## THE DARKENING OF IRKUOOD

## Chapter 1 - The Last Good Years

YEAR 2947 T.A.

the Golden and the expulsion of the Necromancer from Southern Mirkwood that a period of relative peace fell on the forest. The shadows retreated to the darkest corners and Men, Dwarves, and Elves were once more able to move throughout with little fear. It was as if Mirkwood Forest had awoken again after a great period of winter and all its inhabitants welcomed the new day.

It was Ceawin the Generous, son of Cayl, who in the first days of Spring called for the first Folk-moot since Erebor had fallen to the dragon. From his villages in the East Bight, the leader of those Free Peoples sent forth messengers to all of the realms of Mirkwood, save the south where the Shadow of Dol Guldur lingered, with invitation for the leaders of each realm to come to Rhosgobel. The folk of the East Bight having the safety now to grow and build anew wished an alliance with the Woodmen of western Mirkwood, Dale, Dorwinion, and also with the Dwarves of Erebor. Messengers were sent, too, to the Woodland Realm of Thranduil though it was unknown whether the Silvan Elves would hear the plea of these Men of the south.

With flowers blooming across the Mirkwood expanse, a quiet fell upon its people as they awaited to hear whether their leaders would travel, or send envoys in their name, to the land of Radagast the Brown to sit amongst this circle of neighbors and see if the whole of Mirkwood might be united.

Sputtered from the light rain that fell. Men and womenfolk sat around cook fires while rabbits, or other catches, sizzled on spits. The men spoke in low voices, puffing on pipes as they did, seeming hushed by the gloomy weather. The gathering was formed in a circle around which were the many camps of the envoys from the different regions where word had been sent. Tentown was what the congregation was being named and it swelled larger with each week that passed as more travelers arrived.

A better part of the first month of spring had passed since Ceawin had sent forth his summons. With the aid of Radagast the Brown, the word was carried by wing and foot to the far north of Mirkwood. The message was received by the King in Erebor, the men of Dale, and even to the lands of Dorwinion. Other envoys were sent to the lands of the Woodmen along the western eaves of Mirkwood, and many of the clans responded as evidenced by the growing size of Tent-town.

The news of the Folk-moot did not only bring those that were intended, but merchants and traders also followed the caravans as they moved south, east, or west towards Rhosgobel. It became evident that the gathering needed better leadership, as Ceawin was for the most part unknown to the men of Woodland Hall and Woodmen-town, though they were akin. So, it was Ingomer, of the House of Woodland Hall that took up the mantle of head of the council of elders. He saw to the organization of Tent-town and the encampments of each traveling clan. Laws were set by the council, for though this was a Folk-moot to debate the needs of the Woodmen of Mirkwood, there were still troubles that existed between the clans and not a few bouts were seen. Weapons were ordered to be carried only at need and only by those that were on station as sentries. This limited the fights to nothing more than fisticuffs and only wounded egos were the victims.

Ceawin and his company had been the first to arrive in Rhosgobel when the winter was finally releasing its grip on the forest. They had traveled the narrows of Mirkwood to the western eaves and brought tales both fearsome and enlightening. A gloom still clung to the southern end of the forest — those woods that surrounded Dol Guldur — and his people were afraid to move in that direction. Great spider webs and the remains of animals were seen at times wrapped within the trees. Other fears followed due to the legends of vampires and werewolves that were said to haunt the forest.

Though a seeming perilous journey, Ceawin and his folk had arrived safely and settled the first part of Tenttown. Through March and April, the other folks came and were coming still. From Mountain Hall came old and quarrelsome Hartfast, son of Hartmut. He led thirty

of his clan out of the Misty Mountains and over the Anduin to bring both tidings and to be part of the debate. Fridwald the Runner came from Woodmentown; Amaleoda, shieldmaiden of the Black Tarn came west with her folk; Targus, son of Feoll, came from Stoneyford; Bofri, son of Bofur, of Erebor was present though it had not yet been revealed if he was there as envoy for Dáin Ironfoot, King under the mountain; Orophin of the Silvan Elves and Thranduil's people; Grimbeorn of the Beornings; and so on. Even a Hobbit from the Shire-lands, far away, was present again in Mirkwood, though it was not the Folk-moot that had brought him so far afield. Still, the many clansman marveled at the young Hobbit and there was much laughter as Bandy would walk-about telling his tales. Last on the list, but certainly not the least was the mysterious wizard, Radagast the Brown. The Folk-moot was being held within the bounds of his lands, but he had yet to make any counsel to those that had gathered.

Bandy sat by one of the smouldering fires, which stayed alive due to the kindling that crackled around the thicker logs, but still the smoke from it filled the circle of log seats. He watched as a brace of coneys sizzled and darkened and his mouth watered. The young Hobbit found within the camp of Woodmen that it was the skills that you brought, not the coin in your purse that would get you fed here. Many times, he had

experienced what he thought as rude behavior from the large men who would not accept a coin for a leg of meat, or a cup of drink. Instead, the men would laugh and croak for him to go hunt his own food. Now he was enthralled by the two rabbits cooking, due to the pangs of hunger that raged within his stomach. Fortunately for the Hobbit, he had a stake in this meal after finally finding a friend who assisted in his procuring of food.

The youth on the opposite side of the fire, who slowly turned the spits, was named Arbogast. He was of Woodmen-town and had come to the Folk-moot in the company of Fridwald the Runner. His sire, Arbodag, had sent his son south to Rhosgobel so that he could bear witness to the councils of clans, and for the young man to be tested in all matters that related to the survival of Woodmen-town. Arbogast was quiet, where Bandy was as talkative as any good-natured Hobbit, and the young man would sit and listen to the stories that Bandobras Bracegirdle would weave of lands across far away mountains that rose to reach the mists in the sky.

All around them, other folk sat in the common ring of cook fires and spoke amongst themselves. Orophin of the Silvan Elves was a wonder for many to behold, even more so than the Hobbit, but yet he was visited by only a few. The superstitions of the Woodmen kept them at a distance to the Elf, though he was friendly to all. It was Grimbeorn who also sat alone that was more withdrawn than any other. The son of Beorn, who was a legend in the region, was a grim, opposing figure and he received the same attention as Orophin.

The companions' quiet thoughts were interrupted as Freda, daughter of Fridwald, and Munderic, her

cousin, approached. The girl was tall and thin, with auburn hair that hung in two braids to her shoulders. She had eyes that twinkled with the light of day and she made Arbogast stammer a hello at her arrival. If she heard him, she did not seem to notice. Instead she spoke over him, "My father has an errand that needs done. The Tent-town has filled so and the game in the local area of the forest has been shied away. He sent me to tell you to gather those that will accompany you and set out on a hunt. It would do well for our clan to have a deer brought down. Can you do that?"

Bandy looked at Freda, and then to Arbogast, and he wondered if he, too, would need go on this hunt, and would he be able to enjoy some of the beautiful rabbits that now sizzled over the fire. "I'll not be having first or second breakfast at this rate," he grumbled, puffing away harder on his pipe. "Adventures uncomfortable things." Surveying the strange faces of Tent-town, he felt more alone than ever since he left the Shire. The laughter that greeted his lame efforts to buy a meal still stung. He was thankful that Arbogast, quiet though he was, seemed open to friendship. "Songs and stories will only get me so far around here," he muttered to himself. "I'll have to pitch in and do my share." Noticing that the Elf Orophin and the Beorning, Grimbeorn, looked as lonely and out of place as himself, wondered Bandy if the outsiders might find companionship with each other. Nervous approaching one of the Fair Folk and the son of Beorn, Bandy leaned toward Arbogast and whispered, "I think I'll join this hunting expedition. We hobbits are pretty good shots, and I fear I need to prove myself with this

lot to make up for my rough start. Will you join me? Maybe I can return the favour," he said jabbing his pipe stem at the roasting rabbits Arbogast had caught earlier. "Let's invite Orophin and Grimbeorn to join us. They look as miserable as I feel and they may like having something to do."

Arbogast nodded slowly as he thought. There was no question of him not going on the hunt - he had been asked by a pretty girl, and could no more refuse to go than the snow could refuse to melt in spring. Rather, he thought about the odd fellowship that the Hobbit proposed. He was no great hunter himself, and his would-be dining companion seemed ill-prepared for such a venture. Still, he had heard marvelous tales of the Elves' prowess with their hunting bows, and the stony-faced Beorning was an unknown quantity.

In the end, he nodded again more decisively, stood up and fetched his axe and shield. It was a pity, he thought, that no-one here was likely to lend me a spear. My uncle bore this axe well, but it will serve me little for chasing deer! Out loud, he mused, "I have overheard the local folk talking of a nearby stream, seldom visited even by them. That may be an opportune place to begin our hunt."

Ever since Grimbeorn arrived with the envoy in tow, the people about him looked upon him either in awe or wary. He was in no way unfriendly to allies but his bearing and gruff (and notably rough) exterior were offputting. Soon he found himself alone on opposite sides of a campfire from an Elf of the Woodland Realm. He and his father had dealings with them from time to time

regarding trade or the safety of the north path of Mirkwood that ends at the Forest Gate. Not known for being overly talkative, he sat there in silence, brooding over the fire.

Hearing the Hobbit grumble, he smirked ever so slightly -- it reminded him of the story his father told him of the one that came to his home years ago, when he was young for Grimbeorn had been off with his mother to visit her folk at the time. The request for help did not go unnoticed and as he was restless to do something. Young though he was, he was nigh the stature of his father and the look. Standing and stretching, the Beorning youth towered over Arbogast as he came forth. "My axe is ready."

"The stream is as good a place as any to begin if we can locate it." Bandy immediately regrets his decision to join the hunting party. I can shoot an arrow straight and true when I have a melon for a target but I am no tracker or hunter. And how will I keep apace with the Big Folk? Well, what is done is done. I'm in over my head no doubt, but I'll have to make the best of it."

Trying to muster more confidence than he felt, Bandy turned to the Beorning, saying "And I shall join if you will have me. I may be small but you will find me useful. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Bandobras Bracegirdle but that is a mouthful. My friends call me Bandy. I hail from Harbottle. Perhaps you have heard of it ... in the Northfarthing ... of the Shire? And this," Bandy turned to Arbogast, "is my sturdy Woodman friend, Arbogast."

"Over your head no doubt," snorts Grimbeorn, looming over the halfling. "I am Grimbeorn. I've hunted

plenty -- a deer is no challenge. But if you are to join, then enough of this idle chatter lest you like your stomach be louder than your mouth."

"Come Grimbeorn," smiled Bandy, "mine is not the only empty stomach in Tent-town. Together let us go forth and bring back meat that will lighten the mood. Yet more than a sharp axe and steady hands are needed to bring down a deer. We need an archer. I will invite the elf to join us." Turning away from Grimbeorn, Bandy addressed Orophin. "Good Elf, you have a fine bow and I doubt not a keen eye. Will you join us in the hunt? As you and I are the only representatives of our kindred here, it might be pleasant to pass the time in each other's company. I am much interested in any news from the Woodland Kingdom."

Orophin grinned broadly at the hobbit, "I've been listening to your stories my friend. These folks may not see the value in them, but I'll be glad to trade my skill with a bow for the mirth you bring with the telling of your tales." He then leaned down to whisper conspiratorially in the hobbit's ear. "And have no fear, I've been in the company of men often of late, they all act this way when met with something outside their ken. It's a burden only for a short time, till they become more accustomed to our presence."

"You are kind and gracious and make me feel welcome. Until now I have not been further than Bree where the big folk are used to Hobbits. The men here are stout-hearted but grim. I shall heed your advice and judge neither too soon nor too harshly." Picking up his quiver and bow, Bandy added, "Fortunately you need not give up your bow as a light heart makes easy work.

Let us answer Freda's call." He slung his bow while humming a jaunty tune.

Orophin stood and, speaking loudly enough to be heard over the din of conversation, he announced his intentions to join the hunt. "My new friend and I would love to go hunting. My bow is at your service, lady Freda." Bandy bowed low.

As the impromptu fellowship made its way out of Tent-town, Arbogast kept one ear on his companions and another on the forest around them. As the smell of cooking fires faded, he let his lungs fill with the earthy, springtime scents of this wholesome part of the great wood. He followed small cues - hints of fresh water on the air, declines in the land and slight snatches of trickling sounds, towards the hidden spring. All the while, he kept alert for signs of game passing nearby.

Orophin, too, moved quietly through the dark forest looking for tracks in the soft dirt and other signs of deer on the nearby foliage. He stayed close to the group, within sight of them. The joy of being back in the forest after so many years filled him and he had a sudden urge to run and laugh and sing the songs of the forest that he could feel in his bones, but the task at hand kept him in check and he simply stood for a few moments near an old tree, breathing deeply the scent of the ancient woods.

Awed by the heavy silence of the forest, Bandy moved lightly through the trees keeping close to the rest of the group. The trees seemed more alive, more aware than the Northfarthing's domesticated woods and groves. Still he relished the feel of the soil and mosses underfoot, and the rich earthy scent of the

woods. With little experience hunting, Bandy left it to his more experienced companions to pick up the telltale signs of game, but his bow was at the ready.

Companions gathered their things and made to leave Tent-town. Those in need were bestowed with weapons that would be of use on the hunt, although primary weapons were not relinquished - across Grimbeorn's back, Bear Claw, hung heavily. But now, the northman held a large spear that would make easy work of a large animal.

Arbogast led off the group from the eaves of Mirkwood, where trees were sparse and the grey sky could be seen, into the denser wood. They marched and listened, some even taking a sniff of the air, which was heavy and humid. Rain pattered on the canopy of leaves above and the forest was astir with the clicks of tree frogs and insects. The woodman led the company sure footedly through the forest he had come to know over his lifetime. His home was further north of Rhosgobel, but Arbogast had spent his days walking under the boughs of Mirkwood. They followed a trail for a good length of time, while the sun crossed over the sky, behind the clouds, until at last they came to a stream. He knew the creek for what it was, though it had no true name. It ran a north-south direction, and Arbogast took the company north to the region of woods that were most familiar to him.

They talked quietly among themselves, all the while listening and watching for any movement. They kept the creek on their left and within sight as much as possible, but the land rose at times, or large trees or stones would block their path. Always though, with the skill of each, they made their way back to its gurgling track. Only Bandy was a true stranger to the forest and he marched in awe of its unending-ness, while he struggled to keep astride the men and elf, whose gaits were double his own. With the sun sitting in the afternoon sky and clouds breaking - though it was perceived more than seen - they came into a clearing. The creek's origins were from a large spring fed pool of water before them that sat below a green-mossy covered wall of stone. Rain water from above cascaded down and filled the area with a small roar. It was here that Arbogast knew that many herd animals would come to drink in relative safety - they need only wait.



Though the chatter between the hunters was sparse with long silences in between, Arbogast enjoyed it. After long years living within the bounds of his clan's homestead, Grimbeorn's idle mentions of his shapeshifting father and Orophin's snatches of song and talk of star-lit feasts fascinated him. Even Brandobas' mention of hobbit-holes, with their round doors, glazed windows and individual beds, sounded wildly exotic.

Someday, he decided, I'm going to sleep like that. A whole bed to myself, with a feather pillow under my head. Just once. Just to see what it's like.

He could not help but feel sorry when they reached the pool. He motioned for silence, mostly for the benefit of Bandobras. Then, in a hushed whisper, "Let's hope the rain holds like this. It's too light to chill us badly, but heavy enough to keep our scents from travelling far." He distributed some of the smoked meat he brought on the journey to Rhosgobel to the other hunters. It was the last food he had, but there was every chance that he would soon have more. Then he pointed out some places where they could hide and wait for game to come.

Following Arbogast's direction, the company found blinds for themselves. Thistle bushes, midge flies, and uncomfortable roots under their seats soon had Bandy grousing at their predicament. The Hobbit had ventured before from his home, but this was an altogether new experience. Orophin attempted to keep the mood light, but it was difficult while trying to keep silent.



Again, the hours passed, and darkness settled over the forest. Fortunately, the skies had cleared above and a full moon shone brightly casting a pale luminance over the forest. The change in temperature from muggy day to cool night had pockets of fog rising from the forest floor - ferns and other plants poked up out of the glowing mists. But, their wait had finally proven worthwhile for in the soft light four shapes could be seen cautiously approaching the stream. One was large and the rack on his head showed him to be a mature buck; the three that followed were most certainly his mate and offspring. The deer moved towards the fresh spring pool, all the while the buck's ears twitched, and his nose sniffed the night air.

Grimbeorn moved quickly and quietly, too, through the woods, easily maneuvering into position of their prey. His conversation with the others was significantly less than before leaving - not much more than grunts or an "aye" or "no", preferring to hold to the instruction given when he was younger -- keep as quiet as possible. Upon seeing their quarry, he brought spear to bear and steeled himself for the kill. Around the forest, the rest of the companions began to move, too.

Arbogast broke cover as silently as possible and snuck around the opposite side, hoping to surround their quarry. Bandy slipped forward with the light, silent footfalls of a Hobbit. His precise, deliberate movements betrayed no sign of his excitement and fear. As he moved into position to line up the doe, the pounding of his own heart filled his ears and beads of sweat formed on his forehead and neck. Seeing the others move through the trees, He drew the string to his ear.



The small group of deer advanced on the clear pool as Men, Elf and Hobbit slowly encircled them moving through scrub and hiding behind trees. The doe and her two fawn bent their necks to drink, while the buck stood at guard, his eyes searching about while his ears

twitched. The hunters moved as quietly as possible but there was a sudden snap of wood as Grimbeorn's great boot came down on a broken limb lying on the forest floor. The four deer were all up again scanning the trees around them that glowed with the foggy, ethereal light of the moon.

When the animals started, a laugh erupted from Orophin, his mirth getting the best of him due to the ungainly sounds of the Men around him. Still, the Elf winged three arrows even as the family of deer turned to sprint. There were two grunts from thrown weapons, and the whistle of a few more arrows, as the other companions joined the attack.

The missiles struck true - Orophin's arrows taking each deer in their flank. It was the buck that had drawn the most attention and it fell with a squeal into a growth of ferns, its family abandoning it for their own safety.

Seeing their quarry fall, the companions raced out of their blinds to assure the buck would not, or could not, regain its feet and disappear into the night. Arbogast and Grimbeorn found it breathing hard and struggling to rise. The two spears and one of Orophin's arrows were stuck in the animal. Grimbeorn carefully approached, dagger in hand, and put the beast out of its misery. Weapons were withdrawn from the deer and they all took a moment to rest - adrenaline had their hearts pumping from the joy of the hunt. Only Bandy came forward with shuffling feet, his demeanor sullen due to his inability to successfully hit any of the deer.

