his closest friend Dwalin, Balin’s brother who stood at the door guarding his King and friend even in so quiet a place as a hobbit hole.

Thorin grunted, puffing on his pipe. He knew that. He just didn’t want to admit it as he took the quill from his advisor and lashed his signature across the pair of contracts for a hobbit and a Man of – perhaps – Númenorean stock…which made him little better than the elves that had interbred with that line.

At least Balin had argued him out of granting each member of the Company an equal share of the treasury of Erebor for pure logistics if naught else. Both of them remembered well the sprawling sheer mass of Thórór’s treasury, it would take years to account for every last coin let alone separate it into equal portions. No, each member of the Company that survives the reclamation of Erebor will be entitled to five chests of treasure that they could choose from the spoils of the treasury and no more, with the only exclusions the marked family heirlooms of the Line of Durin and the Arkenstone.

“I don’t have to like it.” Thorin finally grumbled as he handed the contracts back to be sanded to dry the ink before Balin presented them to their new members of the Company. “For the sake of our home I will endure much more indignity than having along a soft gentlehobbit of means and a secretive magic-wielding descendant of weed-eaters.”

“Good.” Balin said firmly, staring down his King with a gimlet eye. “Though I would humbly suggest you never refer to them as such where you can be overheard. If that lad can send dishes and tarts spinning and disappearing I don’t want to know what he’d do to a gruff dwarf King that can’t keep a civil tongue in his head.”

“Maybe not.” Dwalin suggested, smirking wickedly. “I think spending some time as a toad or a jackass might be just the thing if his head starts to swell.”

Huffing at his snickering friends, Thorin set to enjoying his smoke and stoutly ignoring them for the rest of the night.
Chapter 6

Broken Blade

Chapter Six: Multi-Tasking for Wizards

The morning after arriving at Bag End found a company of dwarrow and one wizard wakening to the tantalizing scents of sizzling meats, baking bread, and hot kafé acquired specifically from the Hobbiton market as dwarrow were known to appreciate the beverage more than that of tea of a morn according to the gossip gathered by Bilbo in his wanderings of the markets of Hobbiton and Tuckborough this last week or so.

They woke and wandered into the kitchen of Bag End, finding it quite large even for such a grand smial as that of Master Baggins and containing a large round table that if they were willing to be a bit cramped seated them all with Masters Peverell and Baggins refraining from joining them in breaking their fasts as they’d already been up and at their business since just before dawn.

Racks of fresh toasted bread joined a heavy cast iron pot of porridge as well as myriad jars of jams, jellies, and preserves. Platters of grilled sausages, tomatoes, and mushrooms sat cheek-to-jowl with a massive roasting pan filled with what looked like a type of baked egg dish. And to the appreciation of all: several carafes of hot kafé and a pair of steaming tea pots.

“Harry?” Kíli showed his endless curiosity. “What’s that in the baking dish?”

Having given the young princes permission to use his given and nicknames at dinner the night before, Harry ignored the scowls the familiarity gained the youngest dwarrow from some of the grey-beards as he answered.

“It’s what my people would call a breakfast casserole,” he waved a callused soldier’s hand as he sipped at his cuppa at the kitchen counter where he watched over the breakfast repast, Bilbo having long disappeared back into his study with a young Drogo Baggins who’d arrived between first and second breakfast for his review of Bag End and its holdings. “A baked dish,” he explained when the word failed to translate. “Of cooked onions, peppers, and potatoes mixed with cheese and eggs before being baked. This one had leftover pork from last night as well. Quite tasty and filling.”

Questioning glances were traded by the dwarves before in near unison Bombur and Bofur shrugged and started dishing up, having already mostly filled their plates from the other offerings.

Growing up as simple miners of the Blue Mountains, born into poverty even before the refugees from Erebor arrived, they’d never learned to be picky when it came to food.

Bombur scooped some of the steaming dish onto Bifur’s plate as well at a gesture from his cousin, then the serving spoon made its rounds once Bombur had taken a bite and nearly beamed before starting to shovel in the strange casserole in large mouthfuls.

Smirking into his cup, Harry turned from overseeing the dwarves’ breakfast and checked on the rolls baking away in the oven before rinsing out his cup and saucer – sturdy stoneware rather than Bilbo’s heirloom china which had all been gently packed away before the arrival of the Company.

“The contracts are ready when you and Master Baggins have a moment, laddie.” Balin announced after pushing away his twice-cleared plate. If nothing else the side trip to the Shire was worth it for the rest and fine victuals.
“I’ll take them.” Harry wandered over and took the pair of folded parchments, scanning his eyes over the table to get a gauge on both how much dwarves ate as well as taking a general temperature of their collective moods. “Bilbo will be closeted with his cousin for quite a while yet I should think.”

“Master Baggins is a lord?” Balin asked, having had the question buzzing away at him since the hobbit had given Thorin quite the set-down regarding needing a bit of time to see to his affairs.

Both Harry and Gandalf gave hearty chuckles at that, sharing an amused glance even as the grey wizard stood with pipe in hand to go enjoy a smoke on Bilbo’s fine garden bench.

“He would protest the title quite handily, Master Balin.” Harry gave the elder dwarrow a crooked half-grin. “However were we anywhere but the Shire that’s exactly what he would be. Hobbits aren’t one for titles and nobility like the Free Folk of Arda can be. His holdings include most of Hobbiton and given both that and his relation to the Shire’s Thain he serves as arbiter for local disputes before they can increase to needing the Thain’s attention from what I understand of the duties of the Master of Bag End.”

As Harry educated the dwarrow on this matter of hobbitly life, he moved back to lean against the countertop, crossing one booted foot over the other and flicking open the contracts to review them, his brows rising higher and higher before tossing them aside and pinning Balin and Thorin in turn with his stare.

“You’re joking?” He scoffed, flicking his wrist in a dismissive gesture at the contracts. “Those loads of codswallop aren’t worth the parchment they’re written on.” Lifting his hand, he rested his chin in his palm, allowing the ruby and gold lordship ring to flash in the light and stifle whatever protest was on the edge of dwarven tongues before snatching the contracts back up and striding from the room.

“I’ll return them with the necessary revisions in a bit. Master Bombur, please watch the baking bread if you would.”

“Aye, Master Peverell.” Bombur called to the wizard’s back, then ducking his head sheepishly at the collective glare his agreement earned him from the more proudly stiff-necked of their company.

“Well, I’m not about to let good baking go to waste because he’s got his dander up am I?” And with that he returned to clearing another serving of breakfast, resolute in his ignoring their glares and mutters.

Glóin, the banker and most prosperous merchant among them, leaned forward with an amused glint to his eye when the others returned to their meals, some of them rising to clear and wash their dishes and pack away leftovers.

“You weighted it in Thorin’s favor, didn’t you?” He asked, cannily.

“Of course he did.” Dwalin rolled his eyes as he lumbered to his feet and collared the princes before they could slip away from clean up, shoving plates and utensils into their hands and nudging them towards the kitchen sink where young Ori was already getting a start on wash-up. “Same as he has wherever possible since my brother became Thorin’s advisor over a century ago when dealing with outsiders. Only this time,” Dwalin smirked at his red-cheeked brother and seething King. “He was dealing with a Man that knew enough contract-language to catch ‘im at it.”

“Did you see that ring?” Nori mused, packing his pipe and ignoring the swipe his elder brother Dori took at the thief’s head. “Solid gold with fine engraving and a ruby the size of a robin’s egg. He’s more than he seems.”

“Which is worrying.” Glóin snorted, taking out his own pipe for a post-meal smoke before going out
to see to the ponies with the rest of the Company once the lads were done cleaning up. “Considering
how much he shows openly.” Concerned glances were shared between the elders of the quest.
“How significant can his secrets be in turn?”

“We’ll watch him.” Thorin announced. “He takes watch only with Dwalin, Nori, or myself.”

“And the hobbit?” Dwalin asked, as he should given his place as Captain of Thorin’s guard.

“The soft Shireling has no place on watch.” Thorin grumbled, scowling and still put out over the
halfling’s demands. “But try and keep him with Ori, Nori watching them or Glóin in a pinch. He
might open up about more than himself to our scribe more than the rest of us.”

“Aye.”

…

Harry brought the revised contract – after much swearing in both Westron and Khuzdul between
himself and Balin – signed by Thorin into Bilbo’s study along with elevenses, leaving the hobbits to
their work as he headed out to the market for a few last-minute additions to their traveling supplies.

At least the dwarrow had brought a pack-pony along, which increased the foodstuffs that could be
toted from Hobbiton considerably, especially as Gandalf assured him that there would be no real
need for supplemental feed for Shadowfax between the Shire and the Misty Mountains or indeed
until they reached the Great Greenwood in the West.

“What’s that?” Kíli popped up with his brother in tow as Harry was examining an oilskin, Bilbo’s
showing wear from being handed down by his mother and seeing little use since allowing rot to set
in from lack of care.

“An oilskin, Kíli.” Harry told him voice as dry as late summer winds. “Surely you’ve seen such
before?”

“Of course we have.” Fíli wrinkled his nose at the rainwear in his new maybe-friend’s hands. “But
it hasn’t really been raining…and that one is far too small for you, Harry.”

“I’m aware.” Harry held onto an eyeroll alongside his patience. At least the weeks playing with
fauntlings had freshened his ability to deal with youngsters, even if his Teddy…he sucked in a quiet
breath…his Teddy had already been grown enough for Hogwarts. “It’s for Bilbo as lack of rain or
not this is Spring.”

Fíli and Kíli exchanged a wordless communication behind Harry’s back that went something along
the lines of “did you…?”

“We’ll be right back!” The princes shouted then darted off at a sprint for Bag End to check whether
they’d remembered to bring along a particular – and necessary in Winter and Spring – piece of
rainwear.

Harry and the hobbit merchant traded a glance of their own, one very clearly to the tone of
“Children.”

…

Thorin found himself wandering like many of his Company through the Hobbiton market more out
of a desire to do instead of rest in one of the comfortable hobbit armchairs before one of the many
hearth fires of Bag End. Dwalin dogged his steps while his brother rested in one of the
aforementioned armchairs, Bombur, Bifur, and Dori with him while the rest of their Company busied themselves at this or that. He was certain Óin would be elbowing his way into one of the chairs as soon as he was done combing the market for healing herbs and supplies, having found a tome on hobbit healing methods on one of Master Baggins’ many shelves in the areas of his home open to the dwarves brought into his home by Tharkun. Only the fact that Ori was safely occupied by many of the hobbit’s other books likely kept the young dwarf from being forced into the parlor to join his eldest brother, Dori being more than a bit overprotective of the young scribe.

Not that Thorin could blame him.

The ‘Ri brothers were considered quite the beauties to most dwarf and with Ori having such a skill as to be apprenticed to Balin…well. The young one was a catch to any suitor. A fact that clearly hadn’t escaped his elder brothers who’d had more suitors of their own over the years for all that Dori had never sought companionship beyond his craft and his family or that Nori was a rogue of the first order.

His sister Dís kept just as firm a watch on Fíli, as the golden-haired heir of the Line of Durin was as lovely a dwarf as their Line had produced in centuries.

Speaking of which…Thorin held in a groan as he spotted his nephews glommed onto the sides of one Hadrian Peverell, purchases tucked under their arms as the Man with his strange magics and stranger accented Westron eyed the wares at a smith’s stand with a discerning eye – though for the life of him Thorin couldn’t see why.

Even at a distance he could see the pommel of a hand-and-a-half sword on the Man’s hip and as he drew closer the workmanship of that pommel and hilt was enough to tell him the green-eyed stranger possessed a masterwork unless the blade failed to match its hilt. What a decent, Thorin decided after a quick glance at the table filled with mostly farming implements and tools with but a few weapons, but not exceptional blacksmith had to offer in the face of such a sword Thorin couldn’t divine. Until, that is, he came up beside his nephews, chiding them with light taps to the back of their heads for their inattention.

“Here you are Master Harry!” The smith, a burly – if such a thing could apply to a halfling – hobbit handing over a wrapped bundle that the Man opened to reveal strange flat pieces of metal in the shape of a not-quite-triangle with a curved claw-like blade coming off of each point. There were a dozen or so of the weapons – and they had to be weapons – that were as strange as the Man purchasing them. “They were a challenge and that was no doubt but I think I got the weight right at last.”

“They look right enough,” Harry agreed, casting only a mildly-amused glance at the dwarven king now standing at his back before picking up one of the throwing stars and flipping it through his fingers. “Weight seems right, just let me…” He trailed off as the smith stepped to the side, waving an arm towards the open door of the smithy that was empty of aught but his tools and furnace save for a single bag of sand hanging from a rafter. With a nod of thanks Harry waved the dwarf back then with a smooth throwing motion let the blade fly, slicing clean through the rope with a snap before burying itself in the wooden wall at the rear of the shop. “They’ll do, Master Clearbrook.”

Harry nodded, then rounded the table and darted into the shop to pry the star from the paneling of his shop.

Handing over the agreed coinage, Harry added the thrown blade back to the rest and wrapped them once more.

They should do quite well for Bilbo’s ranged weaponry, now if only he could convince him to let Harry teach him how to fight with a melee weapon or even just a staff Harry wouldn’t worry quite so
much for his new friend on this journey they were to undertake.

“Those are an interesting design.” Thorin had to admit as he and Dwalin fell in with the group. “I’ve never in all my years seen another like it.”

And as a Master Blacksmith, Thorin had seen more than a fair share of weaponry even without being a warrior.

“Really?” Harry hummed under his breath at that. He supposed that the idea of throwing stars came from Asia in his old world so…maybe so. Given the givens he rather doubted that introducing a new type of throwing blade was going to be the least of his impacts on Arda before his duties here were complete. “Interesting. They’re common enough where I come from.”

“Hmm.”

“An’ where was that again, Master Harry?” Dwalin pried or tried to anyway as all it got him was a tiny smirk on that too-pretty (for dwarvish taste) Mannish face and a dry:

“No where you’ve ever heard of, Master Dwalin. Of that I am certain.”

…

The last contract was passed over to Balin when the hobbits reappeared from the study, the pair of them setting at once to dinner preparations were they continued to chatter over all that the upkeep of Bag End and its entailed lands required, which had Ori tucked in at the dining table making furious notes regarding hobbit customs of land management let alone anything else that seemed to fly between the gregarious pair of Bilbo and Drogo.

Once dinner was cooking away and Drogo had it well in-hand with help from Bombur, Harry collared Bilbo and dragged him outside with the package from the smith in hand.

“What for the love of Yavanna’s green fields are you doing, Harry?” Bilbo spluttered as his friend hauled him out to a spot behind the smial off the back patio that had planks of wood and a few broken pieces of pottery set up or sitting on a fence rail that delineated between Bilbo’s yard and gardens and the potato field directly behind them.

“Training you so that if we’re attacked on the road you can manage more than ducking.” He was told in no uncertain terms. “I’ve seen your arm at conkers: you’ll do well with throwing blades with some training. Though for close-combat I’m still considering things.”

“Combat! Harry…”

“Oh, don’t start that respectable hobbit nonsense with me, Bilbo Baggins.” Harry snorted, overriding his friend’s objections with ruthless precision as they picked up a trailing train of dwarrow with no wizard to be found – and all for the better. Gandalf was entirely too hidebound to his idea of the Shire as a perfect idyll of peace and tranquility for the idea of training Bilbo to be easy for the old badger to swallow. “If I can teach you to swing a sword or a staff half as well as your cutting tongue against busybodies you’ll make quite the handy fighter.”

Shoulders slumping a bit as Bilbo was never one to fight a battle of wills already long lost, he sighed and allowed Harry to nudge him into a stance with his feet planted shoulder-width apart and his knees a bit bent, his shoulders themselves turned so one was closer to the targets than the other much like they would be to play conkers.

“Here you are,” Harry passed over a small leather pouch. “Throwing stars made just for you.”
“Harry…”

“It’s a gift, Bilbo.” Harry arched a brow. “To a gracious host.”

Muttering under his breath, Bilbo attached the pouch where Harry instructed then opened the flap that was kept closed with a simple – and easy to undo with one hand, he noted – toggle. Taking out one of the “throwing stars” as Harry called them, Bilbo blinked at the weight of them and the trio of razor sharp claws. These weren’t just for protection, he realized. These were real weapons that could do a great deal of damage – even kill. Sucking in a sharp breath, Bilbo lifted his gaze from the danger in his hand and met the steady green eyes of his friend, then nodded seriously. He understood the weight of what he’d been given. Even if simply having one of the throwing stars in hand threatened to scare the hair from his toes he refused to let fear keep him from learning what Harry was determined to teach him lest he hurt himself or another without meaning to.

“Let me.” Harry gently took the star from Bilbo’s hand, sinking quickly into the stance he’d shown his friend then sent the star flying with a rapid flick of his arm.

A whistle sounded from behind them as the dwarrow who’d not already been subject to the effectiveness of the strange weapon saw it sink half-way through the wooden plank Harry had rested against the fence – a good dozen yards away.

“Like a dagger,” Harry began to lecture Bilbo – and by dint of their hovering the dwarrow as well – as he moved over and retrieved the star. “They lose efficacy at long distances but depending on the skill and strength behind them they can fly and wound up to about twenty yards and are best between five and fifteen yards for greatest impact. Now.” He handed the star over to Bilbo. “Don’t try and worry too much about accuracy at the moment, just get used to the throwing motion using the large wood plank as a target.”

“I’d like to try my hand at those, Master Harry.” Nori stepped up, intrigued.

“I as well.” Fíli hopped up next to the thief, eyes locked on the stars in Bilbo’s offhand as the hobbit followed Harry’s instructions, some throws falling short or overshooting into the potato field but Bilbo hadn’t yet run through his store of throwing stars before he started to hit the plank. Harry was right: he had a good arm and decent aim.

“You’ll both wait until Bilbo is finished and gone inside.” Harry told them lowly after a considering glance at the pair. “I won’t have his first go at learning a weapon a cause of embarrassment if you show him up thanks to your dagger training.” He tilted his head towards the daggers tucked in their leathers. “He needs to feel confident in this much at least given how much is sure to come that he’s never encountered in his life.”

Both agreed to wait, Fíli going to far as to step up beside Bilbo when he trotted back to his starting point with his reclaimed stars to start coaching the hobbit up, Harry himself stepping back with a nod to a superior instructor for his friend when the young prince’s tutelage proved his knowledge and skill in the subject far exceeding Harry’s own.

Harry remained to supervise, though that didn’t keep him from sorting through the woodpile – both chopped and waiting for the younger Gamgee boy’s axe – for a few lengths of good solid oak.

“And what are you up to now, young Peverell?” Gandalf asked, appearing from out of nowhere as the wizard tended to do, much to the frustration of nearly all that knew him. He narrowed his gaze on young Bilbo training at throwing some form of dagger but quickly let it go as he knew better than any the dangers that awaited. The hobbit would need to be able to protect himself. No matter how much that pained Gandalf to admit.
“Multi-tasking,” Harry gave the elder a wizard a shit-eating grin as he eyed up the thick oak round he’d unearthed. “Bilbo learns a valuable skill that might just save his life, the dwarrow start to learn about him, see him willing to learn and hold his own. Are they paying any attention to us?” He asked, voice pitched low.

Gandalf leant on his staff, turning his head to dig for his pipe then filled it as his grey eyes took in all around him. Lighting and puffing a bit on the stem, he shook his head.

Nodding in thanks, Harry took a deep breath then let it out and lowered his hands to the wood round sending his magic spiraling through it.

Less than a minute later he held five short lengths of polished hardened oak, just the right length to serve as a walking stick for a hobbit or a shorter dwarf and stood, tucking them under his arm. It was far from the showiest piece of magic Harry had done, but if the arched brow of Gandalf was any sign the elder wizard understood the difference in simply moving something from one place to another and creating something from raw materials or nothing at all. Transfiguration had never been his best subject, let alone without word or wand, but something as simple as a set of walking sticks from a wood round was within his capabilities.

“What is this, Harry?” Harry gave a no-big-deal shrug. “He’s going to need something more. When dealing with this particular hobbit I’ve found that inches gains more than miles. He’s adaptable but small movements after large gains works better than constant pushing.”

…

“What is this, Harry?” Bilbo asked with a sigh that night when his friend wandered into his room while the dwarrow and Gandalf all gathered in the dining room for a smoke, Drogo having returned to the Green Dragon for the night given the bursting seams of Bag End. This referring to the two sets of clothing the Man had laid out on Bilbo’s bed.

Made of thick leather, they were hardly the sort of clothes worn by hobbits save for the occasional smith. The pants at a glance would go almost all the way to Bilbo’s ankles while the shirt was more of a tunic of similar fashion to that both Harry and the dwarves seem to favor. Especially when belted by a sword or weapons belt.

“Hobbit clothing I’ve noticed tends towards layers of light-to-medium fabrics.” Harry explained easily having known before he’d even placed the orders that Bilbo would protest, at least a little, receiving such gifts from his new friend while Harry was still a guest under his roof. Still: needs-must. “Your thicker undershirts will suit and your braces will be hidden under the leather tunic but you need sturdy materials if you want your clothes to survive the trip to the Lonely Mountain under constant wear-and-tear.”

Bilbo scowled up at his presumptuous friend even as Harry’s gaze was gentle and kind.

He’d already packed his pack to Harry’s specifications, with only the clothes left to sort out…which was likely the reasoning behind Harry’s gifts.

“Don’t think I haven’t noticed myself in possession of a new oilskin as well, Harry Peverell.” Bilbo warned, shaking a finger at the impertinent young pup. “I told you: I’ll take no payment for your guesting here.”

“And you haven’t.” Harry retorted with a little smirk. “Only accepted gifts from a friend.”

Grumbling, Bilbo set out one of the sets of leathers – a nice deep brown – on his dresser along with
his sturdiest braces, a soft woolen undershirt, the belt Harry'd provided along with the leathers, the pouch with the throwing stars, and his thick green kerchief. His traveling coat was hanging already on the back of his door with his coinage split between being sewn into the seams of his coat and cloak with the rest in a small pouch in the coat’s inside pocket along with a tinder and striker and a small knife – also Harry’s doing. Harry handed over the shirts from the pile to go into the pack alongside the second set of leathers that matched the first down to the stitching, then Bilbo took the rest of the clothes – including his favorite green waistcoat with its polished brass buttons – and tucked them away in the cedar chest that Drogo and Hamfast would move into storage after Bilbo’s departure.

“Are you certain?” Bilbo asked sometime later after they’d had a bit of a talk while Bilbo fussed about his room when Harry turned to find the pallet he’d laid out in the Big Folk room, having given the bed to Gandalf.

“Pardon?” Harry leaned his shoulder in the doorway, listening to the sounds of the hearthfires and soft chatter still filling the smial.

“Are you certain we should go?” Bilbo clarified, looking – though he couldn’t know it – achingly young to his friend.

“I am.” Harry nodded, then stilled, turning towards the dining room as the sound of deep hums started to fill the air, Bilbo starting and coming to his feet to stand beside his friend when one of the dwarrow – Thorin, he thought – began to sing.

“Far over the misty mountains cold
To dungeons deep and caverns old
We must away ere break of day
To find our long-forgotten gold.”

Then Thorin was joined by another – Bofur perhaps.

“The pines were roaring on the height
The winds were moaning in the night
The fire was red, it flaming spread
The trees like torches blazed with light…”

The song continued on, verses sung by Fíli and then Kíli before Thorin finished the last notes alone.

“We must away ere break of day
To claim our long-forgotten home.”

“That’s why I’m sure, Bilbo.” Harry said quietly, exchanging a long glance with his friend. “I know what it is to be without a true home. Even were it not for the tasks set before me, I would help them anyway.”

Bilbo just nodded as Harry ducked around a chandelier off to find his bedroll.

Sleep in his fine hobbit bed in his fine hobbit home for one more night before helping a group of sometimes rowdy dwarves reclaim their own…yes, that sounded like a worthy plan indeed.
After breakfast and tea the next morning, Gandalf and the dwarves found themselves befuddled as Harry and Bilbo opened one of the locked pantries and began handing out packs and bags of things to be added to their own supplies.

“What’s all this?” Thorin asked in his gruff, scowl-laden manner.

“Road rations better than cram.” Harry told them firmly. “Pouches of mixed nuts and dried fruits. Dried meats, oat cakes, bars made of oats, honey, and either dried fruit, nut butter, or a mixture of dried berries and dried meat. Most of which,” he drawled as more than one set of dwarven eyebrows shot upwards towards hairlines. “Best of all, most of it can be eaten in the saddle.”

Dwalin chuckled, shoving Thorin with a shoulder as he accepted the large sack of the surplus rations that weren’t packed up nice and tidy for each of the Company to carry for themselves.

“He’s got ya there, Thorin.” The bald dwarf told him. “Seems this pair has more to offer than a few magic tricks and a decent arm at throwing blades after all.”

“Yes,” Thorin said after a long considering moment as he caught a close look at the armament on their young wizard and his armor – especially his strangely fashioned coat made from a hide Thorin had never seen in his life, including when he was still a Prince of Erebor and the finest things of the world came to them. “So it seems.”

Once baggage had been packed and sorted and Bilbo handed over the keys to Drogo, the Company set to tacking up their mounts with Bombur and Dori working in concert to pack their extra pony with the shared supplies such as food or what have you, each member saddling up their own mount even if more than one person noted Harry standing next to Bilbo and keeping an eye on the hobbit and giving an extra push here or there where needed as the back of Bilbo’s mule was above the hobbit’s head.

“Shadowfax has grown, I see.” Gandalf noted as he led his grey to stand beside the patiently waiting Mearas as Bilbo used the lowest rail of the garden fence to help him step up into his mule’s – Applejack’s – saddle and took up his reins.

“He has.” Harry nodded. “Not much, an inch or so I think.” He cast a glance at the ponies then handed Shadowfax’s reins to Bilbo to hold for a moment as the dwarves began to mount and he saw worrisome movement – if only a little – from some of the saddles. “Hold onto Shadowfax a moment, will you?”

“Of course but what are you…oh.” Bilbo started to question his friend then stopped when he saw Harry walk over to the closest pony – which was the pack pony – under the curious eyes of the party at large before telling Bombur who was standing at her head to hold her. He knew what Harry was about after the Man had given him lessons in saddling Shadowfax that had come in handy that morning with Applejack.

Nodding at Bombur, Harry took hold of the cinch-strap used on the pony then pressed his knee – gently but firmly – into her stomach, forcing her to blow out a breath that he used to tighten the strap several notches.

“Ponies can be tricky, stubborn creatures.” He told the rotund dwarf with a smile. “A nudge from your knee or elbow is all it takes to keep them from expanding their bellies which leads to a loosened girth that could have even the most seasoned rider taking a dangerous tumble.”
As dwarrow scrambled back out of the saddle save for Glóin who as a traveling merchant was already aware of the tricks of ponies had made certain his girth was tight enough, Dwalin next to Thorin who each found themselves employing Harry’s trick and gaining several notches on the girths snorted.

“Aye,” the guardsman snickered. “We’ll be glad of that one on this trip for certain – Man or not.”
Chapter 7

Broken Blade

Chapter Seven: Consequences of Consequence

Gandalf said that the trail from the Shire to the Misty Mountains could take anywhere from three to six weeks during Spring depending on the weather and the state of the roads and trails, an estimate that Thorin agreed with easily enough from his own travels.

The first day and night out of Hobbiton set the pattern for those to follow.

Kíli and Harry would at times split off from the main group to hunt, returning more often than not with a brace of coneys or wild fowl between them, cleaning the carcasses before returning to the group and wrapping them in tarpaulin until they made camp. The two would split the useful feathers for fletching on either arrows or crossbow bolts while Harry bent his magic to skinning and tanning any befurred game brought in.

“So that’s why you spent so much time at the tannery and the leather-workers!” Bilbo exclaimed the first time he saw Harry at his work, Harry chuckling at his excitement.

“I’ve had call to learn many magics over the years, Bilbo.” Harry had responded easily enough even with all the dwarrow ears bent their way. “But never tanning spells. Without a prepurposed spell such as I was taught during my education I have to know the how of things before I can set my magic to the task.”

“It’s a tool.” Sweet Ori noted with a beaming smile, already scribbling away in his journal that he used for his official purpose of quest Scribe, Bilbo watching from his place beside the young dwarrow. He wasn’t much help around the camp what with the much-stronger dwarrow able to carry out most tasks faster than he could, only his abilities to forage in the surrounding forest having much value at the moment as he’d done with a quiet Nori following him and helping tote wild spring onions and radishes back to the campsite.

“Yes and no.” Harry shrugged. “Some of my people would agree.”

“But not you.” Bofur noted from where he was helping his brother Bombur cut and chop veg and meat for their dinner stew once Harry and Kíli had turned over their day’s catch and Glóin had gotten the fire going.

Fíli and Kíli were busy getting their arses handed to them in sword practice by their uncle with instruction from Dwalin and Glóin whilst Bifur gathered more firewood and the elder ‘Ri brothers settled the ponies with help from Balin and Óin.

And who knew what Gandalf was up to though he was likely to return for dinner.

“No,” Harry lifted bright green eyes from the clean, expertly tanned – magic was a wonderful thing – coney hides he was left with after a half-hour’s spellwork. “Not me.” With a nod for the cooks and scribes, Harry rose, wandering over to his pack and bedroll he’d set between on the outside edge of Gandalf and Bilbo with Bilbo closest to the fire. Tucking the furs away in one of Shadowfax’s saddlebags, he took up the “walking sticks” he’d fashioned before leaving Bag End.

Walking back to the cooks and scribes, he handed a walking stick to Bombur, Ori, and Bilbo.
“Um, thank you?” Ori frowned at his sudden acquisition.

“What’s this then?” Bombur asked.

“Walking staves.” Harry smiled, nudging the pair of Bilbo and Ori to their feet. “I don’t know that you’ll need it, Master Bombur but I’ve seen that other than young Ori here you’re the only member of our company without a weapon. It might not look like much but a solid length of aged oak can crack a skull open in a single swing with enough power behind it. Can bruise flesh and break bone.” Harry eyed the rotund dwarf. “And I know you’ve muscle to spare, Master Bombur. When not in use for a battle it will help in traversing rough terrain if we wind up walking.”

Gulping, Ori and Bilbo clung to their new walking sticks/weapons at that explanation.

“C’mon you two.” Harry shepherded them towards a clear area of grass not far from where Thorin was drilling his nephews.

“But Dori won’t approve.” Ori whispered, looking back towards where his eldest brother with his elaborately braided hair and beard was chatting with the others taking care of the ponies and keeping a stern eye on Nori. “He doesn’t want me using weapons, he says I could get hurt.”

“Have you no training?” Harry frowned. “I thought all dwarrow were trained.”

“I have the basics we’re all taught.” Ori lowered his head, blushing, at the shameful lack in his skills. “But Dori wouldn’t allow more than that no matter how often Nori badgered at him to at least let him teach me to use a dagger. Even the slingshot Nori slipped me gets dirty looks from Dori.”

Harry snorted at that. “Well, now you have a walking stick so if Dori fusses give him a sharp rap to the shins and that’ll settle it.”

“But…” Ori’s tone was aghast but Harry wasn’t going to listen to Ori’s denials or refusals anymore than Bilbo’s. They’d be trained and that was the end of it.

Like as not they wouldn’t end up masters of a weapon with their gentle natures that even Harry noted on the quiet scribe after only a couple days’ acquaintance but at least they wouldn’t be helpless faced with an enemy either.

“We’ll practice with the throwing stars after but for now…” Harry proceeded to get the pair set into stances and showed them a few basic blocks using the staves before slowly striking at each with the remaining staves he held in either hand so they could get used to the impact and recoil of blocking.

“What does that, that, Man think he’s doing with Ori!” Dori gasped, clutching at his tunic.

Nori rolled his eyes as the others paused to watch the training lesson for a moment before returning to their own business – and leaving him to handle his high-strung brother alone the rotters.

“Looks like he’s working at ensuring our baby brother is equipped for his own defense and not an easily slaughtered bunny from where I’m standing.” He said, deadpan. Hooking Dori by his belt while the white-haired dwarf was still spluttering in mortified outrage, Nori forced him over to a seat by the fire, an act that was only possible due to shock as his brother outweighed him in both strength and mass.

Moving Mount Dori when the bastion of propriety didn’t want to move was damn impossible as Nori had had cause to learn over the years of their brotherhood.
Joining the group with the ponies bedded down – Harry had taken care of Shadowfax while walking Bilbo through what to do for Applejack and Gandalf saw to his own Grey – Óin eyed first the staff lesson going on then the walking stick sitting beside Bombur.

“Let me see that, will you lad?” The healer asked the cook, Bombur handing over the staff to the only one of the company prior to Harry’s intervention who used one in battle, though Óin’s had an iron head topping it. Óin turned the length in hand, spinning it a bit and testing the balance before handing it back with a nod. “Good work that. Could use an iron head-knocker on it but it’ll do nonetheless.”

The better part of two weeks passed this way.

Hunting and gathering, chores and weapons practice, talking and smoking around the fire and the endless road leading east.

Of the dwarrow, Fíli, Kíli, Ori, and Bofur endeared themselves to the pair of Harry and Bilbo, the two spending most of their time together or riding beside Gandalf save when Harry went into the forest to scout or hunt or gather as they wandered, Bilbo taking up the latter chore when camp was made after he settled Applejack for the night, scouring the forest and fields surrounding them.

Then on the fourteenth night on the road it began to rain.

…

When the rain started none of the Company thought much about it beyond setting up tarpaulin under their bedrolls and their oilcloths over, resigned to a damp, wet miserable night.

Kíli and Fíli in particular were thankful for the fine oilcloth to be found in the Shire as they’d left their others back in the Blue Mountains in their excitement at being allowed to come on the quest, while Ori was particularly miserable given that the wet prevented him from working on his account of the journey lest his journal be ruined outside of its protective wrapping inside of his pack along with the rest of his parchment.

More than one of the Company followed Harry’s example of hanging their packs and saddle bags up in the branches of the surrounding trees to keep them as dry as possible despite the weather.

They and their bedrolls might get wet but at least they’d have dry clothes to change into once the rain broke.

That’s what they thought at least.

Then it continued all through the night and day for three days.

By that time even the cheer of perennially happy Bombur had been dampened.

Though whether it was from the weather or the subsequent whining Harry wasn’t certain though he was more than a bit entertained.

“Can’t you do something about this deluge!” Dori shouted ahead to where Gandalf rode at the head of the Company on the fourth morning of the rainstorm.

“It’s raining, Master Dwarf.” Gandalf shouted back, his temper short as well from the rains but more the bellyaching of dwarves who are not stock used to the fickleness of weather tucked away in their mountains as they often were. “And it will continue to rain until the rain is done! If you want someone to change the weather of Middle-Earth I suggest you find another wizard to do it!”
Almost as one, all the dwarrows and Bilbo craned their necks to stare at Harry where he rode Shadowfax in relative calm compared to the rest of his party.

“You’d have to choose.” He finally caved. He wasn’t about to offer up his services in magic when more than half of the dwarrows continued to watch him with barely-concealed suspicion. “A charm to keep the water from soaking through during the day or a ward to keep the rain off the camp at night.”

“Well,” Dori huffed. “Why didn’t you say so?”

“No one asked.” Harry deadpanned. “I’m here to fight a dragon not peddle my magic to suspicious – or ungrateful – dwarrows.”

That night Harry did precisely as he said once they came to decision that they’d rather dry, warm nights than still-cold but less-wet days, setting a ward around the camp to divert the rain away like a glass dome overhead.

“I’ll take it down in the morning.” He told them after walking the campsite and drying everyone’s things as a gesture of good-faith considering the dark mutters he’d been subjected to throughout the rest of the ride. As he’d been doing for his own and Bilbo’s packs since the rain began. “But for now as long as you stay inside the ring you’ll stay dry.”

A sharp nudge to the ribs from Balin had Thorin thanking him – or as close as he came to thanking anyone for anything.

“It’s good work, Master Peverell.”

“Should be,” Harry responded mildly. “Given that the cleverest witch of our age created it.”

The rain finally let up several days later after they’d spent a solid week walking through the – as Dori put it – deluge, Thorin calling for camp to be set early that day near a river to allow everyone to wash away the muck of tromping through muddy roads for a week as well as do much-needed washing of bedrolls.

A circumstance which brought a very interesting fact to light about the company’s younger wizard.

“Oh now.” Bilbo complained as he climbed from his wash in the stream to the sight of Harry shaking out his armor and clothes – armor and clothes that the man lived in for Yavanna’s sake – which were somehow miraculously pristine without a single dirt-smudge or stain despite never having been washed. “How is that possible?” He demanded, fists propped on his submerged hips and a glare on his normally pleasant face. “You live in those clothes they should reek without a proper washing! Gandalf’s robes certainly do!”

“Excuse me, Master Baggins.” Gandalf huffed from where he was laying his freshly washed robe over a boulder to dry, his spare already wrapped around him. “But the rest of our company is equally malodorous. There is no need to point at an elderly wizard in your spat with young Peverell.”

Bilbo waved his arms frantically. “That merely makes my point! How are you doing that, Harry?”

Harry laughed at him – and a few of the dwarrows that had disgruntled expressions having noticed now that Bilbo pointed out the strange discrepancy in their malodorous brotherhood.

“I’m magical, Bilbo.” He chuckled, grinning. “Whyever would you think my clothes were not?”
“But…Gandalf,” Bilbo complained with a helpless gesture towards the older wizard.

“Is a very different type of wizard from young Peverell as we have explained before.” Gandalf harrumphed. That the Champion had magic clothes was irritating after all. When Gandalf had asked the same question he’d been told that it wasn’t Peverell’s magic that managed it, which was quite disappointing he had to say.

Grousing at that, Bilbo continued out of the stream in naught but his skin, taking a drying cloth from Harry as well as a clean set of his leathers, his dirty set already drying on the same rock Harry had dropped his armor.

“That,” Bilbo snarked at his friend. “Is cheating of the highest order.”

Harry shrugged. “Wizard.”

Huffing, Bilbo stomped off towards the surrounding forest. If all the rain had been good for anything at all he should be able to hunt up some mushrooms. At least something should go his way after having to deal with confounded wizards and their cheating magics!

…

Fortunately for Harry, Bilbo was quick to anger at times but also quick to forgive, the two of them once again thick as thieves by the time Bombur had the night’s stew ready and was passing portions around the circle of eclectic souls around the campfire, which before long featured Glóin singing odes to his wife and son back in the Blue Mountains once his bowl was emptied and handed off to the young princes for washing up.

The enterprising princes took the first available opportunity to change the subject as by that point of the dwarves’ journey all were quite deluged with tales of Glóin’s family.

Though the mischievous looks on their faces boded for nothing good if Harry was any judge.

“What about you, Bilbo?” Kíli asked with a far-too-innocent look on his young face. “Do you have a sweetheart back in the Shire?”

A snickering cough from Harry had him hiding his mouth and glancing quickly away from the mortified blush that heated his friend from his cheeks to the tips of his pointed ears as the interested gazes of the dwarrow swung towards the pair, Gandalf almost choking on his pipe-smoke due to his own laughter.

“N-no.” Bilbo finally answered with a soft groan when they could hear crickets in the forest in the waiting silence of the camp. “No, I’m, well, a confirmed bachelor if you must know.”

“Why?” Sweet Ori asked with genuine confusion. “You have a fine home and income, and aren’t aged or infirm.”

“Yes, thank you, Ori.” Bilbo replied gently even in the depths of his frazzle.

“The problem isn’t Bilbo,” Harry enlightened the confuddled dwarrow. “Rather the opposite from what I understand.” He nudged his blushing friend with an elbow. “A handsome, respectable Baggins with a handsome, respectable inheritance I believe is what Miss Amaranth called you.”

Groaning loud and burying his face in his hands Bilbo swatted ineffectually at Harry’s arm in punishment.
“No, Ori.” Harry continued, voice and manner gentling from the teasing tone he used on his friend. “The problem is one I think some of your companions can relate to: the consequences of consequence. Bilbo isn’t unattractive as a match he’s too attractive making it difficult if not impossible to love without a shadow of doubt regarding why he’s being pursued.”

A collective “ooh” came from the dwarrow with the princes in particular wincing in sympathy.

“You speak as if you’re not unfamiliar with the issue yourself, Master Harry.” Balin noted cannily.

Harry nodded with a twisted grimace of a smile.

“I was as highly placed in the society of my people as it was possible to be thanks to my father’s blood and as low as possible due to my mother’s. Her beauty, power, and intelligence enraptured my father despite the disparity in their stations and he spent years trying to prove himself more than a,” Harry chuckled. “Bullying, spoiled, clot-headed prat, I believe was the phrase she preferred. To compound matters, my father’s family wasn’t only noble and ancient but wealthy. When I began my training I found myself in an interesting position: disdained by some by my mother and desired because of my father. By the time I came into my own and reached my majority I’d had a pair of short-lived courtships before washing my hands of the idea altogether and sticking to ah,” he moderated his words after a warning glance from Dori. “Brief encounters with likeminded individuals.” He grimaced. “That was at the beginning of my career as a warrior of my people by the time I left my renown was such that I couldn’t even partake in brief encounters lest I find myself trapped due to an intentionally faulty contraceptive.”

At that even Thorin winced in sympathy, knowing better than most what Harry spoke of given his time as a true prince of Erebor with dwarrow and dwarrowdams alike launched at his head in hopes of being his One – or short of that the oldest form of entrapment that Harry spoke of.

“Bein’ a warrior was your career, was it?” Dwalin questioned, eyes narrowed. He’d thought it was something like that. He’d spent too long as first Thorin’s bodyguard and then Captain of the Guard to ignore when he came in contact with another of his same ilk.

“After a fashion,” Harry’s tone was nothing short of grim. “A general when called for and member of the guard – later their Captain – of my people when not. My people were unfortunately predisposed to civil war.”

The dwarrow sucked in shocked breaths all around.

Such a thing was unheard of in the dwarven realms though word would come now and then of such things occurring in the realms of Men.

“If I’d stayed…” Harry cut his burning green gaze towards a knowing Gandalf. He hadn’t told the wizard of his purpose but with how the elder wizard would defer to him he knew that Gandalf was aware of it nonetheless. Nothing else fit especially after watching the grey wizard argue with Thorin Oakenshield until he was blue in the face. “I would have been fighting their wars forever. This time over blood purity the next over types of magic the next creature rights,” he snorted shaking his head. “I knew enough of them then and still know now that I can serve better in Arda than I could my home.”

“But…” Bofur fought his way to wording his question. “You’re a lord, couldn’t you…”

Harry shook his head, eyes all-but dead. “Power is one thing, Master Bofur, as I’m sure your king can tell you. But if people are determined to war no amount of power, diplomacy, or anything else can sate them but blood and I’ve shed and caused enough to drown in.”
“What of your oaths?” Dwalin barked, scowling more fiercely than ever at the idea of having a disgusting vermin of an oath-breaker along.

“I swore no oaths.” Harry told them honestly. “So there were none to break when my men betrayed my trust one time too many and I took a gamble on a bargain that led me to your Company.”

…

More time passed in an endless drone of days on the road.

Bilbo practiced under Harry’s eye or gathered and foraged, Harry often took the last watch of the night with a Thorin-shaped shadow and things…settled.

It was plain for all to see that Thorin didn’t trust either hobbit or Man but the others slowly warmed up to the pair, especially the younger trio of dwarrow as neither treated them like foolish youngsters or nuisances.

In fact by the time they reached the Trollshaws on their fifth week of travel – the week of rain having slowed their progress considerably thanks to stretches of washed-out road and trails – things were nearing a comfortable familiarity at least even if Thorin’s scowls never quite let up though whatever negative remarks threatened to drip from his tongue he kept behind his teeth for the moment.

He likely had enough arguing more and more with Gandalf regarding seeking elven help with deciphering his grandfather’s map to worry about a slightly pudgy – though Bilbo had slimmed down since Hobbiton with only three meals and whatever snacks he could forage or Harry passed him from his seeming endless pockets – hobbit and an admittedly dangerous warrior of Men.

The arguing between dwarf king and wizard came to a head on the same afternoon they reached a burned-out shell of a farmhouse a few days’ travel into the Trollshaws.

…

Ignoring the – yet again – arguing pair of Thorin and Gandalf, Harry inspected the burned out farmhouse, only looking up from his crouched position at the sound of heavy footsteps coming up behind him, turning to look at his most common shadow of Dwalin with wary concern.

“This wasn’t an accident.” He told the suspicious guard captain. “Blood and fire: whoever lived here didn’t just die, they were killed.” He pointed towards damage along the floor and the doorway. “By something large enough or strong enough to batter down a barred door and leave stress divots in hardwood.”

His instincts were tugging at him – hard.

“We shouldn’t stay here.”

Dwalin grunted at the man’s report. “Thorin says make camp: we make camp.”

Shaking his head at the stubbornness of dwarves, he brushed passed the solid form of the dwarrow, not flinching or showing in any way that he’d been harmed as he knocked his side into the strong shoulder of the soldier on the way out.

Grabbing hold of Bilbo, he tugged him towards the fire and leaned down to speak lowly knowing that hobbit hearing would pick up what dwarrow ears would miss.

“Stay near the fire and on guard.” He all-but-ordered his friend. “Your stars on your belt and your
staff in hand, hear me?”

Bilbo frowned at a glance at the worried-anger marring his friend’s face then slowly nodded, trusting that Harry’s words weren’t without cause.

A feeling trebled as he saw Harry snap up his crossbow and quiver from where it had been put down on his bedroll next to Bilbo’s own then did something he’d not seen the Man do in all the weeks and weeks he’d known him: loosened his sword in its sheathe, ensuring a smooth draw before striding away into the forest.

“Harry?” Kili called in confusion at the departing back of the Man so soon after Gandalf disappeared from their camp in a snit with Thorin. Turning towards Bilbo he asked: “where’s Harry going?”

“I don’t know.” Bilbo mused, sharing a worried glance with the dwarrow prince. “If I didn’t know better I’d say something had him spooked.”

“Yer not wrong, Master Hobbit.” Dwalin growled as he stomped over to the fire after giving the farmhouse a quick once-over. “Said we should move on despite Thorin’s order to make camp.”

“He’s worried about an attack.” Bilbo surmised from the instructions his friend had given him.

“But of what?” Fili asked.

“That, lad, is the pertinent question.” Balin told them with a nod. “Go keep watch on the ponies, you and your brother. Whatever that has the wizards in a strop I do not want them making off with our mounts.”

…

Harry followed the tug inside of him, his instincts flaring with warning as much as the magic of air and earth and tree towards a black spot in the green-growing of the forest and fields around him, a spot that was rank with blood-death-decay on the leylines beneath his feet that thrummed through his bones with the pulse of the world.

It had taken time for this magic-sense of the world around him to come back once he’d been cut off from the leylines, lifeblood and wellsprings of magic, of his home and transplanted in Arda.

They’d been weak, easily damaged things on the road from Fangorn, ripped and weeping from trauma.

His weeks in the Shire had done more than lifted some of his grief as he got to know the peaceful beings of the Shire, a reason to fight beyond the call of his bargain, it had given him ever-deepening roots to the magic of the land that he hadn’t even realized he’d been mourning until one morning he woke and felt the pulse of Arda’s magic seeping up through his soles.

They weren’t as strong as they could be, not yet.

But it was a start of a…an almost symbiosis with the natural magics of his new home that in his homeland had saved him more than once over the years once he became cognizant of what was happening to sharpen his natural and trained sense and instincts for danger.

What he sensed before was both new, as many things were in Arda, and both shockingly familiar. Coming to a clearing before a cave set with a heavy cast iron cauldron that shocked him for a long
moment with the sense memory of a graveyard in Little Hangleton, Harry was swift to scale a nearby tree and keep watch.

He was there for about an hour judging by the sun almost gone behind the horizon when the sounds of movement from the cave had him changing position and readying his crossbow, absently thankful for the linking charms he’d set on it and the quiver alike that put him in possession of the only automatic crossbow in Arda as once the shadows covered the clearing the first of the caves three occupants stumbled from the cave.

All three of them were hulking creatures that griped and groused about their stomachs and had Harry shaking off a pair of memories of mountain trolls either dead or trying to kill him.

One breath.

Two.

Then the first bolt flew, piercing with force heavy enough to breech plate armor, straight into the eye of the first troll and sending him stumbling into the others.

One breath.

The second bolt sealed the fate of the nearest of the trolls, the third startled and shouting – but it seemed not entirely stupid as it let out an enraged roar and charged for Harry’s tree, the wizard feeling the icy calm of battle washing over him as he shot quarrel after quarrel into the troll piercing its hide and enraging it further but missing the vulnerable eyes.

A split-second decision had the crossbow holstered and the Sword of Gryffindor freed, Harry waiting out the charge for a seemingly endless moment then he was launching and flipping out of the tree his sword flashing in a motion he must have practiced for months straight before he finally managed it during the Troll-Giant War, slicing deep into the hide of the troll’s shoulder – hide that was magic-resistant if these trolls were anything like those of his home.

He’d find the answer to that once he didn’t have to worry about the last standing squashing his head like a grape.

For now he only had to wait and keep out of range, which he easily did by disappearing into the brush at the far side of the clearing before the troll could turn and spot him though he hadn’t time to clear his tracks it wouldn’t take long for the troll to find him.

Basilisk venom, however, was as potent as it’d ever been.

Harry only needed a few minutes at most.

And from the shambling form of the troll has it kicked up one hells of a racket and bellowed, tearing up trees right-and-left as it searched for the watching Harry it wouldn’t even take that much.

Something he’d learned after his own go with basilisk venom when Hermione was rattling off facts about venom and snake-bites: movement or anything that got your blood pumping towards your heart, lungs, and/or brain were not your friend.

Though apparently the troll’s racket had done more than scare away the local wildlife as a company of dwarrow with a single hobbit came crashing into the clearing just as the last troll standing wavered where it stood before falling to the ground with a great crunch! From the cauldron that caught most of its weight.
Regaining his feet, Harry cast a quick *Scourgify* on his sword blade, walking out to join the goggling Company as they toed and kicked at the massive forms laying dead on the ground, sliding his sword back home.

“I told you.” He stared deadpan at Dwalin. “We shouldn’t have camped near here.”

“Did…?” Glóin spluttered while the rest of the dwarrow attempted to find their tongues through their shock. “Did he just kill *three cave trolls*?”

“Aye, that he did.” Nori answered from where he was crouched by the two that’d fallen on each other. “These two: clean shots to the eye with a crossbow. That one,” he jerked his head towards the last that they’d witnessed fall for themselves. “Is riddled with quarrels, must’ve found his hide.”

“It only has a single wound.” Dwalin noted, eyes narrowed. “And not a killing blow.”

“Ah…” Kíli cocked his head to one side, jerking a thumb at Harry’s form where he’d made a sideways waving motion before the mouth of the cave then ventured inside. “What’s he doing?”

“A troll cave means…” Realization bloomed on Balin’s face as he caught his king’s gave.

“A troll horde.” Thorin nodded, voice gruff.

“And his by right.” Glóin tsked at the thought of losing a stake in the treasure their token Man was sure to find within. “Shame.”

“Forget the treasure.” Nori snorted, his words near-blasphemous to his fellow. “I want to know what he coats his sword with to down a troll from a single wound.”

“What do you mean?” Ori asked, already scribbling away in his journal.

“Only one thing I can think of that kills from a single non-lethal blow, dwarfling.” Dwalin growled. “*Poison.*”

“Kíli, Fíli, Ori.” Thorin ordered, having had enough of speculation regarding the Man, Gandalf had saddled them with though it seemed he’d not been boasting without cause of his positions before he’d struck out on his own. That sword he carried as well spoke, and loudly, of the sort of warrior they’d found among them. He wouldn’t know without a closer inspection but it was a clear Masterwork, the sort only one weaponsmith in a thousand years created. “Make certain the raucous hasn’t frightened off our ponies.”

“What about Shadowfax and Applejack?” Bilbo piped up from behind the others.

Thorin rolled his eyes. “Them as well, burglar. You can assist them to see to it.”

Gulping, Bilbo nodded quickly then sped off with the young ones lest Thorin’s temper land on him in lieu of the trolls or Gandalf.

…

Harry’s wide-range cleaning spell – the same he’d once used to tidy Grimmauld Place and wage war against the constant creeping darkness of the damned place – had lifted the stench of the troll cave but left behind anything not registered by the spell as being dirt, grime, or garbage, giving him his third sense-memory of the day as bones crunched under his boots before he summoned a ball of light in his hand and cast it up to the ceiling of the cave.
Shaking his head, he walked back out of the cave once he’d gotten himself back together.

“Master Oakenshield.” Harry strode over to the leader of the company, casting his tone low.
“Would any of the company be willing to dig a grave?”

“The farmers?” Thorin asked, the pair sharing a rare moment of like-mindedness as Harry nodded.
“I’ll see it done if you’ll bring them.”

“Done.”

With that Harry returned to the cave using a few summoning spells to isolate the human bones from the animal which he banished. Óin joined him in the cave, his face as grave as the task before him and handed over a tarpaulin, the two working in quiet unison as they laid out the remains as close as they could manage to right as from what either could tell there were many missing bones. Nodding his thanks, Harry wrapped the bundle tight and closed it with a whispered word then lifted it into his arms, walking back to the farmhouse with mourning seeping into the ground beneath his feet at every step.

…
Chapter 8

Broken Blade

Chapter Eight: Elven History for Dummies…er…Dwarrow

Thorin was shocked – to say the least – to find himself handed one of the finest swords he’d ever seen as they broke camp the morning after the warrior of Men took on a trio of trolls – and won.

He’d seen Peverell press a short sword of elven make on his hobbit friend, the length making it a long sword in the halfling’s hands though he had no doubt after watching the former-general drilling the pair of scribes in their staves and throwing blades that the hobbit would soon know well enough how to use it even if mastery would be slow to come.

“What’s this?” Thorin asked, taking the gem-encrusted sheath. “Part of your spoils?”

“So it seems.” Peverell watched him with one of his enigmatic expressions that Thorin could never decipher. “But with the Sword of Gryffindor I’ve no need of an extra pair of swords.”

They’d all been treated to warnings regarding the sword kept ever-sheathed – save for the previous night – on Peverell’s hip.

Nori had been right – or close.

A blade imbued with deadly venom.

Impossible or so Thorin would have thought in the past, as blade-coatings such as poisons had to be constantly reapplied but having seen the results for himself and never – not one of their company – having seen Harry so much as sharpen his sword let alone coat it he couldn’t easily dismiss the idea either.

And given that said venom had taken down a troll in a matter of minutes Thorin was in no hurry to cross swords with the Man so long as he had that blade in hand.

“I don’t know much about it.” Peverell went on to explain. “Save that it’s inscribed with it’s name: Orcrist, the Goblin-Cleaver. The other,” he tilted his head towards where the hilt peeking up over his shoulder was in view of the hand-and-a-half sword he’d slung onto his back. “Is Glamdring, the Foe-Hammer.”

“They’re elvish make.” Thorin scowled at the inscription on the hilt of Orcrist but a glance at the falchion blade when he pulled it from his sheath had him reconsidering spurning the gift. Like the sword on Peverell’s hip this blade was as fine as any he’d seen and the shape of it suited to a dwarrow’s hand and combat style.

Then it struck him: “you speak the elvish tongue!”

Harry clamped down on both a snarky retort and the urge to roll his eyes.

“Sindarin, yes.” Harry couldn’t however, hold back the unimpressed drawl. “I’ve only started learning Quenya. Keep it.” He nodded at the falchion. “Who knows when you’ll have need of it.”

…
Gandalf appeared as they were mounting their ponies, Radagast the Brown trailing after him on his rabbit-drawn sled to much confusion from the Company.

“That’s Radagast the Brown.” Bilbo guessed, seeing the staff, ratty robes, and all the animals surrounding the odd wizard.

Harry snorted a laugh. “Makes me glad I was dropped on Gandalf.”

The dwarrow chuckled, feeling a similar relief given that while Gandalf could be odd as well he wasn’t as completely barmy as a wizard with a stick insect in his mouth, a bird’s nest in his hair, and a sled drawn by bunnies.

“He’s far from home,” Harry frowned, his instincts roused by the far-too-serious expressions of the faces of the older wizards. “Gandalf told me he roams the wildelands of Rhovanion and lives in southern Greenwood.”

Glances were exchanged between the dwarrows at that, but before they could question the wizards a howl rang through the woods, forcing them to focus and strain to keep their seats all save for Shadowfax and Applejack, the latter taking his cue from the former, sticking to whinnies and stamping their hooves.

“A wolf?” Bilbo tensed, reaching for his stars.

“A warg.” Thorin growled. “Arms out and ride!”

As they turned to the road, the first of the wargs leapt through the underbrush and was shot down by Kili only to lose his seat when his pony bucked, Harry’s crossbow ending the second as the pony bolted without a rider to control it.

“I’ll draw them off!” Radagast shouted to Gandalf.

“Kili!” The dwarrow shouted even as the youngest among them regained his feet.

Harry steered Shadowfax over to the young dwarf, tossing Glamdring to Gandalf in the process the grey wizard catching it in mid-air even as he argued – or tried – with Radagast.

“Those are Gundabad wargs, they’ll outpace you!”

“Up behind me, young prince, quickly now.” Harry ordered, reaching down with one arm and swinging the lad up and behind him so he was backwards in the saddle, taking a length of rope from a saddlebag and lashing the prince in place. “There.” He nodded in satisfaction. “You shoot, just watch my sword arm.”

“And these are Rhosgobal rabbits.” Radagast sniffed, snapping his reins and sending his sled running. “I’d like to see them try.”

“Gandalf!” Harry shouted as the wizard mounted. “You lead, the rest cluster and stay in front of me!”

“Aye!” Thorin ordered, seeing what the younger wizard was about. “As he says.” Then set heels to his pony and sent it galloping after the grey wizard’s gelding as Radagast led the warg pack – and the orcs upon them – on a wild chase over the hills with Harry and Kili picking off any that threatened to turn from the pack to chasing the Company over the hills and moors.

Not nearly long enough later, Radagast had more than outpaced the wargs – he’d lost them entirely
sending them back to chasing their Company with the experienced ranged fighters: Kíli, Harry, and Nori doing all they could to back them off as warg after warg was wounded or lost a rider to arrow, spell, or knife.

A shouted curse from Kíli was the first warning that they were truly running out of time with no respite in sight then the cause:

“My quiver’s empty!”

“Gandalf where are you leading us?!” Thorin shouted ahead at the grey-draped wizard setting a furious pace.

“To safety!” Gandalf shouted back over his shoulder. “The only safety to be found in these parts!”

Growling under his breath as he had a damned-good idea what that meant – and trust the wizard to turn events to his benefit when he knew as well as any that Thorin did not want to go there – he shot a worried look over his shoulder at his younger nephew to see that Harry had handed off his crossbow to the marksmen, only sending off blasts of magic of some sort when wargs drew up even with his fine stallion to keep from catching any of the Company in the impressive concussive blasts that crushed more than one warg and rider – as well as any unfortunate trees, shrubs, rocks, or dirt in the way.

“I’m out again!” Kíli cried, cursing. “How many of the Morgoth-spawned things are there?”

Made bold by the lack of arrows, a warg sped closer to the white steed – too close as Shadowfax proved himself once more one of the Great Mearas with a firm kick to the warg’s skull without even breaking pace and sending the thing tumbling to be crushed underhoof along with its rider.

“Duck, Kíli!” Harry shouted, the dwarrow obeying and tucking himself down and to the side as Harry’s right arm spun around a hissed command in a word Kíli didn’t understand spilling from between bared teeth.

Kíli understood the effect of them well enough however when as if a giant sword – or claw perhaps – had come swooping down directed by the path of Harry’s hand the wargs and orcs closest bloomed with wounds splitting their skulls or chests or legs. Casting a look up at his friend, Kíli’s face paled at the blue-milk paleness that washed out the Man’s usually golden-tanned skin. Oh no. Harry’d exhausted himself with all the magic he’d been using.

A nudge from Harry’s knees had Shadowfax speeding up and drawing even with Nori now that all of their ranged weapons were spent.

Harry couldn’t risk another spell, not with how reckless he’d been with his spellcasting to get big enough area of effect to be, well, effective against the warg pack.

“This way!” Gandalf called back, steering his grey down a nearly-concealed pathway cloaked by draping vines.

As Shadowfax and Nori’s mount were coming close to feeling warg-breath on their heels, a new sound took over that of the chase: hooves.

And as riders in silver and gold armor thundered passed, arrows flying and swords and spears shining in the light of the morning, Harry held in a chuckle at the nearly in-unison outburst from the dwarves of “elves.”

Gandalf had led them straight to the Vale of Imladris.
Ignoring the revived argument between Gandalf and Thorin over Rivendell, Harry rolled his eyes and handed Kíli down next to his brother, figuring the proud dwarf would prefer riding double with Fíli when they arrived at the Last Homely House than pillion behind Harry, then clicked his tongue to Shadowfax, the mearas setting into motion down the wide path.

“Um, Harry?” Bofur asked in confusion as he passed the dwarf. “What’re you doing?”

Harry snorted. “If you think Gandalf is going to budge on visiting Rivendell now when we’re literally on Lord Elrond’s doorstep, you’ve got another think coming. I’m bowing to the inevitable.”

Shrugging at the chagrined glances traded between the dwarrow – other than Thorin who was still hip-deep in bandying insults with Gandalf – Bilbo clicked to Applejack and set the calm mule trotting behind Shadowfax, the rest of the Company eventually giving in with groans and mutters regarding elves and other not-so-nice apppellations for the Eldar, taking in the beauty of Rivendell as the trees towered over head and crystalline falls and streams rushed by under elegant bridges.

Then they crested a rise and Bilbo saw it spread out before him with slim, curved towers and sparkling glass set amongst riotous gardens of flowers and green.

“Rivendell.”

…

Gandalf spurred his horse forward after talking – nagging – Thorin into sulking compliance, leading their party to the steps of Lord Elrond’s manor where a dark-haired elf descended the steps, offering a greeting in Sindarin to the grey-robed wizard.

“Lindir,” Gandalf smiled genially at the elf as he dismounted, Harry and Bilbo following his lead as Thorin and the others retained their seats on their ponies. “Thank you for the welcome, old friend. I am in need of counsel with Lord Elrond.”

“My lord is away at the moment.” Lindir’s cautious gaze swept over the company Mithrandir had brought to the gates of the Last Homely House, stuttering only a fraction of a moment on the Man with him and the great Mearas he rode. That was no mere Man, he knew in a moment. There was far too much power surrounding him for that, enough to challenge even Saruman the White though he was no Maiar either. A puzzle, the grey wanderer had brought to his lord’s house – and that was before one took into consideration the thirteen naugrim and a Hobytla that accompanied him as well. “With the Great Hunt.”

“Ahh,” Gandalf said as he shifted his gaze away from the too knowing eyes of the ancient elf.

“What are they saying?” Kíli hissed.

Before Harry could turn and tell him, the sound of hoofbeats sounded along with the clang of armor heralding the return of Lord Elrond and the Great Hunt.

In moments the dwarrow circled their ponies as Harry snagged Bilbo by the back of his collar and hauled him up onto the stairs with Gandalf and Lindir as the elven party circled the dwarrow who brandished their weapons at the tall, lithe figures on their elegant horses.

“Lord Elrond.” Gandalf bowed to the Lord of the Last Homely House, one of the three holders of the Elven Rings of Power who had remained untainted by Sauron’s treachery. “My old friend.”

“Mithrandir,” Elrond dismounted his horse, amused at the no-doubt interesting bout of meddling that had led his old friend to his door with thirteen dwarrow, a hobbit, and the Champion of the Valar
in tow. Though of the latter pair he was glad to see. He knew their faces – though for very differing reasons. “You would not know anything about the pack of orcs that came up from the South I have been hunting, would you?”

Gandalf looked away, flustered as Harry chuckled, turning the great Lord’s full attention toward himself.

“Hadrian Peverell.” Elrond gave a bow of his own, one returned in full by the Champion. “You are ever welcome in my halls. Come.” He dismissed his hunters with a nod, several others of his people coming forward and taking the reins of the ponies – and the great mearas who shook his mane and stamped a hoof before the Champion settled him. “You look in need of rooms, rest, and a hot meal.”

“Thank you, Lord Elrond.” Harry replied with a polite nod and a warning glance at the dwarrow that had them dismounting their ponies.

“Greetings, Thorin son of Thráin, son of Thrór.” Elrond picked the royal dwarf out of the company, shooting a far-too-knowing glance at Gandalf for Thorin’s liking. “Be made welcome in the House of Elrond.”

“I don’t believe we’ve met.” Thorin retorted just to be contrary.

Gesturing the Champion forward, who in turn kept a hand on his hobbit friend’s shoulder, Elrond left his troublesome old friend to settle down the dwarrow that were in an uproar at the sight of Harry and Bilbo walking with the elven lord.

“What’s that he said?” Glóin shouted, brandishing his great axe even as he slumped off of his pony. “Do they offer us insult?!”

Gandalf rolled his eyes. “No, he offers you dinner.”

“Oh.” Glóin straightened up, lowering his axe a bit sheepishly as the rest of the party lowered their own weapons. “Lead on, then.”

…

Leaving Bilbo at a comfortable guest room with instructions that someone would come retrieve him for dinner, Elrond ushered Harry into his study, a room bespelled against any would-be eavesdroppers.

“Please, sit.” He said, gesturing his guest towards a chair as he moved over to his decanters along one wall. “A drink perchance? Before we speak?”

Feeling…comforted by his surroundings despite his wariness, Harry removed his dragonhide leather duster, folding it over one arm of the airy-but-strong chair before lowering himself into the first real piece of furniture he’d seen in weeks.

“Please,” he answered with a genuine note of pleasure, rolling his shoulders and neck with a sigh as his tension dropped a click. Now safely arrived in Rivendell, he no longer had to worry about hobbits or dwarrow or any of his old duties from his former home for a time. It was…freeing and wonderful…and vastly terrible all at the same time to have to worry about no one and nothing but himself.

And all the soul-killing loneliness that came with such a state.
In this new world, he had the choice to be nothing but indulgent in desires selfish to the utmost degree…and harm no one in doing so as long as he carried out his duty as a Champion.

He mourned, yet.

If his life has taught him anything it was that he always would.

Some wounds never heal.

Teddy would always be one of them.

But they did turn numb from time to time, only awakening in shy scattered moments to pierce through mind and heart and soul to draw fresh blood before returning once more to dormancy.

“Wine, water, or something else?” Elrond asked as he poured a glass of wine for himself of his favored vintage.

“Wine.” Harry decided with a smile, eyes drawn by the rich red of Elrond’s first pour.

Casting an appraising eye at his honored guest, Elrond poured him a glass of deep winter’s wine, vivid with notes of spice and winter snows, handing it off as elegantly as he did everything else before settling himself in the chair at Harry’s side rather than behind his desk. Harry gave him another of his quirked half-smiles at the tension-easing gesture, which bloomed into full-appreciation after the first taste of his drink. After a long moment of companionable silence enjoying their drinks, Elrond began.

“First,” he said, watching his guest carefully for signs of distress. “I feel it behooves me to inform you that I am aware of at least some of the circumstances that have brought you to Middle-Earth…Vanquisher.”

Harry arched a sardonic ebon brow at the revival of one of the less-offensive nicknames he’d been “blessed” with over the course of his former life. “Visions or a messenger from the Valar?” He asked cannily. “And what, exactly, constitutes ‘some of the circumstances’ that led me here?”

“I have the gift of foresight.” Elrond replied with an appeasing nod. It wasn’t as if it was uncommon knowledge among many of Middle-Earth of the gifts of the Eldar. “However, this was more of a waking dream. I saw your entrance into this world. I saw many moments from your past—though a great deal were difficult to fully understand as they lacked context. Many things were shown to me that night, enough to know that I know a meager amount compared to the sum of your deeds…and your sorrows.”

Shaking his head at that, Harry gave a mirthless laugh as he set his empty glass aside.

“That’s visions for you.” He commented with more than a little snark, eyeing his host. He struggled with himself for another long moment before giving in with a heavy sigh.

He was going to have to trust someone of power in this new world, and clearly the Valar had decided upon Lord Elrond if they were priming him before he ever arrived in his home. Besides which…his magic actually likes this one. Even if he was as overly formal as Professor Snape on any given day.

“Where I’m from,” he started slowly. “Is a place – a world and time – vastly different from this one. There I served a simple – and yet complex – purpose as a child of prophecy. It was made before I was even born to it – or for it. And it marked my life in ways both tangible and otherwise.” He shrugged.
It just…was.

“And it shaped me to the point that even after its completion.” Harry cocked his head, looking away at some vision only he could see. “There was no hope of reclaiming who I might have been.”

“You are a warrior.” Elrond repeated his original impression for Harry’s benefit.

“I’ve been called that.” Harry acknowledged with a dip of his head. “I’ve been called many things. Warrior, champion, killer, liar, hero.” A bitter smile flashed and faded in a flicker. “Even a Lord like yourself. They’re all just titles. Words. I prefer just Harry. Or peace-keeper, if you must.”

Elrond itched to disagree with the wounded warrior’s self-assessment but tabled it for the moment as something he said struck him.

“Lord?”

“Of an ancient and noble House.” Harry elaborated. “Old blood, old magic.”

“You’re a wizard?”

“Not as such.” Harry frowned a bit. “I’m not a Man as you would call them here. Nor a wizard as you know them either. I’m something else. Different. Gandalf suggested to the dwarrow that I am Númenórean but that doesn’t fit either.”

Strange. Weird. Freak. The list goes on. He could hardly wait to hear the Middle-Earth version of some of his favorite epithets.

“How so?” Elrond probed, curious as to how honest he would be with him – and whether he would be able to know the difference given the little he’d learned through his visions.

“I’ll share, but.” Harry arched a brow. “Only in exchange for the information I seek in turn.”

Elrond gave a slow smile at that and nodded in agreement.

“Wizarding kind from my home were longer lived than normal men.” Harry settled back into his chair, eyes distant as he walked a careful line between revealing information about his former world and information about himself – two distinctly different things. “But other than that, in many regards the two were similar. There were still wars, still arrogance and pride. That one could live two or three times as long meant little when it also meant that you had that much more time to hold a grudge or plan a civil war.” He sighed, shaking his head. “My generation was born in the waning years of one war and raised in the rise of another. I spent more time in battle by the time I was considered an adult than any other of my generation as well. When it came to my home, we were warriors and spies and anything we needed to be to survive.”

He debated a long moment and then added.

“A Dark Lord had marked me from birth.” He revealed. “None other ever survived him, let alone as long as I managed it before ending the conflict.”

“How long?”

“The first war against him lasted nearly two decades but it was a cold war – very little actual pitched battle. The second…approximately eight years. I killed him in open battle two months before my eighteenth year. As a result of that battle…I have a bit of a problem with dying and staying dead, and my aging has slowed to a stop.” He jerked a shoulder. “That being the main reason I was sent
to this world. My old one wasn’t built for an immortal being.”

Elrond processed that for a long moment. What he spoke of was unheard of, utterly at odds with his knowledge of things. However, at the same time his words rang with truth along with an unconcealed apathy to his own plight that was at war with a very real rage. If Elrond didn’t know better, couldn’t see behind the quiet mask, he would think Harry untouched by the words coming from his mouth, let alone his abrupt rending from his own world, his home despite everything that had happened there, and tossed here to fulfill some unknown purpose.

That there was a purpose was patently obvious.

No other reason for the Valar to send him crashing into their world in the path of Gandalf the Grey otherwise.

And if what Mithrandir seemed to be plotting came to fruition, then a champion’s presence here, now, at this time and in this place might be a greater blessing to Middle Earth than even Elrond knew.

“When you say that you have a problem with dying, how to you mean?”

“Unaging, undying.” Harry tilted his head to the side. “I can’t be killed – not and stay dead. I was told that my world could end – as it will eventually – and I would still go on. Forever, alone and without end.”

Elrond sucked in a shocked breath.

“Such a thing is nothing less than a curse to a Man.” Elrond whispered, thinking all the while of Gilraen and their discussions of the long lives of the Elves, and their Dunedain kin who were blessed with long lives…but in the end even Estel would pass away for all that he was only eight years old at the moment.

“It would have driven me insane eventually if I had stayed.” Harry admitted blithely, not really bothered by that reality. It was something he had come to terms with long ago. “That was one of the main reasons I agreed to take a chance on this world. The one I came from wasn’t made for a creature like me. I’m an accident. The result of events colliding in a cataclysm and meddling with the course of a prophecy. I’m something that was never meant to be, Lord Elrond.”

Elrond gave Harry a soft smile, picking up one of his hands and giving it a firm, comforting squeeze.

“No creature as lovely and strong as you could ever be considered an accident or mistake.” Elrond told his guest with genuine – and blatant – appreciation. “As for your lifespan,” Elrond gave him a knowing grin. “Elvish kind are immortal – in the unaging sense – as well. Though we can be killed or die of grief, we will be reborn upon Valinor after a time.”

“Valinor?” Harry asked, blushing despite himself at the compliment.

“You would know it – from what I understand – as the Undying Lands.”

…

Once he was done shocking Harry speechless with his revelation that his “reward” for being the Valar’s Champion would be a spot in Elvish-Heaven, Elrond agreed to show him the rooms where he’d be staying, postponing further discussion about himself and his new home for another time once the dwarrow had been fed and Elrond able to change from his burnished brown armor into more comfortable clothing.
It was only once he left that Harry realized they’d been speaking Sindarin all that time, so easy was the language upon his tongue.

Upon securing Harry’s agreement to attend dinner with himself and the others – letting him know at the same time that he could leave his weapons in his room whenever he pleased and they would be undisturbed, Elrond left him to rest.

Harry studied the large rooms he’d been given, appreciating the open concept and airy layout of the three-room suite of sitting area, bedroom, and bath while at the same time cringing at how indefensible they were. Granted, he hadn’t felt anything even vaguely resembling a threat.

But still…it was the principal of the thing.

Sighing over his inability to just relax, he set his duster inside the large wardrobe that had a few other things already stocked that after a quick inspection seemed to be light silks and linens such as Lindir had worn in his size. He laughed a little at that, though fresh clothing would be nice.

Carefully divesting himself of his arsenal, he set his weapons aside on the chest at the end of the plush-looking bed and his folio of pictures, spells, and random-information on the bedside table, secure in that being written in an utterly foreign language. It should be safe enough. Armed only with his magic, he drew himself a bath and made good use of the various strange if spiced-smelling toiletries provided.

Suddenly weary, he pulled his spelled-silk undergarments back on before concealing his sword and the rest of his clothes beside him on the bed. With a dagger under his pillow, he allowed himself to heed his body’s needs and tumbled down into a much-needed nap.

…

Bilbo found himself quite enjoying Rivendell even if he was perplexed by the strange – and immediate – closeness Harry seemed to share with Lord Elrond.

His room was on the far side of Gandalf’s own, allowing him a buffer between himself and the irascible dwarrow of the Company. A room that was more than comfortable with its hearth, bed, chest of drawers, and attached bathing room. One hot bath later and a change into his cleanest clothes had him feeling alive and refreshed even after the long night before and longer day on the run from orcs and wargs.

A soft knock drew him from waterfall watching at the wide balcony off his room, opening the door to reveal a pretty elf maiden who smiled and escorted him to the dining hall where he saw the Company already arranged for the most part at one table with only Thorin seated at the high table with Gandalf awaiting their host.

Somehow, Bilbo wasn’t surprised that when Lord Elrond appeared it was with Harry at his side, the two chatting softly in Sindarin as Bilbo situated himself at the end of the table given over to the dwarf as Lord Elrond and Harry joined Gandalf and Thorin.

It was times like this – seeing Harry dressed in elvish fashion draped in silk and linen with his hair washed and tucked behind his ears – that he was reminded of the sort of personage that had quickly become his friend.

Harry was a Lord.

More, watching Harry chat with Lord Elrond as if he did such things every day, he was a practiced Lord.
Seeing the considering glances that Balin was shooting Harry, Bilbo reckoned that he wasn’t the only one that particular fact was washing over.

Good.

It was about time the dwarrow recognized Harry for more than a simple practitioner of magic tricks or for having a handy sword.

Nodding to himself – and setting himself to ignoring the bad manners and bellyaching of his tablemates – Bilbo tucked heartily into the delicious salads, honey nut breads, and root vegetable stews that graced their table along with sweet fruits, jams, and even a custard.

Silly dwarrow.

If they focused less on complaining and more on what was in front of their noses they’d see the fish and fowl that dotted the table despite the lack of red meat.

Bilbo certainly had, tucking into a flakey fish pie and enjoying the large chunks of duck to be found in one of the salads, laughing into his napkin at the unrelenting bellyaching over “green food” and the stubbornness of dwarves.

“I don’t know that I like our wizards being so chummy with the tree-shaggers.” Dwalin growled as he tore into a soft roll dotted with seeds and honey then spread with butter and topped with cheese.

“Gandalf has known Lord Elrond for years.” Bilbo supplied as he happily munched his way through his second serving. “He’s the one who introduced my mother to the elves of Rivendell when she went adventuring in her youth.”

“He did, aye?” Fíli narrowed his eyes at the grey wizard. “That why you speak their language?”

“Mmm.” Bilbo nodded. “Besides: if Harry really is Dúnedain or Númenórean then Lord Elrond and his children are the closest thing to kin Harry has outside of his home.”

Confused frowns exchanged between the dwarrow had both Balin and Bilbo trading exasperated looks of their own.