With their mood light and hearts calming, Arbogast drew his own dagger and the two men set about

cleaning the deer and prepping it for the travel back to camp. While working, he said, "I thank you, my newfound friends! My kin shall eat well when we return, and all of you shall share in what we have provided. For now, though, we should make camp - above the falls and away from the stream, for there are yet darker things in Mirkwood that must also find water. We can make our way back to Tent Town in the morning. None would be thankful for being woken in the night, even were we laden down with a beast apiece."

"Well done, indeed, to the three of you for bringing down the buck," added Bandy. "Arbogast's suggestion seems wise. He knows these woods best, and I do not fancy traveling through this forest at night. We should suspend the meat from a high branch so that no wild creatures can reach it. I will go in search of firewood."

"Either way, I care not. But if we stay, we must keep a watch -- I trust not to turn my back on these woods," admonished the Beorning.

Orophin smiled at the Beorning's concern, "It is a beautiful night to be beneath the boughs. Do not fear."

Espaluen sat still and quiet - even her breathing slowed to allow her to listen to every sound. The forest was full of them, even at night, though they could fade into the surroundings if you let them. Crickets and frogs all chirped and warbled, flying insects buzzed, and bats fluttered in the canopy above. The area and the forest was strange to her, though being in

such places was not. She was a Ranger out of Ithilien, from the south, and though she knew most every path there, here she needed to be careful lest the forest of Mirkwood take her.



Ithilien lay on the eastern edge of Gondor, across the Anduin River. Once it was the realm of the proud city of Minas Ithil, *Tower of the Rising Moon*, but now it was mostly deserted save for the Rangers of Ithilien who prowled the lands in search of nests of the Shadow. The terrors mostly stemmed from the fallen city, known as Minas Morgul since its capture almost a thousand years prior, and thus the Rangers of Ithilien were created. Made up of soldiers of Gondor, selected from the descendants of the people who had dwelt in Ithilien before it fell from Gondor's control, they dressed in camouflaging green and brown, and crossed the Anduin in secret to harass the forces of the Enemy in Gondor's old domain.

Now it was rumoured that a greater Shadow had reentered Mordor and it was said that it had come out of Mirkwood. Turgon, Steward of Gondor, had met with his council and it was ordered that a group of the Rangers of Ithilien - ten in total - would be sent north to Mirkwood to investigate the southern reaches of the forest and see if the rumours were true. Many tales had come south from Wilderland to Gondor - the death of the dragon, Smaug; a clash of five armies; whispers of sorcery from the Golden wood; and with it all had come south a great presence of Shadow. Turgon wanted information. Was it true, the whispers that Sauron the Great was not destroyed in the Last Alliance that dawned a new age? Surely the shadows of his might were still around, for it was they that threw down Minas Ithil. Turgon *needed* information.

Esgalwen and nine other companions set out from the Henneth Annûn in the latter part of February, when winter still clung to the lands. The time of year for travel was not ideal, but Turgon had been insistent, and the sturdiest of his warriors had been chosen. Three of her companions had died along the way - one had fallen through a crack in the ice of the Anduin, while they made a crossing; another had been torn down by a pack of wolves that had caught him alone; the third fell to orc arrows. The trail had been sad and long and none of the Rangers knew what they would find once they had reached Mirkwood. Would there be friends and allies? Some spoke of contacting the Elves of Lothlórien, but it was strongly urged against - the Lady of the Woods was to be feared.

With her six remaining companions, they had at last come to the southern reaches of Mirkwood. The land was fraught with shadows of evil and two more of her companions perished, the only evidence of their demise was thick webbings that stretched from tree to tree where they had lain. It spoke of the evil of Cirith Ungol in her own realm. Esgalwen and her remaining Rangers quickly moved north, skirting the southern forest and narrows, at last approaching the western eaves and the lands surrounding Rhosgobel. The snows had at last retreated to the highlands of the Anduin Vale and the Misty Mountains, and the Rangers could feel something in the air. They did not know what was about to happen, but it was apparent in the forest. One of her kin was an experienced animal-tamer and he could see that birds flew overhead with messages. They at last met people, Men of the Vale, who told them of Rhosgobel and a folk-moot that was to happen, and so the company of Rangers decided to seek out this Rhosgobel to make counsel with those who gathered. Unfortunately for Esgalwen and her companions, they would not make it.

A raiding party of orcs out of the narrows, set upon their encampment. The Rangers fought valiantly, but their numbers were few compared to the host of orcs. Esgalwen watched as Éothor, their leader, fell with a spear through his torso - a pile of many slain orcs at his feet. Then Rivuld and Morwain fell and she and her two remaining companions took refuge in the woods. The darkness of the forest separated them and though the clamour of battle continued behind, why she did not know. She ran and soon found herself alone.

That was four weeks ago. Now she sat in a tree.

Esgalwen did not know if she was the hunter or the hunted. She sat atop a low hanging branch of an oak tree that allowed her a better view of the forest floor

around her. All she had seen in the eerie light of the moon was a large, wide-backed creature, maned with coarse hair. It was not larger than a horse, but it would certainly take down a man - or woman. It's grunts and snorts had stopped when Esgalwen had taken refuge in the tree. Then there came the sound of a squeal some ways off to her left - to the west - and the thump of something falling. The Ranger's eye quickly noted movement in the gloom, the low fern-scrub shifting as whatever it was that hunted her moved off to investigate the new sounds of the night.

Bandobras moved off as the two men hauled the deer out of the ferns to a clear area of the forest floor. The hobbit had little knowledge of how to prep an animal though he loved to eat them. So, he figured he would help in what ways he could. He had no intention to go far, hoping instead that he would find easy kindling and wood along his path. Bandy was right as his arms began to fill with a stack.

With Grimbeorn's taciturn help, unmaking the deer went smoothly and quickly. Once done, Arbogast, true to his name, watched the dancing flames, enjoying the contrast between the cold behind him and the warmth on his face. His thought turned to the future and he found himself torn between a desire for the life he knew and a previously-unsuspected desire for a life with friends such as those now sharing his campfire - a life alongside Elves and great Men, and travelers from faroff lands.

Sitting before the fire with his back to a log, Bandy warmed his toes and surveyed his companions. The

events of the day played out in his mind. If the people back home could see me they'd think I am as queer a Mr. Baggins, he thought. Yet he trusted these people who were just this morning strangers. During the chase, they proved themselves to be generous, stouthearted, and trustworthy. With an ember from the fire, Bandy lit his pipe and drew on it thoughtfully. Then, as was his way, he began to weave the day's events into a simple rhyme that he muttered half aloud and half to himself. It always helped him remember until he could write it down. Looking up, he asked absentmindedly, "What rhymes with Grimbeorn?"

As he rhymed, Bandy tried desperately to clear his sinuses of the smell of blood and viscera that had reeked the area from the deer's dressing. Grimbeorn and Arbogast had been quick and efficient, and the Hobbit marveled at how little was wasted from the large mule deer. He knew that every bit of the animal would be used by the Woodmen. The stomach and bowel had been emptied, but the animal was now hung on a long branch for easy carrying. The rest of the work would be done in the village camp.

The Hobbit breathed deep of the smoke that came off the fire to clear his senses. It was not that Bandy did not enjoy a nice piece of venison crisped over a fire, or venison sausage with good spices, but that was after the meat was prepared. He took a long pull on his pipe and let the smoke roll out of his mouth - his companions began to settle around him and listened to his idle rhyme-making. The quiet calm of their evening was suddenly broken as the sound of a great snort and squeal filled the night.



Its name to the forest locals was Urska; some called it bloody-muzzle, and it had a terrible reputation in the western eaves of Mirkwood. The wild boar was huge. Some Woodmen claimed that it had been of the swine-herd of the Necromancer - those terrible beasts that both fed the evil sorcerer's armies, as well as served in its terrible ranks - which had been loosed on the forest to bring terror to the local folk. Other hunters and woodsmen spoke of the Bloody-muzzle as a beast that had just grown overly large and now dominated his own realm. These hunters prized the idea of bringing the great boar down.

Urska had been hungry and the smell of the female Ranger, all alone in the woods, had brought it out on the prowl. It was not a few man-folk that the Bloodymuzzle had killed, mostly small children that had strayed too far from the forest villages. But the death cry of the buck had caught the boar's attention - a fallen or injured animal was much easier prey than one of the two-legs - and so, Urska had turned to find its new feast.

The boar moved silently through the forest, a ruffle of fern the only mark of its passage, as it approached the new encampment of the companions. Arbogast and Grimbeorn had just finished washing their hands and arms in the crisp-waters of the pool when Urska espied the fire. The scent of the deer's death was heavy in its muzzle and it breathed deep. It did not see the carcass hanging a few feet off of the ground, it only saw the small figure of Bandy sitting quietly by the fire. The two men came and sat on logs near the Hobbit, when the Bloody-muzzle gave a sudden snort and squeal. Whatever the little thing was, the big two-legs would not have it.

The wild, monstrous boar charged.

"Oi! To arms! What is this beast?!" cried Grimbeorn.

Arbogast's axe was in his hand, as soon as he heard the great boar's squeal. He had heard such sounds before, though never so deep or so loud, and knew that it meant an oncoming charge with plenty of furious muscle behind. He fumbled with his shield and put the fire between himself and the beast. There was a chance, however slight, that some hot coals well-kicked into its face might break its charge for a vital moment.

Orophin's bow was in hand, arrow nocked and aimed at the squealing creature before it even broke through the underbrush.

It came out of the low scrub plants, in which it had hidden itself. The boar was huge, its shoulders meeting most of the Men at their belt. There was a thick, coarse mane of brown-black hair that wrapped its head and yellowed tusks jutted from Urska's mouth. The scent of blood was heavy in the air and the wild beast wanted to make a quick meal of whatever it could catch and carry away. The boar's eyes fell on Bandy, even as the young Hobbit stood behind his companions. Urska lowered its head and snorted deep as it charged - its tusks chomping in its strong jaws.

Bandy swallowed hard as the raging boar charged. Despite the presence of his comrades, he felt small and alone. Knowing that he might have only one chance, he drew the bow, took deliberate aim, and released. Standing next to his new hobbit friend Orophin let his bow sing as well. Before them both, the Men attacked with axe and shield.

Grimbeorn made a mighty roar to challenge the beast. The young warrior swung a mighty blow as Urska raged by him. The man danced out of the way to avoid being gored, even as his axe bit deep.

Urska maneuvered from Arbogast's swing only to grunt as Grimbeorn's wicked Bear Claw hacked into its flank. Still the boar had its intent to race through the encampment, snatching up its quarry along the way.

Orophin's arrow flew from the string only to tangle and stick in the beast's mane, but it was Bandy's shot that mattered. The young hobbit released his missile and it flew straight into Urska's left eye. The metal tipped shaft broke through the ocular socket of the boar's skull and into its brain.

Urska the Bloodymuzzle, terrible haunt of the surrounding woods, tripped and fell - its momentum causing it to slide a few feet across the forest floor. The lungs heaved twice, there was a shudder, and then it died. The companions all looked to their diminutive companion, his own face a look of panic, and they all smiled. Bandobras Bracegirdle had slain the beast!

Slack jawed and wide eyed, Bandy stared at the enormous and now motionless boar laying near his feet. Without taking his eyes off the beast, he slowly backed up a few steps and sat on a nearby log trying to comprehend what had just happened. He felt different and indescribably changed.

"Fierce in a pinch is what I've heard about your kind, halfling," grinned Grimbeorn and slapping bandy on the back so hard he fell off his log. Bandy, feeling himself being lifted back onto the log, snapped out of his reverie, smiled, and said, "I do feel fierce... or at least I did. Thank you, my friend, Bear Claw slowed the creature so I could get a good shot. Otherwise I might have been impaled on those fearsome tusks. What is this beast? I have never seen a boar so large. Do any of you have any knowledge of it?"

"Nay, I have only been this far south in the Vale once a few years past, accompanying my father to counsel with the Brown Wizard following the great mountain battle," reminisced the Beorning youth.

The mention of Radagast snapped Arbogast out of his battle-fueled stupor. Pointing to the fallen boar, he said, "The wizard *must* know of such an extraordinary

beast. If we brought it back to Rhosgobel, he could doubtless tell us more about it. Surely it the result of sorcery of some kind."

The four companions stood around the dead animal, the adrenaline slowly leaving their systems. It was then that the Elf noticed a figure standing just at the edge of the firelight - a cloaked figure with face hidden in shadow.

The figure had made no sound with its approach and all wondered about the dreaded wraiths that were spoken of that haunted areas of Mirkwood. But no, this fear was quickly abated as they saw it was a person underneath that robe.

"Look," Bandy hissed to the others, half raising his bow. "Stranger, identify yourself!"

Two hands came slowly from out of the shadowed cloak, empty and open - palms outward in a sign of nonaggression. A whispered voice, "Forgive my interruption of your encampment, but I feared for your safety, although my concern was ill-spent. Never have I seen a cleaner shot! May I enter your firelight and introduce myself?" The companions all had a look to one another and Orophin kept an arrow nocked to his bow, but the consensus was a series of nods. The silhouette was graceful and it was immediately apparent that this was a woman, as she stepped into the firelight. Her cloak was a shade of grey, or was it green - either way, it seemed to hide her outline with the wooded darkness

behind her. She pulled back her hood to reveal a stunningly, beautiful woman - tall and pale of skin with hair that was dark and hung long, but tightly woven in a braid.

"I am Esgalwen and if it is okay with you, I would like to take refuge within your camp this eve."

"Pretty words will get you far in some places but here your actions will be what is judged," grunted Grimbeorn. "Your honor and your life hangs on them."

Arbogast made some room for the new arrival around the fire, propping his axe and shield within easy reach. "I am the Fire-Watcher. The large man is Grimbeorn, son of Beorn the Skinchanger." He paused, trying to unobtrusively observe the condition of the young Ranger. "If you are hungry, I fancy we have more boar near to hand than any five people could manage."

Esgalwen gave the large man a nod, as the Fire-Watcher introduced the pair. "Thank you for the invitation. While I wish I may have opportunity to prove the worth of my sword arm, for tonight I must simply accept your hospitality." She found a place near the fire. "Some food, and drink should you have some, would be most welcome."

Orophin aimed his bow at the ground as the lady moved toward the fire. His suspicions not completely gone but somewhat relaxed. He sat on a log on the edge of the campsite away from the fire.

"I have had a troubled journey as since leaving my home to the south," the ranger began. "Ten of us left Gondor. The cold, orcs, and worse have humbled us low so that only I stand before you now. My business lies west a little... we were making our way to Rhosgobel."

Gondor! The name was yet another unexpected thrill for Arbogast, who had accepted the existence of Gondor upon Middle-earth in the same way he accepted the existence of the sun in the sky - with no expectation that it would ever be a place he might visit, or from which someone might visit him. Her long journey, though, unquestionably made Esgalwen a guest in the lands of the Woodmen, and with no other representatives of the folk in attendance, the sacred duty of hospitality fell to him.

"You are not far from your goal, then. We are a hunting party out of Rhosgobel, though of unusually mixed peoples, thanks to the folk-moot taking place there."

He thought for a second more, then followed his instinctive guess. "You have come to seek the counsel of the wizard Radagast, I take it?" I certainly can't think of another reason anyone would come here across all those empty miles, he thought.

The Elf inquired, "What darkness befell that ten rangers would have such difficulty on the road from Gondor? Surely my cousins in Lothlórien would have lent aid."

"I, too, would like to hear your tale, dark though it is," said Bandy, who wanted to know more before he extended his trust. Still, the Hobbit's courtesy remained strong even in the wilds of Mirkwood, "But excuse me, first you need refreshment, some food and drink to restore you." Bandy produced some venison skewered on a stick. "I also have some good South Farthing pipe weed, if the people of Gondor practice the art of smoking."

Esgalwen took the skewered meat from the ... half-man? The ranger had never laid eyes on a Hobbit before. Far too clean and fair for a goblin... a man accursed with dwarfism, perhaps... she wondered.

"Your hospitality gladdens my heart, and more so to hear that we are close to Rhosgobel," she allowed herself a moment to nourish her body with the food and drink offered before continuing. "My tale is dark indeed," she began finally. "Though, perhaps, no more tragic than for all good folk who walk these lands. My company set forth from Gondor in late February, while winter's icy chill still clung to the land. My lord sent us forth to these Wilderlands to find out the truth behind the increased presence of the Shadow that we find haunting our borders as of late.

"Eleven there were of us that travelled north. The mighty Anduin swallowed one through the ice soon after we left. Another was lost to a pack of wolves. The third to an orc shaft. Though we destroyed the orcs, the arrow was poisoned by the Shadow's dark arts.

"Yet still, we continued on. Two more were lost as we entered the southern eaves of the Great Woods. Though we saw not the foul creatures, surely, they were spawn of Ungol... evil spider-kin, for we found the telltale signs of their webbing.

"With only half our number remaining, we looked to skirt the southern woods and the narrows, coming north along the western eaves. Having met men of the vale along the way, we learned of the folk-moot happening near Rhosgobel and, with renewed hope, decide this would be the best place to gather news from these lands.

"But we were beset by a raid party of orcs during the night. And while we laid waste too many of our foes, still they had many more. My leader fell to an orc spear, and two more of my brethren were cut down, before the three of us who remained took refuge in the woods. In the darkness and chaos of the night, we were separated.

"That was nearly four weeks ago, and I fear now that my companions might not have eluded our foes. So, here I am now, the last of my company as far as I can tell, alone." The fair maiden looked around the fire, "save for your excellent company."

Putting his arrow back in its quiver and setting down his bow, Orophin had relaxed listening to the tale and now knew this was an ally. The shadow was obviously growing. "That is a sad tale. It's fortuitous that our group has come out into the forest for a hunt or you might have passed it completely in the dark wood. We plan to stay the night and walk back to the meeting place at first light if you'd care to join us."

The woman gave a vigorous nod.

Listening to Esgalwen, Bandy took pity on her plight, "A dark tale indeed, but let us not abandon all hope. Perhaps the Woodmen or the Brown Wizard will have word of your companions. We'll see tomorrow. But tonight, we must be on guard lest we are surprised again by more foul creatures. Let Esgalwen rest and I will take the first watch. My mind is restless and I will not be able to sleep."

"Excellent, I'll keep you company while you watch friend hobbit," said Orophin. "But surely it's not time to sleep yet. We have a warm fire and good company, is there not one among us that has a happy tale or a song to share?"

Grimbeorn didn't care for people just popping out of the woods, especially after encountering a fight -- too much of a coincidence. So, he just sat silently and watched the newcomer with an almost uncomfortable glare.

To the request for song, Bandy hesitantly stood and placed his hands behinds his back. He cleared his throat, "I know a ditty that is neither great music nor filled with high sentiments but it seems appropriate given our circumstances. I must apologize to my friend Elf, as this is a song sung far way in the Shire by ignorant people who know little of the fair folk.

If your skin you'd like to keep Stay away from Mirkwood deep Many go in, few return Except within a funeral urn

Come upon a spider web
It'll become your permanent bed
Elves are fair of voice and face
Men they keep in a dark, dank place

Ask the Dwarves about their stay They'll say it was drab and gray Orcs and goblins, ghosts and ghasts Will be thems who sees you last

Tho' the sorcerer has gone away He's left his evil spawn to play If your life you hold dear Away from Mirkwood you'll stay clear

In the silence that follows, Arbogast clears his throat, nervously, "A bit unfair to the Elves, perhaps, but otherwise not unlike what we Woodmen tell our young children. If we are to sing of things mostly unknown to us, perhaps I could follow? This is a song my father used to sing - our family legend is that it was taught to his grandmother by Radagast himself, though I have never had an opportunity to ask the wizard about it."

He lifted his voice. It was scratchy from disuse and his time-keeping left much to be desired, but the sense comes through strongly.

"I saw three ships go sailing by, Over the sea, the lifting sea. The wind rose in the morning sky, And one was rigged for a long journey.

The first ship turned toward the south, Over the sea, the running sea, The wind blew from great Manwë's mouth, And carried it to a rich country.

The second turned towards the north, Over the sea, the quaking sea, By and by a wind came forth, And the decks shone frostily.

The third ship drove towards the west,

Over the sea, the darkening sea. But by the wind was all possessed, And wandered wild and drunkenly.

The western sky rose high and black, Over the proud, unfruitful sea, North and south the ships came back, Happily, or unhappily.

But the third went far and wide, Into an unforgiving sea. Under a fire-spilling star, And it was rigged for a long journey."

The companions sat and more songs were sung and tales told of heroes, lost loves, and shadows that creeped out of the night. Some had them enthralled, as the tales were of different lands and deeds great and small, while others had them laughing and slapping knees. The mayor of Bywater being called The Ol' Root, because he was always prying into everyone's business! But eyes grew heavy and tongues tired and so the night passed quietly, the companions trading off the watch until the dark faded and the forest came alive with a new day.

With the sun above making the canopy a bright green, Grimbeorn and Arbogast lowered the deer and rigged a simple litter from two of their spears to carry the animal back to Tent-town. They had a long stretch to walk and none wanted to wait for the sun to get higher, for the forest would begin to swelter in its heat. The humidity from the prior day's rain was already

unbearable. With their new companion beside them, they started their march home. Conversation was hushed as they went, but the travel was uneventful.

By the time the sun had passed its mid-day and afternoon shadows began to stretch, the Company walked back into the village of tents. They could see at once that it had grown larger, as to the south a new, large pavilion of many colors and soft, thin fabrics had been raised. Banners of strange sorts fluttered and bronzed-skinned men with dark hair and long moustaches milled about. They carried spears and wore hats and vests of leather.

Upon seeing the companions, a great cry of pleasure went out due to their success and many of the men of Woodmen-town and Woodland Hall came to help. Bandobras marveled at so many large people and strange men - some wearing skins and with great beards, while others were dressed in breeches and tunics. There were many claps on his shoulder as the account of the boar was told to the passersby. Questions were asked if it was the *Bloody-muzzle* and many thanks were given that the beast was now dead.

The deer was moved to the Tent-town center where two thick, y-shaped limbs of wood were staved into the ground. The animal was set down, cut free, and then hoisted on a rope. From there, men that were well-learned in the cleaning of the animal went to work in stripping and dressing the deer. This pleased the companions, as they were tired from carrying their prize - especially Arbogast and Grimbeorn, though the larger man would never admit it. Instead, the small hunting

party were all treated to horns of ale with requests for a repeat of their story.

Freda strode into the camp's fire ring and saw the large buck, as the butchers skillfully pulled the skin. She beamed a smile at such a catch and lauded the companions, "What great hunters we have here! Such a fine catch! The camp will eat well for a good week." Around her, several HUZZAHS! peeled in the air. "I have told my father of your success, Arbogast, and he is proud of the skills you have shown. It is his wish that you and your friends take on the permanent task by joining the camp hunters and messengers, for surely your feet know well the paths of the wood."

Esgalwen looked from face to face in search of any that might be familiar - a face of a friend that was lost nigh four weeks past. She gave a sigh of concession to the fact that she might be the only survivor of her own company out of Ithilien. Bandy, ever the light-hearted fellow, could see the look on the Gondorian's face and he moved to her side. It was then that the Hobbit noticed a new face of his own - standing on the periphery of the ring of onlookers was a new Dwarf. Bofri, son of Bofur, had come south from Erebor but this new fellow had not been amongst his entourage. The Hobbit's interests were piqued.

Freda continued, "My father Fridwald has announced a feast in all of your honor this night!" She turned to all of those gathered, "THE BLOODY-MUZZLE IS SLAIN!" Again, a chorus of HUZZAHS! Orophin wondered at the comment - was he?

With that, everyone began to break up and separate to their own tasks. Bandobras' shoulder aching

once more as those that passed him by clapped him there again.



Gondorian woman noted that no flags flew the southern country's colours. Esgalwen tried not to despair, though she felt nearly certain that, had any of her companions lasted that fateful night four weeks ago, they would have surely arrived before her. She marveled for a moment on how she still lived, while

those with far greater experience and wisdom had perished.

When Freda finished speaking to the camp and Esgalwen realized that it might be days yet before the folk-moot began in earnest, the southern ranger thought perhaps this woodsman's daughter may have heard news of her companions. If not, perhaps Freda might direct her to those she might press for knowledge.

Freda stopped when she was hailed by the southron woman. She nodded at Esgalwen's approach and listened intently to her tale.

"I have heard no news of your folk, lady. Though the wood is a strange place and not even the Brown Wizard can guess all its ways. You are free to join the parties that range from the camp in order to find a sign of your companions and I will pass the word to the others who come and go on the camps business. I will say, greater knowledge will be gained from the voices of many very soon and no doubt the council will speak with greater insight than I. Your story and the reason for your coming should be heard, as well. All who have come in peace should be heard."

Esgalwen gave Freda a courteous nod. "Thank you, m'lady. I shall do as you have suggested and am most grateful of your passing word along of my companions. One more question, if I may trouble you a moment longer...how long before the folk-moot begins?"

Freda looked at the sky, "I do not know, but soon I should expect. I will tell you, Greenwood can be tricky. Even those who know its paths may be separated from kith and kin, and such things are not certain to end in

tragedy for those who keep their wits." The woman paused to see if the Gondorian had any other needs, but then added reassuringly, "I am sure your folk will arrive soon, and they will be well."

Esgalwen nodded at her assertion but felt in her heart differently. She watched as Freda walked away to set about other business of keeping the growing throng organized and fed until the council.



News of the Bloody-Muzzle's slaying spread rapidly through Tent-town, but as ever, the details quickly became confused. Within the hour, Arbogast

found himself trying to play down the premature lionization of himself and Grimbeorn as the beast's killers.

"No! I tell you in truth, we were both ready to fight the boar - the Beorning perhaps more than I - but had we never deigned to lift our weapons the outcome would have been the same. The Halfling's hands were steady, and his aim was true, and within seconds the beast was dead. I know well that I am a young man, but I fancy I may live the rest of my days without ever seeing another shot like it!"

Mildly drunk on ale and adulation, he failed to see the effect his words had on his kinfolk. He had yet to prove himself in any significant way to the Woodmen, and this sudden closeness with foreigners - with an Elf, no less, and with the strange Hobbit from the west - had begun to draw the ire of the more insular and untrusting of his people. While he enjoyed the praise of Freda and the smiles of the other maidens of Tenttown, Arbogast's reputation was crumbling behind his back.

Impressed with the shot made by the Hobbit, Grimbeorn thought it more luck than skill. The young Beorning grew tired of the ongoing praise and decided it was time to get fresh air. He needed to speak to others, anyway.

Overwhelmed and intoxicated by the Woodmen's attention, Bandy indulged the crowd and, if truth be told, his own swelling pride by recounting the hunt and the battle with Bloody Muzzle. Although often interrupted by queries for more detail, Bandy told the story in full, omitting nothing of importance. Indeed, he

extolled his friends' skills in tracking and hunting and made self-deprecating jokes about how, when the deer came into sight, his own arrows flew wide of the mark. Still the Woodmen only wanted to know about the shot that brought down Bloody Muzzle. A growing sense of unease began to creep over him.

Looking up to locate the source of some noise beyond the throng, Bandy saw his friends dispersing through the crowd. Grimbeorn wore a disapproving look and Arbogast appeared downcast. He suddenly felt the urge to disappear and get away from the curious onlookers who called on the Halfling to tell the story again. Bandy found the attention disagreeable.

"Halfling? Halfling! I am a Hobbit, not simply half a man, thank you very much," he grumbled to himself. But to the Woodmen he was politer. "Thank you, thank you for your attention dear hosts, but it has been a long night and I see someone I must speak with."

The Hobbit waded into the crowd, which given his size nearly swallowed him up, and wound his way toward a strange Dwarf newcomer standing apart.

Approaching the Dwarf, Bandy composed himself and gave a low bow. In Dwarven fashion he said, "Bandobras Bracegirdle at your service. I could not help noticing that you are new to camp and I did not see you arrive with Bofri. I wanted to introduce myself as I know what it is like to be a stranger here."

CRINOCORN moved through the crowd of woodmen, women, and even the small children that had accompanied the trains to Rhosgobel. He made his way to the large central pavilion and pushed his way inside. He was large, like his father and so stood blocking the daylight that came through the tent opening. He was acknowledged by a man in a hat that looked book learned, an untrustworthy trait to the Beorning, and was shown to the Master of the encampment - Ingomer.



Ingomer, too, was tall and of strength. Older than Grimbeorn, he was not a clan leader, as the woodmen of Woodland Hall did not have rulers - instead their voices were heard in council - but many deferred to the large man. Though he lived a simple life, Ingomer was wise in the world that he lived. His eyes were cobalt and his long hair hung in a braid. A scar was visible on his face and his beard did not grow full due to the ruined tissue.

Grimbeorn presented himself and then in a gruff voice, "My home is my business and I wish to conclude this and return with tidings to my father with due haste. The shadows at our borders do not rest while I am here. For what do we wait?"

Ingomer listened quietly and politely acknowledged the Beorning, "T'is true that we are all needed back at our homes, Grimbeorn, but we cannot yet call the moot. Folks are still arriving - just two days past, strange men of Dorwinion came with their colorful silks and strange banners. We expect that the moot will commence with the summer solstice, and so wait we must, so that all may be represented. Beorn is well-known to us all and surely his counsels are welcome here, but patience must be observed. This is the first moot of the Men of Wilderland since before the dragon came to the mountain in the north, and so it will not be rushed. We all would be gracious for your presence, but the road is free and Grimbeorn of the Beornings must do as he must.

"If you stay, then you will be a part of this council and assist with tasks needed by clan leaders, as I understand Fridwald has already assigned. But if your folk need your return, then best be on your way."

Ingomer fell silent and waited for a response. He knew of the temperament of the Beornings and hoped there was no offense, but either way, he would not let any representative of any clan make demands on them all.

The reason spoken by Ingomer was not lost upon Grimbeorn, but it did not lessen his irritation. He grudgingly acquiesced to the man's request, "Aye, I recall. My father wishes for me to remain, yet I feel time is wasting while we dawdle in feast and wine. I will await your call, Ingomer." Remembering some semblance of manners, he gave his elder a sign of respect, "Thank you for seeing me."

The Beorning youth returned to sounds and smells of song and fire. Grabbing some food, he rested once again at the log and fire that had become his temporary home away from home. A restlessness grew in the lad once he had his fill, so he sought out those hunters and messengers he was so cavalierly assigned to a task.

Rorin had arrived at Tent Town without incident but fatigued from his journey. He begrudgingly handed over his hammer at the entrance and began his search for ale. He was amazed at the variety of folk that had gathered in this so-called town and noted that he had not seen this diverse a gathering since the Battle of the Five Armies. He hoped that the gathering was not a sign

of an approaching darkness, but if the rumors were to be believed...then his hopes may be in vain.



The Dwarf shook such thoughts from his head as he heard the cheering of a crowd in the distance. By the time he made his way to the commotion the smell of venison was thick in the air and his stomach rumbled in eager protest. Just as he was beginning to conjure a plan to get his hands on some of the meat a tiny Hobbit appeared out of nowhere and bowed to him. He was momentarily shocked at this unexpected event but recovered and replied in kind.

"Rorin, son of Barin, at yours. I thank thee, master Hobbit, I had not thought to meet one o' your kind here. I have heard rumors that one such as yourself brought down the great pig. Is there any truth to such stories? I know full well of the courage of Hobbits and the thought of one of you claiming the kill that the Elves could not, brings me great joy."

"Ah yes, it was me who killed Bloody Muzzle," Bandy admitted feeling embarrassed by his earlier bragging. 'Although I was motivated more by self-preservation than bravery," he added quickly. "I crave neither battle nor glory, a good thing given my size," he said laughing.

"I am glad to make your acquaintance and take comfort in your presence here. You see I am a kinsman, a distant relation really, of Mr. Baggins, who speaks often and well of the people under the mountain. So, although you are the first Dwarf I have ever met, I feel as though your people are familiar to me. I hope you are not insulted by my saying so. A person in the world alone will seek the familiar where he can. My company includes a Woodman, a Beorning, a mysterious southerner, from Gondor I think, and an Elf - a motley band to be sure but good and doughty people, all."

"So master Rorin, what brings you so far from your home? If it is a long tale and you have the time, perhaps we can locate some ale and find quiet corner."

"Aye, t'is a long tale indeed Bandobras, but any kin of Mr. Bilbo is a friend of mine! Come, let us drink!"

Rorin lead Bandy back to where he had set up camp on the outskirts of the main Dwarven camp. It lacked the finery of the official pavilion but was comfortable enough to call home for some time. "Because you asked nicely master Hobbit, I will give you my own tale first. But I very much wish to know what business Bandobras of the Shire has with this moot."

With a frothy tankard in hand, he continued. "My own tale begins in the Iron Hills where I grew up. I was apprentice to my father, Barin the Kiln Master, for as long as I can remember. But one day the thrushes brought news that Thorin Oakenshield and a small company had retaken the Lonely Mountain from the Fire Drake and that Dain II was to muster a force to bolster his claim. My father and I had always spoken of someday travelling to see the remains of Erebor, though we never dreamt of being able to set foot within those halls, so when the chance came for our people to reclaim our home, we decided to ride out with the King.

"As I'm sure you know, what occurred that day came to be known as The Battle of the Five Armies," Rorin paused and drank deeply of his tankard. "...and it was the bloodiest business I've ever witnessed. My father and I fought alongside our kin until he was felled by an orc blade. He died there on the steps of old Erebor and was never able to see his childhood home reclaimed. I stayed at the Mountain for some time rekindling the forge fires and helping rebuild what was lost, but my father's ghost haunts me in those halls and I could not stay.

"Word reached my ears of this great moot and I chose to leave Erebor and see what services I could render in a place such as this. In my experience, there is always use for a large hammer and strong arms to wield it!"

"Rorin, your tale fills me with sorrow," said Bandy. "Even so great a deed as the retaking of Erebor cannot compensate you for the loss of your father. Fight we must when called upon, but folly it is to romanticize war and ennoble the warrior. May you find peace wherever this road takes you. I predict that like Bilbo and Thorin, we will share that road at least for a while. Bloody Muzzle's attack, Esgalwen's strange appearance and unhappy story, and now your own sad tale seems inexplicably connected and that we all have been drawn to this place for some purpose I cannot divine. Such speculation is best left to wizards, does it not?"

Rorin smiled broadly under his beard and poured Bandy and himself another cup of ale. "Aye, it does. Enough of me, what brings the unlikely Mr. Bandobras to this town? And why does a hobbit who craves no battle nor glory travel this far from his hole to slay dark beasts who bring terror to the forest?"

Bandy smiled at the question, "Although my leaving the Shire has doubtless scandalized several hobbits, you will find my reasons altogether prosaic. You see I am a historian and I want to learn about hobbits out in the wider world. It is said we have not always inhabited the Shire but arrived there from the east, and I hope to discover some evidence from our wandering years. I am also interested in gathering some eyewitness accounts of Mr. Baggins exploits, you know to expand upon and round his story. A good historian does not rely on only one source. So here I am, but I must confess that so much has happened to me since my arrival I have not thought to ask a single question about hobbits in general, or Mr. Baggins in particular. Perhaps I will go

with you to Erebor one day to speak with the surviving members of the original company."

"Should our roads lie together for some time Mr. Bandobras, I would be pleased to hear the tales of the Shire from one as learned as yourself."

"And I am eager to learn more about Erebor and what has happened there since Dain became king under the mountain. I should look for my companions. Do you care to join me?"

Rorin nodded and they set off into the throng of gathered people.



Twas with a heavy heart, his worst fears confirmed about creatures coming from the southern forest, that Orophin walked back into the camp. As his companions dispersed throughout the crowd to tell tales of heroism and their great deeds, the Elf sought out Radagast for his council on what they had found.

The Elf recognized readily enough the location of the Brown Wizard's home. Within the enclosure near the great hall stood a copse of old trees. The trees were old to the Elf, they were in fact old even for Greenwood the Great.

Making for the Great Hall, the Elf spied the white stones that led away from the door and into the woods. Taking up the path, Orophin observed the trees grew closer and the long grass that grew up around the white stones, was untended and uneaten by the grazing livestock of the community.

When the elf looked up again, he was surprised to see he was back where he started, and the woods were no closer, though he had been moving the whole time. With a frown he continued and again he was no closer. Realization struck him that the magus of the wood was much stronger than the Elf had given him credit. The Wood Elf never would have thought the wizard capable of confusing one of the Eldar, but he had. Orophin experienced something akin to the Girdle of Melian that had once bound Doriath of old.

Looking away from the white rocks the Elf saw a small field mouse watching him. Speaking in the ancient tongue of the Sindar, he addressed the mouse, "Little master, it appears I have been prideful, would you take me to see the Master of the Wood? I desire to speak with him."

With a twitch of its nose hairs, the mouse nodded and took off down the path for Orophin to follow. On this attempt the Elf passed into the ancient trees. A few moments passed, and the mouse stopped, turned, and ran up and over a great root. Following it with his eyes, Orophin now saw the house before him. The structure was elvish, mannish, and something else entirely, all at the same time. It was fitting and belonged to the wood in which it rested.