“I swear not a one of you paid attention to your non-dwarven histories.” Balin took a long gulp of his wine. “Lord Elrond of Rivendell is Elrond Peredhel, the Half-Elven son of Eärendil and Elwing, brother of Elros who chose the fate of Men at the end of the First Age as his brother Elrond the fate of Elves. Elros who then became the first King of the Númenóreans who later became the Dúnedain do none of you listen?” Balin near-barked in Khuzdul at the end of his lecture when it seemed his audiences’ eyes were glazing over.

Kíli just shrugged at his brother when Fíli nodded along, well-aware as a Crown Prince Apparent must of the histories of the important houses of Middle Earth – whether they were tree-shaggers or not – then mouthed History is Boring gaining himself at head-tap from his brother and Balin both.

“At least we’re not toffs who’re supposed to know such things, yeah?” Bofur offered up in contrition and near-cowering under the glare of the King’s foremost advisor, gesturing to himself and his kin, the rest of the Company having no such excuse ready at hand.

“If Elrond is his kin,” Kíli frowned down into his tankard as he worked his way towards what he wanted to say. “He won’t…”

“Stay, will he?” Ori finished the thought proving to Dori at least that the young scribe had spent
“Bilbo?” Fili prompted when the suggestion had all of the Company worried. Not many of them had made an effort to get to know either Man or Hobbit during the Quest thus far save the young ones and the ‘Ur brothers but Harry at least had proven to have skills beyond imagining and Bilbo’s foraging prowess had been a boon – even if they’d never said as much to the Hobbit.

“Harry’s word is unbreakable.” Bilbo told them after a moment’s thought. “I know why he’s coming along: he won’t go back on his contract with Thorin anymore than I would. Though I’d be willing to make a bet that after the Quest is complete he’ll likely return here if Lord Elrond is, in fact, his family however distantly related.”

Which Bilbo knew very well was hogwash but what the dwarrow didn’t know wouldn’t have them facing another unrelenting wave of suspicion when the secretive creatures had only just started to loosen up.

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Chapter 9

Broken Blade

Chapter Nine: Scattered Shards

After relentless badgering by Tharkun, Thorin gave in and agreed to take counsel with Lord Elrond bringing Balin along with them at his own insistence to one of the elf-lord’s balconies, one bathed in moonlight, after dinner and Peverell and the halfling at Tharkun’s.

Though by the look shot Tharkun by the weed-eater at the sight – and worse comprehension – of Thrór’s map, Elrond wasn’t swallowing the tale of “historical significance” and “trade with the Iron Hills.”

Thorin was tempted to snort derisively.

He had nothing good to say about any elf, even ones that hadn’t directly harmed his people like Lord Elrond and his ilk, but even Thorin thought that Tharkun could’ve done a better job in trying to bury the tree-shagger in fool’s gold than that when faced with a being who was born in the First Age and survived not only the Last Alliance but also the War of Wrath.

“These moon runes are only just beginning to appear.” Elrond announced after the long, dry exchange of looks between himself and Gandalf. “It will likely be some weeks, the Summer Solstice perhaps, before they are able to be read.” He arched a brow at the grumbling pair of Durin’s Folk cluttering up his study. “If you would like to enjoy my hospitality for such a period, you are welcome Thorin son of Thráin and your company with you.”

“Very well.” Thorin agreed – though to the eyes of all around him it looked like he was chewing rocks in the process. “Thank you for your…generous hospitality.”

With that – and gentle hands – Thorin gathered up his grandfather’s map and nodded to the elf-lord, Balin following him from the enclosed balcony with Bilbo joining after a tilt of Harry’s head, Gandalf and Harry remaining behind with Lord Elrond.

Bilbo found himself less-than-surprised to come to a stop behind a pillar only to catch sight of Thorin doing the same across the way though the only thing his sneaking gained him from the dwarrow King was a bit of a smirk – one that looked far too handsome on that already striking face, Bilbo must say – as the two fell into listening though at the sounds of Sindarin, Bilbo was shocked to realize from the expressions crossing Thorin’s face that the devotedly-anti-elven dwarf knew the language.

A shock, yes.

But after a moment’s thought and reminding himself of what Balin had said – and the Durin boys had implied at dinner regarding their educations – it came to him that of course a dwarrow Crown Prince and later King would need to know the language of elves as much as that of Men.

“You are not the only guardian of Arda, Mithrandir.” Elrond’s tone was scolding if anything, with perhaps a hint of warning though Bilbo didn’t know the elf-lord well enough to be certain. “This game you play with the line of Durin is dangerous. It is not to you to redraw the map at a whim.”

“Erebor is the line of Durin’s my friend.” Now that tone of head-patting geniality of Gandalf’s both hobbit and dwarf were more than familiar with. “As it is said: the portents have been read. We
have an opportunity to strengthen all of the north and east with one move. Now that Thorin Oakenshield is set upon this path he will not be swayed from it."

Thorin’s smirk at that had Bilbo rolling his eyes even if both of them – from what Bilbo could tell of Thorin’s expressions – were confused about some of the other things being said between the trio.

“...let us not forget our young Peverell as well.” Gandalf brought up. “He was sent to me to be led to Thorin Oakenshield of that I have no doubt at all else he could have been sent to any of the Eldar or Maiar remaining in Arda. His path is as set as that of the line of Durin.”

“Much as it pains me to agree,” and oh, Bilbo knew that dry tone of Harry’s that was a step away from all-out snark. “I feel the darkness underlying the magic of Arda. It only grows. Steps must be made to check it else when your ancient enemy reveals himself it will be too late. A great dragon is nothing less than a weapon of mass destruction. A weapon that must either be destroyed or neutralized before the enemy reclaims what it once lost.”

“I do not doubt your words, Harry.” Elrond sighed. “But there is a madness that runs in the line of Durin. The desolation of Smaug was brought upon the Lonely Mountain as much by Thrór’s greed and gold-sickness as by the whim of the fire drake.”

“Madness and sickness can both be overcome.” Bilbo could almost see Harry’s shrug, even as a storm of temper broke over Thorin’s face at Lord Elrond’s words. “Thorin Oakenshield is as determined a leader as any I have met in my life. I do not believe he has it in him to break under such things and magic can remedy much when it comes to the mind.”

“I hope so, Harry.” Lord Elrond said, as the whispers of movement had Thorin and Bilbo abandoning their hideaways before they were discovered. “For the sake of yourself and Master Baggins if naught else.”

...

Elrond escorted Harry back to his rooms as Gandalf took his leave, rather pleased – even with what brought the Champion to his House – that he would have several weeks in the company of the young immortal Man, he could see that part of the mourning darkness that had cloaked the Champion when the Valar brought him through to Arda had been lightened and lifted from the young one’s fea, due no doubt to weeks in the quiet peace of the Shire, but there was yet more work in healing the young one’s spirit to do.

It was a shame his children were away from Imladris, Arwen’s gentleness and the twin’s high spirits would likely do much for one such as Harry.

Gone too was Lord Glorfindel, escorting Arwen as a guard to her grandparents’ kingdom of Lorien, as a former Champion would be able to help the young one more than any Elrond thought in bearing the burden placed upon him by fate, chance, and a single choice.

Elladan and Elrohir might return from their hunting and scouting trip with the rangers but Elrond couldn’t bet on it.

Perhaps...

Yes, he rather thought such a thing would suit.

“You mean ents are real here?” Harry asked to confirm with a laugh as they sat before a warm fire in Harry’s sitting room, the two of them enjoying as simple game of cards that Harry had quickly taught the elven lord as they traded information.
“Very real.” Elrond smiled as he played a card. “As are goblins, orcs, trolls, and many other creatures some of which you have discovered for yourself.”

Harry nodded thoughtfully, studying his hand. If trees were different, then goblins and other creatures might be as well. Just because they bore the same title didn’t make them the same thing. You could call an elephant and a tiger the same thing but it didn’t make it true after all.

“What can you tell me about the darkness I’ve felt?”

“Servants of Sauron…” Elrond went on to explain all about the rings of power, Sauron, and Mordor, including the events of the Last Alliance. An abridged history of Middle-Earth with focus on the desolation of Smaug and the claiming of Erebor. At last Harry got an explanation about why Elrond had been so bothered by trolls coming so far south from the Ettenmoors.

They sat up long into the night, drinking honeyed elven wine, warmed by the fire and comfortable with each other’s company, exchanging information and stories alike.

Harry enlightened Elrond a bit about his world and his magic, as Elrond in turn picking up his education on the ways of both the Free Peoples and dark creatures of Sauron that inhabited Middle Earth, that Gandalf, Bilbo, and Harry’s folio had begun, as he was sure to meet some of each in the coming days, weeks, and months of the quest let alone all the years to come afterward until the Valar confirmed his duties as Champion fulfilled. Only Hobbits were overlooked as he’d already been well-versed in their quirks and foibles from weeks spent not only with Bilbo but living among the denizens of the Shire.

…

“Can you feel it?” Harry asked Bilbo and Ori as the pair joined him for breakfast the next morning on the balcony outside of the wing of rooms turned over to the Company save for Harry who’s guest suite was the best available for the purpose that Imladris had to offer – not that Harry knew that – a permanent assignment made by Lord Elrond when knowledge of the Champion was made clear to him by the Valar.

“The magic of Rivendell?” Bilbo asked in turn, looking up from his bowl of porridge rich with cream and fresh berries.

Harry nodded.

“Very much so.” Bilbo sighed, leaning back in his delicate wooden chair and sipping at his tea. “It…beckons.”

Ori frowned, confused. He hadn’t felt a thing since arriving in Rivendell. Well…other than a bit of discomfort at being surrounded by elves aside from his appreciation of the beauty of the place.

And he said as much, his companions trading a look.

“What’s it feel like?” He pressed when they didn’t say anything more on the subject for a long moment, already digging out his journal, quill, and inkpot, shoving his breakfast of porridge and toast with eggs aside.

“Welcome.” Harry said another long pause later, leaning back and tilting his head allowing his riotous mass of thick wavy black hair to fall behind him and feeling the morning sun bathing his face. “Peace. Rest and be healed.” His gold-dusted eyelids slid closed under the sunlight and hid his emerald eyes from his audience of two. “Stay. That’s what the magic here says to me underneath the hum of the flora and fauna, the, um, sparkling of the elves, Gandalf’s thunder,
Bilbo’s soft spring rain, and the pounding shields of the dwarrow.”

“I don’t feel all of that.” Bilbo admitted after a shocked blink at Harry’s indolent pose and trance-like words. “But yes: welcome, peace, stay and be healed, that I can feel from the wood of the house and the soil of the gardens.”

“If there’s so much to feel.” Ori frowned thoughtfully after he hastily recorded the words of the pair. “Why can’t I feel it?”

Bilbo shrugged as Harry sat up and reopened his eyes, reaching for a cup to pour himself some tea to go with his fruit and toast.

“At a guess I’d say it’s because you’re a dwarf.” Harry arched a brow when Ori rolled his eyes at the obvious answer. “Hobbits are children of Yavanna and who the dwarrow call Mahal. It’s from Yavanna the Hobbits gained their *hobbit-sense* or earth-sense as the dwarrow gained stone-sense from Mahal according to what I’ve been taught or read.”

“And you, Harry?” Bilbo prodded, complete with a poke to the secretive – to a point – Man’s ribs, exposed for once in the light elven silks and linens provided to the Company though only Bilbo and Harry thus far had taken advantage of them.

“I’m magic.” Harry smirked, eyes flashing. “I can feel all of it if I want to or block it as need-be. Gandalf can likely do the same to a point but we were made differently for different purposes so who’s to say?”

“Like dwarrow and hobbits.” Ori made the connection with a bright smile.

“Maybe so.” Harry gave one of his infuriatingly enigmatic – as far as the scribes were concerned – smiles before changing the subject altogether.

Though before he could do he was interrupted.

“And for what purpose were you made, Master Peverell?” Thorin asked as the rest of the dwarrow stumbled and piled their way around the breakfast table, only Ori having wakened early given his excitement to plunder the Rivendell library.

“Me?” Harry lifted his brows in an expression of faux-innocence, snagging a sausage before Dwalin could hog them all. “Depends on who you ask.”

“I’m asking you.” Thorin pinned him with a look from under beetled brows, Durin gaze piercing as he sat between his sister’s-sons in an attempt to pass one meal without the two squabbling. Little good it was sure to do him. But the attempt would hopefully keep Dís from scalping him bald when she heard tell of the… *entertaining* feast the night before complete with food-fights and dancing upon tables in the House of Elrond.

“I was fashioned as a weapon.” Harry said, voice and face blank and… *absent* in a way Thorin had seen before on those who lived through the worst of events but came out altered irrevocably by it. An expression and tone on most of the refugees of Erebor that didn’t survive the first winter after Smaug. Or the warriors that survived Azanulbizar. “Forged in the blood and fires of war. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Rising, Harry nodded to the dwarrow and clapped one hand on Bilbo’s shoulder before taking his leave of the Company and heading off to none-knew-where.

“You know the problems of an over-worked blade, Thorin.” Dwalin muttered to his closest friend,
kinsman, and king.

“Aye.” Thorin nodded, face grim. Dwalin knew that absent blankness as much – if not better – than Thorin. He’d been the one that had woken Thorin from it after all. “It can shatter.”

Wandering through the halls of Elrond, Harry found himself in a round gallery surrounding a single statue of a cloaked being holding an altar upon which the shards of a sword were displayed. On each wall was a tapestry which when begun to the right of the statue and followed around told a story that Elrond had conveyed to Harry just the night before: that of the Last Alliance and the moment the strength of Men failed Middle-Earth. Last was that of Isildur with a golden ring hanging from his neck and falling into a river – and then nothing at all after, though there was space for more.

“A story not yet complete.” Harry murmured to himself then turned back to the statue. “Which makes you…”

“Narsil.” A young voice supplied, the face it belonged to peeking around the corner that – Harry thought – led to Elrond’s study and the library.

A human face.

One with black hair and grey eyes that shot a shock of grief-stricken pain straight through his heart as he saw echoes of Teddy and Sirius and a legion of Blacks before them in it.

Cute, at the moment, to be sure and certain to turn handsome in time.

“Hello there.” Harry said with the best smile he could salvage even if it felt weak to him. “What was that?”

“Those are the shards of Narsil.” His little informer told him, creeping around the corner and showing a height Harry thought similar to Ron’s in their first year, putting the lad about ten or eleven years old he guessed. “Heirlooms of the lost line of Elendil and all the High Kings of Arnor and Gondor.”

“Really?” Harry mused, taking a second glance at the broken blade before turning his attention back to the young one. “Now that the sword has been named, I don’t suppose I could have yours as well?”

“Estel.” Bright, curious eyes stared up at Harry as he bowed deeply to the boy. “At your service.”

“Hadrian Peverell.” He swept his arm in an overblown elven salute to giggles from the young one, Estel, as the sound of hurrying footsteps reached his ears. “At your service young Estel.”

“Estel.” The harried visage of an ellon Lord Elrond had introduced the night before as Lord Erestor came around the corner, the look on Estel’s young face the very picture of oops, caught! At the sight of him and the sound of Sindarin. “I see you have found my young runaway, Lord Peverell.”

At the “Lord” Estel’s eyes popped wide with shock only to giggle once more at a wink from Harry even as Erestor snagged his shoulders and began ushering him back down the hall to his lessons.

“It was no problem, Lord Erestor. In fact young Estel taught me about Narsil while hiding from his own lessons.”

“Indeed.” Erestor cast an admonishing look down at his young charge. Even with Elladan and
Elrohir absent they still managed to make their presence felt in the antics they’d taught to an all-too-interested Estel. “Bid Lord Peverell good day now, Estel. Your mother is awaiting you for your Westron lessons.”

“Good day, Lord Peverell.” Estel said at his instructor’s urging, complete with a wave.

“Good day, Estel.”

Harry managed to keep his chuckles to himself until their footsteps disappeared – but just barely.

It was good to know that new world and strange peoples or not: kids would still be kids.

…

That first random meeting between Harry and Estel set the pattern for the days that followed as Harry struggled not to sink too far into the comforting magic of Rivendell lest when the time came he wouldn’t be able to marshal the strength to leave it behind him for the cold trails and colder company of a driven dwarven King in exile.

It was a struggle he saw not only in himself but also in Bilbo’s face at every meal or every time Harry crossed paths with his friend in the great library or walked with him in Elrond’s gardens.

The call to stay and rest was strong over those who could hear it.

Estel’s vibrant young company helped to shake it off of Harry’s steps as the young boy would dart around corners as he fled Erestor or Lindir to drag Harry off to the training grounds, Estel joining Harry in training Bilbo in using the hobbit’s new sword, practice weapons supplied by the elven guards allowing Harry to spar with both boy and hobbit alike, Estel’s skill showing as he easily outpaced Bilbo though stood to learn from Harry himself who used a different style than that he’d learned from his elven guardians.

As it was, the young one drew smiles even from dour Dwalin when the dwarrow eventually followed the clang of weapons to the practice rings, though none of them ever learned the reason behind Estel’s presence in Rivendell until he was introduced at another formal dinner as Lord Elrond’s ward along with his mother Lady Gilraen.

Given the looks of the pair and the knowledge shared by Balin that first night the dwarrow assumed they were Dúnedain and said nothing of it.

Harry – being Harry – didn’t manage to let it go despite the curiosity of the rest being sated.

“He’s more than a boy you’ve taken in, my friend.” He opened the conversation as Elrond entered his quarters once again for their nightly discussion over honeyed mead or wine and the games of both their peoples. “Isn’t he?”

Elrond paused, chagrined that his bid to leave Harry’s spirits with Estel’s presence had had unseen – even for him with his gift of foresight – consequences.

Putting the flagon of wine on the side table between their chairs before Harry’s fireplace, he bought himself a few moment’s time by pouring and handing over a goblet to the insightful creature the Valar have inflicted upon Arda then seated himself.

“He is,” he admitted at last. “Though by his mother’s wish not a word has ever been spoken of it.”

Harry shook his head, more than familiar with the backlash that comes of hiding shit from people,
taking a long drink of the latest wine brought by Elrond to “educate” him.

He could see both from who Elrond is with him and his ease with Estel that the boy could do much worse for a father to learn from.

That didn’t make the obfuscation right.

“What is he, Elrond?” Harry persisted switching to the rudimentary Quenya the elf-lord had been teaching him for the last week and some days. “Why is this boy being raised in your home?”

Quenya was known to few still living in Middle Earth and spoken by even less, the more formal and scholarly of the elven tongues of Arda, though an even older dialect Quendya was the language of the Valar themselves due to the closeness of the Vanyar elves and the Valar.

As such, the rare language was the safest of all for secrets that must be spoken in Arda.

“He is the last chieftain of the Dúnedain, the Heir of Isildur, the last Man of Númenor.” Elrond told the Champion of the Valar as it was likely information Hadrian would have need of during his time fulfilling his pact with the Valar. “At the request of his mother he has been raised as my ward, nothing more. She fears those who wish to destroy the line of Elendil would take her son as circumstance, war, and assassins took the rest of my brother’s descendants.”

Harry managed to follow but that was only due to the intense tuteledge of Lord Elrond otherwise he would’ve been lost somewhere around “his mother.”

Switching to Sindarin Harry had another question.

“Are you raising him as you would another without Gilraen’s request in place?”

Elrond shifted a bit, looking into the low flames of the fireplace that warded off the chill of the early summer night.

“He has no idea, does he?” Harry muttered, lapsing back into English to curse as he’d taken to doing then continued speaking in Sindarin as the many, many implications of Estel’s heritage and position crashed down on Harry’s head. “You realize that acquiescing to his mother’s fear will only cripple him later and cause resentment? Things like this do not stay hidden. He won’t always be ten.”

“He is of Númenor.” Elrond drank deep of his goblet, Harry not saying anything he hadn’t thought at one point or another for himself. “He will live twice or more the life of a Man unless war or violence takes him early. His future is not so near as another’s might be.”

“But it will still come.” Harry argued, setting his goblet aside with a short clang of gold on wood, leaning forward trying to make Elrond see as one who’d been through something not unlike Estel faces. “It always comes and at the least favorable moment for it. Children have a flexibility of thought and ideals that adults do not possess. If you allow Estel to believe himself nothing more than a Ranger until some mercurial point in the future that is what he will cling to no matter what hope you pin on him. Tell him, Elrond. Tell him now while he is still young enough to grow at ease with the idea of what awaits him.”

“I suppose you would know better than most of inevitable truths.” Elrond allowed with a bitter twist to his lips. “Given what you have told me of your past and what I was shown by the Valar.”

“And of the resentment the concealment of truths can cause.” Harry nodded, eyes dark with memories. “I was raised to be a martyr and the consequences of my fate and all that came with it will
follow me all the days of my immortal life no matter how distant those events grow over time. 
Always, Elrond.” Harry emphasized. “I will carry my mentor’s lies and machinations with me 
always. I would not wish such a thing on another, let alone such a joyful child as your Estel.”

“I will think on your words, Hadrian.” Elrond told him truthfully. “Though I can promise no more.”

“As long as you do think on it.” Harry sat back in his chair, satisfied that the elf-lord had listened 
even if events didn’t come to a conclusion he’d be pleased with in the end. At least he’d been 
heard. That was more than anyone but Siri and Snape had done in the end for him up against 
Dumbledore. “Think on this as well: when the truth was revealed to me and my heart shattered to a 
million pieces and the shards were scattered to the wind, I had to leave my world behind to try and 
recover. What shelter will Estel have if Rivendell is tainted by dishonesty? Where will he run to 
collect the pieces of himself and reforge his heart and soul and very self?”

“I hear you, Hadrian.”

“Don’t just hear me, Elrond.” Harry clenched his right hand the words scarring his flesh showing 
white as they were the only ones he’d not healed in all this time: a reminder he refused to let go of, of 
the different faces evil can take. “Do something to ensure that my fate will never be his.”

“I will…do what I can.”

“Then I’ll hope that that is enough.” Harry shook his head. “As I would wager what you can is still 
significantly more than anyone else in Middle Earth has to offer.”

…

A shriek sounded through the gardens of Elrond a little over a week since Elrond and Harry had a 
tense discussion regarding Estel, drawing Harry from his haunting of Narsil’s pavilion with his latest 
tome from Elrond’s library to a balcony overlooking the center gardens – and more importantly the 
fountain in the center of it.

Said fountain having somehow become the swimming pool of a pair of dwarrow princes and their 
shrieking playmate Estel.

His laughter rang out over the gardens, catching the attention of the nude swimmers follicking in the 
rose-petal decorated water.

“Harry!” The three of them cried, even as Estel struggled to free himself from Fíli’s clutches, the 
princes before pausing to summon Harry to join them having been playing a came of catch and 
release with the young boy. “Come join us! The water’s fine!”

“Does Lord Elrond know that you’ve corrupted his ward into nude fountain bathing?” Harry called 
down as he made his way down the winding stair off the balcony that led to the garden.

“I do now.” Elrond himself called out from the balcony off his study that likewise overlooked the 
central gardens. The smile on the elf-lord’s face belied any aggravation he might have pretended at. 
He’d leave the scolding to Gilraen and Erestor. With Harry’s words heavy on his thoughts it did his 
heart good to see his ward happy even if it was nude swimming with dwarven princes that had done 
it. “Do not be late for your lessons with your mother, ion.”

“Yes, Ada.” Estel called in his young piping voice that had yet to begin changing as he finally 
managed to squirm out of Fíli’s hold. When Elrond had vanished from the balcony the boy turned 
beseecching eyes on Harry who stood just out of the splash radius of the fountain, his book left on a 
bench farther away just in case. “Please come and play, Harry!”
“Yes, Harry!” The dwarven princes turned their own puppy eyes on the Man. “Come play!”

Snorting, Harry stripped down to the linen underclothes – trousers that covered him quite well from hip to being tied just under the knee – in tan that would at least preserve his modesty though it seemed the other fountain-bathers felt no such need.

“Well now.” He eyed them then conjured a soft round red ball. “Keep away is it? I think the realm of Men is more than capable of taking on the line of Durin, what do you think Estel?”

The chortling laugh and leap of the boy over to Harry’s side was enough of an agreement for the Durins who eyed Harry and Estel speculatively for a moment and then the chase was on as they went for a dual tackle of their Company’s wizard only for Harry to toss the ball to a darting Estel as he evaded the grabs of Fili and Kili.

Such noise in the heart of Rivendell eventually drew additional spectators and before long the game had grown to include Glóin and Dwalin on the Durin team as well as Bofur and shockingly Ori on Harry and Estel’s when a woman’s voice rang through the garden calling for her son.

With the heavy sigh of the mightily put-upon and more than a few whines – mostly from the dwarven princes much to Estel’s entertainment – Harry snatched the boy from the water and had him dried and dressed in a matter of moments before doing the same for himself.

He left the dwarrows to fend for themselves as they clambered from the fountain with their excuse to misbehave taken from them.

Hand-in-hand with Estel Harry led the young king over to the elegant figure draped in silks he’d only met once before and who was eyeing him with nothing less than censure even as she smiled down at her son and sent him off with Lindir to await her in their rooms.

It didn’t take long – just long enough for the boy to be out of earshot – before Lady Gilraen let the reason behind her lingering presence known.

“You are the one that spoke to Lord Elrond regarding my son.” Gilraen noted with a tone as cold as ice and twice as hard. “The one that thinks to question how I have chosen to raise him.”

“Yes.” Harry arched an unrepentant brow, even as he gave her a stiff bow as due the dowager queen of Arnor and Gondor even if none of her husband’s line have held such a title in hundreds of years. “I am.”

“Such is not your place.” Gilraen told him scathingly. “No matter how you came to claim the ear of the Elf Lord.”

“Perhaps not.” Harry agreed unrepentantly. “But it needed saying anyway. Your fear will follow your son all his days, linger and shadow his every decision. He should know why.”

“That is not your place.” She bit out, reaffirming her choice in the face of his unrelenting bravado. “You are nothing to my son.”

“Perhaps not.” An infuriating half-smile he’d learned at Siri’s knee crossed his face as he repeated himself much as Gilraen had done. “In the end, much like his fate, that will be for Estel to decide.”

Snapping another bow and a brisk: Lady Gilraen, Harry took his leave of Gilraen, widow of Arathorn II of the Dúnedain, never to lay eyes upon her again at her request to Lord Elrond though his words lingered with her thereafter.
“You can’t help but piss off royalty, can you Harry?” Bilbo asked later that night when he’d heard of the confrontation between the Dúnedain dowager – having put the pieces together of who Lord Elrond’s ward must be but having kept such to himself – and his friend.

The pair of them burst into laughter there in Harry’s sitting room as they waited for Lord Elrond who had invited Bilbo to join them in Quenya lessons after learning of the hobbit’s interest.

“You could say I have a problem with authority.” Harry snarked, pouring them hefty tankards of golden honey mead.

“Unless it’s your own.”

Harry had to concede that, passing Bilbo his tankard and saluting his hobbit friend.

“Unless it’s my own.”

Changing the subject, Bilbo noted: “only a few days until midsummer now.”

“And then back to bedrolls, smelly dwarrow, and road-ration.” Harry groaned, letting his head fall back against his chair’s headrest with a thunk. “Yay.”

“Elrond said something to Gandalf about calling the White Council.” Bilbo relayed the news to his friend. “Because of the Morgul blade Radagast gave Gandalf.”

“Why Bilbo Baggins…” Harry smirked at the honey-haired hobbit. “Have you been eavesdropping again?”

“Not intentionally.” Bilbo shrugged. This time at least. “These balconies all overlap each other and sound carries to hobbit ears if not as well as to those of elves. Not my fault Big Folk tend to forget that.”

“No indeed.” Harry sighed, lifting one hand to rub his eyes. “Elrond is…not content but at least resigned to the Quest. The other members of the Council might not be.” Groaning he sat up. “Here’s hoping that Thorin and the rest of us are well gone from Imladris before they arrive or we might face problems even my magic and your sneakiness has trouble working us out of.”

“Agreed.” The two touched tankards in a modified toast then spoke lightly of the late Belladonna Baggins until Elrond arrived to relay his own stories of the adventurous hobbit lass.

…

Luck, as it would have it, was not on their side.

Gandalf hurried to the rooms of the Company mere hours after Elrond finished reading Thrór’s map and bid them all leave under the cover of night as the White Council had gathered but would – hopefully – be distracted by Gandalf and Harry for long enough for the dwarrows and hobbit to be well away.

“Wait for us before trying the High Pass.” Gandalf warned even as he rushed them along. “We will meet you there. Now go: hurry! Before Saruman notices your presence here!”
Chapter 10

Broken Blade

Author’s Note: Movie dialog ahoy as the White Council meets in Rivendell.

Chapter Ten: Challenges Near and Far

Staring down the path back towards Rivendell before it disappeared into the foothills of the Misty Mountains, Bilbo told Ori who was nearest him: “I don’t like leaving Harry and Gandalf to face the White Council alone.” He fretted over his friends they’d left behind in the gleaming elven stronghold.

“They’re wizards, Bilbo.” Ori patted him lightly on the back as they hiked up the mountain path towards the High Pass, already regretting that they’d had to leave the ponies behind lest they be discovered. “I’m sure they’ll be alright.”

“Yeah, cheer up Bilbo.” Fíli and Kíli bounced over to their friend.

“But The White Council.” Bilbo nibbled at his lower lip before allowing his friends to tow him along up the path. “They’re all powerful elves and wizards too. What if they’re not alright? We’d never know it until…”

“Keep up!” Thorin shouted back, wanting to get their focus back on the quest and off of the wizards now that they’d had weeks to grow soft at Rivendell. “All of you! We can’t rest until we’re well away!”

“You heard him.” Kíli sighed, slinging an arm over Bilbo’s shoulders. “Let’s go, Mr. Boggins. I’m sure that Harry and Gandalf are grown wizards. They can take care of themselves.”

…

“I’m simply trying to do what I feel is right.” Gandalf defended himself – and his actions regarding spurring Thorin Oakenshield into reclaiming his birthright – before both the head of his order and two of his oldest friends in Elrond and Galadriel as Harry leaned against the wall half-concealed by shadows.

His presence had drawn attention from the newcomers but their focus – at the moment – was on Gandalf.

“The dragon,” Galadriel, Lady of the Golden Wood, turned from where she’d been staring out the window overlooking the Misty Mountains to speak. “It has long been on your mind.”

“It is true, my lady.” Gandalf turned a bit in his seat to face her and away from the stern visage of Saruman. “Smaug owes alligence to no one.” Turning back to Saruman and the pacing form of Lord Elrond. “But if he should side with the Enemy,” at this Elrond paused his pacing and turned to flicker his gaze between Gandalf and Harry. “A dragon could be used to terrible effect.”

“What enemy?” Saruman questioned, eyes dark. “Gandalf the enemy is defeated. Sauron is vanquished. He can never again regain his full strength.”

“Funny thing, that.” Harry spoke up, moving forward from the shadows and into the meeting place of the White Council for the first time. “From whence I came they said the same thing. Voldemort
was dead they said. He could never return. Never be as great and terrible as he once was. You know what we found out the hard way?” His eyes were as dark as the night surrounding them even as dawn began to break over the eastern sky. “They were wrong. The Dark Lord rose greater and more terrible than he ever had been before. As long as your Dark Lord has servants left who would see him returned, Sauron will never be defeated.”

“For four hundred years we have been at peace.” Elrond spoke as Saruman struggled to swallow Harry’s words, even knowing who and what he was as he’d been enlightened by the others when he’d questioned the Man’s presence. “A hard-won watchful peace.”

“Are we?” Gandalf questioned, pleased that the Champion believed as he did and giving new perspective for why young Peverell had been sent to him of all the Maiar and elven leaders that would have welcomed him. “Are we at peace? Trolls have come down from the mountains. They are raiding villages, destroying farms. Orcs have attacked us on the road.”

“Hardly a prelude to war.” Elrond noted.

“Always you must meddle.” Saruman pointed out, a near sigh in his tone for his second. “Looking for trouble where none exists.”

“Let him speak.” Galadriel commanded. “The Valar would not have sent a Champion to Mithrandir without cause.”

“There is something at work beyond the evil of Smaug.” Gandalf asserted. “If it were only a question of the dragon there are others who can – and have – dealt with such things in the past.”

“Thranduil paid a terrible price to defeat Gostir, lieutenant of Ancalagon the Black, during the War of Wrath.” Elrond warned regarding the Elvenking of the Great Greenwood. “As Glorfindel did to destroy a Balrog. Asking them to take up arms against Smaug would be no easy venture.”

“Something far more powerful than Smaug is at work.” Gandalf reiterated. “We can remain blind to it but it will not be ignoring us, that I can promise you. A sickness lies over the Greenwood. The woodsmen who live there now call it Mirkwood and uh, they say…” He hesitated.

“Well?” Saruman prompted. “Don’t stop now. Tell us what the woodsmen say.”

“They speak of a Necromancer.” Gandalf admitted, Harry spinning to face Gandalf in shock. “Living in Dol Goldur, a sorcerer who can summon the dead.”

“That’s absurd.” Saruman refuted Gandalf’s words out of hand. “No such power exists in this world. This necromancer is nothing more than a mortal Man, a conjurer dabbling in black magic.”

“I wouldn’t be so quick to dismiss the abilities of mortals dabbling with black magic.” Harry warned. “I was once mortal and my magic can do things never before seen in Arda, even by Gandalf.”

Saruman took that in stride, Gandalf speaking once more after Saruman nodded at young Peverell, a thoughtful look upon his face.

The addition of a Champion such as Harry forced them to consider many things they would have dismissed mere months before his arrival in Middle Earth.

“And so, I thought as you did Saruman, before I met the Champion sent us by the Valar. Before Radagast had seen…”
“Radagast?” Saruman scowled. “Do not speak to me of Radagast the Brown. He is a foolish fellow, who has lost his way, our way, in the depths of the Greenwood.”

“He’s odd, I’ll grant you that.” Gandalf agreed. “Lives a solitary life, but…”

Saruman ignored him now well onto his rant regarding Radagast the Brown as Gandalf caught the gaze of Lady Galadriel.

“You carry something.” The Lady of the Golden Wood, eldest and most powerful of the Eldar remaining in Middle Earth spoke directly to his mind. “Radagast gave it to you. He found it in Dol Goldur.”

“Yes.” Gandalf admitted.

“Show me.” She commanded.

Gandalf lifted the wrapped short sword to the table, silencing Saruman’s rant as Elrond moved to it, sensing the darkness that was contained within.

“A relic.” Galadriel announced, knowing it for what it was even from yards away as Elrond flung the wrapping open and revealed the thing to the light. “Of Mordor.”

Stepping back, Elrond spoke: “A Morgul blade.”

“Made for the Witch-King of Angmar.” Galadriel recognized it at once. “And…buried with him. When Angmar fell the Men of the North took his body and all his possessions and sealed them together within the High Fells. Deep within the rock they buried him in a tomb so dark it would never come to light.”

“This is not possible.” Elrond protested what his eyes were seeing. “A powerful spell lies upon those tombs they cannot be opened.”

“What proof do we have that this weapon came from Angmar’s grave?” Saruman questioned.

“I have none.” Gandalf acknowledged.

“Because there is none.” Saruman insisted. “Let us examine what we know. A single orc pack has dared to cross the Bruinen. A short sword from a bygone age has been found. And a human sorcerer who calls himself the Necromancer has taken up residence in a ruined fortress…”

“Let us not forget.” Elrond interrupted the White Wizard with ease, not nearly as sublime regarding these events as Saruman. “That the Valar have sent a Champion to Arda and arranged matters so that he would first meet not myself or Lady Galadriel or even you Saruman but Gandalf.”

“Yes.” Saruman looked as if he was sucking a lemon at that reminder. “Let us not forget that. Still: it is not so very much after all as even the Champion does not yet know his ultimate purpose. The question of this dwarvish company however troubles me deeply. I am not convinced, Gandalf. I do not feel I can condone such a quest. If they had come to me I might have spared them this disappointment…”

“They are gone.” Galadriel spoke to Gandalf’s mind once more.

“Yes.”

“You knew.” She gave a gentle, knowing smile to her old friend as footsteps interrupted Saruman’s
second – or was it third – speech of the early morning.

Lindir cleared the archway to the Council meeting area.


“If we hurry we should catch them up even with Thorin’s impossible haste.” Gandalf said to Harry as they slung saddles and packs onto their mounts as well as Applejack.

“A moment, Mithrandir,” Lady Galadriel spoke as she entered the stable yard in all her impossible beauty, Elrond at her side. “We need to speak with the Champion before he departs.”

“Of course, my lady, my lord.” Gandalf bowed to the pair as they spoke to Harry’s mind, their message one for him alone or so it seemed.

“You were not brought to Fangorn to meet Gandalf alone.” Galadriel revealed.

“There is something there which you will need in the coming age.” Elrond continued.

“You must seek the Ent-Wash to complete the work that the Aratar have begun.” They said as one.

“How do you mean?” Harry questioned, confused about what work the eight most powerful among the Valar had begun that would have him venturing into the most dangerous and deadly forest in Middle Earth alone.

“Surely you have noticed it for yourself.” Elrond prompted him, bidding him to think over his time since arriving in Arda. “Your increased strength and speed.”

“Your fairness that has been remarked upon by all who meet you.” Galadriel continued, a tinkling laugh in her words.

“Your sight.”

“Your hearing.”

“Even those who care little for Men, the Dwarves have marked your differences and called you Númenor and Dúnedain.” Elrond would laugh about the cluelessness of Hadrian later – when the Champion wasn’t standing flabbergasted in his stable yard and over a glass of Dorwinion wine. For now it was merely wasting time.

“The light of the Eldar is upon you, Champion of the Valar.” Galadriel finished. “But more is needed to complete the process and usher you fully into joining the ranks of the Half-Elven. Seek the spring of the Ent-Draught and become who you are meant to be.”

With that final pronouncement the Lady of the Golden Wood and the Lord of the Last Homely House East of the Sea bid them safe journeys and left as swiftly as they came.

“What did they tell you, my friend?” Gandalf asked at the sight of Harry’s shell-shocked face.

“I can’t go with you.” Harry answered still in a daze even as he hurried through finishing packing Shadowfax and Applejack. “I have to…I have to go somewhere else.”

“Where?” Gandalf asked, eyes wide and worried at this turn of events though ever-trusting in the wisdom of the elven Lord and Lady.
“Fangorn.” Harry frowned. “I have to return to Fangorn. There was something I was supposed to do there but I found you instead.”

“Fangorn?” Gandalf questioned, shocked to the hem of his grey robe. “There is nothing in Fangorn except…”

“Ents and angry trees?” Harry supplied, chuckling mirthlessly. “Apparently that’s the point. I’ll meet you and the Company…somewhere.” He muttered, trying to think of what was between the Misty Mountains and the Greenwood not to mention the location of Fangorn among all of that. “I can take Shadowfax and Applejack with me and we’ll be at the glade in Fangorn in a moment but I can’t do that to get somewhere I’ve never been. I’ll have to ride there.”

“The Carrock.” Gandalf decided, sketching a mental map of the Anduin Vale. “Or failing that if you arrive there and we’ve gone on make for Beorn’s Halls southwest of the Forest Gate to the Greenwood. I do not know what waits for you in Fangorn Forest, my young friend.” Gandalf sighed, clasping arms with the Champion. “But I trust in the will of the Valar. If you must go you must go.”

“Clear it with the Company, will you?” Harry requested with a knowing grin. “Thorin is going to spit nails over my detour.”

“Spit nails all he likes.” Gandalf snorted. “That’s one dwarrow begging for a knock of my staff against that great lump of rock he calls a head. Safe travels, my friend.”

“And you, you meddling old badger.” Harry shot a cheeky grin at the grey wizard then held firm to the manes of Shadowfax and Applejack before gathering his magic and sending them hurtling through space and time to a hidden glade in Fangorn Forest.

“Now that.” Gandalf mentioned to his grey who shook his mane as Gandalf set his heels to his sides, galloping out of the Vale of Imladris. “Is a skill that would make my life much easier, indeed.”

Weeks later, after Gandalf had appeared in Goblin-Town in time to help save the Company from certain death and their burglar had been reclaimed from the depths of the Misty Mountains cold, Bilbo Baggins put a simple golden ring into his vest pocket and cast a glance around the Company then asked:

“Where’s Harry?”

“I’m afraid, Bilbo.” Gandalf announced with a heavy sigh. “That after the White Council our friend was given a charge he was unable to refuse by the Lady Galadriel and Lord Elrond. Our paths have diverged for a time but have no fear: he is to rejoin us well before we breech the Rhovanion east of the Anduin.”

Thorin would have had much to say regarding this seeming abandonment of their Quest by the Man were it not for the howls of wargs cresting over the mountains.

“Out of the frying pan,” he growled, unsheathing Orcrist.

“And into the fire.” Gandalf finished. “Run! Run! Or they’ll be upon us!”

To say that Shadowfax and Applejack were not fans of apparation – even if Harry had it down to
where there was no spinning or loud cracks of magic involved – would be an understatement as Shadowfax made his displeasure known by immediately knocking Harry onto his ass when they arrived at the glade in Fangorn and leaned down to snort right in Harry’s face.

It was a threat, of that he was certain, that should Harry transport him in such a way again he could expect more than a bruised ass from the mearas in recompense.

Applejack merely sneezed what felt like a gallon of snot onto Harry’s face which while gross at least was easily dealt with. One spell and the mess was gone. Applejack refusing to move after laying down: Bilbo’s saddle, tack, packs and all on the other hand was a problem.

Groaning as Shadowfax gave nothing else than a mocking whinny at Harry’s attempts to coax the mule back onto his hooves, he rubbed at his temples.

“I seriously hope this isn’t a sign of what this whole trip to find the Ent-Draught spring is going to be like.” He muttered into his hands after burying his face in them, then sighed and combed back his hair from his face and set to making camp. If Applejack didn’t want to move then they’d call it a day.

Though if he remained as obstinate tomorrow, they would be having words.

No matter how ridiculous that would seem to an outsider.

Or, you know, Bilbo when he eventually told the hobbit the story.

…

Having been given no direction other than “find it” by the elves, Harry decided to do what he always did in such times: trust his magic and his instincts to lead him.

In this case they led him northwest towards the Misty Mountains and the origins of the Entwash river.

Pity they didn’t lead him northeast, given that he’d have to partially backtrack towards the east in order to rejoin the Company but beggars can’t be choosers and his magic had chosen to lead him into the foothills of the Misty Mountains where they were covered by the ancient trees of Fangorn that creaked and groaned overhead but let him pass unhindered – which was a miracle in itself from what Harry had been told.

A week Harry rode through Fangorn seeking the well-spring of the Ent-Draught following the whims of his magic.

Under ancient trees and the eyes of curious creatures though despite tales otherwise no wood sprite or evil spirits snatched him up into the treetops to his doom.

The forest was simply…watchful of him.

At night he bed down between Shadowfax and Applejack, neither of whom showed even the smallest hint of reluctance to be off their hooves in the ancient forest.

They trusted they were safe there.

On the eighth day as Harry was riding at ease in Shadowfax’s saddle with Applejack clip-clopping behind him he was startled when a strange bird – the like of which he’d never before seen – with scarlet feathers and golden beak and legs alit on Shadowfax’s head between his ears.
Even more startling was that Shadowfax let it.

It sang a tune that struck right through the heart of him and made him long for places he had never seen and couldn’t name, then took wing as if beckoning him onward through a path his eyes wanted to slide over as if it wasn’t there in the first place.

“I suppose that’s as good of an invitation as I’m going to get.” Harry laughed a little as Shadowfax shook his mane in agreement and his magic pulsed and sang in time with the strange songbird. “And one it would be quite rude to turn down at that.”

Clicking his tongue he urged his familiar on, Applejack coming along placidly, as Harry himself had to duck under low-lying branches and both mearas and mule had to high-step over shrubs and brambles.

The path was long and dim under the canopy of Fangorn, Harry could not say if one were to ask him how long they trod it, but in time it opened to a clearing filled with birdsong and animals both great and small all laying at rest and peace no matter their nature (bear cubs ambling alongside a red deer fawn, an aged wolf with white on its muzzle sleeping beside a colony of rabbits) under the sheltering trees and beside the bubbling spring.

And then as Harry dismounted from Shadowfax and let him and Applejack trot over to the beckoning spring, one of the trees moved.

…

“Haruum.” The tree spoke as it knelt – or Ent, Harry supposed as he watched the strange creature with wide eyes – down to make it not quite so far for Harry to crane his neck. “Welcome, little Champion. We have been waiting for you.”

The Ent spoke ponderously, each word fully formed and rich with age and the sense of old growth.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, guardian of the forest.” Harry swept the Ent a bow. “I was needed elsewhere for a time.”

“Haruum.” The Ent dismissed that with a wave of one massive hand. “What is a few months to an Ent? What is a few years? Haruum. You are here and I am here and I am called Treebeard, little Champion.”

“Treebeard.” Harry nodded. Fair enough. “I am Hadrian Peverell at your service.”

“Haruum.” Treebeard nodded his great head in turn. “It is rare but I believe you when you say that, little Champion. Few have care for the trees so we ents have no care but for the trees. Harruum. My Lady whispered through the trees of your coming, little Champion. You are not like others. Harruum. So you are to be given ent-draught that you might grow as mighty as the trees! Harruum!”

“In this place – this strange world filled with stranger beings – it seems I am to be half-Elven as there is nothing else like me to be found here.” Harry explained to the ancient ent. “Lady Galadriel and Lord Elrond bid me seek the ent-draught to complete the change from what I was to what I am to be.”

“Haruum.” Treebeard gave another wave of his massive hand gesturing for Harry to join the other creatures of the forest along with the two equines he brought with him at the hidden spring: the source of the ent-draught. “You are for the ent-draught and the ent-draught is for you. Long will you be welcome beneath the boughs of Fangorn Forest, little Champion. Haruum. May you never
forget the service you have offered beneath its leaves and atop its roots or the gift it gives from its life-spring. Haruum. For the trees will remember as long as they stand.”

…

On Treebeard’s advice, Harry transfigured a pair of fallen branches from the forest into five-gallon drums that he could seal with a spell and place preservation charms on.

Greenwood was damaged, the ancient Ent told him.

If he was to journey through it then Shadowfax and Applejack wouldn’t be able to find water or forage.

They would need other means of surviving the trip.

Hence: the drums though Harry had to give an oath not to allow anyone or anything other than the mearas and mule to drink from them.

 Needless to say, Applejack wasn’t happy about the additional load but as Harry hadn’t loaded him up as a full pack mule on leaving Rivendell with anticipation of rejoining the Company and Bilbo once more taking his place on the strong animal’s back it wasn’t more than he could carry either.

Harry would still have to ration the mearas and mule through the Greenwood but with the ent-draught a single mouthful could refresh as well as an entire day’s – or more – worth of water, food, and sleep.

With him nearly jumping out of his skin as the bowl’s worth of ent-draught Treebeard gave him coursed through his veins – not to mention the several that came thereafter in the hours that followed – Harry was grateful for the thoughtfulness of the ent as the ancient tree-shepherd told him long-winded stories of the forest stretching back to the First Age.

Finding his way out from the hidden glade proved much simpler (and faster) than finding it in the first place.

The same songbird, which Treebeard named a kirinki, led the way with its scarlet feathers and high piping song and before long Harry found himself astride Shadowfax with Applejack behind and standing at the northeastern edge of Fangorn where it was segregated by the River Limlight.

When he looked behind the path and the songbird alike were gone leaving him with no notion of how he could ever return to that peaceful place but at the will of the forest itself and its guardians.

“Strange magics run amok in Fangorn indeed, Shadowfax.” Harry mused shaking his head in bemusement then set his familiar to crossing the shallow ford of the river that the bird had brought him to before disappearing, putting him on the eastern bank of the Limlight when the wide – but shallow – stretch of the river came to an end. “If I didn’t know better I’d think the last hours – or days – were nothing but a dream.”

Shadowfax snorted at that, shaking his mane.

Even made half-Elven, his person was as strange as the forest that had sheltered them for a time.

…”

Two river crossings that first day out of Fangorn put Harry on the eastern back of the Anduin, which he strictly followed for a solid week, wary of what laid to the east of the mighty river: the Brown
Lands and later the southern reaches of the Great Greenwood including the ruined fortress of Dol Goldur.

Gandalf’s talk of a Necromancer biding there made him itch to investigate but nonetheless he knew better.

He’d signed the contract with Thorin Oakenshield.

Detour to Fangorn aside, he would remain with the Company until Erebor was claimed or the Quest was lost.

Still, Harry was glad to have miles and miles between him and the forest.

Even from so far away he could nearly smell the corruption oozing from the east like a cancerous rot that tugged and riled at his magic, urging him to purge it from the land.

With the tracks he found circling his camp every morning after he checked his wards he was glad he resisted.

Wargs and wolves and other things all sensing something but not able to find him or his hoofed companions and only a skirmish with a lone warg scout to show for the ten-day ride between Fangorn and the Carrock before he settled into camp at the cave below the massive rock formation with its steps fit for a giant.

One thing was certain: the dwarrow hadn’t yet passed that way or else where would be sign of them.

Harry wasn’t the best tracker but he’d learned from weeks on the trail with the Company that a Company of dwarves was hardly inconspicuous either.

For all his worries about meeting up with them or how much time he’d lost in the forest he’d beaten them there.

Unloading Applejack and Shadowfax, they settled in to wait, unknowing of just how long they might have to camp and idle on the banks of the Anduin while the Company crossed the Misty Mountains.

…

Harry had been camping in the cave at the foot of the Carrock for several days when the harsh cries of several birds drew him from fishing (if you call summoning fish from the river fishing but there was no one to judge besides Shadowfax and an unimpressed Applejack) as the handful of shadows in the morning sky grew larger and larger and the cries of the birds louder.

Large enough and loud enough by the time they hovered over the top of the Carrock that Applejack nearly spooked as Harry saw the reason for the Great Eagles to appear: they carried the Company upon their backs or in their talons.

Wincing at the lack of packs and the visible cuts and scratches on them, obvious signs of the weeks apart being rougher on the Company and Gandalf than they were on Harry, he waited for the Eagles to depart before calling up the rock face to his friends.

“You’re late, Gandalf!”

The grey wizard came over to the side of the massive monolith as the dwarrows and Bilbo stared towards Erebor in the east, Harry easily able to hear their exclamations. Looking down at the
Champion Gandalf harrumphed.

“A wizard is never late, young Peverell.” Gandalf insisted with a stamp of his staff on the rock below him. “He arrives exactly when he intends.”

“Harry!”

“Harry’s here!”

A variety of calls and cheers rose from the Company as the short conversation shook them from their staring towards the East, even if the pleased looks on the older dwarrow were all they allowed themselves instead of the riotous calls sent down to the forest floor from their younger companions.

“Are you going to stay up there all day?” Harry eventually heckled. “Camp is already set! Come down!”

“Easy for him to say.” Bilbo muttered to Bofur as they eyed the massive steps of the Carrock. “These stairs are fit for a giant not the Small Folk.”

It was a long way down made worse by injuries but hours later the last set of boots hit the ground and joined the rest of the Company as they were once more whole and greeting their younger wizard with back claps and all-out hugs from Bilbo, Ori, and the young princes.

“Where were you, Master Peverell?” Thorin asked gruffly as the others broke off and set about washing in the Anduin, all of them only able to have the briefest of face-scrubs and hand-washes at the Eyrie of the Great Eagles the night before as Óin and Gandalf tended their injuries from the battles they faced. And all of it absent a fighter that would have made all the difference were he not missing.

Thorin may have apologized and made peace with Bilbo the night before but he was in no way settled over the matter of their missing Company member after Gandalf rejoined him though he understood the original delay to give the dwarrow time to away from Rivendell and the grasping claws of the White Council.

“I had to see a forest about a tree.” Was Harry’s sanguine – and infuriating if the storm-clouds breaking over Thorin’s face were any sign – answer as Gandalf choked on his pipesmoke nearby. Harry frowned, noting the tears in Thorin’s clothes in particular. “You’re injured.”

“You missed much.” Thorin seethed as he stomped away to the river at Óin’s beckon to clean his wounds – and himself – in the clear waters of the Anduin. “This is not settled, Master Peverell. Not in the slightest.”

“Understood.” Harry murmured to his back, arms crossing as he moved to sit beside Gandalf at the firepit he’d dug out of the sandy bank of the river and ringed with rounded smooth riverstones. “What happened, Gandalf?” He asked softly, knowing that the last thing the Company needed was interruption while they were washing off whatever trials they’d faced since they parted at Rivendell.

“Many things my friend, some of which even I do not know fully.” Gandalf reported. “A question to put to perhaps Misters Baggins and Ori for a full accounting as from what I understand they were parted for some time in the caverns of the mountains before reuniting to run for their lives from Azog and his pack of orcs and wargs.”

“Azog?” Harry arched an incredulous brow. “The one who Thorin killed?”

“Not as such or so it seems.” Gandalf raised his eyebrows meaningfully. “He hunts the Line of
Durin in order to end it. A general and commander of the forces of darkness.”

Harry snorted, shaking his head and lifting one hand to rub at his forehead. “And Saruman claimed there was nothing to your worries.”

“Saruman is wise, the greatest of the order of Istari.” Gandalf rebuked his young friend if gently before softening. “But,” he sighed. “He like the rest of us to have long fought the insidious evils of Morgoth and his servants is tired and fears another great war. Our order have only arrived in Arda in the Third Age there are those among the Elven rulers who have held the line in Arda much longer. I cannot blame Lord Elrond for his caution nor Lady Galadriel for her watchfulness anymore than I can Saruman for his wariness. It is simply their way.”

“And the Elvenking Thranduil?” Harry prompted cannily, hearing something in Gandalf’s words that had thus far gone unsaid – a dangerous thing now that they were closer to the Elvenking’s realm than any other in Middle Earth. “What is his way?”

“Thranduil is the second eldest elf dwelling in Arda and the oldest of the Sindar.” Gandalf enlightened his young friend though Harry surely knew some of it already from his studies and talks with any creature that he could convince to converse with him. Gregarious, Harry wasn’t. Inquisitive, however, he very much was and willing to speak to anyone from what Gandalf could tell when observation alone fell short. “He is the greatest living Elven warrior, surpassing even Lord Glorfindel and Lord Elrond. His rule is absolute and unquestioned. He is also dangerous, cunning, wary, and protective of his people above all after the losses they faced during the Last Alliance. He will not risk a single Silvan life to save one of another realm, even another of elven kind.”

“And it’s much worse than that, my young friend.” Gandalf told him brightly with a chuckle. “There exists wounds so deep between Thorin Oakenshield and Thranduil Oropheron that even the end of the Age shall not likely see them healed.”

“Of all the elvenkind the Sindarin and Silvan elves of the Greenwood love the stars above all others. Among the treasures and heirlooms of the Sindar that came with Oropher during the founding of his elven kingdom in the East were gems that embodied this love: gems of pure starlight brought to Oropher’s line in the First Age upon the marriage of Elvëa, a warrior elf-maiden who came with the Host of Valinor during the War of Wrath to Thranduil. The Gems of Lasgalen they came to be known in the years following. Thranduil inherited them along with his father’s kingdom after Oropher fell at the Battle of Dagorland during the Second Age but there were other things Thranduil cherished much more, can you guess at them Harry given what you’ve been told of elvenkind?”
“His wife and son.” Harry didn’t even need to think about it. From what he’d seen and read and been told such a love for their spouse and family was one of the strongest drives of the Firstborn.

“Yes, good.” Gandalf nodded, puffing away at his pipe in approval. “Above all things Thranduil cherished his wife and his son. So much so that during the reign of Thrór King Under the Mountain he brought the Gems of Lasgalen to Erebor’s foremost jeweler and goldsmith: Thrór himself, to be set into a gift for his son’s eventual spouse at the wishes of his late wife who had died protecting Legolas Thranduilion from an orc attack early in the Second Age so that Legolas would never forget that he was not only Sindar but Vanyar.”

Gandalf harrumphed then continued.

“Accounts vary about what happened when Thranduil returned to Erebor to claim the completed gift. Those loyal to Thrór claim that Thranduil refused to pay for the work Thrór completed. Those loyal to Thranduil claim that like the woes of old Thrór refused to return the gems. The truth lies somewhere in between: Thrór in the grips of gold-sickness but not completely lost to it demanded payment of thrice the agreed upon amount which Thranduil rightly refused to pay leaving behind the gems of Lasgalen and severing the alliance between the two kings. Only unlike Thrór, Thranduil is still alive and remembers the treachery he faced within the halls of Erebor. His fury over the slight burns unabated despite the centuries that have passed and only fanned the enmity between the two races.”

“I follow so far, Gandalf.” Harry told him with a confused frown. “But that doesn’t explain why Thorin hates Thranduil and distrusts elves as a whole. There must be something more.”

“There is.” Gandalf nodded with one of his frustrating looks. “But that is a story that must come from Master Oakenshield and not another, my friend.”

“He abandoned us.” Thorin spoke from behind the pair of wizards, startling the quartet of eavesdroppers who to a one dropped their eyes and blushed at the hard glance he sent their way as Dwalin helped him over to sit across the fire from the wizards. “At the moment we were at our lowest, when Smaug tore through the armies of Dwarves and Men alike Thranduil’s army stood beneath the shade of their kingdom and did not but watch as the desolation was upon us.” Thorin spat with venom only trebled by the decades between then and now, the betrayal of the Elvenking as fresh as it ever was. “He left us to Smaug with all the interest one would pay a cat tormenting mice. When his army could have saved us he turned them away, back into the forest, and all with this coldness upon his face.” Thorin snarled in Khuzdul. “I would not trust Thranduil Oropherion if it were the end of days!”

“Now you know.” Gandalf murmured for Harry’s ears alone, the Champion nodding minutely then rising.

“You’re injured.” Harry retrieved a crystal vial from his duster pocket, one with a simple crystal pipette and nothing else, not even a label. No need. This wasn’t a gift from those gone or the Valar. He knew well what was within it. “Show me.”

Exchanging a glance with Dwalin and Óin who said something in the dwarven hand language – an agreement if Thorin’s move to lift his shirt was any sign – Thorin did as Harry asked.

It was more a command but Thorin’s pride wouldn’t let him acknowledge that.

“Now what are you up to, my young friend?” Gandalf leaned close, Óin with him as Harry unsealed the vial and the pearly liquid within shone like starlight in his hand.
“Just watch.” Harry held in a grin as he focused on the ugly rips and tears on Thorin’s torso. “I still need to hear the story of what happened to you lot.”

“We’ll tell it.” Thorin muttered, eyes popping wide as Harry tapped the pipette held so gently in hand, sending a single glowing drop of his strange tonic onto the worst of his injuries only to it to heal before their very eyes. Another drop onto the next, then another, and at that he stopped.

But the healing did not.

Thorin felt it burning through his veins like a gentle fire in the depths of winter, flaring a moment when an injury is found then continuing onward leaving behind only the smallest of scars for the worst of his wounds and nothing at all for the lesser.

“What in Durin’s name is that?” Óin demanded, the healer pressing testing hands against the faintest of remnants of wounds that nearly killed his cousin and King.

“Phoenix tears.” Harry smiled as Thorin was pounced upon by his nephews with shouts of glee from the young dwarrow. “Very rare and incalculably precious given that they don’t exist in Arda from what I can tell. They can heal any wound, no matter how dire and even reverse the effects of the deadly venom upon my sword. So long as there is life,” Harry sealed the vial once more and tucked it away, seeing no more worrisome injuries of the ilk of Thorin’s: just cuts and scratches as well as a burn or two. Nothing life-threatening. “Phoenix tears can heal. A secret,” emerald eyes caught the gaze of royal Durin blue. “And a testament of my resolve to remain among your company, Thorin Oakenshield, King of Durin’s Folk.”

A long, tense, moment passed between the two lords then at last Thorin nodded his head.

Disagreements between them aside over Harry’s absence: Peverell had a place among Thorin’s company.
Chapter 11

Broken Blade

Author’s Note: Going with my trend of “if it ain’t broke…” there’s quite a bit of movie dialog in this chapter as we venture to Beorn’s Halls and beyond.

Chapter Eleven: To the Forest Gate

With the lingering resentment and uncertainty between Harry and Thorin resolved – helped greatly both by Thorin’s apology and better treatment of Bilbo and the gesture of trust offered by Harry – it was a much happier Company that relayed the events between leaving Rivendell and arriving at the Carrock that night over fresh roasted fish and potatoes baked in the coals of the campfire there on the bank of the Anduin.

Harry was not happy regarding the Company’s losing of Bilbo in the Goblin Caves though mollified that other than a few bumps and bruises the hobbit had come out relatively unscathed from the experience.

That night the dwarrow sang the Song of the Lonely Mountain which left Harry with another frustrating information deficit, something he’d been struggling with ever since he stepped through from Earth to Arda and didn’t seem to be letting up anywhen soon.

What, for the love of all things, was the fucking Arkenstone?

Even his book gifted by Death was no help in finding the information and none of the dwarrow were in any hurry to enlighten the confused pair of Harry and Bilbo though the latter recalled the thing being mentioned as one of the “off-limits” items listed in their contracts as not available to be part of their reward for joining the Company and ensuring the retaking of Erebor.

A day’s walk northeast from the Carrock the next day after breaking Harry’s camp, the dwarrow unamused that he’d beaten them there by a large measure even with the assistance of the Eagles, brought them to rolling fields of clover being tended by buzzing bees the size of one of Bilbo’s fists.

They were gentle enough, allowing even the ever-curious younger dwarrow to pass with little more than a curious buzz of their own, despite Bilbo’s – and several dwarves – evading them whenever possible.

Gandalf had told them of a friend who lived in the area where they might rest the wounded and resupply.

A necessary delay in their journey given that after the goblin caves and Azog’s attack only Harry was properly outfitted and the extra supplies he’d brought on Applejack could hardly support the entire company through Thranduil’s realm. There had been more than one grumble over Harry’s refusal to reveal what was in the sealed drums the mule was carrying. But no number of petulant mutters and scowls would have Harry speaking of their contents or opening them much to the dismay of the dwarrow though as ever Gandalf had a knowing glint in his eye when he looked at the wooden containers.

“This Man you are bringing us to see.” Thorin approached where Gandalf walked at the head of the Company beside Harry who in deference to the older wizard wasn’t riding his grand mount – but then neither was Gandalf, the explanation given when Balin questioned the arrangement being that
Shadowfax would allow none but Harry upon his back or those Harry carries with him. “Is he friend or a potential foe?”

“Neither.” Gandalf supplied, looking down at the dwarven King. “He will either allow us shelter or he will kill us. There is little ambiguity with Beorn.”

“Oh great.” Kili muttered to his brother at that news.

“Worry not my friends.” Gandalf cheered them – in his way, anyway. “Between Bilbo and Shadowfax we can be certain of our welcome. A child of Yavanna is likelier than any other to find welcome in Beorn’s Hall and one of the Great Mearas need never fear him, making young Peverell welcome as well. So long as you refrain from consuming meat or hunting in Beorn’s lands there is naught to worry over. I hope…” He muttered the last into his beard, muffling it from being heard by the Company though from Harry’s snort his half-Elven blessing was well on its way to fruition.

His hair at least had grown since Gandalf saw him last, as had the Champion himself though none seem to realize it aside from the grey wizard.

When they’d met, he’d topped the younger wizard by a good deal whereas now he stood eye to eye with the half-Elven Champion of the Valar. Young Peverell hadn’t lost his Mannish build, keeping the wider shoulders and form instead of the lithe appearance of the Eldar but his lengthened hair that touched his shoulder blades gleamed with the blue and silver of a raven’s wing and his skin had the beginnings of the tell-tale glow of the Eldar. If he didn’t want to be found out, the young Champion would need to practice his glamor the more his changes progressed.

Especially as, while they weren’t common, every half-Elven of at least quarter-blood of the Eldar possessed pointed ears like their full-Elven kin.

Though what race of the Firstborn the Valar had seen to bless with Hadrian Peverell joining their ranks Gandalf could not yet say, especially as his human traits were still so strong in his features.

Cresting a rise they saw fields spread out in a valley between two stands of forest, fields teeming with life and livestock and more green since they’d left the Shire behind. Bees buzzed and flew from the clover fields surrounding them to hives kept in the midst of lavender hedges and blackberry brambles. One of the dogs tumbling about the grass of the massive hall around all this was positioned, a hall built of wood and stone, rose and stared at them then turned and loped off to the backside of the hall hidden from their sight.

Gandalf ushered them to the garden gate that separated the fields from the hall and gardens, then turned and spoke to the Company.

“Now.” He looked over them searching for a few of them in particular. “This will require some delicate handling. The last person who startled Beorn was torn to shreds.” As one the dwarrow seemed to rear back without actually taking a step while Bilbo gulped and Harry buried his face in one hand in exasperation. “Ah, Bilbo there you are, you’ll come with me. Then Harry if you would follow in a moment with Shadowfax and Applejack that would be splendid. The rest of you stay calm and quiet and only come over when you hear my whistle. We don’t want to crowd him so only come out in pairs.”

Directions given, the dwarrow huddled around the gate, peeking into the yard where they heard the sound of an axe splitting wood, Gandalf and Bilbo walking forward steadily with Harry and the mearas and mule behind.

“You’re nervous.” Bilbo realized as Gandalf fiddled with his mane of grey hair, attempting to
straighten it up as they rounded the side of Beorn’s hall and caught sight of the man himself – then Bilbo was nervous.

Beorn was a great beast of a Man, taller than anyone Bilbo had ever seen with a great mane of brown hair and using an axe as long as Bilbo was tall to split massive rounds of wood.

With a gulp, Bilbo edged back to be partially hidden by Gandalf.

Now he was nervous as well no matter how much Gandalf protested that very thing.

“Good afternoon.” Gandalf called his greeting – though to no response from the Man who had to know they were there. “Good afternoon!” He tried again.

Harry held in a snicker as he could almost see the sigh the Man gave when his uninvited guests didn’t bugger off before turning.

Then Harry blinked.

That wasn’t a man.

He wasn’t sure what he was for all that Beorn was man-shaped but if anything he’d say an Animagus that spent entirely too much time in his animal form.

“Who’re you?” Beorn asked in his rumble of a voice.

“I am Gandalf, Gandalf the Grey.”

“Never heard of ‘im.”

Harry wasn’t the only one who had to swallow a laugh at that, the Champion resolutely avoiding Bilbo’s gaze or else both of them would dissolve into giggles and wouldn’t that be a fine impression to make.

“I am a wizard.” Gandalf held in a sigh. His companions were finding far too much amusement in his predicament. “Perhaps you have heard of my colleague Radagast the Brown, he lives in southern Mirkwood?”


Gandalf began to explain then Beorn caught sight of Bilbo hiding away behind his robes and interrupted even as his eyes tracked between the hobbit and the appearance of Harry with Shadowfax and Applejack.

“Who is this little fellow?”

“Ah, this is Bilbo Baggins a hobbit of the Shire.”

“A Hobytla.” Beorn rocked back a bit as he rested his arms on the handle of his axe rather than having it at the ready to be swung. “You have come far from your new lands to that of your ancestors, little one. And the half-Elf with the Mearas?”

“Hadrian Peverell.” Harry introduced himself then patted Shadowfax on his white shoulder. “My familiar Shadowfax and Bilbo’s mule Applejack.”

Beorn gave a grunt of approval at that. “A Hobytla, a wizard, a half-Elven, a mule, and a Mearas.” He accounted for them all. “How come you’re here?”
“Well.” Gandalf tried to explain their situation again. “We met with Harry at the Carrock, the rest of us have had a bad time of it from goblins in the mountains.”

“What did you mess around with goblins for?” Beorn snorted then whistled. “Stupid thing to do.”

And from there things went quickly downhill.

…

It took some talking on Gandalf’s part – and Harry was certain that Shadowfax and Applejack played as much a part as anything – but in the end Beorn agreed to allow the Company to rest within his hall and his lands so long as they kept to the rules laid out between him and Gandalf.

No hunting.

No meat.

No harm to Beorn’s animal friends.

No wandering outside the hall after dark.

Simple enough.

And maybe due to Beorn being a massive “skin-changer” that turned into a bear – and that was an entertaining surprise when Bilbo spied him changing into his bear that first night, Beorn spending several days away before returning but the dwarves in their party complained a great deal less over the lack of meat at Beorn’s halls than they had at Rivendell.

Harry didn’t think he could ever grow used to being waited on by Beorn’s friends – ponies and sheep and dogs – but a hot bath was welcome and tall mugs of fresh milk with honey bread even more so.

The dwarrow and Bilbo needed to rest and recover from their ordeal in the Misty Mountains.

Harry just needed to think and time to do it without death around every corner and hiding behind every tree.

It was while he was thinking beside the stream that ran through Beorn’s fields that he saw what Gandalf had noticed about his appearance and thereafter he spent hours crafting a glamor to conceal any further changes and dim the Eldar glow that was only growing stronger to his eyes, unhindered as they were by his spell.

The Valar hadn’t just bargained for him from the deities of his world.

They’d adopted him as their own.

Harry…didn’t know what the fuck he was supposed to do with that to be honest.

Other than Death, he’d always felt like a chess piece or an ill-begotten toy to be used and discarded at the will and whim of fate.

Always fighting the battles of another.

Always alone.

That was not, it seemed, the way of the Valar.
Though whether the changes they’d wrought in his very being would be for good or ill he likely wouldn’t be able to say for a long time to come.

Thankfully for Harry’s tendency to brood, on the fifth night of their stay in Beorn’s halls the skin-changer returned and spoke with them over breakfast the following morning.

…

Harry wasn’t the only one using the peace provided by Beorn’s Halls to do some thinking he noted the next morning as Ori sat – blushing, with a new braid in his hair – beside Fíli at the prince’s insistence and to shows of daggers from Nori and glares from Dori.

“Looks like goblin fights and Azog’s attack weren’t the only things I missed while I was in Fangorn.” He chuckled, clapping the young dwarrow on their shoulders and jostling Fíli good-naturedly. “When did this happen?”

“Fíli was quite proper.” Ori relayed through his blushes as he scooted closer on the bench to his suitor, their hands entwined beneath the table and out of sight.

Not out of Thorin’s sight, however, where the King sat with his back to a pillar and his feet up beside his Heir, the scion of the Line of Durin nudging one into Fíli’s hip with a narrow-eyed glare of warning.

The elder ‘Ri brothers had every reason to be wary of Ori’s courtship by one of the Line of Durin after their ancestress had been left alone and shamed by the Durin King Náin II, leading to their line being baseborn relations of the current ruling family with all the troubles that came with it.

“He asked Dori for my courtship at Rivendell,” Ori continued to explain the process to the interest of both Harry and Bilbo, neither having any frame of reference for dwarven courtship customs, though each was familiar with the ways of their own people. Or former people in the case of Harry. “But he didn’t agree until Fíli saved me from being killed by a goblin in the tunnels. Dori approved officially yesterday afternoon and Fíli presented his first gift and we put in our courtship braids.”

“There’s more to it than that.” Dori allowed, knowing that neither of their non-dwarven company members would realize all the little intricacies that Ori was leaving out to keep the secrets of the khazad. “But that is as much as we tell outsiders.”

“It is a good match.” Thorin agreed, sharing a cordial nod with the eldest ‘Ri, a nice change as Dori had been the chilliest of all the dwarrow to the Durin’s leadership though he joined the Company to protect his brothers nonetheless. “A Master Scribe of Durin’s line is a fine spouse for the Heir of Durin’s Folk.”

The dwarrow pounded their heavy mugs on the plank table, Beorn bringing over a massive pitcher of milk and pouring each of his guests a measure as they settled into breakfast without seeing hide nor hair of Gandalf who’d likely wandered off again as he tended to do.

Beorn’s arrival at the table heralded a change in topic as well.

“So you are the one they call Oakenshield.” The skin-changer noted, taking in the dwarven King with a glance from his odd yellow-orange eyes. “Tell me: why is Azog the Defiler hunting you?”

“You know of Azog?” Thorin questioned the strange being. “How?”

“My people were the first to live in the mountains.” Beorn replied as all eyes fixed on him. “Before the orcs came down from the North. The Defiler killed most of my family, but some he enslaved.”
As if bespelled, the Company turned their eyes to the iron manacle still locked around one of Beorn’s massive wrists. “Not for work, you understand? But for sport. Caging skin-changers and torturing skin-changers seemed to amuse him.”

Harry could see the question forming on Bilbo’s lips and derailed him, having a bad feeling about what would be asked and how it would be answered, shoving – if gently – a hefty chuck of cheese into the hobbit’s mouth, Bilbo scowling at him fiercely but it was no good.

By the time his manners would allow him to speak, Beorn was once more focused on Thorin and Thorin on Beorn.

“You need to reach the mountains before the last days of Autumn, the wizard told me.”

“Before Durin’s Day falls, yes.” Balin agreed.

“You’re running out of time.” Beorn took his seat hewn from a log where the others rested on finished benches.

“We’ll have to cross Mirkwood to make it.” Balin sighed, shaking his head. If only they’d set out earlier they could have avoided the forest altogether – or not been stuck so long at Rivendell in order to read the map.

“Mirkwood?” Beorn frowned. “A darkness lies upon that forest. Fell things creep beneath those trees. Your Hobytla will be most effected by the stain of it but it can work upon anyone. There is an alliance between the orcs of Moria and the necromancer in Dol Goldur. I would not venture there except in great need.”

“And the elven road?” Balin prompted even as Thorin rolled his eyes and rose from the table. “Surely their path is still safe?”

“Safe?” Beorn snorted. “The Wood Elves of Mirkwood are not like their kin. They are less wise and more dangerous. But it matters not.”

Thorin turned from his retreat from the table, facing the skin-changer. “What do you mean?”

“These lands are crawling with orcs.” Beorn warned, having seen the tracks for himself as he verified Gandalf’s story of the company’s battle against Azog. “Their numbers are growing. And other than the strange one,” he tilted his shaggy head towards Harry who shrugged at the nickname. Better than little bunny like Bilbo. “You are on foot. You will never reach the forest alive.”

Beorn rose from his massive rough chair, pacing towards the watching dwarven King.

“I don’t like dwarves.” He announced, as if they all weren’t well aware of it. “They’re greedy. And blind. Blind to the lives they deem lesser than their own.” His gaze locked on that of Thorin Oakenshield. “But orcs I hate more. What do you need?”

…

The next two nights saw Harry laboring over a slim silver bracelet he’d transfigured from a pair of silver coins from his money pouch with the tiny engraving tools one of Beorn’s ponies had located for him.

While Gandalf and Thorin had their own rooms – even if the former took a quiet argument between Harry and the elder wizard before Gandalf would agree to take it – the rest of the company would bed down each night in the soft, fresh hay scattered throughout Beorn’s hall with oxen and horses
and ponies, cats and dogs and puppies and kittens to keep them warm through the night.

Harry was no different though Shadowfax seemed to appreciate staying in a place that allowed him to wander as he would and keep Harry company as he worked before the fire even if one of Beorn’s massive hounds had taken a liking to the half-Elven’s company as well.

Shadowfax couldn’t blame the hound.

His person was better than all the rest to be found in the realms of Men or else Shadowfax would’ve never left the wilds of Rohan to bond with the wizard long before he started to change into one of the half-Elven.

That night, the last in Beorn’s halls, Harry wasn’t alone in his distraction keeping him from sleep as he noted for himself when Bofur rose from his pallet laid out between his brother Bombur and his cousin Bifur to join the “strange one” at the hearth.

Bofur watched the man’s delicate etchings into the soft silver of the bracelet for long moment, silence comfortable between them as the dwarf loaded his pipe and lit it from the coals of the hearth being one of the only dwarrow to retain a hold on both pipe and pipe weed thanks to being on watch when they were trapped in the goblin caves.

They were perhaps too quiet as thanks to Shadowfax’s shifting coat and the shadows of the hearthfire Bilbo slipped from his own pallet and padded farther into the Hall though there was no tell-tale creak of a door opening to reveal his destination.

“What do you make of that?” Harry asked one of the hobbit’s best friends among the dwarrow, one well-sealed by the time Bilbo fought to protect Thorin from Azog and his orc pack.

Bofur tilted his head, trying to get a better look at what he thought were runes the Man at etching with no-little amount of skill though still not that of a dwarven smith could manage.

“He’s been different since the mountains.” Bofur replied at last, long after Harry thought his question was going to be ignored. “Quieter, more thoughtful. I suppose Thorin almost dying, being separated and alone for days, plus Azog and all that has made it all real in a way it wasn’t before.”

“Hard to understand such things until you’ve experienced them for yourself, I suppose.” Harry mused, only half to his audience of one – or two if he was right about the Durin blues watching from the shadows leading to Thorin’s room. “There’s always been a spark to Bilbo. I saw it the moment I met him and he took me in with nary a thought. He notices things others dismiss – just as they dismiss him thanks to those warm eyes, pleasant face, and hobbit features. They say in the Shire that they are made to endure.” Harry lifted his gaze from his work and focused on those watching him from the darkened hallway, ignoring the warning glint in the icy blue stare, knowing he had Thorin’s attention even if he was – ostensibly – speaking to Bofur. “Things pass from one generation in an unending line unceasing. Orcs and wargs and wicked Men drove the Hobytla from the Vale of Anduin to the West but they couldn’t destroy them. The Fell Winter was the worst devastation the Shire had seen in two centuries.”

“And yet they endure.” Bofur commented, miner’s eyes easily swinging between Harry and Thorin. The history might be for Thorin’s benefit but Bofur was still willing to learn from it. Even if he didn’t entirely understand the undercurrents between Harry and Thorin regarding Bilbo.

Harry cut his gaze back to the genial miner. “And yet they endure. They thrive as the earth thrives and wither as it withers. Some say there are yet hobbits living in the Vale of Anduin but if so they haven’t been seen since the Wandering Years more than a thousand years ago.”
“That’s why Beorn warned us about Mirkwood’s effect on Bilbo.” Bofur connected the dots as Harry returned to focusing on his metalwork.

“That would be my guess.” Harry agreed, etching a final rune then blowing a breath across the silver piece to clear the shavings. “And also my guess at what keeps our little friend from sleeping in peace.”

“That what that’s for, then?” Bofur made a guess of his own, nodding towards the bracelet. “Far too dainty and small a thing for a dwarrow or Man to wear.”

“If he’ll take it, the stubborn thing.” Harry chuckled, rubbing a thumb over the etchings and allowing his magic to smooth the edges. “I’ll wait until Mirkwood to get a sense of what magic is at work in the forest before I finish enchanting it. If nothing else it should at least stymie some of the darkness from taking root in him if not combat it altogether.”

“We need to worry about you as well then?” Bofur asked only half-joking.

“Depends on the spellwork at hand.” Harry sighed, rubbing one hand over his eyes as Thorin finally came out of the shadows and joined them at the hearth. About fricking time. Only took most of a conversation to manage. “And what it targets. If it’s mind-magic then I’ll have no problem at all. Everything else has a potential to affect me to varying degrees if the enchantment is powerful or pervasive enough.”

“Then it will affect us as well.” Thorin noted, cursing the twists and turns a simple journey had taken since leaving Ered Luin. Just once he’d like something on the way to Erebor to go as planned. Just once.

“That’s likely.” Harry nodded, tucking the bracelet away. “If it’s safe to do I can set wards to protect our camp at night but during the day such things are useless while we move unless tuned to a specific person and purpose like the runic protection I’m working on for Bilbo as the most at risk among the Company from all I’ve heard of Mirkwood.”

“Bilbo isn’t the only one who’s changed.” Thorin pointed out, settling back against his chair and accepting the pipe from Bofur with a grateful nod. “Something has changed in you, Master Peverell. What I know not. But you are not the same Man who greeted us at Bag End.”

Harry looked away from the flames and titled his head to the side then rose, making his way to his pallet, leaving the observation lingering in the air like the rings of smoke from the pipe shared between King and miner.

…

Beorn and Gandalf watched from the woods above where the Company had assembled in the morning light as the ponies supplied – on loan – for the dwarrow as well as a horse for Gandalf were saddled and packed for the journey to Mirkwood as Harry returned to teaching Bilbo, this time how to harness Applejack into the simple cart Beorn had offered to ease the journey for the pair of equines.

Kíli only half got out a question regarding why the smaller mule was being strapped into the harness instead of the larger Shadowfax before the stamping, snorting, mane-tossing hissy fit answered it for him.

The Lord of Horses was not a cart-horse, thank-you-very-much.

Applejack stood placidly in harness during all this hullabaloo whilst Beorn and Gandalf discussed
things far more worrisome than a simple mule pulling a two-wheeled wooden cart packed with Harry’s drums of who-knew-what and feed for the pair of hooved animals through Mirkwood.

Well, that and Bilbo who’d be driving the cart from the hastily-added seat that Bifur and Bofur had cobbled together the day before.

“What’s that all about I wonder?” Glóin muttered to his kinsman as he mounted his pony at Thorin’s side, meaning the conversation between Gandalf and Beorn.

“Nothing good most like.” Thorin responded, Harry’s words and Beorn’s warnings at war with his drive to reclaim his homeland. “Gandalf!” He called for the wizard.

The grey wizard took his leave from the skin-changer, quickly mounting the black horse offered by Beorn and took the lead as Harry leapt up into Shadowfax’s saddle with a grace and skill that had the wizard arcing a brow, remembering well a time where such a thing – not so long ago either – would have had Harry falling face-down in the dirt at the mearas’s hooves.

“We must ride, quickly.” Gandalf announced, setting heels to his horse’s sides. “Or our hunters shall be upon us!”

And quickly ride they did, only stopping as little as necessary between the borders of Beorn’s lands and the edge of Mirkwood to rest the mounts and let them drink their fills of water and crop at grass before remounting and setting them as fast as possible for the Forest Gate.

Twenty-five miles separated the Western edge of Mirkwood from the Eastern bank of the River Anduin.

Between the journey to Beorn’s Hall and the distance north they had to traverse to reach the Forest Gate they had to cross that distance and then some feeling the breath of the wargs and orc pack on their backs even as the excellent night vision of the dwarrow and the light of Gandalf’s staff and the moon alike had them pressing through the night.

So it was with exhausted mounts and an equally drawn Company that found them stopping before the stone archway of the Forest Gate in late afternoon the day after they set out from Beorn’s lands.

Harry took one look at the twisted boughs of Mirkwood and swore up a storm in every language he spoke to shocked looks from some of the company and impressed from others as he swung free of Shadowfax’s saddle and to the archway of the Forest Gate, tearing down the twisting vines clogging it to show the blood-runes – crude and vile – painted onto the stone itself.

Considering that Harry currently spoke four languages fluently and several more in various degrees – and knew curses in every one – it took him a while to exhaust his repertoire.

“I’m going to go out on a limb here,” Kíli said sarcastically as at Gandalf’s word they dismounted Beorn’s ponies and began the process of unloading them and setting them free while Harry threw his tantrum. “And say that that,” he jerked a thumb at the swearing Man. “Isn’t a good omen.”

“How did he even learn the Khuzdul curses?” Ori asked in awe as his ears turned red with embarrassment at a particularly crude suggestion painted the air blue.

Bilbo snorted, rolling his eyes from where he was watching the rest in the safety of the mule cart. “Please.” He snarked. “You lot tend to speak your secret language more often than not the farther we get from others. I could probably curse in Khuzdul by now, give an approximation in your hand language, and I’m not nearly the linguist Harry is based on how quickly he was picking up Quenya in Rivendell.”
Chagrined dwarrow traded guilty glances – particularly Dwalin and Thorin who tended to curse at each other during arms practice – and got busy with the ponies as Gandalf moved to – attempt – to calm Harry.

“Rotten, isn’t it?” Gandalf asked his young friend, leaning on his staff and staring into the depths of Mirkwood beside Harry who after exhausting his crude vocabulary had cleaned and repaired the archway in a fit of pique at the dark creatures who had defiled it. “It lies over the woodland realm like a miasma, tainting all it touches. Threatens to trick the mind and beguile the sense and lead all who wander there astray into the arms of Sauron’s servants.”

“How can a King such as Thranduil allow this?” Harry asked, feeling truly weak in the face of Mirkwood’s corruption for the first time – besides his moments of intentional mourning weakness – since he took up the banner of Champion of the Valar. “With all I’ve learned of him, all you’ve told me, I don’t understand…” He shook his head, wild black hair tossing itself free of its binding and falling into his face. “I just don’t understand.”

“Thranduil wishes to protect every last soul of the joined Sindarin and Silvan kingdom.” Gandalf allowed the ancient king that much at least, even if he found him the most frustrating and confounding creature he had dealings with in all Arda save for the stubbornness of dwarves. “To the point that he would have them withdraw from the world before risking them against an enemy they cannot fight. Mirkwood is the result of this.”

Turning, Gandalf called back when Fíli went to unpack his horse. “No, not my horse.” Taking hold of Harry he steered the young Champion back to the Company. “I must leave you now.” Holding up one hand he brooked no protests, not even from Bilbo, though Harry simply watched him out of knowing eyes shining from under the mass of ebon hair. “I have other duties, you all knew I would not be able to remain with the Company forever.”

Swinging up into the saddle, he took his staff from Harry who was the only member of the Company to refrain from even a token protest of his leave-taking.

“Whatever you do: stick to the path.” He gave his last instructions. “A river passes through the forest with black water: it is enchanted. Even a drop can cause one to fall into a deep and endless sleep. You must use the bridge to pass over it. Remember!” He charged them before setting heels to his mount. “Stay to the path or else you shall never find it again!”

Thorin eyed Harry where the younger wizard had moved to Shadowfax’s side to adjust the supply pack that had been tied to his saddle as Harry would walk from there on out while the bedrolls were piled in Applejack’s cart.

“You know what he’s about, don’t you?” Bilbo asked before Thorin could do it himself, seeing for himself what the dwarven king had surmised.

“I have an inkling.” Harry agreed, taking out a simple silver bangle that Bofur and Thorin both recognized. He spoke a few words to it then sliced into his arm with a dagger loosed and returned in a flicker of movement before spreading the blood from the small cut into the engraved runes.

The runes shone with light for a long moment before dimming and revealing nothing left behind of the blood that had marred the silver surface but a white sheen to the engravings.

“May I?” Harry asked Bilbo, holding out one hand and curling his fingers.

Bilbo gave over his wrist without hesitation but gave his friend a long look of concern as he allowed his blood to drip onto the forest floor rather than wrap his arm like a sensible being.
Locking the bangle in place, Harry was pleased to see that he’d fashioned it correctly as it sealed itself showing no sign of hinge or clasp once it was in place.

“The forest is worse than I thought even with all the warnings we – and I – have been given.” Harry announced as he finally saw to his nick with a whisper of a spell. “That charm should keep the worst of the effects at bay for you Bilbo. For the rest of you,” Harry eyed the dwarrow then took a length of rope from the cart and strung it between Shadowfax’s saddle and the cart, conjuring thirteen shorter lengths that would keep the dwarrow attached to the lead line but allow them enough slack to be comfortable and not walking atop each other. “We’ll tie off. Shadowfax and I will be fine thanks to my immunity to mind-control and warping magics everyone else is in danger until I can ward our campsites before dark.”

There were grumbles and grouses at that before a barked order from Thorin had them all complying even if it did make them feel like dwarflings on leading strings though that Bilbo was likewise strapped into place on the cart at least made them feel less ridiculous as Harry stepped up to Shadowfax’s hackamore and spoke a few words in Sindarin to his familiar.

Durin’s Day wouldn’t wait for them.

Dangerous or not, strange safety measures aside they had no choice but to press on.

Come what may beyond the Forest Gate.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: I went back and made a small edit to Ch. 10 regarding the name and origin of Legolas’s mother…for reasons. She’s now Elvëa, a Vanyar elleth warrior who came to Middle-Earth from Valinor during the War of Wrath with the Host of Valinor, fell in love with Thranduil, and stayed when the rest of the Vanyar returned home to Valinor.

Broken Blade

Chapter Twelve: Edge of Darkness

If the Company was unimpressed with Harry’s precautions against wandering off the forest path through Mirkwood, they were even less impressed with his rationing protocols.

Though said protocols were the reason they finally found out what was in the wooden drums he’d been packing around for weeks.

Rounding the two equines up and circling the dwarrow, Bilbo remaining in place upon the cart, they watched with wide eyes as Harry once more opened up the cut on his arm and allowed the blood to run in even drops down his arm and off his fingers into the dirt of the circle he’d cleared amongst the leaf litter.

“Why’s he doing that?” Óin, their healer, demanded in outrage.

“I think he’s setting wards.” Bilbo answered on Harry’s behalf, nibbling at his lip in worry for his friend. He wasn’t effected by the forest other than the unrelenting dim and dank of the place – at least he didn’t think so – not yet but it had been clear to see that either the forest was acting on his dwarrow friends or they were just that cranky and foul-tempered between Harry’s restrictions and Gandalf’s leave taking. “Like he did against the rain in the Lone Lands.”

“He didn’t have to bleed for them then.” Ori retorted quietly, though not in any mean-spirited way as Fíli stood close, nearly tucking the smaller dwarrow under his arm.

That line of Durins from Thorin to Dír to the two princes were all taller than the average dwarf but Kíli and Thorin stood above even Fíli who had several inches nonetheless on his One.

Even with height not being a particularly attractive trait in a mate Ori appreciated the sign of his One’s strength in Fíli nonetheless.

“That was the Lone Lands, Master Ori.” Harry finally answered, feeling the drain once he was finished. “This is Mirkwood. The level of protection one demands from a simple rainstorm is not commensurate with the insidious magics of this place that will only get harder for us all to fight off if we cannot sleep in peace and rest our minds. Blood wards are required to combat this place.”

“And are draining.” Óin noted with his healer’s eye, though once Harry had finished pacing his circle they all – whether they’d admit it or not – felt an immediate lessening of their foul moods and
small complaints that had moment before been mountainous.

“They can be.” Harry allowed with a nod and a sigh. “Lack of water is of greater concern than my fatigue which sleep will cure. We can go weeks or more with little or no food but thirst can kill within days and the water sources here are all sure to be corrupted.”

“We’ll ration.” Thorin agreed with the underlying suggestion despite earlier spiteful thoughts of Harry trying to usurp his position as leader of the Company. “What of the two mounts?”

“I’ve already taken care of that.” Harry retrieved a pliable piece of leather – one of dozens he’d stashed away from hunting at this point – and treated to allow Shadowfax and Applejack to drink. Setting it up to hang on the side of the cart, Harry unsealed the first of the drums and asked for a bowl from Bofur who retrieved one from the pile by Bombur’s cookfire. Dipping out a portion of ent-draught into the skin he motioned for Bilbo to lead over Applejack who drank half the portion before trotting away happily refreshed, Shadowfax coming for his own remainder without prompting.

“What in the world is that then, laddie?” Balin asked with keen eyes as the dwarrow and hobbit watched the renewed antics of the equines as they munched on the oats (for Applejack having the harder work to do) and alfalfa provided by Kíli.

Harry tipped the small amount of the draught back into the drum then sealed it once more, then hung the skin so any last drops will fall onto the forest floor.

Who knew?

Perhaps the tiny amount of the draught would help cleanse the forest as they traversed the forest path. At worst it would do nothing at all, the ent-draught being a gift of Yavanna to the ents and not something that would fuel the dark magics inflicted upon the once-Greenwood.

“A gift I had to fetch.” Was all Harry would say on the matter. “To help the animals on our journey.”


Harry and Bilbo shared a snickering laugh at the idea of dwarves disapproving of secret-keeping as dusk fell and bringing with it surety of the effectiveness of Harry’s wards as the Company was gifted with a view of an aerial hunt overhead.

Giant moths were drawn to the light of the fire, able to see it through the wards as they were natural creatures, only to rebound off of the protective spells in place making them easy pickings for massive bats large enough for Bilbo to fear they were capable of carrying off a grown hobbit or perhaps even a dwarf.

“Now that is an impressive bit of magic.” Dwalin nodded in approval at a surprised Harry as the gruff guardsman rarely had anything good to say at all about anything let along the pair of outsiders among the Company.

“They work.” Harry shrugged as he reclined onto his bedroll, taking the portion of spit-roasted rabbit Kíli had downed between the edge of Beorn’s lands and that of Mirkwood where they dare not hunt or forage for fear of the taint. The cook was hoarding the potatoes and roots vegetables for farther into Mirkwood, intent on one last meal of fresh game before reverting to roots and road rations. “I know wards that would hide an area entirely as if it had never existed at all. Others that would take hundreds of wizards attacking at once to bring down.” Harry said, reminiscing on some
of the great protections of his people. “Enchantments that brought life to an army of statues to fight an invading force. Charms strong enough to sing a dragon to sleep. This,” he laughed a little, waving around the camp to encompass the simple blood wards. “Crude in comparison to some of the magical workings of my people but serviceable. Nothing more.”

“Not unlike you, eh Harry?” Bofur joked good-naturedly jostling Harry from the signs of an oncoming dark mood when he fell into memories that clearly haunted him. “Crude but serviceable. Speaking of which,” he leaded in as if in confidence. “Can you tell me how to tell those ruddy tree-shaggers how to go fuck themselves on a pinecone in that poncy language of theirs?”

Bursting into laughter as the rest of the Company did the same, Harry shook his head. Crude but serviceable.

Hell, he’d heard himself called worse things in his life.

At least this time it was from a friend and not yet another stain on his family name being dragged through the mud by the avaricious press corps of Wizarding Britain.

…

“Maybe it’s the forest fuckin’ wit’ me.” Glóin blinked up at Applejack one night almost three weeks into their slow trek across the woodland realm. They’d run out of fresh rations over a week before. The second drum of whatever enchanted bit of water for the mounts Harry’d brought had been opened two days before. To say that the forest was fucking with those of the Company susceptible to it during the day outside of the protection of Harry’s magic would be an understatement. And the farther into the forest they tread the worse it got, taking them longer to shake off after Harry set the wards around their camp. “But aren’t these nags taller than they used to be?”

Harry wasn’t the only one snickering at Glóin where the dwarf was buckling Applejack into the cart harness, Bilbo chuckling almost helplessly on the ground as good humor and moments of levity had come fewer and fewer under the boughs of Mirkwood.

“Glóin’s cracking.” Dwalin shook his head in dismay at the dwarrow. “Always knew countin’ coins for a livin’ would drive you crazed one day, cousin.”

“He’s not crazy.” Harry stepped in before he had an all-out dwarven brawl on his hands. Valar knew those took ages to break up and he didn’t want to waste any time while relying on his magic and Shadowfax to lead them through the forest. His glamor hid the worst of it but Harry was starting to feel a strain that no night of sleep could leaven. “It’s a side-effect of the water that’s keeping them going.”

Sitting up like he was on a spring, Bilbo shouted “Ent-Draught!” as the answer came to him.

Only to lower his head with a blush when all eyes turned to him as if now he was crazed, the very tips of his pointed ears blushing along with the rest of him.

A situation which Thorin resolutely and categorically ignored no matter how fetching he thought it was.

“What’s that?” Óin demanded not having his ear-trumpet handy as they were in the midst of packing and breaking camp to move with the coming dawn. “Ant drink?”

“Ent-draught.” Harry enunciated clearly into the dwarf’s hearing aid.
Which only served to round out the expressions that clearly read of “Huh?” from the company dwarrow.

Aggravated once again by the lack of non-dwarven histories and lore shown by his companions Bilbo huffed and crossed his arms, tapping one hairy foot in exasperation as he enlightened them.

“Harry said he’d gone to Fangorn Forest when he left Rivendell. Gandalf said he had a separate task to complete before returning to us.” He rattled off matter-of-factly. “When he came back Harry was taller than when he’d left and was packing along those two sealed drums that he refused to talk about or let anyone drink out of despite that being a simple solution to our water rationing as at this rate we have another two and a half weeks to go before the drums run out and we have to take other measures to water the mounts. Now.” Bilbo heaved a sigh and cast a gimlet eye over the dwarrow and the patently-amused form of Harry. “What exists in Fangorn Forest that isn’t found elsewhere, can nourish and refresh even in a small amount, and causes growth?”

“Ent-draught?” Kíli never was one to quail before a rhetorical question.

Balin rolled his eyes. “That’s a legend. Snarks and talking trees.”

“And yet.” Bilbo swung his arm towards Harry where he was leaning against Shadowfax’s shoulder. “I present evidence to the contrary.”

“When you said you went to see a forest about a tree…” Thorin arched a brow at the Man as he recalled his words upon meeting them at the Carrock.

“Technically, Treebeard is a tree.” Harry shrugged. “Or a tree-shepherd anyway. And finding him wasn’t easy either, thought I was going to be lost in Fangorn at the coming of the next Age. It may not be as large as Mirkwood but the trees are much more lively. Spun my head around more than once I can tell you.”

Thorin turned to his closest advisor and said in utter deadpan: “ Ents are real.”

Balin patted him on the back consolingly. “Just don’t go chopping down trees in Fangorn Forest and you should survive the knowledge just fine, lad.”

…

They came at last to the enchanted river three weeks after arriving at the forest gate.

Much to Harry’s dismay as the Company gathered around him staring at the vines pouring from the trees and the ruins of the shattered stone bridge.

“Shoddy tree-shagger workmanship.” Bofur huffed, the miner less-than-impressed by the sight.

“What now?” Kíli asked anxiously, hand tight around the hilt of his sword, splitting his stare between his uncle and their wizard guide.

“Now you wait.” Harry sighed, gesturing them back into line. “And prepare to catch me…just in case.”

He would hope that a simple repairing spell wouldn’t knock him for six but as draining fighting the constant attempts at piercing his shields by the contagion of the forest and setting wards each night besides the power he’d linked into a feedback between himself and Bilbo’s charmed bangle he wasn’t taking any bets.
“What?” Bilbo sqwauked, hobbit-hearing easily picking up *that* from ten yards away where Applejack shifted restlessly in harness. “Why?”

“Because what I’m about to do is *not* what Gandalf would consider wise.” Harry cracked his neck then knelt, placing his palms on the near edge of the bridge floor, grimacing as soon as his flesh came into contact with the tainted earth and stone.

“*Mahal’s hammer.*” Bifur blinked. “*If Tharkun would consider it unwise*…”

“*Then it is a foolish risk indeed.*” Thorin growled.

And then the stone under Harry began to *glow*, chunks rising from the depths of the black river water and tumbling and locking into place, vines retreating from where they’d torn the bridge to shreds and lifting like a forlorn veil from over the arch of carven stone.

Swaying, Harry lifted his right hand from its place on the bridge, finishing the repair and then flung it sweeping outward as he tumbled facedown onto the newly repaired, cleared, and cleaned creamy stone of the bridge.

“Harry!”

Shouts cried his name from Bilbo and the Company alike, silenced only by a command from Thorin who was closest to the fallen wizard.

“No!” He ordered. “Stay back in formation!”

Kneeling, Thorin leaned close and tested for his breath, finding it to relief that he would never admit to another living soul then in a show of dwarven strength slung the limp form over his shoulder and stood, eyeing up the silvery whickering form of Shadowfax.

“Can you lead us in his place?” He asked the great steed as Dwalin moved forward and took half of the Man’s weight from his king’s shoulders, recognizing in the creature an intelligence akin to the great ravens of Erebor who had long served and kept company with the line of Durin.

A bobbing nod was the only answer the *Mearas* gave after licking at wavy ebon hair then Shadowfax was kicking into motion, clattering over the stone of the bridge with Harry carried between the dwarves, his weight passed from one to the next as they moved and could no longer bear his weight lest they exhaust themselves until he arrived at the stout forms of Dori, Nori, and Ori whose great strength bore him easily.

Shadowfax led them for an hour along the forest path, far from the noxious fumes and beckoning waters of the enchanted river before stopping in a clearing along the path and whickering at the dwarven king that had moved to walk beside him.

Perfect timing at that as Harry began to move and awake, the ‘Ri brothers lowering him to the path at the first throaty moan from between thirst-chapped lips.

Rocketing upwards with a knife at the ready, Harry awoke to the choking sensation of the cloying magic of the Mirkwood, dwarrow jumping back from him at the war-ready response to his sudden waking.

“Easy lad.” Óin cautioned him as the others went through the motions of setting camp and making the circle in the leaf-litter though without the blood-drops that accompanied Harry’s own, Bilbo remaining in place upon the cart as Harry always made certain to ensure no matter how antsy the hobbit was to climb down and stretch his legs. “You collapsed at the bridge, do you recall that?”
“Aye.” Harry sheathed his blade than struggled to his feet, batting off proffered helping hands, pressing one palm to his temple as a headache beat a tattoo behind his eyes. “It took more magic to repair the bridge than I thought. The forest fought me.”

Leaning forward, Harry braced his elbows on his knees then gave stretching all the way upright another go.

His second attempt found his vision absent the dancing white and black spots that threatened to flatten him and his feet steadier upon the ground.

Nodding, Harry pulled up his left arm revealing a score of thin silver and pink marks that were healing – faster than a Man but slower than an Elf – Óin making a noise deep in his throat as the healer made to grab his right hand and prevent him from making another.

Emerald eyes – dim with exhaustion but hard with resolve – make the aged dwarf’s gaze head-on.

“It must be done.” Harry’s tone could crush solid rock with one blow. “Or I will be worse for it tomorrow, let alone the rest of you.”

Waiting no longer for other objects even as he saw them form on easily half-a-dozen tongues, Harry made a new cut then paced the path of the blood wards without faltering even for a moment.

No sooner were they up than Bilbo was rushing him, firm hands pulling his head down to check his eyes and search for damage from his collapse, quiet words tumbling from a terrified tongue.

“Be honest.” His friend demanded of him. “How much longer can you keep this up before you collapse fully?”

“As long as needed.” Harry asserted, then leaned forward and pressed a kiss to a worried forehead before rising once more and limping, exhaustion in every line of him, to the cart and doled out the portion of ent-draught to each of the mounts then drum resealed and duties carried out allowed himself to fall down beside the cart, resting his back against the wooden wheel. “No more, no less.”

“Honor his pride.” Thorin commanded his people, taking hold of Bilbo and turning the hobbit towards the fire Glóin was making. He ushered the hobbit to a seat between himself and Kíli as Bombur hurried around passing out measures of honey-oat cakes dotted with berries and nuts provided for their road rations by Beorn. “Let him rest.”

Digging in his duster pocket, Harry unearthed his silver flask which the Company had only seen make appearances during the long rain in the Lone Lands before entering Mirkwood. Uncapping it he let the warmth and restoring rush of the cocoa pour down his throat, only looking up from running one thumb over the engraving when Bombur appeared beside him to pass over an oat cake. The dwarrow was followed by Shadowfax who laid on the ground beside him, resting his large head in Harry’s lap with a mournful whinny.

“Sorry for scaring you, my friend.” His words were just as much for the Company as they were his familiar. “But I must do what I must.”

Tucking the flask back away, Harry leaned his head back and stared up at the inky canopy of the endless trees of Mirkwood as the soft sounds of the Company drifted over to his slumped form where he pretended he could see the stars as he stroked the soft hair over Shadowfax’s face and downy nose.

“Three weeks to the enchanted river.” Balin mused, tapping one weathered finger on his thigh as the Company talked quietly around the campfire, leaving Harry to his rest.
“How long until this cursed forest ends?” Dwalin grumbled.

“The river was two-thirds or so through the woodland realm if I remember the maps of Greenwood.” Bilbo offered, sipping at his limited ration of water with care to stretch it out. “Between four and five weeks in total from east to west for the full journey…less than two weeks left.”

“Good.” Nori nodded, tossing a fierce look back at their wizard. “I don’t want to think about what our wizard would look like after another three weeks like the last.”

“How he fights the magic of the forest.” Ori pondered thoughtfully. “I wonder if that’s the sort of thing that can be taught or if it’s something he just does.”

“Aye, the thought’s occurred to me as well.” Dwalin nodded approvingly at the mite one of his lads had taken up with. Good head on his shoulders, that one. Now if only his ruddy brother would keep his sticky fingers out of Dwalin’s packs the journey would be much simpler.

“It’s likely a wizardry skill.” Bilbo nibbled at his lip, blind to the effect it had on the Durin to his left as the young one on his right snickered into his sleeve, gaining himself a head-slap from his uncle. “Gandalf said Radagast lived in southern Mirkwood when he was talking to Beorn.”

Nods abounded around the fire at that then Bofur changed the subject to a less depressing one and always a favorite of the dwarrow: making fun of the elves.

…

“You cannot do everything alone, Harry.”

The voice whispered to him as sweet as a summer rain and as bright and clear as the North star.

Opening his eyes, Harry rose from his sleep and cast his gaze around the camp though when he looked beyond the small circle he protected each night and the resting countenances of his friends he found himself not under the dingy eaves of Mirkwood but in a place bright with sunlight and as green as his mother’s eyes.

Bird song trilled through the forest.

A brook babbled merrily nearby.

And when Harry turned he found himself face to face with a vision that made him ache for his mother and comforted him like the peace of the ent-draught glade all at once.

Her hair was the red of autumn foliage.

Her eyes as green as new spring shoots.

Her raiment was the verdant leaves of the springtime forest.

Flower petals peeked from amongst her hair.

And beneath her bare feet flowers and grass blades and saplings grew with every step.

“My Lady.” Harry bowed deeply, knowing that in Her he faced a being as endless and terrifying as Death ever was.

For She was Yavanna.
And while the earth may comfort and cradle and grow it also could shake the ground and sunder an entire mountain range in an instant.

“My Champion.” Yavanna lifted one arm as elegant as a willow bough, holding out her palm for his own sword-and-work roughed hand.

Her skin was the silken glide of a first morning dew and Her voice the whisper of leaves upon the wind.

“Be welcomed in this place and rest.” A wave of Her free arm fashioned a bench grown of entwined willow boughs and softened by rich green moss, gentle white flowers blooming here and there as butterflies impossibly blue and purple alit upon one and then another. “Your journey has been long and grows longer still with every step down the path you take.”

“I knew there was more than Smaug for me to come when I did.” Harry sat at Her behest, feeling all the pain, strain, and exhaustion that had fallen upon him since he stepped into Mirkwood slide away. “Did I choose wrongly? Should I have gone with Gandalf?”

“Our Maia have their duties as the Champions have theirs.” Yavanna answered, keeping his hand in Hers and enfolding it in Her gentle grasp. “We set the Maia to their task and to their task they must tend. It is not for Us to choose the path of Our Champions. Their steps and paths are their own.”

“And so are the consequences.” Harry quirked a half-smile at the gentle Lady of the Earth. Well. Gentle until Her ire was roused anyway. “Or so I would imagine.”

“The path of a Champion can be short and simple or long and winding as they choose.” Yavanna supplied as Her magic worked through the guest in Her domain. “One is Chosen every Age.”

Harry thought on that a moment, getting the feeling that the Lady was both testing him and keeping him focused on their conversation as part of a greater underlying cause.

“Tulkas, Eärendil, Glorfindel?” Harry guessed, though he’d been told before that the Lord of the House of the Golden Flower was one of the Champions despite his original death taking place during the First Age he was reembodied by the Valar and returned to Arda in the Second Age.

“Now Hadrian of the Third Age shall join them.” Yavanna smiled and it was like the sun breaking after a winter storm. “Glorfindel has Chosen to remain in Arda to fight the forces of darkness until the Firstborn are recalled for the last time to Valinor. That is his path and his choice. What Hadrian of the Third Age chooses shall be his to choose alone. Cast doubt from your mind, My Champion. Fight when you choose. Watch when you choose. Your title was earned before you stepped into Our keeping. Not even your Death could take it from you now. Rest.” She told him, lifting one hand and brushing his eyelids closed. “One day all of Arda shall need your strength. Rest and fear no more.”

…

Harry awoke from a deep sleep to a fretting Dori shaking his shoulder, feeling as if he was swimming upwards from a dream though with no notion of what it might be.

As awareness broke over him he felt refreshed in a way he’d not been since his time idling in Imladris or perhaps even further back to halcyon days in the Shire where he had grieved and raged and cried and laughed all in his own time and his own way.

Either way, he was renewed and thanked whatever Valar or deity was responsible for it.
“You seem almost giddy this morn.” Kíli noticed with the narrowed eyes of a devout non-morning person. “It’s unnatural. Stop it.”

“Shan’t.” Harry smirked then ruffled the younger prince’s hair before darting out of range.

“What’s gotten into him?” The archer groused to his brother as he tried fruitlessly to tidy his thick mess of bedhead hair.

“Dunno.” Fíli munched his way through his morning oat cake. “But whatever it is I wish he’d share.”

Agreeing laughs puttered their way around the campfire before they rose and stamped it out to break camp.

…

The closer they came to where they thought the forest would end the closer they danced to the edge of darkness in the hours between ward sets.

Tempers grew shorter, rations thinner.

Nary a day passed from the crossing of the enchanted river that a squabble did not break out between the dwarrow, though Harry weathered the worst slashes of Thorin’s already formidable temper with the aegis and steady head of one grown under the fire and fury that made him into a weapon from the tips of his ebon hair to the toes of his boots.

It would take more than an enchanted dwarven king with the manners of a drunken pirate to goad Harry into unleashing the razor side of his own black wrath.

That wasn’t to say Harry wasn’t impressed with Thorin’s ever-increasing tries at it as more than one had him counting in Latin or reciting the Tengwar alphabet in Quenya under his breath once the scion of Durin’s line stormed away to practice sword against axe with Dwalin to stew in his own bile until the effect of the malevolent Mirkwood miasma lifted.

To the dismay of Bilbo, the two least overtly pressed by the malignancy were also the most at risk from it between dawn and dusk as the Company they kept slowly grew to pose nearly as great a threat if not handled with utter care as the forest’s disease itself.

Then almost five weeks to the day of passing under the Forest Gate into Mirkwood the sound of the great Forest River reached their ears, mere hours later saw them passing from under the all-encompassing canopy of the ancient trees of the once-Greenwood, and the edge of darkness passed them by as if they’d not been dancing along it with a single move to see them fall all along.

…

“Feel better?” Harry asked Bilbo as they crossed out of the lands of the Elvenking and into the plains and marshes bordering the Long Lake, keeping the Forest River to their left as a guide.

They had left the oh-so-welcoming “shelter” of the once-Greenwood several hours before and at last with dusk approaching Thorin had given the order to make camp.

For the first time in weeks they would do so beneath the stars and to a meal of fresh game, a brace of wild birds that Kíli had eagerly shot down once they’d left Mirkwood well behind them.

For the first time in weeks they could set camp without Harry bleeding for it.
That alone was worth more than gems or gold to a wizard who had been constantly drained for
weeks to sustain their journey through Mirkwood.

Handing over the bangle that had opened and nearly fallen away were it not for Nori’s quick hands
as they’d left the tainted forest behind, Bilbo smiled up at his friend.

“Don’t you?”

“Not yet.” Harry admitted, staring towards the horizon where the great peak of the Lonely Mountain
had bewitched the dwarf for long moments when they’d cleared the forest enclosure. “Some
magics are harder and more difficult than others to combat. Give me a wave of cursed fire or a
bludgeoning hex any day. Insidious magic that tempts and teases and steals your mind takes a heavy
price from those who would face it.”

“But you did it anyway.”

“That I did.” Harry choked on an incredulous laugh. “It would have been poorly done of me if I’d
come all this way to die of lethal magic loss from fighting that which cannot truly be fought only
moderated. It would have been a sad footnote in Ori’s tale of the quest for Erebor: there lays
Hadrian, a fool of a wizard who couldn’t help but help.”

“Was it that close?” Bilbo whispered, taken aback and skin washing free of color in his shock. He’d
known it was bad at times but…but not that.

“There were…” Harry searched for the right words. “Moments, flickers here and there. Illusions
banished before they could form and beguile. Spinners in the trees who called out with human
voices to draw the unwary from the safety of the path. A silencing spell here. A notice-me-not
there.” He shrugged. “It all adds up in the end. The forest learned of me as I learned of it and so the
magic worked its insidious wiles. Small, infinitesimal efforts during the day to fatigue me before the
cost of the night. We diced with my magic and life: the Mirkwood and I.” He smirked at his friend.
“It lost.”

“Yet you’re still paying the price.” Bilbo noticed taking in the near-slump of broad shoulders and the
heaviness of Harry’s steps where before they had been growing as light as any elf. “And the others
are all shouts and good cheer. That hardly seems fair.”

“Fair is for bards and minstrels and children’s tales, my dear friend.” Harry sighed, ruffling Bilbo’s
honey curls before wandering over to ready his bedroll beside the cart. With the lack of his wards
came the return of a watch. He’d be up before dawn most like. Best to sleep while he could. “A
pretty fiction but a fiction all the same.”

…

“Ada,” Legolas Thranduilion, Prince of the Woodland Realm and first among its commanders strode
into the throne room of his father. “Strangers have been in the forest. They crossed the Forest Path
and left strange magics in their wake tracked by Ungoliant’s spawn and fell beasts alike.”

“Where is my Captain of the Guard, ion nín?” Thranduil, the Elvenking asked as he reclined in his
great throne of antlers and carven wood. “Where is Tauriel?”

Legolas lowered his head and saluted his father then answered.

“She is back-tracking their trail to see all of their path before making her report.”

“What is known of the trespassers?”
“They number fifteen with a horse and a mule cart.” Legolas lifted his head at a flicker of his father’s fingers as while Thranduil could be cold and remote to some the love he bore towards his only child was strong and deep between them. A curtesy is all he ever required of his Heir. “Most were dwarves but some were not.”

“And the magic, ion nín?” Thranduil rose at last, his autumn crown resplendent upon his head in leaves and brambles of fiery oranges and reds against his silver-gilt hair and grey eyes that marked him as one of the Sindar. “What do you make of that?”

“It is unlike any I have ever seen, Ada.” Legolas admitted. “The camps were ringed in blood but felt of safety and rest. The broken stone bridge has been made anew and sang of a battle between magics to restore it. I know of no elf or Istari capable of such deeds.”

“Strange magics indeed.” Thranduil mused, linking his arm with that of his son and escorting him from the throne room. “To pass under the eyes of the Elvenking and remain unremarked until away. When Tauriel returns you shall take a patrol and hunt those tracking the strangers. Find out all they know and capture one or two for questioning.”

“Of course, Ada.”

“Now come,” Thranduil brought his green leaf of spring into his chambers revealing a feast fit for a king and a prince. “You have been gone from my side long enough hunting the dark spawning in the forest. I wish to enjoy a repast with ion nín before your duties take you from me once more.”

...Later that night as Harry awoke to take his shift on watch he found himself with silent – and grumpy – company before too long as Thorin climbed from his bedroll and came to sit beside him, the pair staring off towards the Lonely Mountain as dawn began to break over Erebor.

With time pressing and drawing near, Harry asked a question that had been tearing at his brain for weeks on end.

“What would you do, Thorin-King?” His voice was like smoke carrying on the morning mist. “To regain your mountain home? What would you give? What would you sacrifice to have it all as it once was?”

“Anything.” Thorin answered with nary a pause, unseeing of the emerald eyes that flashed like balefire in the gloaming at his answer – and more his lack of hesitance. “To save my people I would give it all: including my life.”

“Hmm.” Harry hummed under his breath as he rose and stretched, casting a sardonic glare at the back of the beaded – and thick, so very fucking thick – head before moving to wake the rest of the Company. Erebor beckons after all. “I may remind you you said that someday, Thorin-King.”

...
Chapter 13

Broken Blade

Author’s Note: More movie dialog from Bard’s entrance at Laketown here, but not that much. I just really like his confrontation with Alfrid at the toll-gate since it gives an interesting overview of Bard’s character from an outside perspective beyond the Company, then towards the end some more elves appear.

Chapter Thirteen: Upon the Long Lake

“My Captain has returned to us.” Thranduil nodded to his adopted daughter as Tauriel saluted her father and king upon entering the throne room of the Woodland Realm. “Tell me: what of the trespassers?”

Tauriel knelt at the foot of the throne to give her report, head lowered.

“They entered by way of the Forest Gate, my lord. Crossing through our lands unseen but tracked by spider and warg and orc. None were found and none were taken by the trackers who my men have cleared from our paths.”

“Have they?” Thranduil tapped a finger against the ancient oak of his throne. “Shame as I wished to question one. Why did you, the Captain of my Guard, not think to take a prisoner?”

“My lord,” Tauriel gasped, lifting her lovely face and revealing the deep scratches the marred it and her neck. “We were near to overrun and outnumbered. There was no time to think of such things.”

“There is ever time, Captain.” Thranduil’s words were little more than a sigh. “That is the truth of what it is to be Eldar. You are young yet.” He dismissed her error. “You will learn. Rest and then accompany your Prince to fulfill the task you have failed to foresee.” He lifted a hand to give her an airy dismissal then paused. “And the magic of these trespassers?”

“My lord,” Tauriel stopped, freezing in mid-motion of her rising from her humble posture before the throne. “The stone bridge and Forest Gate were repaired as if new, campsites ringed with blood but felt of comfort and rest. New growth sprouted in the older sites over the blood-ring. Pure growth, untainted by the corruption of Dol Guldur.”

“The Forest Gate?”

“The same.” She swallowed, knowing better than most of the significance of the statue standing guard at the Forest Gate given her relationship to the Elvenking. “Only more complete: tainted growth torn away and new flowers bloom even with winter soon upon us.”

“That will be all, Captain.”

“Thank you, my lord Thranduil.”

Dismounting Shadowfax, Harry stared out over the Long Lake through the mist towards Esgaroth or Laketown in Westron. It rose like a perching bird of prey on narrow wooden stilts over the mists of the lake. Even to his improved vision it was little more than a grey mass nearly indistinguishable from the mists of the lake and the ash that even over a hundred years since Smaug came and sixty
since he last left the mountain coated the mountainsides and the fields surrounding it.

“Fuck, that’s depressing.” Harry said as much to Shadowfax as he did to himself or Balin who’d stepped up beside him when he’d stepped off the river trail where it turned south along the lake at the delta of the Forest River and the lake. “I swear this quest is cursed.”

“Don’t say that, laddie.” Balin frowned disapprovingly up at the Man. “We’ve made good time and avoided the elves in the forest nor have we heard the howls of wargs since the Forest Gate. Now we’ve weeks to rest in Esgaroth before daring the mountain to search for the hidden door before Durin’s Day. It’s not so bad as all that.”

Shadowfax shook his mane in disagreement with the old dwarf as Harry snorted in eerie unison with his equine familiar.

“You can’t feel what we feel, Master Balin.” Harry ran one hand down Shadowfax’s silvery neck, gentling him and soothing them both. “Or else you wouldn’t say that: not for a moment. The sight of that high peak fills you and your kind with exhilaration and delight, renewed purpose.” He swung back toward the delta, frowning at the sight of barrels floating down the river towards the delta and swinging his gaze back to the lake found a speck moving their way from Laketown to meet them. “All I feel when I look at it is a watchful foreboding tingling down the back of my neck like the hairs of spider legs.”

Harry jerked his chin towards where the lone dock sat squat and lonely against the shore of the lake.

“You might want to go meet the boat coming into dock.” He suggested. “If you leave the talking to Thorin’s gruff arse we’ll be waiting for passage here until the dawn of the next age.”

“Aye, laddie.” Balin chuckled at that and trotted over to speak in low tones to his kinsman and king. “You’ve the right of that, that’s for certain.”

…

Bard the Bowman pulled his simple barge into the dock at the mouth of the Forest River to the strangest sight he’d ever set eyes upon in his thirty years of life: that of a company of dwarves with a Man and a child plus a mule cart and a fine horse; waiting upon him along with the barrels from the Elvenking’s halls.

“Hail, strangers!” Bard called out to the company as a pair of the dwarves caught the ropes tossed to them and helped him tie off. “What brings you to the shores of the Long Lake? The ferry to Laketown is miles from here.”

The oldest among them – or so Bard supposed he had little enough exposure to guess a dwarf’s age and had to guess based on the snow-white hair and beard – stepped forward to speak with him as the rest gathered amongst themselves with only the Man standing a bit part. Though he was not, to Bard’s eyes, the only one who kept his swordarm free and at the ready. The tallest dwarf with silver-streaked black hair and a short beard – little more than a thick scruff – did as well as did the archer among them who bore a striking resemblance to the scruffy dwarf down to the hint of whiskers on his chin and upper lip.

A bald dwarf with a mass of black hair that had seemed to fled his pate in fright to settle in a puff around his neck and chin didn’t even bother to return his axes to their places upon his beltloops.

Suspicious bunch.

Too bad that would only serve them so well in Laketown if they wished to cross and pay the
Master’s “taxes” for safe passage.

“Hail, bargeman.” The old dwarf greeted him with a crisp nod as Bard stepped out from his vessel, humble as it was, to the dock. “The forest put us out a bit farther north than planned.” He chuckled. “My memory isn’t what it was. We’re travelers to the Iron Hills to celebrate Durin’s Day with our kin. Would there be room on your barge for passage to Esgaroth to rest before returning to our journey?”

“And the Man and child?” Bard questioned, scratching at his chin. It would be a risk, the Master watched him these days closer than ever but…the coin would be worth it even if most of it would be sacrificed in bribing the Master’s guard and lackeys to turn a blind eye towards Bard’s non-sanctioned cargo.

“Child?” The fresh-faced youth piped up. “I’m not a child! I’m a Hobbit!”

Bard frowned at the white-beard, confused, and then looked back at the speaker as the others chuckled.

“A…hobbit?”

“Perhaps,” the Man suggested with a smirk down at his littlest companion. “You might know their people by another name: Halfling. Our Master Baggins is a scholar, invited by Masters Balin and Ori as a fellow Scribe to witness the Durin’s Day festivities.”

Ignoring the hobbit’s squawk and swat at the man complete with the words: Harry you know very well that I’m not half of anything, thank-you-very-much! Bard contemplated that a moment. “And you, sirrah?”

“A mere Ranger, Master Baggins’ guard for the journey.” The white-beard assured him. “Hardly a danger to the good people of Esgaroth, Master…?”

“Bard.” He nodded, decided. Rangers were known even as far East as Esgaroth for being good folk if a bit strange from their time spent roaming the wildelands. Valar knew there were far worse folk in Laketown already. “Passage is a silver per person, two for the horse, and four for the mule cart.”

There were some grumbles about the sheer extortion of the price but with lack of options made Bard’s demanded fare reasonable enough as Balin and Glómín handed over the coinage for the Company and Harry for the mounts and cart, the ‘Urs bending their backs to helping Bard load the barrels and cart in the meantime.

They all left convincing Shadowfax and Applejack onto the watery conveyance to Harry’s deft touch.

None of the others felt like risking being kicked all the way back to the Forest Gate and Bard took his cue from them as they arranged themselves in the extremely limited free space to be found on the overcrowded – but thankfully not overloaded – barge.

Then Bard took his place at that rudder, lowering the barg’s single sail, and across the Long Lake they began.

…

Bard considered the company he’d found himself among that first night upon the water as he dropped anchor. The Long Lake was vast: two days to cross from the Forest River delta to Laketown was nothing.
The dwarves spoke in their language, at times lapsing silent and using hand-signs amongst each other, though they would deign to speak Westron to their hobbit and Ranger – if rarely to the latter.

He was an odd one, this Ranger that roamed with a company of dwarves and a halfling.

His face was young but his eyes old.

A scar was silver against his sun-bronzed skin when he removed his gloves to eat but otherwise he was unmarred on face and hand.

The hobbit clucked over him at times when he wasn’t conversing with who Bard thought were the youngest amongst the dwarves or who he thought was their leader with his silver hair-clasps for all that the white-beard alone spoke to Bard he’d not agreed with his price until the silver-adorned dwarf had given the smallest of nods.

Light leather armor was worn with ease by the Ranger with a crossbow at one hip and a fine sword at the other.

And yet he moved with a grace Bard had only seen among the elven guards who would meet him for the Elvenking’s shipments of Dorwinion wine.

The light rocking of the barge didn’t phase him nor the clutter and cramp of overcrowding.

Yes, the Ranger was an odd one, and dangerous with it.

And yet…

And yet Bard got the sense from him that he was a good man to have at your back in a scuffle or to entrust his children to in case of danger.

The Ranger was the sort of danger you wanted on your side not against it.

Wise of the little halfling to hire such a man to see him safe to the Iron Hills if so.

It all fit no matter how odd it was.

Except for the horse.

Living on a lake all his life, Bard would easily admit that he was no judge of horseflesh.

Even so he knew a mount fit for a king or a high lord when he saw one.

If that Man with his jewel-green eyes and fine face was a simple Ranger and nothing more Bard would eat his boots muck from the lakeshore and all.

Which created the question: what was a king or lord or chief of the northern Rangers doing in Esgaroth escorting a group of dwarves with a hobbit companion to the Iron Hill?

Simple answer: he wasn’t.

One of those things was a lie.

The problem was scouting which was the falsity before it came back to bring danger to Bard, his family and people.

…
“He’s watching you.” Bilbo commented lowly as he came to sit at Harry’s side where his friend was propped against the barge rail keeping Shadowfax and Applejack calm despite their dozing.

“He’s watching all of us.” Harry corrected as he took the oat-bar and water skin from the hobbit, Bilbo taking it up once more as his charge to feed up Harry after the stretched-thin appearance he’d taken on in the forest. “Me, you, and Thorin in particular.”

“What?”

“Because we’re the least likely of the story we fed him and he knows it.” Harry answered a lengthy moment later around a mouthful of dried-out honey and oats. “We’re the ones that don’t make sense. Especially me and Thorin if he doesn’t know enough about dwarrow culture to realize they wouldn’t invite a hobbit scribe to one of their celebrations.”

“Why us?”

“Because my great lump of a familiar,” Harry noted drily ignoring the head-bump he got for his cheek from Shadowfax. “Couldn’t pass as a normal horse if he was on his deathbed. With my low magic reserves I don’t have the extra to glamor him to pass either. Him plus my sword will give me away anytime.”

“And your clothes.” Bilbo commented for himself, casting an amused glance at his friend. “That’s what topped it for me. You’re as much a lord as Thorin is a king even if you’re better at mumming otherwise than him.”

“Please.” Harry scoffed, rolling his eyes with a grin. “Dwalin would be better at pretending normal than Thorin. Especially the closer to Erebor we get.”

“I’ve noticed that.” Bilbo nibbled at his lip, a nervous gesture that had become more and more prevalent the longer they spent on the quest, one hand slipping down his vest to feel for his special ring. “He gets more impatient and driven the closer we get. I know Balin worries.”

“Balin’s old, nearly as old as Thorin.” Harry sighed, shaking his head before leaning back fully to rest against the rail. “Next to the King he remembers Erebor and Thór the best and Thráin as well as any alive before the folly of attempting to reclaim Moria from Azog’s armies. If anyone alive has the right to worry over the line of Durin I’d say it’s him short of the Durins themselves.”

Bilbo snorted a laugh. “I think the Durins are too cocky to consider that they might need to worry over themselves though they do a good job about fussing over each other.”

“Personally,” Harry chuckled along, nudging Bilbo with a gentle elbow to a no-longer-soft side. “I think they’re all just terrified of Thorin’s sister from the stories they’ve all told of Lady Dís. Though you’d know better than me Mister Protect-Thorin-from-Azog.”

“Well, you’re not wrong…”

…”

“What day is it, Master Bard?” Harry asked, frowning at the icy water as he looked over the lake the next morning.

“Should be a fortnight or less to the autumn equinox, Master Ranger.” Bard replied, glancing between the other man and trying to figure out what held his attention upon the lake.
“September then,” Harry murmured to himself in English before continuing in Westron. “Does it always get so cold and icy upon the lake before winter has even properly began?”

“So the tales say,” Bard agreed with a grimace, feeling the chill for himself even with his gloves and layers of cheap homespun wool. He was thoughtful a moment then added: “they also say it wasn’t always like this though none living here now remember it for themselves. That before the great wyrm came and set his curse upon Dale and the Mountain that the fields were lush with growth every spring through harvest and the lake was ripe with life. Trade caravans would come from all corners of Middle Earth for the great market of Dale.” He shrugged, turning back to steering their path over the waters. “But they’re just stories now. Though the cold keeps meat fresh when the few of us who know how to hunt manage to pay the toll to bring our catch back to the town.”

“You,” Bilbo blinked, certain that it was the cold and the waking from the sudden warmth of being tucked in between Thorin and a clingy Kíli that was clouding his mind. “You have to pay a toll to bring your own hunting efforts to your home?”

“That is the world of the Master of Laketown, Master Baggins.” Bard grunted, scowling. “Every last one of the poor and suffering could starve so long as he dines on golden plates and drinks imported wines.”

“A leader who feasts while his people starve is no leader at all.” Thorin spoke up as he rose, one hand lowering to help Bilbo to his feet, the hobbit returning the King’s furred coat to once more hide the dwarven armor and mail he wore under it.

“Fine words for a warrior.” Bard noted bitterly, casting a searching glance over the company. “The rest of us are not so blessed in our options.”

“Any tyrant can be deposed if the people can rise to see it done.” Harry offered – and he knew a thing or two about that, as Thorin did sacrificing for the betterment of his people. “But it can’t be truly accomplished by outside intervention. It must come from within.”

“Know a thing or two about that, do you laddie?” Dwalin drawled, arching a brow at the enigmatic wizard who at times said much without saying anything at all. But at least he wasn’t a riddler like Tharkun.

“Perhaps.” He smiled, grin widening as when he went to finish his favorite phrase – since coming to Arda at least – Bilbo, Kíli, Fíli, Ori, and Bofur all chimed in in unison.

“Perhaps not!”

As the compatriots in mocking Harry devolved into giggles their target simply have a chuckle and shook his head. “Oh dear, I’ve become predictable.” He gave an exaggerated pout. “I’ll have to do something about that.”

“Please don’t if it means you talk more like Tharkun.” Kíli nearly begged, hands folded and shuffling forward on his knees like a supplicant. “Another meddling old badger like him and the end of days will be upon us!”

Snickering he batted the young dwarf away – if gently – then turned and shrugged at a staring Bard. Like he could control that lot.

Please.

He liked what little he’d retained of his sanity intact, thank you very much.
“What’s this about then?” Bofur murmured as he posted up beside the unlikely pair of Nori and Harry, the thief having little enough to do with the Man all through their journey once he’d proven himself incapable of penetrating the defenses on Harry’s coat to lighten his pockets.

Nori helped Bilbo and Ori learn to throw blade well enough, but other than leading Dwalin on a merry chase from one end of Arda to the other had behaved himself on the quest – for the most part.

“Looks like our bargeman is up to no good.” Nori smirked. “Seems we’ve aligned ourselves with a smuggler, me lads.”

As the fishing boat came alongside and filled the empty wine barrels with fish, Harry shook his head though Bard at least had the senses to cap them afterward.

“No good indeed.” Harry commented as he moved away from the rail while Dwalin grumbled about tossing Bard over the side. “Trying to feed people, a crime for the ages, that.”

“I don’t like ‘im.” Dwalin scowled, arms crossed.

“You don’t like anybody, Dwalin.” Fíli teased, as Ori tucked himself under his suitor’s arm for warmth as Dori fussed on his other side.

“Still, there’s something about him.” Dwalin muttered. “It picks at me.”

“He’s just a lakeman.” Balin sighed, patting his suspicious brother on the shoulder in consolation. “Nothing more.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.” Harry murmured, watching the dark-haired man with caution. “Dwalin’s right, there is something about him but I can’t place it either though we’re likely picking up on different things.”

As they arrived at the toll gate at Laketown less than an hour later they got quite the education on Bard the Bowman – even if it was from a most unlikely source.

“Halt! Goods inspection! Papers please!” The gateman called out to the barge, blinking in surprise at the line of dwarves and assorted others on Bard’s vessel. “Oh, it’s you Bard. Bit of extra cargo today?”

“Morning, Percy.” Bard greeted his friend.

“Anything to declare?”

“Passengers and cargo picked up at the Forest Gate dock, along with the Elvenking’s barrels.” He passed over the papers for the barrels, Percy stamping it with ease. “And I am cold and tired and ready for home.”

“You and me both.” Percy sighed, eyeing the lot on Bard’s barge. “Five silvers for the extra cargo, Bard.”

Bard passed over the extra toll, knowing it was going straight into the Master’s pockets but glad that it was Percy manning the gate and not one of the tax-men and gold-wringers who bled Laketown dry at the Master’s behest.
Or at least he was until a most unwelcome voice spoke up.

“Not so fast.”

“Ah, Alfrid.” Bard nodded at the Master’s chief lackey beside the captain of the Laketown guard, Braga.

“A consignment of empty barrels from the Woodland Realm.” Alfrid read off the papers Bard provided, one of the guards with him kicking the closest barrel to show it anything but empty. Bard thought he was so smart, smuggling in fish and the like. Not on Alfrid’s watch. “Open one up.”

“Alfrid is this really a scene you want visitors to our fair town to witness…” Bard attempted to belay them.

The weasel of a man hissed warningly at the bargeman, motioning for the guard to open it and revealing the fish filling it to the brim.

“Only these barrels aren’t empty, are they Bard?” Alfrid stepped up to the taller man, right into his face and tossing his papers down onto the icy dock. “If I recall correctly you’re licensed as a bargeman, not a fisherman. Passengers and cargo: fine. Fish…” He tsked.

“That’s none of your business.” Bard warned.

“Wrong.” Alfrid’s tone was smug with self-importance. “It’s the Master’s business. Which makes it my business.”

“Oh come on, Alfrid.” Bard played nice for the moment. “Have a heart, people need to eat!”

Alfrid scoffed, tossing the large bass he’d picked up into the water to rot.

“These fish are illegal.” He turned to the guards. “Empty the barrels over the side.”

“Thorin, Harry…” Bilbo whispered, tugging at Harry’s sleeve.

“We can’t interfere.” Harry told him mournfully as he watched the guards, the dwarrow all bristling with indignation at the waste.

“Thorin?” Bilbo looked up into Durin-blue eyes pleadingly.

“He’s right, little one.” Thorin’s voice was nearly a growl from restrained rage. “It’s not our place.”

“You heard ‘im.” One of the guards called to another. “Into the canal.”

“Folk in this town are struggling, Alfrid.” Bard switched attacks. If warnings and appeals to Alfrid’s non-existent better nature were in vain then perhaps… “Times are hard, food is scarce.”

“That’s not my problem.” Alfrid wrinkled his nose at the bargeman.

“And when the people hear the Master is dumping fish back in the lake?” Bard pressed, tilting his head slightly towards his passengers. “When the rioting starts? Will it be your problem then?”

Alfrid cast a disgusted look at the taller man then threw up one hand. “Stop.” He hissed the order. “Ever the people’s champion, eh Bard? Protector of the common folk. You might have their favor now bargeman: but it won’t last. Your family learned that the hard way already, didn’t they?”

Percy gave the order as Alfrid stomped back inside the toll booth. “Raise the gate!”
Unable to let it go despite the well-struck barb, Alfrid turned back to the barge as Bard steered it through the canal gate into the town.

“The Master’s got his eye on you! You’d do well to remember: we know where you live!”

“It’s a small town, Alfrid.” Bard shot back, recovering from the dredging up of ancient family history by the Master’s lackey. “Everyone knows where everyone lives.”

…

The Company watched and waited, Harry coaxing Applejack back into harness with the cart now containing their near-empty packs and bedrolls but naught else, as Bard pulled into dock near a market.

He’d been anxiously expected if the crew of young men – not much beyond their majority if that – jumped on deck and hauled the barrels of fish two at a time to empty them into rolling handcarts, the fish disappearing into the town as if it’d never been in a matter of moments under the bored eyes of the market guard who shook hands with Bard.

Harry and a few of the others caught the glint of silver passed between them.

Bard hadn’t exaggerated the state of the town in the slightest.

If anything he’d been downright discreet.

“There’s an ostler off the market.” Bard relayed, gesturing for one of the children underfoot at the market stalls to come over. “My son Bain here can show you the way then to the inn.”

The boy, Bain, was young, barely a teen if that, but seemed eager if the awed glance he cast at the horse and Company was any sign.

“Thank you, Bard.” Harry nodded as the dwarrow cleared the path for Harry to get the mule cart and Shadowfax off the vessel. “We appreciate it.”

Grumbles from the dwarrow seemed to echo Harry’s thanks however ill-given and then when at last Bard’s barge was empty the men clasped hands.

Harry was smooth enough that Bard almost missed it: the press of a coin.

Bard had been living under the Master for long enough not to give any sign of the hand-off, not so much as glancing into the cuff of his glove until he was home and gave hugs to his daughters and jaunty waves to the guards watching his house.

A good thing that.

It was no silver the Ranger had passed him but a shining piece of Gondoran gold.

…

If the innkeeper was startled to find himself playing host to a troop of dwarves plus a Ranger and a hobbit he gave no notice of it once he saw the gleam of good silver.

It was a small, shabby place due to the dearth of customers.

The innkeep was more accustomed to harboring drunken husbands turned from their beds or those too deep into the inn’s taproom tankards to even return home in the first place than he was renting the
inn entire to a single company but he rallied at receiving half the due coinage for their stay in order to purchase food from the marketplace to feed his guests.

Long term guests required better than thin porridge and day-old bread.

No, it was to be fresh roasted hens, haunches of whatever meat could be found, and the freshest and best of the day’s catch that wasn’t bought for the Master’s table.

He apologized to the Ranger guard who was far more personable and easy for the Man to approach than the rest of the strangers for the lack of fresh produce but was assured his dwarven guests would not object to the lack though the hobbit would appreciate whatever little things he could supply as well as the Ranger himself.

And so they lingered beneath the wary eyes of the Men of Laketown and the grasping claws of the Master for more than a fortnight before trouble came knocking once more.

…

“How many?”

The question of the Elvenking rang through his throne room as he took in the single surviving orc they had brought before him: the rest escaped beyond their borders or dead.

Legolas stood strong with one of his long knives pressed to the filth’s throat, his adoptive sister Tauriel watching from the foot of the throne with her arms crossed as Thranduil slowly descended from his throne.

“At least seventy, my King.” Legolas reported as the most senior of their hunting party that had spent many days and nights scouring the Woodland Realm at his father’s order. “We killed more than half their hunting party, the rest fled east.”

“Such is the nature of evil.” Thranduil pronounced. “Out there in the vast ignorance of the world it festers and spreads. A shadow that grows in the dark. A sleepless malice as black as the oncoming wall of night. So it ever was. So it will always be. In time: all foul things come forth.” He stopped his procession at the entrance to his throne room, facing his adoptive daughter and allowing Legolas to proceed unhindered by the distraction he caused the orc filth as its gleaming yellow eyes could not help but track him through the room though it could not understand his words.

“You were tracking a Company of fifteen souls.” Legolas tightened his grip on the filth, lifting his blade in wordless threat. “Why?”

“Not fifteen, not anymore.” The orc spat, glee in its every word as it drawled and drooled over the Westron tongue. “We saw the tall one: the black-haired magician falter and fall at the bridge. The forest will finish what we could not. He’s as good as dead already.”

“You like killing things, orc?” Tauriel commanded.

“Answer the question, filth.” Tauriel commanded.

“I do not answer to dogs, She-Elf!” The orc spat in the Black Speech of Mordor.

“I would not antagonize her.” Legolas warned as he stopped the filth’s flailing and Tauriel brandished her own curved blades.

“You like killing things, orc?” She spoke softly. “You like death? Then let me give it to you!” She darted forward only to be halted at a single word from her king.

Stepping back from the orc filth, Tauriel nodded in compliance then strode from the room, hearing her king’s words as she went.

“I do not care about one dead dwarf. Answer the question. You have nothing to fear.” Thranduil promised. “Tell us what you know and I will set you free.”

“Not a dwarf.” The orc spat. “Not a Man either. Smelled like nuttin’ else we’ve ever hunted before.”

“You had orders to kill them, why?” Legolas continued the interrogation. “What are they to you?”

“A dwarf runt that’ll never be King!” The orc growled. “A black-haired rider that kills orcs and wargs by the dozen.”

“King?” Legolas scoffed. “There is no King under the Mountain, nor will there ever be. None would dare enter Erebor whilst the dragon lives.”

“You know nothing.” The orc taunted. “Your world will burn.”

“What are you talking about? Speak!”

“Our time has come again. My Master serves the One.”

Now that gave even Thranduil pause in his slow rotation around the throne room while his son carried out his orders.

“Do you understand now, elfling? Death is upon you. The flames of war are upon you!” The orc began to laugh only for it to be cut short with one single sweep of the Elvenking’s sword, leaving Legolas holding a mere head for the second it took to process and he dropped it.

“Why would you do that?” He questioned his father, a perplexed look upon his face. “You promised to set him free.”

“And I did.” Thranduil replied moving to the twitching body at his son’s feet and stomping on one leg to halt the death-spasms. “I freed his wretched head from his miserable shoulders.”

“There was more the orc could tell us.” Legolas insisted, looking up into the face of not his father or even the king but the shadow of the greatest elven warrior alive reveling in the spill of black blood at his blade.

“There was nothing more he could tell me.” Thranduil corrected his son, turning away with a spin of his sword and sheathing it as the lightning quick movement – both the beheading and the spin – left it free of the orc’s taint.

But Thranduil had not raised a fool or a simpleton, Legolas continuing his interrogation but of the only source left to him: Thranduil himself.

“What did he mean by the flames of war?”

“It means they intend to unleash a weapon so great it will destroy all before it.” He enlightened his son before calling out his commands to his First Commander and the Guards alike. “I want the watch doubled at our borders! All roads, all rivers! Nothing moves but that I hear of it. No one enters this kingdom…and no one leaves it.”
Legolas saluted the King, relaying the orders through the guards as he moved to the Gate.

“Close the Gate! Keep it sealed by order of the King.”

“What about Tauriel?” One of the scouts asked as Legolas turned away to continue with his tasks now that the order had been given.

“What about her?” Legolas paused and turned back to the open gate, already mentally cursing his stubborn, willful adoptive sister. Now was not the time to be testing their father’s authority.

“She went into the forest.” His scout reported. “Armed with her bow and blade. She has not returned.”
Chapter 14

Broken Blade

Author’s Note: Yes, more movie dialog. Let’s move this beast along shall we?

Chapter Fourteen: The Lord of Silver Fountains

Legolas tracked her from the shadows of the trees for three days, always watching, searching to see what drove her onward.

Then she found it: animals slaughtered, blood spilled, all on an outcropping of rock high over the Forest River with a clear view of the Long Lake and Esgaroth beyond.

She knelt at the edge, thoughtful then whirled: bowstring drawn and arrow set only to be faced with the same but instead of a Morgul shaft on an orcish bow it was the beloved visage of her elder brother and mentor she faced.

A far deadlier enemy than any orc.

And worse: one she would have to explain and justify herself and her disobedience of their father’s word to.

“I thought you were an orc.” Tauriel told him, only a hint of sheepishness at being caught distracted by her mentor showing in her tone.

“If I were an orc.” He pointed out ruthlessly. “You would be dead.”

They lowered their bows, Tauriel rising to stare out across the lake as Legolas moved to her side.

“Tauriel, you cannot hunt thirty orcs on your own.”

That he needed to even say it hurt something inside him for having turned over her instruction to his captains when his duties as First and Crown Prince began taking up more of his time as the Greenwood darkened.

“But I’m not on my own.” She smiled back at him.

“You knew I would come.” He chuckled for having been played – rather handily at that – by his sister as if she was still an elfling trying to convince him to steal her sweets from the royal kitchens.

“The King is angry, Tauriel.”

“And our father?”

Legolas sucked in a breath, thinking of all he’d seen, all he’d heard. Frightened. Their father was frightened. But Tauriel was a child in many ways: curious, testing, naïve. She had lived through a tragedy but she hadn’t fought in any of the great wars or been Regent while their father marched with their grandfather at the order of Gil-Galad during the Last Alliance. She was an elf born in the Third Age under a waning darkness rather than constant threat. She didn’t yet have the experience to understand that even a great warrior, an Elvenking, could be frightened when all she could see was the cold mask of the King.

“For six hundred years he has protected you.” Legolas said instead of all that flitted through his
mind. “Favored you. You defied his orders. You betrayed his trust. Come back with me. He will forgive you, if you go no farther down this path.”

“But I will not.” She refused his counsel. “If I go back I will not forgive myself. The King has never allowed orc filth flee our lands. Yet he would let this orc pack cross our borders and harm travelers beneath our trees.”

“It is not our fight.” Legolas tried to reason with her, despite the sinking feeling in his stomach that said it was pointless. “The enmity between Oakenshield – if this is Oakenshield they track – and the orcs is fierce but apart from our own concerns.”

“It is our fight.” She insisted. “It will not end here. With every victory this evil will grow. If the King has his way we will do nothing. We will hide within our walls. Live our lives away from the light. And let darkness descend. Are we not part of this world, brother? Tell me, my oldest friend: when did we let evil become stronger than us? Than the great Elvenking’s First Among Commanders?”

“You know what you risk if we go.” He had to warn her, one last time. “A King cannot allow such disobedience. Not from his Captain of the Guard. Not even from one of his family.”

Legolas at least had the buffer of following their father’s orders to retrieve her, which would allow the Elvenking to brush off Legolas’s seeming disobedience under that aegis.

There was no such protection for Tauriel.

No one – not even Thranduil’s most ardent supporters – would believe she’d acted in ignorant haste rather than out-right disobedience.

“I know what we risk if we do not go.” She retorted. “I can live with our father’s wrath easier than I can a conscience riddled with cowardice.”

“Then you will not risk it alone.” Legolas agreed before darting off into the trees, the shorter form of Tauriel – and younger which played a part in her abilities – barely able to keep pace with the ancient Sindar Prince of the Great Greenwood.

…

To no one’s surprise, eventually word of the dwarves with their two strange companions spread like wildfire through Laketown, leading to an invitation for their leaders to attend an audience with the Master as whispers of what a group of dwarves might want with Laketown spread.

Invitation was putting it delicately, Harry thought, given that it was nothing less than a summons which was sure to chafe at Thorin.

They’d been there a month with plans to leave within a week when the overfed dandy finally took note of them and Thorin gathered up Dwalin, Balin, and Bilbo and hauled them along with him as he counted on the counsel of the latter pair – to Bilbo’s shock when the dwarrow said as much – and Dwalin wasn’t about to let Thorin out of his sight.

Harry was glad of it as it gave him a chance to explore without a suspicious – paranoid really at this point – Dwalin on his heels or a curious Bilbo who felt more comfortable with Harry’s company in the town of Men than any of the dwarrow who drew gazes where ever they went.

Trusting his feet to lead him where he needed to go, Harry wandered picking up snippets of gossip as he went.
The subjects on many minds were split thrice over from the majority of what Harry learned when he lifted the hood of his duster and did his best to blend in with the shadows that ran rampant in the dim, weak light of the northern autumn.

Of them all one was king – and led directly to the others in different ways.

Bard was right in what he’d said to the lackey of the Master.

The people were struggling, barely one step up from starving and that step mostly provided by the smuggling Bard “the Bowman” as Harry heard him called for his hunting endeavors and a small group of bowmen he hunted with engaged in when game was scarce.

From there the whispers took two paths: Smaug’s attack and the possibility that Thorin had come to reclaim Erebor even though they had no proof that Thorin Oakenshield was the Heir to Erebor or even Thorin Oakenshield at all.

That he was a dwarf with a small company with him seemed to be enough.

Then Harry heard the dreaded word that he seemed incapable of escaping even by finding a new world to call home: prophecy.

It was Bard, interestingly enough, who was frantically searching through a second-hand market stall’s wares that brought it to light.

“Looking for something?” Harry asked after he had his fill of watching the bargeman work himself into a lather as he searched.

Bard stopped, frozen in his tracks as his head slowly turned to face the Ranger, his hand slipping away from the tapestry he’d been searching for and located just as the other Man stepped from the shadows.

“A tapestry, apparently.” The shopkeeper announced, blind to Bard’s exasperated expression. Well, Vance never had been known for keeping things to himself.

“Really?” Harry tilted his head, amused at Bard’s frustration. “Like that one, there?” Harry moved around the frozen form of the man, pulling out the rich blue fabric undimmed from the years since it was taken likely from the ruins of Dale itself. “Let’s see, what about this tapestry could have you in a strop?” Harry mused, though he knew it wasn’t kind. Bard was too fun to play with, but he’d let him off the hook before long. He did try not to be intentionally cruel after all.

Spreading it out so that the Line of Durin was prevalent in the dim light of the stall, Harry hummed, whispering into one well-shaped ear as Bard kept him in sight at all times eyes flickering this way and that.

“Hmm. Interesting.”

“It’s him, isn’t it?” Bard asked, matching the Ranger tone for tone only his respect for the bellies the Man’s gold had filled over the last weeks keeping him from more aggressive action. “Thorin, son of Thráin…”

“Son of Thrór.” Harry nodded, his breath hot on Bard’s stubbled cheek. “It is. A favor for a favor: what is the exact wording of this prophecy I’ve heard of?”

“Not here.” Bard shook his head, hands quickly refolding the tapestry and shoving it back into a pile of rags. “The taproom.”
“Lead the way.”

…

“It’s an old saying, maybe a poem.” Bard enlightened the Ranger as they sat in a darkened corner of the inn’s taproom. They were alone, the cold of the night inspiring even the drunkards to stay warm at home and the innkeep waved off to bed with Bard’s assurances. “But it has taken on near mythic proportions to us.” Bard’s smile was bitter. “A bit of hope in hopeless straits.”

“The wording?”

“The King beneath the mountains,
The King of carven stone,
The lord of silver fountains
    Shall come into his own!

His crown shall be upholden,
    His harp shall be restrung,
His halls shall echo golden
    To songs of yore re-sung.

The woods shall wave on mountains
    And grass beneath the sun;
His wealth shall flow in fountains
    And the rivers golden run.

The streams shall run in gladness,
    The lakes shall shine and burn,
All sorrow fail and sadness
    At the Mountain-king’s return!”

“The lakes shall shine and burn…” Harry quoted with a short whistle. “Not the best phrasing but I’ve worked around worse while the rest of it sounds like the mountain’s curse can be lifted.”

“The mountain’s curse?” Bard frowned, confused. “You mean the dragon?”

“No.” Harry shook his head, taking a sip of bitter ale – but it was what there was – as he locked stares with the dark-eyed archer. “No, that I don’t. I could feel it from the river delta even as far off as the mountain was then. It’s only gotten stronger the more I linger here. Your people are hungry, there has to be more to it than a single greedy leader?” Not that Harry was underestimating the damage a sole, shitty, leader could do to a place but that didn’t quite match up what he’d been seeing and hearing around the town.

Bard’s shoulders hunched. “The wealth of Dale was taken by the dragon when the city burned. The people turned to Laketown for refuge. But you’ve seen the grey slopes and plains of Erebor. Nothing grows there.”

“Influx of population with no way to feed them and little to their names.” Harry nodded, wincing. “I can see how that would cause problems down the line. Dale was important for more than trade wasn’t it?”

“The Kingdom’s main export was produce from fields and farms to Erebor.” Bard gulped down his own ale without sign of discomfort. “Without those fields both kingdoms would’ve fallen without the fires and dragon’s ire.”
“It’s true what they say, isn’t it?” Harry pressed. “About you. About your family.”

“It’s just a story.” Bard lowered his gaze to the scarred wooden table. “Nothing more.”

“It bothers Dwalin you know.” Harry announced a moment later, tone conversational. “Something about you tugged at him when he met you. He knew Girion of Dale, you see. As the bodyguard of the Prince who often visited the city as he learned rulership he knew the Lords of Dale before Erebor fell. I bet if I asked him the mystery would clear up for him.”

Bard shook his head with a little laugh. “Ranger, spymaster, horse whisperer, is there nothing you can’t do?”

Harry leaned forward, confidingly. “Dance.”

Laughing – for real this time – Bard finished his ale and braced his hands on the table to rise only to freeze and sink back into his seat at another of Harry’s uniquely timed questions.

“Is what else they say true? Did Girion strike true? Did he wound Smaug?”

Standing, Bard spun away saying over his shoulder: “Under his left wing.” And stormed from the taproom towards home.

“Interesting company you keep, wizard.” The other spy of the Company melted from the shadows, Kíli taking Bard’s place across from Harry, not a hint of his normal jovial persona on display. “Bargeman, bowman, smuggler, Heir of Girion?”

“Good informants are hard to find.” A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, pleased as a cat in cream that he’d finally gotten the youngest Durin to drop his mask. “You should know that better than anyone considering the way you run the ‘Ris.” He leaned in, Kíli matching him. “Though I wonder if your brother is aware of your habit of pumping his beloved for information on your uncle and Bilbo?”

One hand snapped forward, the archer closing his fist around Harry’s lean throat in a not-so-idle threat.

“Temper.” Harry arched an unconcerned brow. “Now we can play this game all night but would you like to talk strategy for killing Smaug or prefer to rely on luck and blind faith like your fellows?”

Letting loose of the wizard, Kíli sank back eyeing him all the while, certainty that he’d read the other all wrong swirling through him. This wasn’t some bright-eyed idealist. Not a friend risking his life out of loyalty. No, those were there but they weren’t the all of him. Hadrian Peverell was playing a deep game, one that Kíli was suddenly aware he didn’t even come close to even grasping the rules of.

It was disconcerting to say the least.

He felt relatively sure that if they lived to see the end of his uncle’s mad venture that he could be three hundred years old and still learning spycraft from the Man before him.

“I’m listening.”

…

Dori was sipping his tea, gazing out over the lake towards Erebor as it was rimmed by the moon in the night sky when the world crashed down upon his head.
Gasping a cough, the dwarf swung one curled fist knocking the orc that had jumped down through roof over head down the hall then gave the call to arms as windows were crashed through and the taproom door battered down: “Du Bekar!”

Doors springing open down the halls as battling dwarves poured from the rooms he was answered: “Khazâd ai-mênu!”

“Orcs!” Harry shouted from the taproom as his crossbow downed the first attacker through the door before tossing it to Kili, unsheathing his sword and setting to work. “They’ve found us!”

Standing back-to-back with the youngest Durin, Harry was given no chance to rush the stairs and assist the remaining dwarves against the attackers they faced as it seemed an unrelenting flood of orcs poured into the downstairs from doorway and windows alike to the screams of the innkeeper and his wife who barred their door at Harry’s shout.

“took them long enough!” Kili laughed as another orc died with a bolt in the eye then launched a dagger at another.

Upstairs, the ‘Urs, ‘Ris – save Nori who was off who-knew-where, and Ōin and Glóin were shocked with the sight of elves dropping down from the holes provided by the orcs, arrows flying and bows knocking orcs from the windows.

“They search for something.” Legolas commented at the sight of the orcs tearing through the rooms despite losing body after body to the fury of the dwarven strength and elven bows.