Entering, a multitude of animals looked up to see the Elf; sitting among them was an old man shrouded apparently by the tree itself. His clothing was so soiled, and the hat so bent that he appeared almost as part of the tree. The eyes however were staring straight at Orophin and were shockingly green...or sky blue; perhaps even grey. As he concentrated on determining the color, the lichen twitched, and a mouth moved. Here was Aiwendil, one of the Ithryn, still at work in the lands of Middle-earth, and he was conversing with a salamander. While Orophin watched, the salamander scurried down the wizard's hand and up his sleeve. The crystal, clear voice was strong and deep, and he spoke Sindarin, "Yes, what is it? I see you there First Born. Not all my companions have your allotment of days to stand and not come to a point, and their messages and aid is most pressing to them."

"Your eyes are keen, Master Radagast - as is your mana, for surely it is power indeed to misguide the feet of a Silvan Elf, folk who have walked these woods since

the First Age. We knew every trail and stream. But as you say, time is pressing, and Men and others do not count the days same as an Elf.

"I come to you regarding our find on the hunting trail. The Woodmen speak of legends and shadows of terror, but we know whence the true Shadow came and its taint on the Greenwood. Yestereve, the Hobbit, Bandobras, was fortunate, as his arrow struck the right eye and bore deep into a great wild pig. Had he failed, I am not sure if our young friend would still be among us, for the beast's intent was upon him.

"The animal was of no natural kind. It was large and powerful, and full of a malice that stems from something beyond a need to hunt and eat. This beast was first tracking a new arrival, Esgalwen, a Ranger out of Ithilien. It must have been the scent of our own kill that drew the boar's attention to us, but as I say, it was not the intent of the creature to make off with our deer. It came to kill on its own.

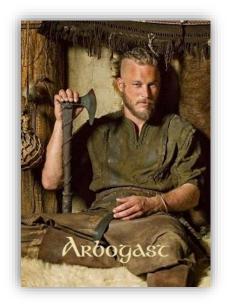
"The Ranger also spoke of orc raiders that slayed her companions. I fear that, though the Necromancer has been driven from the forest, that his will and malice still bear down upon us. His machinations are still in place to forestall, if not destroy, our efforts to form an alliance of the Folk of Mirkwood and its surrounds. Do you feel this within the wood? Should we warn Ingomer and Ceawin of this potential threat? What should happen if all the great leaders of the clans are gathered here within your realm, and their own homes are attacked? What if we are set upon and leave the Woodmen with no leadership?" Orophin sighed, "I know this is much to assume from naught more than an

encounter with a great beast of the wood, but I would be remiss if I did not speak it and seek your council."

The wizard pondered the Elf's words and tone and his own demeanor softened. "Yes, you speak truly. The enemy is at work in all things. The great council of the wise has often thought to strike the Enemy where he has assembled armies, and where he has worked dark magic. This foe, however, is but the servant of a greater enemy. I will not name him, but you know of whom I speak. This foe has done much more than unleash his foul war bands upon Elves, Men, and Dwarves. In the very making of the world, he sowed discord into the earth. Even the beasts and the plants have their foes due to his malice and hate. Some work alone, some work at the hand and the bidding of our current Enemy; some others do his will but are unaware. I am unable to say for certain into which category we should place the boar. Perhaps, more information on what transpired with the woman from the south would give us greater insight into whether the beast came by chance, or by design.

"As for the moot, I did not summon it, though I am sure none will give me a moment's peace if I do not appear and look contemplative. The Shadow is abroad in Greenwood, master Elf, we are seeing but the new growing shoots of its malice, and the roots are still hidden. The folk of the woods have a chance to work together and grow stronger before the storm comes again. As for attacks, not the snail, the bird, or the tree are immune to predators. Each must look to themselves and to those who are willing to aid them. All who are friends should meet and exchange news and burdens so

that common ground can be found. That is as good a reason as any to assemble. I suppose I should tell the Clan heads I am ready for their meeting."



LRCda was wrong with her statement regarding the companions' deer - it did not feed the camp for the week. It was used up mostly that night due to her father's decree of a feast in the honor of the group that had gone out to hunt. The evening celebration had been blissful, if not a squander of the small, impermanent tent town's supplies, but it brought a feeling of camaraderie to the people and boosted morale. Many

songs had been sung, contests of strength and wits, and other festivities.

Esgalwen had enjoyed the simpler pleasures of the woodland-folk - log-splitting and tree climb races - wishing for such a time to return to the city of Minas Tirith. A time when the threat of Minas Morgul, or worse, Mordor was not pressing on its people and their spirits. But wasn't this the purpose of this gathering? Hadn't a great shadow been removed from southern Mirkwood not long ago, and a dragon slain in the north? Surely this gave reason for these people to gather and celebrate, and to see what kind of alliances could now be formed. The Ranger thought of the shadow that was purported to be driven out and now the rumblings of the Great Shadow returning to Mordor - for Mount Doom had erupted - a harbinger of His return. Was this the same shadow, she wondered?

The night of celebration passed and with it came the need for more hunting and gathering. The spring was moving into summer and so the forest was a'bloom with many berries and fruits that the woodland-folk needed. The companions were tasked with these missions, as was mandated with their first success. They would go out with basket and bow - or spear - to garner anything they could find from the forest's bounty. But, as the tent-town grew with more folk, so too did the distance of their ranging.

And so the weeks passed.

The companions were now six in number, for the Dwarf, Rorin, had developed a good relationship with the diminutive Hobbit. It seemed that being far from home was a commonality that they both could cling to

and grow a friendship - along with food and spirits. It had been a challenge, though, for the Men and Elf to finally talk the Dwarf into unlimbering his armor when they would go out to hunt, as the clink of his mail was loud along with his heavy booted feet. It was most times that the companions would just ask Rorin to wait at camp and *hold the fort*. A task that even the Dwarf found himself better suited.

Today, though, the group were all together as they strode west into the forest deep. Each carried a basket, along with their weapons, for gathering anything that could be used. Arbogast had led them further west and south then he had ever done in the past, and the forest weighed heavy on them all. The heat of summer hung thick under the canopy of leaves, where the breeze seldom blew, and bugs buzzed in their faces creating a greater nuisance. They quietly grumbled to themselves about the task, about the forest, and even about each other, when suddenly the trees opened on a gurgling, brown-blue river. They all walked to where the bank was thick with bramble bushes, and other plant-life that clung to its sides. Looking south, the companions saw the river run out into a great expanse of water - the Black Tarn. A lake that was said to be enchanted. Bandy remembered that one of the clans had come from this area lead by Amaleoda, the Shield-maiden.

The group breathed in the fresh air and enjoyed the breeze that now blew across the water. Still, large flies and dragonflies danced about the air. Orophin knelt to put his hand in the water. It was cool and pleasant, and the Elf thought of his own northern home, and the river that ran through the King's Hall. The Silvan Elf suddenly

jumped with a start, as a man erupted from the foliage. The thorns and thistles dragged at his clothes and had torn at his flesh. He stumbled towards them, his face pale as a ghost and yellow-flecked spit welling up from the corners of his mouth. Orophin barely had the time to balance on his own two feet when the man collapsed into his arms, bearing them both to the ground.



Arbogast immediately recognized the man, even as the Elf rolled him off of himself and tried and make him comfortable. His name was Beran the Watchful; he was a Woodman and was known as one of Radagast's watchmen. Orophin felt a parchment crumpled into his hand and then Beran fell into unconsciousness. His form limp, the companions could now see where more than four nasty looking wounds were spread about the Woodman's torso and legs. The stabs were grouped

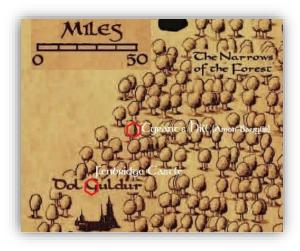
closely in two's and were each the size of a small coinclean and deep. A dreadful smell came from the punctures.

The Elf handed the parchment to Arbogast who saw a scrawl of words upon it. The Woodman read the words allowed...

These words of mine, Beran of Rhosgobel, must reach Master Radagast!

Orcs in Fenbridge Castle! One of the outlying fortifications of Dol Guldur that The Enemy abandoned after the White Council drove the Necromancer away, but now the Orcs have returned!

At the bottom of the page was a crudely drawn map that showed the castle's location near the Narrows.



Arbogast glanced at the parchment long enough to understand its meaning, then thrust it quickly back to Orophin. "Show the others," he said, matter-of-factly.

His attention was already turning to Beran's wounds. That they were orc-work was beyond doubt, and the state of them clearly indicated poison, but there was yet something the younger man could do for the elder. Without looking up from the man on the ground, he called out, "Esgalwen, bring fresh water, quickly! Rorin, Grimbeorn, be ready to help me move him. This man is my kinsman, and I shall do what I can to help him, but I do not doubt that his survival will depend on us returning him to Rhosgobel and to Radagast!"

Grimbeorn had also been startled to see the man fall out of the woods -- only out of sheer will did he stay his hand at the surprise. He listened to the words of the note and rage began to well in his chest. "Orc scum!" he bellowed. "If we are to move at best speed, I will carry him. Rorin, we will need your hammer at the ready in case further surprises befall us."

Rorin, whose nerves were already worn thin from trekking through the seemingly endless forest, had raised his hammer to attack the instant Beran had fallen out of the brush. But as it became clear that this poor man was no threat he turned his eyes outward and began to look for any more violent surprises.

As he heard Arbogast read the note, the forest seemed to close in around the group and shadows of threats could be seen behind every tree and under every bush. Arbogast began barking orders and Rorin exchanged a knowing glance with Grimbeorn. "Aye, we must make haste. Pray that we are not beset upon, but if we are, my hammer is ready."

Rorin noticed Bandy standing completely still and staring at the Woodsman's wounds and put a hand on his shoulder. "Come good Bandy, it is best not to dwell on such things. The elf and the woodsman will be busy tending to our new friend here, we will need your keen eyes to warn us of any new dangers. Take a moment now to gather your strength, the trek back to the Tent Town will not be easy." He broke a loaf of bread and handed half of it to the hobbit then bit into his own.

"Uh ... what?" Bandy, still dazed by the surprise and sudden horror, could barely take his eyes from the man who lay unconscious before him. The feel of Rorin's hand on his shoulder and the sound of his reassuring voice broke the spell and he turned and took the bread. "Thank you, my friend." Then, after a pause, "Rorin, look at those wounds. Whatever made them – it was no sword or spear. The punctures are nearly perfect and made in pairs. I do not think orcs are responsible for this, or if they were, they were in league with something darker and more foul. These woods are tainted by shadow. Let us make haste to Rhosgobel. I will gladly carry the equipment of any who must support Beran."

Orophin looked to Bandy and then back at the body of Beran, "He's right! These are not punctures from blade or arrow, but those of a beast. These are bites." The Elf then grabbed at Beran's tunic only to then look at his own. He pulled at silken fibers that clung to the man's arms and clothes. "Webs?"

The strands were tacky, like that of any spider's weave, but they were thicker and hardier than any Orophin had ever seen before. "Cursed creatures!" he spat. "We have had many troubles with dealing with spiders. It seems that our friend here was unfortunate enough to run into some while'st alone. It is a wonder he survived." The Silvan Elf marveled again at the resilience of Men. Though short of life, they were certainly made of sturdy stuff.

The Beorning youth spat and cursed at the mention of spiders. "I have met and dealt with too many of that kind than I care to count. Let me know if you need any assistance as I, too, have some expertise in ministering wounds of this nature. Tis indeed a wonder he survived...the creatures play at sport, trapping their prey in cunning traps that are nearly impossible to escape."

Hearing his companions' thoughts on the type of wounds and smelling the dreadful odor with each, Arbogast knew that if it were poison, it must be leeched from the man's body. He looked about for anything that might aid, and he remembered the old wives around his home telling of poultices and wraps for various wounds from snake bites to axe cuts. *Moss*, he remembered excitedly. Arbogast pointed to the side of the river where the stuff grew in abundance and his friends quickly gathered what they could. The Woodman was skilled in some healing and even carried his own small pouch of healing agents - alone in the woods, you always needed to be prepared. As he pulled the pouch from his pack, he told Orophin to pack the wounds with

the spongy plants. He hoped that they would serve to draw the poison from the wounds.

Grimbeorn and Rorin took up a stance of defense around their friends.

They administered to Beran for more than an hour of the sun's passing and at last the Woodman smiled for his efforts. Beran's brow broke its sweat and the tremors that shook him ceased. His breathing was still ragged, but the older man opened his eyes. Panic was the first reaction and he flailed and kicked out at those he did not recognize.

"Calm our new friend lest he bring further ruin our way," grumbled Grimbeorn.

The man was calmed with a simple explanation - where he was, what happened, and who they were.

Once done, a crude litter was constructed, and the company got on their way. They needed to get back to Rhosgobel as quickly as they could but there were many miles to cover, and the day was half through. Grimbeorn and Rorin took up the burden first of carrying Beran, while the rest of the companions scouted out the trail home.

They had not traveled far from the Black Tarn when a group of six armed warriors emerged from the forest, accompanied by as many huge snarling wolfhounds. The companions became defensive and Grimbeorn and Rorin quickly set down the limp form of Beran, freeing their hands for weapons.

The newcomers were clad not unlike the Woodmen of Mirkwood but did not bear the marks of any known clan. They wore shirts of mail, and carried helms and shields on their back, but it was evident that they were not looking for a fight. The leader of the group stepped forward: she was a lean, broad shouldered, Northman woman, with dark hair streaked with white. She announced herself as Dagmar, servant of the Tyrant's Hill. Pointing at the poisoned man, she spoke, "This man stole something from me." There was an arrogance about her and she demanded that he should be handed over to them.

Grimbeorn gripped his axe tightly as he stepped between the injured man and the group. "This seems a large party to hunt a lone man for 'something'. What would this object be that you so earnestly seek?"

With bow drawn but pointing downwards, Bandy, grim-faced and determined, stepped forward to stand beside Grimbeorn. His eyes flashed with indignation. His desire to protect the injured man, Arbogast's kin, from what he took to be bandits or worse had emboldened the hobbit. "Have you no mercy? Business you may have with this man, but I say to you Dagmar that you shall not have him while he is wounded and ill. I have experienced much that is evil and deceitful since entering these woods, and I fear that no justice can be obtained here."

With his heart hammering in his chest, Arbogast stepped back next to Grimbeorn and Bandobras, ready to form a miniature shield wall should such be required. He did not yet brandish his axe, though. Rather, he held up his empty hand in the 'parley' gesture recognised among all civilised folk.

"I pray you, take no offence, but we shall not hand over this man to those known but little to us! I greet you, Dagmar of Tyrant's Hill. I am the Fire-Watcher of Woodmen-town. This man is kin to me, as he is to all the Woodmen of Mirkwood. You can plainly see that he has run afoul of some fell creature of the forest spiders most likely. My companions and I are bringing him to Rhosgobel, for to be ministered to by his kin, and by the wizard Radagast.

"Perhaps this meeting will prove opportune. Though we are near neighbours, my folk know little of the Men of Tyrant's Hill - less, certainly, than we ought. Yet this can be easily rectified. A folk-moot is gathered the first since the death of the Dragon - and you would be welcome to join. Many matters will be discussed at the moot, and your claim that this man has stolen from you could easily be among them. We are a free folk, and we hold fast to our laws. If he has truly made offense against you, then you shall see that he is appropriately punished.

"But now is not the time. Instead of bickering in the wild, come with us. Help us return this man to safety for today, and let his fate be determined tomorrow."

Dagmar tossed her head back and the pride in her bearing was an almost physical thing.

"I see you Fire-Watcher, I will not explain our laws or our ways to a Beorning and a child. This is a private matter and the man you have owes me a debt of service. He could not pay his debt in coin, so he will pay it in sweat. Now, he attempts to rob me even of his labor. I would tell your friends to mind their business and their manners. For our ways are not their ways, we do not suffer insult lightly, and we outnumber you.

Beran seems capable of movement, I would convey him back to where his debt must be paid."

Arbogast refused to be goaded by Dagmar's words. "It seems that we are at an impasse, then, and one that serves neither of us well. For while his wounds have been seen to, his condition may yet worsen if they do not receive better attention than is possible here. Yet we need not resort to steel and bloodshed to resolve this. Come! Sit with me by his side, that we may discuss this further. I suggest also that we post a watch - some of your companions, some of mine - that we might not be taken by surprise by what we all know yet lurks in the deep woods."

As he spoke, he studied Dagmar and her followers closely, attempting to puzzle out their motives. Do they truly want to see justice done for some unknown wrong, or are they simply using the wounded Woodman as an excuse for a battle?

Bandy returned his arrow to the quiver and slung his bow across his back. He tried to assume a more relaxed posture and bit at his tongue, awaiting Dagmar's response before saying any more.

At last, the tension seemed to break. Dagmar looked at her companions and then back at Arbogast, "We should not tarry here. Spiders and worse creatures may come upon us. Where are you taking him to?"

"To Rhosgobel, as I said. Or, if that is unacceptable to you, to the tent-town that has grown up outside the Hedge. Either way, the sooner we arrive, the better for all of us."

Abrogast watched the woman, as Dagmar approached the bier. Her posture was tense and as her

companions fanned out behind her he got the feeling that they were following her lead on how forceful they were going to be.

"Well, the forest is dangerous wherever it is that you would move him. My men and our hounds will help you bear this burden, was anything found with him or did he speak?"

Rorin noticed the change in Arbogast's demeanor and concluded that while these unexpected visitors may not be enemies, they were not yet to be trusted. He reslung his hammer across his back and with Grimbeorn's help hoisted the litter into the air. "While I thank you for your concern, this man has been too weak to speak with us. I believe we are able to carry this burden on our own. Though your help ensuring our safe passage would be much appreciated."

Esgalwen never took her hand from the hilt of her sword when the strangers had emerged from the woods, but she did not draw the weapon. As a Ranger of Ithilien, strangers along the borders were a regular event in her life and she had learned manners of diplomacy, but this was always tempered by awareness. Like the Dwarf, she could read the demeanor of her woodman companions and used them as a gauge of threat. Her familiarity with Mirkwood was nothing to put faith in, but Esgalwen knew how many leagues they had walked this day in their search. With the day half passed, the Ranger judged that their new burden would not guarantee a return to Tent-town before the sun would set. They would need camp somewhere soon and greater numbers would ascertain a safe night - if these folks were truly trustworthy.

She spoke her thoughts, "Arbogast...Grimbeorn... hardy is the content of our company with Rorin now among us, but the labor you will bear will keep us from reaching Tent-town before nightfall - surely we must camp between here and there. Having Dagmar and her companions with us seems a boon." The look she gave her friends betrayed the graciousness of her words. Esgalwen needed them to understand the threat of a knife in the dark, as they all lay at rest.