Swinging through the air with a leap, Legolas launched himself back out of the inn looking for the commander as Tauriel rushed down the stairs as she pinpointed it as the source of the main attack.

Kili felt air – and ten years off his life – rush past him as he ran out of quarrels and took to fending off orcs with his dagger alone when an arrow with green fletching whistled by his ear and struck the largest of the attackers in its black heart. Whipping his head around in surprise, he saw her jump and turn in the air over their heads from beam to beam before landing to cut one orcs neck here and wallop another over the head with her bow there. She was fierce and deadly. She was…

“Beautiful.”

Harry smirked even as his awe-struck brother-in-arms fought with at least half of his attention of the red-headed elleth who had come to their aid.

Spymaster and skilled warrior or not, at times like this he remembered how young – comparatively – the three youngest dwarrows are.

“Kill now.” Harry reminded the young dwarrow. “Adore later.”

“Can’t I do both?” Kili laughed, grabbing yet another knife from the hidden sheaths he could feel in Harry’s armor against his back, returning the favor of the lovely elf with a well-thrown dagger saving her from a nasty blow from an orcish mace.

A bellow of Black Speech sounded, the last of the attackers dying as their reinforcements abandoned them.

“After them.” Harry ordered, Kili falling in behind him as he in turn darted after the elleth. “If even one escapes they’ll bring another hundred down on this place if they think Thorin remains.”

A shout from Fili had Kili’s arm snapping up to catch his bow and quiver as his brother launched it
at him from the second-story window of their room, the younger Durin keeping pace at a sprint with his longer-legged companions as he strapped the quiver in place and launched arrow after arrow at speed during their chase.

Closing the distance on the group of wargs they could at least see under the light of the moon at the edge of town surrounding a large white orc – put not the Pale Orc himself – they came upon a second battle in progress one of an ellon with silver-laced golden hair who sliced through a pair of orcs with his dual knives as easily as a hot knife through butter while Kíli and Tauriel laid down fire upon the wargs.

Three of whom turned and ran into the night at a roared order from the white orc commander.

“Kíli, the roof.”

Nodding, the dark archer ran up the railing of a near-by home, launching himself up and grabbing hold of the edge, hauling himself up and over through sheer strength as the elleth seeing Harry’s plan used her elven grace to best his maneuver onto the roof of a house on the opposite side of the canal.

Good. Harry thought as he gripped the Sword of Gryffindor. Now they had a kill-zone.

Picking up speed, Harry jumped from barrel to wall to railing, coming down behind the white orc as the blond ellon fought his way through the orc’s minions, Harry blending in much better in the dim shadows of the night in his dark armor and lifted hood than the beacon of the elf’s hair under the moonlit sky.

Eyes flicking at each other in acknowledgement, the two leapt and spun and turned keeping the massive orc pinned between them with every movement at the archers kept his minions from distracting them with cover fire.

The ellon used twin long knives to Harry’s bastard sword, taking the orc apart piece by piece and evading the monster’s massive strikes of blackened iron with the grace inherent in his kind coupled with the almost supernatural skill of a warrior with eons to practice his craft.

Harry didn’t need that.

All he needed was an opening; just one.

Moving in concert as his every strike was parried or blocked by armor or iron, Harry growled under his breath as the orc knocked away one of the ellon’s knives, focusing on the expert attacker at his front rather than the less-skilled one at his back.

More fool him.

Striking fast and sure, Harry split him from shoulder cap to mid-back through skin and meat down to bone before jumping away with a laugh even as bright summer-sky-blue eyes under dark brows stared at him in confusion as the ellon continued to press the orc, Harry joining him once more lest the pretty ellon get taken down by a lucky blow before the venom could do its work.

Moments later the monster swayed under a double assault then collapsed at their feet.

“Sorry, mate.” Harry grinned in elation from bloodrush and battle. “Venom takes a bit to work.”

Legolas cleaned and sheathed his knives as Harry did the same with the Sword of Gryffindor, the pair joined by Kíli and Tauriel from the rooftops, one with a great deal more ease than the other.
Crouching, Legolas studied the mark on the orc as Kili launched one final arrow killing the warg waiting for its master.

“This is Bolg, spawn of Azog the Defiler.” He looked up and away towards where the three surviving orcs had disappeared towards the north. “He wears a mark I have not seen in many years.”

“A mark?” Harry asked, arching a brow at the surprise on the elves’ faces.

“What did he say?” Kili prompted, keeping up appearances though he knew very well what the blond had said.

Harry relayed the ellon’s words while having a stare-down with the two elves.

“That of Gundabad.” Legolas finally loosened enough to admit. “You’re the stranger from the forest. The one whose magic protected and concealed the dwarves. The orcs thought you dead. Something about a stone bridge.”

The dark-haired Man – if that was indeed what he was, there was far too much magic around him for Legolas to believe such easily – smirked. “Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated I assure you.”

“Those orcs headed north.” Legolas told them, looking at Tauriel with nothing less than command. “We will track them to be certain.”

“You know where to find us if you feel like sharing what you find.” Harry replied, clamping a hand on Kili’s shoulder when the archer opened his mouth to say something that would likely be less-than-helpful given that they were both in public and dealing with elves.

Nodding at the pair, the elves sped away into the night leaving behind only green-fletched arrows as proof of their presence at all.

…

“Is that dwarf still staring at you?” Legolas asked, scowling as Tauriel glanced back towards the town.

“No more than the Man is at you, brother.”

Unsurprisingly, that didn’t make Legolas feel any better regarding having a dwarf infatuated with his sister.

“He’s tall, for a dwarf.” She continued, relentless in the way of a younger sibling who’d found a point to poke at on her elder.

“Aye, but still as ugly as the rest of them nonetheless.”

…

Resolutely ignoring the smirk on Harry’s face after they’d piled up the orcs from the battle on the edge of Laketown Kili was watching the dancing flames with the Man at his side when Thorin and Bard found them, the town guard already alerted to the disturbance and being sent away by the innkeep with a flea in their ear.

The rest of the Company remained at the inn to help with rudimentary repairs that would see them
through the night until stock could be taken in the morning.

“What happened?” Thorin demanded, quickly searching his nephew for any sign of injury of which there was thankfully none to be found.

“Orcs.” Harry told him. Ask an obvious question… “Specifically Bolg, Azog’s get. He’s dead.”

“And the elves?” Thorin pressed, Bard standing back his eyes swinging from Thorin’s back to Harry’s calm face to the pyre.

“From the Woodland Realm, tracking the orcs if I had to guess.” Harry shrugged. “They didn’t stick around for conversation, taking off after the few that escaped.”

“Did you get a name?” Bard asked when Thorin appeared disinclined to press the issue.

Since, you know, elves.

“No,” Harry tilted his head in consideration. “They were quite careful in that regard, communicated mostly in gestures. One a red-headed elleth with curved blades and bow, the other an ellon with twin long-knives and bow, silver-gold hair.”

“Elleth, ellon?” Bard frowned.

“Female and male elves respectively.”

Light dawned over the bargeman’s face. “That sounds like the Captain of the Silvan Guard, Tauriel.”

“And the male?”

Bard hesitated, flicking his eyes between Thorin and Harry before answering. “I’ve only met or heard of two elves in these parts with blond hair in my life: the Elvenking and his son, Legolas Thranduilion.”

“Aww, Harry.” Kíli teased mercilessly. “You saved the King’s son like some pretty pretty elven princess.”

“He held his own.” Harry corrected. “Better than I did. I just happen to carry around an envenomed sword instead of a longbow and twin long-knives.”

“I like this not.” Thorin scowled fiercely at the pyre. “We leave in the morning. I don’t want Thranduil sniffing around my people.”

“And you’re okay with the orcs doing it?” Harry rolled his eyes, exasperated with the stubbornness of dwarves.

Thorin had no answer for that, sweeping away with Kíli in hand, leaving the Men to their own counsel.

Harry eyed up Bard who was staring lost at the mound of burning orcish – and warg – bodies.

“You wouldn’t happen to know where I can find a black arrow and a windlance do you?”

…

Legolas and Tauriel returned from tracking the wargs and riders to find the dwarven company and
their strange companion gone from Laketown, already hours ahead of them by barge.

“Oakenshield left as soon as he heard of our presence most likely.” Legolas surmised after speaking with the innkeeper who’d been reimbursed handsomely by the Company for the damage to his establishment.

The dwarves had left, purchasing ponies and supplies from the townfolk, before the dawn.

“Why Gundabad?” Tauriel asked. “Why Bolg? What is so important about Thorin Oakenshield?”

“If he makes for the Mountain there is a great deal important about Thorin Oakenshield. As for Gundabad…” Legolas shook his head. “It is nothing good. An orc stronghold in the far north of the Misty Mountains.”

“My lord Legolas.” One of Legolas’s scouts mounted upon an elvish horse trotted up to the pair on the shores of the lake where they’d camped after hearing the news of a distinct lack of dwarves in Laketown. “I bring word from your Father. You are to return to him immediately.”

“Come, Tauriel.” Legolas ordered.

“My lord,” the scout hesitated then relayed the message nonetheless. “Tauriel is banished by order of the Elvenking.”

“Banished?” Legolas questioned in disbelief that the patient Thranduil had acted so quickly. “You may tell my Father if there is no place for my sister there is no place for his son.”

“Legolas.” Tauriel cautioned him. “It is our king’s command.”

“Yes, he is my king.” Legolas admitted. “He always will be. But he cannot command my heart and I will not leave my sister to walk alone into the dark. I ride north.” He walked away from the scout. “Will you come with me?”

“To where?”

“To Gundabad.”

…”

“Tell me again.” Thranduil commanded the near-shaking messenger. “Where did my son say he rides?”

“North, my King.” The messenger kept his eyes fixed on the toes of his boots. “To Gundabad?”

“Not why?”

“No, my King, however…” He hesitated as it wasn’t anything said but something he observed.

“Go on.”

“A fight had taken place in the town. The stench of orc and warg bodies being burnt laid heavy in the air. Lord Legolas tracked them north before returning with Taur-“ He stuttered on the name at the glare leveled at him then continued. “The banished to the town, my King.”

“Gundabad orcs and wargs in Laketown, a dwarven Company traveling East, Azog the Defiler.” Thranduil mused as he flicked his hand in dismissal than called for his generals save the first among them who was missing.
Traveling north to Gundabad, apparently.

“Ready the armies. Encamp on the very edge of our territory. Send scouts ranging north and south along the mountains.” He ordered. “If orc filth think to take the Lonely Mountain we will be waiting for them.”

Who knew?

Maybe Thorin Oakenshield and his small band will manage it against all odds and logic screaming otherwise.

It had been nearly an Age since he’d been surprised.

Not since Tauriel’s elfling years.

It would be good for the blood and the exercise excellent for the armies.

In any event: the Woodland Realm would not be caught unawares no matter what the near future held.

…

When the Master awoke after his meeting with the dwarven leader the previous night it was to most outlandish tales.

Orc raids on the town.

Bodies burning on a pyre sending up the most outrageous stench.

Topping them all however had to be the news that they were suddenly missing one dwarven windlance that used to be stationed upon their bell tower!

Immediate reaction – and Alfrid’s incessant nagging – would have it that Bard somehow made off with it or his dwarven patrons did so.

However, the guards had thoroughly inspected Bard’s vessel to ensure that the only thing Bard left with was the pack of rabble and their animals: nothing more.

Still.

It was a most perplexing issue.

Something would have to be done about it.

After a flagon of Dorwinion wine, of course.
Chapter 15

Broken Blade

Author’s Note: Can we just take the fact that I'm going to use movie dialog until...ever...as read at this point? Please?

Chapter Fifteen: Smaug the Terrible

By barge and horse, Esgaroth stood only a few hours from the ruins of Dale. Once, the short distance was intentional for the purpose of commerce as Esgaroth was a vassalage of the Lords of Dale and founded by them as a fisher village. For the purpose of Thorin Oakenshield, it put the orc pack and elves well to their backs as they made for his mountain.

Dale itself in the days of Garon the founder and Thrór father of Thráin was, as Garon’s ultimate descendant in the days of Thorin Oakenshield had noted to a strange Ranger, a trading center.

Commerce and trade had flowed down the mountain to the River Running and the grand city of Men that had grown in a bend of that great river and from thence to Esgaroth, the Long Lake, the lands of dwarves, elves, and Men to the south or east, and last to the lands of the Elvenking to the west.

To the elder members of the Company the sight of the ruins where they remembered a thriving city filled with healthy citizens was as great a shock to the system as the memory of the dragon’s attack itself and made them fearful for what horrors awaited them inside the halls of the Lonely Mountain.

It was a grief tinged with elation – they were finally within near-touching distance of the mountain! – but it was grief nonetheless.

And while grief and awe held sway over the dwarrow of the Company, the pair of Men and a single hobbit were dealing with much different emotions.

Well, they were now that Thorin had gotten over his tantrum at Harry including Bard in the last leg of their journey.

Being told: You hired me to kill a dragon! How I go about that is my business not yours! Hadn’t set well with the King to say the least, especially as his moods became evermore mercurial with each step towards Erebor.

He couldn’t feel the curse the wizard spoke of.

The dread on the hobbit’s face at the sight of nothing but ash and ruin meant nothing to him.

Only the Mountain.

Only finding the Hidden Gate and all that lay beyond it.

“Do I even want to know how one goes about stealing a windlance?” Bard asked that night as they made camp in the shelter of the stone docks of the River Gate. Adjacent to where the River Running came out from under the mountain and swept down towards Dale, it had been quickly closed like the Main Gate at the time of Smaug’s attack.

Smaug might have been monstrous and terrible but he was clever and intelligent with it – which was almost worse.
For his part, Bard was there for one reason and one reason only: the black arrow.

He would not give up the only heirloom of his family.

It was all they had left after more than a century of scrabbling to create a life in the mud and muck of Laketown.

All that remained of their pride.

He would no more let it go freely than Thorin would hand over his map of Erebor.

However, when faced with a troop of dwarves who would not rest but enter the mountain, Bard couldn’t chance that the lake shall shine and burn at the mountain king’s return.

Blood and fire would not take his family and people from him as they had done his ancestor.

Bard was left in the end with only one option: go with them and see it done himself even if it meant leaving his children orphaned.

At least they wouldn’t grow up, as he had and his father and his father before him, under the shadow and terror of the Great Wyrm.

That the Ranger, Harry, actually had a plan – one that he, Bard, and the young dwarf Kíli had sat and discussed for hours as they crossed the Lake – helped.

Thorin had in the end caved to a combination of not wanting to waste anymore time before searching for the Hidden Door, Balin’s sound advice, Dwalin’s badgering, and Bilbo’s soft eyes though he had stipulated that Bard was not a part of their Company and had no claim on the treasure of Erebor even if he should be the one to slay Smaug.

That was fine with Bard.

He wasn’t a greedy man and Harry had already promised him a share from his own pocket either to be passed to Bard or his family depending on the result of this mad venture.

At first, Bard had been half-convinced that Harry was the only sane one of the Company.

Then the more he spoke to those that would speak to him he became convinced: Harry’s wasn’t the same one, he was the most insane of the lot.

Given that he’d not only signed up to kill a dragon but convinced Bard with honeyed words, dark portents, and cheerful graveyard humor to do the same, Bard found he wasn’t actually surprised by that revelation.

That Bilbo was right there with him however in the ranks of the mad, was a bit of a shock.

…

“The Main Gate is on the other side of those hills then.” Harry mused, looking over the map and the surrounding terrain as they loomed over it in the light of the campfire that night between two arms of the mountain.

“Ravenhill is the one with the ruined watchtower.” Dwalin supplied, Thorin lost in his own thoughts even as they talked strategy which did nothing but worry his brother Balin the more it happened though the Halfing was still able to shake their King out of it. “If the beast is as monstrous as I remember the Main Gate is his only way out of the mountain.”
“Smoke still rises from it.” Bard said. “When vagabonds search the ruins of Dale for anything still surviving for use or sale they whisper of it in the town.”

“The question is,” Harry mused, staring at the foothills and sheer rock faces of the mountain above. “Is Smaug the type of creature that charges a threat head-on or does he turn and shield himself?”

“As dangerous the foul thing is, what makes a threat?” Dwalin retorted. “Charge, I’d say. You didn’t see it lad. Arrows by the hundreds were loosed and bounced off its armor like they were tipped in naught but wool. Even a dwarven black arrow shot from a windlance: the weapon designed to take down a dragon, can fail if shot at the wrong piece of it.”

Bard shot a nasty glance at the dwarf at the reminder of that.

As if any son of Girion had ever been allowed to forget it.

“Left side and a single scale.” Harry shook his head, rubbing at his chin. “I haven’t seen Smaug but on any of the dragons I’ve seen in the past that’s a small target. You might as well be trying to shoot an acorn from the top of a great oak with the wind in your face.”

“What about your magic, Harry?” Fíli asked, moving over to join the conversation after settling around the fire with Ori, Dori finished fussing over his brother.

“A dragon is no orc or warg.” Harry grimaced. “They have magic of their own and their hide isn’t just resistant to weapons but magic itself: the hide, you understand not just the scales.”

“Then the eyes, open mouth, and the missing scale.” Kíli tapped out the targets on the rough sketch of Smaug that Balin had scribbled out for them in the dust and ash coating the stone dock. “Those are our targets.”

“Supposing the beast is even alive in there.” Thorin at last joined the conversation as if waking from a stupor.

“Oh, it’s alive.” Harry noted grimly, turning to stare up at the high peak. “I can feel its magic with every breath. I wasn’t being flippant or paranoid, Thorin, when I said this land was cursed: it was and is. The dragon-sickness calls, reaching out with grasping, beguiling tendrils to trap the mind and ensnare the senses. And there is something else,” he frowned, tone absent. “Something beneath it. Something…older that calls as well.” He shook his head, dismissing the notion for the moment.

First things first.

“Never thought I’d miss the cloying magic of Mirkwood.” He chuckled darkly. “But that,” he jerked his head towards the mountain behind him. “That is a whole different kettle of fish unlike anything I’ve ever felt before.”

Leaning forward, he tapped Ravenhill.

“That’s where we set the windlance. I’ll fashion copies of the black arrow – they won’t have the dwarven enchantments to pierce armor – mind.” He warned Bard. “But they’ll let you test the aim of the weapon with the right weight and flight of the arrow. Secondary archers,” he pointed to the ruined watchtower and the far statue beside the main gate. “Will help aim and position Smaug where we need him.”

“And if he won’t be herded?” Bilbo asked.

As it was his job to investigate the mountain and see if Bard’s information on the missing scale was
right he felt it was a rather pertinent question – though Thorin had commented that there was something else he was needed for as well.

He hadn’t said what.

Not yet.

But something told him it had to do with his official Company title as a Burglar.

“Then he becomes my problem alone.” Harry said simply. “Fortunately I have a few tricks up my sleeves yet that Smaug won’t expect.”

“We still have to find the Hidden Door.” Thorin pointed out drily. “And only a week to do it.”

“That’s a lot of mountain to search in a week.” Bilbo winced, shivering a bit with cold only to start in surprise when he felt the heavy drape of a fur coat cover him. Glancing up at Thorin he blushed and stared back at the fire, rigorously avoiding the knowing gazes around the fire – especially the smug one belonging to his prat of a best-friend.

“Technically we only have to search a quarter of it.” Fíli noted pragmatically, very much his mother’s son. “Lord Elrond said it was on the Western Face.”

“Oh,” Bilbo snorted, rolling his eyes as the others laughed. “That’s so much better then.”

…

“Can’t you use your magic to find the damned thing?”

Even perennially-cheerful Bofur’s spirits were dampened by three days of searching by day and Thorin’s increasingly foul mood at night, Harry could tell by the sheer tone of the question.

“That,” Harry pointed his spoon at the pig-tailed dwarf as he tucked into his bowl of hot stew. “That right there is why wizards don’t go around showing and shouting what they can do. Once people start to expect miracles out of thin air it’s the beginning of the end.”

“I’ll take that as a no.” Fíli interpreted drily, gaining himself a shrug from Harry.

“Only if you want to definitely wake Smaug up before we’re ready for him.” Harry suggested. “I’ve been careful to keep my magic from even touching the cursed land here, keeping it to acts above the earth to avoid gaining his attention. If I send it seeking to discover the Hidden Door, he’ll know it with as pervasive as his spell is netted down over the mountain and especially if I inadvertently interact with the treasure.”

That he was also conserving his magic as much as possible since he wasn’t sure if he was going to be breaking a curse or actively fighting one – pre-or-post dragon at that – wasn’t for them to know.

Valar knew Thorin would likely act like a wounded bear – or even more so – if he said anything about it.

Even his nephews had felt the sharp-edge of Thorin’s tongue the longer the search for the Hidden Door drags out, only Bilbo spared by virtue of the pair’s increasing closeness that seemed to have begun out of thin air to Harry but then he hadn’t been there for the Misty Mountains or Thorin’s apology at the Eyrie.

Of course it was strange to him despite witnessing the progression of it.
By the eyerolls, sighs, shrugs, and playful nudges of the rest of the Company – depending on the culprit – it wasn’t nearly as odd to them.

“You have more plans for him than just to man a windlance.” Balin commented from behind Harry as they wizard moved away from camp to pet and spoil Shadowfax.

“Just as you had more plans for Thorin Oakenshield than to scrabble and scrape to feed his people in the Blue Mountains.” Harry answered. “One is not unlike the other.”

“Bard is a good man, I’ll give you that.” Balin admitted, moving up to stand side-by-side with the wizard. “But good men don’t necessarily make good kings. Thorin had the education and experience before Erebor fell to lead his people, all that came after polished and hardened it into the diamond bedrock Durin’s Folk have leaned on through this exile. What does that lad have?” Balin asked, shaking his head as Shadowfax allowed him to pat at his neck. “A life as a smuggler, poacher, and bargeman? That’s no making of a king.”

“He has a love of his people and a burning desire to see them live a better life than one under the boot of the Master of Laketown.” Harry responded. “I won’t make him a king, Balin. I couldn’t even if I wanted to.”

“Once he helps slay a dragon you won’t have to.” Balin snorted, seeing right through that pretty bit of worded fluff. “They’ll do it all on their own. And then what? Overthrow the Master? Resettle the ruins of Dale? Uprisings of any kind set a dangerous precedent.”

Wasn’t that the truth? Harry knew that better than anyone. Still never stopped him before and after witnessing the deprivations of Laketown he wasn’t about to stop now.

“Gandalf thinks I wasn’t sent to slay a dragon.” Harry finally spoke just as Balin turned away to return to the fire, his piece said. “If that was all that was needed any idiot with more balls than sense could do it with luck on their side.” He jerked his head toward the Mirkwood. “A dragonslayer already exists a few days that way. I like to think Gandalf was right. That there’s more I can offer this world than a passing skill with a sword and a bit of magic to throw around. That I care more about the people going cold and hungry in Laketown that the cursed treasure under this great hunk of rock.” Green eyes burned when they flicked between Balin and where Thorin hovered near Bilbo. “And I don’t give a damn what sort of precedent it sets.”

…

On the sixth day – to the rejoicing of all the Company at the lift to Thorin’s mood – Bilbo and Fili found a hidden path up the face of the mountain. It was slim and craggy, Bombur not trusting it to hold him or to keep his feet on the tiny goat-path and so stayed at the camp with Bard, their gear, and the animals. Blending with the rock face, the hewn stone led them to an alcove and then an outcropping that overlooked the Main Gate of Erebor with a smooth – too smooth to be natural – sheer wall as it dead-ended.

Harry, finished with practicing along with Bard by the Main Gate, found them up there: Thorin and his nephews, Bilbo and Ori, Balin and Dwalin with mulish looks on more than one face that said they’d not be leaving until “the last light of Durin’s Day.”

The others – except Bombur – had already come and gone, the outcropping and ledge far too small for the entire Company to camp upon for the night and all the next day.

A blasting spell would probably be the only thing getting Thorin off the rock face.
Kíli would have to leave before Bilbo went into the mountain with Harry shadowing him else they’d be absent an archer but for the moment Harry let them be, the three Durins huddled close with a nephew under each of Thorin’s arms and Bilbo within arm’s reach.

“You lot set?” He asked, looking around at their bedrolls, rations, and water skins. Their call if they wanted to piss off the edge of the mountain for the next day or so. As long as he wasn’t downwind he couldn’t give a fuck over what idiocy they indulged in up there.

“We’ll be fine, Harry.” Bilbo assured him with a smile, reaching out and tugging the tall Man into a hug. “Going back down the mountain?”

“Is the wizard afraid of heights?” Dwalin guffawed good-naturedly with the relief of having found the location of the Hidden Door.

“Not in the least.” Harry smirked, arching a brow. “But I’ll take hot meals for the next day over shivering up here anytime.”

Bilbo perked up at that, as Harry knew he would, though a single glance traded between king and would-be burglar had the hobbit sighing and bidding goodnight to his friend.

“Last light of Durin’s Day.” Harry reiterated. “I’ll make sure I’m not late.”

…

As the sun lowered towards the horizon, Harry and Bard traded a look and clasped arms before turning from each other and sprinting away.

Bard to Ravenhill with his black arrow to wait in silence for Kíli to join him.

Harry to the Hidden Door to follow Bilbo into the belly of the beast.

“Stand fast.” Bard bid him.

“Shoot well.” Harry responded then nearly flew up the mountain so swift and sure were his steps.

Bard watched him go with raised brows.

Nothing he’d learned of the Ranger had changed his mind in the least: there was more to him than met the eye.

Reaching the ledge and finding it overcrowded with dwarrow, even Bofur leaving his brother to wait at the base of the stair with the ponies, Harry shook his head in exasperation at the frantic spell that seemed to have washed over the Company as he studied the rock formations whilst the sun set to a near-riot from the dwarrow when no key hole or door appeared.

“What?” Thorin breathed, hopes dashed in a moment, key and map falling from his slack hands. “All of this. All the pain and blood. All…for nothing?”

“What did the map say, Balin?” Fíli prompted the advisor. “What did it say?”

“Last light of Durin’s Day.”

“Oh.” Bilbo blinked. “Is that all?”

“All?” Dwalin stared at the hobbit like he’d lost his wee mind. “All?”
“Well, yes.” Bilbo shifted, leaning down and plucking up the map and key. “Durin’s Day is when both the last moon of autumn and the first sun of winter appear in the sky together, yes?” He held up his hands in exasperation, flapping the map and pointing to the sky. “The moon hasn’t risen yet.”

“Moonlight.” Harry grinned at his friend. “Not sunlight, moonlight the same as the moonlight needed to read the map. Valar bless your good hobbit-sense, Bilbo, I wasn’t looking forward to trying to take on Smaug blind without a back-up plan.”

“How were you going to manage that then?” Kili frowned. He hadn’t said anything to him or Bard as far as he could tell.

“Knock on the door until the grumpy bastard answered.” Harry snarked, then sobered at the scowl from Bilbo who’d moved to stand beside Thorin, handing the King back the key to the hidden door. “Same way I’m going to get his attention with information: break his spell over his horde thereby cutting his connection to it. If there’s a better way to piss of a dragon I don’t know it.”

“Yer a mad bastard.” Dwalin growled.

“I followed thirteen dwarves, an inconsistent Istari, and a hobbit across two-thirds of Arda.” Harry deadpanned. “I think we can take that as read before I started making plans to kill a dragon.”

“Man has a point.” Bofur muttered to his cousin Bifur, the spear-wielding dwarrow growling something in return in Ancient Khuzdul.

“There!” Ori bounced on his toes, pointing towards the upward crescent of the moon beginning to show over the top of the mountain’s natural formation. “The light!”

A held breath, like a deep breath before the plunge, and then Thorin saw it: the crack in the wall as a thrush flew from a bush with a snail held in its beak and knocked on the crack before flitting away when Thorin stepped forward.

The key turned and with a great gust of air dust and rock blew out from the wall at the Company who shielded their eyes and faces with raised arms and hands.

When their vision cleared it was to the sight of Thorin pressing forward against the rock, the line of the door having been revealed by the gust.

With the muscle of a dwarven smith behind it, the slab of stone swung free into the dark passage of the mountain.

Heart in his throat, Thorin Oakenshield made to step forward into his home and heritage for the first time in over a hundred years – only to be brought up short by a hand with a golden ring set with a ruby halting him on his shoulder.

“Wait, Thorin.” Harry told him, voice grave and grim, drawing even the stubbornest of the dwarrow company from their awe. They’d done it. They’d made it to Erebor. They’d found the door. But they weren’t done yet and the greatest challenges yet laid before them. “Wait. Can you feel that?” He asked, eyes dark and locked on the passage. “Can’t you sense it?”

Lifting one of Thorin’s hand with a gentle touch on his left wrist, Bilbo pressed it to the doorway into the mountain, the six-inch wall that hid the passageway then the door was shut.

“I can feel it.” Bilbo whispered. “It fills me with dread and I haven’t the stone-sense of a dwarf only the earth-sense of a simple hobbit.”
Thorin closed his eyes, putting aside his elation and pride, and focused on that the pair seemed to know that eluded the rest of them as the rest of the Company exchanged glances then motioned Bofur and Bifur on, the cousins laying their hands above and below Thorin’s own on the doorway as Bilbo moved out of the way.

Bofur felt it first, his stone-sense refined and practiced from years in the mines of the Blue Mountains though his cousin and their King weren’t far behind him, all hissing and jerking their hands away from the stone of the mountain.

“What is it, Uncle?” Kíli asked, almost frightened of the reaction, a visceral place inside him – an instinctive place – wanting to leap away from it.

“The stone cries out.” Thorin swallowed hard. “It…”

“Weeps.” Bofur shook his head, backing away from the doorway. “I didn’t believe you, lad.” The miner stared between Harry and Bilbo. “Either of you, friends or not when you spoke of the curse you could feel. I’m sorry for it. It wasn’t well done of me.”

“What can be done?” Thorin asked, finally turning away from the passage into Erebor. “Can it be righted?”

“I can try.” Was all Harry could promise him, promise them all. “First things first: Smaug. Then I can go about making the mountain safe for dwarrow to enter. In the meantime,” Harry stepped forward and lifted a hand, silent words falling from his lips as a glowing white line traced the doorway. “A precaution or two and a back-up plan: what did you want Bilbo to fetch from the mountain?”

“The Arkenstone.” Thorin admitted after a glance and nod from Balin. “The King’s Jewel. With it I can command the Seven Kingdoms and bring an army to retake Erebor that would undo even the wrath of Smaug.”


“A shining oval stone.” Thorin explained, lifting his hands to show the approximate shape and size. “Filled with the glowing white light of a winter’s sun.”

“One gem in a dragon’s horde. Right.” Bilbo nodded sighing. “How hard could that be?”

More than one snort met his irreverent words though Kíli and Bofur actually snickered even as Kíli started back down the mountain to get into position.

“Alright, first plan first.” Harry turned to Bilbo. “We need to see his left chest, under his wing. Dragons are clever, vain, intelligent. If it isn’t readily visible he’ll need to be maneuvered into showing himself in full. The moment,” Harry emphasized. “The moment you see the missing scale you need to get out of there and return here.”

“What about you?” Bilbo gave a worried frown, shifting on his feet.

“Don’t worry about me.” Harry dismissed that. “You’re not the only one that can go unseen when you wish my friend, and I have a different path in mind to reach the Main Gate. Ready?”

“Mahal go with you.” Balin murmured, the rest of the Company echoing his words as Thorin reached out and pressed Bilbo’s hand for a brief moment before letting go.

Looking up at his friend’s bright green eyes, Bilbo nodded. “As I’ll ever be to raid a dragon’s
horde."

Creeping down the steps of the passage, Harry stopped Bilbo when he began to hear the distinct sound of breathing having already been smelling dragon for quite a ways into the mountain.

“Something I didn’t say before,” he informed his friend so it wouldn’t be a terrifying surprise later. “I spelled the door to close after you cross the threshold the second time. So, don’t panic and raise a fuss.”

“Really?” Bilbo sighed in exasperation. “Really, Harry? You’re not even going to try and escape if this goes wrong are you?”

“No, I’ll get out, Bilbo.” Harry grinned down at him. “But I won’t need any door or secret passage to do it.” So saying, he flexed his magic and appeared to melt and blend into the surrounding rock.

“Wizards.”

…

Harry sat, making himself as comfortable as possible on the stairs leading to the passageway as Bilbo muttered to himself searching through the gold.

“Arkenstone, Arkenstone, a large white jewel…very helpful.”

As the burglar searched, the wizard closed his eyes and sent his magic spooling through the horde, looping and weaving and tying itself in and around and through and between the dense net of the dragon’s power over the horde. Harry never had been much of a cursebreaker. Too much tombs and deserts and Inferi guardians for his taste. But when it came to shredding spells and wards set by an enemy there were none better.

This magic was new to him.

Different.

But it was pure force, no elegance to it, no give much like the dragon’s nature.

It was iron.

However, as a dwarven smith or two Harry knew could have told Smaug, iron can shatter if struck wrong.

Or in this case: just right.

Now they just had to find the damned thing under the literal mountains of gold in the belly of the mountain.

Harry had been wealthy in his old life.

This…this excess and gluttony was just ridiculous.

More: it was disgusting when contrasted with the poverty that laid almost literally on its doorstep in Laketown.

Then Bilbo made a lucky – or unlucky – depending on how one looked at it, grab to move a golden cup and coins waterfalled down on of the massive golden hills of treasure, revealing at last what they were there to find: dragonhide.
Specifically, the closed eye of a great fire drake.

Smaug the Terrible, Greatest and Chiepest of Calamities, asleep amongst his horde.

More coins shifted as a long, scaled tail moved beneath them, and hidden by a great pillar Bilbo turned back towards where he knew Harry waited and lifted his arms in pure disgust with the debacle he’d gotten himself into.

Harry held in a laughing snort.

It was a little late for Bilbo to be reviewing his life choices.

The massive head moved, seeming to swim through the gold, Bilbo falling to his back with a little cry, and that great closed eye snapped open searching for what had disturbed its rest.

As Smaug rose, roused from his slumber as Harry watched, Bilbo took something from his pocket then between one moment to the next disappeared.

Brows lifting, impressed, Harry leaned forward but couldn’t see the hobbit no matter how hard he tried.

If it weren’t for the oppressive magic of the dragon, he’d try and see if how Bilbo did that left any magical residue behind but for the moment there were other issues at hand beyond Bilbo’s surprising ability.

Like a massive dragon that could apparently talk.


Watching Smaug move and prowl, Harry was suddenly glad to have Bard waiting with a black arrow.

He did not fancy having to try and do a run-up on that creature to stab the damn thing with the Sword of Gryffindor. No, not at all.

“Where are you?” Smaug hissed. “Where are you?”

Then, from what Harry could tell Bilbo…well…panicked, turning and running the sound of his footsteps and the clatter of coins giving him away when sight alone did not.

Smaug’s head whipped around with a draconic grin and then he was giving chase, Harry rising to his feet with a spell ready on his lips, willing to take the chance even if it would do no good and ruin the plan that at least he might distract Smaug from Bilbo.

Thankfully, it seemed there was no need, Bilbo’s mad genius rising to the fore under pressure even if it took listening to Smaug taunt him for far too long to get there.

“Come now,” the dragon entreated. “Don’t be shy.”

Harry could nearly taste the new spell that threatened to ensnare.

“Step into the light.”

“Hmm.” Smaug pondered. “There is something about you. Something you carry. Something made of gold but far, more, precious.”
Harry nearly cursed when the spell snagged Bilbo, having him remove what looked like a golden ring from his finger and revealing him.

“There you are.” Smaug was pleased. “Thief in the shadows.”

“I did not come to steal from you.” Bilbo swallowed, straightening. “Oh Smaug, the Unassessably Wealthy. I merely wanted to gaze upon your magnificence.”

Harry bit his cheek, careful not to draw blood. Someone had been practicing temper regulation on Thorin. Good to know, Bilbo’s calm worked on dragons and those merely with the temper of one alike.

“To see,” Bilbo gasped, backing up against a pillar. “If you really were as great as the old tales say.” He whimpered a bit. “I did not believe them.”

Smaug reared back, stomping and shifting.

Vain, Harry had told him, the word echoing through Bilbo’s mind. Oh yes, he could see that. Smaug was vain, indeed.

“And do you now?!” Smaug puffed himself up, showing himself in all his glory from the horns on his head to the spikes of his tail.

Harry rose to his feet, focusing. There. He smiled viciously. Bard had been right. Smaug was missing a scale.

Bilbo, Harry sent the thought at the hobbit’s mind like a dart. I see it. Go.

But Bilbo was far from the stair.

He needed Smaug to herd him closer or he’d never make the run – invisible or not.

“Truly,” Bilbo swallowed, side-stepped away from the pillar, shifting in small degrees towards escape. “The tales and songs fall utterly short of your enormity, oh Smaug, the Stupendous.”

“Do you think flattery will keep you alive?”

“No, no.”

“No, indeed.” Smaug stopped with his preening and moved closer to the strange creature. “You seem familiar with my name but I don’t remember smelling your kind before. Who are you and where do you come from, may I ask?”

It was then that Bilbo saw it: gleaming and shining under a layer of golden coins and felt himself torn in twain.

For there rested the Arkenstone and yet upon the steps behind him stood his friend hidden in the shadows waiting for Bilbo to run that Smaug might yet be slain.
Chapter 16

Broken Blade

Chapter Sixteen: Death and the Undying

Last Time:

It was then that Bilbo saw it: gleaming and shining under a layer of golden coins and felt himself torn in twain.

For there rested the Arkenstone and yet upon the steps behind him stood his friend hidden in the shadows waiting for Bilbo to run that Smaug might yet be slain.

...

Bilbo cursed in his head.

That just…figured.

“I,” he said breathlessly. “I come from under the hill.”

“Underhill?” Smaug questioned, moving closer.

Bilbo nodded vigorously, gaze splitting between the Arkenstone so near and yet so far and the great drake bearing down upon him, well aware that Harry was likely having a conniption on the steps as he watched and waited for Bilbo to escape.

“And under hills and over hills my path has taken me.” Bilbo continued. “And, and, through the air, I am he who walks unseen.”

“Impressive.” Smaug twined around a pillar, more entertained than he’d been since he’d taken Erebor. “What else do you claim to be?”

“I am,” Bilbo closed his eyes as Smaug leaned in far too close. “Luck-wearer. Riddle-maker.”

“Lovely titles.”

“Star-thrower.”

“Stars?” Smaug backed away. “Now that is interesting. And what about your little dwarf friends?” He asked. “Where are they hiding?”

“D-dwarves?” Bilbo asked, pretending confusion and shaking his head. “No. No, no dwarves here. You’ve got that all wrong.”

“Oh I don’t think so.” Smaug told him smugly. “Star-thrower. They sent you in here to do their dirty work while they skulk about outside.”

Bilbo moved towards the Arkenstone – and away from the stair – Harry cursing up a storm inside his head as Smaug took his gaze off Bilbo for a few moments before returning to watching him like a cat tormenting a mouse.

“Truly,” Bilbo tried again. “You are mistaken, Smaug, oh Chieftest and Greatest of Calamities.”
“You have nice manners.” Smaug dealt him a backhanded compliment. “For a liar and a thief! I know the smell and taste of dwarf! No one better! It is the gold! They are drawn to treasure like flies to dead flesh!”

As Smaug stomped around his horde, he sent a particular stone flying, Harry finally seeing what had Bilbo deviating from their plan: Thorin’s damn Arkenstone.

He would kill that dwarven oaf if his “King’s Jewel” ended up getting Bilbo hurt or killed.

“Did you think I did not know this day would come?!” Smaug ranted, Bilbo running around after the Stone while the flying lizard threw his tantrum. “That a pack of counting dwarves would come crawling back to the mountain?!”

“The King Under the Mountain is dead!” Smaug declared, not yet done playing with Bilbo as he ran. “I took his throne! I ate his people like a wolf among sheep! I kill where I wish, when I wish! My armor is iron! No blade can pierce me!”

…

In Laketown, the people cried out as the mountain crashed and shook. At the edge of Mirkwood, an elven scout called back into the forest: “Alert the King! The dragon has awakened!”

…

Smaug flew down the mountains of gold, landing on a stairwell landing of clear stone.

“Oakenshield.” Smaug almost spat the name. “That dwarfish usurper! He sent you in here for the Arkenstone, didn’t he?”

“No, no no.” Bilbo continued to play the game with the massive fire drake. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t bother denying it.” Smaug scolded him. “I guessed his foul purpose some time ago! But it matters not.” The dragon calmed, even if only for a moment. “Oakenshield’s quest will fail. A darkness is coming.” Smaug looked towards the south then returned to his game. “You are being used, thief in the shadows. You were only ever a means to an end. The coward Oakenshield has weighed the value of your life and found it worth nothing!”

“No,” Bilbo shook his head where he stood tucked in a corner pillar. “No. You’re lying.”

“What did he promise you? A share of the treasure?” Smaug mocked. “As if it was his to give. I will not part with a single coin! Not one piece of it!”

Harry used the tantrum – complete with its waterfalls of golden coins, pillars being knocked over, Bilbo’s cries, Smaug’s echoing bellow – all to his advantage sprinting across the treasure hall of Thrór and scooping up Arkenstone and burglar alike when they both went flying at a swipe of Smaug’s giant paw.

“What part of run was so hard to understand?” He hissed at his friend under the cover of Smaug’s latest vainglorious speech about the awesomeness of himself. Snapping up the Arkenstone, he tossed it behind them, not wanting the foul thing touching his friend a moment longer. He could almost taste the madness on it.
Behind them, Smaug roared out his fury, Harry beating his golden-red flames to the concealed corridor of the hidden passage by but a hair's breadth.

“Go!” Harry yelled as he set Bilbo back onto his feet, the hobbit stumbling up the hidden stairs. He waited a moment to be sure the fool – a fool in love apparently if willing to risk his fool-of-a-Took’s neck for a bloody rock was any sign – was well and truly gone then apparated to Bard’s position on Ravenhill.

…”

“So,” Kíli chirped after shaking his head at the sight of a wizard just appearing in the shadows that had most definitely been lacking a wizard a moment before. “I’m guessing Smaug is alive, now he’s awake, and you’ve managed to piss him off.”

“Actually,” Harry drawled, wincing at the smell of burned hair. Damnit. That was coming from him. “That was all Bilbo and your uncle. For a creature that hasn’t poked his head out of the mountain in sixty years Smaug is remarkably well-informed about Thorin and his quest to retake Erebor.”

“Birds.” Bard and Kíli said in unison, shooting uncertain looks at each other.

“Men of Dale can understand the thrushes born and bred in his area.” Bard explained.

“Great Ravens have served the Durin line for centuries.” Kíli added.

“Awesome.” Harry said in English, ignoring his companions confusion as they heard Smaug continue to rage inside the mountain. “Just…get ready. I’ve got the curse ready to break. It won’t take long after that for him to come roaring out of the mountain.”

“Is,” Bard hesitated. “Is he as big as they say?”

“Bigger.” Harry shot them both warning looks. “His eyes alone are the size of a Man’s head: Kíli, those’ll be your target. Bard, yours is smaller, perhaps half that size and exactly where the tales say it is. I’ll aim for his mouth with spears then switch to my crossbow: I doubt I’ll hit the brain but it should buy you both time.”

“Aye.”

“Aye.”

“Good.” Harry nodded. “Give me a hundred count to get into position across the way on the statue and then I’ll break the enchantment.”

Bard and Kíli nodded, then Harry stepped back into the shadows and around the corner before apparating again to the bit of a deer-blind he’d set up atop the far statue before the main gate. His spears, fashioned with his magic and given a refresher or two from Bifur on throwing them, already standing tall with their tips shining in the moonlight, his crossbow on his hip. Harry took a deep breath, then another.

And on his mark, he tested the magic he’d woven into Smaug’s own then with a tearing motion of his arms tore it to shreds to the sound of a trumpeting, enraged bellow that put all of Smaug’s previous cries to shame.

On the ledge waiting before the hidden door, the dwarrow shifted on their feet, Bilbo rocketing out of the passageway and the door slamming shut behind him, collapsing in pure terror into the arms of
Thorin and the others as they all turned their gazes down to the main gate.

…

“Wizard scum! I am fire! I am Death!”

“I am throwing a tantrum.” Harry finally mocked as he’d been yearning to do since the damn leathery rat-with-wings opened his maw and started yapping his ear off.

Better Bilbo than him trying to deal with Smaug after all, minor heartattacks they both suffered aside.

Harry would’ve lost it two minutes in and either been fried – he didn’t want to test his undying thing to the point of mastication and digestion by a dragon thank you very much – or tossed spells at his conceited ass until one got lucky then had to deal with Thorin’s bitching over having a stinking dragon corpse on his damn treasure.

Everyone else was terrified.

Harry was too.

But at the moment he couldn’t really feel it buried under heaving layers of exasperation, spite, and wanting to be done with this already.

Plus, he did not like what Smaug had said regarding “a darkness is coming” at all.

Tremors spread and grew stronger as Smaug continued his rampage inside the mountain then in a spray of flying boulders and stone he burst through the Main Gate like a fist through tin-foil.

Dragon bone must be exceedingly dense.

“Shit.” Harry cursed, snatching up the first spear.

Smaug was moving too fast even without taking flight. He needed to slow him down.

Taking careful aim, he took a breath.

Another.

Then launched the spear – but didn’t let go, using it like a grappling hook and sinking it exactly between the plate of two scales on Smaug’s right shoulder thanks to a spell, Harry letting go and rolling away as Smaug flared his wings with a cry, loosing his sword with one hand and grabbing hold of a spine-ridge spike with another as a disillusionment charm snapped into place.

No need, as it turned out.

Harry’s mad, reckless risk had panned out as no sooner had Smaug reared back and flared his wings, chest heating and turning red had Bard seen it and launched the Black Arrow, the dwarven craft striking true.

Falling and rolling to the ground as the dragon swayed, not about to risk getting crushed under the massive body, Harry sprinted away behind one of the shrapnel-boulders from the gate then turned to catch what his magic had already told him with the winking-out of Smaug’s life-force: Bard had done it.
Bard had slayed the dragon.

Cheers and cat-calls and shouts resounded from high above as Harry stepped back around facing the remnants of Smaug the Terrible and sheathing his sword, pounding feet from Ravenhill his only warning that he was about to be joined.

There were several arrows jutting from the thinner hide around Smaug’s eyes, Harry having missed Kíli’s work as he focused on Smaug alone, Harry’s spear from the dragon’s shoulder, and barely visible from under the left wing the black fletching from an arrow nearly the length of Bard himself.

“Now *that* is something you don’t see every day.” Kíli noted, arching a brow, then frowned as something occurred to him. “And it’s right bollixed up the road to the mountain and the main gate.”


“Can’t just enjoy the moment, can you?” Harry tsked, crossing his arms over his chest as he flicked a hand and set an age line over the gaping entrance to the mountain only with the opposite effect of the one he’d seen used before. Instead of making it so one had to be of a certain age had to be *under* a certain age to cross it.

With the dragon-curse gone he was getting more feedback from the magic of the land and mountain.

It was a sad day indeed when killing a damn dragon was the *least* complicated task to deal with.

Thorin was going to be *fuming*.

Hopefully he’d remember his own words regarding what he’d felt in the stone and not press him too much before he can fix the problem.

If nothing else Harry would toss Bilbo at him.

Maybe his friend could keep his infuriating beau in check.

Harry rather doubted it though he was certain Bilbo would try.

“Right then.” Harry sighed, rubbing the back of his neck and beginning to pull supplies out of his jacket pockets and enlarge them back to full-sized including a trio of leather satchels he’d purchased in Laketown, a large crystal vial Lord Elrond had given him, and an iron-banded trunk from Bilbo’s attic. “To work. You two just…” He waved a hand absently as he conjured lit torches around the length of Smaug. “Pull up some rubble. I’m sure the others will be down here soon to revel and I’d like to get as much of this done as possible before they get underfoot.”

“Any idea what he’s talking about?” Bard asked his fellow archer.

Kíli merely shrugged and found a seat on – as Harry suggested – a piece of rubble, certain that they were about to bear witness to more of what Harry considered his every-day magics, Bard following his example though as the arrows – Black and regular – and spear detached themselves from the great dead lump of dragon and clattered to the ground at their feet he could do nothing but goggle in shock.

“Yeah, he does that.” Kíli responded to the wordless shock on the Bowman’s face. “Sad to say that you actually get used to it after a while.”

And as Harry continued breaking down the dragon corpse, Bard watching with wide eyes, he could somewhat see what Kíli meant.
A wave of Harry’s hand had – Bard thought anyway – the blood from the dragon swirling in the air and funneling into a container.

A turn of that same hand revealed the belly of the beast, a grasping motion all the treasure used to harden and shield the vulnerable underside of Smaug peeled away, then dividing and flying into two of the bags sitting to one side.

All at once, Harry lifted both hands into the air, Smaug slowly rising from the ground. With one hand staying flat as if bracing the dragon up, the other slowly slid to the side, scales peeling from the hide as if Harry was using a razor to slice them away. The scales rather than falling to the ground diving into the wooden trunk as Harry turned his “bracing” hand, Smaug turning with it, until there was nothing but leathery hide covering the once greatest of all calamities.

A pulling motion had claws flying off to the side.

Then at last was a spell Kíli had seen many times before: one for skinning followed up immediately with one for tanning and Harry, panting from exertion, was able to lower the carcass – for that was all Smaug was anymore – back to the dirt.

“Okay there, Harry?” Kíli called, remembering a time not so long ago where Harry had strained his magic into blacking out.

“Fine.” The wizard called back, then dug into his jacket for his flask. “Almost done, actually. All that practice with our catches on the trail made this easier than it’d be otherwise.”

Sipping at his cocoa, Harry debated what to do with the dragon flesh, knowing no real use for it then vanished it with a click of his fingers, leaving only the massive heart untouched and clean bone behind.

Tucking his cocoa back away, Harry levitated the dragon heart from inside the cage of black bone, raising it to eye-level a foot in front of him as he considered it.

The damn thing was bigger than Bilbo.

Using the hide-tanning spell once more, the fingers of Harry’s free hand teased and played in mid-air as he worked the heart-strings apart, then once straightened wrapped them into a coil and set them atop the pile of scales in the expanded trunk he’d been enchanting off-and-on since Bag End.

Closing and locking the lid, Harry shrunk it back down and slipped it into his pocket, followed by the sealed vial of dragon’s blood as he considered the problem of the dragon’s skeleton.

Which was about the time the rest of the Company arrived, Harry shrinking the dragon’s claws and sending them flying into the still-empty third satchel as he picked up the other pair and wandered over to where Bard and Kíli had been holding a quiet discussion and watching him work.

“Here you are, my friend.” Harry handed over the stuffed-full packs to the dragonslayer. “One reward for your help killing a dragon: as promised. With the dragon-curse ended it is safe to take from the mountain.”

With a flight of fancy, Harry flicked his fingers and had the image of the Black Arrow’s unique head burnished in black onto the flaps of leather as Bard set them at his feet.

“Thank you, my friend.” Bard smiled at the other man. “Believe me it was my very sincere pleasure although,” he grimaced. “I have a feeling the first thing I’m going to have to buy is new pants!”
“What, in all the hells, are we supposed to do with that?” Thorin finally asked after they had reached the trio of dragonslayers at the main gate and finished celebrating, the Company turning to stare at the skeleton as Bard slipped away back to camp, intending to return to Laketown with the dawn.

“What’d you do with the rest of him?” Óin prodded a reclining – against Smaug’s great, ruddy skull nonetheless, the younger dwarrow taking his example and clambering all over the damn thing – Harry with one boot, waking the drowsing wizard.

“Broke it down!” Kíli shouted from where he was lounging between Smaug’s horns atop his skull. “Like any other thing we’ve hunted the last six-plus months!”

“Mahal’s Hammer.” Bofur adjusted his hat. “You did?”

Harry nodded, hands linked over his flat stomach, not bothering to open his eyes to watch a bunch of dwarrow goggle at the dragon’s skeleton, though he had checked on Bilbo before taking up his slump against surprisingly-comfortable dragonbone…but that might just be the exhaustion talking.

“Scales, hide, blood, and all.” He confirmed. “Thought Thorin might like a dragon skeleton for his throne room as a trophy.” He mused aloud. “Would make quite the statement piece and a suitable coronation gift.”

“I thought Bard struck the killing blow?” Fíli was puzzled. Why was Harry dealing with Smaug when according to the laws of most realms it actually belonged to Bard no matter who had the idea of how to see it done?

“They had a deal.” Kíli jumped down from playing on the skeleton, the last to get tired of the new sport. “Bard got whatever gems or gold or whatever was attached to the corpse and Harry got the rest of it.”

“What about you?” Glóin’s merchant’s heart beat with suspicion at that. From what he could see – that being a handful of blooded arrows not shot from a windlance – his cousin was entitled to something from the kill as well.

Kíli shrugged. “Covered under the Company contract. Harry’s detailed that he could make any and all deals or arrangements pertaining to the slaying of our dragon infestation. He asked but I’m already a Prince of Durin’s Folk. I didn’t think I’d need anything from the kill itself in view of that.”

“Probably going to make him some dragon-claw or dragon-scale arrows anyway.” Harry commented, still pretending sleep from sheer obstinacy at this point. “His birthday presents for the next century from me are taken care of.”

Kíli’s smile could blind the sun at that.

“And the curse?” Thorin got back to the pertinent question, urgency prodding at him. Once word traveled that Smaug was dead the scavengers would begin circling – if they weren’t already.

“Still there.” Harry confirmed to much let-down among the Company, finally heaving himself to his feet fully intending to leave the skeleton where it lay until Thorin decided whether he fancied a new throne room decoration or not and starting the long walk back to camp. “The dragon-sickness was only the top layer of the curse upon Erebor. What remains is much older and problematic.”

“Why’s that?” Balin prompted.
“I can sense the cause now that the dragon is gone.” Harry explained, shooting a warning glance at Bilbo when he started to ask a question. Given that he’d seen Harry chuck the Arkenstone back into the mountain like the very sight of it would burn the eyes from his head he really didn’t want his friend mentioning curses or stones anywhent soon. “Reversing it…that’ll take more magic that I possess. But with a few newly acquired magical items – dragon’s blood, for example – I might manage to undo enough of it to make it safe to inhabit while I work on the remainder.”

“What about Gandalf?” Bilbo suggested, frowning. Harry’s voice had a tone he wasn’t certain he liked. “Could he help?”

“Certainly.” Harry snorted, voice dry. “If he were here.”

“Famous last words.” Thorin muttered, exchanging an amused glance with the present wizard over the disappearing antics of the absent one.

…

“What’re you doing?”

Harry looked up from creating one last blood ward before he risked everything he was sent to Arda to do, to accomplish, for the sake of people who would never know his name and for others that once they found out the cost would never thank him for it.

He had been told over and over and over again that he could not die. No matter what.

His magic would keep him living through things that would kill another.

He would feel every bit of pain and sorrow and deprivation but with no sweet release at the end of it all.

His magic would do that.

The question that had occurred to him sometime ago as he repaired a bridge and hit his knees was simple: what happened if he ever truly emptied his magical core?

Would he live through that?

Was it even possible?

His people had experience with draining their magical cores but it was a system designed to prevent the complete emptying of the core because, as he’d told the others months ago, every living thing was a being of magic.

Even when he risked his life at seventeen he’d never run the risk of living without his magic should he survive.

It was inconceivable.

Until now, when circumstances had presented themselves in a manner where losing his magic completely was an actual possibility.

And that terrified him.

To a wizard who’d thought he’d lost the ability to truly fear in the wake of losing everything
mattered to him and never really regained it even once he allowed himself to start to feel again, it made him think of things he hadn’t considered since he’d lost his concept of personal mortality.

Since coming to Arda he’d never had to consider what would happen if he were to not exist.

What would happen to his friends?

What would happen to his familiar?

Would he disintegrate into dust and ash like Tom had done?

Would he drift as a lost spirit until Middle Earth ended?

Would he be taken to Valinor?

Or would there not even be enough of him left without his core and magic to cobble him together for his spirit to go on?

It made him cautious in a way he’d not been in…years.

He wasn’t forsaking the gift the Valar had given him or the trust they’d placed in him, not in the slightest.

But there was a part of him that had never died that was the son and godson of the Marauders and that part had never lost the knowledge of the value found in taking an immense risk to gain an equal reward.

It was the same part of him that listened to an apparition, bargained with Death and deities, and stepped through into another world on the mere chance for something more to his life than an endless parade of dark wizard to catch and politicians in search of his rubberstamp.

That being said: he hadn’t expected to be caught out taking one last precaution for the good of his friends in case of a worst-case scenario either.

And if he had, it certainly wouldn’t have been by Fíli.

Thorin’s heir had been an interesting one to come to know. Not as charming and gregarious and deceptive as his younger brother. Not as singular a dwarrow as Kíli in either looks or attitude, for being the “golden” son of Durin he tended to fade into the background of his younger brother’s charm and his uncle’s sheer presence. A warrior being groomed for the throne, on his shoulders fell all the responsibility for himself and his brother – as well as all of the blame.

If Harry had been asked to think of a specific instance where Fíli stood out to him amongst the Company, it would only have ever been at that breakfast in Beorn’s Hall where he was all-but glowing with radiant joy at gaining approval to court Ori.

Intellectually Harry knew that Fíli had accomplished feats at arms of bravery and daring whilst he was away in Fangorn but as he wasn’t there, he didn’t think of them when he thought of Fíli.

In a way, it made him almost a better spy than his younger brother for all that he truly didn’t have the temperament for it being far too honest and honorable in his actions and words alike.

He also understood the idea and function of tact which definitely put him one up on his uncle the King.

Harry liked the match of Fíli and Ori. The scribe’s gentle comfort wrapped around a spine of solid
steel and a punch that could knock out an ox would stand the future King in good stead. That the pair were likely to be constantly underestimated thanks to Thorin’s brusque, over-the-top, hammer-to-the-face persona actually made Harry interested in dropping into royal council meetings to eavesdrop once Fíli takes the throne from his uncle to watch them run rings around politicians and envoys alike.

The wizard sensed shenanigans and fuckery ahoy once the unholy pair of Fíli’s unbending honor and Kíli’s sly cunning ruled Under the Mountain.

“What I always do, Fíli.” Harry finally met the blond’s Durin-blue gaze so like his Uncle’s. “What I must.”

Stepping out of the blood-ward circle, Harry closed it, lifting one finger to his lips in a shushing motion, smirking only a lot when Fíli attempted to step over the line and discovered it was of a different nature entirely than those he’d used in Mirkwood. Those were to keep things out as well as prevent outside influence. This was closer to a nursery spell used on young witches and wizards to protect them from foreign magics and keep them in a safe place while their parents are using potentially dangerous magics.

“And what is it you must do that requires us trapped, Harry?” Fíli lifted one hand after he’d been – gently but still – pushed backward when he tried to step forward, testing the circle but only felt that same gentle warmth keeping his hand inside the blood-ring. “After you’ve already prevented us from entering Erebor?”

“I knew you’d try once I slept.” Harry grinned, tilting his head a bit and letting the melted and singed ends of his hair fall into view. “Let me guess: Nori?”

“Óin, actually.” Fíli shrugged at Harry’s visible surprise. “The greybeards all remember Erebor, Nori was the youngest at the time of the attack, not more than a toddler. He doesn’t recall it.”

“Damn.” Harry mused. “I owe Bilbo ten gold coins for that. My money was on you or your brother.”

Harry turned to walk away, Fíli at last noticing what was wrong and had him so unsettled: Harry wasn’t wearing his armor. He didn’t have his weapons. Other than bathing, seeing Harry standing in the dark of the pre-dawn morning it was as…naked as he’d ever seen him. Real and…raw he supposed without all the padding and protection of layers of mail and leather and silk.

All the Man wore was a pair of thin, undyed trousers.

No boots on his bare feet.

No tie in his damaged hair.

Not even a shirt.

Just a simple, unadorned dagger in one hand and a glint of crystal in the other.

The morning was frigid in the new winter air but Harry didn’t shiver.

The mountain was rough under his feet but he pace was steady and utterly unhurried.

Resolved.

That was it, Fíli decided.
Harry was resolved about whatever it was he felt he had to do.

Fíli thought the set of his shoulders and the flex of his arms were not unlike that of when his uncle had risen to his feet on a tree falling over a cliff, flames all around, wargs and orcs baying for their blood, and walked down to meet the Pale Orc with sword in hand.

Harry was going to face a battle…and it was one he didn’t expect to win.

“If you’re going to collect on that bet.” Fíli called out, knowing that any protests or arguments would fall on deaf ears. So he did the only thing he could. He did what he must. “You’ll have to be here to claim it.”

Harry turned his head to the side, not fully looking back but Fíli saw the glow of bright green eyes nonetheless and nodded.

And that was all.

Perhaps, Fíli thought as he lowered himself down to stir up the coals of the fire since it looked like they weren’t going anywhere soon, that was all that was needed.

…

A flick of Harry’s hand had the age-line on the Main Gate falling.

Another dropped the barrier spell on the Hidden Door.

One way or another Harry and this cursed mountain were going to come to terms. If he succeeded then the spells keeping the dwarrows out wouldn’t be needed. If he failed…well it wouldn’t be his problem then anyway and he could hardly make the curse on the damned place worse.

Setting the dagger and vial of dragon’s blood down beside the gate – he wouldn’t be needing to enter the mountain, not this time – he summoned what he needed from within the damned place, lowering the cursed Arkenstone, that tainted Silmaril cursed by a darkness unlike any Harry had felt before in all his life.

It had felt at war with itself even in the brief instant he’d held it in hand in the depths of Erebor.

A dark, wicked curse that drew like-to-like, feeding on the very power of the Gem, the same power that utterly rejected it and held it at bay.

Harry had to admit, it was the first time he’d felt comradery with a Gem of all things.

The curse of the mountain wasn’t a curse of the mountain but the stone. His problem was that unable to complete its insidious purpose the dark magic had twisted and reshaped itself into the curse of Erebor, worsening any evil it comes into contact with. It trebled gold-madness and dragon-sickness. Called for all those greedy and lusting to come and claim it. The curse could not stay or the entire East would never know true peace, an East that contained people that to Harry’s surprise he’d actually come to give half a damn about.

Acts of extreme evil had twisted the Silmaril of Maedhros into the Arkenstone.

Evil had continued to reinforce that first sundering of fire and blood.

A different sort of fire and blood would be needed to cleanse it and the land that the taint and curse had settled into over centuries and centuries of seething below the surface of the world until it had
been unearthed by Thrór in the Third Age.

Looking at the unprepossessing pile of spell components: Gem, vial, and dagger; Harry cracked his neck, rolled his shoulders and shifted into his Animagus form then launched into the sky with a piercing cry his plumage as blood-drenched black as the fire dripping from his mighty wings.

A song of cleansing and defiance poured from Harry’s beak carrying through the breaking dawn for miles as he soared through the sky once more cloaked in his phoenix form, feathers as black as his hair edged in the blood red of his flames with hints of flash-fire white and blue.

Climbing and spiraling higher and higher, he sang and sang an unending lament of evil come and evil defeated, his flames growing hotter and fiercer with every note and press of his wings against the air currents, his flight as unending as his song until he hovered high in the sky above the peak of the Lonely Mountain, flames wraithing him.

And then he dove, spiraling once more until he reached the far point of Ravenhill, his speed and magic such that as his near-wing brushed the frost-tinged ground fire leapt in time with his song for miles and miles in an ellipsis until he had wreathed the damaged lands of the mountains and the Desolation of Smaug in flames of a different ilk than a dragon’s fire.

Harry rose once more, just high enough to return to the Main Gate of Erebor leaving his spell-not-circle blazing in his wake.

Shifting back as his claw touched the stone before Smaug’s skeleton, Harry picked up the three items he’d left in the dragon’s “keeping” then apparated to the plateau of the peak he’d marked from the air: as high as he could go above the mountain and still stand.

His glamor dropped as he set Gem, vial, and dagger down onto the ice-cap of the mountain.

This wasn’t a place or time for such things and he’d need every ounce of his power as it was to even attempt to pull it off.

As it was, he’d already begun: there was no backing out now despite second, third, and hundredth thoughts.

Unsealing the dragon’s blood, Harry pulled with his magic until the entire mass of it was floating over head in a roiling bubble of red. An unholy cloud of life and fire and fury. Intoning a spell that was as much will as it was Quenya, he crossed his fisted hands and arms over his chest then slashed them outward, hands spread wide, forcing the blood to spread into a filament-thin net over seven miles long from point-to-point across the Lonely mountain to the far point of Ravenhill, covering the entire mountain side and even the ruins of Dale.

Then he dropped them, sending blood searing down and filling in the central “grid” of the ellipsis he’d marked with his phoenix fire to contain the dragon blood and the effects of the ritual he attempted alike.

The only place absent the dragon blood catalyst?

The blood-warded circle made of Harry’s magic surrounding the dwarrow camp on the River Gate docks, the raised platform even preventing them from being indirectly affected along with the soil of Erebor.

Harry stood on the high mountain-top, the nexus point of the catalyst grid, glaring at the evil little jewel that had caused so much strife and pain, wishing he could simply punt it into the River Running but knowing even if he did that wouldn’t be the end of it.
Placing the Arkenstone *just so* inside the grid, Harry knelt and picked up the simple dagger marked with the sigil of the Master of Death.

With a knowing hand, he traced his left-hand ribs, counting.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

In he drove the dagger, thrusting it into his heart and coughing blood within moments as he jerked it out, blood spilling down onto the Silmaril as his phoenix fire ignited at his incantation, lighting the dragon-blood grid like a match on gasoline.

Light raced through the grid: black and green and white as the words poured on and on and on from between blood flecked lips, tongue never faltering, earlier precautions keeping his magic from shutting down his voluntary systems to force him to stop, allowing him to continue beyond the endurance of the mortal Man he used to be and even the immortal half-Elven he’d become.

They’d made him Undying.

Damned if he wasn’t going to force them to prove it.
Chapter 17

Broken Blade

Chapter Seventeen: The Nature of Sacrifice

Last Time:

Looking at the unprepossessing pile of spell components: Gem, vial, and dagger; Harry cracked his neck, rolled his shoulders and shifted into his Animagus form when launched into the sky with a piercing cry his plumage as blood-drenched black as the fire dripping from his mighty wings.

...

Bilbo startled awoke to a heartbeat like a crash of thunder under his ear where it was pressed to the planks of the River Gate docks, reverberating up through the soles of his feet and the shouts of his companions’ panic.

Given the events of the previous night he’d been rather hoping for a much calmer wake-up call but there was nothing he could do about it now.

Rising slowly to his feet, Bilbo stared with shock at the pandemonium surrounding him.

Flames danced on the horizon.

Light – power – flashed upon the ground as Thorin spun to him upon finding that they were trapped upon the dock and wrapped him in his arms, the pair holding each other close as Bilbo located the pulse of a heartbeat he’d heard just before waking: it was the press and throb of the light where it touched the earth.

All across the dock-camp the others did the same, quieting in time as the display drew on and on without end, pulling the others close in pairs or family groups.

Ori held between Fíli and Dori, Kíli pressed up against his brother and uncle.

Dwalin grabbing hold of Nori and Balin alike and pulling them close to eye-rolls from the rest of the dwarrow that in a less-stressful moment would have likely been heralded by a round of finallys.

The ‘Urs stood back to back as Thorin’s cousins Glóin and Óin sat with not more than a bare inch between them.

And despite the earlier cacophony, all was quiet save for the sound of harsh, panting breaths.

For a group of dwarrow set very much to fight over any other reaction being held inside one of Harry’s blood-ward circles was perhaps more straining than an all-out battle would have been.

Which reminded Bilbo…

“Where’s Harry?”

Fíli looked up from where he’d been soothing Ori, being one of the only dwarrow to keep his head through the whole initial panic. He’d known something was going to happen after Harry faffed off. Even so…he could’ve hardly expected what came and as the light kept going strong as the sun rose, the light and heavy thrum of stone that vibrated up the pillars of the dock nearly forcing his teeth to
“He left before dawn in little more than his skin.” He reported as much to his Uncle’s chosen – whether Thorin or Bilbo were aware of it or not the oblivious sods – as to his King. “Caught him just as he finished the circle to keep us in and safe while he did…whatever this is.”

Bilbo nodded as Thorin frowned harshly at that – or as the hobbit had come to think of it made his “thinking” frown since the high-handed dwarf had a dozen or more of the things – nibbling at his lip, debating with himself.

“Thorin…” He said slowly, swallowing. “There’s something that happened in the treasure chamber with Smaug that I didn’t tell you last night…”

The spell was like a scream of power into the night.

A shining beacon visible in the sky from miles and miles away.

For those sensitive to magic it was felt from a far greater distance, a wave or ripple of magic reaching all the way to the great caverns of the Elvenking’s Halls, the cairns beneath Mount Gundabad, the far reaches of Khazad-Dûm. Heads turned towards the northeast from Lorien, Fangorn, Imladris, and even the Old Forest itself that was a mere remnant of Fangorn’s former glory that spread once from the western seas to the Anduin Vale. And in the ruins of Dol Goldur a grey wizard trapped in a crow’s cage by a servant of darkness opened his eyes and smiled.

The Champion of the Third Age had at last truly come home to Middle Earth.

“Why must you always push?”

Harry opened his eyes slowly surrounded by a warmth that had no place on a high mountain top and with an absence of pain directly contrary to what he’d been doing when his eyes last closed.

Hypothermia was painful after all as he’d had cause to learn long before he’d adapted to both his phoenix nature after his second – or maybe third – death-that-wasn’t and being made Half-Elven didn’t negate that even if it increased his already impressive resistance to cold.

And then there was the stab wound to his heart thing.

At least he hadn’t felt his dagger nick the bone of his ribs.

Bone took freaking forever to heal and bone chips were a bitch to remove without cutting himself back open.

Sitting up and then standing, noting absently that he was in the same tissue-thin trousers he’d passed out in, Harry looked around at the faces and forms surrounding him, more than one looking very not amused while a couple others had nothing less than shit-eating grins in place.

Looks like someone(s) won/lost a bet.

“It’s my nature I suppose.” Harry answered, turning at last to bow to the one figure he recognized. “My Lady, Yavanna.”

Now She looked like that cat that ate a whole gallon of cream to wash down a flock of canaries.
The burly Vala beside Her with fiery red hair and burning eyes however...not so much.

“Hello, Harry.” Yavanna grinned, looking painfully young for a moment for a near-all-powerful goddess of earth. “You rang?” She teased, borrowing an idiom from his original world.

“Had to get your attention somehow, My Lady.” Harry grinned in return as the other Valar grumbled a bit over being ignored by their Champion in favor of the Green Lady. “Seemed to be the thing at the time, always worked for Death.”

“The Powers of your old world are ridiculous ninnies.” Nienna, the Lady of Mercy, snorted, crossing Her arms over Her chest as Harry turned and smiled at her, nodding in tacit agreement with Her evaluation. “And heartless save for your former Patron, Our Champion.”

“As you say, My Lady.” Harry agreed without agreeing, knowing better than to all-out insult a deity even one a universe away. “I found something that many have sought that belongs in Valinor.”

“Your sacrifice cleansed it of that which concealed it.” Manwë, High King of the Valar, spoke in his gentle voice that could howl like a hurricane in battle or sooth a babe to sleep with a whisper.

“It is not yet time for what was found to be returned.” Vairë, She who Wove the strands of fate, reminded Her fellows.

“Such an item could tip the balance of the world.” Námo, Lord of the Dead, shook His great head.

“For good or ill.” Irmo, Lord of Visions frowned. “The Paths are unclear.”

“Then it is settled.” Varda, High Queen of the Valar, decided after a glance at Her husband. “The Arkenstone shall remain with the Earth as it has since the fall of Maedhros.”

“I broke the spell on the stone.” Harry shifted, eyes flitting over the illusive forms – more light and air than substance – of the Valar. “It cost my life. I don’t have the power to conceal it once more, though in time I could keep its nature Secret.”

Yavanna’s tinkling laughter rang through him and over the skies though Harry was the only one to hear it in his dream.

“The favor owed my children is repaid with this, My Champion.” She told him, beaming. After all: he’d laid the pattern and set the spell at the cost of his life.

All She had to do now was give it a tiny push and part of her Earth long tainted could be renewed.

“The cost you pay will be great for what is done.” Nienna warned, her eyes dark but endlessly gentle. “You will not regain your full power for many years to come.”

Harry simply bowed in response.

If his magic amplified by the Green Lady’s own managed what he thought, it would be decades before the darkness he felt upon Arda regained enough strength to strike back at the Northern Kingdoms.

It would have to be enough.

“So be it.”
When the lights faded and the blood-warded circle fell (Glóin falling onto his face with it as it’d been his turn to test the barrier) the Company stared in shock at what they found.

Where before the entire mountain and lands for miles around were naught but barren ashen grey, it showed the waning growth of autumn-turned winter. Tall dark green grasses from plenty of rainfall. Late-autumn flowers in golds and reds and oranges. Bushes and shrubs and trees.

Entire fields with rich brown tilled earth separated by hedgerows of berry bushes.

Erebor once more contained an actual tree-line instead of burned stumps that spoke of where one used to be.

It was as if the land had been restored and awoken overnight.

Staring around in shocked awe, Thorin exchanged a glance with Balin the same thought occurring to the pair, and they ran for the ponies that had been saddled in preparation for whenever the ward-circle dropped.

If this was what the land looked like…what about Erebor itself?

Someone, it seemed, had had that thought before them and Thorin goggled a moment at the sight of a tiny hobbit clinging fiercely to the bare back of a great Mearas, Bilbo having managed – likely using the cart-bench – to jump onto Shadowfax’s silvery back and sent him galloping from the River Gate towards the grand main entrance of Erebor – the self-same direction that Fíli had reported Harry had disappeared towards before trapping them.

For their own safety or so Bilbo insisted – but trapped nonetheless.

…

Harry didn’t awake from his coma for three days.

It was Bilbo and Shadowfax that found him, laying as if dead between the open gates of Erebor with a dagger in one hand, a scar between his ribs on his left side, and an empty vial fashioned seamlessly of crystal.

The dwarrow were there in time, coming to a thundering halt of their ponies as they saw a crying Bilbo cradling Harry’s head in his lap as Shadowfax nuzzled at the Man’s bared chest.

Only as they drew closer to the Man they thought they knew the began to see that they didn’t know him at all.

For that was no Man in Bilbo’s arms but an Elf with a hint of Mannish features.

His skin glowed – dimmer than others such as Elrond and Lindir they’d seen recently but glowed nonetheless – with the light of the Eldar.

His ears came to delicate points.

His face at rest showed an ageless youth entirely at odds with the sardonic and world-weary soul they had traveled with.

His limbs were long and lithe despite the shoulders of a broad, strong Man from the first joints of his fingers to the last of his feet.
This was no Man with a hint of elvish blood as they’d thought.

It was an Elf with perhaps half-Man heritage at most.

And that…the dwarrow thought staring in shock and concern from Harry to Bilbo to Thorin’s thunderous face and back…that had the potential to change everything.

“Dwalin.” Thorin ordered at last, having taken a moment to order his thoughts. In the end what it came down to even as everything Harry had done warred with his burning hate of elves was that his chosen, his One, held a friend – even a damned Elf – in his arms and was weeping over him. There would be time to discuss issues of betrayal and lies once his One’s friend was awake. Until then the mountain was before him and there was work to be done. “Test the Gate, see if we can enter.”

“Aye.” The guard nodded, unclenching his jaw as he stared in impotent fury at the tree-shagger who’d been playing at their friend their shield-brother for fucking months. “My King.”

Striding with care through the doors as Thorin bent and whispered to Bilbo – though none of the dwarrow could hear what he said that had Bilbo nodding and swiping at his tear-streaked face with the inside of one wrist – and actually deigned to pick up the elf in his arms, Dwalin took a breath and stepped over the threshold into Erebor.

Then another step.

Then another.

Nothing happened.

No spell keeping him out, no magic at play, just polished carven stone shining in the bright winter’s morning light.

With help from Dori and Nori, Thorin pushed the limp form of Harry onto Shadowfax’s back, Bilbo moving to the mearas’s side and resting one hand on his friend’s leg to help steady him, Applejack who had followed the near-stampede to the gate closing in on the far side of the silver-white lord of horses at a whicker and stabilizing Harry by pressing close.

“Erebor.” Thorin breathed staring up at the gold-veined green marble entrance hall with its grand statues of Durin the Deathless on one side of the bridge leading to the golden Sun gate and Thráin I who made Erebor his stronghold, the first of the Durin Kings to do so, on the other.

“Thorin,” was all Balin could say, tears in his eyes as the Company moved forward stepping into the grand halls of the Durin’s Folk for the first time save for the hobbit and unconscious elf who followed behind them, “Thorin.”

The King Under the Mountain turned as he made it to the beginning of the arching stone bridge leading to the Sun gate, staring at the towering walls and ancient engravings until he stopped and stared up at the one set in place by Thráin the First himself over the lintel of the Main Gate.

“I know these walls.” Thorin whispered. “These halls. This stone.” He knelt pressing one hand to the stone that had none of the sickness of that he’d felt in the Hidden Corridor. “You remember it Balin? Chambers filled with golden light.”

Balin stood beside his king, resting one weathered hand on his shoulder. “I remember.”

“It’s the same.” Óin breathed. “Exactly the same as in my memories.”
“And mine.” Thorin nodded, standing. “And mine.”

“Herein lies the Seventh Kingdom of Durin’s Folk.” Glóin read the inscription that had held Thorin captive for long moments, the others with him as Bilbo looked on, patient despite the straits of his friend’s unwaking state. “May the heart of the mountain unite all dwarves in defense of this home.”

A day before, Bilbo might have asked what that was above the engraved throne, but now he knew all too well.

The Arkenstone.

A glance at Thorin’s darkened eyes had him nearly flinching.

He didn’t know how Harry had managed it all: fixing the mountain, what he’d done with the dragon skeleton, not to mention the land…but he had a feeling that if any of it had to do with that shining jewel it was going to take more than a few riddles and quick words to pacify the anger of Thorin Oakenshield.

“Get him settled in an alcove with the mounts.” Thorin ordered after everyone had a moment to take in the great entrance hall, to realize that they had done it despite everything working against them. “We need to inspect the mountain for damage before anything else.”

“And the Arkenstone?” Balin pressed.

Thorin shot a look at Bilbo. “Our burglar found it once: he can find it again.” He arched a brow at a shuffling Bilbo. “And this time don’t let a panicking tree-shagger toss it at a dragon.”

Bilbo gulped.

“Yes, Thorin. I won’t, won’t let him do that again. Promise.”

They did as ordered.

The dwarrows tested the halls of Erebor, moving slowly through the stronghold and setting up camp first in the grand entrance hall then farther in as the stability of various halls, wings, and sections of the fortress was confirmed.

They shut the Gate at noon that first day.

Then around midmorning on the third day since they entered Erebor a break to their routine occurred as Harry woke up alone in a simple room and stumbled his way out into a stable holding Shadowfax, Applejack, and thirteen ponies, utterly lost as to where he was and how he came to be there.

If the halls of Khazad-Dûm in the Misty Mountains were the most beautiful ever carved from stone and the ancient caves of Gundabad the most sacred to them, those of Erebor there the most complex.

A hive of tunnels, corridors, and mines delving deep into the mountain and below the ground to the great underground sea that birthed the River Running.

Legend had it that beyond the far shore of the crystal caverns of the underground fresh sea connected to yet another river and another in a grand network of cairns and seas and crystal caves though no dwararrow had ever ventured so far and returned to tell the truth of it.

The apex of the hive-like grand twisting halls of Erebor was the throne room and it was here Harry
found the Company standing and bickering before the great carven doors of solid gold studded with diamonds, rubies, sapphire, emerald, and even a great pearl and sunstone in a mosaic map of Arda before the sundering of Beleriand into the western sea.

Feeling like he’d been dragged through Mirkwood by his hair and back when he’d woken from his restorative sleep – though both his body and magic felt as weak as Nienna had warned – but anxious to see his friends, all Harry had managed was staggering into his boots over his underclothes and shrugging into a tunic. His hair was as much a mess as it’d been after being singed by Smaug’s wrath, and with his magic weak he’d foregone a refreshing spell leading him to think something had died in his mouth. He didn’t even want to think about how the rest of him smelled.

Being that he’d woken in a stable, albeit the stable-master’s room if he had to guess, it went without saying he’d not gotten a look at himself.

Walking up to the Company he had no idea that the secret he’d gone to great pains to conceal had gotten out in spectacular fashion.

At least, not until Dwalin had turned at his approach – noisy for him given his state – and called a gruff:

“Look lads! Our pretty elven lordling has finally hauled his glowing, tree-shagging arse out of bed!”

“Harry!” Bilbo cried, tearing away from Thorin’s side before the king could stop him from running pell-mell and slamming full-force into his friend.

Harry staggered, only Bilbo’s large sturdy feet and deceptively strong arms around his middle keeping him from falling back, raising his weak arms to wrap around Bilbo’s head and shoulders as he laughed a little at the hobbit’s ecstatic greeting.

“You’re alive you’re alive you’re alive!” Bilbo cried into his friend’s hard stomach, eyes tight shut, not letting loose of his friend for an instant. “I thought you were dead, you looked dead, don’t you ever do that to me again!”

“Bilbo, Bilbo, Bilbo.” Harry stroked one hand through the hobbit’s downy curls that swept the top of his shoulders. “I’m sorry you were worried.”

“Worried!” Bilbo squawked in protest, shoving back a bit but not letting go to stare up at bemused green eyes. “Worried is when a friend it late for tea! Harry, you looked dead! I was terrified!”

“As terrified as I was watching you talk and riddle and bait Smaug because of a fucking rock?” Harry asked pointedly, raising his brows.

Bilbo scowled up at him, displeased indeed at what he felt was making fun.

“It’s not the same thing, Harry.” Bilbo whispered harshly. “Not the same thing at all.”

“You’re right, it’s not.” Harry agreed, Bilbo nodding along only to stop-short mid motion at what next came out of his mouth. “You can die: I can’t.”

“You are, then aren’t you?” Balin asked shrewdly, breaking into the touching tableau as it seemed the reunion was done with though Harry still boasted a hobbit-shaped barnacle clinging to the front of him much to Thorin’s discontent.

“Am I what?” Harry asked, casting a confused glance around at the dwarrow seeing more suspicious glares and hard looks than he’d figured on. “Bilbo?” He asked in an undertone. “Why
are they staring at me like that?"

For that matter...why did Dwalin call him a “pretty elven lordling?”

“You were different when we found you at the Gates.” Bilbo explained, haltingly as he stepped back at Harry’s urging hands on his shoulders. “Ears, skin, hair, everything really. Like everything was flip-flopped.”

“Huh?” Harry blinked, glancing over at Balin in clear demand for a coherent explanation.

“Before, all this time.” Balin said slowly, arms resting over his chest. “You had the look of a Dúnedain or a Man from Númenor stock. A hint of elvish blood perhaps, enough to age slower and move faster but not more than that. At the Gate…”

“It was the opposite.” Thorin completed when his advisor lost his words, though to the credit of Bilbo’s lectures it was much less accusatory as it would have been three days before. “You’ve taken on the look of an elf with some Mannish blood. Of the Half-Elven.”

“Brings a whole new light to your decision to leave your homeland lest you’d be fighting their wars forever.” Kíli joked after a glance around at far-too-serious faces. “I just thought you were prone to bardish turns of phrase.”

“No, not often really.” Harry gave an appreciative half-hearted grin at the spymaster’s attempt to lighten the dark mood that had fallen with the phrase “Half-Elven.” “I tend to be rather literal quite a bit of the time. Not my fault no one ever takes me seriously. To answer the underlying question: yes, I use my magic to appear as a Man but with the effort all of this,” he gestured to the mountain. “Took to fix I won’t have the reserves to hold it for quite some time to come.”

“Why would you hide?” Ori asked, then added after the incredulous look Harry gave to thedwarrow that surrounded him. “In general, I mean. You saved us over and over again, you can’t believe we’ll turn on you because of your heritage?”

Harry arched a knowing brow as a couple dwarrow in particular gave rough coughs and looked away from his gaze (Dwalin, Thorin, Glóin...) who got the harsh side of Bilbo’s stare, then answered the young dwarf:

“I suppose you could say I’ve been having issues coming to terms with it.” He deftly side-stepped the fact that this was because it was a new development altogether not something he’d been born to though it got him an eye-roll from Bilbo who knew the truth of it. Or most of it anyway. “The glamor was my choice, let me blend in as much as possible.” He snickered. “In case you were unaware there’s a whopping handful of Half-Elven running around Arda and they’re rather infamous beings. Not the best bunch to be lumped in with when you’re on a secret quest.”

“What’re you called, then?” Fíli asked, head tilted curiously. “Harry’s not an elven name.”

“But it is the one I was born with.” Harry told him honestly, shrugging. “Hadrian James Potter to be exact but when I left, I chose to take up the name of my family’s oldest Lordship instead with the Peverell name.”

“Now that that claptrap is over with,” Glóin grumped. “Can we stop overlooking the oliphaunt in the room? What was it you did to Erebor?”

“Nearly killed myself.” Harry snorted, ducking out of the way at Bilbo’s swat. “I wasn’t lying when I said the curse laid over this place would take more power than I possessed to right. So I used what I had at hand to see the thing done.” He spun, looking up at the foyer before the golden doors
to the throne room. “All of this though is much more than I hoped for. At best I was going for the curse to be lifted.” He frowned, tilting his head thoughtfully and muttered: “must have been something in the incantation, maybe…”

“How do you mean?” Balin pressed, wanting more information – and information that actually made sense. Wizards, half-elven or not, were a frustratingly vague bunch at times with their gobbledygook magic talk.

“The curse was resistant to being broken.” Harry bit at the inside of his cheek, turning his head this way and that as he studied the great golden doors the Company had been clustered around when he found them. “Or removal, tampering, etc. The best I could see to do was altering what it was laid upon, restoring it back to its untainted state and hoping that would do the job.”

At least, that was the fullest explanation he could come up with on the spot while still weak and needing to leave aside any-and-everything about the Valar lest he be locked away as a madman.

“And what,” Thorin asked, voice low. “Was the curse laid upon, Master Wizard?”

Harry winced, whistling innocently and asked: “is there a reason you were all standing out here or…?”

“Doors are locked.” Bofur supplied helpfully. “Nori was trying to pick it but, well, throne room.”

“I could manage it if I had the right tools.” Nori harrumphed at the impugning of his thieving skills which got him a look from his older brother and his One, Dwalin less-than-pleased at the situation to begin with.

“What was the curse laid upon, Harry?” Thorin asked again, voice turning silken with threat of violence if he wasn’t answered.

Sighing, Harry turned from where he’d moved to stand before the doors, the dwarrow and Bilbo behind him.

“What do you think the curse was laid up, King Under the Mountain?” Harry asked bitterly. “When did Erebor begin to falter? When did the crop yields for miles around begin to diminish, the fisherman from the lake start to see smaller schools? When did the enmity between dwarf and elf grow and spread like a raging inferno to the point that Thranduil would literally not piss upon your people whilst your mountain was on fire? Think, Thorin!” Harry commanded. “You already know if you let yourself.”

“The Arkenstone.” Thorin said at last, tone broken as he lifted his burning blue gaze to meet that as green as the richest verdant foliage. “As soon as my grandfather’s miners discovered it and set it above his throne. It drove him mad.”

Harry shook his head, closing his eyes. “It did not have that power. It couldn’t create something from nothing. The gold-sickness was already there but it was worsened by the curse that drew evil to it like flies to a rotting carcass. I asked you once, Thorin-King what you would give to see your people safe in Erebor. I would remind you now, as I said I would, of your answer.”

“Aye, I remember it.” Thorin shook off his melancholy. “After seeing what you have done for my people, my answer is the same.” His gaze firm.

“But…Thorin.” Balin gasped, staggered at the implications of what his oldest friend was saying. “The Seven Kingdoms swore to the King’s Jewel. Without it…”
“I would take any member of this Company over an army from the Iron Hills or the Red Mountains or the Evendim Hills.” Thorin swore, then and there, moving up to stand shoulder to shoulder with Harry, Bilbo on his other side, the King Under the Mountain bracketed by a Half-Elven wizard of uncertain origins and a Hobbit from the Shire as he faced twelve of the bravest dwarrow he had ever had the privilege to meet. “For when I called, you answered. Loyalty, honor, a willing heart. I can ask no more than that. If the loyalty of the Seven Kingdoms is so easily swayed by a single gem then perhaps we – and they – deserve for it to remain lost.”

Dwalin nodded, exchanging a glance with first his One and then his brother then led the cry as the other dwarrow raised their weapons:

“Khazad! Khazad! Khazad!”

Harry waited a moment for the echoing cry to dissipate and echo through the caverned then looked down at his – dare he say it – his friend, Thorin Oakenshield.

“Do you trust me, Thorin?”

Thorin watched Harry’s too-pretty elven face for a long moment then sighed, admitting with a laugh: “I suppose I do.”

Harry grinned, then turned the dwarven king with a hand on one shoulder to face the great golden doors of Erebor’s throne room. “Then tell the doors who you are.”

Puzzled, but willing to humor the crazy wizard who’d only just woken from his sickbed, Thorin spoke: “I am Thorin, son of Thráin, son of Thrór, King of Durin’s Folk.”

With a riotous clatter of tumblers and sliding bars, the golden doors clicked open as the locks were undone.

Staring incredulously at the strange creature at his side who looked entirely too pleased with himself, Thorin allowed himself to take comfort and courage from a small, delicate hand that had slipped into his own, squeezing it once, then stepped forward placing both hands on the mighty golden doors and with a great push sent them opening wide to reveal the throne room of Erebor.

And the shimmering moon-white gleam and glisten and shine of the Arkenstone already set into its place above the carven throne.

…

“You fucker.” Fíli smacked the back of Harry’s chuckling head later that night after they’d settled down from the excitement that was the reveal of the throne room complete with – cleansed and no longer cursed Harry had assured them after they’d almost pummeled him for leaving the cursed thing there – Arkenstone. “You are such a shit.”

“You should use your powers for good, Harry.” Kíli told him solemnly, the effect only ruined by the grin twitching at his mouth. “Uncle nearly had a heart-attack after all that you told him and made him admit about the stone and then seeing it there.”

“Please.” Harry snorted, digging into the stew Bombur passed him, his room having been moved to the same royal hall where the entire Company was staying for the moment to keep things easy, even if some of them would rather rooms and homes elsewhere in the mountain. “After all the commentary you lot made about me and Bilbo when you thought we either wouldn’t hear or understand you all had that coming. Besides, I needed to be certain of Thorin. That he was willing to sacrifice the Arkenstone to save his people means I don’t need to second-guess everything I gave
in turn to do all,” he waved his spoon, meaning Erebor in general. “This.”

“What did you do, exactly?” Ori asked, quill in hand and posed over his notes regarding the journey.

“Reverted the stone.” Harry gave the only answer he ever would give. “With the curse tangled up in the mountain and land it must have forced the rest of it to revert with it to a pre-cursed state.”

There.

As long as Gandalf didn’t show up and call him on the bullshit he was feeding his dwarrow-and-hobbit shaped mushrooms everything would be fine.

“And don’t go thinking I’ll be doing anything like it ever again.” Harry warned, thrusting his spoon at the dwarrow in general who’d been eyeing him up far too speculatively. He’d only just broken them of that bullshit after repairing the bridge in Mirkwood. “I’m going to be weak for months, maybe even years after that.”

“It will be a secret of the Company.” Thorin intoned, warningly. “Not to be spoken of ever again no matter who asks or why. You have my word as the King Under the Mountain. The curse lifted with the dragon’s death: that is all.”

…

High in the ruined towers of Dol Guldur, an old wizard cloaked in grey cried out as the iron crow’s cage in which he’d been trapped for time uncounted was ripped from its moorings and thrown across the tower ruins in the brutal hands of one of the pale orc generals of Mordor.

…
Chapter 18

Broken Blade

Chapter Eighteen: On the Wings of War

Taking flight from Ravenhill the morning after strange fire lit the sky around Erebor, carrying a message to all the realms of the Free Folk of Arda were the descendants of Cärc, personal messenger and raven of King Thrór:

Erebor was reclaimed.

Thorin, son of Thráin, son of Thrór, called the Oakenshied was King Under the Mountain, King of Durin’s Folk.

Smaug was dead.

Long live the King.

…

One Week Later:

It was the thrush that had taken a bit of a fancy to Bilbo much to the amusement of the Company that alerted them via Rӧrc son of Cärc the current leader of the Erebor ravens.

Laketown was rioting.

The village burned.

…

“You can’t go!” Bilbo protested as he hurried to catch up with Harry as the half-elven warrior ran for the stables between the Sun and Main gates of the Lonely Mountain. Shadowfax and the rest bedded down there during the nights after pasturing during the day, a task Harry had taken on overseeing in lieu of a proper stablemaster. “Harry! By the time you even get to Laketown it will be over!” He challenged in exasperation, trailing dwarrow like ducklings as they sprinted behind the pair – well, all who’d been around when Rӧrc had delivered the news to Thorin anyway.

So, Thorin, Dwalin, Balin, and Kíli, the rest busy doing other things.

Bombur in the kitchens.

Bofur and Bifur inspecting mine shafts and maps Ori unearthed from the library regarding said mines.

Óin stocking the infirmary, Glóin working on recording everything that had been sorted into each member of the Company’s share of the treasure.

Which was another thing…

…

Harry’s magic had apparently taken the reversion quite seriously as when before the treasure hall of
Thrór had been piled high with anything golden or shiny in the mountain or from the surrounding area where after Harry woke and was able to walk Thorin through opening up everything depending on the locks his magic put on things they found the treasure had been sorted into vaults.

Which was where the treasure of Erebor used to reside before Thrór and later Smaug were obsessed with running amok among it all, though rather than sprawling willy-nilly inside the new vaults most were either filled with great iron-banded wooden chests or lined or filled with shelving containing smaller cases of treasures.

There were vaults with nothing but gold coins others with gems rough, cut, polished, or set.

Vaults with gold plates or bowls or cutlery stacked to the ceilings.

Vaults with the entire treasury of Dale and another the personal wealth of late King Girion.

Fourteen vaults lined what was once a wall of Thrór’s treasure chamber, each with a portion of the treasure according to the contract signed by Thorin for the Company.

One vault Bilbo had seen contained nothing but crowns for Yavanna’s sake!

From what Thorin had said, the King as confused about the new constructions as anyone, there used to be some vaults where the treasure hall had been built by his grandfather but not as many or as organized as what now stood in its place.

Worse: they couldn’t get into the damn things no matter what password they tried after Harry showed them the trick with the throne room.

Harry had snickered, laughed, and coughed when they complained to him about the issue then with a hovering Óin and Bilbo ahead and behind him he’d ventured down into the belly of the mountain and walked along the new corridor of vaults before stopping at one with the sigil from his sword chisled into the stone. He’d studied the door for many moments as the dwarrow watched him like hawks. Then without any to-do he’d lifted his right hand and pressed it to the very center of the vault door.

Runes had shone with light under his touch and the door had swung wide revealing all iron-banded chests save for a pair of wooden jewelry cases before he’d taken hold of the door and swung it back closed, the door locking the moment it no longer felt his touch.

Raising a brow at the dwarrow, they’d all scattered and found their own vaults marked with their names in runes behaved just the same.

“They’re locked to your bloodlines.” He’d told them, glancing at Thorin. “Though I would imagine that in the King’s vault there will be an actual key to unlock the vaults of the kingdom itself.”

“How would your magic know how to do this?” Bilbo had asked in wonder, remembering what his friend had told them all of how his magic worked.

Harry had smiled, though it was less bitter than those Bilbo used to receive when asking questions pertaining to Harry’s past, and said: “I’ve seen vaults like these before.”

…

Now only a few days since that excursion, his barmy friend thought it was a grand idea to go charging to the rescue of Laketown when he could barely handle the run to the stables!
“They’ll still need help, Bilbo.” Harry said, returning his friend’s exasperation with his own. “I did this. I hauled Bard along, I cast the spell that altered the land. The results are my responsibility to deal with. I have to go.”

“And do what?” Bilbo crossed his arms over his chest and tapped one hairy foot as his friend rushed about – as best as he was able – tacking up Shadowfax and coaxing Applejack into harness for the cart before blowing out a breath and smacking Harry’s hands off the mule to do it himself. “Your magic can barely manage to keep you upright. You can’t click your fingers and fix things. Not this time, Harry.”

“I know that better than anyone.” Harry sighed, resting one hand on Shadowfax’s hackamore before girding himself and swinging up into the saddle, his regular light armor – only short the mail shirt – moving with him. “But at least I can help those that are fleeing the fires. Provide protection from the shore to Dale.”

“You can’t do it alone, laddie.” Dwalin grumped, sending a look at Kíli who jumped into action, moving to saddle their ponies as Óin ran up with a satchel over his shoulder and Glóin on his heels with arms full of blankets.

Balin simply gave a placid smile at the look Thorin sent him at the pair’s arrival, Fíli two paces behind them with what little of their stores they could spare until a caravan arrived from either the Iron Hills or the south.

“Ten dwarrow can hold this mountain alone when the gates are sealed.” Balin mused. “Isn’t that what you told me, brother, when you were gushing over the fortifications just yestereen?”

“Aye.” Dwalin rolled his eyes. “I did at that.”

“Kíli, Óin, and…” Thorin paused in handing out orders as the sound of more running boots reached them. “Dori will go with you, Harry. In the meantime Fíli and Glóin, as you are the next-best with the ravens beside myself and Kíli will take up a watch at the tower on Ravenhill, sending messages between those going and the mountain. The rest of us will hold Erebor until you return.”

At Thorin’s nod, the supplies were piled – even if it was a small pile indeed – in the mule cart, Óin taking up the reins as Kíli jumped onto his pony and Dori climbed in the back of the cart with the supplies, Harry leading the way out of the Main Gate as Dwalin and Thorin opened it, Fíli and Glóin off to relieve Nori from his turn at watch in the tower, knowing that within minutes it would shut behind them and seal the mountain from anyone unwelcome who would approach it.

…

Harry drew rein at the sight of the smoke and fires still licking at Laketown as they crested the last hill before the plain leading to the lake’s dock nearest the mouth of the River Running. For the most part they’d followed the overgrown and broken river road that wound its way down to the lake from Dale and the gates of Erebor. He’d expected to come across at least some survivors already making their way to Dale by road or fighting the river current upstream to the Dale docks but none had been seen.

Spying the dotted camps along the banks of the lake, Harry saw why.

“By the stars.” Harry breathed, shaking his head in shock as he took up making a rough count in the afternoon light. “How many are lost?”

“Or trapped, laddie.” Óin reminded.
“Maybe some of the people ended up on other parts of the lake.” Kíli tried to be positive even staring down at the dismaying scene laid out before them. “People panic in riots, get separated.”

“There,” Harry’s half-elven sight spotted what he’d been looking for, pointing out at a familiar barge. “Bard’s vessel. Let’s see who – or what – we’re dealing with.”

“Aye, lad.” Óin agreed, Dori jumping down from the cart as they were close to the camps and a fighter might be needed. “Time to take the measure of the latest problem.”

Clicking to Shadowfax, Harry charged ahead the people of Laketown looking up at the sound of hoof beats and more than one would remember that sight: of an elf with raven’s wing hair thundering down from the Erebor road on a silver-white horse, riding to their aid; all of their lives.

“Harry!” Bard called, jumping up onto an overturned bucket and waving the Ranger down – even if the sight of him as he drew close with pointed ears and a dim, but ethereal, glow took him aback. Well. That explained what he’d felt was off with the other Man. He wasn’t one. Though to play one so convincingly perhaps he was a rare Half-Elven, maybe even one of Lord Elrond’s twin sons traveling incognito. Not that it mattered at the moment. The Ranger hadn’t forsaken the people of Laketown and with him – for Bard wasn’t blind to Thorin’s exclusionary habits – the dwarves of Erebor had come to their aid. “Over here!”

Before Harry could push all the way the camp to Bard’s side with Kíli beside him and Dori keeping Óin and the mule-cart from being swarmed, he found himself hailed anew – much to Bard’s visible chagrin as the Man cringed and hopped from his bucket height boost.

“Is it true?!” One of the people cried. “Is it true that Bard killed the dragon?!”

Harry turned in his saddle, taking in the crowd of damp, weary, wounded people who stopped their work and crying, even the children being hushed, to hear his response.

“It is true.” Harry announced, his voice carrying and echoing through the makeshift camp from his place upon Shadowfax’s back. “As others distracted and wounded the beast, Bard, heir of Girion Lord of Dale, loosed his ancestral black arrow from a dwarven windlance and slew Smaug before the Gates of Erebor.”

“And the riches he returned from the mountain with?” A black-cloaked figure Harry recognized all too easily as the mangy cur Alfrid pushed forward.

“His reward for slaying the beast.” Kíli took his turn, looking every inch the Prince of Erebor with his straight back and squared shoulders.

Pushing the rest of the way through the crowd as they started to cheer, “Bard! Bard the Dragonslayer!”, Harry dismounted Shadowfax at Bard’s side as Kíli helped keep the people of Laketown from swarming them.

“What has happened?” Harry asked, intense as he put Shadowfax and Kíli between the cheering people and the pair with the lake at their back. “Why does Laketown burn?”

“I was accused of theft.” Bard told Harry in an undertone. “But the Ravens and thrushes reported my actions before the gate. When the Master arrested me and then ordered my execution the people rioted.”

Harry cursed under his breath as Bard called out to one of the men, Percy, to get the people focusing on survival once more.
“How many lost?”

“We have no way of knowing.” Bard sighed, shaking his head. “The Master escaped with Braga and a handful of the guard on a barge with the town’s treasury – including my reward. The remaining guard were slaughtered by the rioters but there’s no telling how many innocents were hurt in the initial riots let alone the fires and looting that followed.” Bard shook his head, eyes lowered then looked up at Harry. “We need help. Those here salvaged what they could when they fled the rioting but…”

“Starvation won’t take long to set in, you’ve already got wounded, and illness won’t be far to follow.” Harry nodded, waving off Kili as he ducked around Shadowfax to tell them that Óin had found a woman named Hilda who seemed to be leading the charge of organizing things.

“You’re not wrong.” Bard winced. “They’re looking to me for leadership, Harry. I’m only a bargeman and your announcement won’t help.”

“If not you then who?” Harry arched a brow. “Who has more right to lead them than you in the wake of their last leader buggering off? Alfrid?” He snorted. “Yeah, that’ll go over well.”

Bard chuckled, entertained by the idea and the inevitable fallout for one glorious moment then sobered.

“I’m no Lord, Harry.”

“Neither was I.” Harry shrugged, smirking unapologetically at the goggle that got him as he lifted his right hand and showed the golden sigil ring of Gryffindor to the “simple bargeman.” “Then when I was seventeen I killed a wizard who styled himself a lord of dark magic and found out that my father hadn’t just been from an old family but from a noble family. I was raised as little more than a drudge by my relatives after his death when I was a toddler. I didn’t know a damn thing about being a Lord.” He shrugged. “I learned. You will too. At least your business required you to read, write, and do sums.” He grinned viciously. “That’s more than most politicians I’ve met in my life can claim.”

“You are astoundingly hard to argue with, did you know that?” Bard muttered, the statement clearly not a compliment.

“Only when it comes to some things.” Harry clapped him on the back. “Consider me practice for when you have to sit across from a negotiating table with Thorin over trade agreements and peace treaties.”

Bard groaned. “I take it back.” He swore, swatting at the Ranger’s – his friend’s? – head, Harry easily ducking the blow. “Alfrid can lead them, I’m running away to live on my barge with my children.”

“Can’t.” Harry chirped. “You’re the only one that can open the gates of Dale for the refugees from Laketown. Which I’m imagining is your plan since nothing else makes sense.”

“And why would that be the case?” Bard arched a brow at the impossibly smug half-elven sorcerer. “Harry…what did you do? Harry?!”

…

A day later after they’d led the camp in breaking down and marching to Dale, Bard stood with his friends Percy on one side and Hilda on the other, staring up at the rebuilt walls and gate of Dale in shock.
“Alrigh’, I take it back.” Percy announced, blinking at the sight before them. “That Ranger friend of yours is plumb scary if ‘is lifting the curse on the mountain did all this.”

“You’re a bit behind the curve, Percy.” Bard shook his head in wonder. “I had that figured from the moment I clapped eyes on him running about with a bunch of dwarves and a halfling.”

“Fair enough, milord.”

“Oh, by Ulmo’s trident.” Bard cursed, swinging out and popping Percy in the back of the head. “Not you too with that tripe. Bad enough that between Alfrid and Harry they’ve got everyone else saying that nonsense.”

Hilda snickered. “Probably the only thing those two are ever going to agree on, Bard. I’d enjoy it while it lasts before your dangerous, scary friend ties Alfrid to a pole and leaves him in Mirkwood for the spiders.”

Bard snorted a laugh. “Is that today’s threat?”

A pair of nods and grins answered him.

“Effective.” Bard decided after a moment. Especially considering everyone of the refugees knew Harry would not only carry through with it if he found Alfrid trying to bully anyone or just out of general irritation but also that Alfrid would likely have it coming if he did.

For all those who’d taken the presence of the dwarves easily enough when it came to the – as Hilda said – dangerous and scary Ranger/sorcerer there was still more than a little awe among the former people of Laketown once tale spread that Harry had come specifically to kill the dragon and that it’d been his plan that’d seen it done – even if Bard had been the one to loose the arrow that did the deed.

Bard was the Dragonslayer, of that there was no doubt, much as he disliked the name.

But Harry was the Cursebreaker, and to a people who’d watched their home slowly be strangled by the dragon’s magic, that was nearly as important to them – moreso in Bard’s opinion since if the curse had remained they wouldn’t have to only worry about starving this winter but all those to come as well.

…”

“How many were lost?” Thorin asked Harry quietly when the half-elven found him up on one of the balconies overlooking the River Gate and Dale. In times of peace they were used for small gardens below the tree line anyway – while in times of war they served as perfect blinds for windlances, spearmen, and ballistae.

Bilbo had taken to exploring all of the outer halls to find each and every one of them.

Thorin had the idea the hobbit was, perhaps, seeking a perfect location for a garden fit for a hobbit’s touch.

He certainly hoped so even if its only a vague idea on Bilbo’s part.

 Anything at this point that meant the other male was giving consideration to Thorin’s request to stay was good news as far as he was concerned.

Now if only he could find the courage to take Balin’s advice and present the hobbit with Thorin’s First Gift… but still the mountain wasn’t totally secured. He was hesitant to take such a step with
lingering questions of the future still looming. Or at least that’s what he told himself when he found himself faltering instead of presenting a Gift or heading to the forges to work on his Crafted Gift.

The first and second gifts could be presented in any order after all…and being that Thorin was a blacksmith above all else that put him in a bit of a predicament when it came to a gift of craft for Bilbo.

Still…he had time.

He hoped.

“It looks like ten percent died in the riots and upheaval directly following.” Harry reported, folding his arms over his chest and leaning on the balcony rail next to the dwarven king. “Half landed on the opposite shore of Long Lake, scouts reported that of those they’ve broken into two camps: one that has decided to return to Laketown and salvage what they can there and the others to join with Bard at Dale. The entire town guard was either killed or went with the Master when he fled.” Harry shook his head. “The only fighters Bard has left are loyal to him though: his bowmen hunters and the smugglers that helped him keep the town fed.”

“They’ll starve if they don’t receive aid.” Thorin grimaced. “Did you inform Bard of the treasury?”

“I did.” Harry sighed, shaking his head. “He’s glad of it but that won’t solve the immediate needs. People can’t eat gold.”

Thorin chuckled. “That they can’t. However…” He smirked up at the half-elven that despite himself even upon learning his heritage Thorin couldn’t help but consider something like a friend with all the sheer effort Harry gave to see his people settled into their home once more. “Birds can be quite the gossips as you’re learning. If the Elvenking hasn’t already learned of the destruction of his nearest neighbor and isn’t already making plans to swoop in like some poncy children’s tale savior I’ll eat Bofur’s hat…”

“Well,” Harry groaned as he popped his back with a stretch, wanting nothing more than a bath heated by the mountain’s forges that Fíli had reported they repaired enough to light and keep the cold from settling into Erebor. “You have thousands of new neighbors now a full day closer than they used to be. Congratulations and good luck with that, I need a bath and about twenty hours of sleep…”

…

Bard carried bandages over to the infirmary in Dale that the dwarf healer Óin had set up when they arrived in the renewed walled city.

If he hadn’t been there – if none of them hadn’t been there – he never would’ve believed it.

Seeing the difference in the fields around Erebor and the Long Lake had been one thing.

But the strong walls of Dale as if Smaug had merely been a nightmarish figment?

*That* was something else altogether.

Moreover, Bard never in a hundred years would have believed that the gates would only open to Bard, but that was the truth of it.

Bard had been told of the locked gates by a runner sent to fetch him from hunting to feed the people with help from his bowmen and returned to find most of the refugees idling before the gates: none of
them could pass.

Not until Harry, who’d been with him in the lands and making good use of his crossbow, had told him to try.

Percy and the others had scoffed.

But Bard had seen something in the half-elven’s green eyes.

Something not unlike the moment when he’d looked at who he’d thought was a Ranger and been asked about a Black Arrow.

Fate, perchance.

Still, he’d done as Harry had told him placing his hand on the iron banded-and-studded gates of Dale that had stood fast with over a thousand people milling before them and they had given way after shining with a brief, but visible, golden light in the sigil of the Lords of Dale.

He’d glared at the snickering Ranger with his theatrics.

Harry, it seemed, had a liking for them.

Still, intact and sturdy buildings or no: there was still the problem of a lack of food stores and the wounded, ill, and infirm to see to.

His people couldn’t eat stone or gold, for all that Harry’s magics had provided them with a safe and warm place to sleep and recuperate once wood for fires had been gathered.

“We need more food, Bard.” Percy told him quietly, catching him before he’d moved out of the Great Hall that was holding most everyone in need save for the single men that’d been stationed at Hilda’s insistence in the empty barracks instead. “We’ve only enough for a few days, even with light rations. We’ll either have to risk Laketown or hope we hear from some of the villages farther down the river soon.”

“Do what you can, Percy.” Bard told him, passing off the bandages with a nod before heading out to check with Alfrid on the night watch.

“Nothing to report, sire, all’s quiet.” Alfrid told him around a yawn as Bard pushed through the doors of the great hall and came to an abrupt halt at the scene before him. “Nothin’ gets past me.”

“Except an army of elves.” Bard noted, with a sardonic look at the Master’s former lackey. “It would seem.”

Standing in rigid, straight formations before the Great Hall and lining the walls of the city were the golden, hardened-wood armor of hundreds – if not thousands – of elves from the Woodland Realm, who came to attention at the sight of Bard in his worn coat and old leather trousers.

The single men from the barracks poured out into the courtyard as Bard descended the stairs of the Great Hall, the elven troops in-line with his path turning and creating an exact corridor of soldiers to pass through to the empty road.

Or, formerly empty road since as they hadn’t been worried about an attack but rather that any refugees were able to join them they had chosen to leave the gates of the city open, and now the sound of hooves alerted him to the reason for the elven army on his literal doorstep.
With his glistening silver hair, silver circlet, and mounted upon an elk, Bard would know the Elvenking anywhere.

“My lord, Thranduil.” Bard greeted with a short nod. “We did not look to see you here.”

“I heard you needed aid.” The Elvenking replied, turning his elk around and looking down the road to where a wagon was following behind him and his aides and generals.

Bard and his people could hardly believe the sight of the cargo: brimming with food and supplies the wagons pulled into the city square, Bard’s people coming and jumping to assist with the unloading with Hilda and Percy taking everything in hand as they’d proven both capable and honest from the first moments finding themselves refugees upon the shores of the lake after fleeing the violence of the riots.

“You have saved us.” Bard made his way to Thranduil’s side. “I do not know how to thank you.”

“Your gratitude is misplaced.” Thranduil informed him with an arch of an elegant brow, the expression on his face chilling Bard to the bone and puncturing his elation from only moments before. “I did not come on your behalf. I came to reclaim something of mine. Though,” Thranduil tilted his head, studying his – former, now, he supposed – bargeman. “I am curious as to what you can tell me of this sorcerer and blood-mage that has taken up with dwarves. My scouts tell me you know him quite well. Indeed,” he smiled slowly. “It seems he saw fit to restore your ancestral lands to you in a storm of fire and power.”

…

“Thorin!”

The shout rang through the dining hall in the royal wing that the Company had taken to eating in together for meals.

“Thorin!”

Pounding boots on stone had the members of the Company who’d gathered to break their fast with Bombur’s porridge stood, which was basically everyone except for Kili who’d had the nights at the Ravenhill watch tower, Bifur on duty at the watch-post over the Main Gate, and Dori over the River Gate.

Which as the voice was easily identifiable as Kili’s was very much not good since it would take one hell of a message or threat to have the younger Durin prince abandoning his post to relay it rather than trusting it to the ravens.

“Thorin!” Kili rounded the door into the dining hall, breath gasping and face flushed for proof of his speed making haste to find the rest of the Company. “An army of elves has encamped themselves in Dale!”

“What?!” Was the general roar from the dwarf only Harry and Bilbo keeping their cool at the news but sharing a worried glance nonetheless.

Kili nodded frantically, leaning over and bracing his hands on his knees as he sucked wind. “They must’ve moved under the cover of the night. I only saw them with the dawn and they were already in place.”

Thorin growled something in Khuzdul that Harry was translating for Bilbo exactly never.
“How many?” Dwalin demanded as Thorin exercised his gutter-language.

“Thousands.”

Now Thorin’s cursing was joined by that of the rest of the Company.

“Did you seal the gate?” Thorin double-checked, pleased that with the looming threat Kíli was wise enough to pull back to the mountain lest he be stranded or taken captive at Ravenhill.

Kíli nodded again, straightening with a wince. “There’s more.”

Harry watched, sitting back as something that had been waiting settled.

This was it.

Whatever news Kíli had – aside from the sudden arrival of the Woodland Elves – it was what had pushed him towards Erebor above and beyond Smaug.

“Some of the ravens have returned from carrying your message, Thorin.” Kíli grimaced. “They’ve news of massive orc patrols – an army even – moving towards the mountain.”

“Is it Azog?” Fíli scowled as the Company hissed, spat, and generally fell into a new round of cursing the air blue.

“I don’t know.” Kíli winced, knowing that that wasn’t going to sit well with Thorin. “The ravens couldn’t gather more information with the orc trying to shoot them down.”

“Refugees in Dale, and elven army on the doorstep.” Harry summarized, leaning back in his chair and balancing on the back legs absently. “Orcs on the move and shooting down Ereborian ravens.” He shook his head, groaning. “Pieces are moving into play and all with one destination.”

“Erebor.” Thorin hissed, eyes narrowing then turning as hard as the mountain bedrock which his people were originally hewn from by Mahal. “Dwalin double the watches and lock down the gates.”

“Aye, sire.”

“Balin, a message to Dain.” He snapped out the next order. “See if you can get an answer.”

“Aye.”

“The rest of you,” he cast an eye over the Company. “To the armory.”

“What’re we going to do, Thorin?” Bilbo asked quietly as the others rushed off, the hobbit falling into step with the dwarven king and Harry just behind.

“We took the mountain.” Thorin told him. “Now we have to defend it.”

“But the elves,” Bilbo pressed. “What could they want with Erebor?”

“You already know the answer to that, Bilbo.” Harry reminded his friend gently as Thorin struggled to think beyond his formidable temper and protective instincts. “Gandalf told us the story: the Gems of Lasgalen are in this mountain and if that army of elven warriors are from Mirkwood then Thranduil has decided that now is the moment to attempt to reclaim them. If I were a gambling man,” which he was...kinda. “I’d say the Elvenking as no bloody idea that his army is currently positioned between the orcs and us.”
“Oh.” Bilbo blinked, thinking on his feet. “Isn’t that a good thing though? I mean, there’s only fifteen of us. Unless the Men from Dale can help…”

“I doubt it.” Thorin told him, not unsympathetic to the current change in the wind for the Bowman. “With thousands of elves between them and us plus being refugees, even if they wanted to help us they can’t without risking being slaughtered. No, my friend.” Thorin’s tone was grim. “We’re on our own.”

“What about the elves though?” A thought struck Bilbo. “If they’re willing to fight us for the gems mightn’t they be willing to fight for us?”

Harry and Thorin snorted in unison, grinning when Bilbo huffed, scowled, and then tapped his foot at them.

“He’s a King, Bilbo.” Harry explained it best as he could given that any explanation from Thorin would be riddled with centuries of antipathy. “He is literally the last King of the Firstborn left in Middle-Earth as well as the greatest warrior. His position and pride won’t allow him to turn mercenary for what he wants. He can go to war for it. He can fight and kill and die for it. But bargaining the lives of his warriors for it would be a blow to his station and consequence he would never consider or tolerate for a moment.”

Bilbo frowned, glancing up at Thorin to see if the dwarven King agreed, netting himself a solemn nod.

He gave another huff.

“Dwarves, elves, Men, all with your pride.” He muttered. “Ridiculous creatures, every last one of you.”
Chapter Nineteen: Councils of War

With winds whipping overhead Legolas dismounted his horse at the outcropping shielded from sight of Gundabad by the cliffs and ledges of the meeting of the Misty and Grey mountain ranges to the north of his father’s kingdom, Tauriel at his heels as he ran with natural elven grace and the trained and experienced proficiency of a warrior and scout.

Crouching down, the two peered over the outcropping towards the rusted iron gateway that sulked atop and from the sides of Mount Gundabad, searching for any sign of the orc parties they’d tracked for days.

“Gundabad.” Tauriel’s eyes were wide as she took in the foreboding sight of the ancient fortress. Turning, she frowned at the stony look upon her brother’s face. Legolas was many things but rarely was he as stoic and cold as their father yet something about this trip, this evil place, drew it from him. “What lies beyond?”

Legolas blinked, clearing his mind of his distressing recollections, memories that have haunted him in figments since he was an elfling thousands of years ago.

It was moment like this that reminded him of just how achingly young Tauriel was in comparison with the other warriors of her caliber.

Much of that was due to the training she received as his father’s ward, it was true.

When being trained personally by Legolas and the Elvenking themselves, any elf with even a modicum of natural ability would shine.

Tauriel not only shone, she’d truly excelled growing in ability and command until she’d earned her position as one of the captains of the guards of the Woodland Realm.

But still she was young and prone to making missteps that an older elleth or ellon would avoid, such as showing flagrant disobedience to an already-agitated Elvenking. No matter Thranduil’s fondness for Tauriel, Legolas knew his father. He would not relent. Though perhaps in time his adopted sister might earn her place back in the Woodland Realm, Thranduil wasn’t likely to make it easy for her, nor would any of the others of their people who would feel slighted or betrayed by her actions.

The only way Legolas knew to bring her safely home was to prove that though her actions were rebellious they weren’t without merit making it more a matter of youthful impetuosity than outright subversion against the Elvenking.

“An old enemy.” Legolas scowled, disgust lacing his melodious tones. “The Kingdom of Angmar. Gundabad was taken from the dwarves by the orcs and used as the Witch-King’s eastern-most fortress and gateway to harry and harass Greenwood, Dale, Erebor and all the peoples of the east as Carn Dûm was his capital and stronghold in the west against Armor, Imladris, and Gondor. Each was filled with armories where they forged their great weapons of war and bred their foul beasts.”


Legolas stopped her from charging ahead with a gentle – but unyielding – hand on her arm. “We
wait for the cover of night.” He would allow nothing else. “It is a fell place, Tauriel. Long before you were born our people waged war on Angmar for seven centuries before its fall.” He looked away, swallowing. “My mother died there.”

Tauriel held in a gasp, eyes darting over Legolas’s pained face as they lowered themselves down to remain hidden by the rocks of the mountainside.

“Father does not speak of it.” He recalled screams and snarls, grasping hands and the stench of orc and warg alike. But nothing more. Nothing but a face carved in stone and thousands of years of silence. “There is no grave. No memory. Nothing.”

Hours passed with nothing else spoken between them as the winter sun slowly sank down and all was still within the iron fortress of Gundabad when Tauriel’s patience finally waned.

“If we are going in we must move, Legolas.”

Before he could respond – one way or another – bats flew up from below them, spilling from the caves lining the mountainside.

“They are swarming.” Tauriel noted, confused. She’d never seen bats like this before. They were massive, bigger even than those of the Woodland Realm, and behaved differently as well.

Legolas hissed a curse under his breath though not in the Sindarin or Quenya Tauriel recognized but the Doriathian dialect of Sindarin, an ancient tongue only spoken by the eldest of the Sindar of the Woodland Realm that she had never been taught.

The language of the Teleri and Beleriand; of the court of the High King of the Sindar Elu Thingol, uncle and kinsman of Oropher Elmoion who was Legolas's father's father.

“These bats are bred for only one purpose.” Legolas hissed, eyes locking on the gateway to Angmar and giving the flying creatures no more mind as a thought that had had him first tracking Tauriel and then Bolg’s orc squad was proven true. “War.”

As if to drive home the dread thundering through his veins, a horn sounded from inside the fortress followed by the discordant thudding and clamor of an army’s forced march.

“We must warn the others.” Tauriel turned and rushed from the outcropping for the horse, Legolas on her heels.

“We might already be too late.” Legolas responded in kind, leaping easily over her head and jumping into the saddle to lift her up behind him once more. “Hurry!”

…

“My lord Thranduil, please reconsider.” Bard found himself – somehow and he was blaming Harry – in the position of arguing and pleading with the Elvenking instead of overseeing his people as they settled into Dale under the watchful eyes of Hilda, Percy, and a few of the others Bard trusted with assistance, however reluctant, from Thranduil’s aide Galion when the Elvenking decided to speak with Bard regarding their current situation. “Is laying siege to the mountain worth what it will cost? And for what? Gold and jewels?”

Thranduil watched the leader of the refugees coolly, seeing in him a shadow of a Man he once called friend. Girion of Dale was a good man. His daughter Astrid the only survivor of that line. Thranduil had kept an eye on the line of the once-Lords of Dale, ensuring their survival in case such a time as was now before them arrived.
It was the culmination of ages he supposed that had led him to this current course.

And yet here was a Man determined to dissuade him from it.

It never failed to interest him, how at times the blood of Men can breed so true even after several generations or more have passed away.

A week ago Bard the Bowman was a simple bargeman for all that he dabbled in undermining the regime of the Master of Laketown and now there he stood, as passionate as Girion ever was, with the faith of his people behind him and the determination to carry him through whatever may come.

Thranduil could respect that, if nothing else, he knew what an untenable position his own decisions have placed the Men in.

But neither shall that dissuade him.

“The heirlooms of my people are not so lightly forsaken.” Thranduil told him at last as the Man paced before his mobile light throne in his personal tent outside the walls of Dale – as opposed to his campaign tent where even now his generals were discussing the siege of Erebor. “We will not leave until what is ours is returned. As your people have been returned to Dale.”

“The Company of Thorin Oakenshield has dealt fairly with the people of Laketown.” Bard said, unshakeable in his belief that this was a fool’s endeavor the Elvenking was set on. “As much as we appreciate and are grateful for your aid, milord Thranduil, the position in which you have placed us is...” Bard searched for a word that would neither insult the Elvenking nor was weak to the risk posed should the dwarves consider the elven presence in Dale a betrayal. “Dangerous.” He decided blunt was best in the end. “Thorin did not strike me as a person to take well to threats of force.”

“You speak of the wizard and the halfling.” Thranduil pursed his lips. “You would treat with them?”

“You speak of the wizard and the halfling.” Thranduil pursed his lips. “You would treat with them?”

“As I have said,” Bard held in a relieved sigh at – at last – some expression other than chilly superiority crossed that ancient, perfect, face. “The Company has dealt fairly with my people. I have no reason to expect that to change once I make it clear,” to the elves as much as the dwarves, his tone implied. “That the Men of Laketown are refugees who will take no part in the siege. Perhaps they will agree then to negotiate through a third-party.”

“Such as a wizard and a dragonslayer.” Thranduil arched a brow then nodded a moment later, calling out an order in Sindarin. “Go then, treat with them. But do not be surprised if you find them much changed now that they have returned to their mountain like polecats scurrying into a warren.”

Gandalf shivered upon his knees as the merciless pale orc dragged him across the ruined tower of Dol Guldur that had become his prison these last days, pounding at him with questions and demands about the three elven Rings of Power before holding his wrist onto a chopping block.
What Gandalf would not give – would never give – the orc would take.

Beneath the stench of orc and Gandalf’s own self after his imprisonment, a fresh breeze blew then a sound came breaking over the ruins like dawn in the depths of darkest winter.

Gandalf turned his head, weak as he was, and saw her there wreathed in glowing silver light like a star fallen to the earth.

“I come for Mithrandir.” Galadriel told the foul scum of Mordor. “And I will leave with him.”

The orc general dropped Gandalf, letting him fall to the rubble-strewn ground as he advanced on the pale she-elf, wicked sword bared and raised.

“If you try and stop me.” She continued, voice echoing with power. “I will destroy you.”

The orc roared its defiance and without pause or hesitation Galadriel flung out her hand in a blast of white light laced with power, shattering the orc where it stood.

Galadriel leaned down in the wake, lifting the limp, drained form of her friend as if he weighed nothing at all, and began carrying him out of the ruins when another voice, a fell voice laced with dark power, echoed through the ruins in Black Speech.

“Three Rings for Elven-kings under the sky…”

She turned feeling the power rise and cold set in frosting her breath upon the air.

“Seven for the Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone…”

Shadows and light grew form, Galadriel turning in a circle as she felt it – felt them – surround her, the Lady of the Golden Wood finishing the set:

“Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die…” And all around her they appeared: the Ring-Wraiths.

The Nazgul.

And with them all their leader: the Witch-King of Angmar as fierce and terrifying in death as he’d been in life.

…”

Surrounded, Galadriel lowered herself down upon the weathered stone, Gandalf limp in her lap as the Witch-King spoke.

“You cannot fight the shadow.” He taunted as the Ring-Wraiths closed in upon them. “Even now you fade. One light…alone in the darkness.”

Galadriel smirked, lifting her gaze from her dear friend’s worn, pain-wracked face. “I am not alone.” She announced as the sound of bootsteps on stone whispered through the air, Lord Elrond, barer of the third elven Ring of Power striding sword ready into the ruins as Saruman the White flanked her other side staff glowing with power as he asked:

“Are you in need of assistance, my Lady?”

Two of the Nazgul broke ranks from surrounding the Lady of the Golden Wood with a piercing hiss at having Saruman appear at their backs, Elrond sneering at the wraiths.
“You should’ve stayed dead!” He cried as he and the White Wizard attacked, forcing the Ring-Wraiths back from the pair in need.

As the pair battled against the Nazgul, neither elf-lord nor wizard showing any rust in their skills despite the years that had passed since they’d used them in such a battle, Galadriel called to her friend.

“Mithrandir,” she summoned him back from the edge of death, voice once more laced with power. “Come back.”

Sounds of battle crashed around them for an endless moment then Gandalf sucked in harsh, shaky breath. “He is here.” He tried to warn her, panting.

“Yes,” she agreed, stroking his cheek gently. “The darkness has returned.”

“C’mon!” Radagast called, sending his sled flying through the ruins as only he could, pulling up alongside his wounded friend. “Gandalf! Gandalf, climb on!” Radagast rushed over to his friend, helping the Lady roll and push his weak form onto the sled.

“He is weak.” Galadriel told the brown wizard, weakened herself from the power it took to call him back. “He cannot remain here it is draining his life! Go, quickly!” She urged him, even as Gandalf found the strength to grasp her wrist.

“Come with me, my lady.” He pleaded, fearing for her in this state.

Touched, Galadriel stared at him a long moment, marshaling her power then ordered them: “Go!” Power flaring and sending Radagast scurrying to obey as he urged his rabbits on and out of the ruins turned battlefield.

Saruman and Elrond defeated the Ring-Wraiths – as much as such things could be defeated – Elrond coming to the side of the Lady where she lay slumped on the ancient stones of the fortress.

A moment later, when all seemed quiet, the southern-most tower exploded in a wave of power and fire revealing the great Eye.

“It has begun,” came a dread voice that all of the three present wished never to hear again. “The East shall Fall.” A dark form wreathed in the flames of the Eye stepped forward, the Necromancer Gandalf had heard rumors and whispers of, or more properly: Sauron. “The Kingdom of Angmar shall Rise. The time of the Elf is over. The Age of the Orc is come.”

All seemed lost as Saruman and Elrond stared into the flames and fire, Sauron’s latest form marching forward with his advance guard of the Nine, then Galadriel rose with her vial in hand, the dread power of a Noldor lady of great magic filling her, Artanis, as she gathered it all to her, all she had and spoke:

“You have no power here, Servant of Morgoth!” She denounced him as Elrond fell back from the sheer power of her and Saruman trembled to behold the immortal Lady of Lorien fending off the black magic of Sauron himself. “You are Nameless! Faceless! Formless! Go back to the Void from whence you came!”

She cast him out, sending a second shockwave through the East as the Necromancer disappeared in a ball of fire that flew through the sky before crashing into the South.

Into Mordor.
Galadriel staggered back as the power left her, falling into Elrond’s arms as he leapt to catch her, lowering her slowly to the ground in her severely weakened state.

“We were deceived.” Elrond gasped, shocked to his bones that even the foresight and prescience of himself and the Lady had been blinded to Sauron’s rise.

Galadriel shook in the arms of her daughter’s husband. “The spirit of Sauron endured.”

“And has been banished.” Saruman noted, eyes flicking between the slumped forms of the two great elven leaders and the southern horizon.

“He will flee into the East.” Galadriel knew. He would heal and gather power in Mordor.

“Gondor should be warned.” Elrond frowned. Estel was still far too young to deal with the rise of Sauron. Of what such a thing meant for his adopted-son’s future. Harry was right. It was too close a thing to rely on fate and hope alone.

The Heir of Isildur would have to be told, have to be ready, if Sauron was rising again.

“They must set a watch on the walls of Mordor.” Elrond planned. It wouldn’t be much against the strength of Sauron but it might give them warning.

“No,” Saruman insisted. “Look after the Lady Galadriel,” he told Lord Elrond. “She has spent much of her powers. Her strength is failing. Take her to Loth Lorn.”

“My Lord Saruman,” Elrond protested, even as Galadriel clung to his hand. “Sauron must be hunted down and destroyed once and for all.”

“Without the Ring of Power,” Saruman reminded them. “Sauron can never gain hold dominion over Middle-Earth. Go now.” He persisted despite Elrond’s words. “Leave Sauron to me.”

…

“What are the numbers looking like?”

Bard overheard as he was ushered into what he thought was a dining hall repurposed as dining hall, war room, meeting place, or whatever was needed at the moment by the Company encamped in Erebor.

It wasn’t what he expected, that was certain.

Though, to be sure, he hadn’t expected for his hailing the dwarf on duty upon the watch-post window over the Main Gate to result in a lowered rope to climb before being shown into said repurposed dining hall either.

It seemed since waking that morn to an elven army running amok in his city the day had been brimming with the unexpected.

“Rörc has the ravens flying in the gloaming hours, trying to track them.” One of the dwarves reported to Thorin’s demand. Fili, Bard was reasonably certain after his time with the Company that that was Fili speaking, Thorin’s acknowledged heir. “Azog’s emptied Moria and Dol Guldur. Tens of thousands.”

Then it struck Bard: they weren’t discussing the number of Thranduil’s army on their doorstep but another, one far more terrible.
“Have we heard back from the elf scouts tracking the orcs that attacked Laketown?” Thorin asked, frowning as they all, save for the one dwarf left on watch – Óin who Bard knew quite well by now – stood around a map laid out on the center of one table.

It was an old thing from what Bard could tell, likely dating back to before the mountain had been taken by Smaug. Cracked and dusty, but from his greater height he could easily see that it laid out the lands surrounding Erebor in great detail. He frowned, tilting his head. He didn’t understand what some of the curved lines meant, however, he thought perhaps they might have meaning towards elevation given what he knew of the land near the lake.

“How’s being Lord of Dale treating you so far, Bard?” Harry asked as they turned, almost as one, and looked at their new addition to the war-council.

“Oh, fantastic Harry.” Bard snarked. “Truly a gift you’ve given me there. Nothing like waking up to an elven army making itself at home in your new home and having to try and figure out what the damned cryptic Elvenking is after.”

“His pointy-ears are bent out of shape is all.” Dwalin scoffed, folding his arms over his chest. “Snuck right past his halls and he never even knew we were there.”

“Aye, that might be some of it.” Balin agreed with a sigh. “But lest you all forget there was a reason Thranduil Oropherion broke his alliance with Erebor.”

“He said something about the heirlooms of my people are not easily forsaken.” Bard quoted. “He means to claim them, whatever they are.”

Bard watched as most of the Company shifted, trading glances.

“You, you know?” Bard was incredulous. “Then what are you doing? Or haven’t you seen the ten thousand elves of the Woodland Realm: archers, spearmen, swordsman; camped out in the valley below?”

“If Thranduil, King of the Woodland Realm,” Thorin explained, forcing back his ever-present rage at the thought of the honorless tree-shagger. “Was interested in shedding elven blood for the Gems of Lasgalen he would have done so when Smaug attacked and weakened the mountain’s defenses or brought siege machines with him along with his shiny army. He’s bluffing.” Thorin snorted in unison with several of his dwarves who scoffed and rolled their eyes. “Trying to prove a point.”

“Maybe so.” Bard allowed, nodding. “But that won’t keep him from starving you out regardless.”

Harry and Thorin exchanged a long glance then the half-elven moved away from the table and gestured for Bard to follow him.

“Come, my friend.” Harry told him, a grave expression on his face. “There’s something we need to tell you…”

…

“So, what’s the plan?” Bard demanded as they stood in the window watching out over the fields below Erebor, Óin having left them to it. Harry was apparently trusted enough that Thorin allowed him judgement in this matter. “Neither Dale nor Erebor can hold against tens of thousands of orcs and wargs.”

“No, they can’t.” Harry nodded, arms folded across his chest as he stared out at the elven army. “And fleeing won’t do a damn bit of good considering that they’re marching from both North and
South. Which really leaves us with just one option…”

Bard winced, having a damn good idea what that option was. “You’re going to let the elves and dwarves prance around insulting each other while the army draws near.”

“Until Thranduil has no choice but to fight, yes.” Harry’s face was grim.

“They’ll be totally unaware.” Bard protested. “There’s no way they can survive that.”

“Not totally.” Harry countered. “If Thranduil is half the King or warrior his reputation makes of him he’ll have warning. Especially since you’re going to report that Thorin has no interest in fighting elves over pretties when an army of orcs is on its way.”

Bard’s mouth opened and closed several times. “He’ll never believe it.” He realized, dread pooling in his stomach. “He’ll think it’s some ploy of Thorin’s to buy time for help to arrive.”

“Oh, he likely will.” Harry was far too cheerful about that for Bard’s liking. “But that won’t stop him from double-checking anyway.” And Bard did not like that hint of smugness in his voice either. “No one – not even a royal elf of ancient birth and lineage – stays a King uncontested for over three thousand years without a measure of caution. He won’t want to believe it but he can’t afford to discount it either.”

“You want him to call for more troops once he’s committed to the siege.” Bard blinked. And he’d thought Harry’s planning to take out Smaug was impressive, this… “How are you going to manage that?”

Harry chuckled. “Oh…” He drawled. “I’m just going to let Thorin be his oh-so-charming self…”

Bard laughed, almost despite himself.

Yeah, he figured.

That’d probably do it.

…

As with the trend of the day, Bard found himself facing the unexpected presence of Thranduil upon his great elk awaiting him as he came around the bend of the road between the Main Gate and Dale, his generals and captains behind him.

“He won’t treat with me regarding your aims, Lord Thranduil.” Bard reported, picking and choosing his words.

“Indeed, how unsurprising.” Thranduil nodded towards one of his captains and gave the order, turning his elk back towards the city. “Ready the archers.” He commanded. “Prepare to wound… for the moment, should they attempt to sneak beyond our blockade.”

“Aren’t you going to present your terms to Oakenshield?” Bard asked, baffled. “I could not speak to what it was exactly you seek.”

“They know why I have come.” Thranduil responded, looking back over his shoulder at the Man. “We shall give them a night to realize the depth of their folly by refusing your generous offer of mediation before seeking to treat with Oakenshield.”

Not that Thranduil expected it to amount to anything more than Bard’s own attempts but still,
appearances and customs must be upheld.

…

Later that night found Bard joining Thranduil in his tent once more much to the Man’s frustration.

For an Elvenking used to getting his way in all things, that the Men had taken a stance of utter neutrality in the face of the argument between Thranduil and Thorin had to chafe.

It was that, if nothing else, and the fear that the elven supplies distributed to the refugees could disappear as quickly as they had arrived which had Bard acquiescing to Thranduil’s “request.”

His pride was not so great or fragile that pandering to the demands of the Elvenking will harm it if it meant that his children, friends, and neighbors could continue to enjoy the largess of the Woodland Realm unhindered.

That he was using – and worse to his eyes helping the Company manipulate – Lord Thranduil would normally be a much worse offense to his mind.

But given that for all the assistance Thranduil was supplying he’d still had the utter gall to field his army in the midst of Dale without so much as a by-your-leave from any Man Bard found himself if not at ease with the plan at least resolved to it.

He wouldn’t let his children die.

Not if he could help it.

Even if it met staring straight into the eerie pale grey frost of the Elvenking’s eyes and lying his smuggler’s heart out.

“Ah, Lord Bard,” Thranduil looked up as the elven guard showed him into the Elvenking’s campaign tent, the generals and captains or whoever else all giving him a respectful – if arch – nods from where they stood around a map of the mountain laid out before the King’s seated position.

“You asked to see me?”

“I was wondering if any word from the elven scouts who tracked an orc party to Laketown have been heard from?” Bard’s eyes scanned over the handful of ancient beings, catching a few flickers of apprehension directed at the Elvenking.

Given that even for a normally-ice-cold ancient being Thranduil suddenly looked chiseled from the glaciers of Erebor at his question he wasn’t surprised.

He’d stumbled on a sore point and didn’t even know it.

Great.

Just fantastic.

“Elven scouts?” Thranduil asked, as if he wasn’t already well informed regarding his son and adoptive-daughter’s escapade in Laketown. And the subsequent instance of flagrant disobedience that followed.

Such behavior Thranduil expected, to a certain extent, from Tauriel.

She was young.
Testing her boundaries and place in the Woodland Realm.

Legolas on the other hand was no young ellen growing into himself but a seasoned and skilled warrior and commander. One who’d earned his position as First Among Commanders of the Woodland Realm’s Armies, much as Tauriel had earned hers as the former Captain of the Woodland Realm’s Guard. As his children – natural or adopted – they’d had to work twice and thrice as hard as another to prove themselves. A natural consequence of the position their birth and placement had caused. Either could have chosen to be courtiers alone. It would have been perfectly acceptable, even expected especially for Tauriel.

No such comfortable position – though Thranduil and anyone who was a true courtier would decry the description others who were ignorant of the real dangers of playing the games of Court entailed – for his children, no.

They were warriors.

Command was bred into their very bones and martial affairs in their blood.

He did not fault their instincts that had led them down this foolish path.

He did, however, fault their lack of faith in him as both their father and their King.

What he was going to do about it now that they have backed him so thoroughly into a no-win situation with their behaviors and choices he had yet to discern or decide. Too much was still unclear. If there was one thing he had learned from the horrors and failures of the Last Alliance it was to never act in haste.

Though unlike young Elrond and the Lady Galadriel, Thranduil at least would act.

Between Elrond’s fatalism and the Lady’s habit of spending as much time in her visions as she did grounded upon Arda, it was a wonder the courts of Imladris and Caras Galadhon accomplished anything.

The Peredhel and the Ñoldor Lady might have given up on Arda, existing only to fight the shadow of Mordor, casting their gazes more and more towards Valinor where the lady Celebrían awaited them, but the Sindar, the Silvan, and the Avari never would so long as there were stars in the sky and trees upon the earth.

“I did not see them myself.” Bard informed the war council, though how much of what he had to say they already knew was a guessing game he didn’t have time to worry over. “But from the descriptions it was Captain Tauriel and your son Prince Legolas who took part in a skirmish against a pack of orcs and wargs led by Bolg according to the information I was given at the time.”

“Bolg?” Several of the elves gave minute frowns at that, chattering softly amongst themselves at the news.

“This is who my First Commander and former Captain are tracking?” Thranduil’s question put a sharp end to the speculation of his commanders.

“Not as such,” Bard shrugged even as he heard his late-wife shouting at him for doing such both as a lord – however reluctant – and to a king. “He was slain by Prince Legolas and the Company’s Ranger companion.”

“The sorcerer, you mean.” Thranduil arched a knowing brow.
“That too.” Bard admitted since there was no use hiding it when the Elvenking had made it more than clear he was aware of Harry’s other abilities beyond that of crossbow and sword. “With support from Tauriel and the younger dwarven prince, Kíli. Prince Legolas and Tauriel left after the skirmish to track the survivors of the orc pack north to Gundabad from what Harry was told.”

“Gundabad.” Thranduil’s eyes flickered. He’d known as much from what his messenger to Legolas had reported but still, confirmation was never a loss. Even confirmation of such ill-news as this.

“Yes,” Bard held onto his patience. “Which given what I, ah, overheard in Erebor I was hoping that Prince Legolas and Tauriel had reported back.”

“And what was it you overheard?” Thranduil sipped lightly at his Dorwinion wine as his commanders did excellent impressions all around of being statues so as not to miss a word of information – or gossip as the case may be.

He supposed he couldn’t blame them.

Eternity did drag on at times.

“From what I can tell the dwarves are using those great monsters of ravens to track troop movements from Moria, Dol Guldur, and Gundabad.”

“Hmm.” Thranduil tilted his head to one side, his silver-blond hair falling in an elegant wave of silken strands with the motion. “And you just happened to overhear such when coming to treat with them?”

“I suppose.” Bard agreed, smirking a little. “Being an uneducated bargeman it might not occur to King Thorin that I might understand what it is I hear about such things. Laketown isn’t exactly Minas Tirith or Edoras or Dol Amroth.”

Thranduil chuckled at that, sitting up and standing in one smooth, cat-like motion as he loomed over his commanders, Bard, and the map upon the table alike.

Bard blinked. It was easy to forget when you only saw him sitting upon a throne – even a lesser one like those in his campaign and personal tents – or his great elk just how bloody big the Elvenking was. Thranduil towered over all others by at least a few inches. Bard couldn’t say that he’d ever seen a Man or Elf to match him, even in a town that existed solely on trade and fishing that gained citizens and visitors alike from both the south and east.

Honestly, as far as Bard was concerned between that ruddy great height of his, his broad shoulders that were wider than the Silvan elves surrounding him, and the way Thranduil carried himself the crown and silks were a bit over the top.

Thranduil didn’t need them.

He could be bare to the sky and anyone with a brain in their head would still know in their bones that this was the great Elvenking of the Woodland Realm.

His son, Legolas, from the few times Bard had seen him when running his father’s wine up the river had yet to gain that sort of innate poise.

Legolas wasn’t without his own manner of intrinsic sense of self-worth and confidence, but it wasn’t the same as his father’s. Hadn’t mellowed from the cockiness of youth into the self-assurance of age. Perhaps it never would be as Bard didn’t have the same sort of earthy wisdom his own father had seemed born with. Still, both were impressive in their own ways even if Thranduil’s version of
“impressive” tended to knock the very breath out of your lungs.

“Even still.” Thranduil spoke after studying both Bard and the map of Erebor for a moment. “If Thorin Oakenshield hasn’t shown the respect due an elven army on his doorstep, such blindness can yet be corrected.” And secondary confirmation of orc movements wasn’t to be discarded out of hand either.

He gave an order to his commanders then dismissed them with an airy wave of his hand before turning back to Bard.

“Whether Oakenshield is trying to bluff and frighten us with tales of orc armies or not, it would do your people well to have at least rudimentary training in arms.” He noted, tapping one elegant finger over the marker for Dale on the map. “My people report your refugees are mostly small folk: fishermen, traders, farmers, merchants.” He smiled slightly. “Bargemen.”

“That’s right.” Bard nodded, already aware of the manner of folk who had followed him from the lakeside. “The guard was the main focus of the riots, few survived from what we can tell even if the most violent of the people of Laketown didn’t leave the city despite it burning around them when they could sack it and loot at their ease.”

And oh, did that chafe him, that the good people of Laketown had once again paid – in spades – for the greed of others even if this time it was the Master and not a dwarven king.

“The magic that rebuilt this city is strange.” Thranduil continued, quirking his brow. “My commanders report that the homes and buildings will open – with a few exceptions – to your people but not all. Tell me:;” he smirked. “Have you inspected the armories yet?”
Chapter Twenty: Boars, Goats, and Woodland Sprites

Bard was less-than-enthused to find himself woken abruptly the next night from a much-needed healing sleep orders of one of Thranduil’s healers who had wrangled him earlier in the day when Bard was visiting his people in the infirmary and checking on Sigrid who had taken to helping there. The healer, a stern elleth with chestnut hair named Selebil, had taken one glance at his gait and had him stripped to his smallclothes within moments. Granted, Bard had been aware that he’d taken no little amount of damage during his escape from the Master’s guards, the riots, and the escape to the lakeshore even before the hard march to Dale. But in the end it had been easy enough to ignore his own pains when all around him were others with worse wounds and ails than his own.

Selebil hadn’t seen it that way.

Neither had Sigrid when the elven healer had tattled on him to his daughter who’d escorted him back to their rooms in the Great Hall like a recalcitrant youngster and tucked him into bed after a bowl of the ever-present broth that was found at all hours in the Hall. Whether it was made from vegetables provided by Thranduil’s largess, wild produce foraged from the renewed countryside, or whatever game could be hunted or fish could be caught in the river at least the broth was hot. Given the cold that was only worsening hot was a blessing even if it wasn’t terribly filling on its lonesome.

If it weren’t for the person waking him from his healer-mandated slumber being a shouting wizard cloaked in grey and carrying a staff outside the Great Hall, Bard would have been more than happy to dump the latest drama onto Thranduil’s lap since after a quick word with the wizard – Gandalf, or so it seemed – it became more than clear that the wizard’s business was with the Elvenking more than it was Bard himself.

Though from the look Thranduil gave the wizard then turned on Bard when it looked like he might slip out of the tent and leave the Elvenking to manage the grumpy bastard alone, the Elvenking was no more pleased to have been disturbed than Bard was himself.

Which, seeing how quick the wizard was to jump down Thranduil’s throat, Bard couldn’t really blame him.

Bard had merely been treated like an errand boy by the wizard until Thranduil had greeted him with a soft “Lord Bard” after the icy renditions of Thranduil – no honorifics to be seen, Bard noted – and Mithrandir traded by the pair after the Elvenking called an order to his guards to allow Gandalf and Bard entrance to his personal tent.

The wizard’s blatant disrespect must chafe especially with Thranduil already being in a less-than-hospitable mood.

“How has this come about, Thranduil?” Gandalf demanded, his temper in no way helped by his weakened state after the battle at Dol Guldur. “Your army encamped in and around Dale and Erebor? The mountain under siege?” He huffed.

“I notice you do not ask questions regarding the state in which you found Dale and Erebor.” Thranduil hummed lightly under his breath, refusing to allow the grey wanderer to get a rise out of him. The Istar was young to Arda for all his ancient wisdom. And arrogant in the ways he sought to
maneuver and manipulate the Free Peoples. Thranduil had little liking for the Istari in general, though Radagast, at least, treated the Sindar and Silvan elves with the same respect as the Eldar races, a trait he alone possessed among his great order. “Curious. Is the blood-mage one of yours perhaps? A new wizard to dazzle and awe the masses?”

“He is not.” Gandalf admitted, though he refused to show that Thranduil’s knowledge – and description of young Peverell’s powers – had him on the back-foot as much as his mere presence in Dale. “Nor is he the matter under discussion here, Thranduil.” Gandalf stamped his staff against the tent floor, ignoring the glances shared between this “Lord Bard” and the Elvenking. “You must set aside your petty grievances with the dwarves. War is coming. The cesspits of Dol Guldur have been emptied. You’re all in mortal danger.”

“What are you talking about?” Bard asked, stepping forward.

Thranduil rose, holding back a sigh as he moved to pour himself and Bard glasses of wine. “I can see you know nothing of wizards, your association with the blood-mage aside.”

Gandalf sighed, rolling his eyes at Thranduil’s posturing.

“They are like winter thunder on a wild wind. Rolling in from a distance, breaking hard in alarm.” He handed Bard a glass, the Man taking it with a nod as he sipped at the excellent vintage. “But sometimes,” Thranduil rolled his elven wine across his tongue as he gave Mithrandir a dismissive glance. “A storm is just a storm.”

“Not this time.” Gandalf protested. “Armies of orcs are on the move. These are fighters! They’ve been bred for war. Our Enemy has summoned his full strength.”

“Why show his hand now?” Thranduil asked perceptively, already knowing the answer no matter how Mithrandir chose to phrase it. Nonetheless: he wanted the wizard to admit it for not just Thranduil but also Bard to hear.

“Because we forced him.” Gandalf made a vague gesture. “We forced him when the Company of Thorin Oakenshield set out to reclaim their homeland.”

“You mean you forced him.” Thranduil corrected even as he and Bard followed Gandalf out of back of the tent to the overlook beyond.

It got him a dirty look from the wizard but still: it wasn’t as if Thranduil was wrong.

He may not be one of the trusted, venerated elven representatives of Saruman’s White Council but even so he was no ignorant naïf either. He knew well what went on in the other courts. The whispers and rumors that ran from Mithlond in the far west all the way to Dorwinion in the east. Mithrandir’s spurring of Thorin Oakenshield was his act alone: not one sanctioned by anyone but the grey wizard.

“The dwarves were never meant to reach Erebor.” Gandalf said with certainty, coming to a stop upon the overlook and staring up at the Lonely Mountain. “Azog the Defiler was sent to kill them. His Master seeks control of the mountain.” He turned to face the Man and the Elvenking. “Not just for the treasure within, treasure that could buy a hundred armies of mercenaries, no. But for where it lies, its strategic position. This is the gateway to reclaiming the lands of Angmar in the north. If that fell kingdom should rise again…” He sucked in a breath, shaking his head and staring down the implacable Elvenking and disbelieving Man. “Rivendell. Lorien. The Shire. Even Gondor itself will fall.”
“Rivendell. Lorien. The Shire and Gondor.” Thranduil repeated, arching a brow at Bard. “You see how highly our peoples rate to Mithrandir?” He drawled. “Not at all.” Before Gandalf could defend himself – as if he could defend his blatant favoritism that he played among the Free Peoples despite being, or so he claimed, an impartial party only interested in the war against Sauron – he continued. “These armies you speak of, Mithrandir. Where are they?”

Hours – and several glasses of wine later – Bard was surprised to find how long a pair of immortal beings could argue no matter how seemingly-polite they were to each other on the surface.

Then again, when you had eternity to do anything and everything, he supposed a matter of hours wasn’t much at all.

At least Thranduil’s main aide, Galion, had been ducking in and out – studiously avoiding being caught in the crossfire between his lord and the wizard the lucky bastard – bringing trays of bread, cheese, and fruits to eat or else Bard would be in much worse straights than he already was.

Though the wine was doing a fine job of making him forget any aches that lingered even after elvish healing.

“Since when has my council counted for so little?” Gandalf, it seemed, was at his wits’ end. “What do you think I’m trying to do?!”

“I think you’re trying to save your dwarvish friends.” Thranduil told him idly tone firming as he spoke. “I admire your loyalty to them. However it does not dissuade me from my course.” He rose, voice silkening with threat. “You started this, Mithrandir, you will forgive me if I finish it.” He strode to the tent’s opening. “Are the archers in position?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Give the order. If anything moves on that mountain: kill it.” He turned back to Gandalf, eyes dark. “You have stalled long enough, wizard. The dwarves are out of time.”

“You, bowman.” Gandalf demanded. “Do you agree with this? Is gold so important to you?”

“You misunderstand my position in this, Gandalf.” Bard said, rising with a nod to Thranduil. “My people have no part in this dispute.”

“And yet your people train alongside elven warriors and an elven army is encamped in your city?” Gandalf’s brows flew up. “I’d say your people have every part in this.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re right.” Bard strode from the tent, Gandalf on his heels as Thranduil gave an order in Sindarin once the wizard was out of his presence. “I have assured both the Elvenking and the King Under the Mountain that my people are refugees, nothing more and nothing less. We will not take up arms against either of our neighbors when no wrong has been done to us in recent memory by either party.” He nodded, once, firmly to the deceptively aged wizard. “You will excuse me. I have duties to attend to.”

Gandalf huffed, scowling, then did an about-face.

There had to be someone in this city that would listen…he frowned.

And where in the world were Legolas, Harry, and Bilbo in all of this muddle? If there was anyone he thought could get through to at least one of the kings and/or lords involved it was those three. And yet neither hide nor hair of any one of them was there to be seen.
Thorin left Harry heckling the other dwarrow in the armory over a few of them choosing the most ornate and heavy armor pieces – to the point that Glóin could barely move and Fíli wasn’t much better – and herding them towards better choices, ones they could actually fight in, going in search of his burglar.

The hobbit had been unnerved ever since the ravens had delivered word of the armies moving towards Erebor.

He couldn’t blame the gentle creature.

For all Bilbo’s ferocity in defending the Company and Thorin himself, war was no place for a gentlehobbit, let alone war against orcs.

That their entire strategy at the moment relied on Thorin’s ability to enrage the Elvenking and keep his army between the orcs and Erebor didn’t exactly delight Bilbo either, nor more than it did Thorin and a few of the other dwarrow though minds that were more rational – or so Balin and Harry claimed – prevailed.

Thorin had agreed to their plan, though he liked it not.

It was a dishonorable way to behave and only the notion that the Men of Dale at least had been informed – or their new leader anyway – had kept him from rejecting it utterly.

Honor, as Thorin had come to learn since Smaug attacked Erebor, was only as useful a trait in a King as the bellies it fed and the lives it saved: sometimes vital, others totally useless no matter how it chafed when the wheel turned and it was a moment for the latter rather than the former.

Dwalin would likely never understand the flexibility in such matters a King had to possess to safeguard his people, nor Fíli for that matter for all that he was Crown Prince – but that was as it should be.

Mahal knew, Kíli was morally flexible enough for both his sister-sons, as Frerin had once been for Thorin.