"Yes, most fortunate," chimed Bandy, following the ranger's lead. "You must forgive my initial reaction, Lady Dagmar. You and your friends startled me, and I have learned through experience that these woods are full of bad surprises."

With the strongest members of the company bearing the unconscious woodman, Bandy feared that the truculent strangers might take advantage of the situation. He positioned himself at the rear of the party where he could keep an eye on everyone. Should Dagmar object to him bringing up the rear, he would plead that his short legs could not keep up with the big folks. She was condescending enough to believe that, wasn't she?

The companions came to a quiet agreement that the additional strength of their newly found allies would make the trip back to Tent-town easier, but they would remain vigilant. Grimbeorn and Rorin returned to the burden of carrying the litter and they all moved off

heading north and west towards Rhosgobel and the western eaves of Mirkwood.

The heat of the day bore down on the forest canopy and made the underlying air thick and heavy with heat. Sweat beaded on the brow of Man and Dwarf alike, and eventually, pride be damned, Grimbeorn relinquished his end of the litter soon to be followed by Rorin. Arbogast walked along one side of Beran, with Orophin on the other. The two healers wanted to watch over their charge, and to also make sure the men of Dagmar did not attempt to run off with the wounded woodman. Three others of Dagmar's folk took up the lead with hounds along with them to scout their path.

But as was predicted by the Ranger, the daylight began to fade before the lengthy trek was completed and the companions needed to decide whether they would push through in the darkness or make camp.

Grimbeorn merely grumbled about having to stop. "We should press on instead taking our chances with whatever the night may bring us."

Arbogast, though silent through the grim trek, now spoke in agreement. "Indeed. Each hour is precious, and I fear that Beran may not live to see the dawn, were we to stop now." He hoped that his companions also understood, as he did, that each step took them nearer to help from the Woodmen of Rhosgobel, should violence break out. For the hour was fast approaching when Dagmar's hand would be forced, one way or the other.

Bandy added his voice to those of his companions, "We must press on. This man's death serves no one. The woodmen will have lost a kinsman and you", he

said speaking directly to Dagmar, "will have been denied the justice you seek and whatever it is he is supposed to have taken from you." Then he added after a pause, "with your strength and the knowledge you possess of the area, we may travel in greater safety through these dark woods." The last was an appeal to her ego, which he hoped his companions would not mistake for sincere flattery.

"These woods are indeed fell, as the beardless dwarf has indicated. They are more so at night, which is why people do not tarry but seek the shelter of their walls and homes. Our chance of meeting these fell creatures increases if we press on. They will be more likely to hear or come across our path. Surely resting now would improve our chances of reaching our destination." The companions of Dagmar still spoke no words in the company of the strangers.

The companions made quick debate of the situation and it was decided, although one-sided, to continue. Dagmar tried to coerce them into camping for the night, but the Company would have nothing to do with it. So, the southern woman plodded along beside them, her own companions in tow. What was agreed on was the need for light, and brands were sparked and now the forest glowed where they passed and flickered with shadows.

The burden of the wounded man weighed heavy on the shoulders of the two that bore the litter, but even the others felt the day. The heat had drained them, and their legs ached. The darkness, even if softly lit by the torches, still hid rocks and roots, and toes and shins were stubbed and cut. Grumbles did not come from just one, as the distance to Rhosgobel diminished ever so slowly. One of Dagmar's henchmen cried out when he walked into a large cobweb that stretched between two low branches. The man's face was draped with the strands which laced into his beard - his hands came up waving about to brush the unseen cobweb away. The situation actually provided some levity and the companions chuckled at his demeanor.

Rorin had been walking behind him and had heard the man's girlish cry. With a large smile, the Dwarf strode to the Tyrant's Hillman to see if he could offer aid - for surely the massive beast of a spider that had spun the web between the branches had to be crawling on him. The Hillman brushed at his face and beard and pushed at the low branches and tree. Suddenly, there was a crack from above and Grimbeorn watched as a tumble of branches fell atop the Dwarf and Hillman - both disappeared under the dried leaves that clung to the branches.

Rorin managed to get his arms up just in time to keep a large branch from striking his head. He cried out in his surprise and cursed the clumsiness of this supposed woodman, "You fool! Curse you and your clumsiness!" He then grumbled a string of choice insults under his breath.

The sound in the quiet forest was thunderous. The cries from Rorin and the Hillman added to the cacophony. The two litter bearers quickly set Beran down and ran to aid the fallen. The others turned from the darkness beyond to look at what had befallen the friends. The two under the dead, old branches were

moving and Arbogast could see why they had fallen. The Hillman had walked through a web, but his flailing had caused him to disturb the dead tree, whose branches hung loose. The deadfall was inevitable.

Orophin stood back from the group, out of the torch light so that his eyes adjusted to the darkness. He chuckled quietly, as the two fumbled with the webbing and the deadfall. The Elf's mirth did not eliminate the feeling that the shadow was creeping after them, through the darkness.

Dagmar looked around. The Fates had been kind. All of the others were busy - it would be her moment, if she wanted it. The woman quickly drew a blade at her side and buried it hilt deep into the man upon the litter. She motioned to her comrades who drew their blades, as well.

Once their comrade had the use of his limbs she gave a shrill whistle and torches were flung into the dead leaves. The flare illuminated the night for a brief instant, as the Men of the Hill attempted to fade into the flickering shadows.

Orophin turned from the frivolity and saw the woman stab the wounded man. Before she could withdraw her blade from the dead man's corpse, he pulled back the arrow already nocked to his bow and released it at her.

Arbogast's shock and horror at Dagmar's sudden attack was quickly blunted. With her hostile demeanour, tense bearing and sidelong glances at her men, she as much as told him her plans, and the death of Beran was as much his responsibility. So, with a cold fury born of shame he rounded on her, his shield quickly

unslung, and his axe brandished in the firelight. "Woe to you, Dagmar of Tyrant's Hill, for by this act you have proven yourself to be the enemy of all who cherish justice! Your head I now claim as wergild for my kinsman!"

Arbogast's axe swung in the firelight as Grimbeorn roared, "Treachery! Your family be cursed by it!" The young Beorning charged after the scoundrels, arming himself as he moved. Fueled by rage, all weariness fell from his limbs and he chased down those Hillman that tried to fade into the shadows.

Recoiling at the murder of Beran, Bandy drew his own arrow and released it at Dagmar, now hideously illuminated in the firelight.

While he was trying to get out from under the fallen tree, Rorin heard the skirmish commence, along with the bellowing roar from Grimbeorn. The Dwarf realized he was in no position to reach his hammer and instead drew the dagger on his belt. With speed that defied the Dwarf's stature, held his captive tight and placed it at the man's throat, who lay next to him. "I wouldn't move, lad," he hissed. "I will not hesitate to slit your murderous throat."

The woods turned into a frantic melee as the Men of Tyrant Hill attempted to form a shieldwall and then withdraw from the company out of Rhosgobel. Amid the flare of torches and the sudden updraft of burnt leaves, blows were traded.

Dagmar raised her shield and deflected Arbogast's hasty attack. She heard the hiss of an arrow pass her head, but then felt the sting as Bandy's entered her chest. The

Tyrant Hillwoman gave a terrible curse, as she called to her companions to move, "Get ye moving now! Or the Master's lash will be on your backs!"

The companions pressed their attack as the traitors attempted to flee - their dogs now released and between each group. Esgalwen had also witnessed the treacherous killing stab and could not believe a man, or woman, could do that to her fellow - especially one who was incapacitated. An Orc, for sure, was notorious for such a cowardly act, but not a woman!

Defying the dogs before her, the Ranger drew her long sword from its scabbard and lunged at Dagmar's flank, only to be intercepted by one of her allies and his animal. Both attacked the Ranger but were ineffective. Beyond them, Esgalwen was pleased to see as Dagmar swooned from her wound and crumpled to the ground.

Grimbeorn gave a battle cry, "You should fear me more than your master right now, for you are all dead men!" he raged furiously, his ancestral weapon flashing in the light of the fires.

Seeing the results of the first arrow he had ever loosed at another person, piercing deeply into Dagmar's leg, Bandy let out his own cry, "The Shire! The Shire!" He yelled it loudly, over and over, almost mechanically in his stress of battle. The Hobbit drew another arrow from his quiver and let it fly at a new foe.

Dagmar lay on the ground in a black fog, pain shooting from her wound and she struggled to breath. Around her, the dim form of her allies backed away from the ferocious attacks of Arbogast and Grimbeorn. Seeing their fallen commander only incited the other Hillmen into action - a few whistled and expertly guided their hunting dogs to attack all the while bringing their own swords to bear.

Two of the Hillmen circled Grimbeorn and the Beorning was hard pressed to stave off their blows, the giant man parrying and kicking as the dogs bit at his legs. It was the same for Arbogast and Esgalwen, but only the Woodman was struck - the wind knocked from him when the flat of the enemy's sword struck his leather shirt.

Rorin held his captive tight, but like his comrades, the Hillman whistled for his hound and it bounded into the fray. The Dwarf stomped and kicked, but still the coppery-colored, slobbering dog clamped its teeth on the back of his calf. Rorin yanked and the dog yipped away, his leg free once more.

Pain shot up his leg from where the hound had bit, "Could someone get this accursed dog away from me!?" He shouted, as he attempted to cover the man's mouth so that he could no longer whistle at the dog.

Esgalwen dodged and feinted with the warrior in front of her, his sword coming close but not making any contact. Why were they doing this? Who were these men and women that came out of the forest, and what was the purpose in killing Beran? What did they hide? There were too many questions that went through her mind. Her sword held in two hands over her head, she saw her opening and she stabbed. Her weapon pierced into the man's chest and he fell to her feet gasping for help.

Around her, more of the Hillmen were falling – another to Bandy's arrows; Arbogast drew blood from his opponent, as well as Grimbeorn. Still, her companions showed signs of their own wounds.

Orophin uttered a small curse as his arrow went wide and his hand automatically went to his quiver to pull another. He nocked it, aimed, and let fly once again, this time at one of the hillmen. The shaft entered the man's eye and he cried out, toppling to the forest floor.

The leaves were being quickly consumed in the bright flame. Most of the men of Tyrant's Hill lay dying on the forest floor and their leader had been the first to fall. The three survivors tried make their way towards Dagmar, to pull her from the fray, but the Elf's arrow erupted from one of the men's eyes. Now panicked and unable to reach her, the remaining two turned to flee into the dark of night.

"You will not get away so easily," yelled Grimbeorn. Grappling one, as he fled. The other raced into the trees.

"Feh," called Arbogast, "let the orcs and spiders take him!" Then he narrowed his eyes and pressed his attack against the remaining Man of Tyrant's Hill, entangled in his friend's arms. The Hillman saw Arbogast's approach, axe held high, as did the Beorning who quickly let him go. Arbogast swung his axe, striking with the flat staggering the Tyrant Hillman. He then smashed him with his shield and the man sprawled to the ground, unmoving.

Orophin had watched as the last of the hillmen ran off through the woods and heard Arbogast tell

Grimbeorn to leave him to his own devices. The Silvan Elf came quickly to a conclusion of his own and to the surprise of his companions, bounded off after the man. If he could get in front of him, cut him off, he could stop any news from returning to wherever it was that they had come. *Tyrant's Hill*, he remembered the woman, Dagmar saying. Orophin only heard a few of the lady Ranger's words before he was deep into the darkness of Mirkwood.

Grimbeorn also set out after the remaining villain, but his friends called him back. He chafed at letting the man go as the portent of their 'master' was ominous. Also was the concern that Orophin had run off alone.

The light was fading quickly away as the leaves crackled and were consumed, leaving only glowing embers of wood. Only one of the Hillman had gotten away, the pack of dogs chasing and howling behind him, leaving three unconscious on the ground with minor and severe wounds. Dagmar lay there, too, but her wound was clearly most grievous - her tunic a dark black from blood loss. Rorin gripped the only one that was aware of their situation, and the traitor was begging for his life.

On the litter, the dead body of Beran also lay, his own blood staining the ground. Dagmar had made a cruel stab to his chest, through the ribs, and into the man's heart. There was nothing anyone could have done for Radagast's friend.

The companions felt the adrenaline leaving their limbs, and the shakes were commencing for some. Esgalwen looked around and saw in the faces around her, that only a few of these new friends had ever taken

another man's life. Bandy stared at Dagmar, where his arrow protruded just below her right breast. She was a woman...and he might have slain her. The Ranger needed to snap them all back to the moment, "We need to get help. There are too many for us to carry back to Tent-town. One or two of us must go for aid."

Arbogast nods, distractedly, still surprised at Orophin's disappearance. "I will go," he said, as he knelt by Dagmar's side. "I know these woods better than any of you, but this woman needs help if she is to live and there has been enough death already this night." With that, he begins the delicate work of removing the arrow from its lodging-place in her chest.

"I will go," said Grimbeorn, "as I will move fastest unhindered and I cannot stand idle now. This one may be able to give more information useful in understanding what has transpired."

Esgalwen listened to the two Woodman and Beorning debate on who should make haste back to Tent-town, and she threw her lot in with Grimbeorn. She spoke her reasoning, "I agree that the Beorning should make this trip. He is larger and sturdier than you, Arbogast. And from my understanding of your cultures, Grimbeorn is a recognized leader among his people and so will have the most credit with your Elders. Besides," she added with a smile to soften the blow, "your skill at healing is needed here." Esgalwen looked at Grimbeorn, "Run, sir! We will need aid as soon as possible if this woman is to survive."

Tent-town. It was the gray of morning and their legs and arms screamed of weariness. Their hearts, too, were low for the expedition that had started as a food gathering task had turned into something terrible. They had seen a man slain and had taken the lives of others.

The procession was led by Grimbeorn and Arbogast, followed by four bound strangers and two litter bearers. A body was covered respectfully with a blanket, while Dagmar was plain to see - her wound even more terrible to behold in the morning light. Following all was the remainder of the companions and the Woodmen that had come at Grimbeorn's beckoning. Only Orophin had yet to return, after he had given chase to the last of the Hillmen - his companions wondered at his wellbeing. They had been unable to aid him in his chase, with Grimbeorn leaving for help and leaving them with five captives to monitor. Even when Grimbeorn returned, there was no way to know in the darkness which way Orophin had gone, and so after a short debate, it was decided to return to Tent-town. Orophin knew his way back - he would have to make it on his own.

Ingomer, the de facto leader of the encampment and the Folk-moot, stood watching as the entourage came into the town's center. Freda and Munderic also stood nearby with eyes wide at the night's events. The young women met Arbogast's haunted gaze and gave him a wan smile. The chief wanted the companions before the Elders to speak of what had happened as

soon as they were refreshed. "Get drinks. Wash the forest from your face and hands, and then see us," he said in a stern voice.

The prisoners were taken to a tent and corralled there. Tent-town was not built with the intention of prisoners, as that was not the idea of this moot, and so the need for improvisation. Dagmar was taken to the healers and Beran was set down outside the Elder council's tent for Radagast to see - this was his man.

The companions had time for themselves. Each went where he, or she would, and tended to their own needs.

Arbogast found that with each return to Tent-town, had become colder than the last since he began keeping the company of his new fellowship. His father and family give tended him and gave cold water to wash and hard bread to break his fast. They took from him his wargear for safe-keeping, but it was a bone-weary, demoralized, young man who sat before them now.

Silently, he waited for the remainder of the fellowship, watching the fire and letting the events of the previous day resolve themselves in his mind.

Grimbeorn was the first to come to the tent where Arbogast waited. Across the camp, Bandobras Bracegirdle stood and watched as the woman for Tyrant's Hill was tended. As he stared at Dagmar, pale and unconscious, and the now-bandaged wound he had inflicted, Bandy wondered who he was and who he was becoming. He recalled the consuming desire for revenge that overcame him when she had thrust her dagger deep into Beran's chest.

These woods cast a shadow on all things, he thought, turning their acts to evil purposes. I have been here but a short while and I am already becoming like them. His eyes fixed on Dagmar.

Looking up, his attention was caught by the busy preparations for the council, where men and women would soon decide in free debate how best to defend themselves. No, no, he thought, I have it wrong. These people, these Woodmen, are of the forest, and yet they struggle against the creeping malice. Dagmar is weak, not strong. Then he saw his friends standing across the camp from him, and they were in a different light.

Realizing how difficult it must be for young men like Arbogast and Grimbeorn to win acceptance in a society that because it exists constantly with the Shadow, demands much of its people. The need to prove oneself, to be both strong and wise, must be great. He approached the Woodman and the Beorning, their faces strained and anguished. "You have been called upon to perform deeds that would quail the hearts of great men and have rendered great service to your families and people. You have proven yourselves to be doughty warriors, but not merely warriors. Wisdom guides your hands and mercy your hearts. You should be proud."

To Arbogast, he said, "My people, too, are distrustful of outsiders. Keeping company with a Woodman and a Beorning, not to mention an Elf and a Dwarf, would cause a scandal. We are strong together last night proved that - but the enemy will prey on our differences and try to divide us. Is not that what this council is about, to bring together different people in a common cause? Take heart. You are not alone."

The heir of Beorn once again found himself staring intently at the fire. Father had warned him of their people's tendencies towards swift retribution where treachery, disloyalty, and unfaithfulness lie. But he didn't have his father's equally easy ability to laugh and find joy in the littlest of things like his animals -- the rage within him burned deep.

What Grimbeorn wouldn't acknowledge was that Beorn understood his son better than he, and knew it was the fire of youth and inexperience. He had faith that it would turn around and knew that this was a test for both of them. The youth heard the words of the hobbit and sighed. "Killing dark creatures and orcs to protect one's homeland and people is one thing, but to kill a man is still a hard thing. It's the look in their eyes..."

Bandy felt compassion for the inscrutable Beorning youth. What turmoil had he locked deep within him? What was it like to be the son of the great Beorn, of whom even Hobbits knew something? Difficult no doubt. But he also seemed to think that his experiences and troubles were worse than other people's.

In a soft and friendly voice, Bandy said, "I know that all too well. If the Dark Lady of Tyrant's Hill dies, it is because I killed her. I have experienced more horrors in the last few weeks than in a lifetime in the Shire, and the worst was when the arrow I released entered her breast. I cannot bear to think of her death and will that Arbogast's remedies worked. But that does not change the fact that there are orcs that are born and there are orcs that are made either by their own choices or by some power beyond our reckoning. Do you catch my

meaning? Should Dagmar live, we must try to redeem her."

Bandy, for the first time, began to understand Bilbo a little better. Did he wander so often because his experiences and emotions were so at odds with his bucolic surroundings?

Grimbeorn and Bandy looked up to see a wizened, old man enter the council pavilion - both knew him immediately to be Radagast, though it was the first time both had seen him. The Hobbit had heard tales of Gandalf the Gray and had been in awe from the stories but was left mouth agape when he saw this new wizard.