That was their way in the Line of Durin when possible, training a younger son or cousin as a left-hand, able to take the measures and steps to safeguard their people that might cause a stain upon a King’s – and therefore the Kingdom’s – honor. Thorin no longer had such a luxury as intentional ignorance of the actions his people took on his behalf. And with that the case, it was better that he knew all of it rather than just what they’d prefer he knew. Safer all around that if he couldn’t be blind to it, he was always aware of it.

Rounding a corner not far from the armory, Thorin spied Bilbo seated – a bit slumped and weary, as they all were when they thought no eyes were upon them save for Harry who always seemed to know when he was being watched – on a stone bench tucked into an alcove looking at something small in his hand with a wistful expression.

“What do you have there?” Thorin asked as he approached, Bilbo startling a little in his worn-down traveling clothes that had seen better days even being made of tough leather.

“Oh, it’s nothing.” Bilbo tried to dismiss his question, his fingers curling protectively over what he held in one small hand as he jumped to his large hairy feet to stand and face the dwarven king.

“Nothing at all.”
“Nonsense.” Thorin held in a scoff and an eye-roll. “Show me.”

Heaving a put-upon sigh and not holding back his eye-roll Bilbo held out his hand and slowly uncurled his fingers, revealing his little treasure that he’d protected for some weeks now: an acorn, gleaming brown under the dim Erebor torch light.

“I picked it up in Beorn’s garden.” Bilbo explained with a brief flash of a smile.

“You’ve carried it all this way?” Thorin was a bit incredulous at that considering the long weeks between then and now and the care such a thing must have taken.

“I’m going to plant it in my garden.” Bilbo closed his hand once more and tucked the acorn back into his jacket. “Someday.” He shuffled on his feet.

“It’s a poor prize to take back to the Shire.” Thorin huffed a little laugh, smiling down at the bashful hobbit.

“One day it’ll grow.” Bilbo told him smiling down at his feet then looking back up at Thorin through his eyelashes. “And every time I’ll look at it I’ll remember. Remember everything that happened. The good. The bad.” He raised his head, smiling at Thorin straight on. “And how lucky I am that we all made it home again.”

“If you’re going to watch your tree grow, you’re going to need this.” Thorin took his hands from behind his back and held out a shirt to his hobbit.

Bilbo frowned, blinking at the shirt – sized for a child of Man or Elf or yes, a grown hobbit, far too small for a grown dwarf with their muscles and barrel chests – made of a silvery-white metal mail with a collar of pearls and what he’d learned since coming to Erebor were diamonds stitched with thread in the same silver-white metal.

He’d never seen such a thing before in his life.

“What is it?” Bilbo stretched out his hand and brushed his fingers lightly over the fine chainmail work.

Even with his new and growing knowledge of metals, gems, and the crafts dwarrow could do with them this was still something he’d never seen the like of before.

“Silver-steel.” Thorin explained, still holding out the shirt until Bilbo slowly reached out and held it between his small, delicate hands, studying the mithril and jewel embroidery on the collar, cuffs, and hem intently. “You might have heard it called by another name: mithril.”

Bilbo gasped, eyes blinking as he tore his gaze from the fine work he was studying, finer even than anything he’d seen the brothers ‘Ri do on their journey or the finest tailor back in the Shire.

“Thorin no, I can’t.” Bilbo protested, well aware from his dwarven-training with the Company as well as his own readings how much such a thing was worth. “This is far too much, more than my share of the treasure, surely! I can’t accept.”

He tried to press the mithril shirt back upon the dwarven king, only to have large, calloused working-hands hold themselves around his own and press it back towards him.

“It is a gift.” Thorin told him, eyes soft and gentle even if his voice was gruff. “Either as a King to a beloved friend for his protection or as a Suitor to his beloved to prove his worth as a Provider. Whichever you prefer know that I will not have it back.”
“S-s-suitor?” Bilbo nearly yelped in surprise, eyes wide and jaw slack as he stopped pushing the shirt back towards Thorin – though that had been a losing proposition from the start, he hadn’t the strength to challenge even the weakest of the dwarrow of the Company let alone one of their strongest – as the words hit home and rang through his head. “B-beloved? Me? Thorin.” He all-but-groaned the name in exasperation. “There is a matter of timing! And with an army lying siege to Erebor with another one – or two! – behind it this is hardly the time!”

“There is none better.” Thorin held in a chuckle at Bilbo’s lecturing, finding it endearing now when six months before it would have been infuriating. “Should I fall in battle I would do so knowing I did all that is within my power to protect you, my gentle hobbit. My One.”

“Thorin…” Bilbo blinked away the sudden moisture in his eyes then nodded once, taking a step back and setting the mail shirt aside then stripping out of his leather jacket and tunic, standing there a moment in only his undershirt before slipping on the gift which was a bit big. It didn’t bother him at all though, the mail light as feathers as he’d read. Shrugging back into his tunic and jacket he glanced up at the dwarven king, a blush on his face as he held out something he’d slipped with clever hobbit-fingers from one of his jacket’s inner pockets.

Opening his hand once more in an echo of his earlier reveal of his acorn, he showed the dwarven king something that likewise gleamed in the light with rich brown tones but was much smaller.

Stepping into his courage much as he would his braces, he spoke: “I suppose you weren’t the only one making plans.” He admitted, blushing from the tips of his pointed ears down over his face and onto his chest. “I asked Ori and Kíli a few questions when the others weren’t about to take offense. Hobbits have our own traditions, gifts of flowers with specific means are most common but trees have their own.”

Sitting there in the center of his hand was a small carved wooden bead. Thorin plucked it up, blinking back damp eyes himself at what Bilbo’s words meant, studying the craftsmanship and the single oak leaf carved into the polished and oiled wood. It was a courtship bead, one wholly unlike any a dwarrow would make or give but a courtship bead nonetheless.

“Bofur helped me with polishing it and borrowing his tools.” Bilbo continued unbated – much like his blush at the look Thorin was giving him. “I have a feeling he’s setting up to win a round of betting with our friends.”

That wouldn’t surprise Thorin one bit.

“It’s acacia wood.” His hobbit shifted from foot to foot as his speech sped up to a nervous babble. “Which means friendship in the flower language for how our – rather unlikely, I have to admit – relationship began, per Shire tradition. Do, do you like it?”

Oh, how Bilbo hated feeling so unsure, so vulnerable like this as his great lump of a dwarf just stood there the gruff thing!

If he didn’t know any better he’d think he was wrapped up in a functional mute and not a dwarven king!

“Bunnanunê,” Thorin breathed, beaming a rare, wide smile. “It’s perfect.”

“That, that’s good?” Bilbo frowned, blinking, uncertain of what he’d just been called. Or if that had been directed at him at all.

Thorin laughed. “I see we’re going to have to give you actual language lessons now.” His eyes
crinkled with delight at the corners despite their current hardships and dangers looming. “It means ‘my tiny treasure.’ I accept your courtship bead, Bilbo Baggins, Master of Bag End.”

With that, Thorin reached up and removed a small pouch made of some sort of wire mesh from what Bilbo could see from a long cord that kept it tucked under his clothes whilst hanging around his neck. Opening it, he revealed what Bilbo speculated after a quick count were a dozen – give or take – hair-beads. Thorin shifted them easily, his fingers dexterous for being so large and bulky parted to Bilbo’s own, plucking one bead from the mix before fastening the pouch once more and tucking it away, Bilbo’s wooden bead still held easily in hand.

“Do you accept mine?” Thorin prompted, showing a bead made of the same silver-white metal, mithril, as his gift, set with – Bilbo counted quickly – seven tiny diamonds surrounding the bead.

“I accept your courtship bead, Thorin Oakenshield, King of Durin’s Folk.”

From far-too-near they heard a rollicking shout and cry.

Trading a chagrined look over the moment of privacy that wasn’t all that private, they grinned at each other, far too happy to allow such a minor thing as eavesdroppers ruin their moment together.

A few hours later, Bilbo stood watching with the rest of the Company upon the balcony behind Thorin as they watched Thranduil ride up to the Gate upon an elk – an elk of all things! – with a disgruntled Bard beside him on horseback and a nothing-short-of-cranky Gandalf beside Bard.

Though from the looks Harry was catching passing in flickers between the Elvenking, the Lord of Dale, and the Grey Wizard approximately none of them were happy at the turn of events.

Even if he couldn’t quite make out which part of it was irritating to which parties, it was entertaining.

To him, if no one else.

As it was Harry lingered in the shadows of the open balcony door, lest his presence distract others from their purpose. He’d yet to recover enough surplus magic to bring his glamor back up. The last thing they needed was the Elvenking in a strop over an imagined betrayal – they wanted him irritated and entrenched, even enraged, not out for blood regardless of cost.

“Mithrandir entreats me to come to terms with you, Thorin Oakenshield.” Thranduil called out, his voice carrying over the valley leading to the Gate, his army at his back save for a company of archers he’d left to supplement the Men’s defense of Dale. “Though it suits me not, I have agreed to try one last time to reclaim that which your grandfather stole from my Realm without the shedding of blood.”

“You come to the Gates of Erebor and speak of reclamation without bloodshed!” Thorin spat back. “You?!” He shouted, voice echoing and ringing over mountain and vale. “I would not trust Thranduil, the great King, to honor his word if the end of all days were upon us! You lack all honor! I have seen how you treat my people, your friends! We came to you once: starving. Homeless. Seeking your help. You turned your back! Turned away from the suffering of my people!”

What Thorin might have said next they would never know. What new ill he would have charged the Elvenking with or insult dumped upon his silvery head. Bilbo reached out, stepping forward on quick hobbit feet hidden from below by his slighter form among the shadows, and gently pressed the tips of his fingers to the back of one clenched fist, anchoring the King in his burning rage.
Let it never be said, Harry mused, that between them the kings of the Rhovanion didn’t have enough passion burning in their bodies to rival the fires of Smaug:

A bargeman willing to face – and slay – a dragon for the safety of his family.

A dwarven smith leading a group of refugees from one side of Arda to the other to reclaim their home.

And last but not least: an ancient Elvenking willing to go to war to fulfill a final request of his beloved.

No, passion would never be a lack in the Kings of the Rhovanion, even if Bard hadn’t quite caught onto where his lordship of Dale was heading.

Sense, now that might be a different matter.

“Do not speak to me of lacking honor and broken oaths, naug!” Thranduil lashed back, blue-grey eyes nearly white with rage. “I know the wrath and ruin of them! Did not I warn your great king Thrór of the danger he courted with his greed? Did not I pay the price demanded by him for my commission only to be spurned and turned away? It was your people who broke with mine, Thorin son of Thráin! What succor thence should the great Elvenking provide to his enemy no matter the hour of need?!”

“Oh dear.” Gandalf muttered into his beard beside Bard as the two witnessed Thorin and Thranduil each turn nearly incandescent with fury at the accusations and insults of the other.

Especially when a horn sounded, interrupting the argument before it could devolve any further.

“That’s not an orc horn.” Kíli almost started bouncing in place with glee as those mounted below turned to face the northern hills opposite Ravenhill and Dale beyond came the clatter and stamping of an army.

An order was shouted by Thranduil, the army of elves – which seemed to have grown overnight to Gandalf’s eyes – turning in unison to face the far greater threat of a dwarven army cresting the northern hills, having rounded the eastern side of the mountain to approach the vale where Thranduil’s force had been set from above.

“Ironfoot.” Gandalf muttered, Bard looking over at him as Thranduil took off on his elk to face the vanguard of the approaching dwarven host which appeared – from what the wizard could tell – about half the size of that of the elves bristling with spears and axes in their heavy plate armor as the dwarves of the Company cheered.

A few of the Company, however, had to appreciate the sheer smooth unified movement of the elven host.

For an army that hadn’t seen a battle-plain in centuries they were as locked together and fluid as ever.

The immortal bastards.

“Well, that’s two armies in play.” Bilbo noted to Harry who was frowning and rubbing at his temple. “Are you feeling alright?”

Harry shook his head, braided-back ebony hair glinting in the faint light that reached his alcove. “We need to get ready.” He warned. “I feel something coming. Something so dark it’s like to split my skull open in my weakened state.”
“Two will have to stay.” Thorin warned his Company. “We can’t leave the Gate open for an enemy army to take the mountain. Are you up to a fight, Master Wizard?”

Harry smirked. “I’m always up for a fight.”

“I’ll stay.” Bilbo already knew it was coming, preventing Thorin from making it an order. “If the ravens will listen to me I’ll stay right here and send out troop movements with Balin’s help.”

“Aye, that’ll suit.” Thorin agreed, then eyed Ori who merely sighed and nodded his head as Harry handed him his crossbow and quiver. Strength aside, the gentle scribe could do more assisting Balin and Bilbo and using a crossbow than he could in the thick of battle.

Besides which with their beloveds safe and out of harm’s way – as much as possible – he and his Heir wouldn’t find themselves distracted at inopportune moments.

“To the Gate.” Thorin ordered, hefting Orcrist. “To battle. If you would follow me one last time.”

“Aye!”

…

Down below on the battle plain things were not so easy as Thranduil, Gandalf, and Bard faced off against Dain Ironfoot, Lord of the Iron Hills.

“Ironfoot.” Bard asked the wizard, confused. “Who’s that then?”


“Are they alike?”

Gandalf sighed, glancing over at the simple Man who’d been thrust – Harry’s doing or so he understood – into the arena of kings and lords.

“I have always found Thorin to be the more reasonable of the two.”

Bard winced. Having felt the sharp side of Thorin’s tongue – both personally and as a bystander – that didn’t fill him with hope for staving off bloodshed until their common enemy could arrive. Not that Gandalf knew that was what he was doing – or trying to do. But he had no reason to trust the grey wizard. He thought if Harry and the rest wanted Gandalf to know what they were about they would fill him in on their plans by their own doing – not his.

“Good morning.” Dain called pleasantly as he trotted up seated upon his war-boar to a small outcropping of rock overlooking the Gate valley, his eyes easily spotting the movement of his kin from the balcony as he distracted the elves and their two odd companions. Wizards. Worse: Tharkun. Thorin had told him of the wizard’s prodding him to reclaim Erebor. A fool’s notion, despite it paying off in the end. Still, while he wasn’t willing to risk his people against a fucking dragon, he’d risk them against tree-shaggers any day, especially if it helps lift his shame of turning Thorin away when his cousin had requested his help retaking their homeland. Their, Dain admitted, since as Thorin’s cousin and a son of Durin, Erebor was as much his ancestral home as it was the main line’s. Both of which combined in Dain bringing the full might of seven-thousand dwarven spears and five hundred calvary when Thorin sent word rather than a token force to help keep hold of the mountain until Thorin’s people from the Blue Mountains could arrive. “How are we all? I have a wee proposition if you wouldn’t mind givin’ me a few moments of your time. Would ya consider… just sodding off?!”
Bard choked back a laugh.

Less reasonable, sure.

But far more entertaining unless one found brooding interesting.

“All of ya! Righ’ now!”

“Come now, Lord Dain.”

“Gandalf the Grey.” Dain scowled over that the wizard who nodded in greeting. “Tell this rabble to leave or I’ll water the ground with their blood!”

“Have to admit.” Bard said in an aside to Thranduil who was watching the antics of the new dwarf lord with a smirk. “He knows how to make a threat interesting.”

“There is no need for war between Dwarves and Elves.” Gandalf protested, kneeing his mount closer to the boar-riding dwarf. “A legion of orcs march on the mountain. Stand your army down.” He demanded.

“I will not stand down before any elf! Not least this faithless woodland sprite.” Dain shook his warhammer at the Elvenking. “He wishes nothing but ill upon my people. If he chooses to stand between me and my kin, I’ll split his pretty head open! See if he’s still smirking then!”

“He’s obviously mad.” Thranduil said, tone bored and drawling. “Like his unalmented kin.”

“You hear that lads?!” Dain called to his army. “We’re on! Let’s give these bastards a good hammering!”

But before Dain could carry out his threat, Bard turning his horse and already riding for Dale to take command of the militia there as well as the elven archers promised to keep the city safe if battle was to break out, the ground shook and rumbled turning all eyes to the west as stone and mountain groaned, Gandalf gasping:

“Were-worms!”
Chapter 21

Broken Blade

Chapter Twenty-One: Fight, Sons of Durin!

Bursting through solid rock like visions from the deepest of night terrors, the massive were-worms, devourers of rock and stone that dwelled deep beneath the earth groaned and roared then retreated back into their tunnels as horns sounded behind.

“Oh c’mon.” Dain groaned in turned as he saw this with his own eyes, Thranduil’s head whipping about as his frosted eyes stared in shock at the scene from a bygone era.

Behind the elven army which turned once more to face the newest threat, grudge against the dwarves forgotten – for the moment – the Gate of Erebor opened revealing a great white steed, a Mearas, galloping for the watchtower upon Ravenhill as the Company save for those agreeing to stay and man the Gate poured from within.

“Mounts!” Dain shouted to the dwarven cavalry at his back. “Mounts for the King’s Company!”

The spare boars and goats were spurred down to the Gate led by a squad of cavalry, the elves ignoring this as the dwarven host moved to form a shield wall before them, military tactics taking precedence as the dwarven infantry with their unshakable strength, shields, and spears protected the companies of elven archers.

Dain couldn’t move his war machines to behind the redrawn lines, but he could – and did – order them to reposition atop the same stretch of foothills as Ravenhill’s watchtower, not even blinking an eye at the black-haired rider – an elf of all things? – that leapt from the white horse and ran into the watchtower other than to hope the lad barred the door behind him: that was sure to be a prime piece of real estate given the windlance atop the flat roof that if Thorin had been wise was supplied with dozens of lances to rain down on the enemy.

The silver-white steed wheeled and ran straight through the elven host, not slowing for a moment as they moved before it like parting water, thundering for the gates of Dale.

Smart. Dain had to admit. Very smart for a beast of burden.

Before long as orc horns sounded, Dain found himself mounted side-by-side behind the shield wall with Thorin.

“Cousin! Quite the party you’ve invited me too!” He shouted then Dwalin took up the battle cry:

“Fight, sons of Durin!” The captain ordered. “Fight for your people! Fight for your King and Lord!”

“Du Bekar!”

“Khazad ai menu!”

“Hold!” Thranduil called to his archers, one hand held out as the orc army bore down upon the
shield wall. “Hold! *Loose!*”

“Loose!”

“Loose!”

“Fire!” With the fourth barrage – even the dwarves impressed despite themselves as their ballistae were joined by the elven arrows – they were joined by the Men of Dale and the elven archers therein, all commanded by a tall dark-haired man wielding a longbow: Bard the Bowman, slayer of dragons. “Fire at will!”

The charging army had drawn close enough to the city for them to join the offensive as the vanguard of the orc armies – tens of thousands of orcs and wargs – crashed against the strength of the dwarven shield wall.

It couldn’t hold for long – everyone knew it – not with the sheer force of orcs pouring down upon them, but it lasted long enough for line after line after line of orcs to fall under elven arrows, dwarven ballistae from the hills, and dwarven axes, swords, and spears at the shield wall.

An order from Dwalin had the dwarves switching in place and moved the entire wall forward a pace, allowing fresh dwarrow to replace those that had taken the first two charges.

Then again.

Then again.

Then again, until at last they were several paces forward and the orcs had learned against charging straight to their deaths, a new orc horn sounding and order that had the grunts falling back and a new menace coming forward: trolls, disfigured, broken, and enslaved.

And terribly effective as sheer blunt-force weapons against shield-walls, troops, and gates alike.

Thorin nodded and Dain gave the order, the shield wall splitting behind the cavalry charge of goats and boars alike, elven swords and spears flanking them into the breech.

Thranduil gave an order, his archers aiming for – and taking down – several of the trolls as Dain’s war-wagons did the same, though none were as effective as the single being the Elvenking spied atop Ravenhill’s watchtower: lance after lance piercing trolls through the belly or head and crushing their orcish masters and allies when they fell.

A new horn sounded and a line of massive trolls – mountain trolls rather than the former cave trolls – with catapults lashed to their backs marched from the were-worm holes following a host of orcs.

Following them towards *Dale*.

At once, the assault from the watchtower ceased on the trolls attacking the frontlines and the dwarven war-wagons as Harry turned his assault on the massive creatures that sought to cut the combined armies and force them to fight on two fronts.

Bard ordered the militia – those who weren’t armed with bows – to the city gates even as his archers focused on bringing down the war-beasts before they could breech Dale’s walls.

He’d already ordered the women, children, and infirm to barricade themselves into the hidden tunnels below the Great Hall.
There was nothing more he could do for them now other than fight to his last breath to protect them.

“Bring them down!” He ordered, loosing arrow after arrow. “Aim for their eyes!”

But it was no use: there were simply too many.

Or…he blinked as he saw light flash and smelled burned flesh, there weren’t enough.

Bard laughed, shocked to his toes but elated even with blood and death all around and below him.

Harry.

That tricky fucking bastard.

Rocks from catapults broke and fell to the ground, crushing anything that lay beneath them.

A war-beast with a stone battering ram lashed to its head groaned and fell as it was seared to the bone.

Barrage after barrage of black orc arrows sizzled and hissed: but not one pierced the magical shield a cunning – and paranoid – wizard had placed over the renewed city of Men filled with refugees in need of protection.

“Every man to the walls!” Bard gave the order. “Spears and bows! Take them down!”

While others had been distracted by Harry’s light display – wards didn’t stop protecting a city simply because there were people living in it after all – Thranduil had turned to killing orcs by the dozen, his massive elk scooping them up and the Elvenking cleaving their heads from their bodies in a single stroke, tearing a wide swathe of carnage through the evil forces that threatened his archers as they brought down the rear of the enemy army by the hundreds with every volley.

The elven archers found themselves retreating to place their backs to the city walls using the wards for their own protection though even an Elvenking’s luck expired at some point, a lucky orc arrow volley finding his war-elk mount and sending Thranduil flying into a circle of orc soldiers.

Not that it made a difference.

He could slaughter them as easily afoot as he could astride, loosing his second sword and whirling through the enemy like a cyclone of razor-edged death cloaked in silver.

“We cannot take the city!” One of Azog’s captains reported to the commander as the Defiler stood upon a high hill overseeing the battle-plain. “Magic protects it!”

“Find the sorcerer!” Azog commanded. “The Man with black hair!”

If they could kill him his enchantments would fall.

…

At the top of the Ravenhill watchtower, Harry cursed as he ran out of lances and arrows for the windlance and spears to throw leaving him with naught to do but watch as the battle below unfolded.

Azog was out of war-beasts but even with thousands and thousands of orcs dead at the blades and arrows of the combined armies of dwarves, elves, and men more still remained.

A caw from a raven had him turning towards the north where Dain’s army had first appeared.
Groaning, he sent the ravens flying to find Thorin and Balin to relay the news.

The army of Gundabad was coming.

They would arrive in less than an hour – if their forces could hold out that long against Azog.

…

“Fall back!” Dain ordered, seeing the utter chaos. They needed to regroup with the elves protecting the city and guarding against a renewed attack from the south. “Fall back to the gates!”

“The dwarves are almost spent.” Azog proclaimed watching this. “Prepare for the final assault!”

Dain was happier than he’d admit seeing his cousin and the lads flanking him on either side as they reformed the lines.

“Hello, cousin, nice to see you!” Dain said, nudging the black-haired dwarf. “Still alive, aye! I like that bloke you’ve stuck up on the watchtower, very handy he is!”

Thorin rolled his eyes at Dain’s antics. “Provided we survive I’ll tell him you said so.”

At a horn-blast from the orcs, the pair of noble dwarves nearly groaned as yet more war-beasts moved forward taking up position at the head of the orcish forces.

“Don’t these bastards have anything else in their books?” Fíli griped, rolling his wrists and twirling his twin swords.

Kíli was already grinning, loosing arrow after arrow as Thorin began the charge – on foot this time – at the point of the formation. “I don’t think Azog’s the type to read Fee!”

The war-beasts dropped under the combined efforts of a handful of dwarven archers on the ground and Ori and Bilbo upon the ramparts as Balin blew the horn of Erebor for a renewed assault.

“They’re rallying.” Gandalf smiled where he fought among the elves. “They’re rallying to the King!”

“Du bekar!”

…

“The sorcerer commander!” One of Azog’s underlings reported. “He’s stationed at the watchtower of Ravenhill!”

…

Upon the ramparts of Dale, Bard watched with dread pooling in his stomach as a force of orcs and goblin mercenaries – hundreds in number – split off from the main army and headed straight towards Ravenhill at an order from Azog.

“Sweet mercy.” He breathed, having a damn good idea of who was up there manning the windlance. “He’ll be slaughtered.”

Whipping around he turned to his men.

“The half-elven Ranger is under attack!” He bellowed. “Any man who wishes to fight and give their last to protect our people and the one who protected us, follow me!”
Thus said, he bared the sword given him by the Elvenking – just in case – but before he could charge
out the gates found himself being galloped over to by a familiar silvery steed, Shadowfax eyeing him
from liquid – if fierce – eyes then nodding his great head towards the empty saddle.

Gulping – having heard more than one story about the Mearas in his life – Bard nodded in turn,
climbing into the saddle and then giving the order to open the gates as he charged out into the fray,
his men behind him, to keep the orcs and goblins from assailing Harry in the watchtower.

Barred or not – that wouldn’t save the Ranger with goblins in play that could climb sheer walls of
stone.

Something which Harry himself was learning as he found himself pressed as he retreated to a
windowless room with a single door to keep himself from being utterly overrun as the goblins
advanced but funneling them into his trap.

He wouldn’t be able to manage it forever.

But he hoped that he’d manage it long enough for Thorin – or Gandalf or fucking anyone – to
come up with an idea to keep them all from being slaughtered through sheer numbers.

...  

“We can’t keep this up!” Dain shouted over to his cousin as the pair of them flanked by Dwalin,
Fíli, and Kíli fought their way through never-ending lines and circles of orcs. “I hope you have a
plan!”

“Aye.” Thorin thought he had just that as he eyed the flags high upon one of the hills. “We’re going
to take out their leader.”

Finding one of the riderless goats still roaming the valley and mowing down orcs Thorin jumped into
the saddle.

“Azog?” Dain blinked.

“I’m gonna kill the piece of filth!”

“Thorin.” Dain tried to talk sense into his cousin. “You cannot do this! You’re our King!”

“That is why I must do it.” Thorin swore.

“And how, exactly, are you planning to fight your way single-handedly onto that damned hill?”

There came a rolling cry and the stamping of hooves as a war-wagon clambered and clattered to a
stop between the cousins and sons of Durin, Balin at the reins.

“Balin?!” Thorin shook his head at the sight. “You’re supposed to be holding the Gates inside
Erebor!”

“Aye, about that.” Balin mused. “Seems I’ve changed my mind laddie. Gundabad is coming
according to Harry. We’re running out of time to see this done before we’ve another ten thousand
crashing down upon our heads. It’s been awhile since I’ve driven one of these but...”

Dwalin, Fíli, Kíli, and Bifur all jumped onto the war-wagon as Thorin roared the charge.

“You’re all mad bastards!” Dain called to their backs. “I like it!” Then he whispered, fear quaking
in his heart: “May Durin save you all.”
While Thorin and his small band fought their way to Azog, Bard was fighting his to reach Harry within the tower of Ravenhill.

Fighting their way through hundreds of goblins and orcs, his men of Dale, perhaps a thousand in all, cleared the hill surrounding the tower in less than an hour as they followed the silvery beacon of Bard upon Shadowfax who took out an orc or goblin for every two or three that fell to Bard’s sword.

Leaping from the Mearas at the battered-down door to the tower, Bard and a squad of spearmen at his back fought their way up the tower steps as the sound of fighting from above reached their ears.

When at last they breeched the room with piles and piles of dead bodies it was to the sight of a weary, dirty, and bloodied Harry standing almost hip-deep in corpses.

The half-elven Ranger barked a laugh at the sight of them.

“Never thought I’d be this glad to see a band of scruffy smugglers and fishermen in my life!” He shouted, clapping arms with Bard. “Thanks for the rescue. I don’t know how long I could’ve kept this up.”

“Well being buried alive under orc guts wouldn’t be a noble end for the savior of Dale, now would it?” Bard shot right back then sobered as he commanded his men to continue clearing – and holding – the tower.

“How goes it?” Harry asked, leaning on the spear he held in one hand as he held his sword loose in the other. “I’ve lost track of how long I’ve been fighting alone in here.”

“Dale holds.” Bard said, cleaning his sword of the aforementioned orc guts on a nearby goblin corpse. “And the dwarves rallied to their King but we’re still outnumbered even with elves taking down ten and twenty orcs or wargs for every one they lose and dwarves three to five for theirs.”

Harry hissed, eyes narrowing then started from the room. “C’mon.” He jerked his head toward the exit. “We need to find Gandalf if we’ve any hope of salvaging this clusterfuck of a situation.”

They didn’t have to go far.

Gandalf along with Thranduil and the elven host had advanced from sheltering under the wards of Dale and were pressing Azog’s southern flank, bringing them up to and over the crest of Ravenhill with Dale well protected behind, the remaining company of archers inside the city more than capable of picking off any stragglers that wanted to test their luck against the city.

A raven landed on Harry’s shoulder, whispering into his ear as he found himself taking an unofficial war-council with Gandalf, Bard, and the Elvenking.

“We can hold.” Gandalf told him at a glance from Harry’s emerald eyes, Thranduil cocking his head in interest as he caught sight of the strange half-elven creature that dripped of magic. “Your magic over Dale has saved us, young Peverell.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.” Harry warned, shaking his head about to speak when the clattering of hooves interrupted him, the group swinging to face the oncoming threat only to find a pair of once-absent elven “scouts” riding up on a white elven horse.

“Gandalf! Father!”
“Legolas Greenleaf!” Gandalf greeted in return, relieved to his bones to see the Prince of the Woodland Realm as the archer was one of the few beings capable of keeping Thranduil from pulling back his forces now that the tide had turned in their favor.

“There is a second army.” Legolas reported, glancing curiously at the half-elven standing by a Man of Laketown that looked much like the fighter that had helped him kill Bolg. “A commander leads a second army of Gundabad orcs and wargs down from the North. They’ll be on us in moments.”

“Ten thousand.” Harry confirmed, nodding at the pair. “Give or take. They have divided into two forces to flank us from the North,” he gestured across the valley. “And the west.” Then the high hill that Azog had been using as his command post.

With the East protected by Erebor itself and the South by Dale, it would trap the remaining combined forces between a hammer and anvil.

“Thorin has ridden for the high hill.” Gandalf announced, dread coating his words as he looked west. “With Kíli, Fíli, and others.”

“They must be warned.” Bard looked towards the hill covered in fog and mist in the cold winter afternoon, refusing to burn away.

“It’s a trap.” Tauriel breathed.

“I will not lose one more elven life protecting that dwarven fool.” Thranduil swore, eyes flaring.

“You won’t have to.” Harry sheathed his sword and handed his spear to Bard. “I’ll go.”

“As shall I.” Tauriel glared at her adar. “As I am banished it matters naught what your orders are… milord.” So saying she leapt up onto the elven horse, Legolas joining her after a disappointed look at his father even as the elves around them rallied at the sight of their prince and the first of their commanders as they galloped towards the high hill, expecting Harry to catch them up.

Shadowfax knickered only for Harry to pat him on the nose before cracking his neck, Gandalf and Thranduil’s eyes flaring wide at the sight of the power in his aura sparking to life from the banked ember it was only moments before.

With a shrieking cry and a flash of black flames streaked with red and orange and blue and white, a great bird with a wing span eight feet long hovered in the air where a half-elven Ranger had stood. A nudge of Shadowfax’s nose had Bard climbing back into his saddle, the Man ordering his fighters: “West! To the high hill!” as he galloped after the flying – and singing – form of his friend.

In the battle plain between the foothill crests and high hill vales, a sound never heard before in Arda washed over the battle. Those of dwarf, elf, and man alike taking heart and feeling renewed, rallying under the song. Meanwhile Azog’s forces shrieked and cried, the weaker and less disciplined troops clamping their hands over their ears as their enemies pounced upon their distraction to cut them down.

“Who is he, Mithrandir?” Thranduil demanded to know as one of his captains led over a horse for the Elvenking. Shape-changing was not an ability any peredhel or Istar possessed. Yet he could not deny what he had witnessed.

Gandalf smirked over at the ancient elf. “If you want to know, I suggest you take yourself and your vanguard to the high hill and find out.”
Legolas, Harry was convinced, was insane.

As he flew over the battle-field he nearly lost the train of his phoenix song at the sight of Legolas leaping up from horseback and catching hold of the legs of a bat – one of a company that swooped down from the North – and flew upside down shooting his bow or cutting through companies of orcs all the way to the high hill until he was above the highest point and shot it in the head and leaping back down before the bat fell with its death.

Tauriel – and Bard behind her he saw, Shadowfax must really like him – took a much saner path across the plain and up the foothills to where the flags directing the orc armies stood.

Well.

He would have smirked if his Animagus form was capable of it.

With a single dive and flare of his flame – where the flags used to be high over the battle plain.

Seeing the dwarves in the midst of battle with orc berserkers, blending in with the frosted-over landscape with their infamous sickly-white skin, Harry dove once more singing a final refrain then shifted in mid-air, dropping down into the center of their circle where the sons of Durin stood back-to-back though he saw no sign of any of the others save for Thorin, the princes, and the Fundinsons.

“Harry!” Kili greeted him with far too much cheer considering they were surrounded by massive white orcs. “You made it!”

“Ran out of spears.” Harry explained as when a gap in the attackers appeared – courtesy of Legolas’s bow from what he could tell in the midst of the mayhem – and the circle expanded allowing him to slip in between the princes. “And we’re running out of time if you’re after killing Azog, lads. Half the force from Gundabad is going to overrun this hill anywhen now.”

Harry truly did appreciate the brevity of orc armor.

Lots of pasty white flesh on display for the Sword of Gryffindor to slash at and envenom.

“Bit busy at the moment.” Fili protested.

“Can’t find ‘im.” Dwalin corrected the lad. “Just these bastards.”

“And a bunch of Durin’s sons wasn’t enough to flush him?” Harry arched a brow. Orcs had restraint. Who knew?

“Apparently not.” Balin said drily.

More arrows rained down from a second archer even as the horn of an orc horde sounded to renewed clash and clattered from the battle-plain below.

“That’s one half of the Gundabad force.” Thorin said, grim. “Where’s the other?”

“Azog now, Gundabad later.” Harry reminded, eyes narrowed as the archers bought them a pause from Azog’s brutes. “We need Azog’s attention.”

“Aye, and how’re you thinking to get that?” Dwalin asked testily.

Kili took one look at the expression on Harry’s face and started shaking his head.
“Whatever mad plan you’ve cooked up now the answer is no.” He said firmly. “Last time I saw that look on your face I ended up shooting arrows at a dragon and the time before that I followed you through Laketown to kill Bolg. Keep your suicidal insanity to yourself.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “As if they didn’t work. Which is very much the point,” he explained. “I’ve foiled Azog at every turn by protecting the Company on the run from his trackers and then my wards over Dale which kept him from dividing the armies to protect the city. If there’s anyone he wants more than you lot it’s me either to kill or capture and take to his Master. He already sent goblins and orcs to siege Ravenhill, if he knows I’m here he’ll come to take me on.”

“How did he miss your arrival?” Fíli pointed out, bemused. “It wasn’t exactly subtle.”

“No.” Harry smiled. “But it wasn’t of me either: just a bloody big singing bird. Not a black-haired wizard that his trackers have reported dead once already only to be mistaken.”

“Alright.” Thorin said, nodding. “How are you going to draw him out?”

“Magic of course.” Harry’s smile turned vicious. “Only…remember what I said at the bridge?”

“Get ready to catch you?”

“Yeah…that goes double this time.”

…

After watching the deadest of deadpan stares sent his way by the dwarves, Harry snorted an inappropriate laugh and explained:

“That spell to repair the bridge was all brute strength with little control needed to guide it. What I’m about to do is the opposite: a tiny amount of power but needing utter control else it will rage without boundaries and destroy everything in its path.”

“Why risk it then?” Fíli asked, worried all at once not just for the ongoing battle in general but for his friend who hadn’t so much as floated an oatcake in the two weeks – or so – since he’d fixed Erebor.

“Because I didn’t help two peoples reclaim their homelands just to watch this orc cockpimple wipe them out.”

“One of these days you’re going to have to teach us your other language.” Dwalin muttered, constantly looking around as if he could conjure Azog from the fog and mist. “I’ve a feelin’ we’re missin’ some prime curses.”

Harry snickered, rolling his shoulders then sent himself into a controlled rise – flying by any other standard than his own even though it was just straight up – then held himself steady in air once he saw what he needed: the missing five thousand creeping, quietly he’d give them that, up the back of the small western hills that the high hill was part of.

He tested at his power for a moment, making sure he hadn’t strained himself.

He wasn’t lying after all.

What he was about to do was something he’d never done before, the effects far too devastating outside of the controlled environment where he’d learned it. If he cocked it up that massive bloody Elvenking was going to kill him. Even if it took a thousand years for the big bastard to figure out
how to do it and make it stick.

Fiendfyre, in the end, hadn’t earned its name lightly.

Harry hadn’t lied either: it took little power as he well knew. Crabbe had proven that in the Room of Requirement. What you had to have in order to use it and not die along with everything else in its path was control and an iron will.

Near sentient, fiendfyre served only one purpose: destruction.

What actually made it preferable to other spells of its same class such as balefire and Greek fire was that it was neither cursed – though his old world liked to say it was – nor did it curse the land.

Fiendfyre fed off of ambient magic: when the magic was gone it would extinguish naturally. That ambient magic was what turned it in an instant from a small candle flame of fire into a raging inferno. It was also to his advantage.

Orcs – tainted, miserable creatures that they were – weren’t without magic. In fact, they were more magical than the Men and dwarrow Harry had met in this world if much less magical than elves. Remnants of what they once were, he thought.

Still, the fiendfyre should go right after them once he pointed it in their direction.

And as the flames wreathed him and he sent them roaring down over the crest of the hill, devouring the dead grass underfoot and melting snow and ice with a gust of hiss-laced steam, it did just that, Harry only having to rein it in a little to keep it from diverting to either side.

The orcs tried to run.

Their warg mounts bayed and howls and tossed their riders.

To no avail.

The fiendfyre found them anyway, cutting a path of melted snow over now-bare earth five hundred yards wide and a quarter-mile long in the process.

Sweat dripped down Harry’s brow as he felt his levitation in mid-air wobble for a dangerous moment but he couldn’t turn away from the fire. Not now. Then as the great beast of flame – Harry was pretty certain he’d seen a dragon form in the midst of the flame though not Smaug at least – turned back upon itself and swallowed up the last of the missing Gundabad force, Harry began to close his wide-spread arms in achingly slow degrees as the fire fought him every inch and step of the way.

Long moments passed even as he heard the sounds of battle from below once more, curses in Black Speech and Khuzdul raging in step with the fire, the wizard barely able to duck a thrown axe from Azog thanks to an arrow striking it off-target in the air.

Then at last with a massive clap of sound and a shockwave that had him spiraling into a tumble before he could right himself, the spell was done and Harry felt himself caught with a crash against an armor plated chest.

He peeked up sheepishly into the shocked summer-blue-sky eyes of an elf who set him firmly upon his feet, Harry glancing around at the top of the high hill to find all eyes – even those of the newly arrived Elvenking, Bard, and Men of Dale upon them, all save for the center of the hill where with a bellow of Khuzdul Thorin struck down Azog as his nephews hamstrung the great Pale Orc, removing his ugly head from his grotesque shoulders.
A second, piercing cry sounded overhead, sending them looking up even as Thorin panted with triumph and grabbed Azog’s head from the ground, marching over to the crest of the high hill to call his victory down to the orc armies that had begun to mill and panic with the lack of orders coming down for the last hour or so.

“The eagles.” Kíli bounced in place, much to the amusement of a certain red-headed elf who’d found her way to fighting at his side at some point in the battle Harry had missed. “The eagles are here!”

“So’s Beorn.” Harry noted, rubbing at the back of his neck as he felt fatigue begin to set in, spying the massive shape-changer diving from a winged-back and changing into his equally-massive brown bear form before landing. “Well lads.” He took up his sword once more before leaping into Shadowfax’s saddle in front of Bard. “Let’s go help with the mop up, shall we?”

“Aye.” Dwalin smiled viciously. “Can’t let that bear have all the fun!”

…

Chapter End Notes

I'm currently working on Harry's adventures - solo and with others - during the time break between the Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings. I really appreciate all the ideas my Facebook peeps gave me for Harry's idle-time activities!
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: So this is the first mop-up chapter for the Hobbit trilogy. After this there will be a handful of intermediary chapters that bridge the sixty years between the Hobbit and the very beginning Lord of the Rings which in itself has a seventeen-year time lapse between Frodo inheriting the Ring and his journey to Rivendell.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Broken Blade

Chapter Twenty-Two: What’s in a Name?

“Who is he, ada?” Legolas asked his father as the Elvenking rode over to give him a hand up into his own saddle, though with their gifts they were headed to the healing tents and not the battle plain. After a thousand years as one of his father’s commanders he knew Thranduil’s orders so completely he had no need to ask. Even if he was tempted to just to irritate him after Tauriel’s banishment, his adopted sister sharing a look but no more with him and their father before following after that dark-haired dwarf who’d caught her eye back in Laketown.

Legolas didn’t care if he was a Prince of Erebor as his armor and beads proclaimed. He still wasn’t good enough for his sister.

Worse – he was mortal and would only pain her in the end even if he was still young for a dwarf who lived longer than the other mortal races.

“I do not know the full answer to that myself, my son.” Thranduil answered as he turned their mount towards Ravenhill where medic tents were being set up for the elves and Men and few dwarves who fought farthest in to the flank of the battle. Most of the dwarves were being taken off the field to rest when wounded by the Gates of Erebor, protected best by the flank of the dwarven infantry there.

“There is much, I feel, about this half-elven sorcerer that has been kept from me. Neither Mithrandir nor the Dragonslayer have been helpful on the topic despite the knowledge I know they possess.”

“I cannot remain under the Greenwood, ada.” Legolas told him what truly bothered him at last, though it was like a knife to both their hearts. “I have grown…complacent here. In my role.”

“You have earned your role as First Among, my green leaf.” Thranduil said with assurance. Even still, he knew his son. Legolas was as stubborn as Thranduil had ever been. “You are a great warrior.”

“And you a good king.” Legolas said. “A good father to myself and our people. You have protected us against the coming darkness but now…”

“I was not ready.” Thranduil admitted. “When the Kingship of the Greenwood fell to me. The last alliance took the great kings of elves and cast them down. Only the Greenwood remains while the rest have fallen to Lordships and stewards. With the price the Greenwood paid at the Battle of
Dagorland drawing in, avoiding loss was the best I knew to do.” Thranduil turned his head, grey-frost eyes flashing to his son’s beloved face. “It is no longer enough. I see this now. When we are finished with this,” he waved an armored hand at the blood-and-body strewn field. “I will write to my cousin Lord Celeborn, our distant kinsman Lord Elrond, and the Lord of Dorwinion. You are a great warrior, you could be a great king, greater than I ever dreamed. But for that you need polishing in other Courts, experience with diplomats that our realm due to my policies cannot yet provide.”

“How long?”

“You will leave after the funerals for Imladris.” Thranduil decided. “Five years in each court I should think will suffice. Learn from their servants: their minstrels and stewards and guards; as much as you do their diplomats. Adventure with their warriors and scouts. Then return to me, my green leaf.” His voice turned pained. “And I will tell you of your mother and her people the Vanyar.”

Not that Thranduil didn’t believe Legolas would return anyway as much in love with the Woodland Realm as his son had always been, but at a certain age when raising elflings it became clear that reward was a much easier enticement than avoiding punishment could ever be.

Case in point: Tauriel’s latest escapade that he was going to have to salvage something from.

“I will, ada.” Legolas dipped his head as they crested Ravenhill and Galion rushed to attend them. They would need to bathe and dress in clean garb before entering the medic tents and ministering to the wounded. “As you once did in the courts of the High Kings Elu Thingol and Gil-Galad.”

“Smart elfling.”

Though as Legolas turned away with a groan at the joke about his age to change before heading to heal what they could in the tents, Thranduil felt the words pulled from him almost against his will.

He had gone far too long without saying them as he slipped into the language of Doriath that he’d taught his son and his son alone.

“Your mother loved you.”

Legolas stopped in his tracks, tilting his head just slightly back towards his father.


The elven Prince turned, hand over his heart then saluted his father and King, then turned back to his path, showing no sign of how deeply the words had struck him.

If he knew anything about his ada’s prescience and ability to read others however, Thranduil already knew.

…

Cleaning up after a battle took ten times or more that which it was fought Harry found especially without magic at his beckoned call to do the heavy lifting.

By the time he’d fought his way back from the high hill on the western flank to the Gates the orcs were scrabbling, running back to the were-worm holes left in the western hills. From what Harry would figure weeks later once his magic had recovered enough for him to conjure serpents to go seeking through the tunnels and kill everything they found there be it orc, were-worm, warg, goblin,
or troll, the tunnels began in the Misty Mountains or Dol Guldur, avoiding the elven territories even underground, before terminating at the hills west of Erebor between Mirkwood and the Lonely Mountain. One of the first tasks on the plate of the dwarves was collapsing them after the healing and funerals were done.

Without his magic Harry wasn’t much of a healer – or even much of one with it – but between first-aid and phoenix tears he managed. The first healer he found at the gates – Óin to no surprise – he had direct him to the worst cases. And then he started and kept going until he ran out of bodies to patch back together. Not every case was so dire as to need the tears, so when he ran out of fatal and/or crippling cases he whistled for Shadowfax and presented himself at the healing tents of the Men to start the process all over again – which given how few Men had fought didn’t take nearly as long – and then found himself frogmarched by an elven healer to the elven healing tents to repeat the process all over again.

He couldn’t say how long he did it: stripping down patients, cleaning wounds, drops of tears, patient handed-off; though as he found himself only able to think of vague faces shoving food or drink at him lest he pass out completely he knew he’d strained himself even with his new and improved elven stamina.

Harry knew he’d caught both the Elvenking and Prince Legolas watching him at one point before he was presented with an elven tonic the healer called *Miruvor* he thought. There’d been Bilbo fussing at one point complete with an oatcake shoved at him. He remembered being bent over a nasty gash on Fíli’s side and rolling his eyes at Bofur’s posturing at not needing healing for a claw slash to his head.

Not much else for a time period he’d come to find out later was more than a day in the healing tents.

Whispers followed him when he left the last tent and cracked his back before Shadowfax trotted up to his side – someone had groomed the stubborn creature, probably Bard given that the *Mearas* had taken to him – and nudged his chest with his silky nose.

Petting his demanding familiar, Harry flung an arm over his neck using the strong *Mearas* to steady himself.

“*Mae govannen, Belegur maethen Eithadolen!*” An elf hailed him, one he’d seen around the Elvenking off and on during both the battle and afterward.

Harry knew he was tapped-out when it took him a moment to translate.

“*Well met, Belegur wielder of Eithadolen!*” He was pretty sure Belegur and Eithadolen were names, meaning “Great Heart” and “Hidden Sting” respectively but either he was more exhausted than he thought or the elves were running around naming things when he wasn’t looking. Though he supposed since none of them had ever been introduced to him they’d had to come up with something to call him.

Even if he was confused regarding if Eithadolen referred to his sword or his magic.

At least having to puzzle through that bit woke him up enough that he didn’t have to cross-translate the rest of the elf’s words.

“*My Lord Thranduil bids you take your rest in camp before attempting to ride back to Erebor.*”

Well, preemptively naming him and his things aside, Harry supposed that there’s worse things Thranduil could have decided to do with the random half-elven sorcerer that’d been co-opted by his
healers than feed him and give him a place to sleep for the night.

The elf – Galion he found as the aide introduced himself – ushered him still clinging to Shadowfax to a light green tent not far from the healing tents and didn’t even blink when Shadowfax followed them right through the opening. Perhaps spying Harry’s overwhelming exhaustion or just taking elven hospitality to a new level, Galion’s quick fingers helped him disrobe from his light armor and underthings, all of which including his sword and other weapons were set aside on a low, long table then Galion assisted him in stepping into a steaming tub of water. A screen blocked Harry’s nude form from anyone who might enter the tent as Shadowfax laid himself down with an equine sigh a few feet shy of the opening.

The crisp, green scent of herbs rose from the hot water along with the steam and helped to clear Harry’s nose and mind of the clogging scents of blood, decay, and death after days of being submerged in them.

Fast – but thorough – hands scrubbed Harry down, Galion’s sharp nut-brown eyes catching every bruise on Harry’s golden skin.

His armor blocked edged weapons, that was certain, but impact left its mark nonetheless.

He’d be feeling the battle for a good while if Galion didn’t tattle on him to a healer first, though the herbs in the water were helping with the residual pain and threatening to send him tumbling into sleep.

A *tsk* from Galion and an arch of a brow as brown as his eyes came with strong hands steadying him and urging him to stand, Harry finding himself towed off and draped into a soft linen nightshirt of some sort before being dumped into bed and tucked in like an elfling as the aide bustled around the tent lowering lights and stoking up the heat of the braziers.

Not that Harry knew that.

The moment his head had touched the soft pillow he’d been lost to the world.

…

Harry blinked his eyes open uncounted time later, squinting a bit even in the soft golden light of the tent as it took him a few moments to realize where he was in the confusion of waking in a strange place surrounded by strange things.

Light green fabric walls.

Golden light.

A banked fire in an elegant metal brazier.

Galion.

Galion had brought him to an elven tent to sleep after he’d exhausted himself in the healing tents.

Sitting up — slowly in anticipation of complaining bruises and strained muscles then with his full half-elven speed and dexterity when it didn’t come – he looked around spotting the screen that shielded the bed and the now-missing bathing tub from the tent opening, the low table burdened with his clothes and weaponry, his boots sitting tidily underneath it, and a bedside table that had a small tray with a cloth-covered something upon it as well as a silver goblet and an elegant, curving decanter.
He swung his legs over the edge of the bed – an actual bed and not a camp cot or pallet he noticed now that he wasn’t falling down in exhausted strain – enjoying the soft rub of the sheets on his bared legs for a moment before rising and padding over to his things.

Finding his underthings on the top of the pile of clothes and light armor he had a moment’s entertainment at the idea of implacable Galion being flummoxed in his duties to care for him at the discovery of magically-clean clothes before pulling them on, restraining himself to only his underthings, tunic, and trousers leaving aside his mail and armored tunic and jacket for the moment, folding his borrowed nightshirt and setting it aside. Padding back over to the bedside table he took a cautious sniff of the slender decanter before finding it filled with a measure of more Miruvor. Pouring it out into the silver goblet that had a small dusting of herbs in it, Harry smiled at the warm, pleasant armor the mixture gave off, feeling it warm him from his toes to the tips of his ears after a single sip.

Uncovering the plate, he arched a brow at the strange brown bread he found there but appreciated the gesture of the small honeycomb cubes in a shallow dish and the scant handful of late blackberries that must have been brought along by the elves as Mirkwood had been much more temperate than Harry had found the lands surrounding Erebor even after lifting the Arkenstone’s curse.

Harry was most of the way through the bread – which he found soft and sweet – having downed the honeycomb and berries before starting on the bread with sips of the Miruvor when he was alerted to a visitor by the sound of salutes coming from the entrance of the tent.

He held in a chuckle.

Thranduil had given him a guard.

Though whether that was for his own protection or so the Elvenking would know as soon as Harry woke was up for debate.

Rounding the screen, Harry saw he was correct as he came face-to-face with the Elvenking of the Great Greenwood for the first time not on a battlefield.

Shadowfax it seemed had cleared out, likely off in search of honeycomb of his own the glutton or pets from Bard or Bilbo, leaving him alone with the icy blond elf of ancient origins.

At least Harry had gotten dressed and wore his boots.

He didn’t want to think about facing such a personage in little more than his skin and a borrowed nightshirt.

“Well met, Vanyarion.” Thranduil greeted him complete with elven salute. “Long has it been since these shores have seen one of your kind. Be welcome in the halls and lands of the Greenwood.”

“Well met, Oropherion Thranduil.” Harry searched his mind for the proper response as Elrond had tried to drum into him. Even as he found himself once more at sea with the names the elves of the Woodland Realm insisted on calling him. “King of the Woodland Realm.” He returned the salute then gestured to the pair of chairs in the “entry” portion of the tent separated from the private sleeping area then turned back to his bedside table to snatch up and down the rest of the Miruvor. He had a feeling he was going to need the full revivication effects to deal with whatever it was the Elvenking sought from him.

“I must say.” Harry began as he sat opposite the impossibly beautiful being older than all but Galadriel and the Istari in Arda. It wasn’t the stern beauty he’d found with Elrond or the ethereal
beauty of the Lady of the Golden Wood. No. Thranduil while almost dare he say angelic in appearance made him think not of guardian angels with downy white wings but his childhood tales of the Archangel Michael with savage fury and an ever-bloody sword ready to fight the demonic children of his brother. “That the elves of the Woodland Realm are more eager than those of Imladris to bestow names upon me.”

“My people have little choice in the matter.” Thranduil allowed a knowing smile to curve his mouth. “When no name has been given for such a being that has impacted them so from your magic in my woods to the renewal of Erebor to the fierce fire and blade of battle ended with the gentle succor of your skills in the healing tents. Songs are already being sung of your deeds Vanyarion. They required a name to go with them.”

“Vanyarion.” Harry’s glance was inscrutable. “Belegur. Eithadolen.”

“Yes.” Thranduil tipped his head down slightly. “The half-elven son of the Vanyar who have not been seen in Arda in more than an Age. Of the elves of the Greenwood, I would know one when I saw him. You have not their famous sun-gold hair but do boast their gold-dusted skin and bejeweled eyes. Your jaw, nose, and lips are that of a Man but your brow, cheekbones, and even the delicate points of your ears are those found in Valinor. Given your efforts on behalf of the Men and Dwarves and even my people with your magics and healing you have been shown to possess a great heart. I need not tell you why your sword is named for the venom it hides in gleaming silver steel and Sindarin engravings.”

Harry knew that his mouth had fallen open but he couldn't help it.

This was the icy Elvenking Thorin so despised?

The same one that had come to the gates of Erebor with an army and traded insults with the King Under the Mountain?

It seemed more had passed since the morn of the battle than Harry knew.

“I have another name I would give you, as I see that the naming traditions of our people have never been passed to you.” Thranduil seethed internally. Such a gift should not have been so neglected. His kinsman Elrond had educated the peredhel before him but not well enough. From all Thranduil had been told, if he were Elrond, he would have never allowed such a gift as a young peredhel with Vanyar blood to leave his halls for the likes of Thorin Oakenshield’s sake. Which, perhaps, was why the young one’s path had taken him not through Thranduil’s halls until his oaths to Oakenshield were fulfilled. “Vanyarion will suit well enough for your father-name and Belegur for an after-name. I cannot give you a chosen name, that is a private thing for you to decide and share only with those closest to you. But for your mother-name I would give you Berthon: He Who Dares, if you would accept it.”

Names were serious business to elves Harry knew.

And allowing the Elvenking to gift him with both his father and mother names would be a statement, he knew that very well.

But. And it was a big “but,” of all the elven lords and ladies of Arda there literally was no one else who had the inherent authority to do so given Harry’s maturity, power, and status but the Elvenking. He also was probably the only one daring enough to as well.

It would tie Harry, in an ephemeral but nonetheless real, way to the Woodland Realm.
Oh yes, Thranduil was every inch the King.

“Berthon Vanyarion.” He arched a brow as he mused over the name in Westron which was the reverse of what it would be in any elvish dialect. Berthon Vanyarion versus Vanyarion Berthon. “I’ve been called worse things.”

As an agreement it was tacit but enough if the gleam in Thranduil’s eyes was any sign.

“Excellent.” Thranduil smiled, and it was genuine as was his pleasure in the young peredhel’s choice. There was a cunning mind behind those emerald eyes. One that gave truth to the lordship ring in the fashion of Men upon his hand. It was too bad Legolas was to leave for Imladris soon, Thranduil, in one of those flashes of insight from his prescience thought. There was much his son could learn from this young half-elven son of the Vanyar with the magic rich in his veins and a heart as gentle as the new shoots of spring and as fierce as a winter storm at sea. “Once your dealings with Erebor and Dale have been satisfied I invite you to settle for a time among the Woodland Realm. There is much yet for you to learn of elven ways, young one.”

“Then I shall do so, Thranduil King of the Woodland Realm.” Harry took his cue and stood, saluting the Elvenking which was returned in similar vein. “Once I am free to do so.”

“A star shall shine upon that meeting.”

…

Dressed once more in his armor and weapons, having finished his bread and a flacon of water brought to him by Galion, Harry stepped from the elven tent and whistled, the tone echoing over Ravenhill for a long moment then followed by the galloping of hooves.

Harry gave a jaunty grin to his guard and Galion then sprinted forward, snagging the saddle in motion with Shadowfax and leaping into position on his back as the great Mearas thundered through the camp towards the Gates of Erebor.

…

“Okay, what’d I miss?” Harry asked, looking around the dining hall that he’d been directed to by one of the gate guards but was filled to brimming with soldiers from Dain’s army. He looked down at Bombur who’d bustled up to him when he’d entered the cook taking over for feeding the sudden glut of dwarves in the mountain. Though at least their supply train had arrived not long behind them or they would’ve been sunk. “For that matter, how long has it been since the battle?”

He could’ve sworn it hadn’t been long enough for the status quo to completely change but given the dwarves he’d found scurrying this way and that inside Erebor – including the couple manning the equine stables that had watched him suspiciously as he settled Shadowfax in – maybe he’d been lost in healing and sleeping longer than he’d thought.

“You’ve been gone from the mountain for close to three days, Harry.” The affable cook informed him, casting a worried glance up at the Man – then half-elven – who had come to claim all of the Company as friend over the course of their adventures together. Even without that, what with the gift he gave in restoring their home, he would be made a dwarf-friend regardless! “It’s been two since the battle.”

“How quickly everything does change, I suppose.” Harry grimaced, finding himself able to believe he’d lost so much time in a haze of healing tents and wounds but not wanting to believe it at the same time. “Where’s our lot then?”
“Up in the royal wing, same as before.” Bombur patted his arm. “But if you can spare a while – and the magic – we’ve got dozens of goats, boars, and horses that fell during the battle in need of slaughtering before they start rotting and the meat is lost.” It was a hard reality that they couldn’t afford – neither the men or the dwarves – to allow the carcasses to be lost with such a dearth of food. No matter how many sideways glances the pointy-eared tree-shaggers gave them for it… present company excluded. “Only the hard freezes the last couple of nights have saved them but with needing to clear the valley of the other bodies and burn the orcs, wargs, and trolls there hasn’t been time for us to see to them.”

Harry cracked his neck with a grin.

Thanks to a hard twenty hours or so of sleep and elven ideas of refreshment, he found he did indeed have the power to spare to see to the noxious chore.

“Don’t worry about burning the bodies, pass it along yeah?” He told Bombur as the cook ushered him to where the animal carcasses were being kept on ice. “Save the fuel. I’ll take care of it once they’re all collected.”

“Will do, Harry.” Bombur waved him in. “I know Dori and Balin will be glad to hear it.”

“I’m sure.” Harry said drily. The pair of tailor and adviser had taken over charge of Erebor’s supplies before the battle, there was no reason for that to change afterward. That unless Dain had brought along a few spare quartermasters with him there wasn’t anyone else better qualified to do the job likely helped as well. “I’ll need runners to take the butchered meats for smoking, salting, or cold storage, plus soup bones and hides to send to Dale.”

“You’ll have them, Harry.” Bombur agreed with a wave, already bustling off to see to it.

As he was putting in the work, you’d better believe he was going to see some of the proceeds sent to Dale – if not the bulk of the horsemeat since all of that came from elven mounts.

Walking down the line, he arched a brow as he came to one big bastard of an elk.

Thranduil would spit fire if his nominal enemies – Harry wasn’t certain where they were with that at the moment – ate his mount.

The hide at least should make a handsome bedcover for the new Lord of Dale, a kingly gift from the Woodland Realm whether Thranduil was aware of it or not.

He was hours there in the ice, casting warming charms on himself when his toes and fingers got a bit cold. Hides were stripped and tanned and piled up. Carcasses butchered and offal banished to the Carrock for wolves and other predators to do what they would with them as a dozen soldiers or others attached to Dain’s army ran in and out of the butchery with massive roasts and slabs of meats on trays for the smoke house or salting or Bombur’s cookpot. The venison Harry wrapped himself for delivery to Dale.

Horsemeat, he decided though there wasn’t as much of it as there was boar or goat, would be best smoked and salted to cover the odd taste. Jerky was jerky. The Men would be glad of it even if the origins were suspect.

Needs-must.

With supplies so low they couldn’t afford to turn their noses up at anything that would fill bellies
through the winter and spring until the first early harvest helped lighten the load.

The passes at least shouldn’t close for another month or two depending on the weather and caravans from the south should start arriving now that word of Erebor’s reclamation and the need for foodstuffs and supplies had traveled on raven wings.

Still, it was a Harry with cold-chapped lips and chafed skin that eventually made his way to the dining room that the Company had taken as its base after being sucked into the hard work of stabilizing an empty mountain hosting an army.

He’d entrusted Bofur with Applejack’s mule cart for the venison and soup bone delivery though he had the hide slung over his shoulder.

He wasn’t a leatherworker despite his ability to skin and tan hides and Kíli’s best attempts to educate him. The youngest prince might be a spymaster by circumstance, but his craft was as a woodsman from his bow skills to tracking to tanning and leatherworking he’d learned it all in the hills of the Blue Mountains and the towns and villages of Men nearby. If anyone could help him with his project for Bard’s household it would be Kíli.

Though Harry had sent the antlers from the elk along with the venison in Bofur’s capable hands to find their way to Thranduil’s tent.

He was greeted with shouts and cheers and thuds of tankards upon the table by the Company members present in their unofficial domain, the smells of a hearty stew reaching his nose and causing his stomach to grumble.

The repast provided by the elves had been welcomed and the Miruvor had been instrumental in keeping him on his feet and going, not to mention helping replenish his magical reserves but he’d missed the hearty fare found in Bombur’s cookpot – at least when they had the supplies for it.

And as he’d spent a better part of the day butchering animals he knew they did – for the moment at least.

“Done playing with the elves then, laddie?” Dwalin joked when he caught sight of Harry dragging his way into the dining hall.

Harry smirked, snarking back: “Never.” To a chorus of boos, hoots, and curses from the Company.

“I’m half-convinced Thranduil wants to adopt me.”

Thorin grimaced in unison with Glóin and several of the others at that, even as they started carving into the roast and passing platters of simple brown loaves of bread and roasted wild onions and potatoes.

“He can’t have you!” Fíli protested, Kíli nodding firmly at his side. “You’re our half-elf!”

“I think Harry would protest he belongs to himself, lads.” Balin chided them lightly. “Though I am curious as to the cause behind Harry’s words.”

Finding himself stared at by a dozen curious sets of dwarven eyes and one hobbit, Harry sighed and gave a shrug.

“He knows what kind of elf I am and is appropriately impressed.” He said, wrinkling his nose a bit even as he took a gulp of ale imported from the ruins of Laketown from the gossip he’d heard while working in the cold storage. With the town ruined by looting and fires what was left was being picked over by the Men of Dale for what could be salvaged which apparently included the stores of
at least one tavern that an enterprising boatman had sold on to the dwarves.

Harry hadn’t heard word from the refugee camps on the western shore that hadn’t deigned to join those in Dale under Bard’s leadership.

Given the direction of orc troop movements before the battle…Harry wasn’t thinking there was word to hear.

He doubted they’d be mourned beyond the general loss of life as they’d been either criminals or a few guardsmen which were damn-near the same thing thanks to the Master’s erstwhile leadership.

“And?” Bilbo pressed after swallowing a mouthful of potato and onion. He knew what had been done to him pressed on his friend, especially having no knowledge of which type of elf he was since that was a thing that mattered in their society much like families did in the Shire or clans to the dwarves for all that most non-elves liked to paint them all with the same brush regardless.

“Vanyar, apparently.” Harry’s small smile was nothing short of bemused. He still had no idea what to do with that news. “I guess when the Valar like to meddle they go big or go home.”

“Figures.” Kíli snickered. “Gandalf had to learn it somewhere.”

“Vanyar, hmm.” Balin mulled that over for a long moment. “Interesting.”

“Why?” Glóin grunted. “One tree-shagger’s much the same as another, present company excluded.”

“They’re the descendants of the first of the Firstborn, that’s why.” Balin scolded him with a glance. “Akin to our Durin’s Folk. Our Harry was made half-elven of the smallest and noblest clan of elves.”

“That explains what Thranduil wants with him.” Thorin said with a mulish glower at the thought of the Elvenking trying to steal away a member of his Company.

“It’s not all that from what I can tell.” Harry said, shaking his head. “But that’s likely part of it. Either way, I promised to visit his halls when my business with Erebor and Dale is settled.”

“Why?” Seemed to be the baffled question on the Company’s mind if only voiced by Bombur.

“Politics.” Glóin all-but-spat the word, well-versed in the subject both as a banker and merchant and as a cousin – if a bit distant down the tree – to the Durins. “Thorin’s going to have to sit across a negotiation table with Thranduil and Bard in the next few days once the funerals are over. All we have at the moment is a cessation of hostilities – and even that might be temporary. If someone who can smite down five thousand enemy troops or restore a pair of cities has friendly relations with all three of the lords of Rhovanion then it makes it harder for one to be an arse to the others – officially at least.”

“I don’t like playing deterrent.” Harry admitted with a grimace. “But I’ll do it if I have to if it keeps Thorin and Thranduil from starting another cold war to last two hundred years and more.”

Thorin, Glóin, and a few others who were entrenched in their dislike or outright hate of Thranduil and his people grumbled but they couldn’t argue that.

More Erebor couldn’t afford it even with Harry’s magical intervention on their behalf.

They wouldn’t have to devote people and materials and time to physically rebuilding their home, it
was true. But that was only a small part of the work that would need to be done. The farms and orchards of Erebor and Dale were gone. They had no craftspeople beyond those of the Company and whoever would immigrate from the nearest dwarven realms until their people – those who wished and not all will – moved from Ered Luin back to the Lonely Mountain. Trade lines were gone along with their trade agreements.

No, the work to establish Erebor once more as a Kingdom had only just begun.

Picking a new fight with Thranduil – or continuing the old – would gain them nothing at all and had the possibility of costing them dearly especially with caravans from the Blue Mountains able to arrive months earlier if they could travel across the Woodland Realm instead of having to divert north or south around it.

Thorin had gotten to call the Elvenking out at the Gates of Erebor before Thranduil’s own army.

That would have to be enough – for the moment – to satisfy old wounds.

...

Shameless story plug:

If you haven't checked it out yet, I have a new Harry Potter/Hobbit crossover up called Sons of a Took featuring a Hobbit!Harry.

Find it here: [https://archiveofourown.org/works/17507912](https://archiveofourown.org/works/17507912)

Chapter End Notes

So, I know a lot of readers were looking forward to a big blowout between Harry and Thranduil or a confrontation regarding Thranduil’s choices but that doesn't really fit with the direction of the story and here’s why:

At this point, Harry isn't interested in outing himself as the Champion unless absolutely necessary, which he would have to do with Thranduil in order to have a leg to stand on when it came to confronting an Elven King.

He also is more interested in moving on and restoring prosperity to people than picking at old wounds and old wrongs.

Given the situation, a smack-down between Harry and Thranduil wouldn't really serve any purpose other than pissing off the Elvenking and Harry knows that but more importantly is politically astute enough to not only not pick a fight with Thranduil but also to take the hand of friendship metaphorically offered to him here by the Elvenking.

I hope that all makes sense to everyone...
They’d wiped out the armies of Azog, emptied the orc fortresses of Gundabad, Moria, and Dol Guldur.

All it had cost them was blood and tears, more than any of them realized when Thranduil brought his army to the Gates of Erebor they had to give.

Harry did as he said he would.

The day after he’d returned to Erebor he saddled Shadowfax and rode out onto the battle-plain of the valley to where the piles of orc and warg and troll bodies only lacked the additional stink of rot due to the low temperatures that had roared down upon Erebor and Dale like a blast of cold brought on chill winds direct from the Northern Wastes.

One by one he cast out his hand and they lit though not with the all-consuming flame of fiendfyre, black smoke and clean ash rising and falling as the pyre cleansed the stench and stain of them from the land.

More than once he would turn from his work, tirelessly burning pile after pile until tens of thousands of corpses were lit and sending up heat and light into the gloom of a cold winter’s day, and spy an elf watching him in fascination. From a distance he fancied it would look quite the sight: a hundred bonfires and more lining the valley and the western hills of Erebor, a dozen more high upon Ravenhill filled with goblins, dozens more between Ravenhill and Dale, and one last upon the high western hill with the remains of Azog and his commanders. All but Azog’s head which even now was frozen in place on a spike beside Erebor’s gates.

It would rot – in time – but for now Thorin took far too much pleasure at the sight of it and the certainty that the monster who had haunted and hunted his family in turn was truly dead and gone, unable to harm another loved one.

Funeral arrangements for the other lives lost to what was already being bandied as the Battle of the Five Armies were not so simple or easy to arrange.

Dale had lost just over a hundred men from those who had followed Bard to Harry’s rescue and thence into battle, plus those of the refugee camps whose bodies had been recovered when realization had struck the men of Dale of the likelihood of their death at the hands of the orcs.

After a debate with his main supporters, a small group that Harry already saw forming into a semi-proper council, it was agreed that what could be salvaged – including the very wood from the
buildings – from Laketown would be and then the remainder burned as a massive pyre for their lost. The Men were working near around the clock to get it done. Though with the elves still encamped while their people healed in some of the empty buildings once they recovered enough to be moved from the tents at least Bard didn’t have to take away from the workers to guard the city. The elven archers and guards had that well in hand.

Dain Ironfoot brought seven thousand foot soldiers, five hundred calvary on boars and goats, fifty war-wagons, and a dozen ballistae each manned by half-a-dozen troops. Shy of eight thousand troops in all.

Just over three thousand died on the field with another two hundred dead of injury before Harry could get to them, a forty-percent loss.

Thranduil marched an army of ten thousand spear-and-swordsmen and five thousand archers to Erebor.

Thanks to his archers taking advantage of the dwarven shield-wall at the beginning of the battle and Harry’s wards over Dale later, their companies took a ten-percent loss, half of that of the elven foot soldiers, the Silvan army cut down by twenty-five hundred lives whose bodies were borne on litters back to the Woodland Realm by the bulk of the army when it decamped several days after the battle.

They left only a force to defend Dale and their healers and wounded who remained as well as the King’s guard and aides behind, a move that was spurred on by the arrival of the first caravan from the Iron Hills not attached to the actual army but containing immigrants, supplies, and support.

Thorin’s last act as King before his coronation was giving the lost dwarves to the mountain.

That day mountain, forest, and vale rang with songs of mourning and farewell as the valient dead were laid to rest in the earth, by flame, or returned to the stone from whence they came and a phoenix rose over all with a song of his own that pierced straight to the hearts of all who heard it but uplifted as well.

After all, if there was a soul in Arda who could sing of what follows death with any certainty it was one who knew what followed a last goodbye, even for Men who of all races had no true lore regarding the matter unlike Dwarves and Elves.

…

Gandalf found who he sought high in the halls of Erebor in the summer wing of the royal halls.

The grey wizard came and went at will from the mountain, none of the dwarves inclined with so much else to do to stop or question him, the guards taking their cue as with all else from the Company and their Lord, Dain, or their King Thorin Oakenshield.

Curl up in opposite chairs with a pot of tea between them on a low table, likely supplied by Harry given that the incoming supply trains and caravans were focused more on staples than luxuries, he found Bilbo and Harry.

“There you are.” Gandalf huffed a little as even as Harry flickered his fingers and conjured an armchair for the older wizard. He arched a grizzled brow. “I see your powers have recovered from strain.”

“Not quite.” Harry sprawled out a bit in his chair, resting his head on his propped up fist. “I’m weak still, reserves almost emptied, it will take years for them to recover but the elves’ Miruvor has helped my active magic recover.” His smile was wry. “I won’t be restoring any cities to former glory again,
of that you can be certain and that was as much Smaug’s magic – after a fashion – as it was mine.”

“Yes,” Gandalf hummed. “Blood-mage I believe you’ve been called by the Silvan elves, among other things. Still.” He smiled. “It was a great kindness you have paid the Rhovanion, young Peverell.”

“You weren’t idle yourself, from what I understand Gandalf.” Bilbo said, turning the conversation at Harry’s obvious discomfort.

“The Lady Galadriel cast out Sauron from Dol Guldur not I.” The wizard dismissed. “All I did was get captured by the enemy like a great fool of a wizard.”

“Still.” Bilbo said persistently. “If you hadn’t then the Lady wouldn’t have ventured there.”

“Listen to the good-hobbit-sense of our Mister Baggins, Gandalf.” Harry laughed at Gandalf’s chagrin. “I was at the Council, remember? If not for your own persistence in the matter of the Necromancer he might still be encamped there and spreading his influence on the forest and bordering lands.”

Gandalf harrumphed, not pleased with their arguments but knowing better than to try and change the stubborn minds of hobbits and wizards alike – and for all that young Peverell was a Champion, in many ways he was a wizard through and through.

“Thorin’s coronation is tomorrow and the negotiations the day thereafter.” Gandalf changed the subject. “After which I will be departing.” He looked between the pair. “The question which brought me in search of you both being whether I shall be departing alone?”

Bilbo blushed to the tips of his ears, playing idly with his courtship braid that Thorin had woven into his hair as Harry and Gandalf chuckled at his bashfulness.

“I think that’s a no, my friend.” Harry shook his head. “And my own business keeps me here for some time or so it seems.”

“Oh?”

“Bard is in need of – as he calls them – lording lessons.” He shrugged. “As I’m the only even part-Man lord to be found in a month’s travel in any direction I thought I’d at least stay until Dale is more than an idle fancy.”

“Good thing.” Bilbo snorted, recovered from his bout of shyness. “Since it was your meddling in the first place that restored him to his family’s noble station.”

“That aside.” Harry rolled his eyes. “Which is markedly close to what Bard said only with less profanity by the way, Thranduil has requested,” he drawled the word as they all knew it was just-short of a royal command. “That I spend a time in the Woodland Realm after I’ve completed my tasks in Dale and Erebor.” He sighed. “The elves want their turn with the local oddity.”

Bilbo gave Harry a kick for that bit of self-deprecation. “You know very well that the elves respect you as much as anyone else does after what you’ve done to help us all along and your work in the healing tents.” He narrowed his eyes on his friend, tone chiding. “If Bard needs lording lessons then you need elving lessons and you know it very well.”

“That’s settled then.” Gandalf nodded. “I shall be departing alone. Now.” He leaned forward, smiling softly. “Tell me about this business that has my dear Bilbo wearing a courtship braid and bead from the Line of Durin, hmm?”
The knock on Thranduil’s guest quarters in the reopened palace of Dale – though he’d not witnessed it himself, from Galion’s report the sight of the now-Lord Bard being bullied into taking up residence in the palace by his people had been most entertaining – drew him from reviewing the healers’ report.

Thanks to the most intriguing Vanyarion, most of his injured were recovered and returned to the Woodland Realm.

It was only those with what his people considered nuisance injuries – not worth the effort and energy to heal in the elven way or deserving of the remedy in the Vanyarion’s possession – that remained in Dale’s infirmary. Strained muscles and ligaments, bruised bones, and so on that made travel uncomfortable. Still, when he left after the end of the negotiations – and the coronation of that oaf Oakenshield – most should be ready to travel.

Some of his people would remain behind he expected.

Dale and Laketown had been longtime allies of the Woodland Realm and they currently had a dearth of tried warriors to defend their walls when the magic protecting the city – magic that had saved the lives of Men and Elves alike by the hundreds – inevitably fell. He could well afford a company or two stationed in the city until immigration and training served to plump the ranks of Dale’s guard. If the rumbles reaching his ears of the antics of Rohan’s king proved true, Bard might find himself with an influx of trained warriors of Men sooner rather than later once Dale was established in two or three years as more than a refugee colony.

It wouldn’t do to leave them to suffer under the sole influence of dwarven soldiers in the meantime.

“Enter.” He said, setting his papers aside and folding his hands on his temporary desk before him. He’d been expecting the knock and the company it brought with it for some time. He would have thought it would come long before decamping to the palace but even after six hundred years he still at times failed to understand the way this one’s mind worked.

Tauriel strode into the borrowed office, back straight and head held high, completely undimmed and unrepentant by the events of the last weeks since she’d categorically disobeyed his orders to close the borders of the Woodland Realm.

Her spirit was unbowed and unbroken by the events since then – that was good.

War had a devastating effect on elves ten times her young age.

It would have hurt him to see her overwrought by the events of a single battle no matter how severe the carnage and losses that came with it.

“Sit.” He commanded, leaning back in his chair and allowing his hands to fall lightly to the sides of the wooden arms as he watched her nod jerkily and sit in the sole chair opposite him: a dreadful, hard thing that he ventured Galion had dug up from the depths of the palace for just this moment. As infuriated as he’d been at her latest rebellion, there were those in his household and court who exhibited signs of nothing less than betrayal and heartbreak at her behavior. Galion, who had long been her champion and mentor in the ways of the Court, perhaps most of all. “Tauriel.” He sighed, closing his eyes for a brief moment then pinning her in place with his pale blue-grey gaze. “What am I to do with you?”

“Adar...”
“No,” he held up one hand imperiously. “Do not speak. The moment for explanations regarding your behavior has come and gone. It expired when I had to be informed by the lack of your name on the casualty lists or those of the wounded that you survived the battle unharmed.” Relatively, at least. As with any other member of his guard – former or not – she was skilled enough at healing and first aid to see to her own minor wounds without venturing into the healing tents. “Not even your brother had word of you for two days. *Two days*, Tauriel. Your disobedience could be forgiven as the impetuousness of youth. Your flagrant disregard for your *family*, however, is another matter.” He shook his head, silencing her once more when she made as if to speak. “You have been a member of the royal house, the ward and adopted daughter of the Elvenking, for six hundred years. While the dwarves and Men are still ignorant of your station, our *own* people are not and your disregard has been noted, making my position *difficult* when it comes to the matter of your disobedience: do you understand?”

Seeing that he desired a response, she nodded, eyes lowered in shame.

Tauriel might prefer the woods to court but she wasn’t ignorant of the schemes of the courtiers or what he meant by her making his position difficult.

Her – as he put it – disregard for her familial connections effectively made it so he could not use them to lighten her punishment for disobeying his orders.

If she had presented herself to her king and adopted father directly after the battle, he might have been able to use her performance in battle and a demotion from Captain of the Guard to lift her banishment.

That she hadn’t…well.

It would have to be upheld, she knew that even if before walking into his temporary office in Dale she’d been frightened of that exact outcome or worse – a complete dismissal of her connection to the Elvenking. He wasn’t – unless she was completely reading him wrong – disavowing her or casting her out. He was, however, punishing her for her behavior.

What form, entirely, that punishment would take he had yet to reveal.

“How long?” She asked at last, after swallowing down her pride and fear alike.

“Young brother will be sent to the other noble houses still in ruling in Arda.” Thranduil informed her briskly. “Five years each with under Noldor of Lórien, the Sindar of Rivendell, and the Avari of Dorwinion. When he returns from his diplomatic mission, we will review your punishment at that time. During that period you will not be allowed within my halls or under the leaves of the Greenwood. You will stay in Dale or Erebor or Esgaroth if it is rebuilt as an attaché to Lord Bard’s household or envoy to Erebor as circumstances demand.” He smiled a bit, eyes softening. “I may be ancient in your eyes, child but I am not blind. I believe you will find a happiness there – even if sorrow will inevitably follow it in time – that will make your term of punishment a blessing in disguise.”

“As you will, my King.” She rose, giving him one of her charming crooked grins that he had seen far too few of in the last century. “I will miss you, *Ada*.”

“And I you, my child.” Thranduil and returned her salute with his own. “And I you.”

…

Thorin sat at the long table in the King’s Hall that had been used for hundreds of years as a place of
negotiation with Fíli as his heir to his right and Balin as his closest advisor on his left. Young Ori stood in one corner of the room at a scribe stand, his position echoed across the room by his elven equivalent, each charged with recording the proceedings for their histories and to be used to fashion the contracts at the end of things. His trade negotiations with his cousin Dain had been good practice for the quiet scribe and beloved of his heir. These talks, at least, should be less unruly as kin or no it was rare for a dwarven discussion of trade to pass without a bevy of shouted insults.

Across from Thorin was the Elvenking in all his stately repose, his heir Legolas across from Fíli and an advisor likewise opposite Balin while between the two parties sat the most impartial members of the negotiations: Bard, as Lord of Dale, with his son on one side of him – youth aside – and his right-hand.

In a rare deviation from tradition, a trio of somewhat neutral parties had found their ways into the room, though how Thorin wasn’t quite sure, as he’d found a wizard, a half-elf, and a hobbit had beaten them to the room and taken their places ahead of the others. He knew his own beloved well enough to know that the expression on his sweet face was one of unshakable stubbornness while Gandalf was playing implacable and Harry looked far too amused for Thorin’s peace of mind. Meddlers, each and every one of them for all that Bilbo and Harry would protest at the description, but their presence should force Thranduil – and himself though he hated to admit it – to behave as the Kings they were.

Holding in an unkingly sigh, he nodded to Balin and his advisor began the proceedings that were certain to take the entire day if not longer to complete in full.

…

When the talks broke for a recess, Legolas found himself following the intriguing form of the peredhel Ranger that had become a member of Thorin Oakenshield’s Company.

The talks hadn’t – yet – devolved to literal daggers-drawn which Legolas attributed to the presence of the three presences that had little stake in the negotiations compared to the others for all that the little hobbit was being courted by the dwarven King. Though why any sane creature, which Master Baggins seemed to be, would want such a thing Legolas couldn’t begin to imagine. The rest of the chilly-but-working atmosphere he put down to the battle being less than a fortnight passed.

None of them – even his at-times intractable father – were eager to see more blood spilled in the vales of Erebor be it that of Men, Dwarves, or Elves.

But while the hobbit and Mithrandir would interject here and there or Bard would do likewise when it seemed the age-old enmity between the dwarves and elves started to get out of hand and threaten to derail the talks, the peredhel, who seemed to have been bestowed with quite a few names since Legolas had first encountered him on a much-smaller battlefield in Laketown, remained silent and watchful.

It made him no less interested to the Prince of the Great Greenwood who had never met another of his kind other than the most famous example in Arda of Lord Elrond – and this Belegur of the Vanyar or Berthon Vanyarion depending on who was speaking or even Harry as he was called by the dwarves was as different from Legolas’s distant kinsman as chalk and cheese.

Legolas was glad he’d chosen to follow the Ranger with his mane of raven’s wing hair with its glints of pure sunlit gold, rich blue, and even a fiery red in the sunlight – that he hadn’t noted in Laketown, hidden no doubt by his strange if strong magic – that had taken on braids of dwarven design as a mark of his friendship with the Company if Legolas had to guess, as he found himself approaching one of the few balconies overlooking the six vales of Erebor, this one if Legolas wasn’t mistaken
from the shadowed light overlooking the eastern vale and approach to the mountain.

He was about to step out onto the balcony and join the peredhel under the afternoon winter sky when the sound of heavier footsteps than that of an elf reached his ears and had him darting back into shadow, playing witness – however uncomfortably – to a discussion he knew full-well he had no part in.

Still…neither did he turn away his curiosity far too keen regarding the blood-mage and Ranger, which were only two of the titles the strange being could claim.

Vanyarion it seemed had heard the steps as well, turning to lean against the balcony’s balustrade with his feet planted wide and his arms crossed over his chest, though Legolas would be willing to wager that neither of them expected who stepped out of the shadowed corridor and right up between the peredhel’s spread thighs.

Legolas scowled at the leather-covered back of the new Lord – or King depending on who one asked, though it seemed only the Lord himself was fighting his own coronation – of Dale, Bard the Bowman. The Dragonslayer. Friend of the half-elven Ranger who had used his own magic and the blood of Smaug – or so Thranduil believed – to effect the change around them and restore both Erebor and Dale to their former glories.

He held in a snort as Bard rested callused working-man’s hands on lean hips.

Friends.

Bard then, it appeared, had an interesting interpretation of friendship though this was likely a new behavior judging by the cool lift of a raven-black brow over an emerald eye and the utter lack of gossip in Dale regarding their current closeness.

Though, perhaps, it may be that Bard was behaving with such boldness due to the assumed privacy of the balcony.

True privacy was rare for those of high rank, as Legolas knew better than any given the length of time rumors tended to follow one around as an unfortunate side-effect of the limitless and faultless memories of elven-kind and all the long years they had to gossip and collect the tastiest bits of rumor no matter how lacking in fact some of them may be.

“You’re an arse.”

Legolas nearly choked. It was hardly the words to a lover he expected. Still, Men did things differently and from what he could tell and the little his father had been willing to share, the peredhel seemed to have been raised exclusively by Men rather than the Vanyar side of his heritage.

Perhaps the peredhel did not know to expect better than such an unflattering greeting from his lover.

Given that the ethereal glow of the Firstborn was strong in Vanyarion, stronger than any Legolas had seen before other than himself or his father, which in the latter case was due more to his great age than it was a natural effect of his birthright, as of all the Eldar and Avari peoples the Vanyar shone the strongest, the peredhel hadn’t yet made the choice between the Gifts of Men and that of Elves: an eventual mortal death and the rest that came with it or the undying nature of the Elves, he would have time to learn that he – or any – deserved better than such a greeting from a lover.

Legolas woke from his shock quick enough to catch the snort – though not the eye-roll he would think given the mannerisms of the peredhel he’d seen that would accompany it – Vanyarion offered in return.
He did note, however, that he had lifted his arms from their position crossed over his broad chest and link them around the Bowman’s neck, holding one wrist in his opposite hand.

“I didn’t force lordship – let alone a kingship,”

“’m not a ruddy king!”

Vanyarion continued despite the grumbling interruption.

“…upon you, Bard.” He tsked. “Your people managed that all on their own with you helping them along every step of the way by stepping into the power-void before another could. Leading them to Dale from the shore of the lake.” He counted off, Bard interjecting excuses or the reasons behind his decisions in the heels of each.

“They would’ve frozen if they’d stayed there…”

“Choosing where in Dale they would start making camp, including places to watch over the children and infirm…”

“We didn’t have enough resources to scatter about, was better to stick together in groups…”

“Delegating tasks to your deputies…”

“Oi, now, Percy and Hilda know what they’re about far better than I do, an’ that’s for certain…”

“Greeting the envoys from Erebor…”

“Well, I knew you rowdy lot…”

“Greeting and taking council with the Elvenking…”

“I was the only one to have met the bloke before the riots…”

“Parlaying with King Thorin…”

“Uh…”

“Serving as mediator between Thorin and Thranduil…”

“That was your idea if I remember correctly…”

“Leading the defense of your city and your militia into battle.” At that Harry arched a brow at a brooding, but silent, Bard. “You are a King, like it or not Bard, of the Line of Girion.” He smirked. “You became one the second you led your people into Dale and reclaimed it for your own.”

In the shadows, Legolas had to agree.

“You’re still an arse.” Bard complained, though it was weak in the face of Harry’s argument. “Between the black arrow, the dragonslaying, and the opening the gates of Dale – those were all your doing and you know it – you set me up!”

“Of course I did.” Harry chuckled. “If Gandalf sticks around I think you’ll find that for all we disagree about methods at times there’s a few Wizardry skills most of us have: disappearing at random, excellent timing for rescues, a bit of the showman, and a tendency to meddle. It’s how we go about the latter and what we find worth the effort that tends to vary.”
“And what does Gandalf like to meddle in, then, if you prefer restoration?”

Bard, Legolas had to admit, was spot-on with that even with only part of the information regarding Vanyarion’s actions on the path to Erebor. The Stone Bridge. The new growth in the forest. Dale. Erebor. The Line of Girion. For all that he was likely to be remembered by songs and poets and scribes for his lethal abilities in combat – the destruction of the five-thousand comes to immediate mind – from what the scouts of the Woodland Realm could tell everywhere Vanyarion had stepped East of the Misty Mountains he’d left a trail of restoration and renewal in his wake.

“What else?” Legolas could just barely see that mane of hair toss around strong shoulders at the peredhel’s shake of a head. “But the fate of the world itself. Come on.” He stood, drawing back his arms until his hands rested on Bard’s shoulders, giving them a squeeze even as he stood a few inches taller than the uncrowned King of Dale who despite the deprivation of Laketown was of good size for a Man, if a head shorter than Legolas’s own height.

With Vanyarion’s mannish heritage, he was of good height for a Man, quite tall in fact if not as tall as some of the Dúnedain who are rich with elvish blood.

Legolas’s father Thranduil was taller yet than Legolas himself, standing a full seven feet in height, of an equal with that of the famed Balrog-Slayer both of whom were broader of shoulder than Legolas or Vanyarion could have ever hoped to be as those of their blood, the Vanyar, were known to be as lithe as the spears they wield in battle or the young tree Legolas had oft been compared to in his growing years.

“The next part of the talks should go easier.” Vanyarion was telling the Bowman as he turned his lover – or perhaps not, Legolas hadn’t seen anything other than the Bowman’s elf-handling that would point to that, not in words or deeds leaving him just as puzzled as he was when Bard stepped onto the balcony – towards the balcony doors, Legolas taking the chance to dart away before being seen.

“Why?” Bard drawled. “Are you actually going to take part this time?”

“Yes?”

“…"

Thranduil stared down into the carved wooden casket bound in mithril and decorated in elvish designs with a slight widening to his eyes that to one who knew him would know as shock.

Upon the talks reconvening where from the lack of grumbling from a hobbit-stomach refreshment was taken as needed by the mortals, Oakenshield’s advisor had stood and made a pretty practiced speech about reforging bonds between their three kingdoms then gestured a pair of dwarves – from Oakenshield’s Company or Thranduil was the woodland sprite Dain Ironfoot named him – who each set down a jewelry casket before himself and Lord Bard.

Even if it wasn’t what he’d hoped he would’ve taken it back to his Halls to cherish the memory of the persimmon-sour look on Oakenshield’s face.

Whatever concession he’d been talked into for the sake of peace and prosperity for his people it clearly sat ill.

Good.

With the death and blood the stubborn dwarven King, his spineless father, and cursed grandfather had brought down not only upon their people but upon Thranduil’s he deserved every bit of
discomfort this concession brought him.

That said: Thranduil hadn’t expected what amounted to a total concession.

Flicking his eyes up from the Gems of Lasgalen: gems of pure starlight brought with his wife from Valinor as part of her bride-gift from her family, strung on mithril in a long chain and ending in a drop-pendant that would sit with unearthly beauty upon a consort of male or female or both or neither persuasion; up to the dancing eyes of Berthon Vanyarion as he’d named the peredhel, he knew exactly who to thank for the return of his kingdom’s third-greatest treasure after his son and their people.

A glance over the table saw a dumbstruck Bard staring down at an ornate pectoral necklace sized for a Man made of hundreds of faceted emeralds set in rich yellow gold: the emeralds of Girion; taken no doubt from the ruins of Dale by Smaug.

Well.

Thranduil snapped the lid shut on the casket, noting that some gems not strung on the necklace had been set into wrist-bangles, anklets, and a circlet all upon mithril to complete a set of consort’s jewels while the rest were left loose to be set into a crown or other jewels as needed…though it would be a long time indeed before Thranduil entrusted such a commission to dwarven craft once more.

A week after never, perhaps.

“Let us continue.” Thranduil decreed, locking the casket with the key provided by the dwarves and handing it over to Legolas for safekeeping, the key disappearing into his robes. “I believe we were discussing renumeration for the provisions of food until the next harvest and seed for planting the fields of Dale and Erebor from the Woodland Realm…”
Chapter 24

Broken Blade

“In winter, I plan and plot. In spring, I move.” ~ Henry Rollins

Twenty-Four: Winter Fades to Spring

Winter passed in a haze of caravans arriving – for trade or with those immigrating to Erebor or Dale or all of them at once – until the snows grew too deep for easy travel, days and weeks of kinging lessons with Bard since his people were as steadfast in ignoring his attempts at not being a King as they used to ignore the Master’s thoughts on smuggling food into Laketown, and watching romance bloom under the mountain in nothing less than baffled amusement.

Fíli and Ori he’d been well-aware of.

Thorin and Bilbo had taken him a bit by surprise.

But when Kíli started accompanying him as an “envoy” to Dale for his kinging lessons with Bard and spent most of his time flirting with Tauriel, now that had been shocking when Harry realized the dwarf was serious.

Not as shocked as he’d been when he’d noticed that rather than humoring the prince, Tauriel was starting to reciprocate.

Harry’d been tempted to conjure popcorn – even if it wouldn’t taste of anything, being conjured – at the Company dinner where Kíli’d announced his intentions to court the exiled Silvan elf to one and all.

The shade of puce Thorin had turned had been spectacular even if Glóin was the one who ended up fainting from lack of oxygen due to his endless ranting.

Thorin had gotten his own back from the little shit that was his spymaster and nephew, Harry had to give him that.

There was nothing like telling your sister’s son – who still commanded no little amount of respect and loving-fear from her children – that he wasn’t going to interfere with Kíli’s courtship…which meant the little bastard would have to tell his mother himself that rather than a nice dwarrowdam or strong dwarrow or even a pretty hobbit like Bilbo, her youngest had fallen arse over anvil for an elf.

Kíli would deny it until the end of his days but he’d meeped and hid at that, something which Fíli and Harry would hold over his head until he died.

Gandalf left after the negotiations as he said he would on “wizardly business” as Bilbo put it.

Harry rather thought he was off to recover from his trials in Lórien which would also allow him to check on his good friend the Lady Galadriel but that was none of his affair.

Prince Legolas had left with him, giving credence to Harry’s assumption, though not without a final, curious glance at Harry.

He wasn’t sure what he’d done that made him such a puzzle to the Prince of the Woodland Realm, it wasn’t like anyone knew for certain that Harry had taken the Gems of Lasgalen as part of his portion
of the treasure which was the only thing softening Thorin’s pride enough to allow them to be “gifted” to Thranduil as a measure of good-faith, for all Thranduil’s knowing glances and Legolas’s confused ones.

That the next time Harry entered his vault down in the new vault corridor that replaced Thrór’s treasure halls he found several chests filled with gleaming golden coins with no mention from Thorin or anyone else how they got there was neither here nor there.

Though it seemed the dwarrow at least appreciated Harry’s efficiency in the matter of the treasure sorting as Bard had when he’d been shown both the treasury of Dale and that of the Line of Girion after the negotiations were finished.

Harry’s magic had been the conduit for the renewal of Erebor as much as the dragon’s blood had provided the catalyst and his phoenix fire the boundaries. It had had it’s way with the framework the power of the Valar had used. The vaults were one example, as the wards over Dale were another.

When it came to sheer efficiency in said vaults, however, the chests that Remus and Nymphadora had used for their personal vault before their deaths couldn’t be beat. Harry had had to sort and organize them for being rolled into Teddy’s inheritance from the Black family. That all their wealth and items of worth had been stored in iron-banded oak chests with little chalkboards that kept a tally on what each contained had smoothed the way considerably and been something right out of Remus’s clever mind.

The dwarrow loved the damn things that now contained the wealth of Erebor save for the jewelry vaults that had each piece or set in locked caskets similar to those used to present the Gems of Lasgalen and the Emeralds of Girion.

It kept accounting – Glóin’s position as soon as he returned with Bombur and the guards provided by Dain’s Iron Hills warriors from fetching their families and those leaving Thorin’s Halls in Ered Luin for Erebor – much easier to manage, a task that Dori would be eager to hand back to the Royal Treasurer when Glóin arrived.

When he wasn’t devoting his time to kinging lessons with Bard – something which both Thorin and Thranduil had also provided help with as the enmity between them had turned, somehow, into competition, Thorin sending down Balin once a week while Tauriel assisted in her position as envoy, exile or no – Harry found that he spent the majority of his time either hunting to supplement the lembas given by Thranduil as part of the treaty, or bent over crop plans with Bilbo.

Equally determined to pull his weight now that he was being courted by a King – which made Bilbo flustered anytime he thought too long on the subject – and seeing that save for a handful of farmers from Laketown who’d had farms on the edge of the Lake that had been overrun by orcs and wargs none of the current residents of either reclaimed kingdom knew what the blazes they were doing when it came to the matters of soil, crops, and growing things Bilbo had taken the entire matter over.

Needless to say, the hobbit had pulled Harry into the matter right along with him.

Balin and Ori had provided maps of the mountainside and the valleys that sprawled between the arms of the mountain and its foothills, as well as historical records of crops planted and their yields.

With the faith of one fully aware of who he was dealing with, Bilbo had set to drawing up a planting plan. Secure in the knowledge that Harry would manage to acquire what Bilbo wanted even if it couldn’t be found in the Woodland Realm or Dale or upon the trade caravans, they charted orchards and forests to be regrown on the mountainsides. Berry bushes to be sown beneath the trees and fields to cover the lower southern slopes.
Conifer forestland to provide hunting grounds and wood for dwarven craft in the northern vales and slopes.

Fruit-and-nut-and-seed bearing trees and bushes and plants to cover the mountain.

Companion-planted fields that will grow and yield food for both the people of Erebor and Dale but also livestock in maize, sorghum, summer and winter squash, snap and dry beans.

That first planting, Harry knew, wouldn’t have much by way of variety even with his magic to speed things along with the trees and bushes.

But it would be plentiful with the rich earth of the renewed fields and that was what mattered to Bilbo.

After feeling the pinch of rationing even with lembas which filled the stomach but was damn boring after months of it and little else but what he could hunt or the Dale men could fish from the frozen lake, Harry didn’t mind Bilbo’s furor even though he knew his hobbit friend would be counting on his magic to make up where they had a lack of hands for planting.

By harvest the rest of the caravans with those moving to the mountain should have arrived.

Though for the sake of Bilbo’s plans, Harry was glad that the ground of the mountain and vales surrounding it stayed frozen longer than that of the Woodland Realm.

Harry had business beneath those trees before the thaw of Spring woke all that still dwelled there.

What Thranduil would have to say about that business, well.

That was a worry for after it was done.

…

“My lord Thranduil.” A scout hurried into the private study of the Elvenking, finding the owner lounging in one of the soft armchairs placed just so that it caught the beams of sunshine coming down through the crystals placed in the caverns to lighten the upper levels of the halls of the Woodland Realm.

It was a weak sun, still.

Caught in the cusp of the stirring between last breaths of winter and the early break of spring.

Thranduil’s crown reflected this duality of the stirring season with delicate points of diamonds fashioned like slender icicles dangling from the points of his crown but having blooms of snowdrops, crocus, and early hellebores twining around the branches of the crown.

“Yes?” Thranduil asked, glancing over from eyes as frosty as the season. While his participation in the Battle of the Five Armies had woken him as if from a long sleep and shaken him from his isolation in his Halls, it had also cost him dearly. He mourned every last elven life lost in the vales of Erebor.

And though they were merely gone – if only for the moment – and not lost to Valinor, he mourned his children as well.

Winter and the Stirring in the Woodland Realm were times of reflection and craft for his people.

No business of the realm was argued, no grievances presented before the king or taken to the dueling
circles.

They were seasons of rest in the Elvenking’s halls as the wood slept and rested around them.

Only a few patrols of scouts ever left his halls in Winter to ensure that foul things didn’t creep close to their borders but not even the great spiders that were invasive the rest of the year wished to traverse the Woodland Realm through the great drifts of snow and freezing cold, pulling back to Dol Guldur with the first snows.

That one of these scouts was nearly running into his private study was not a sign of favorable news.

“Fire, milord!” The scout saluted then went to one knee. “Fire in the Southern Wood, high upon Amon Lanc!”

“Dol Guldur?” Thranduil arched a brow. That was…odd to say the least. Both Mithrandir when he was present in his halls on his way to Lórien after taking his leave from Erebor and his cousin Lord Celeborn, husband of the Lady Galadriel had assured him that the dark fortress and once-home of his people had been cleansed of Sauron’s taint.

“We cannot say, milord.” The scout lowered his head, tips of his Silvan ears blushing. “We cannot see it clearly from within our borders.”

“Galion! A warming meal for our scout. Tell Feren to gather a company and saddle my mount.” Thranduil ordered his aide when the dark-haired elf appeared in the doorway moments after his summons as the Elvenking rose to his great height, a vicious light in his oft-unnerving grey eyes. “We ride to Dol Guldur.”

…

Harry hadn’t quite spent the entirety of the Winter mired in plans and plots or playing teacher to Bard.

Once the snows grew too deep for even Harry and Shadowfax to want to traverse he found the time before that he’d spent hunting or gathering – not under the leaves of the Greenwood as he didn’t want to venture there again until his magic was in a better state than bare weeks after hollowing himself out like a canoe – spent in the practice yards of Erebor or Dale depending on the week.

All of the Company it seemed, save for Bilbo, Balin, and Ori who preferred other pursuits, wanted a go at him now that there were plenty of practice weapons that wouldn’t accidentally kill them with a nick of the blade like the Sword of Gryffindor or Eithadolen as everyone called it now to a grumpy-face from Thorin over the elvish appellation.

It stuck and was less of a mouthful than Sword of Gryffindor so Harry didn’t bother fighting it anymore than he did the names he found himself called in Dale, the elves’ insistence on using the names they or their king had given him spreading to all of the Men save for Bard who rolled his eyes and carried on.

Harry appreciated hearing his birth name from more than his friends in the mountain more than he’d counted on when Thranduil and the Woodland Elves had named him in the elvish tradition.

What shook him, when he was spending one of his weeks in Dale and matching sword or spear or knife against the elven company Thranduil left for Dale’s protection as part of the treaty between Dale and Greenwood, was the realization that in twenty or thirty years – maybe more if his friend was lucky and less if not – he would hear himself called Harry nowhere else but Erebor when Bard inevitably died. With Bard’s children under the tutelage of Tauriel and Balin as much as Bard
himself, they’d quickly taken to calling their “Da’s Ranger friend” Berthon as the elleth did. Balin, showing the wisdom groomed by tutoring Thorin’s heirs which was no little thing given how well Harry knew Fili and Kili, chose to choose his battles in countering Tauriel’s influence on the next generation of Dale’s leadership and let the matter of Harry’s name be.

He had to admit: two and a half months of deep snows and daily training had sharpened his skill at arms considerably though he often found himself lying on his back in the dirt or snow when facing an elvish opponent.

What he lacked in centuries of practice however he made up in practical experience and tactics, even if he still ate ground five bouts out of six that was better than the eight out of nine when they began.

That his dwarven friends had taught him a thing or two about taking on an opponent bigger than him, as all of the ellon guards were as well as a few of the elleth guards could be, helped close the margin between them, even as the elvish instruction did more to bridge the gap between Harry’s skills at arms and those of the Company’s warriors than the dwarves’ did that between Harry and the elves.

By the time Harry was strapping Eithadolen onto his hip and the dragonbone spear Thorin himself had fashioned for him upon his back for a trip under the leaves of the Woodland Realm he was holding his own in spars against Fili’s prowess, smart enough to not step into the ring with Dwalin unless he was prepared to stay well out of range of the dwarf’s immense strength, and still getting his arse handed to him by Thorin two bouts out of three.

Hardly the stuff of legends no matter what the songs said about him, but he’d take it after the nasty bruises and cracked ribs that followed his first week of training with his dwarrow friends.

Dwalin was a mean bastard.

Damn good at his craft.

But a bastard nonetheless.

“Ah, where are you going?” Bilbo asked as he peeked his head around the cracked-open door in Harry’s rooms in the royal wing.

The rest of the Company had spread out, claiming suites of rooms or full homes and houses elsewhere in the mountain if all relatively close to the royal wing, but Harry and Bilbo had been granted rooms in the wing itself. If those rooms placed Bilbo literally in the consort’s suite, no one was dumb enough to question Thorin on it. Harry had taken the rooms farthest down the hall, ones that made Thorin’s face go all scowly and conflicted that Balin told them later after he’d claimed them were turned into Thrór’s rooms in his later years of gold-sickness with panels of engraved gold clinging to the walls and studded in gems. Harry’s magic had returned the rooms to how they were before that madness-tinged remodel: smooth, clean walls of green marble without a speck of the golden veins found elsewhere in the mountain to be found with a small sitting room/entry room that Harry had filled with books borrowed from the Erebor library in Khuzdul, Westron, Sindarin, and Quenya, a bedroom, and a simple washroom.

Bilbo had gotten more than a chuckle or two out of the looks Harry had gotten when the others had realized books in their secret language had grown legs and sauntered their way into Harry’s rooms which meant – horror of horrors – that he could likely read them.

Much blustering, cursing, and shouting had followed.
Though as Bilbo and Harry had been tucked up with a tea tray and the room, like all of Erebor piped with water-pipes heated by the Great Forges, was toasty-warm neither had paid the grousing and complaints much mind.

Dori had filled Harry’s wardrobe with dwarven fashions, taking the different body types of the pair as a challenge, Ori supplying a few soft-knit things, but that wasn’t what Bilbo saw when he opened the door and spied his friend, even as he himself was in a mixture of dwarven-styled tunic and overcoat in the dark blues and black of the Line of Durin with a silvery hobbit-style trouser underneath.

His silver belt had been fashioned by Thorin’s own hands and finer than anything he’d owned before in his life for all that his betrothed protested he was no silver or gold smith, and as always he wore the mithril undershirt between his underthings and his tunic.

Harry, however, was in attire Bilbo had grown all-too-accustomed to seeing on the journey to Erebor that tended to only make reappearances now when his friend would leave to spend a week in Dale with hunting being as limited as it has for months.

His friend had his strange leathers on that he’d been told came from a creature called “The King of Serpents” whose venom was yet contained within the sword at his hip. The tunic that never seemed to stain was on with the light chain-mail shirt whispering underneath it. His weapons were in place. Even the spear Thorin had made for him when they all realized Harry was more taken – and skilled – with the weapon than any had known before he’d used one to wound Smaug and later taken down trolls and war-beasts during battle. That Harry had gifted Thorin with Smaug’s skeleton to turn fang and bone into weapons was beside the point yet had a delicious irony he knew both his beloved and his best friend equally enjoyed.

Harry was going on a journey.

More, if that look in his friend’s eyes meant anything, he was going off to battle.

Oh no, Bilbo didn’t like this one little bit.

Worse, he knew full-well that he wasn’t likely to change the crazy Champion’s mind once it had been set upon a course. What Harry’d done with Erebor was enough proof of that. Or the first weeks he’d stepped into the ring with the dwarven warriors.

Bilbo would’ve rethought that decision after the first broken bone.

Harry just healed himself and kept going.

Crazy. His best-friend was pure crazy in a half-elven package.

Granted…Bilbo had let said crazy half-elven package talk him into a quest with a bunch of just-as-crazy dwarrow and then fallen in love with the barniest, stubbornest, handsomest of the lot, requiring him to permanently pick up stakes and stay in Erebor as consort to a bunch of crazy dwarrow so he didn’t know if he really had a leg to stand on there.

“To see a spider about a ruin.” Harry said, blithe as could be, even as he checked the edge of one of his knives before tucking it away in its sheath and buckling his quiver, full to the brim with raven-fletched quarrels courtesy of a Yule gift from Kíli, in its place.

Bilbo frowned, pursing his lips, remembering the last time Harry answered a question in that manner. If he recalled correctly, in the end it led to the revelation that he’d gone to find an Ent for ent-draught
to get Shadowfax and Bilbo’s mule – which Harry had fully gifted him as a betrothall present the berk – Applejack through Mirkwood.

Whenever Harry was being blithe or glib, it was an excellent sign that he was up to something, usually dealing one of his wizardly-cards from the bottom of the deck if nearly a year’s friendship had taught Bilbo anything.

“Yeah…” Bilbo shook his head, sighing and crossing his arms. “I’m going to need a bit more than that, Harry.”

Harry turned, flashing a devil-may-care grin at his little friend as he checked his duster pockets to make sure his provisions – more lembas, yay – were in place.

“Trust me.” Harry said, wincing a bit at the stern glare leveled his way by the hobbit. Ouch. Bilbo was going to make one hell of a mum if what he’d learned about hobbits and dwarrow reproduction was true. “This time it’s better no one in the mountain or Dale knows what I’m about until it’s done.”

Groaning, Bilbo rubbed his forehead with one hand. “You’re going to piss off Thranduil, aren’t you?”

“Dunno.” Harry shrugged, waggling a hand from side in midair. “Wouldn’t bet on his reaction, personally. Could go either way.” He looked off, pondering the odds for a moment. “Depends on how sentimental he is at the end of the day.”

“Stop.” Bilbo held up a hand, wincing. Harry was right. He really didn’t want to know if the Champion wasn’t willing to lay odds given the last time he went rogue he rebuilt a pair of cities from ruins. “I take it back, I don’t want to know.” He leaned forward and gave his tall – really, was there any real need for a person to be that height, he didn’t think so – friend a squeeze hug. “Just be back before planting or I’ll never forgive you for leaving me alone to handle all these ignorant dwarrow by myself.”

“Deal.”

Harry wrapped his magic tight around himself after he ran at full speed across the hard-packed snow of Erebor, his stride and step light enough that he sped over the snow instead of sinking into it.

Being half-elven was so weird.

He knew that in time he would accustom himself to it. Perhaps even take for granted the sharp vision and hearing that had come with his “upgrade” as he joked about the change to Shadowfax that came with his taller height – something he would never not like, though he was glad that his armor had been spelled to grow with him, always fitting perfectly no matter whether he grew or shrank or became rotund or stick-thin – and pointed ears.

The small changes to his face that refined him down even further than the noble bones his father’s family had given him he could’ve done without.

As Thranduil had pointed out in his ever-so-kingly way, those that saw him now without a glamor knew him at once to have elven blood.

They may not know what kind but that he was part-elven all the same.

With his infamy in the Rhovanion, there was no point to wasting the magic to maintain a glamor no
matter how small the drain was compared to other magics to constantly keep up such as wards or the enchantment he’d fashioned to protect Bilbo from the taint of Mirkwood. Still. Why bother? Unless he needed to go unremarked and then even his own face and form turned back to that of a simple Man wouldn’t be enough.

A benefit, however, of months of rest while the ground froze and snow fell was that it gave him much needed time to allow his magic to replenish its reserves. Even with the help of Miruvor he was yet to return to his pre-stupidity store of magic in his core. But it was tremendously better than it had been to the point that he no longer had to worry about whether a single spell might have him seeing spots in his vision from overstrain.

His Patronus came at his call easily once more without causing him weakness, his general post-injury indicator that he could go back into the field when he was still an Auror and when he’d tested his control by levitating a book in front of him last week he’d maintained it for a solid two hours without trouble.

He was as ready as he could be to begin being himself, magic and all, again.

Not that he hadn’t enjoyed his time in Erebor and Dale teaching and being taught or simply enjoying a good meal with friends and songs over tea or pipes for the dwarrow (and more than that with Bard when they’d retired for the night.)

He had, just as much as he’d reveled in his peaceful weeks in the Shire the previous Spring.

Time and evil waited for no one however, and he’d left the lingering stain on his friends’ south-western border long enough.

Lady Galadriel had banished Sauron from Dol Guldur, Harry believed that.

However, the darkness creeping across the Woodland Realm had begun long before rumors of a Necromancer living in the ruins had arisen.

Honestly if he thought he’d get away with it he’d ride North and tear down Gundabad to nothing but rubble but Thorin – not to mention the rest of the seven dwarf lords – would have his head for it if they connected him to the destruction given that it was a holy place to them: where Durin and the other original dwarrow had woken from their sleep, the fathers of their race.

For the orcs’ and Angmar’s tainting of their holy place, the dwarven people hated them as much as any of the Free Folk and more than most.

Once he was well away from the gates of Erebor and any of the watchposts, Harry took a frigid breath of air then spun on his heel and disapparated with nary a sound to the far south-western edge of Mirkwood which he had passed on horseback some months before.

…

Two more apparations later found Harry pacing around the base of Amon Lanc, the hill that had once been the capitol of Oropher’s Silvan Realm that had been taken by Sauron for his base in the North against the elves as Dol Guldur, blood dripping down his arm in a steady drip-drip-drip of blood-magic warding that any member of the Company would have recognized.

It seemed he had timed his quest rightly: as yet not a thing stirred within the walls of the dark fortress.

Chills raced up and down his spine as he locked his Occlumency barriers tight.
The taint of the forest was ten times ten times worse outside the very walls from which it bubbled and roiled into the air and seeped into the very soil of the earth below.

Magic held tight within as the words of warding spilled from between his lips, fresh blood sure to be a siren call to whatever dark things creep outside the fortress and a Notice-Me-Not in place from the top of his head to the soles of his boots he tread the invisible path before him.

Nothing would escape from within the barrier once it was set.

Not one single thing be it the twisted creatures of Morgoth’s servants, Sauron’s spells, or Harry’s own magic.

Which, considering that he was about to do, was as much a concern as anything else.

It was a nice side-benefit of fortresses: easy to slap up a basic ward if you had the time to encircle it, keeping things like spell-damage, combatants, and spells-run-amok all neatly contained and safe from damaging, say, the surrounding massive forest.

Much neater and easier than trying to harness Fiendfyre in the middle of a battle field.

As Harry finished the blood-warded circle he blew out a breath even as it sealed him outside the wards.

That was just fine.

They were his wards.

He didn’t need to be within them to work within them as he knew where the holes in the net were – so to speak.

Shaking his head over the irony of how much he was using the cliché of fight fire with fire since arriving in Middle-Earth, Harry did just that with a single breath of: “Fiendfyre.”

Loosed completely from his control and feasting on the dark magic of the fortress and all the evil creatures that thrived there even in the absence of its Master, the spell-formed fire gave a roar not unlike that of Smaug and took the shape and form of the great wyrm, spinning and whirling in a hurricane of fiery torment that then crashed down upon Dol Guldur in an inferno that had Harry sweating even beyond the bounds of the wards.

Flame hot enough to melt even stone to molten rock and ash.

“Huh.” Harry cocked his head to one side. “Feed fiendfyre enough magic and it turns into a volcano – sort of.” He pursed his lips, wincing at a particularly bright flare, knowing that wards aside the conflagration was sure to be spotted by elven scouts of Lórien and Greenwood alike. “Good to know.”

One thing he was glad of – beyond the ability of fire to cleanse even the darkest of magics as he’d seen this spell do once before to a Horcrux – was that the roar of the fire drowned out any shrieks and cries of the creatures inside the fortress.

And that the flames were so hot that they likely died, in many cases, before they even knew death was upon them.

Harry’d heard stories about the spiders of the Woodland Realm and seen the webs for himself.
He was going to take a *solid pass* on having to fight or even see them for himself.

Aragog was enough for one lifetime – thank you very much.

Some likely remained in nests in the Black Mountains of Mirkwood north of the Old Forest Road, but they were a problem for another day, much like the source of the foul enchantment of the so-called Enchanted River that flowed from the same mountains.

One problem at a time, please-and-thank-you.

Dol Guldur was a problem for both Greenwood and Lórien, making it a priority beyond that it was a breeding ground for orcs, wargs, and spiders alike.

Destroying it was only to the good of everyone: Men, Elves, Dwarves, and so on.

*Why* the White Council had suffered it to exist after Sauron’s last defeat prior to his duel with Lady Galadriel a few months past was beyond Harry’s ability to comprehend…though having seen them in action for himself he was going to go with a large dosage of *ostrich-syndrome* as exhibited particularly by their leader Saruman.

It wasn’t like Harry wasn’t well-versed in *that* particular blend of stupidity.

Hours passed – or maybe days, the more he settled into being half-elven the less he needed to rest making time blend together at times – before the *Fiendfyre* was at last satisfied having consumed every last scrap of magic it could find within the boundaries of Harry’s wards and began to die down.

Feeling a bit weary, he sent another spell seeking through the wards: “*Aqua Eructo Maxima*” as a tidal wave poured through the wards and surrounded the fire, the two colliding in a massive burst of steam that rose to the top of the wards before falling again to the ground as if it was raining in a quick, magical cloudburst.

With a sigh, Harry broke the simple warding once the cloudburst ended and left nothing in its wake, the ground greedily soaking up every last bit of the clean water and turning the ash, obsidian, and pumice left in the wake of the volcanic destruction of Dol Guldur into a soupy mess of ground.

What had once been a high hill and a mighty fortress was nothing more than a pit in the ground, Amon Lanc collapsing with the inner supports of the fortress and the orc pits consumed by Harry’s spell.

Good, he thought. Better an empty field that the forest would reclaim soon enough than a scourge upon the earth. Cracking his neck and feeling the cost of his spells and waking watchfulness as they worked, Harry held out his arms before him and slowly closed them in a clap that resounded across the cleared glade as the very ground obeyed his will, the earth and ash moving and filling in the gaping pit that once was Dol Guldur and leaving no sign of its passing other than its lack.

Woken from his watchful, controlled stupor, Harry arched a brow as he stared all around him, picking out the shining eyes of spider and orc alike.

It seemed it wasn’t going to get his wish, he sighed, taking up his spear and raising it high, already channeling his power through it as clouds churned overhead, dragonbone serving as a particularly fine magical conduit. Pity. He really *did not* like spiders.

More fools them for testing him.
Dropping his Notice-Ne-Not, he swept his spear in an arch with a shouted spell: “tintreach staile!”

The summoned lightning jumped from the tip of his spear from body-to-tree-to-sky and back to his spear in a massive chained attack of wrathful power focused on every set of eyes that had been lured by the sent of his blood and charged his way the moment he dropped the cloaking spell.

A vicious grin crossing his face, he charged in turn with a rollicking cry and blasted the first of a dozen spiders from his path.

These may be different.

Darker.

But they were spiders nonetheless and Harry knew better than most how to deal with giant fucking spiders.

…

Author’s Note:

After some research I found out that the Elves keep a completely different calendar than Men or Hobbits or Dwarves (surprise, surprise)

I found this from Wikipedia to explain it:

“In Rivendell, the loa,” (sun-round or growing aka a year) ”began on the spring equinox and was divided into six "months" or seasons, as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quenya name</th>
<th>Sindarin name</th>
<th>English translation</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>tuilë</td>
<td>ethuil</td>
<td>spring</td>
<td>54 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lairë</td>
<td>Laer</td>
<td>summer</td>
<td>72 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yávië</td>
<td>Iavas</td>
<td>autumn</td>
<td>54 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quellë</td>
<td>Firith</td>
<td>fading</td>
<td>54 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hrívë</td>
<td>Rhîw</td>
<td>winter</td>
<td>72 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>coirë</td>
<td>Echuir</td>
<td>stirring</td>
<td>54 days</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Five other days, two between coirë and tuilë and three between yávië and quellë, meant the calendar added up to 365 days. Irregularities were allowed for by adding another three days every twelve years, except the last year of a yén.”
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: As we get into bridging the Hobbit and the Fellowship of the Ring, there’s going to be quite a few time jumps to cover the seventy-seven years between the end of the Hobbit and Frodo leaving the Shire/the Council of Elrond. In these interlude chapters what you’ll see quite a bit of is snippets of activity that serve as a sort of time-stamp mixed with larger sections of prose and dialog.

Broken Blade

Chapter Twenty-Five: Elf-ing for Dummies

Thranduil had half-expected to find the Vanyarion when his soldiers made it to Dol Guldur.

At the very least given that they’d taken the safe path following the Forest River to the western edge of his Realm and then followed the Greenwood south that they would encounter curious elves from his cousin’s lands in Lórien come to investigate the trouble at the dark fortress.

What hadn’t been expected was to find both the perëdhel and his cousin himself standing almost shoulder-to-shoulder in the center of where once stood Amon Lanc and the ruins of Dol Guldur.

Evidence of battle surrounded both the half-elven warrior and Celeborn, with the taste of magic ripe in the air.

“Hail Celeborn, Lord of the Golden Wood!” Feren, one of his captains called out acting as Thranduil’s herald for the moment. “Hail Vanyarion Berthon of Mountain, Forest, and Dale!”

“Hail, Thranduil!” The perëdhel greeted back after sharing a glance with Celeborn who sheathed his sword after wiping it clean on a convenient warg’s fur. “King of the Woodland Realm! A star shines upon the hour of our meeting!” He tilted his head in what wasn’t quite a bow then gave the traditional salute of greeting which came much smoother than it had last time Thranduil had met him.

He’d been practicing with more than spear and sword, his smooth twirls to sheath his sword and spear giving proof of gained skill from the rough – but effective – motions Thranduil had noted after the Battle of the Five Armies.

Celeborn, Thranduil noticed, didn’t even flicker an eyelash at the name Feren greeted Vanyarion with.

He held in an unkingly sigh.

That was the problem with his cousin. He’d been married to a Seer so long there was no room for surprise in his life. Were it not for the tragedy of Celebrían, he might suggest the Lord and Lady of the Golden Wood try for another elfling to remind them that there was more to life than flouncing around Caras Galadhon with their Galadhrim courtiers.

But then Celeborn’s personality – or lack thereof, especially once he fell in love with the overbearing Ñoldor that became his wife, as if her close kin hadn’t slaughtered their own as well as Thranduil
and Celeborn’s kin in Doriath – had always irritated him.

“The wood seems to be missing a hill and a dark fortress.” Thranduil said after returning Vanyarion’s salute and nodding – cordially at that – to his cousin. “Your doing I suppose, Berthon?”

“Who else would dare?” Harry’s mouth kicked up on one side in a half-grin, giving the invisible – but real, ouch so real – tension between Lord Celeborn, who’d ridden hard to reach Dol Guldur and help Harry fight off the dark creatures that remained after he’d sundered the fortress at his wife’s request, and the Elvenking no mind. He’d stay out of immortal family drama as much as possible, thank you.

Valar knew they had the time to carry grudges that would make the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black jealous.

“Who else, indeed.” Thranduil allowed his eyes to warm in what another would be an amused smile that he couldn’t show especially before his cousin who of all his surviving kin – few as they were numbered – Thranduil had the most contentious relationship. “Spread out.” He ordered his company of soldiers and scouts. “Our friend has done the bulk of the work of clearing this den of darkness. Let us not waste the opportunity presented.”

Feren at once set to ordering the soldiers and scouts into pairs and squads to sweep into the forest spiraling out from the once-ruins of Dol Guldur.

None of them were fools enough to believe they’d clear the forest.

Not that day.

But Thranduil felt himself strengthening when he dismounted from his elk and war-steed, his soft boots landed lightly upon the earth of the once-darkest portion of the Great Greenwood. That was no surprise. As the King who laid claim to all of the Greenwood under his dominion of the Woodland Realm, he would feel the effects before his people as he had when an impudent blood-mage had led a Company of dwarrow and a single hobbit through the Forest Path, cleansing small spots of land as he went.

His people would feel it, would strengthen and their spirits would lighten, eventually.

Content to ignore Celeborn’s trespass onto his lands – a trespass that hadn’t his wife’s and Elrond’s excuse of being a member of the vaunted White Council to excuse it – after little more than a nod, Thranduil studied the wounds on the corpses fallen to the ground.

A spear wound there.

The stink of singed fur and magic there.

Celeborn’s arrows or Vayarion’s dragonfang-tipped quarrels there.

And last the infamous slim cuts or clean beheadings and stab wounds of Berthon’s sword Eithadolen.

“It seems we missed quite the sortie.” He arched a brow at the irreverent peredhel. “Does this mean I can expect you to join patrols in the coming seasons or do your affairs in mountain and dale yet restrain you?”

“Planting restrains me.” Harry gave into a full-on grin at the exasperation he could see hiding in
Arthur Thranduil’s gaze at his answer. “If I were to miss it I think Bilbo might hunt me down in your Realm and haul me back by my ear, besides the weddings to come at which I will be expected, and harvest after that. Caravans to settle, immigrants to help Bard vet.” He shrugged, knowing that the unpolished movement had to irritate the always-elegant, even when cutting off orc heads a dozen at a time, King of the Woodland Realm.

Thranduil might be more congenial to him but that didn’t stop the ancient King from being an arse to Thorin whenever the chance presented itself to irritate the King Under the Mountain.

If it weren’t for the ages involved, sometimes he’d think he, Bilbo, and Bard who were stuck in the middle in one way or another were dealing with utter children.

In the spat between Thorin and Thranduil the usually-sound counsel of Balin and Tauriel alike was woefully biased.

“A week after Durin’s Day,” he conceded to a deadline given the distinctly unimpressed looks he was getting from a pair of royal elves, even if Celeborn looked little like his taller cousin beyond the silver hair and grey eyes of the Sindar nobility that weren’t as, pure if Harry had to put a word to the difference, as Thranduil’s own. “I will arrive no later.”

“You will be expected then.” Thranduil gave a majestic nod then clasped arms with the young peredhel. “If you have need of extra hands to speed your arrival…”

Harry tossed back his head and laughed. “If I thought Thorin wouldn’t poison my mead for even suggesting such a thing I’d take you up on it.” He smiled ruefully at the Sindar who – for the first time since Thranduil rode in on another of his massive battle-elk – shared an aggrieved glance of commiseration over his attachment to dwarves. “As it stands I appreciate the sentiment behind your offer, Lord Thranduil, but must defer it to the toils of King Bard’s people in Dale.”

“As you wish.” Thranduil exchanged a salute with the young Vanyarion who loped off after Feren into the woods. “Until a star shines upon our next meeting, Berthon of the Vanyar.”

“Until then, Thranduil, Lord of the Great Greenwood.”

…

Thranduil turned to face his cousin, the pair sharing iced-over glances.

Neither could – or perhaps would deign to – understand the choices of the other.

Celeborn disdained his haughty cousin’s caution as cowardice in retreating from the southern reaches of the Greenwood and allowing darkness to hold sway there.

Thranduil saw little of merit or valor in Celeborn’s following behind his power-grubbing wife’s skirts for centuries on end before snapping up the first leaderless enclave of Firstborn to come available without a stronger claimant and thought he had little room to speak of cowardice when the great Lord of the Golden Wood had seen true battle precisely once in his blessed life – and lost.

Perhaps Thranduil could have thrown his heir into the deep end by sending him to the court of the Golden Wood first but he loved his son.

Imladris would teach Legolas enough guile and diplomacy to see him – at the very least – survive the wargs of Caras Galadhon intact if with a few bruises from sharp-tongued words of Celeborn’s court though he expected his green leaf would slip as easily into the ranks of the Galadhrim archers as he seemed to be doing with Elrond’s scouts and the Dúnedain rangers that passed often through the
halls of Imladris from what his informants relayed.

“How fares the Lady of the Golden Wood?” Thranduil asked, as expected of him given the weakening Gandalf had explained Galadriel had been stricken with when driving Sauron from Dol Guldur.

“How is well.” Was all Celeborn would allow. “As was my young cousin when he passed through Caras Galadhon on his journey to Imladris.”

Thranduil knew well enough that Legolas was in good health, as a message from their kinsman Elrond had arrived over the mountains upon his son’s arrival at the Vale.

Still, like his query regarding the Lady, it was expected.

Saying nothing more, the two exchanged the briefest of nods then turned away: Celeborn to fetch his mount and return to the Golden Wood at all speed, no more comfortable in Thranduil’s realm lack of dark magic or no than he would be walking bare through Mordor, and Thranduil to investigate the remains of the ruins, curious, as ever, regarding the peredhel’s strange magic.

…

“Harry, why do I have an envoy from Lothlórien in my palace?!”

Harry snickered even as the exasperated message – relayed by a particularly fine thrush, Bard having started using the ancient bond between the thrushes and the line of Girion long before the Company of Thorin Oakenshield wound its way through Laketown – found him knee-deep in the first of the early spring plantings. He stretched out his magic as he walked through the already-planted orchards, encouraging growth and deep roots. In other places he scattered seed into the wind allowing it to fall and take where it would with only the slightest bit of direction or encouragement in place of plotted lines and specific boundaries.

He – and Bilbo – had been right in the end.

A century of laying fallow – even under the hold of Smaug’s terrible curse – led to land eager to blossom and bloom once more upon the introduction of seed, nut, and acorn Harry had gathered from both near and far to bring new life to Erebor’s slopes and fields.

If Harry had furthered the renewal along by a misting of the remainder of ent-draught over the mountainside he wasn’t telling.

That the saplings had more in common with trees two or three years old and bushes seemed well-established rather than simple seedlings was telling enough all on its own without his confirmation.

But at least Celeborn and Galadriel had – wisely – chosen to bother Bard for more information about him instead of Thorin as there was no way on Arda Harry could see that ending well.

…

“I blame you for this.” The – Harry would call the thrush poor but he knew full-well it was spoiled rotten between Tilda in Dale and Bilbo’s gentle heart in Erebor – even managed a disapproving look this time with Bard’s latest message.

What he was being blamed for this time he didn’t know.

But, as those in the know had accurately accused him of, since Bard might not’ve ended up as King
of Dale without Harry’s intervention – which sounded much better than meddling – most things anymore that irritated Bard ended up being Harry’s fault.

Least-wise as it pertained to being King of Dale.

The vagaries that came with parenting a pair of teenagers and one adolescent were not his problem.

…

Meddling was Gandalf’s job, Harry decided staring down in consternation at the message from Thranduil that both gently reminded him of his promise to winter in the Woodland Realm and reported on the Woodland Realm’s army’s successful scourging of the Wood save for some tunnels in the Black Mountains the elves weren’t about to enter.

What Harry did was intervene.

At least it sounded better – from his perspective – and had less Dumbledore-esque connotations.

…

The first wedding in Erebor was technically an elopement between Nori and Dwalin – which scandalized a few of the Iron Hills dwarves that had stayed to take up positions in the kingdom under the mountain given that Dwalin at least was entitled to a Lordship he had no intention of ever taking up and wedded with a dwarrow with a past.

Watching as Thorin swore his fidelity and love to Bilbo unto the ending of the world and beyond, blinking away a stray tear, he found himself happy as a weight he hadn’t been aware of – consciously – pressing on his shoulders lifted.

Bilbo wasn’t just happy as Lady Dís – who had arrived with the bulk of the Ereborian contingent from Ered Luin as only a hundred or so dwarrow remained in Thorin’s Halls as they preferred mining coal and tin or woodcraft and the simple lives that came with those trades than the rich splendor and traditions of Erebor – handed off the delicate diadem fashioned of mithril and copper set with emeralds and peridots in a motif of oakleaves twining through amethyst forget-me-nots to Thorin and the King Under the Mountain crowned his consort in devoted glory.

His hobbit friend was glowing with love, devotion, and joy as he stared up into Thorin’s piercing – but soft with love for his greatest treasure – blue eyes.

Perhaps nudging Bilbo out of his front door hadn’t been such a bad thing after all.

Staring across the cheering great hall with its silver floor at the form of Gandalf, both of them in positions of high honor and esteem as insisted upon by Thorin and Bilbo alike, the pair of wizards met gazes and shared a nod and rueful grins.

Whatever either of them had hoped for regarding the Quest for Erebor, neither of them could have predicted this as the bells of Erebor and of Dale rang out in celebration at the wedding of the King Under the Mountain and the festival of Midsummer began in riotous merry-making through the hills, valleys, and forest of the Rhovanion alike.

…

If Harry thought the celebrations for Thorin and Bilbo’s wedding were overwhelmingly joyful, they were nothing on comparison to those that ran through Erebor and Dale on Durin’s Day.
The harvest had come in and while not extravagant – it would be enough.

All who had survived the Battle of the Five Armies had survived the following winter and lean times.

The caravans with their people had come from all of the dwarven kingdoms and realms that had taken them in following the attack of Smaug, including the most skilled tradespeople who couldn’t make a living on the road – or those who simply wouldn’t risk it – as those such as Thorin’s blacksmithing and Kíli’s woodcraft had done.

Of it all the jewel of the celebrations was the dual wedding of the princes with Thorin presiding and even a grumpy – though not truly displeased though Harry knew full-well he wasn’t that happy either – Thranduil in attendance as Fíli placed a golden circlet set with citrines on Ori’s sandy-auburn braids and Kíli one even more delicate than Bilbo’s oakleaves and forget-me-nots of woven silver set with diamonds that shone like stars on Tauriel’s fiery red hair.

None had thought that Kíli would succeed in his pursuit of the elven guard and adopted daughter of the Elvenking, exile that temporarily took her outside of Thranduil’s direct supervision aside.

Even more none had given that Tauriel might truly return his regard serious thought with the inevitable pain, heartbreak, and possibility of fading that came with an elf loving a mortal – though it was usually between an elf and a man or woman, not a dwarf.

At least Tauriel would have more years with Kíli than if she loved a Man.

Small comfort to Thranduil given his undying distrust of dwarrow and the pain one of his children had allowed to take seed – even if it wouldn’t take root and bloom for centuries yet barring death in battle – in her heart.

Still, he’d allowed it in the end, perhaps even – though he’d never admit it – approved in a tiny portion of his kinglyness over his ward wedding one of the four dragonbanes even if it had to be Kíli Dragonbane and not Harry Quickspear, Bard the Dragonslayer, or even Bilbo Dragonriddler as the tales had taken to calling them after the tale of Smaug’s demise in full was told after the Battle of the Five Armies.

Seeing that he had Vanyarion’s eyes upon him, Thranduil mouthed a silent one week across the hall as applause broke out once more across the great hall of Erebor.

Harry barely held in his eye roll.

For an Elvenking that was vaunted for his patience, Thranduil could be an irritating prat regarding deadlines when he wanted to be.

…

If there was one thing that Harry found odd about his new species above everything else it was the lack of sleeping as he’d been accustomed to before arriving in the Woodland Realm the second winter after the Battle of the Five Armies as well as the second winter Harry spent in Arda full-stop.

Some changes had taken him quickly: absent one morning and there the next like his improved vision or the delicate points of his ears.

Others, like the not-sleeping-thing, at least as Harry understood sleep, took time to develop.

Elves not only needed less of what they considered sleep but it was more a restful meditative state –
complete with their eyes open which was just weird – than the deep quiet dark that took mortals.

Over the year-plus he’d spent in Arda, especially after his visit to Rivendell where he’d had elven fare for the first time from fruits and vegetables grown within the shelter of the Vale of Imladris’s magic to the elven wines he’d enjoyed in Elrond’s study, he had slowly adjusted to needing less and less sleep unless he strained himself through either magic or combat. By the time he’d been plied with Mirúvor after the Battle of the Five Armies he was sleeping – at best – three hours a night. He was down to two hours every other night by the time he took his leave of Erebor and Dale to winter in the Woodland Realm – which was actually a relief given that the royals weren’t the only ones marrying and being sickeningly cute and loving with it.

At least in Thranduil’s halls he knew that any billing and cooing was much more likely to be from songbirds and not his best friend towards the lummox of a stubborn dwarven king Bilbo’s fallen arse over tea kettle for.

He was delighted for his friends, don’t mistake him.

Love was a precious thing that he’d never disparage even if he’d never found it for himself, Siri’s promises regarding his new home having not yet come to fruition.

But thanks to elven fucking hearing combined with little need to sleep he could do with a lot less marital bliss surrounding him.

Tauriel had filled him in on allowing himself to fall into rest, a state not dissimilar to sorting memories with Occlumency and explained a lot about what he’d heard of elven memories.

The only time a state similar to actual sleep took elven kind was during times of great injury or stress upon their bodies, otherwise about an hour a day – or a cumulative seven or eight hours at once if they have to go without rest at all for a period of time – sufficed of their meditative rest.

All that said before journeying to spend winter through the end of the stirring with the Silvan and handful of Sindar elves of the Woodland Realm, he’d found himself with a lot more time on his hands than what he’d been used to as a mortal wizard, even one with as stressful an occupation as being the Head Auror helping raise his godson. Erebor and Dale alike weren’t made or set-up to cater to an occupant who – unless seriously tired, injured, and/or drained – was awake twenty-plus hours a day. There wasn’t anything for him to do in the dark hours of the night when the cities slept around him save read in his suite or work on his Cirth and Tengwar penmanship.

Honestly, if it weren’t for Bofur and Bifur teaching him to whittle and wood carve during the journey from the Shire to Erebor he would’ve started climbing the walls at some point.

Harry had always been active whether by force or later habit that grew into preference.

He would never be a bookworm content to sit and read night after night after night like Hermione or now Bilbo even though the information he gained through his studies – then and now – were important.

His was a personality suited to doing.

By the time the Company was camping on the river docks of Erebor he’d progressed under the ‘Ur cousins’ skilled tutelage to not needing to toss his efforts into the campfire at the end of the night, though he admittedly needed significantly more practice shaping his little works than he did engraving designs into them since magical rune-work had given him a solid basis for the latter.

If he used his new skill to carve a set of beads and pendants engraved with proximity wards for his
friends which would alert him if they were in mortal danger that was his own affair.

“You realize.” He pointed out to Thranduil after they’d done the protocol-dance for the Woodland court in the throne room and the Elvenking had taken him off to his study and then show him where he’d be staying the winter and stirring seasons – which were apparently in the same hall as the rooms for Thranduil and the absent Legolas and Tauriel. Yet another royal that insisted on having him close – for one reason or another. “That I know approximately nothing about being an elf, right?”

His tone was just short of darkly sardonic. “Elrond focused more on history of Arda as a whole and the conflict with Sauron than anything else except polishing my Sindarin and bettering my Quenya with some basic etiquette mixed in. I would literally know more about being a dwarf at this point – and would probably make a decent hobbit if I could stomach their obsession with propriety – than I do being an elf.”

“Good.”

And yes, Harry thought, that was definitely a smug smirk on Thranduil’s face.

“Less Ñoldor airs and vagaries to train or coax out of you.” The Elvenking sighed, shaking his head as they were in the privacy of his study and not where he could be observed other than by his guest. With having seen him knee-deep in blood and gore – and knowing that the Vanyarion was likely never to be an actual member of either Thranduil’s court or kingdom – he wasn’t as worried for his impeccable reserved mask around the young peredhel. “Elrond may be my kinsman and of the Sindar,” he explained at Vanyarion’s frown. “Due to his mother Elwing’s lineage but through his father’s he has a strong relation to the Ñoldor and a weak link to the Vanyar. As he was raised by Maglor following his kidnapping and served Gil-Galad, my kinsman is very much the Ñoldor elf-lord despite what he might claim otherwise or the unaware factions of Arda believe.”

“Vanyar?” Harry considered that a moment doing a quick mental count. If he had his math right that made him the seventh person with Vanyar blood living in Arda after Galadriel, Elrond and his children, and Legolas Thranduilion.

Fate – or the Valar he supposed, now – did so love irony.

“As I said, a weak connection: five generations removed to Indis, sister of Ingwë, the High King of the all the Firstborn though his dominion hasn’t been felt in these shores since the War of Wrath.”

Harry smirked. “Isn’t that the same Indis whose blood gave her granddaughter Galadriel her famous golden hair?”

“The same.” Thranduil returned the knowing expression smirk-for-smirk. “The rest of the Vanyar have little love for the Ñoldor’s vengeful ways and desire for conquest. Which is not to be confused with a lack of skill at arms. Their white banners struck fear in the hearts of the enemy’s battalions when the Host of Valinor sailed to Arda. Like the longbows of the Galadhrim, the knives and recurve bows of the Woodland Realm, and the swords of the Ñoldor; the spears of the Vanyar are unparalleled.”

“What’s first then?” Harry asked, intrigued by that bit. In light of recent developments it seemed rather apropos.

Rising, Thranduil strode from the room in his regal strut that reminded Harry of nothing so much as a massive jungle cat, leading the way through his halls and up to a warm circular courtyard filled with the bright – if cold – winter sunshine and the sound of elven voices raised in song intermingled with harps and pipes and a drum or two.
“Our histories may be bound in paper and leather for anyone with passing skill at Sindarin to learn.” Thranduil spoke softly as the young _peredhel_ blinked wide green eyes at the sight of the dozens of elves arrayed around the winter garden with its delicate flowers and bright green grasses concealed from aboveground only through the crystal roof and clever elven craftsmanship. “There for all to read but to truly know them is to hear and learn and sing them back in turn – particularly for one of the Vanyar however you came to be so young and yet so far from your people in Valinor.” He waved a hand towards an open cushion near the singers who were working at such hobbies suited for clever hands as their voices lifted in song in time with those strumming at harp or lute, with the pipers and flutists and drummers harmonizing along or keeping the beat. It wasn’t Imladris’s Hall of Fire but the gardens of his people were a place of music, song, and memory nonetheless. “This is where you begin to learn what you truly are, Berthon. Not as a weapon of war and magic but as one of the Firstborn – and all that entails.”

Thranduil would never admit it but when one of the younger elves pressed a set of panpipes into the _peredhel_’s grasp and encouraged him to try his hand at following along with the tune but had an expression upon his face like the _elleth_ had given him a spiderling he’d not had to work so hard to hold in a laugh in years.

It had been far too long since an elfling – no matter how much the matured form who’d spent his life hidden among Men would protest the description – had been at home in the halls of the Woodland Realm.

…

Not sleeping upside: plenty of time for things.

_Downside: plenty of time for things._

_Nighttime in the Woodland Realm was much like daytime only with more stargazing._

_Silvan elves were _serious_ about their stargazing as Harry came to discover._

For the three months – give or take – he spent that first round of winter and stirring seasons in the Woodland Realm Harry had as much elven-culture-for-idiot-half-elves, not that any of his teachers formal or informal were rude enough to say something like that but that didn’t keep Harry from _thinking_ it when his hands were clumsy on a loom or tongue tangled over a Quenya phrase, crammed into his days as they could manage and he could stomach before disappearing into the caverns of Thranduil’s halls.

Well, disappearing was a bit of a stretch.

More along the lines of beelining straight to the practice rings for Feren to pummel him with the vicious – but _fucking wicked_ – double-bladed spears that the Woodland Realm’s army were infamous for since not even the most persuasive of the scouts, guards, and warriors could convince him to try his hand at the recurve bow said army was famous for – an important distinction as Harry knew.

Harry’s crossbow suited him well enough, with Thorin more than willing to make any repairs it needed and Kíli keeping him in quarrels when his own were lost or broken.

_Dwarven skill at crafting being what it was_, Harry broke a _lot_ less quarrels once Kíli took over their manufacture.

His attempts at learning the panpipes gifted him his first day by Sína, one of the youngest female elves around thanks to Tauriel’s exile, were laughable at first and almost had him tearing up from
heartache for missing Hagrid, his very first human-shaped friend.

Sína, however, was as tenacious as any other youth Harry had ever met and cajoled him to practice between helping him learn the songs that were just as important in elven culture as Thranduil had implied.

He couldn’t lie – the song of Nimrodel brought a tear to his eye – in that, Thranduil’s words had been proven correct.

It was one thing to read of the elven histories, another to hear them, and yet another to sing them.

Though whatever might be said of his rudimentary piping, none complained about his singing voice which had taken on a bit of the power of his phoenix form, moving those who heard it to tears or laughter or joy (or other, darker emotions) depending on his own mood and will.

A discovery that had harp and lute alike pressed into his hands to his exasperation.

Harry couldn’t deny however that for every hour spent learning the music of the elves he also was taught about their culture just by sitting in the winter garden and watching the others around him.

Little by way of formal elven education was undertaken that first winter for all that books and scrolls would appear in his quarters while he was being schooled in music, poetry, and song or hiding from said schooling in the practice rings.

He returned to Erebor and Dale in the spring for planting season as despite the influx of people there was still a lack of skilled farmers and gardeners if plenty of helping hands.

Harry rode into the Greenwood with the Host of the Woodland Realm to drive out the remnant of darkness and evil lingering in the tunnels beneath the Black Mountains in the Summer when the power and energy of the elves was at its height, his sword and crossbow getting as much of a workout as his magic for all that it was useful in disarming traps and preventing the spiders, orcs, and goblins hiding within from escaping the wrath of the Woodland Realm.

Though of everything he learned that year the most surprising was a few “facts of life” that he’d somehow either overlooked or just not registered, as taught to him by a not-amused – and very pregnant – Bilbo Baggins when he returned from the hunting trip.

It went something like this:

“So male dwarrow can…?”

“Yes.”

“And male hobbits.”

“Yes.”

“And male elves?”

“Yes.”

“But not male Men.”

That orcs didn’t – or couldn’t – bear young at all went without saying as they were bred through rape of other species and not any wholesome form of reproduction, their bodies unable to sustain a new life.
“No.” Bilbo gave Harry such a look, even as he tucked into the wild strawberries the half-elven ranger had brought back from the Woodland Realm along with fresh jars of honey Beorn had presented to their shared friend when the shape-changer had come to see the destruction of orcs in the Black Mountains – likely told by his animal friends of what was afoot in the Greenwood. Thranduil had been as stirred from his long repose in the Woodland Realm to action against the sickening of his lands as thoroughly as any could have hoped for and as vigorously as his name implied. “Really, Harry. Why did you think no one was worried about both Thorin and Fíli marrying males?”

As not even the most progressive of dwarrow would approve of a half-elven heir to the Line of Durin, it was a rather pertinent question.

Harry just gave a rueful half-grin to a scoff from his best-friend. “How?” He asked plaintively instead. Male pregnancy was something his people had been capable of but, you know, magic.

Which, really, when he thought about it explained the current situation quite well.

He supposed his shock and confusion was a latent holdover from his original world, as none of the creatures there save for a few – not even a handful really – had males able to both conceive and bear young.

“It’s a bit logical when you think about it.” Bilbo mused. “Elves live such long lives that they aren’t the most fertile race. Imagine if only half of their people could carry young. Then for whatever reason Mahal skewed dwarrow gender ratios to only one female out of three births: same problem. As for hobbits, well…”

“You’re the most fertile of all the species.” Harry nodded, eyes narrowing. “I think all three of those races are harder and longer-lived than Men too from what my studies have implied or said outright. Without a lot of health issues I can’t see many male Men surviving birth with maternal mortality rates being what they are for their women.”

“It was the way we were designed by our makers.” Bilbo nibbled at another strawberry, contemplating the jar of honey sitting on the tea tray. “You might as well have asked me why I have large feet for goodness’ sake!”

“In my defense.” Harry laughed then handed over the honey jar fresh from Beorn’s Hall. “When I left to help deal with the Black Mountain tunnels you weren’t, you know,” he waved a hand at his friend’s gravid form. “Like that.”

“You will stay for the birth, won’t you?” Bilbo pressed him, feeling no shame in widening his eyes as big as they could get and letting his tone weaken just a smidge.

Shaking his head at the blatant manipulation Harry agreed.

Playing midwife would be a new one but he couldn’t say it was a disagreeable thing for him to be on hand…just in case.
Chapter Twenty-Six: Glorified Babysitting

Over the five years following the Battle of the Five Armies, Harry spent months at a time in the Woodland Realm, his lessons slowly shifting from innumerable hours learning histories and lore via poem and song to time in the healing halls or out learning tracking and woodcraft with the scouts including, to Harry never-ending entertainment, how to listen and talk to the flora and fauna of the forest – including the great trees of the Greenwood themselves once they were roused.

That together Radagast and Thranduil slowly started to wake the ancient trees that Oropher and the eldest of the Silvan host had cast a spell of sleeping over to prevent the great trees from being tortured by Sauron’s influence was awe-inspiring when the first of the great Huorns woke and shook from its roots to the tips of its leaves.

Even if orcs and wargs and goblins tried to return – let alone spider-spawn of Ungolient – they would find the Greenwood a much more inhospitable place to their ilk than it was when Sauron held partial sway.

Harry was pretty sure at least one of the great trees they’d woken were either an Ent or even a rare Entwife but it was hard to tell when the sleep that lasted more than an Age had left them torpid and even slower to movement and action than Treebeard or the Ents of Fangorn.

He still enjoyed his time in the winter gardens practicing with his panpipes or harp or lute, but the change was appreciated nonetheless when just getting his fingers to pluck a string or his lips to shape air in just the right way took less focus.

His dwarrow friends took his learning instruments from the elves as a personal affront with the elves likewise less-than-impressed with the dwarven influence on his woodcarving.

Harry’s skills became – for a time until he put a stop to it – the newest front of competition between the neighboring races.

In that span of five years he also watched other changes come to pass, some which affected him directly.

Others not so much.

He stood at the birthing bed of every member of the Company – and a few others besides – who bore a child or whose spouse birthed during that time, even if it meant delaying his return to Thranduil’s halls for a few days or weeks.

Two years after the Battle he stood as witness to a different event, one which Thranduil had predicted though Harry didn’t know it: an influx of Rohirric cavalry with their families in tow seeking asylum in Dale. It took a few months for the newest residents to settle in but once they did the companies of Silvan guards were able to return to the woods permanently to mingled celebration and grief. Bard was ecstatic to have the city of Men able to be as independent as possible from the older kingdom.

However, more than one mortal had fallen in love – and vice versa – with an elvish guard.
It was a time of many delicate negotiations but in the end Thranduil conceded to an elven contingent to settle in the city, mainly craftspeople who enjoyed the increased trade the location brought, but also the guards who’d found love among their mortal allies.

As more and more of the Elvenking’s people moved again to the outlying villages that once populated the Greenwood and started having elflings once more, it was hardly a hardship with the population boom the Woodland Realm was experiencing, much as Erebor and Dale were neck deep in themselves even aside from the influx of immigrants or exiles returning with the reclaiming of the Mountain.

Life, as Harry had learned after surviving one war after another, had a way of flourishing with a nearly spiteful glee in the absence of an evil defeated.

Middle-Earth, he found, was no different in this regard from his original home.

A year after that saw Harry at another royal wedding: this time between Bard’s daughter Sigrid – an event his friend was in no way ready for – and the leader of the Rohan exiles, one Lord Leofric of the Wold, a veteran of the Rohirrim for all that he was only a twenty-something at the oldest.

While Harry was busy learning to “elf” or training at arms or what have you, Bard’s children were growing up.

An event which in the year 2946 of the Third Age when Harry returned, as had become habit, from the Woodland Realm for the spring planting – needed or not by this point though the Rohirrim was always glad to put Shadowfax to stud if he was amenable – had Bard cornering his longtime friend before Harry could disappear into the Mountain not to be seen for weeks until Bilbo and the wee ones of the Company let him loose.

…

“You want me to what?”

Harry stared down at Bard, arms crossed over his chest, his face and tone a complete deadpan.

The King of Dale – something he still didn’t quite get over even five years later with a heavy-arsed crown for “formal occasions” and a golden circlet engraved with the crossed black arrows of the Kingdom of Dale to go with the title – had weathered the handful of years after the Battle of the Five Armies well, only taking on a few more silver hairs in his short beard and shoulder-length brown hair, though his crows-feet were as deep as ever.

If you asked Bard he’d tell you – blunt as ever – that the signs of aging were as much the fault of his neighboring kings and their rivalry, no matter how ostensibly friendly these days, as it was his children growing up.

Had Harry – or anyone – told him five years ago that slaying Smaug would have him playing peacemaker between Thorin Oakenshield and Thranduil Oropherion for the rest of his days he would have run screaming into the dragon’s maw hoping for a fiery death.

At least there would’ve been a lot less whining from envoys from other lands of Men to deal with.

In one matter the pair of royal twats seemed to agree: other than Bard and his people they had little liking for the race of Men, preferring that diplomats from the other lands filter through Dale rather than dealing with them directly.

The fuckheads.
At least with Sigrid wed there were less offers for an arranged marriage presented to Bard, since even the densest of diplomats knew better than to suggest such a thing regarding sweet Tilda who was still too young to wed.

Bain on the other hand...that was a separate problem altogether and one he was hoping Harry would help him with given the Arda-sized soft spot his friend had for children, even Bain who’d been sixteen when they’d all met Harry in the first place and the pair having had little to do with each other in the interim.

“I’m thirty-five, Harry.” Bard leaned back against his desk, propping one hip up on the wooden surface. “And until recent years I’ve lived a hard-scrabble life. My health will never be what it should’ve been, if I’m lucky I’ve only spent half my years if I’m not…” He trailed off, sighing and shaking his head. “I want to leave Bain a better inheritance than I was given, a strong kingdom he won’t have to work every minute of the day to keep and learn to maintain.”

“You’ve been a good king to Dale, Bard.” Harry dropped his defensive position, moving close and leaning into his friend. “The one they needed when they needed you.”

“Aye, I’ve done my best by them.” Bard said, agreeing with that much at least. “But I was a bargeman and the son of a bargeman who rose to a crown through slaying a dragon and making the right friends. I’m excused things that Bain won’t be as the son of a King.” Much as it chafed, he knew it was true. “He needs polishing he can’t get here where kiss-asses fear to offend lest it effect their chances with our powerful allies but…”

“He’ll be vulnerable elsewhere.” Harry sighed, rolling his eyes. He’d known he’d end up agreeing but nevertheless he’d wanted to hear Bard’s justification first. “And thus in need of a guard.”

Or as Harry saw it a glorified babysitter.

“There’s none I would trust more with my son and the Heir of Dale than you, Harry.” Bard rested his head in the curve of the taller Ranger’s shoulder. “Please. Look after my son when I can’t.”

“I’ll do what I can.” Harry lifted his left arm and wrapped it around Bard’s shoulders – still so strong and unbowed despite all the griefs and trials of ruling a kingdom in its infancy. “I make no promises especially when it comes to well-earned thumpings in tavern brawls if he’s anything like his father was when I first met him.”

Bard chuckled, wrapping his own arms around hips just as lean as they’d been when the pair had met on the shores of the Long Lake years ago, Harry’s face and form unchanged – despite being clearly half-elven – in the obdurate way of the elves.

“Just bring him back to us, old friend. That’s all I ask.”

…

“Uncle Harry!”

A few nights later at the sending-off feast Bard threw for Harry and Bain, Harry found himself quickly swept up into a hurricane of little ones tackling his legs. From Bilbo and Thorin’s four-year-old daughter Fríða – the mithril of her father’s eye from the top of her tightly curled blonde locks to the bottom of dwarven-sized toes though she distinctly lacked the wisps of beard hairs that would have her a complete little dwarrowdam – and their two-year-old son Hadri, named for Harry and as much an almost-hobbit with loose black curls and Durin-blue eyes as his sister was an almost-dwarf, to the other children of the Company born in the last handful of years. None of them were happy at
the news that their tall uncle was to be gone for years instead of the month or three they were accustomed to.

That all but Frída were unlikely to remember him when he did return gave him little joy in their parting.

Fíli and Ori had been blessed – and indeed, a firstborn girl was a great blessing upon a dwarrow – with Eydis the year after Frída was gifted to Bilbo and Thorin, with Kíli and Tauriel’s own greatest of blessings – and the only one they were to receive given the near-death bringing it into the world had brought Tauriel – Unna following the year thereafter as elven pregnancies lasted a full-year.