The Master of Rhosgobel had looked like he was dressed in a cloak of lichen and fur, which was smeared with droppings from the birds that flitted above his hat. The diminutive fellow shook his head as he looked to the Beorning to see his reaction.

Esgalwen came next, up to her friends along with Rorin - both had pondering looks on their own faces. The Ranger wondered about Orophin - he had disappeared the night before in chase after the last hillman and none had yet heard news of him.

Suddenly, a woman came out of the Council Tent and announced, "Ingomer has called the council to order - you are requested within."

Managing to suppress a weary sigh, Arbogast stood. After a day and a night of walking, then a period of immobility, his legs were protesting. He hoped it did not show on his face as he extended a hand towards Bandobras. Esgalwen, Grimbeorn and Rorin, he judged, would prefer to stand without accepting his help.

Gladly accepting his friend's hand, Bandy pulled himself up. The sight of the wizard caught him off guard and he thought the old man looked like a bird's nest. But then he caught the wizard's eyes and paused. The eyes are deep and ancient and wise. There was kindness and a terrible power if unleashed. Bandy quickly regretted his first, mocking thought. He glanced at his friends and mentally prepared for the council.

Rorin was glad that their unexpected adventure in the wood was complete, and that they finally had the chance to inform Radagast and the other leaders of the Tent Town about what they had learned. As he looked around at the company preparing to enter the Council Tent, Rorin was glad to see no small amount of true friendship being shared between them all, for the first time in years he felt as though he was in the right place.

Grimbeorn grumbled something barely audible about timeliness, lordlings, and wizards.

The canvas of the tent was heavy, a slight tackiness and oily feeling was left on every hand that grabbed, or touched the flap, as they entered. The tent was large on the inside and braziers were used to expel the dampness and provide light. No open flames burned — instead the braziers were filled with charcoal and arranged with polished mirrors to give off a red light. As the companions entered they saw that several of the elders sat in conference; the brown mage sat silently to the side; and while no man sat higher or in a finer chair, none did have the presence than that of Ingomer Axebreaker.

"Companions," the aged man said as he rose in greeting. "Welcome! Come sit and be heard. We would like to know your story of how you came to the camp bearing a dead man, a few wounded, and a well-armed man of the forest?"

Arbogast began to recount the tale. He described the route taken by the companions in some detail, noting landmarks near the point on the banks of the Black Tarn where the Fellowship first encountered the unfortunate Beran. He described the man's wounds and the tatters of web clinging to him - evidence that the spiders of the deep forest are perhaps encroaching on the Western Eaves. He recounted the words of Beran's parchment, though the document itself was still in the hands of Orophin, who had not been seen since yesternight's skirmish.

He similarly spared no detail in describing the location of their meeting with Dagmar and her followers. If Ingomer, or any of the other assembled elders knew of Tyrant's Hill, then they may be able to reckon the location of their hall.

When it came to the fight, though, he said little. The fighting was a desperate and confused scuffle - hardly the stuff of grand tales - and the resulting prisoners testify to their own defeat.

After what seems like an age of talking, he finished simply. "...then Orophin and I removed the arrow that struck Dagmar, dressed her wound and brought the survivors back here, along with the body of Beran Wizard's-Friend. Her fate we will leave to the folk-moot, should she recover."

Rorin sat silently as Arbogast recounted the story of the previous day's excitement, content to let one of the groups more eloquent members take responsibility. He saw the concern grow deep in the faces of the elders and slowly began to realize that his companions, and himself were no longer to be a mere hunting party. The realization did not fill him with apprehension or fear, because even in the short time this unlikely group had broken bread together, each of them had proven their worthiness and capability as companions. Rorin knew that they could overcome whatever was in store for them in the coming days.

His tale over, Arbogast cast an appraising eye at the elders, Ingomer especially. He felt the opprobrium of his people like a wound, but it, and the dour faces before him, had kindled a new fire in the young man's heart. He would not hold his tongue simply for fear of further scorn, "Of Orophin's fate, we know nothing, and so a representative of the Woodland Realm and the Elvenking is absent. Yet the news of the day is grave: orcs on the march and a people unknown to me, a true-born son of Mirkwood, at arms to the south. The folk have waited long enough. What we now know must be told. The moot must begin."

"Aye! Aye! Hear! Hear!" came a chorus of cries from the council, as Arbogast spoke his request for the moot to commence. Ingomer and Radagast had the center seats in the circular council sitting, and they were seats of honor, though neither man considered himself the authority. Around them sat Fridwald and Hartfast, Targus and Cutwine, Amaleoda and Bofri - all clansmen and leaders of their perspective folk and some gave acknowledgement of Arbogast while the others sat silent.

At last, Ingomer sighed and he looked to Ceawin, the golden-haired leader of the folk of the East Bight, "You have heard the words, Ceawin. It was you who had called for this moot and most of the folk of Mirkwood have sent their representatives. Now Arbogast brings us these tidings and advises that action be taken. What say you? Do we start the folk-moot with the threat of orcs and evil men to our south?" He then turned to wizard, "Master Radagast - high is the regard of men for your wisdom- what words do you offer us now?"

Before the wizard could reply, a chorus of voices chimed in around the room. Rorin completely agreed with Arbogast and said, "Aye, there are no sturdy walls here and your homelands are lacking many of their leaders. If there is indeed a threat from the south, we had best deal with it rather than let it come to us."

Grimbeorn grumbled, "About time!"

A small voice from Bandy spoke, "The forces of shadow are gathering. Let the moot begin without delay, so that we may face the enemy united."

Esgalwen quietly observed the council meeting, not feeling the need to add or correct the Woodman's witness. And when Arbogast made his request for the folk-moot to begin, the Ranger was content to let others raise their voices while she merely observed.

She was favourably disposed towards the folk-moot beginning, though would she help the men of the Wood? She was uncertain at the moment. Her mission had only been to gather news and report back, though now a journey home alone would be perilous.

Shhh...quiet yourself, child, she could her father's voice. Pay attention... you will find your way.

Esgalwen smiled inwardly at the comforting sound of her father's voice and settled down to hear what news would be shared around the council.

Radagast scratched at the brown beard that grew tangled upon his chin - Bandy wondered if it were bugs at which he dug. Without noticing the Hobbit, the Brown Wizard spoke, "If it were orcs that had ambushed our fine friends here, then our answer to these questions would be simple. The shadow of the Necromancer, or its agents, still vie for a hold on the southern end of the forest." He pointed to Esgalwen, "Even our Gondorian friend here has spoken of these creatures waylaying her and her companions along their road. Unfortunately, though orcs still haunt Dol Guldur, it was not orcs that ambushed Arbogast and his company. It was Woodmen. So, our challenge now is in the strength of heart - who is strong enough to stave off the remaining evil influence of the domineering Necromancer? How many Woodmen are beholden to his will, even though he might be cast out? And who can we trust?"

Ceawin began to speak, but Radagast continued his words, "We speak of alliances, unity among the clans, peace within Mirkwood - perhaps to reclaim the name of Greenwood the Great, instead of the more current, ominous moniker. But how can this be if brigands and outlaws hunt our own, or worse, folks we trust have turned their cloaks. Do we commence the moot when we are not sure which party has been corrupted?

Beran's note speaks of orcs at Fenbridge Castle, but who is the will behind them? Why would the woman we have captured, Dagmar, who is clearly a woodman, have slain my man? There are many questions that the situation has brought before us.

"Do we investigate the castle? Tyrant's Hill?" Radagast's questions hung in the room for all to ponder.

Ceawin, seeing an opening, broke the new silence, "Master Radagast, your words ring true and we must take care as we move forward - for this is a chance that Mirkwood has not seen since well before the forefathers of my clan first settled the East Bight. Yes, trust in our alliances is paramount, but it is for the people to decide this. We must present the facts to our gathered comrades. The moot must commence!"

The room moved back and forth with the debate, as each party added their own to the conversation. Voices were raised, curses and oaths made, but in the end, it came down to the decision of Ingomer and Radagast - both the assumed clan leaders of Tent-town. The two men listened attentively and when all arguments had been made, they had a quiet conference between themselves, at last Ingomer returned to the council pavilion.

He looked at each person in the tent and then spoke, "Great is the purpose for which we have been called. Wise indeed, though his years are still young, was the choice of Ceawin the Generous to call for this gathering - to make new allegiances and join the clans. But the actions of a few over the last few days has had an ill-effect and jeopardizes the moot's

commencement. To Radagast and myself, this can only be the Shadow at work, for who else would set evil against us at a time when peace and unity might prevail? So, we say nay to the darkness that would draw us apart, let the folk-moot begin!"

The room erupted in a chorus of cheers along with a few anguished cries, but Radagast held up his hand to restore quiet. He took over from Ingomer, "The folkmoot will commence in a fortnight. This will give time for Orophin to return with any tidings, for the representative of Thranduil must be among us. It will also allow for the people of Tent-town to gather their thoughts and intents for this common cause."

The debate was done and the men of the council, along with the companions of a new fellowship, all exited the tent. It was all about to begin.

CVCN in the darkness, the trail was easy to follow. The Tyrant Hill's man ran indiscriminately and was being followed by a pack of five dogs. Orophin slid through the shadows in pursuit. The Silvan Elf ran along the trail, as well as took to tree and limb, his Elven feet nimbly walking along the thinnest branch as if he had no weight.

At last, he caught up with his quarry who leaned against a tree trunk, panting and winded. The pack of hounds sniffed and roamed around the stalled woodman. They did not catch sight or scent of the Elf, in the trees above. Orophin was sure, based on the man's

demeanor that he was lost in the night. If there was a path back from whence he came, it would not be until morning for him to find it.

Orophin had put his bow away during the chase. He was frustrated by his poor aim of late, but now was not the time to redeem himself, he had to make sure that this Man did not get away. Of course, the volume of his crashing through the woods made that unlikely. Nonetheless he followed as stealthily as he could and kept the man in or near his sight as they ran.

The Silvan Elf spent the night in his tree as the woodman, with his pack of hounds, all sat down and made to wait out the evening. If the man was afraid, Orophin could not tell, as there seemed to stem a confidence by being surrounded by five dogs.

Time passed, a fleeting moment for the immortal Elf, and the sun rose. With the morning light, the woodman was off again at a good pace but Orophin was able to easily keep up with him. The path he took led south to the Black Tarn and passed it, until at last they entered the land that had been once ruled by the Necromancer. The atmosphere was different here. Orophin did not like the sound of the woods, as it was nothing that he had experienced before. The song the trees sung was not of death, but of lamentation and sorrow. Limbs hung low. Dried and stringy moss hung upon the trunks and roots were gnarled atop the ground, as if they did not want to dig deep into the earth below.

The woodman zigged and zagged as he continued south, but he had become more cautious. Orophin

knew why - traces of spider webs stretched across treetops and hung down from upper branches. Black ravens gave lone cries in the shaded wood, and squirrels as dark as night scampered around them. It was like they had entered a night that would not let day return.

The darkness was no problem for Orophin, but it was an eerie reminder that this place was dangerous and getting more so by the league that they traveled. He made sure that he was very careful not to be spotted and to keep an eye out for any spiders that wanted to make a meal of him. The holes in the Wizard's Man flashed to the fore of his mind, more and more often, as the number of webs he past increased.

Though now more wary, it was unfounded for no beast presented itself to waylay the woodman or the Elf. Only the oppressive atmosphere of Southern Mirkwood weighed heavy on Orophin. His normally light, elven mood was subdued, and it was a grim face that he wore as he pursued the Tyrant Hill's man.

Days passed.

Orophin stayed on the man's path as he quickly made his way south. He was ever looking over his shoulder - something he had begun the day before, as if he knew something - or someone - was following.

At last the forest cleared and Orophin could see a great hill rise within the clearing. Crowning the hill was an earthen rampart and palisade. Single streams of smoke could be seen rising from within, signaling the cook fires that burned. It was a fortified settlement and Orophin wondered at the men who were brave enough to make such a place their home. If his memory served,

the dreaded Dol Guldur was roughly fifty miles further south.

It was a settlement of men. The streams of smoke told of many cook fires and homes. It was not a temporary encampment, but a permanent structure that probably housed a good two to three hundred folk. Orophin could see general things through the open gate, but not enough to justify an estimation.

The Silvan Elf watched as the man began to climb the path that led to the top - the dogs running ahead of him and baying their return. Orophin drew back his bow and let one arrow fly at the man he had pursued. It would serve as a warning that this forest was still watched by the Elves, even as the Shadow crept closer.

The Elven bow twanged and the arrow arched over, coming back down to stab into the man's right calf, delivering the Elf's intended message. The man cried out in pain and fear as he fell to the ground, clutching at his wounded leg. He looked back at the dark eaves of the woods and wondered at the threat that lay within.

"HELP ME!" he yelled to any that might hear him from above. "HELP!"

Orophin saw two new men emerge from the palisade and jog down to find the last of Dagmar's companions come home at last. They saw the arrow, then looked to the woods. There was fear on their faces as they hoisted up their wounded fellow and carried him quickly the rest of the way. The Elf turned his back on what he saw and began the trek back to Tent-town.

A little fear was a good thing for those that aided the Shadow, Orophin thought to himself as he watched the terrified man being helped into the walled village. The miles back to the tent town passed more quickly, no longer having to trail the man. As he passed from the southern woods that were still under the oppressive Shadow, he could feel the weight lifting and he breathed deep the smells of the Mirkwood. This was the land of *his* people and Orophin began to run as joy filled his heart once more.



The morning sun shone brightly over the small tent town. It was the mid of August and the day of the Folk-moot had come at last. The great fire ring in the center of camp had been cleared of all debris and more logs and stone blocks were added so that many could sit. In the past four weeks, the camp had swelled even more with the announcement that the moot would finally begin. Tables were also being set on the outskirts of the meeting ring, along with cook fires. Merchants

with kegs of wine and beer upon wagons encircled outside of the cooks' ring and opened for business. Bandy smiled to himself as he blew the froth off of a large pint - a cup size he had never seen before.

The clansmen of Stonyford were gathering, as were those of Stonehollow. They began to fill in the outer circles of seats in no particular order, save to be among their own. The boisterous cries of the Men of Mountain Hall carried over the crowd as friends saw each other once more after the many months of waiting. Amaleoda entered the rings of seats along with her people from the Black Tarn; Fridwald with his daughter Fredao led the entourage of woodsmen into the meeting place; and finally came Ceawin with his folk, who were given the seats nearest the center, for it was a place of honor - it had been these folks of the East Bight that had made this all happen.

Ingomer and Radagast, who had been waiting for all to gather, both stood, and the tall man of Woodland Hall raised a hand for silence. The noise of talking became a murmur and then naught was heard but wind and birdsong.

"WE HAVE ALL COME TO THIS PLACE FOR A COMMON PURPOSE," cried Ingomer. "BUT ONCE MORE I ASK YOUR INTENTION. DO WE CALL THIS FOLK-MOOT TO COMMENCE?"

A great shout out of "AYE!" resounded through the council ring.

Ingomer looked to Radagast and the mage nodded. With his hand still in the air, the woodman spoke, but now in a softer voice, "We have come together by request of Ceawin the Generous, and his people of the

East Bight, in hopes of forming a union. An alliance of the peoples of Mirkwood to strengthen our lands and drive out forever any vestige that remains of the Shadow. It is not just the people of the woods that have come, but the men of Dorwinion and Dale; the folk of Erebor and Thranduil's realm; the folk of Beorn; and even those from as far as Gondor and across the Misty Mountains. I welcome you all and may this gathering prove a boon to all who stand here in representation of their folk!"

Again, came a shout of "AYE!"

Radagast now spoke, "The purpose that Ceawin has called us is paramount to all other things, but still - we have come far and so all things will be heard and debated as needed. But," the wizard emphasized the word, "any troubles among the clans will not hinder this meeting. In fact, it is in all our interests that these differences may be discussed and hopefully be cleared from between our peoples.

"We shall start with the folk of Mountain Hall, for they have come the farthest within the Anduin Vale."

And so, the moot began - much news was told, debates were presented, and grievances entered. Ingomer controlled the meeting allowing each clan to talk in turn and reveal all that they wished to say. Notes were taken so that all points could be returned to once all clans had made their appeal.

Bandy wiped his mouth and thanked the good merchants for the ale...it was going to be a long day.

Arbogast, still ill-favoured by his kinfolk, stood near the back of the circle. His nephews and nieces, not yet of

age themselves, flirted and sniped in whispers around him, largely ignoring the proceedings of the moot. As he contemplated the horn of slightly sour southern wine in his hand (it being too warm to comfortably stare at a fire), he found himself wondering what sort of life they would have. Today was, without a doubt, a turning point in the history of his people, and it seemed a grand opportunity for the Woodmen of Mirkwood to become something greater than they had been - to grow in strength and spread the peace and comfort of the Western Eaves throughout the southern forest.

And yet...

And yet...

And yet, something inside him ate away at a confidence that, by rights, should be near-absolute. Arbogast had seen the Brown Wizard observing him and his friends with a look of sombre contemplation. Then there was the issue of the Men of Tyrant's Hill, and what ought be done about the Woodmen's possibly-hostile kin. Shall it be axes and arrows? And will that leave them weakened in the face of the shadow that still lies upon the forest?

As the clansmen spoke on one matter, then another, Arbogast's mind turned itself over and over, looking for answers. Until such were to be found, he held his tongue, minded his place, and waited.

Bandy watched and listened intently as the debate rolled back and forth. At times, he was reminded of Hobbits who air longstanding grudges against other families over a mug of beer in the local tavern. Within the menacing confines of Mirkwood, he did not mistake

the seriousness of the current situation for the entertaining carping of folks at home.

During a pause in the oratory, Bandy stood on his seat to compensate for his puny stature. Bowing low to the elders, Ingomer and Radagast in particular, he addressed the assembly.

"When I left my home west of the Misty Mountains, I had no idea that I would attend, let alone speak at, an important council of the wise. But here I find myself caught up in the events of this great forest and its people. Yet I do not believe I am here by accident. Fate drew me here, just as I believe it called to Ceawin and to many of you and brought me into an unusual but wholesome fellowship of free people.

"Woodman, Beorning, Dwarf, Elf, Hobbit and Gondorian: we have worked together to kill the unnatural beast you called Bloody Muzzle and to bring Beran's murderers here for justice. We also delivered Beran's message that orcs once again lurk near Fenbridge. I do not pretend to know your history, laws, and customs, nor do I presume to dictate a course of action. I only urge that during these deliberations we focus on what unites us and to see our differences as minor compared to the evil that lurks in these woods.