The blessings bestowed by the Valar on the line of Durin – a portent of greatness to be sure – was completed in six-month-old Thýri to Dwalin and Nori, another girl-child.

If there were any naysayers left regarding the reign of Thorin over the Line of Durin’s Folk and from thence over all the dwarrow-kind they kept their whispers behind their teeth as never had such a spate of first-daughters ever been seen in any royal dwarrow family since that of Durin the Deathless.

Little hands made quick work of finding wooden toys tucked away in pockets normally reserved for knives or the honey candies he was known to give to any wee one that presented themselves to him.

Bilbo could shake his head all he liked over Harry being a soft-touch for the little ones.

He knew – all too well – how dear they were and how quickly life could change from carved likenesses of Shadowfax and the taste of honeyed violet taffies to ash and ruin.

Harry would have them stay sweet and piping and yes, even a bit spoiled, as long as the world allowed.

Reality would steal it from them if it could.

It was the duty of their elders to keep it from impinging on their sweet years of toys and play and taffy while they could.

“Will you sing a song, Uncle Harry?”

Staring down at the big, pleading Durin-blue eyes behind the question, Harry smirked a little to himself. At least he didn’t have to worry about the fate of the Line of Durin. With Frída there to keep her cousin Fíli and later Eydis in line it was well-secured if her tactics for acquiring sweets and songs were any sign. That was all Bilbo’s cunning mixed with Kíli’s guile.

“A song is what you’re after little ones?” Harry swooped Hadri up onto his shoulders, the toddler screeching in delight even as hair-covered toes curled and little hands dug into his hair, finding the braids therein for hand-holds with the ease of a child raised by and among dwarves.

“Yes!”

“Please, please!”

“Well, I suppose.” Harry heaved a great sigh as if it was the greatest imposition ever pressed upon him, then flashed a look at the musicians before bounding up onto the little dais set aside for them, his pack of little ones chasing after him and paying no mind for the stumbles of the dancers.

Taking the lute offered by one of the men with a rueful smile, he tapped out a beat after the current song died then picked through a tangle of complicated notes, the little ones already beginning to clap
along and twirl as they recognized the simple tune he’d written – with quite a bit of help from Bilbo, his friend having a better turn of phrase than Harry ever would – that was one of the simpler referencing the events of the Quest.

“When the cold wind is a’calling
And the sky is clear and bright
Misty mountains sing and beckon
Lead me out into the light

I will ride, I will fly
Chase the wind and touch the sky I will fly
Chase the wind and touch the sky!”

Voices of the children and the more playful – or musical – of the adults chimed in for the vocalizations along to the tune as the whirl of dancers turned into a quick stomping circle dance around the dizzying whirls of the little ones kept safe in the center.

(Na na na na
Na na na na
La na na na
Na na na)

(La na na na
La na na na
La na na na
Na na na)

A lilting call of a panpipe then Harry was taking the second part of the tune back up.

“Where dark roots hide secrets
And mountains are fierce and bold
Deep waters hold reflections
Of times lost long ago

I will read every story
Take hold of my own dream
Be as strong as the seas are stormy
And proud as an eagle’s scream

I will ride, I will fly
Chase the wind and touch the sky I will fly
Chase the wind and touch the sky!”

Now even Thorin – a rare sight that as the dwarven king rarely danced – was twirling his beloved Bilbo around the floor to a laughing giggle of their son still perched on Harry’s shoulder, complete in his trust of his honorary uncle and namesake as the wizard danced his fingers over the lute and singing along with the na-nas of the children’s tune, the pure joy of the moment engraving itself into Harry’s memory for him to hold dear.

As well as serving as enticement to come back.

To come home as reluctant as Harry had always been to call either Dale or Erebor such.
(Na na na na
Na na na na
La na na na
Na na na)

“And touch the sky
Chase the wind
Chase the wind
Touch the sky…”

They rode out with all due pomp and ceremony from Dale, planning to travel through the Greenwood before turning south and thence through Rohan to Gondor.

Thranduil hosted his ally’s heir – and of course, Berthon – with genial banquets and practiced courtesies even if it was something of a surprise to the elves who had come to know Berthon as one of them to see him behave as “Harry” the head guard of a Prince of Men.

Three guards accompanied the pair of half-elven warrior and Bain, Prince of Dale, all veterans from the Battle of the Five Armies but young ones without wife or children to tether them to Dale or make them resentful in time from being separated from their loved ones for what was sure to be at least a year if not more. Bard had chosen them personally. For his part, Harry had yet to take a good measure of them as he had little to do with Dale’s guard when he visited his friend the King or the Prince and Princesses though from what he had seen he approved of thus far.

Part of his agreement with Bard was that Harry would be able to travel incognito knowing that his own name and all that was associated with it: peredhel, the Cursebreaker, Quickspear, Berthon, Belegur, Vanyarion, et al.; would be a distraction for any dignitary Bain was to meet with as well as draw attention they didn’t need whilst traveling in a small party.

Unfortunately, his face and form were as attached to his seemingly-endless train of names and as Bard had pointed out once years ago there were few enough half-elven running around without adding in his preferred guise of a Ranger that he couldn’t even rely on his normal glamor that covered his elven characteristics.

Worse: thanks to his own notoriety, it wasn’t just him that needed a glamor but Shadowfax as well because if Harry thought he was leaving the Three Kingdoms without his familiar the great Mearas would have no problem chasing him down just to kick his arse all the way to Mithlond.

To top matters, both glamor sets had to wait until they were away from the Woodland Realm with its gossipy – as Harry very well knew after spending season after season with them year after year when he wasn’t needed in Erebor or Dale, or just taking a break from aforementioned gossipy creatures – residents which included the wildlife as much as the elves, lest his efforts be for nothing.

At least thanks to his years of peace other than chasing down the occasional orc or warg during a patrol once they’d cleared the Greenwood he’d had plenty of time on his hands to train with anchoring runes as part of his woodcarving and metal engraving.

He’d never attain the sheer mastery of forge and fire that Thorin possessed, or that of any dwarf for
that matter with their innate understanding of such things, their strong hands that just knew where the weaknesses in a piece of metal were or how to shape a gem just so to bring out the best of its natural beauty and shine, but he wasn’t a complete cack-handed oaf after years of practice anymore either.

Well, at least the little ones of Erebor and Dale – and the not-so-little ones as Sigrid and Bain seemed intent on forcing both him and their father to face – seemed to appreciate his gifts and trinkets.

Anchoring runes were both a simple and a complex magical matter all at once, a refined method of powering a spell of any kind without resorting to sheer force like that of the blood-laid warding circles he’d used to drag the Company through Mirkwood back during the Quest for Erebor when the Greenwood still deserved the Man-given epithet.

Using runes instead of blunt-force had been a necessity for him to learn back as an Auror since not all spells could be torn apart the way he’d shredded Smaug’s dragon-sickness the dragon had cast over Erebor’s treasury. Some had to be undone in other ways. Others must be warded off through more than a stationary ward-cast.

Bilbo’s one-time bracelet Harry had made in Beorn’s Hall was one such example though his lack of experience with them had shown in that the bracelet had been linked to Harry’s power instead of empowered alone as he hadn’t the time to fiddle with trying to stack the runes just right to fix the problem and taken the drain to keep his friend safe.

It was a lack in himself he’d been keen to remedy during the peacetime studies he’d undertaken.

He couldn’t spend every blasted moment learning how to “elf” or practicing instruments or carving toys and trinkets. His magic had needed his attention too, perhaps more than anything else. Especially after what he’d put it through to restore Erebor and Dale. If nothing else so that when the wards over Dale inevitably fell – he hadn’t put them up intentionally after all so he had no fucking idea how to power them, tricksey Valar working through him – he could give them another set for protection even if it wouldn’t be as complete as the old were.

His various practices and crafts had come together in a pair of amber tokens each the size of a silver coin. The backs were carved with the runes needed to anchor a glamor then set in a simple length of braided dragonhide that would fasten and hold-tight around Harry’s ankle once he’d put on his glamor. Shadowfax’s – a simple glamor that would change his coloring, nothing more – would be woven into his mane and hidden with an extra rune on the amber.

Harry got more than one laugh out of the jumps of startlement from his companions when they were away from the Woodland Realm and the watch of elven eyes when he wound the simple amulet into Shadowfax’s mane and he changed from his normal night-time coloring of shadowed greys and blacks into a simple, if pretty, buckskin coloring.

“If that has you jumping for weapons,” Harry snorted, conjuring a mirror and moving to stand in front of it once he’d passed off a bit of honeycomb to his familiar. Shadowfax wasn’t pleased by the glamor to say the least. Even so, he understood the need. But bribery had never hurt anything to keep the mighty lord of horses in good favor with his person. “I’m glad I’m doing this in front of you rather than showing up with my own glamor in place.”

“What do you mean, Harry?” Bain asked, a frown straight off of his father’s brow crossing his face. He wasn’t a young one anymore but still he remembered how Harry Quickspear used to look before he’d stopped pretending to not be one of the half-elven anymore. “Isn’t it just…oh.” He broke off as he watched his father’s…something…do more than cover his pointed ears and dim his bright elven glow with a spell.
Ebony hair with its strange streaks of silver, blue, purple, and even gold that echoed the iridescence of a raven’s wing that fell to Harry’s hips changed first going to a copy of Princess Tauriel’s fiery strands even if Harry’s own contained different dwarven-style braids than that of the consort to Prince Kíli. His skin dimmed, yes, but it kept a Man’s version of the golden tone Harry had become infamous for in the three kingdoms, so at odds was it with the normal pale tones of the north. In the looking glass that Harry had conjured in midair Bain arched a brow in surprise when jewel-bright emerald eyes changed to the blue of the Long Lake in spring.

His body stayed the same mixture of elven-litheness married to a Man’s broader shoulders and chest, though Harry was still taller than any Man Bain had ever met if shorter than any of the male elves he’d seen since the reclamation of Erebor and Dale.

His face, however shocking the change in coloring Harry managed with his magic, was the biggest alteration.

Little did Bain or the others watching in stunned fascination know, but Harry had patterned his new glamor on an old friend: down to the trio of scars swiping up from his jaw and over his cheek to barely miss his right eye.

From the color of his hair – if not the length – to his eye color to the scars, he’d become a ringer for Bill Weasley if not for his skin tone.

Harry didn’t think he could pull off freckles.

Nodding at the face in the mirror – not one of a stranger but one he’d need to get used to nonetheless – he tied up his long hair into a tail, a look that his elven and dwarrow friends only used when at messy or dangerous work such as the forge, but left in his dwarven braids.

“Don’t call me Quickspear or Cursebreaker or what-have-you, yeah?” Harry instructed. “Harry, son of James, should do just fine.”

Bain agreed, blinking. He didn’t think he’d ever heard Harry speak of his family before. And he knew he’d never heard the name of his father, a very Mannish name. Huh. Must’ve been his mum that was the elf then, who knew?

A snap of his fingers had a switching-spell swapping out his well-known Ranger’s gear for clothes and armor appropriate for a warrior of Men from the Three Kingdoms and the anchoring anklet set in place.

Black leathers from his boots to his tunic covered his underthings of soft – but tough – cloth from Dale just a notch less fine than Bain’s own. His blackened hauberk, greaves, and vambraces had all been forged in Erebor’s armory, the greaves and vambraces etched by Thorin’s own hand with the sigil of the unified Three Kingdoms, a sigil that any of the veterans of the Battle of the Five Armies were given authority to wear by royal writ from the three kings. Fashioned in a bisected triangle – that Harry had suspicions was inspired by the Hallows sigil on Eithadolen but he had no proof of – the two sides were made of a black arrow for Dale on the left with the double-bladed spear of the Woodland Realm on the right. The bottom and bisecting line were filled in by a dwarven warhammer, the bottom of the hammer’s handle/haft joining with the points of the black arrow and spear at the top of the triangle.

It wasn’t a sigil he tended to wear, mainly because other than his original gear that he arrived in Arda with he only wore the clothes gifted him by his friends that he left in his rooms in either Thranduil’s Halls, Erebor, or Bard’s palace in Dale.
Still, it was one that was expected he wear as a warrior of the three kingdoms, especially one entrusted with “guarding” – or as Harry put it glorified babysitting – Bain as he got his diplomatic feet wet.

If it was only that Harry wouldn’t be as irritated with himself for agreeing to Bard’s request.

But that he had to leave his more infamous weapons behind to avoid being outed – which was more his issue than one of Bard’s or Bain’s – was frustrating. Eithadolen hadn’t been away from his side since Harry had stepped through the portal in Fangorn Forest years ago. Not that the simple sword he’d had forged for practicing swordplay against people he didn’t want to accidentally kill was a bad sword, not in the least. Dwarven smiths were often the best to be found after all. Still…it wasn’t the Sword of Gryffindor either.

His dragonbone spear had had to be left behind in his locked-and-warded chamber in Erebor as well as his quarrels fashioned by Kíli if they had either dragonbone or fang tipping them, both replaced with quality dwarven workmanship but not nearly as wonderfully made as what they were substituting for.

Any of his distinguishing weaponry, armor, clothes, looks had to be shed anymore for Harry to pass unnoticed beyond the guard of the Prince of Dale.

He’d known what he was agreeing to.

But by Yavanna’s green fields it was irritating nonetheless to feel stripped-down to base components without the comfort of his longtime armor and weapons.

Thank the Hunt Lord for Shadowfax.

If his friend hadn’t agreed to coming with – glamor and all – Harry might’ve run spare with leaving not only things that had come to be relied upon but also friends and people as well.

Since he’d passed into Mirkwood for the Quest, Harry hadn’t stepped one toe outside the Three Kingdoms in years.

He’d become comfortable there.

Now here was a twenty-one-year-old prince who needed watching as he traipsed across the kingdoms of Men come to shake him out of his comfortable routine.

Harry smiled down at the dagger Tauriel had given him, one of Woodland make, that he was sharpening.

Perhaps this wasn’t such a chore.

After all, it wouldn’t do for the Champion of the Valar to become complacent with darkness still gathering – however slowly – in Mordor and Angmar.

…”Do you have to go?”

Legolas looked up from packing his saddle bags, finding mournful grey eyes with just a hint of bright blue watching him from the doorway of the suite of rooms he’d called his own for the last five years in Imladris.
His kinsman Elrond had been most accommodating even though Legolas’s active personality often chafed at the slow pace of life in the Last Homely House compared to that of the Woodland Realm.

In that he’d found good company in Elrond’s twin sons, the pair including him in their hunting trips and raids on any orc pack or encampment that crossed too close to the lands under the protection of themselves and their father.

With them came Elrond’s foster-son Estel, the same who was watching him with sad eyes from the doorway.

Perhaps due to the slow pace of life in Imladris, but Elladan and Elrohir didn’t seem to mind that someday – hopefully far in the future – Elladan would be expected to become the Lord of Rivendell whereas the future that awaited Legolas and Estel was not as easy for either of them to accept.

Not long before Legolas’s arrival from what he could discern Lord Elrond confided in the then-ten-year-old boy regarding his future as the Chieftain of the Dúnedain and his station as the current penultimate Heir of Elendil – and all both of those things entailed.

For a boy who’d previously wanted nothing else but to be a simple Ranger, it had been hard truths Elrond had laid upon his slim shoulders.

Legolas could understand that more than any elf in Imladris.

As the son of the last Elvenking of Arda, he understood all too well and that was before adding the additional expectations that his mother being one of the Vanyar dropped upon his golden head.

Legolas wouldn’t quite say that he and Estel were fast friends, the maturity difference between them still too great, but he had done what he could to be a confidant and help to the young man with a destiny greater than any other Legolas had met in his life…except, perhaps, the peredhel of Oakenshield’s Company.

“I do, mellon.” Legolas told him simply, pausing in his packing and walking over to the stripling of a young one, all of fifteen years old and knee-deep in the changes between boy and Man. “My father made the arrangements years ago: I am expected in the court of my cousin Celeborn in the Golden Wood before another season passes.”

“I’ll miss you.” Estel chewed at his lower lip, frowning fiercely. “No one else understands like you.”

“It is a heavy thing to be a Crown Prince.” Legolas agreed, cocking a half-smile at his young protégé. “That is a truth that will never change whether your future kingdom is a city such as Dol Amroth or as vast as the joined kingdoms of Arnor and Gondor. I would not worry about it overmuch while you are still young. If there is anything I have learned in my many years it is that the future will always come no matter how you might wish to hold it off.”

“Will you come back?”

“Perhaps.” Legolas punched the young man on the shoulder. “Perhaps not. But once I have returned to the Greenwood you will be of age and nothing holding you back from journeying to visit my future kingdom as I might visit your own one day.”

…

Author’s Note: Yes, I went Disney for Harry’s song :D “Touch the Sky” is from Brave, I’ve only borrowed it.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

This is the last of my pre-written chapters, I'm currently working on Ch. 28.

Broken Blade

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Friendly Favors

Year 2949 of the Third Age: Dale

“You know, Harry.” Bard stared deadpan at his old friend when he returned to Dale almost three years after leaving to watch over Bain on a diplomatic trip down the Anduin to Rohan and Gondor. “When I sent you off three years ago I wasn’t expecting you to be gone so long nor to return with my future daughter-in-law in tow.”

Harry shrugged, completely unrepentant.

“That is not my fault.” He told him adamantly, eyes narrowed. “You try talking Bain out of love with a Dúnedain Princess of Dol Amroth, see how far you get.”

“I think I’ll pass.” Bard decided staring across the feasting hall at the beautiful Princess Laerwen who had captured his son’s heart with her golden hair and fog-grey eyes. “I remember being that young and arse over tits for his mother.”

“Yeah…” Harry grimaced. “About that…”

“What?”

“Did you realize that your children were under the impression that we were betrothed?”

“What?!”

…”

Two and a Half Years Ago, Edoras, Rohan

They had been in the capitol of Rohan as the guests of King Fengel for only a week when the ongoing tension between Harry and Bain came to a head.

Bain hadn’t questioned his father’s old friend – one of the great heroes of the Age – when Harry disappeared during the nights on the trail only to return with the dawn, save for when he stood his turn at watch or fell into the restive – and bloody eerie – meditative sleep-state of the elves.

He hadn’t said a word when Harry insisted on concealing his actual identity to all they met.

Hadhn’t complained when the half-elven avoided Lórien, staying to the boundaries of the Greenwood until they reached the Fields of Celebrant and crossed into the lands of Rohan, avoiding the lands of the Galadhrim altogether.
But when he’d caught sight of Harry trading glances with one of King Fengel’s guards, the muscular blond blushing for the sake of the Valar!

Now that broke the tenuous compliance Bain had been giving over to the Cursebreaker.

He would not sit idle while his father’s beloved broke faith with him.

Excusing himself from the King – a man whose moods swung wildly and could make great sense or be completely insensible, understanding more than ever why Dale had seen such an influx of Rohirrim exiles in the last years – Bain made to intercept Harry when the currently-redheaded guard rose with a laugh and took his leave from his feasting companions, his steps, to no surprise but much fury from Bain, leading him after the young blond guard.

To no avail.

By the time Bain made it through the feasting masses in the great hall of Edoras, Harry – and the blond he followed – had vanished from sight.

Growling low in his throat, Bain scowled darkly at the empty corridor, slapping his palm roughly against the sanded-smooth wooden pillar of the doorway.

No matter.

Harry wouldn’t disappear for long and when he returned to Bain’s side they would have words.

…

After living through more wars than seems possible or even likely over the course of his life, Harry would be the first to say that surprising him was hard to manage given that he’d long ago internalized Barty Crouch Jr.’s – to say nothing of Mad-Eye Moody’s – shouts of constant vigilance!

Just because he could live through just about anything didn’t mean it was a pleasant experience.

So when the young man he’d seen shoot up from a teenaged stripling into a prince that was sure to do Bard proud grabbed his arm as he wandered into the suite of rooms given over to their party for their stay in Edoras after a pleasurable – and rather vigorous – night spent with a little consensual stress-relief with a young guardsman with blond hair to his midback and an arse you could bounce a silver coin off of, and proceeded to body-slam him into the wall he was, indeed, surprised as he hadn’t done anything to seriously piss-off the lad since the first year of his friendship with Bard.

At least, so he’d thought.

Harry arched an unimpressed brow at the young man, ignoring the rage all-but-seething out of his eyes.

“Is there a problem, your highness?” He drawled.

Bain fisted his hands in the fine, soft material of Harry’s tunic, pulling him back from the wall and slamming him against the wall once more, breath hissing between bared teeth.

“You.” Bain spat. “You are the problem! My father may not know or wish to know, but I will not allow you to continue to dishonor him and our people. He and they deserve better than you. Better than a whorish slattern of a King’s betrothed who casts eyes upon and shares himself with whatever pretty thing crosses his path!”
Lifting his hands, Harry – ever so gently – took hold of Bain’s wrists and peeled his arms away from him, the young man who was barely more than a boy, finding himself forced to loose his hold on Harry or have his arms broken.

“I see.” Harry held in both a smirk and an eyeroll. And Bard accused him of being dramatic. Clearly his old friend had long forgotten what it was like to be a boy too young and inexperienced for true manhood but too old to be excused foolishness on the back of lacking years. Hormones are almost worse than assumptions when it came to the underdeveloped brains and logic of young men as he well remembered being more balls than brains at that age. “Well.” Keep his hold on Bain’s wrists, Harry pushed him, still as gentle as he’d be with his own child but as inescapable as solid steel cuffs, until Bain’s knees hit the low chaise in the suite and had to sit. “It seems we need to clear up a couple of mislaid assumptions, lad.”

Summoning a chair to hand Harry sat with all the inhuman elegance of elven kind, crossing his legs and folding his hands in his lap in a smooth movement Thranduil had taught him as much from observation as harry and Bilbo had taken to calling them long ago – “elving lessons.”

“What?”

Meanwhile, Bain had clearly learned Bard’s deadpan.

“Your father and I aren’t betrothed, Bain.” Harry sighed, shaking his head. “We never have been. Where did you get that absurd idea?”

“Well…” Bain blushed, scrubbing at the back of his neck. “We’re not idiots. We’ve seen you coming and going from Father’s rooms at all hours and while at the time Tilda was too young to understand both Sigrid and I knew lovebites when we saw them on Father’s neck when he returned from slaying Smaug.”

Harry blinked. He hadn’t thought anyone not among the Company or Bard himself were aware of the, well, we lived!, bit of celebrating he and Bard indulged in. Given that Harry hadn’t been sure at the time that he’d survive what was to come it had been an indulgence not unlike a deathrow inmate being granted a last meal.

“One:” Harry began countering Bain’s accusations/explanations in turn, treating them seriously given the true outrage with which he’d been confronted. “Your father and I have never been anything more than friends. We care greatly for each other: yes. We share our bodies with each other when inclined: yes. But never lovedads. Never betrothed. Two: that being the case, I cannot apologize for an offense towards your father and the people of Dale that I have never actually gave. Three: that you and, I would assume, your sisters have believed otherwise and you have clearly felt ill-used by my physical encounters with others I am sorry for. Four: your father loves your mother and always will.” Harry smiled half-heartedly. “I have never loved anyone in that way.” His features hardened. “All that said,” his eyes flashed fire at Bain’s chagrined features, no less intimidating for being Weasley blue instead of emerald green. “Call me a whore or a slattern again and question my honor and I’ll give you a beating you’ll never forget. Am I clear?”

Bain gulped, suddenly feeling as young and untried as Harry’s tone when he called him lad implied, and nodded sheepishly.

“Good.”

…

Dale, After Bain’s return:
Bard groaned, hearing the story recounted by his friend.

“Apparently,” the King of Dale grimaced. “I need to have a discussion with my children.”

“Look on the bright side.” Harry clapped him on the back. “At least it’s only them. I shudder to think of the consequences if the rumor spread of your half-elven friend the Cursebreaker shared your heart along with your bed.” Harry’s grin was nothing less than shit-eating. “You might’ve had to marry me to keep your honor intact.”

“Ha, bloody, ha. Arsehole.” Bard sighed, rubbing his hand over his eyes. “Please tell me that’s the worst of it.”

“Well…”

Bard swore under his breath then gulped down the rest of his drink, bracing himself then waved for Harry to continue.

…

**Rohan, near Fangorn Forest, Two Years Prior:**

Harry returned from his nightly wanderings of the land surrounding the latest camp, as was his routine when not on watch, to a sight that had him rubbing his eyes in chagrin.

“Please tell me,” he sighed, looking up at one of the guards from Dale. “That Prince Bain didn’t give leave for exiles of Rohan to join our travels to Gondor.”

“Can’t.”

“Damnit.” He groaned, muttering under his breath as he strode away from the clusterfuck that was a dozen Rohirrim and their horses talking to Bain towards the snorting form of Shadowfax who kicked out anytime one of the horse lords got too close to the fussy creature who was still holding a grudge regarding his glamored coat. “I leave the little shit alone for a handful of hours to plant some trees with Treebeard and I come back to a diplomatic nightmare.”

…

**Dale:**

“He didn’t?”

“Oh, he did. Needless to say we made haste from Rohan and didn’t take the safer path from the south when we needed to return to Dale.”

“How many taverns did you have to pull him out of?”

“A few.” Harry and Bard shared a laugh. “But that tapered off once he clapped eye on Laerwen.”

“When was that?”

Harry pursed his lips, thinking.

“We’d been in Minas Tirith a few weeks when the Prince of Dol Amroth and his children came on a diplomatic visit of their own…”

…
Minas Tirith, Gondor, Halfway through Bain’s trip:

Harry was entertaining Ecthelion’s court – including his petulant son Denethor – and Prince Thengel of Rohan’s exilic household with a song and his lute when he saw it happen, as clear as day to one who knew the young man – and more, knew his father who Bain was a near-replica of down to his skill with a bow.

Smirking a bit with a feeling of whimsy roiling through him as Bain’s dark eyes locked across the opulent white marble feasting hall of the Steward of Gondor, he finished his song then changed the pace from an upbeat summer song to a ballad as Bard moved through the hall crowded with courtiers.

He couldn’t blame the kid’s taste at least.

The Princess Laerwen was a true Númenórean beauty from her hair to her flashing eyes.

…

Dale, with Bard:

“So what did you sing?” Bard felt the corner of his mouth twitching in amusement and no little amount of commiseration. He hadn’t been much better when he’d seen his wife.

“Beren and Luthien.”

“My poor boy never had a chance, did he?”

“Not an icicle’s chance in Far Harad, no.”

“Well, it turned out well or else the Princess wouldn’t now be gracing my halls with her lovely presence.” He noted optimistically.

Harry snorted, rolling his eyes. “That wasn’t easy to manage either. For a bit there I thought Prince Aradhil was going to string Bain up from the highest tower in Gondor when he found out Bain was paying court to his sister, though their father was genial enough to invite us to their home to continue their romance under more…amicable circumstances than Ecthelion’s court.”

“Denethor?”

“I can neither confirm nor deny that.” Harry sighed. “I don’t like what I’m seeing in the future for Gondor, however.”

Bard winced.

On the bright side: his son had found his beloved in Gondor and Dale didn’t have trade with the once-great kingdom, Bain’s visit there being more of a simple courtesy than anything.

Though that Prince Thengel of Rohan currently dwelled there certainly played its part in the decision as well.

“And you charted the course from Dol Amroth?”

Harry shook his head. “The Grey Havens. Princess Laerwen and her people are quite the sailors and wished to have one last journey on the sea before moving so far inland.”

Bard whistled under his breath.
Few were those of the Rhovanion who ventured so far West only to return, in fact Bard couldn’t think of a single soul he’d heard tell of in all his life who’d done such a thing.

“Tell me.”

…

_Six Months Prior:_

Harry was more relieved than he’d ever admit seeing the docks of Mithlond come into sight.

It wasn’t often in his life that he’d felt as useless as he had since stepping onto the deck of the Dúnedain vessel and not from any issue of seasickness either but one of pure… *smallness*.

His magic was vastly useful… on _land_ or even in the air.

Upon a ship?

In the midst of the ocean?

Beyond the sight of shore?

He was as useless, magically-speaking, as Gilderoy Lockheart in a room full of pixies.

No, give him the solid land: rolling fields, high mountains, rocky steppes alike, _any_ day over the deck of a ship, especially a ship that was also carrying a pair of lovestruck youth and suspicious Dúnedain guards and Rangers.

“How long to Dale?” The Princess stepped up beside him at the rail, Bain’s arm wrapped around her dainty shoulders.

“Depends on many things, your highness.” Harry answered with a respectful nod. “With good weather and swift horses we can make the Shire in a week, give or take, then anywhere from three weeks to twice that to Rivendell. The Low Pass through the Misty Mountains: another week then two weeks to the edge of the Greenwood, and so on.” He tilted his head in consideration. “Four to eight months altogether.”

“So long?” She blinked. It was only a fortnight from Dol Amroth to Minas Tirith after all and that was with a slow, gentle pace.

“Arda is vast, your highness.” Harry reminded her. “And with easy travel from the South via Rohan ill-advised at the moment the East-West Road is the best option available.”

“Plus you have messages to carry to the Shire for Erebor’s Consort.” Bain smirked at his father’s… whatever-he-was.

“And that.” Harry smirked back. “I have to ensure my dear friend’s holdings are safe from the Sackville-Bagginses, a quest of high importance to Erebor.”

…

A simple elven horse-path ran from Mithlond, through the Tower Hills, Far and White Downs until it met with the great East-West Road in Michel Delving within the bounds of the Shire. The great East-West Road was made up of many smaller roads that connected – as the name suggested – the Western shores of Arda before ending at the River Running. The elven path of Mithlond was both a part of the trail and separate as rarely did any _but_ the Firstborn traverse it.
As such Harry wasn’t anticipating trouble in the remnants of Lindon ruled by Lord Círdan the Shipwright – correctly, as it turned out, as they were neither harassed nor harried between the borders of the Grey Havens and that of the Shire, Harry easily able to complete his task of looking in upon the inhabitants of Bag End and deliver his friend’s messages to Bilbo’s cousins the Thain and the Master of Buckland.

No, it wasn’t until they were at the very borders of the Shire were upon them that their charmed journey – while slow with the required train of servitors and guards for a Princess of Dol Amroth – saw an end to the bucolic peace of their travels as encountered the darkness nipping at the edges of the Shire for themselves.

…

Harry hadn’t returned to the Shire since leaving it in the Company of Thorin Oakenshield, let alone walked the fields and hills and forests of it in the time that passed after he’d learned of his ability to help restore the land and encourage growth of everything from the smallest flowers to the most towering trees or that his blood and magic could be used to cleanse the insidious evils of the land from the very soil in which they sought to grow and spread as he’d done – to great effect – in Rhovanion.

His connection to the land was…changed not unlike himself.

Though whether a consequence of his being made half-elven or a result of his daring the Valar and meeting not once but twice with the Green Lady he didn’t know.

Maybe he never would.

Maybe it didn’t matter.

All the same it was an ability he had and one that he loved to use with a joyful glee not unlike that of a child’s first romp through a field of dandelions gone to seed, spreading his ability far and wide and allowing it to pass from him into the land wherever he walked even if it required a bit of subterfuge in nightly wanderings away from his guard duties and encampments to keep knowledge of his nature – and the fullness of his power – from those who he couldn’t trust with anywhere near the ease of the veterans of Dale or Bain who knew far more of him than an ability to cause a seed to sprout or a flower to blossom out of season.

During his first time traveling to-and-from the Shire, he’d been aware in a peripheral way of the danger that lurked elsewhere in Arda that had yet to seriously impinge – the Fell Winter aside – on the borders of the peaceful locale.

However, he’d had no utter clue, of just how close to those borders darkness and evil dwelled beyond a few, confusing at the time, whispers and mutters regarding the Old Forest and the High Hay.

Bilbo’s discomfort as they passed through the Old Forest on the way to Bree should have been a sign, let alone the milk-pale face his friend had maintained all through the Barrow Downs but Harry had thought that it was the quest itself or not being accustomed to traveling rough that was the issue – not a bone-deep knowledge of the very real and tangible danger the Company had been in every moment had they veered from the path into the Forest or were too close to the Downs come nightfall.

Knowledge Harry wished he – or anyone in his party – had possessed before departing Buckland after dropping Bilbo’s missive at Brandy Hall.
The Brandybucks likely would’ve warned them if they’d any idea Harry didn’t already know.

But they didn’t know and thus they went ignorantly on their way…nearly losing half the guards and a handmaiden in the process.

…

“What. The. Actual. Fuck?”

Harry blinked rapidly, shaking his head as if trying to shake the sight before him right out of his mind as if it was nothing more than a disturbing apparition.

No such luck.

That really was a crazy-ass Huorn.

The missing guards – every last one of a dozen men – were wrapped tightly and handing limply from willow vines save for a pair that were sunken to the shoulder or hip, depending, into the actual trunk of the sentient tree as a luring spell hung thick in the air of the Old Forest.

Several of the guard had strayed from the path – an occurrence that had him suffering flashbacks of the Greenwood before the miasma enchantment had been banished from it – and not returned, forcing Harry to call an early halt on the eastern edge of the Forest so they could be sought out when they failed to return to the party in a timely manner. A squad had gone out. Only they hadn’t returned either forcing Harry to heave a heavy sigh, loosen his sword in its scabbard and take up his spear, ordering the others to take up a constant watch on the edges of their camp until he returned.

He didn’t know what was waiting for him under the eaves of the Old Forest though he followed the cast out lures of enchantment easily enough.

It would be perfectly accurate to say that even in his wildest imaginings in the early days of having the strangeness of Middle Earth explained to him that a carnivorous Huorn wasn’t among them.

“Right.” He sighed, cracking his neck and twirling his spear in one hand and his sword in the other. “It looks like someone needs pruning.” He called out to the great willow. “Release my men, Huorn! Or be torn up by the roots and set ablaze, your ashes cast to the wind and never to darken this wood again!”

What could only be described as the creaking-wood of a sinister laughing tree greeted his ears long moments later and the men being devoured – or maybe subsumed was a better description? He thought it might be – sinking in another precious inch, coming closer and closer to suffocation within the twisted willow with each breath.

He smirked, eyes flashing.

Given the state of the forest – in large part he now knew thanks to the corrupted Huorn marring it – he’d been hoping for a lack of acquiescence from the fucking thing.

At least this way Treebeard can’t blame Harry for doing what needed doing.

That the hobbits of Buckland would have one less thing to fear creeping through the night to bedevil them was a bonus.

…
Harry led the – stunned, disbelieving, incredulous, and so on – guards back to the western edge of the forest towards their encampment having serious flashbacks to the Company’s journey through the Woodland Realm when it still deserved the name “Mirkwood” and fearing that the pained shrieking of a dying, burning Huorn would haunt his thoughts for many days to come.

After spending time with Treebeard and the sentient trees of the Greenwood – not to mention the Silvan elves teaching him to *speak* to all living things if he wished – he knew they were as alive – if not more – than any person he’d ever met.

That didn’t mean he regretted what he’d done.

The willow was clearly maddened and in need of being put out of its misery.

That also didn’t mean he’d enjoyed it.

It was, as he’d once told Fili, simply something that *must* be done and therefore he’d seen it done.

Nothing more and nothing less.

All that said, with the weight of the Huorn’s demise dragging him down into gloomy contemplation the *last* thing he wanted to see as they left the Old Forest and returned to camp was the non-tree-snack guards in a tizzy.

Taking a deep, patience-shoring-up breath, he closed his eyes then found Bain.

“What happened *now*?”

Bain gulped, knowing better than anyone else among them – even the guards who’d fought with Harry during the Battle of the Five Armies who’d come along to protect him until he returned to Dale – that nothing *good* was ever heralded by that piercing look in the Cursebreaker’s eyes.

“Laerwen’s handmaiden is missing as well.” Bain told him, voice managing – through some miracle – to stay even and calm even with an irritated half-elven sorcerer and warrior staring him down.

“She was in camp before you left but disappeared not long after the sun dipped below the horizon and the fog started rolling in from the downs.”

“Great.” Harry groaned, scrubbing his hands over his glamoured face. “Just fucking *great*.”

…

*Dale:*

“What had happened?” Bard asked.

Harry grimaced, still cursing his own ignorance of the danger they’d been in.

“We were on the borders of the Barrow Downs, which – I’d thought – were named for the burial mounds that made them.”

Bard frowned. “Aren’t they? I don’t know much of Eriador but the ways of the old warriors and kings of Arnor are well-documented.”

“Not quite. Creatures – twisted spirits of Sauron’s servants – dwell in them now. They possess the dead bones of the ancient kings and warriors, attacking the unwary in the night and dragging them off into the cairns.”
A swift intake of breath. “What manner of evil is that?”

“Barrow-wights.” Harry’s face was grim. “When we made it to Bree I learned they were called Barrow-wights.”

“You survived.” Bard reminded his friend, seeing the ghosts of horror drift through his eyes. “All of you.”

“The girl almost didn’t.” Harry shook it off, not wishing to think of such things anymore. “As it is…that Imladris was on our way was a boon more than you know – for both the handmaiden and myself. I thought…” Harry trailed off, sighing.

Bard didn’t know of his former life.

He had no idea just how close to his deepest fears of his adolescence the barrow-wights had struck.

They were markedly similar to dementors save a bit less wraithlike.

Though he didn’t think he’d get their song as they prowled around and terrified the girl out of his head anytime soon:

\begin{quote}
Cold be hand and heart and bone, 
and cold be sleep under stone:
never more to wake on stony bed, 
never, till the Sun fails and the Moon is dead.

In the black wind the stars shall die, 
and still on gold here let them lie, 
till the dark lord lifts his hand 
over dead sea and withered land…
\end{quote}

No, Harry wouldn’t forget what he’d seen beneath the Barrow Downs anytime soon.

Thankfully, the wraiths liked a Patronus to the face – or what passed for one – no more than dementors of his old life had done, scattering and dying at the charge of a glowing silver-white Prongs.

…”

\begin{quote}
Imladris, on the way to Dale:

“Harry!”
\end{quote}

The laughing shout of a youthful voice drew the half-elven champion and current bodyguard-cum-babysitter of the Prince of Dale from his contemplation of the shards of Narsil.

Harry smiled, despite his deep melancholy that had lingered since the fight against the wraiths, the foul barrow-wights, outside the Old Forest. Imladris was working its magic upon him. Letting him find ease from the memories that haunted him as much from his old life as the sight of an innocent girl ensorcelled and set to be used in some dark magic rite.
Certain things would always strike him deeply he supposed, no matter how much time passed.

But it was good to see Estel nonetheless, even if the strong young man before him wasn’t the sweet if mischievous child he’d once been willing to take on a grieving Lady Gilraen – a fierce creature indeed – to save from the wounds of shared manipulations that his young friend had been in danger of incurring no matter how well-intentioned on the parts of Gilraen and Elrond for keeping him unaware of his true nature and destiny.

“Estel.” He smiled and clasped arms with the young Dúnedan, feeling the weight of years passing more than ever as he took in the wide shoulders and long limbs of the Harry-blinked-and-he-grew-up boy. “A star shines upon the hour of our meeting.”

He switched to Sindarin, having shed his glamor for the first time in months and months when they’d arrived in Imladris and Erestor had shuffled the rest of his party – royalty and all – off to the guest wings and far from his quarters before going wandering with the knowledge that not a single soul in the house of Elrond would tell the strangers he’d brought with him of his true identity.

As the members of Bain’s party were all well-used to his wandering off by now, none would be surprised to see a distinct lack of “Harry, son of James” in the safety of the Last Homely House and if any did Bain or one of the guards from Dale would be quick to divert them.

Thankfully other than Estel who’d met him as a child there wasn’t anyone in Imladris who would call him by a name of Men when they had one – or more – of elvish design to use instead and a single peredhel in the infamous home of Elrond the Half-Elven would hardly be noticeable given the lack of Elrond’s children who were off doing who-knew-what who-knew-where.

If anything, the average guards – if they saw him at all without his glamor – would likely mistake him for one of the pair of lordlings, Estel’s foster-brothers, Elladan or Elrohir who Harry’d yet to meet for all that Harry didn’t look anything like Elrond beyond both of them being of dark hair and elven heritage.

It wasn’t like an untrained human eye would be able to easily tell if the only peredhel they ever saw in person were Elrond and Harry, even those with the close ties to the Dúnedain such as a Princess of Dol Amroth.

Looking over Estel, he found a teenager standing before him with solemn eyes instead of a joyful – if ignorant – boy and mourned the loss of one for the enlightenment of the other.

“Don’t you mean, Aragorn?” The boy asked then found himself being directed by Harry, the young prince – if uncrowned – of Men allowing the other to guide him over to a bench with a clear view of the shards of Narsil and the tapestry depicting Isildur’s defeat, however temporary, of Sauron. His tone on his name was only a bit sharp with bitterness over the long deception perpetuated against him by his mother and foster-father.

“No,” Harry arched a scolding brow at the – yep, he’s a teenager – young man. “Your name has only ever concerned me as it was kept from you. A fact that led to the stiff enmity that exists between your mother and I.”

“You’re who insisted I be told.” Aragorn nodded. He’d thought so after his ada told him the truth of his heritage and name not long after the Ranger had come and gone from Imladris and gotten into a very public disagreement with his mother in the process.

He hadn’t understood it – not then.
Then when he did he rather wished he didn’t even if he had grown thankful for being informed in time.

“I was.” Harry tilted his head. “I wasn’t much older than you were at the time of your father’s death when I found myself orphaned and used for years afterward as a tool to be shaped, molded, and sharpened into the correct form as determined by someone who focused on the greater good to the exclusion of all else. Such as that while a person could be a tool that should never be all they are. Otherwise,” he grimaced. “We’re little better than the darkness we seek to destroy. When those who would see goodness spread lose sight of those they seek to help, at the cost and worth of lives, that they fight strengthens that much more. Do you understand, Estel?”

“No,” Aragorn sighed. “But if what Ada saw comes true, I think I will one day.”

“And already you prove yourself wiser than many others.” Harry laughed, clapping the teen on his back then rising. “Come, let us walk and talk of pleasanter things. How goes the prank war against your tutor?”

“Considering that Lord Erestor was also the tutor of my brothers,” Aragon was not pouting as he wandered through the halls of his home. “Not well.”

“Well, we’ll have to do something about that, won’t we my young friend?”

…

Dale:

“But you returned to us, hale and hearty, in the end.” Bard shook his head, banishing the thoughts of his friend sickened from his encounter with a creature such as a barrow-wight. “And managed to keep my son from either running off to become a Ranger or a corsair from Harad. You have my thanks, my friend.”

“Keep your thanks.” Harry smirked, plucking up a flagon of fine Dorwinion wine. “Give me wine and never ask me to babysit one of your heirs through the courts of Men ever again and we’ll call it even.”

“Done.”

“My thanks, Your Highness.”

“Oi.” Bard scowled, shoving his cackling friend away lightly. “You don’t get to mock when that’s still your fault.”

“Whiner.”

“Arse.”

…
I’m back! Lots of set-up for later adventures in this chapter, some headcanon backstory and background characters, and really what amounts to a self-indulgent dive into Tolkien lore and details surrounding various Middle Earth cultures.

The end note is a collection of names going by the naming traditions of Valinor for a handful of characters more for reference and to help keep things straight as Harry just skips around Middle Earth collecting names, not unlike Aragorn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Broken Blade

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Portents of Fame and Folly

Fading Season, Year 2951 of the Third Age; The Halls of the Woodland Realm

Harry followed the rich, lush singing voices that harmonized in utter perfection after thousands of years of practice deep within the Halls of Thranduil’s Realm.

“…but still the sunken stars appear,

In dark and windless Mirrormere.

There lies his crown in waters deep,

‘til Durin wakes again from sleep.”

The singers were secluded in their private bower, known only to those of Oropher’s line, Harry’s knowledge of the place coming the third winter he spent among the Halls of the Woodland Realm, making him rethink whether his joke about Thranduil wishing to adopt him wasn’t that far-fetched after all.

It was a secret originally held close between Oropher and Thranduil, one they had kept tight for many years, telling only three people in all the years since their fleeing the Kinslaying of Menegroth: Thranduil’s wife, then his son and adopted daughter. Six hundred years had passed since Tauriel was entrusted with the greatest secret of the Woodland Realm. Then Thranduil decided to entrust it to another, led either by his instincts regarding Harry or his prescience, or, perhaps, that of the singers themselves.

The line of Elu Thingol and Melian the Maia had long produced highly skilled and accurate gifts of foresight among some of their descendants.

Elrond might be the most famous…but his lost uncles who Harry came to call the singers, Eluréd and Elurín were certainly his equals in power if not his superiors, though rather than meddle or peer into the minds of others as some Eldar used their gifts, the twin sons of Dior Eluchil and Nimloth of Doriath preferred to sing of what may come to pass.
They were young, mere elflings or so went the story Harry was told when Thranduil brought him to meet his oldest friends and advisors, during the Kinslaying of Menegroth.

Left to die alone and unprotected in the wilds of Beleriand.

Oropher and Thranduil escaped the Kinslaying with their household, though Oropher’s wife and Thranduil’s mother was killed in the massacre, and came upon the orphaned twins in the forest, vowing to never abandon them as others had done over and over again during their short lives and to protect them always.

They lived in their secret bower deep within the very heart of the Woodland Realm, dyeing their moonlit silver hair with walnut dyes to pass as Silvan elves rather than the ancient elders of their race they truly were, and wearing scouts’ masks over their faces to conceal their legendary fairness that all of the line of Elu Thingol and his Maiar queen were blessed with.

Never in his life had Harry met more peaceful and genuinely gentle souls, completely understanding after only a day’s acquaintance why the House of Oropher had long protected them so fiercely – even from their own kin.

Though never let it be said that while peaceful and gentle they were likewise malleable and naïve.

Their refusal to have anything to do at all with their nephews or their offspring, raised as they were by the same Sons of Feänor who had slaughtered their kin, more Noldoran than Doriathi in practice if not bloodline, was proof enough of that.

“I hope that’s not a warning, mellyn.” Harry said after greeting the elegant forms with their silver hair and dark blue eyes, forms draped in the dark blue silks of the Fading Season and nestled as much among the soft mosses of the bower floor as they were silken pillows stuffed with goose down. “I could use a time of rest and not a siege or battle for a change.”

As he’d spent the last two years travelling back and forth between the Rhovanion and stomping out the darkness in the Barrow Downs, including expanding the forests of the Old Forest and Rhudaur and the Trollshaws with fresh, untainted growth, he felt completely justified in passing on another adventure for a time, as the three years prior to that mission – barrow-wights were wilier than he’d rather and far too similar to Dementors for his preference – had been spent as a glorified babysitter to Prince Bain of Dale, making him more than ready to limit his travels for a time.

“Belegur,” Eluréd, distinguishable from his twin brother by the sweetness of his smile, reached out and clasped arms with the returned peredhel.

He and Elurín hadn’t quite known what to make of the young one Thranduil had taken under his wing at first.

A Vanaryon, a Champion, a sorcerer and more, they were understandably wary of such a high-titled personage being brought among them.

When they chose to wander Arda, they did so incognito, rarely spending time with the high-born whether of Men, dwarves, or their own Elvish races.

The only one close to a Champion of the Valar they had ever known was Thranduil.

But they had found that Berthon’s great daring – Thranduil’s naming being apt indeed – was equally balanced with the great heart the Silvan elves had charged him with possessing, much more an elf who loved to sing and weave and coax green things to grow than he was the fierce, daring sorcerer who would stare down even the Valar to right a wrong and cleanse Morgoth’s taint from the world.
For a moment – or perhaps longer, though neither of the elder elves would ever voice such a thing – they had been stricken with an unbecoming sense of jealousy as they were shown that though Belegur would be their friend and confidant, would join them in their bower and songs, he would never be theirs.

Belegur was for others, not for them, though through him their mate would be born at last, a bit of comfort in their disappointment – and in Thranduil’s, the pair easily seeing through the matchmaking of their oldest friend.

Thranduil desired the peredhel Champion to join with his house, of which Eluréd and Elurín had long been considered and had long considered themselves, but if such an ambition was to be appeased it wouldn’t be through his foster-brothers and oldest friends.

No, one of Berthon Belegur’s children would be theirs, they simply had to be patient and let fate take its course.

And in the meantime, enjoy the simple pleasures that life had to offer, among them that of Belegur’s company and friendship and if they were lucky perhaps even a song.

“A star shines upon the hour of our meeting.” Elurín finished the greeting, clasping arms much the same as his brother had done but with a firmer grip. “How are Treebeard and Fangorn?”

“Treebeard is as he has always been,” Harry told them, smirking a little as he joined them down on the softly cushioned floor of their bower, waiting a moment for them to retake their seats against moss or pillow then sprawling over the pair like a languid cat, head cradled on Elurín’s leg and his legs sprawling over and tangling with Eluréd’s. “Fangorn grows with every Stirring and Spring, as does the Greenwood and the other forests and woodlands…”

To such a sight it was that Thranduil, finished with the business of the Court early that day upon word of Berthon’s arrival, entered the hidden bower to see: his kinsmen in their preferred repose, talking idly over the form of his…not his foster son, but certainly for many years the elfling who has been his charge. Elurín’s clever hands wove late autumn flowers into Berthon’s rich mane of gleaming ebon hair, the hidden bower always slower to slide into Fading and Winter and quicker to leap into stirring and spring than elsewhere in the Woodland Realm. Considering whose great magic had helped form it when they moved to the Greenwood, the things that their nephew even now was capable of as Lord of Rivendell, Thranduil had long ago found himself incapable of being surprised by it.

Ever did the pair seem to earn for the temperate forests and lush flowers and foliage of their lost home – all of their lost home for all that Thranduil had come to love the Great Greenwood fiercely – and their bower reflected the lost forests that were now beneath the sea.

“And you wondered why I thought to ask of your courtship.” Thranduil commented wryly as he removed his crown with its Fading foliage in the rust red of the season, cosmos – stubborn flowers those – twining up the wooden branches of it in gold and red and brown. “Given such a sight would scandalize many of the court.”

“A bit of scandal might be good for them.” Eluréd noted, laughter dancing in his night-sky eyes. “Shake the Court from their complacency and send them out into the Realm to walk once more among the woodland instead of huddling in the caverns of the palace.”

As even as the height of their kinsman’s isolationist policies following the betrayal of Thrór, the silver twins would venture among the woods and forests of Rhovanion and beyond, albeit incognito, he knew of which he spoke.
“Remind them of what it is to live and not just abide.” Elurín added, all without lifting his gaze from his weaving of Berthon’s hair. “As your children have long done for you, mellon.”

“Gossiping busybodies, all of them.” Harry said sleepily. “I don’t understand why they’re so fascinated with my marital state.”

“You are beautiful even for the Half-Elven,” Thranduil told him bluntly. “Strong and fierce with a reputation for equally strong and fierce magics. You have the favor of all three Kings of the Rhovanion and that of Elrond alike and possess a heart of legendary compassion. Such a spouse would be the prize of any elf who could claim you for their own. That is why the Court and all of the Woodland Realm are fascinated with your marital state, Berthon.”

“Pity they will all be forced to seek another for their own.” Elurín said, tone taking on a bit of a dreamy quality as it did – as did his brother’s – when he was speaking more from knowing rather than knowledge, as he slipped likewise into Quenya rather than the Doriathi Sindarin they’d been speaking previously. “Blood calls to blood.”

“The great heart of the Greenwood will find his equals only among those of his blood.” Eluréd joined in, the two speaking in alternating statement not unlike the Greek Fates of Harry’s homeland lore.

“It is of the Vanyar for whom the Untamed will gentle.”

“It is of the Half-Elven for whom Renewal will give his blessing.”

“Four of name, four of loves.” Elurín’s dreamy smile turned wicked.

“For he who dares will dare to unite the disparate Kingdoms of the Firstborn within his house and in his heart.”

“Oh, goody.” Harry snarked, eyes popping open rather than continue to play at drowsing away under the care and affection of his soothsaying friend. “Just what I wanted: another prophecy to my name.”

“There are worse ones to claim.” Thranduil chided him as he lowered himself down to join them, nudging his way with regal insistence between Eluréd and Berthon. “Such groups of lovers are not unheard of in our culture, though they are rare in that of the stunted ones and the halflings with Men disdaining such practices. As least our friends have narrowed the field for you significantly.”

And, though it wasn’t their intention, gave Thranduil hope that his wish to tie Berthon permanently to his House wasn’t made in vain.

The Vanyar had always been the smallest race of Firstborn, which some said was the reason for their beauty, grace, and abilities outstripping those of the others of their kind.

In fact, among the Elves of Arda, Thranduil would only think of less than ten elven souls who claimed such heritage: Galadriel, the three children of Elrond via their grandmother’s own heritage, Glorfindel (though knowledge of that was long lost to time, perhaps Círdan, Maglor, Thranduil, Celeborn, and Galadriel being of an age or relation to recall who Glorfindel’s parents even were let alone their families), Berthon, and Thranduil’s own son.

“Our foolish nephew has three children with Vanyar blood.” Eluréd said was Thranduil was thinking. “Then there is the Lord of the House of the Golden Flower and our own dear little Green Leaf.” He pursed his lips in thought. “Not many to choose from if you are meant to find them here
and not in Valinor where while those of the Vanyar are lower in number than the other Firstborn there are significantly more of them there than yet remain in Arda.”

“That may be true.” Harry sighed, fiddling with the end of his woven braid. The twin singers – or any of the elf-maidens who cornered him in the gardens of the palace – always did a better job of braiding his hair and weaving in flowers than he did alone…without magic at least.

Ten years had come and gone since he restored Erebor and Dale, and yet he still felt the lack in his reserves.

If what the Valar had implied turned out to be truth, it might yet be another twenty years and more before he was as fully empowered as he had been upon leaving Fangorn Forest – the second time – after drinking the Ent-Draught.

Mirkwood as it had been then under the sway and taint and sickness of Sauron’s evil had taken its pound of flesh from him – or rightly his power – as had the insidious curse both mountain and vale had been under, affecting him for months before he’d risked everything he was or ever would be to right a wrong that had been allowed to take root and rot the Rhovanion.

His wards – unintentional as they were – had yet to falter over Dale, the land and crops and orchards he had planted alongside Bilbo and their volunteers all flourished with life and plenty.

The Rhovanion was thriving in spite of all Sauron’s minions and evil had done to weaken and sicken it.

All for the mere cost of Harry’s life and the bulk of his power.

It was a price he would gladly pay again and again, ten times over, to see a place that had dwelled in darkness and existed in fear blooming with life.

Thankfully, barring another cursed – literally, not just figuratively as Thranduil and others like him thought of the things – Silmaril bringing down toil and hardship and death on innocent people like those of Dale and Erebor and the Woodland Realm, he would never need to repeat his sacrifice again.

Perhaps not even then.

Harry had learned much of elven magics and ways over the last ten years and still had much left to learn, much like the great craft of the dwarrow and the tending hands of the hobbits, enough that he thought he might be able to come up with a solution other than gambling with his life should he come across another item like the Silmaril of Maedhros.

It was, perhaps, the greatest gift and likewise the greatest curse of the truth of immortal life.

Plenty of time to learn and love and live – likewise plenty of time to fuck it all up anyway.

He continued with his thought on the matter of his mates:

“Howevert, I can’t help but note.” He tilted his head thoughtfully, the gazes of the elder Eldar locked on him with varying degrees of indulgent care. They did so love to spoil him as the youngest of their race. “That all of whom you have mentioned fate, it seems, has taken care to ensure I either never meet or have met only in the midst of battle in the case of the Prince. I imagine that if my mating is part of some design of the Valar, that I won’t meet them – whichever of the Vanyar-blooded they might be – until it suits the purpose of that design.”
Not like it would be the first time his life was fucked with by a deity – not even the first time it was altered by these deities…though as the Elves loved their Father Eru Ilúvatar more than any other, even more than they loved and admired the Valar, it was entirely possible that it was Him who was meddling this time and not His Valar who had come to an agreement with Death and brought Harry into their world and made him their Champion.

“Your instincts have always been good, Berthon.” Thranduil agreed, strong nimble hands plucking up a high harp that had been set aside when the youngest of them had arrived, a simple tune quickly being found and then joined by the lute of Eluréd and a flute taken up by Elurín. “In this matter, as in others, I would trust them.”

That Berthon’s instincts implied it would be some ephemeral time in the future that his youngest charge would leave Thranduil’s care and take up with his future loves and mates, Thranduil found himself at peace.

While he might still hope for a union of his Green Leaf and the Great Heart of the Greenwood, only time, as he knew, and the hearts and feä in question would decide the matter.

No matter how tempting it might be – such as recalling Legolas from his diplomatic training – to meddle. No.

He would leave unbecoming behavior like that to the likes of his cousin’s Ñoldor wife or Mithrandir.

If there was anything all the long years of his life had taught Thranduil, King of the Woodland Realm, it was patience.

A tree does not grow in a day – unless it’s been coaxed along by Berthon – and love will not root and blossom where it is forced.

If it is to be it will be.

Thranduil would just have to content himself with that…and a few daydreams of elfling babes with silver hair and jewel-green eyes, perhaps.

“Renewal…” Harry said thoughtfully as the soft music of his companions played on. “What would that be? Cílon?”

“In Sindar, yes.” Thranduil agreed. “As the elves of Lorién and Imladris call you Rávo.” Likewise Sindar for wild, free, or untamed, a given-name that Thranduil found himself unable to argue, as his Berthon did have quite the tendency to wander and do as he pleased.

A rather wizardly trait, but not one that was unbecoming in an elf either.

Even Elu Thingol, Thranduil’s kinsman, had lost himself in the forests of Beleriand for a time.

“Hmm.” Harry hummed, smiling softly. “I think I like it.”

“Then as Cílon you shall be known, among those you allow the use of it.” Thranduil agreed.

…

To no surprise, when next Thranduil went seeking for Berthon, he found him not hidden away with the twins in their bower, but in the training rings.
This was just a rest for the young one, with the Prince Consort heavy with the Crown Prince’s second child Berthon would be returning to the halls of Erebor to watch over the health of his friend during the Prince Consort’s travail.

More and more, the young one that Thranduil had been gifted with the training and charge of was spending more time among the woods and forests and wilds and less in the strongholds of his friends.

That was as it should be.

As it was for most elves at some point during their maturation.

Thranduil recalled fondly the halcyon days spend wandering the forests and wilds of Beleriand with his father and mother before the Sack of Menegroth, the long days of exploring the Great Greenwood with Eluréd and Elurín at his side learning every last tree and hill and stream.

It was their nature, to love and be at home among the wild things, sheltered only by the embrace of the trees and the watch of the stars.

Berthon was different from others of their kind, it was true, as much for his magic as for his being among the Half-Elven, but in this, his yearning for the peace and embrace of the wilds, he was just the same as any other elf.

Though he wasn’t the youngest among them all any longer, if still the youngest de facto member of the Oropherion house.

Long had it been known that the fecundity – sparse as it was compared to the mortal races of Arda – of elves was not unlike that of the Ents: inextricably tied to the lands they called their own and were given watch and care of.

Never did their people number more than the land could easily support – and when the land sickened, so did they.

Sína, who had taken quickly to Berthon upon his first-ever arrival to courts of the Woodland Realm, had before him been the youngest elf in Arda at two centuries old, with Tauriel the next-closest to her in age.

While it was true elflings were not born with the habitual regularity of Dwarrow, let alone that of Men or Hobbits, such a dearth of young was a sure sign of sickness in the land.

Galadriel and Elrond had both taken the lack of births – so long in Loríen that he struggled to recall the last elfling the Golden Wood had seen, with the Lady Arwen the last born to Imladris – as a sign that the time of elves in Arda was waning.

Thranduil took it as a sign that the darkness needed tearing out of their lands, root and stem and seed, never to return, choosing to fight the darkness creeping into his lands where Galadriel and Elrond had chosen to retreat. He was an isolationist before Berthon came to him, it is true, but he had still trained his people to fight and protect themselves from Sauron’s taint. Of all the Galadhrim and the Great Hunt of Imladris, only the triplet marchwardens of the Golden Wood and Elrond’s twin sons could claim the same.

Berthon was much the same: desirous of peace but willing to fight, and that willingness to fight and ability to bring cleansing and renewal to the land itself was much the cause of the wellspring of life that had sprung up in forest and mountain and vale.

Never in his life had Thranduil seen such a large burst of population nor a blessing of elflings as had
come after Berthon cleansed first Erebor and then Dol Guldur.

Pairings of elves were blessed with offspring, as were those guards who had given their hearts to children of Men during their time in Dale.

Much as he was no longer the youngest elfling around, Berthon was likewise no longer the only peredhel, though none were currently so infamous as the delightful Unna, daughter of Prince Kíli of Erebor and Thranduil’s own adopted daughter Tauriel.

Though she was likely to be the only one of her kind, her birthing being a struggle for both mother and child, she was a blessing like none other ever seen in the past nor likely to be seen again in the future.

Few were the dwarrow, after all, who would look with love upon an elf, nor have an elf return their regard.

And elves, it must be said, only had children where there was love.

As Thranduil’s ward and finest general sparred, Thranduil watched both Feren and Berthon with a keen and critical eye.

It was not yet time to take over charge of training his ward, Berthon still had much to learn.

And yet…as Berthon spun out of a trap, sword spinning in hand, Thranduil thought it would not be long at all as elves saw such things before it was time to advance his ward into his personal tutelage, as he had done for both of his children in the past.

Berthon likely wouldn’t thank him for it when the time came.

Thranduil knew himself and knew he was nothing short of an exacting taskmaster when it came to the art of the sword.

But if watching both Legolas and Tauriel in battle and survive conflicts that had killed others taught him anything, it was that the temporary ire of his ward would be more than worth the reward of a warrior so fierce and skilled that none could best him beyond the greatest warriors all of Arda had to offer.

…

Harry rode Shadowfax under the eaves of the Greenwood, the great forest of the Rhovanion once more earning its name, with Eluréd on his left mounted upon Súrelal and Elurín on his right upon Larcatal, the mares much like their riders twin palominos – and unless he was very mistaken offspring of Shadowfax on one of the elven-bred horses kept by the noble elves of the Greenwood.

Shadowfax was a father dozens of time over from their travels the last ten years, siring foals on mares from the Rhovanion to Dol Amroth (and perhaps even one or two in Mithlond and the Shire), the randy bugger, not that Harry was much better though he kept his affairs to those not likely to leave a train of half-elven offspring behind him.

Namely, by choosing to take mortal Men to bed or those of the Dúnedain, as neither race possessed the male-bearing abilities of the elves, dwarves, or hobbits.

Contraceptives were a hit-and-miss concept in Middle Earth apparently, with Men having nothing at all that would do the job beyond abstinence, and nothing that the hobbits had found working long-term against their extreme fertility.
It was only Bilbo’s solidly middle-aged years that had kept him from having a bushel of children with Thorin already and as it had been some years since the birth of little Hadri, neither Harry nor Bilbo anticipated more little dwobbits in the offing from the pair.

Though as all of the Company who were interested in and capable of having children had done so, there were quite a few little ones waiting for their uncle Harry to bring honeyed-taffy and gifts in the mountain.

That Bain and Laerwen had presented Bard with another grandchild Harry intended to think about precisely never beyond having another baby to spoil, as his friend and sometimes lover having an heir for his heir made him think of the press of age and the grief that was coming as surely as the sun would rise come the morning.

Harry had a warm rabbit-furred basket for the new prince of Dale, what his former home would have called a moses-basket, and a blanket to match, both made from the softest and warmest winter pelts Harry had had left from previous winters trapping, with the exact same gift ready but in warmer lambskin to protect the coming babe from the chill of Erebor as no amount of heat radiating from the forges or heated water piped through the walls could completely match the chill of the mountain in winter.

Both gifts were made with his hands and magic, though he had to purchase the lambskins rather than trap them himself as he didn’t keep livestock at his home tucked into the treetops of Fangorn or in Treebeard’s hidden glade when he was visiting the ancient Ent.

His companions weren’t venturing with him all the way to Erebor, having said something vague about wanting to browse the markets in Dale and check in on some of the elvish craftspeople who had moved to the city of Men. They’d appeared in his rooms as he was changing from his elvish attire into his normal basilisk armor with their hair dyed brown and their scout masks in hand the morning he’d left Thranduil’s halls. But then he wasn’t entirely surprised nor was he entirely believing what they had to say about “shopping.”

He may not have an ability on par with their own of foresight, nor were his instincts even of the same class of skill as the visions and knowing they had been given by Irmo, but he still knew when something was brewing.

He felt it deep within when danger or an event that would impact him approached.

Harry had felt it more than once upon arriving in Middle Earth, even though he didn’t always know what event was taking place or how it would affect him.

This time he had a sinking feeling that he was going to be front and center what with the twins accompanying him to Dale – or so they said – and the only thing going on that he knew of already was Ori’s travail with Fíli’s second child (and heir) which would allow Kíli with his wife and their daughter to finally decamp from Erebor for Ered Luin.

Court wasn’t the cup of tea of either the wild second-price nor his wood elf wife, both desiring a simpler life for themselves and their family than what Erebor had to offer.

Something was coming…and once again it seemed to be centering on his friends in Erebor, for all that the twins tried to distract him with their foreknowledge of his mates.

Not that it was a bad try by any measure.

Harry’s curiosity wasn’t in any way absent or changed between having a new world to explore and
greater experience from, well, life.

He may still look like a young man – or half-elf – but he was over forty and still as cat-like in his curiosity as ever.

Though, fortunately, with all he had to learn from joining a new world and a new people, it had mostly been sated over the last decade on those opportunities, or at least enough to the point that he wasn’t going to rush out to (try) and track down Elrond’s sons or the Balrog Slayer or Legolas Thranduilion.

He hoped the Valar were pleased with his restraint.

His libido, now that he had names to go with the idea of his soulmates, wasn’t going to be.

“So,” Harry finally brought up the pink-elephant in the…well, not room, in the forest?, on the last day before they reached Dale as they made camp in the plains between the city and the eastern edge of the forest. “Are you two going to tell me what you’re really doing, or are you going to wait until the last possible second and pounce with it when it can cause me the most trouble and the greatest headache?”

“Oh, the latter naturally.” Elurín grinned brightly as a quick strike of his flint had the campfire flaring up.

“Much more fun, for us, that way.” Eluréd added cheekily.

“Fantastico.” Harry drawled, rolling his eyes exaggeratedly, then sighing. “I just love being kept in the dark by seers.”

“Oh, it’s nothing harmful, promise.” Eluréd assured him, reaching out and tugging at one of the dwarrow-style braids Harry had spelled his hair into once they left the eaves of the Greenwood.

“Rather the opposite, really.” Elurín agreed, patting his friend’s nearest knee. “You’ll see.”

“Somehow.” Harry sighed again, shaking his head ruefully. “I’m not reassured.”

Having seen for himself in their pranks and jokes on the more…pigheaded of Thranduil’s court what passed for the twin’s idea of a fun time, that was probably wise.

That they shared a sharp, knowing grin at his lack of complacency despite their words, likewise failed to be anything approaching comforting.

He didn’t know what was afoot, was half-convinced he didn’t want to know and the other half was certain that whatever it was he didn’t want anything to do with it.

But…if it included both his friends from Erebor or Dale and the presumed-dead sons of Dior Eluchil, he didn’t reasonably see how he could manage to avoid it.

…

Entering Erebor three days later to the sight of envoys from both Caras Galadhon and Imladris and Mithlond all awaiting audiences with Thorin, dragging the twins on his heels despite their words they’d only tagged along to visit Dale, he’d never wished to be more wrong in his life.

…”That’s the last of them settled.” With a heaving breath just shy of a sigh, Bilbo plopped down with
approximately zero grace into his favorite cushioned chair beside the comfortable hearth in the royal chambers, speaking to a small gathering of Thorin and the rest of the Company currently within the mountain, all children left with non-Company spouses – mainly Tauriel and Glóin’s and Bombur’s wives Ardís and Ahjo – as the appearance of more elven representatives in Erebor since Thorin’s coronation was a bit of an all-hand-on-deck matter. “Now, Harry,” Bilbo pinned his long-time friend who’d brought two of the representatives with him with a stern look that had gotten quite a lot of practice over the last decade between his husband’s nephews, his own children as well as those of the Company, and, well, Harry. “What by Yavanna’s green fields is going on?”

Harry grimaced, taking a sip of his spiced honey mead that Bombur – as the Head Chef of Erebor’s Royal Kitchens – always ensured was stocked.

“I don’t know.” He had to admit, then glanced meaningfully at where Fíli was rubbing a soothing hand over the burgeoning swell of Ori’s stomach, the dwarrow looking due for labor at any moment. Or like he’d swallowed a beach ball, but none of his friends would understand the reference. “But it has to do with foresight of some kind.” He winced at the looks the Company shot him, taking another drink. “I’d expect at least one or two Istari to wander in anywhen soon if so.”

There were almost more grumbles at that than there were over their new elvish guests.

“What do you say foresight?” Nori pounced on the operative word of Harry’s admission. “Have you seen something?”

“My powers don’t work that way.” He immediately denied, shooting down that line of questioning. “Never have had even the slightest spark of true Sight other than a sense for oncoming danger or instances of Change in the offing, even with the prescience that I’ve been given by being made peredhel.” His jaw worked a moment as he chewed on the inside of his cheek. “I say foresight because of both who I’ve brought with me and which elven strongholds have sent representatives: all with strong links to the Eldar and none of the strictly Avari held lands.”

“The Lady Arwen and Lord Erestor from Rivendell.” Bilbo mused thoughtfully, holding hands with Thorin and his beloved rubbing one callused thumb – from both the forge and the sword – rubbing over his knuckles. “Haldir the Marchwarden from Lorien, your friends from Greenwood.”

Harry nodded then shook his head to much confusion on the part of his friends, which he quickly cleared up with an explanation.

“Arwen Undómiel is representing her father Lord Elrond, that much is true.” He corrected the misinterpretation of his friend, though it was understandable enough to one who hadn’t been as well-schooled in the politics and connections of the various elven courts as Harry. None could say that Thranduil was an…inadequate instructor. “But Lord Erestor might serve as Elrond’s chief advisor and closest friend, however he is not – officially – a part of the Imladris court. Correctly, his is either Círdanion or Maglorion Erestor, depending on which parent he is using as his First-Name at the moment, and a representative of his first-father Círdan the Shipwright, lord of Mithlond and Steward of Lindon.”

“Ma-Maglorion?” Bilbo squeaked eyes wide.

Not that Harry could blame him.

With all the destruction and pain the Feänor and his infamous sons caused, each and every one of them lived in infamy, even with only Maglor, the gentlest of the brothers (not that that was saying all that much, all things considered), still living in Arda though to most his presence was as much myth and legend as the lost lands of Beleriand.
“Mmm.” Harry nodded in understanding as the dwarrow all caught up to what had Bilbo, by far the most learned in elvish lore of them all save Harry himself, shocked to the curls on his toes. “I would imagine those still living in Arda who know of Lord Erestor’s second-father’s name and relationship to Círdan – before now – numbered less than a dozen in total. Elrond and Elros were known to have been raised by Maglor, what was left out of the tale was that it was beside his own son by his husband Círdan, as the spouse of either of them somehow has never made it into songs.” A bit of a smile quirked up the edge of his mouth. “Time does that I suppose, as my fellow Champion Glorfindel could attest for all that his father is almost as infamous in Arda as he is but none think to connect the Balrog Slayer to Finrod, pass off his loyalty to Turgon as friendship rather than kinship between uncle and nephew, or that he willingly gave up the High Kingship of the Ñoldor to Turgon as he was quite young when his father was killed and then reembodied by the Valar to rejoin his mother in Valinor.”

“And how do you…?” Balin spluttered, fingers already itching for a quill and parchment and ink to record the information that his friend tossed out like it was nothing at all instead of quite startling indeed.

Harry arched a brow. “Thranduil is easily the third or fourth oldest living elf in Arda. Of course he told me all he knew of the other courts, especially figures so important as the envoy and Champion of the Valar, the Lord of the House of the Golden Flower of Gondolin and Erestor son of Maglor and the oldest elf living in Arda in Círdan the Shipwright.”

“We’ve gotten off point.” Thorin pointed out, though he tucked the information away just in case it came in useful another time when dealing with the tree-shaggers. “Foresight?”

“Arwen hasn’t her father’s or grandmother’s level of gift but has some,” Harry ticked off the envoys one by one. “But as Elrond’s gift is infamous as is Galadriel’s, we can move on from Arwen, Erestor, and Haldir. Which leaves my companions, nosy bastards that they are.” He noted with far too much affection for the others to dismiss the relationship – of whatever degree – that existed between Harry and the newcomers. “Both of whom have gifts which are significant and have been keeping mum on the reason that they’ve decided to be thorns in my side at the moment. Other than wishing to wander the wilds, only an event of import would pry them from their bower, they didn’t even accompany the Woodland host to the Battle of the Five Armies.” He added the last so the others would understand of just how important an event would have to be to get them to attend – other than out of sheer rampant curiosity anyway. He wasn’t the only one – fortunately or unfortunately he never could decide – stricken with that particular character trait.

“If the birth or marriage of an heir or a coronation didn’t garner such an attendance of important personages…” Kíli drawled, shifting restlessly. “What would?”

“I think we all have an idea of what would.” Ori whispered, looking down at his stomach and then up at his husband who looked alternately shocked, elated, and terrified at the implication.

“…but still the sunken stars appear,
In dark and windless Mirrormere.
There lies his crown in waters deep,
’til Durin wakes again from sleep.”

Harry sang softly, then joked: “Well, look at it this way, at least you don’t have to fight over naming this one.”
Based on the *looks* that got him, he didn’t think the soon-to-be-parents were *amused* at his attempt at levity.

Not in the *least*.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: Not all of these are applicable yet, but I thought I’d make life a little easier for everyone and copy the list of Harry’s names for you. Most if not all of the information I have here is from realelvish.net, including many of the names and their meanings.

Harry’s Elvish Names:
Elvish Naming Traditions: First-Name or Father-Name – Vanyarion (Son of the Vanyar)
Second-Name or Mother-Name – Berthon (He Who Dares, Sindarin)
Private Close Friends/Family Only Third-Name aka Chosen-Name – Cílon (Renewal, Sindar)
Fourth-Name or Nickname – Rávo (Free/Wild/Untamed) among Lórien and Imladris;
Belegur (Great Heart, Silvan/Sindar) Greenwood

Incognito with Aragorn: Carver, son of Cennan (Sindar for potter); similar glamor as with Bain but without scarring and his normal eyes instead of Weasley-blue

Earned-Name from the Men of Dale: Harry Cursebreaker or just Cursebreaker

Earned-Name from the dwarrow of Erebor: Harry Quickspear, one of the four Dragonbanes

Common title given to him: Blood-mage

Incognito with Bain: Harry, son of James; used a copy of Bill Weasley as his glamor

The Sword of Gryffindor: Eithadolen (Hidden sting/prick/bite etc.)

Elvish Names:
Legolas:
Elvish Naming Traditions: First-Name or Father-Name – Thranduilion
Second-Name or Mother-Name – Legolas (green-leaf)
Private Close Friends/Family Only Third-Name or Chosen-Name – Legolas (kept/used in honor of his mother)
Fourth-Name or Nickname – Green-Leaf, used only by Gandalf

Thranduil:
Elvish Naming Traditions: First-Name or Father-Name – Oropherion
Second-Name or Mother-Name – Thranduil (strong/vigorous spring, play on/reference to the rivers of his future home and his legendary strength and abilities as a warrior)
Private Close Friends/Family Only Third-Name or Chosen-Name – Vorondo (steadfast/faithful, referencing his protection of the Greenwood and its people as well as his love for his wife and children)
Fourth-Name or Nickname – None

Glorfindel:
Elvish Naming Traditions: First-Name or Father-Name – Fingonion
Second-Name or Mother-Name – Túrendur (servant of victory, referencing his mother's vision of his sacrifice to slay the Balrog)
Private Close Friends/Family Only Third-Name or Chosen-Name – Wahaiyo (far away one, referencing a vision of meeting his mate far away from the lands of his birth - Valinor - or where he ruled as Lord of the House of the Golden Flower in Gondolin)
Fourth-Name or Nickname – Glorfindel (golden-haired, given by his friend Ecthelion, a bit of a tease regarding his strong Vanyar blood)

Elladan:
Elvish Naming Traditions: First-Name or Father-Name – Elrondion
Second-Name or Mother-Name – Elladan
Private Close Friends/Family Only Third-Name or Chosen-Name – Elladan (kept/used in honor of his mother)
Fourth-Name or Nickname – ‘Dan (by Estel)

Elrohir:
Elvish Naming Traditions: First-Name or Father-Name – Elrondion
Second-Name or Mother-Name – Elrohir
Private Close Friends/Family Only Third-Name or Chosen-Name – Elrohir (kept/used in honor of his mother)
Fourth-Name or Nickname – ‘Ro’ (by Estel)

Elured:
Father-Name - Diorion
Mother-Name - Elured
Chosen-Name - None/Kept Elured
Fourth-Name (used when incognito) - Dollon (Hidden One, Sindarin)
Father-Name when Incognito - Elion (son of the Stars)

Elurin:
Father-Name - Diorion
Mother-Name - Elurin
Chosen-Name - None/Kept Elurin
Fourth-Name (used when incognito) - Dolenor (Secret One, Sindarin)
Father-Name when Incognito - Elion (son of the Stars)

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