"Our enemies thrive upon division, so we must unite to meet the greater threat with unity and purpose. Then we might drive the shadow from the forest once and for all. Recent events make Ceawin's proposed alliance propitious and timely. Lest I impose too much on your patience, I will say one thing more and then surrender the floor to others. You know best how to treat with the master of Tyrant's Hill, but I

would encourage restraint until you can treat with him and exert every effort to bring him under your laws."

Suddenly feeling self-conscious, Bandy returned to his seat.

After Bandy spoke, Rorin saw many confused faces in the crowd. Most of these people had never laid eyes on a Hobbit and they were unsure as to how one came to be at this Moot. Even through their uncertainty, though, it was clear that many saw the wisdom in Bandy's words. Rorin took a long swig from his mug and stood to help ignite the spark that Bandy had laid.

"I am Rorin, son of Barin of the Iron Hills and of Erebor. This Hobbit, my companion, speaks wisdom and we would all do well to heed his advice. Just a few short years ago when Thorin Oakenshield came to retake the Mountain from Smaug, Dwarves, Men, and Elves stood ready to spill each others blood simply for the sake of greed. I know this because I was there. In some of you, I see the same anger that nearly led to disaster under the shadow of the Lonely Mountain. And today, just as there was then, an enemy approaches our doorstep. Orcs driven by some evil master move to destroy the good peoples of this land. If you all band together you have a chance to purge this darkness from your lands."

Each clan leader, visitor, and guest were given his moment to speak. News was conveyed to all of the happenings in Mirkwood and its regions.

First came news of the Grey Pilgrim - Gandalf - and how he had been seen in the north. The news was delivered by men of Dale and Dorwinion; from the Dwarves of Erebor; and even from the Elves of Thranduil's realm though this was conveyed by the Dwarves, for no Elves were present at the moot since Orophin had left. Of Gandalf's doings even Radagast gave confirmation, for the wizard had come to Rhosgobel one eve in the last few weeks, under the cover of the stars, and left again a few days later. He had made no attempt to announce himself nor speak of his business to any others, and of this the Brown Wizard said no more.

The men of Dorwinion told tales of how one of the merchant princesses, Una, had left her court on a diplomatic errand to King Bard's court in Dale. It was said that along her way, men out of the East harried the lady and her entourage, but a detachment of Barding warriors arrived to chase the Easterlings off. Una spent the month of June in Bard's court and many womenfolk smiled at how the King's eyes gleamed in captivation when he watched the princess dance.

Old stories like the tale of Balthi, rumours about the River-maidens, and of the loss of Ingomer's son in the forest was also topics of many - sometimes repeated. During these councils, Arbogast and his friends could see Ceawin's followers were everywhere, offering gifts of food, drink and gold to win obvious support for whatever their cause would be. The moot continued with more trivial matters and woodmen of the north said that Dale-men had trespassed under the eaves of Mirkwood and cut down many trees. Included in this theft were the silver beeches, most beloved of all tress of Thranduil's folk.

The clan elders discussed trade between their houses and their allies. To this, Hartfast of Mountain Hall, who was given the floor to speak before all others, cried out in complaint of the high tolls imposed upon them by the Beornings. Grimbeorn stood and shouted back at the accusations and in defense of his father's purpose for said tolls. And so, it went as each group stood and presented their clan's needs and issues - the folk of Woodmen town asked for more iron and tin; foreign merchants come to sell swords and spear-heads made by Dwarves in the north.

And on and on it went - nothing seemingly resolved, nor the primary purpose of the moot being discussed.

Next, the folk of the Black Tarn were given the floor. Amaleoda revealed that the recent years brought wonderful harvests, that the lake was alive with fish, and the pestilent fogs that sometimes blew up from the south were gone. She said that the Maiden of the Lake welcomed their presence. Amaleoda invited more of the Woodmen to come south with them to the Black Tarn, for they intended to raise a longhouse and build a larger walled settlement. Some of the Woodmen greeted this prospect with enthusiasm, and many cheers went up as the lady of the Black Tarn returned control of the moot to their leader.

Ingomer raised his hands for silence, "One not of our people - though kin from afar - asked for this Folkmoot and he has traveled far to speak here. Come forth, Ceawin."

Bandobras pulled another mug of ale for himself and smiled. His head was not yet swimming from the heavy lager, but he felt more comfortable. "At last," he thought, "We get to the point."

Ceawin the Generous stood up moved to the center fire ring to address the crowd. "For those who do not know me," and here he addressed himself chiefly to Hartfast, "I am Ceawin, called the Generous by my kin. My people and I dwell in the East Bight of Mirkwood." There were many courteous greetings called out, but Arbogast could hear the occasional grumble of some of his fellows. His attention was called back to the center as Ceawin continued. "The lands of the East Bight have been blessed and hold many virtues - the soil is fertile, and our crops grow in abundance. We must work diligently lest they go fallow and the foods spoil. Fortunately, we are close to the rich lands of Dale and Dorwinion and we make good trade with these lands.

"We are a folk of legacy for long was the East Bight the home of the Northmen of old. The fathers of Eorl the Young were born upon the fields of the East Bight and it was the chieftain, Frumgar, who led his people from there long ago to the northern reaches of the River Anduin. These Men became the Éothéod and were themselves the ancestors of the Rohirrim. It was Eorl the Young who rode south to the aid of Gondor, and was granted the wide green land of Calenardhon, now known as Rohan, as his reward for him and his people."

Again, there were cheers, and again there were angered words. "Frumgar led his people away and left ye behind!" Esgalwen wondered at the infighting and the divides that still stood between these clans.

Certainly, they were not wide enough to keep these people from uniting? She turned her head back to the man in the center of the ring, "I have many followers and a sturdy longhouse. I ask that we be counted among the Woodmen - my people need to learn how to survive in Mirkwood. We offer friendship and wealth in exchange."

As he finished his words, a murmur came from the eastern edge of the Folk-moot. All eyes turned to see as Orophin, the Silvan Elf, his travel clothes stained with mud (and blood) and torn from his travels, strode into the ring. Without a word, the Elf moved to where Bandy sat and joined him there on the grass.

Ceawin was done. Now the son of Beorn stood and began to speak of his father's concerns. He gave a long discourse regarding the typical slander about the tolls for the roads between the great wood and the passes of the Misty Mountains. His voice boomed to command the gathering.

"Orcs. Wolves. Spiders. Foul creatures of all kinds my people have protected the Vale from for generations. Our lands extending from the Carrock to the elf-road in Mirkwood, north from near to Gundabad to your lands in the south, have been under constant assault by these creatures and there is a cost associated with that protection – my people.

"With the death of the Great Goblin and breaking of the goblins in the north, attacks have been fewer but there is still a darkness eating away at us. In a way, that has grown and encouraged those remnants of evil to be more cautious and even more savage. People and animals seem to go missing or turn away from others in the outlying areas without a trace." A despondent look crossed his face for a moment, then he continued. "Then I came across one of your messengers fleeing a stray band of orcs and wargs. Rest assured they were dealt with promptly," he said, showing off a massive scar across his chest. "My father and my people stand ready to defeat the darkness that spreads but we cannot stand alone."

Ingomer stood and raised a hand, cutting off Hartfast, as the mountain-man tried to reignite his argument towards the Beornings and their taxation of the roads out of the mountains. The leader of the moot gave the Elf a questioning look, "Master Orophin, you have returned out of the forest after near fifteen days of being gone...do you not have a tale to tell?"

"Sadly, not much of a tale. I followed the man who escaped us in the woods back to this hill in the south on which they've built a fortified town with a wooden palisade. There looked to be about fifteen score or so in the village. I put an arrow in the man as a warning to stay out of our woods then returned here."

As Orophin spoke, there was a rustling in the crowd of the tent as if more room was being made for newcomers. The wood Elf's words were scarcely done when a fletched arrow, well-known to Orophin, struck head first into the ground for all to see.

"And well did that arrow find its mark into one of my people!" resounded a stern voice from the crowd. The crowd rippled again, and a group of figures were revealed. To the company they were recognized as bearing the same gear and equipment of the men they had recently done battle with in the woods. Several of the men bore sacks over their shoulders, but one stood clearly in charge.

The leader, like his men, was well-armed and equipped. Their gear of war looked cared for but worn. The stranger took a few quick steps forward so that all in the tent could both see and hear him. The light of the tent revealed a dragon helm upon his head, the light making the bronze shine and flicker like flame.

Ingomer stood and was the first to speak after the moment of silence, "Only Woodmen and their friends are welcome here."

The keen eared among the crowd heard a low chuckle come from under the helm. When a hand swept up to remove it.

"Oh, but I am a Woodman, by blood and birth. Don't you know me father? You called me Ingold, your eldest and only son. Though now men call me Mogdred." Ingomer looked at the man, face suddenly slack, and sat down again.

Mogdred scanned the room and spoke with a voice that filled the tent, "For many years I was a slave in the dungeons of the Necromancer. Now, I am lord of the place you call Tyrant's Hill and command many men."

The man spun on Amaleoda and a finely wrought intricate blade sprung from its scabbard, gripped in a tortured scarred hand. "You and yours would be long dead if it were not for our protection and the valiant deeds of my men." The man lowered the blade point, but the naked steel still shown in the light.

"Darkness does indeed return to the forest, had you all the eyes to see it. There are Orcs in Fenbridge, and shadows stir again in the fortress that was my prison, the mount of the Necromancer."

A voice then spoke from the nameless crowd, "What do you want here? Your men killed Beran."

"Killed Beran? A trespasser and a spy we believed him to be. How many would have been treated the same by you in your homes? How many unmarked graves lie in the woods, dead at the hands of an Elf arrow when a man lost in the woods strayed too close to their homes? We did no more to him than this Elf did, and he was far from home to call it defense. If the man had a just purpose he should have revealed it, instead of skulking in the woods. I will consider the wergild for the one you call Beran paid, if he was honest, due to the death of my own men whose families I will now have to support."

Orophin's bow was in his hand and arrow nocked before Mogdred finished his words. He responded to the man's insult with calm composure barely veiling his anger. "My people do not murder one another or any of the Free-folk that roam these woods, only protect the lands that are our own. Perhaps were those men not skulking murderers, as your people have proven themselves to be, my King would be a little more accepting of their presence in his realm."

"Bah!" was the dismissive response from Mogdred. "I have come for a seat at this council of Woodmen, tribute from the Black Tarn, which is just for the protection provided, wives for my warriors, and for gold from the mountains. This is no more than any other clan

chief wants for his people. This stranger," Mogdred pointed to Ceawin, "who is not a Woodman by any reckoning, offered you trinkets and sweetcakes. My offer is of a far more practical sort."

He motioned with his hand and the men bearing the sacks stepped forward. A rustle and a tumbling were heard by all in the tent as objects began to spill from the sacks. Several gasps came from the crowd, as the upended sacks spilled forth the severed heads of orcs.

"Here are the pledges of the Men of Amon Bauglir. What say you to my terms?"

"Bah!" spat Bandy, as he leapt back onto his chair. The memory of Dagmar's knife cutting deep into Beran's chest overriding his caution. "You, Mogdred, come to us like the thief who demands restitution after he has been caught and the goods returned to their rightful owner. Had you presented yourself with an honest heart and displayed some willingness to discuss the issues that stand between us, I would beg for your inclusion at this meeting. But coming here and demanding tribute at the point of the sword from people you claim as kinfolk reveals you for the blackguard you are. If Mogdred takes a seat at this council, I predict his demands will grow and he will turn this body of equals into a tyranny."

Mogdred scoffed, "A child speaks while others are silent, eh? The moot is the very place for such things to be discussed, learn better the ways of a folk before entering their conversations, boy. No one has taken such umbrage at the same tolls charged by the Beornings."

"Careful who you call child," replied Bandy. "I am the slayer of Bloody Muzzle and I am the one who defeated your servant, Dagmar, after she buried her dagger to the hilt into a defenseless man's chest. We can use your strength that is true, but I for one will not submit to demands or veiled threats against Black Tarn. I want to know what others think."

Grimbeorn stood with his companions against the newcomer with axe out, upon seeing the flash of the blade. "My companion here certainly has proven more courage and honor than we've seen from your people, as of yet. Your demands have been heard and I'm sure will be discussed but you gain no favors here by your presentation."

Mogdred seemed unaffected by the words of those who had spoken at the council. He judged their renown to be low and not likely to carry much weight.

Turning back to Orophin, "My men do not travel so far north as that, Master Elf, but I am sure the Dwarves, Beornings, and Men of Woodland Hall would have more to say on your brand of hospitality. Long have the folk, who called me lord, dwelled under a darker and harsher shadow. Many, like myself, bore chains and toiled as slaves. Now, we have a longhouse, stout walls, and valiant men. Who here has done better, or come so far as those of us bereft of succor and the support of family, as we of Amon Bauglir? I tell you all that the shadow is not wholly gone. Is not the moot established so those that are strangers may support each other? Who here is not leery of strangers? T'was naught but a month past that me and my folk came upon a large

group of orcs waylaying travelers out of the south. We were too late to save them, but I will have you know they were avenged! We are men of valor and strength. I have offered my terms, they are no more than any other lord would offer if the roles were reversed."

Mogdred sheathed his sword and his fiery helm gleamed tucked into the crook of his arm.

As the moot erupted in a cacophony of exclamations and insults, Arbogast pushed his way toward the centre of the circle. His moment had come - if he had not already waited too long.

"Kinsmen," he called, "cease these harsh words, for they will avail us naught! This man has shown himself, by his father, to be one of us, and to desire that which we all do - a hearth, home and refuge from the shadow of the wood. But more than that, his arrival at this moot shows that he desires the bonds of kinship that unite us! What right have we to deny this to him? The actions of the murderer Dagmar, after all, are not his, and his words," he paused to meet Mogdred's eyes, "while unduly harsh, are no more than any of us might utter who had lived a life as harsh as he claims.

"But whatever may be thought of him, the question we face goes beyond his demeanour, or his actions. Master Orophin has seen with his own eyes the hall that he claims and has told us that many dwell within. How many more of our kin may be under his protection, for who among us did not lose close kin - vanished into the wood before the death of the dragon and the flight of the Necromancer? Shall we deny the bond of our kinship to them? Orc-heads and harsh words he has

shown us, but I say to you that the return of such lost ones as he has found is his true gift to the folk!

"Think what you will of Mogdred of Tyrant's Hill, or certain of those who follow him! Yet we have no cause to turn away our kin, once enslaved and now free. Let them take, not tribute, but assistance, for which hall, which household, could stand against the darkness of the wood unassisted? Let them take, not gold that might adorn them as the orcs slew them for it, but wool from our flocks, mead from our halls and fish from the Black Tarn. And, should they take wives from our clans, then might we rejoice, for they will thereby have proven their devotion to our fledgling nation, and then will their strength truly be called ours."

Exhilarated by his speech (the longest he can remember making in his young life), he casts his gaze around at the circle of the moot. *Please*, he thought desperately to himself, *please let them see! Mogdred is but a man, and will pass in time, but to have* all the Woodmen united! Please let them see what that might mean...

There was something in the air. Arbogast could feel it, and it had extended from his powerful words. The men and women around him wanted to say something; wanted to cheer; wanted to yell and stomp their boots; wanted to cry for their dead. The emotions that were being withheld were palpable in the circle of the moot.

Even Esgalwen was stirred when she heard of the orc raiding party that had been slain. Was that the raiders who had killed her own kin? She would need to

have private words with Mogdred once the moot had ended.

In any case, she suddenly felt unsure of her decision...should this man and his people be punished for the misdeeds of one of his own?

It was Ingomer who broke the tense silence. He slowly stood, all the while looking at his son and smoothing down the gray flecked beard on his face. His spoken words came in a whisper, "My son is alive...alive!" Ingomer's face broke into a smile of love and pride, "MY SON HAS RETURNED TO ME!" He shouted. A murmur from Ingomer's clan could be heard, while others quietly whispered both curses and thanks. The moot leader turned to the throng of people, "We have heard from all folk who had a proposal or spite to bring before the clans. It is now time for you all to make your decision and have your voice heard. To each of you will be given a chit - a small piece of wood that says naught but your clan's sigil. Three proposals have been made to us and so three barrels will be brought to the center of the moot. You will cast your chit into the barrel of your choice and so be heard. Once finished, the chits will be counted and so our decision made. A majority must be received in each barrel for the Folk of Mirkwood to accept this proposal."

At his words, three men rolled out three barrels into the center. The names of Amaleoda, Ceawin, and Mogdred were whitewashed on the outside of each respectively. The people of the moot all began to stand and collect the markers for their clan. Even the strangers were given a marker of Rhosgobel, for they, too, would influence the choice of the moot. Once in hand, each person walked to the trio of barrels and made their choice.

Each of the companions now wrestled with their own decisions. Words had been spoken and many pondered how best to help the folk of the Vale.

While the speech of his companion had pulled him back from being openly aggressive toward Mogdred and his natural joviality made him cheerful at the options they had, Orophin would not support the man and decided to split his chits evenly between the other two barrels.

Bandy, although moved by his companion's speech, could not believe that Mogdred's would not use his influence in Woodman councils for anything but selfish and self-interested purposes. While the people at Tyrant's Hill might be Woodmen, they also seemed devoted to Mogdred and would obey his commands, even to the point of committing murder. He cast his vote for Ceawin and Amaleoda.

As the counting of the chits concluded, Arbogast left the hall rather than let his kin see his youthful disappointment in person. Amaleoda's hall would be built, and Ceawin's folk would join the Woodmen, but the Men of Tyrant's Hill were now enemies by the willful decision of the moot. It was as he had feared the Woodmen will be divided, as the Shadow of Mirkwood reached into the gaps between halls and clans.

As he waited for his companions, the sun set behind the Misty Mountains. Arbogast watched, unseeing, as the embers of a nearby fire-pit flickered and tried to decide what must now be done.

was beginning to orange as the last of the clansmen cast their chits into the barrels. Ingomer stood and walked to the barrels and looking at each, tossed his own. It was done. The people had made their choice. Now it was only to count them and see for whom the decisions were made.

Each barrel was rolled away from the other and then shoved onto its side to allow the wooden chits to pour out - their clatter filling the quiet of the moot. The people all sat silently in the great circle and watched as Ingomer and Radagast - the appointed leaders - slowly counted through the many tokens. It was a slow and tedious process, but no one within the gathering stood and left, all kept their eyes to the center and only soft whispers were spoken.

Ceawin's barrel was counted and many tokens were stacked across the table, a telling sign to the moot that he and his people were probably entered amongst the ranks of the woodmen. Amaleoda's was next and her count was tallied. The majority of votes would be needed in each circumstance for it to have passed the will of the clans. Finally, Mogdred's barrel was spilled and the chits counted. It seemed to many of the onlookers that his tokens did not need the same amount of time as his fellows.

It was done.

Mogdred watched as the votes were cast and tallied by the members of the moot. He spared few glances at his father during the proceedings, but neither could Ingomer bear to look upon his son for long either. Clearly the boy who had become a man in bondage of the Necromancer was heavy on his mind.

Ingomer was the first to speak, "Assembled folk and friends, all who have desired to speak have been allowed, the proposals have been laid before the folk and voted on.

"Ceawin the Generous, your proposal to join with the Woodmen has been adopted. I recognize you as clan head and member of the Folk of Greenwood the Great.

"Amaleoda, I extend greeting to you as well. The Black Tarn will be a welcome addition and source of trade and friendship for the men of the wood."

Ingomer looked to his son and his eyes said it all. For the briefest of instances, the old man wanted to deny the decision and make his son's proposal a success. He had the power. His word was all that need be said - an aye for Mogdred and he would not lose him again. Surely, with this vote his son would leave once more and Ingomer knew he would not see him again, at least not in peace. Mogdred - the man that had been raised as Ingold - knew what had been chosen without his father's words.

"Ingold, my son who has returned out of darkness and death to us," said the older man, in what now seemed a frail voice, "the folk have spoken against your proposal. Long lost to me, I am happy that you have returned and survived your ordeal. Perhaps our clan

would consider taking the Woodmen among you back into our long house."

The responses of the Ceawin and Amaleoda to the verdicts were stymied by Mogdred's retort to his father. "Spare your filial love for Ingold, for he died many years ago upon the rack, Mogdred has no need or use for it. You have rejected my proposal, not that I am surprised by that, but that does not negate the needs of my people. We, who bore the lash and the scars of bondage, will not meekly set aside our new-found freedom for a distant past that few now can recall. All of you have lived on the fringe of shadow, but we, we men of Amon Bauglir existed in the very pit of darkness.

"Of all of you, the wizard alone knows perhaps the truth of the horror of those days. But from them we breathe free again, have built a longhouse of our own and draw swords in common cause with men from far and wide. Our common bondage and freedom has united in ties stronger than blood. I will not return here, and nor will I renounce our need for peace, wives, and wealth either. We came before you as a bulwark against the shadow, you have rejected it by your vote today. Pray that when the time comes for you to ask us for help, or extend your hands in need and common cause, that my war leaders are more open minded than you have been here. I assure you, that need will come. The Elves will not heed you, the Dwarves have redeemed what they have lost and will not come forth again, only in other Men will you find succor. What collection of warriors do you have secreted away here? Or do you place your trust behind a brown robe and pigeons?"

Radagast rose and spoke, "Mogdred, I hear your words. I do know of the darkness that you speak of, I know it better than you yourself do. I know by sight that the blade you carried slew kin, once before, when the scions of Númenor made war on each other. Be not so quick to reject your fathers love out of pride."

Mogdred spit upon the floor, "I seek no love from any here. Keep the heads of the orcs, take them as wergild for all the other sons that were lost in darkness and never redeemed. From today on, their blades will be drawn in their own defense under my leadership. Let each of you then look after yourselves."

The scarred man crowned his head in the dragon helm and left the tent, his followers swept behind him in his wake.

Silence ruled the tent of the Folkmoot.

Esgalwen, moved swift and silently out of the tent, following behind Mogdred and his men. As the slave-now-lord prepared to leave, the Ranger made to intercept him.

"Lord Mogdred, a word please, before you leave," Esgalwen pleaded. "The folk from the South that you spoke of, can you tell me how many you found dead and describe for me what they were wearing? I fear they may have been rangers of my company, my kinsmen. Did any of them speak to you?"

The large Woodman turned at Esgalwen's voice. Anger filled him from the result of the Folk-moot and he at once wanted to lash out but stopped...she was beautiful and there was something about her that demanded, if not commanded him to calm. She was of

the Dúnedain, born of the blood of Westernesse and the Exiled Kingdoms - of Isildur and Anarion themselves, and Mogdred, not knowing why, deferred to her.

"My...Lady, forgive me. I fear that in my ire... I did not hear your words." She asked once more and watched as he breathed, calming himself. "The night was a flurry of swords and cries, my Lady. My horsemen and I were ranging in search of raiders and came upon the encampment being attacked. We drove our spears into the enemy, but I fear it was too late - the orcs were already plundering the fallen, and thus were caught unawares. Now that I think of them, the men of the fallen company did have your look to them, yet we did not see any other women-folk."

The afternoon was quickly falling into dusk and Mogdred felt his impatience rising, "I must away from here, madame, as I find it more to my distaste with each passing moment. If you would want more information, then ride with me. I will take you to the place where they were slain - I will take you to the hill under which your people were laid to rest. We saw to it that no evil befell their remains. If any survived, I cannot speak of it."

Esgalwen was immediately filled with the desire to mount up with this man of the Tyrant's Hill and go to look upon the place where her company was slain. She had lost the location when she ran into the woods and did not know how to get back, save to walk along the western eaves of Mirkwood. Alone would be dangerous, but with these men she would have no fears. The Dúnadan woman turned to look back to her new companions, those that had brought her out of the

darkness of the wood and wondered at the road she should take.

The hesitation for Esgalwen was momentary. "It is a kindness you show me, Lord Mogdred," she said graciously as she accepted the large man's hand and mounted behind him. "I accept your generous invitation."

She looked back once more at her new companions, as Mogdred spurred his horse. She hoped they would understand.

## Epilogue:

ROOGAST was by no means a skilled craftsman, but a young man willing to work long days would always find welcome where a hall was built.

He spent the remainder of the summer assisting in the raising of Black Tarn Hall. Still, he found few friends even among Amaleoda's folk, for the Men of Tyrant's Hill had already turned to raiding their nearest neighbours and his vocal support for them was widely remembered.

Arbogast bore this small doom with characteristic stoicism - while the self-fulfilling nature of the doomsayers' predictions at the Folk-moot was not lost on him, he recognised the fear in his neighbours eyes

and their need for security. Providing it became his self-appointed task.

In conversations with those who would speak to him, he suggested several ways in which the defences of the Hall could be strengthened. Though others ultimately took the credit, Arbogast took a private pride in the stout palisade and well-sited gate that rose in early September.

It was about this time that he received a quite unexpected visit - his uncle Lafdag having made the uncertain trip down the Dusky River from his small steading near Woodmen-town. The crippled man bore his shield on his back as he embraced his nephew.

"Well-met once more, my boy! It is good to see you hale and strong."

"Thank you, uncle. I must say, I had not thought to see any of my kin so soon. My father and brothers have sent no word since the moot."

His uncle nodded his characteristic slow nod. "You love your father, as is proper for a son, but the man is blinded by the words of his clan. Even if he weren't, I suspect he's too much a fool to see just what manner of man he has fathered! I can see, though, even if he will not. You (and this hall!) are worth a trip, come raiders, spiders or shadow. Besides, your mother worries about you."

"How do you kn..."

"Because all mothers worry about their sons. It seems to be a law. I'm sure your grandmother worried about your father and me. I don't think they ever consider us really to be men, ready for the world." He un-strapped the shield. "That's one of the reasons I'm giving you this."

"Your shield?"

"Your shield, now. Keep it close - it's a good one, well-wrought in my youth and still strong. Remember, a sharp axe may bring you all the glory it denied me, but a shield will save your life! And our people already remember too many glorious, dead men."

A grim nod and then a smile between the two men and talk turned back to happier things. Arbogast was glad that his uncle stayed for a time and he enjoyed his company, now that all the others with which he had spent time were off on their own tasks. But soon, the need to return home became pressing and Lafdag mounted a small river-vessel that would be going back north. Arbogast waved at the man and was filled with a warm feeling of love.

After Lafdag's departure, and with the weather cooling, Arbogast set to building himself a small house near the palisade gate. Once complete, he extended a standing invitation to all the members of his summer fellowship to come enjoy what hospitality he could provide, particularly Bandobras, who had no other home east of the Misty Mountains. For those who were absent, he left messages with the people of Rhosgobel, who have become accustomed to their comings and goings.

This continued association with strange folk did little to improve his popularity, though several trading expeditions to the East Bight in the company of Grimbeorn in 2948 brought a measure of grudging acceptance. These crossings of the Narrows of the

forest (a route from Black Tarn Hall proving elusive, though Arbogast continued to believe one might be found) were dangerous and uncomfortable. But the Beorning was as indefatigable as his father, and Arbogast was adept at finding hidden ways through the darkest of woods. They found a people already trading with the Men of the Lake and, through them, the Men of Dorwinion.

Though their capacity was limited, they brought back wine, fine cloth and well-wrought rings. With what little he could afford, Arbogast began courting Lindwine, the Ice-Dancer. Though she was as cool as her nickname, and her family was less than pleased, she did not refuse him outright. Arbogast, smiling as he watched his own hearth, was willing to take his time.

As the snows of winter melted and the year 2949 of the Third Age awakened, he heard the news that the fellowship was beginning to reassemble in Rhosgobel. Desiring greatly to see his friends once more, Arbogast the Fire-Watcher of Black Tarn Hall set out to see what tidings they might bring.

CRIMOCORN bade farewell to his new companions, "I go to help these men on my way back to my people. My father is surely keeping watch for my return as I have been gone far longer than expected. I will return ere he deems the errand worthy. Farewell, my friends."

Seeing as he'd be able to help the Woodmen in two ways at once, he set out with the hunters to find the

game and protect the lands from the further incursions by orcs out of the mountains, while also surveying the lands to find better routes through which to create new roads to connect the people. The road was long and hard with many battles fought and losing good men to the rabble created by the Dark Lord of ages past. Rough maps of the area were made and secured for they both held economic import but strategic information to help defend the people as well.

By the time Grimbeorn and his hunter companions reached the borders of his land, the seasons were changing for the colder. Snow could be seen upon the peaks for weeks now, but they were getting more and more white with each day. The heir of Beorn offered the men refuge for as long as they needed it before they returned to their own people for the winter, but they politely declined, only accepting what provisions they could carry to get them comfortably back on their way. Bidding them farewell from the borderhouse, Grimbeorn carried on back to his father's home.

"Father, I am home!" Grimbeorn called boisterously, upon entering the House of Beorn. The room was light with the fire in the center burning brightly, casting fearsome shadows throughout due to the ornate woodcarvings of bears and the like. A large man with a great black beard peered with the light of the fire in his eyes at the newcomer. "My boy! Have those Woodmen forgotten how to count or have you?! You tarried with the wizard longer than you said you would. I told you it might be dangerous if you had stayed away from your folk so long -- dangerous for

them, that is. Bah, come sit by me and tell me of your adventures."

The day wore into night and back into day while Grimbeorn told of what happened in the lands of southern Mirkwood -- his companions, the boar, the assassination and traitor, the dark Woodmen of Mogdred, and of his journey back to his homeland. The animal servants kept food and drink flowing so the lad could tell his tale. "Another of these Hobbits out of the West, you say? That is a surprise. But what isn't are emissaries of the Elf and Dwarf kingdoms. It is good that they arrived -- those men could certainly use the counsel. Yet what gets stuck in my craw though are those ingrates complaining about our tolls. You reminded them of the price we bear for keeping them safe?! The price I, we, have paid because the fell creatures! I have a mind not to send you back..."

But before he could rant any longer, he let out a big yawn, which was shared by his son. "Off with you now and get some rest. We'll finish this later."

When he awoke, Grimbeorn found the sun was setting. He found his father out in the pastures tending his animals. "My head has cleared, son, and so has the rash thoughts. I will send you back as the emissary of our people. Make no mistake, my ire is no less cooled, only tempered. But before you go, tonight is the equinox and the full moon. It is a night held deep by our kind and the first of many for you as you begin the journey to come into your birthright as bear and man."

A week later, a more aware, a more proud Grimbeorn set forth from the northern Anduin vales back south towards Rhosgobel to continue what he helped start.

Arbogast leaving for Black Tarn, Bandy tarried a while at Rhosgobel to rest and to learn from the people whose lives had intersected with his own.

The killing of Bloody Muzzle, however, had left the mistaken impression that Bandy was a marksman and he was soon pressed into service into one of the many parties that ranged far into eastern Mirkwood. Together with a band of Woodmen and women, Bandy found himself enveloped in the forest's gloom and struggling to identify and follow tangled, little-used paths. With axes and long knives, they cleared old tracks and cut new ones with the aim to create a corridor between Rhosgobel and Sunstead.

Beset by wild and sometimes unnatural, black-pelted animals, they were hunters and hunted as much as trail blazers. Many close calls left Bandy shaken, but he gave thanks that they encountered nothing as ferocious as the boar, or Dagmar. The danger drew the companions closer together. If the days were long and difficult, the nights were rewarding. Camped around a fire, enjoying the rough camaraderie of his new friends, Bandy smoked and told stories of the Shire. Whether out of politeness or real interest, he could not tell, the Woodmen called for more tales from west of the Mountains.

In turn, he encouraged his companions to tell stories from their own history and folklore. Bandy listened intently to tales of great champions, wise elders, and crafty wood-people. After many stories had been passed back and forth, the camp grew melancholy as Barald, a quiet, older man with grey-flecked hair and beard, remembered Ingold, Ingomer Axebreaker's eldest son, as a young man.

Brave and good-natured, Ingold was a natural leader and beloved by all. Always the first among his kinfolk to venture forth against encroaching orcs, he risked his life often for his people. Then one day Ingold fell in battle. His body was never found, and it was assumed he had been killed. Barald trailed off, not needing to say more for all present had attended the Folk Moot and heard Mogdred's claims.

Knowing that not everyone present approved of the decision to decline Mogdred's proposal, Bandy tried to restore the sense of fellowship. "Hearing your tale of sundered kinship makes me ache to return to my homeland to be with my family and friends. Only the thought that I have embarked on some important task with you, my friends, holds me to this place. At home I would be comfortable and secure, but here you are driving back the shadow that has for too long hung over this great forest. I would like to be a small part of that." He then passed around the skin of wine he had been saving for the occasion.

With the coming of winter, Bandy took up Arbogast's invitation and journeyed to Black Tarn. There he spent the days working on the Hall, and the long nights spinning tales to entertain and lift the spirits of

the Woodman youth. One night, during a good dinner, Bandy related Barald's story and confessed his own yearning to return to his kinfolk. Then, he added, "Arbogast, you spoke well and wisely for unity and kinship at the Folk Moot. Yet I have heard nothing about your own family. Why you are not with them this winter season?"

Arbogast did not answer immediately, though the silence in the house was a friendly one, allowing fuller contemplation of the warmth of the hearth, the dance of the shadows cast on the ceiling and the aroma of forest herbs from the stew-pot. When he did speak, the young Woodman's voice was controlled - almost empty of emotion.

"The hard and simple answer is that they would not have me. Arbodag, son of Scyldag - my father - takes great pride in his house and his clan. He is a steadfast warrior, despite his age, and would see his sons become the same. Lafdag, his brother, is very different. He crippled his leg when he was but a boy and has never stood in a shield-wall. Instead, he watches, he listens, and he ponders. He understands much that my father does not but has never fully convinced his brother that his understanding is worth the while. I am not much like my father, but a great deal like my uncle. I have only recently taken up arms as befits a man of my people but have spent long nights watching the fire with Lafdag and learning to understand as he does."

A thoughtful look came over him. "Perhaps my father worries that I am Lafdag's son, and not his? The events of the past year have given me cause to reexamine much that I believed to be the case among my

people - and this would explain the harsh looks I have seen passed between them.

"In any event, my uncle at least bends his understanding to the benefit of his kith and kin! My friendship with outsiders has exhausted the last of my father's tolerance for me, I suspect. It was a stroke of great fortune that Amaleoda's proposal came when it did, for as you have seen," he indicates the newlyformed calluses on Bandy's hands with a spoon as he serves supper, "the folk of the Black Tarn welcome anyone who can wield a hatchet, no matter the company he may keep!"

With that, he sat himself down on a stool and began to eat. Around mouthfuls of savoury vegetables, he asked "and what of you, Bandy? The upheaval that drove you to cross the Misty Mountains and abide with strange Men in Mirkwood must have been great indeed!"

Unprepared for Arbogast's revelations, Bandy felt clumsy of thought and speech. His heart ached for his friend. He wanted to be comforting, but what could he say? He said nothing for a while.

"My friend, I have no words to cheer you, although that is my greatest desire. To be separated from your family is a great ill for which I have no remedy. You can only demonstrate your worth by living according to your conscience. One day, you will be a leader among your people. I can see that. You may have to join the shield wall on occasion, but your greatness will be in your words and in your council. Your father will have a choice then, to stop his ears or to soften his heart and listen.

Until then you may rely on your uncle, on the fellowship of your friends, and on the people of Black Tarn.

"Although our stories are not so different, I fear my own troubles fail to measure up against your own and that my reasons for sharing your fire may seem altogether frivolous and selfish. My own family, although successful in their own way, and by the standards of my people, are a rather narrow and incurious lot. Most Hobbits are I suppose. I am expected to succeed my father on the farm, but my own predilections are toward scholarship. As you know, I have been collecting stories for a history of Hobbits, especially those that go out into the world. That is the reason I gave for leaving home, but if I am truthful with myself, it was to escape the suffocating expectations of my parents.

"Like your father, they would be scandalized by my friendships with big people, Dwarves and Elves. Still my experiences here with you and the others have made me see myself and them more clearly, more honestly. Yet, those same experiences prevent me from going home. I now understand better, better than any Hobbit except perhaps Mister Baggins, that the world outside the Shire is dangerous. The Shire may enjoy some protection from the Shadow by virtue of its remoteness, but it cannot be immune from evil. I must do my part here to ensure my family and friends do not have to face it. Until then, I shall call Black Tarn my home with your permission."

Arbogast smiled at the diminutive Hobbit, a spoon of stew stuck between his teeth. He marveled at the wisdom that he had just heard.

Che speed at which Men made decisions never ceased to amaze Orophin. The Moot was over so quickly, and he'd barely gotten to know the Men and the Hobbit, with whom he had allied. So, he decided to spend a little more time with them, hunting and helping prepare for winter before he returned to the hall of his king.

A couple of moons running the paths of the forest with them and singing songs around the fire, listening to the stories of the Woodmen and the Hobbit almost made it seem as if the Shadow had truly departed. But still he could feel it, like a thief in the night, just a glimpse at the corner of his eye as the others slept.

It wasn't until the snow began to fall that Orophin made the journey home, to report to the King. He spent the winter there and, in the spring, made his way back to his raft. Travelling up and down the great river, trading with those along the way. He visited Rhosgobel several times throughout the summer of 2948, with trade goods for those people he now called friends.

Time passed as it always did for the immortal Elf and the spring of 2949 was upon him before he knew it. Once again, he was plying the trade routes along the Great River looking forward to spending a few days and nights with his friends in Rhosgobel.