



THE DARKENING OF  
MIRKWOOD

the  
ONE RING



# Chapter 2 - Whispers of the Shadow

*Spring 2949 T.A.*

Rhosgobel bloomed.

The winter had held on as long as it could, but at last the Vale of Anduin was released and life returned with gusto. Birdsong filled the long length of the forest as trees greened and flowers painted color across the land. The mountains to the west were still peaked in snow, but their melts allowed for the river to rush and at times break its bonds filling the flood plains with silt and other rich nutrients that were needed.

With the return of Spring came the many wanderers who had taken different paths that had sprouted from the success of the Folk-moot. Their journeys had seen a summer end and another pass, before at last they found their feet bringing them home. Some of the companions had gone together and some alone, but all had shared in new events and so many tidings were revealed.

From those that had returned north, to either the mountain of the Dwarves, Thranduil's Hall, or to Dale came tidings of those lands. King Bard had courted and then married the fair maiden, Una of Dorwinion and the

bond reinforced the status of the kingdom of Dale as a rising power in the North. Una, it was said, came with a rich dowry of gold and diplomatic relations. In December, the happy king and queen were blessed with a male son, Prince Bain, making Bard a father at the age of 38.

In Thranduil's realm, a great hunt for a fabled white deer of Mirkwood, a race of enchanted beasts known to roam the forest, had taken place and for the first time the Men of Dale were invited. The Elven-king had declared that any may participate that were friends of the realm. Thranduil's goal was to quell the tension that had grown with the Barding villages along the eastern border of the Woodland Realm, for the mortals continued to trespass into the lands of the Elves. Some wondered at the offering of the Elves to join the hunt and its true intent.

During the hunt, an Elf-maiden, Ruithel, had been captured by exiled Dwarves who had coveted her mithril bow - Penbregol. It had been crafted by the hands of the Dwarf-smith, Gamil Zirak, and the exiled Dwarves deemed it a handsome wergild to use in the request for aid in the retaking of their own home - the Greydelve. The maiden was rescued by Bardings, much to the delight of the Elven-king who had decided to look past the mortal-folks transgressions into his realm. Also, as a condition of the Elf-maiden's release, an agreement was made that Thranduil would meet with Frár, chieftain of the exiled Dwarves. Yet, with the coming of spring it had yet to happen.

From central Mirkwood came tales of the opening of routes to the eastern eaves and the East Bight.

Spiders were rampant in the shadowed heart of the woods, and one had attacked a Woodman boat travelling down the Dusky River. The River-maidens interceded to save the Woodmen by guiding them out of the webs. One of the Woodmen reported seeing a gigantic Spider lurking in the shadows.

On the fringes of the Western Eaves, a skulking shape was seen lingering about and stealing food from the Woodmen. One farmer tried to catch the chicken-thief, but the creature retaliated by terrifying the farmer's cows, who trampled the Woodman to death. Ingomer of Woodland Hall has placed a bounty on the head of this 'Bloody Ghost' that was said to hiss and whisper to itself.

A light spring rain had just refreshed the land and now the sun broke through the clouds that ran before its warmth, leaving blue skies above and a thick humidity.

Esgalwen rode into the clearing that had been a large gathering of people just two years past. The field on which the moot had been hosted was now empty save for the fire rings and logs that had been laid about as benches. A feeling of melancholy filled her, as she looked about and saw no one. Under the eaves of the wood was the house of Radagast and the smoke that came from its chimney told of his presence, but otherwise the field was empty.

She had spent the better part of the last year and a half ranging the East Nether Vales and southern Mirkwood in search of word of any companion that might still live. She found none within The Toft - the strong southern village of Men, which was her expectation. If they were alive, they were being held by the orcs, or some master of the filth. The Dúnadan had spent the rest of her time among the folk of Tyrant's Hill. She had pleaded with Mogdred to accompany her, or at least extend her a company of men, to aid in her search, but he had refused. He opened his home to her, but the bitterness of the moot hung on him through the winter and following summer.

Esgalwen thought about seeking her former companions to ask their aid but had received word that they were busy with tasks that had sprung from the moot. The Black Tarn was being settled and built and the narrows were being explored to allow easy route to the East Bight. She also wondered at their opinion of her, having ridden off those many months ago with the man that had been scorned by all.

In all her travel, the most she had achieved was to see the mound that had been raised over her fallen companions and to learn of the Vale. Orcs raided the settlements of Men, but she alone could do little to stem their attacks. Esgalwen sent word to her homeland and lord and put in motion plans to establish stronger ties with Mogdred and his people with the Steward of Gondor. She saw strength in these Woodmen who lived on the very doorstep of the Shadow and knew an alliance with them would supply Gondor with information and the Woodmen with the

needed resources. Esgalwen hoped over time that the entirety of the clans of the Anduin Vale would reconcile and strengthen themselves by their allegiances.

She knew not why, but with the coming of spring felt the need to return to Rhosgobel. Mogdred gave leave grudgingly and lent her a horse. Now she looked upon the empty grounds and wondered if her heart had been reading a false calling.

The Dúnadan jumped at the voice, “T’would seem that time has made you fairer, my lady.” Esgalwen turned in her saddle to see the beaming smile of Bandobras the Hobbit. Behind him stood Arbogast and Grimbeorn, looking dour and hot. Next to all was the tall, graceful form of Orophin seeming not to mind the heat in any way. Only the Dwarf, Rorin, was missing and she wondered if he had returned north.

Her heart had not been wrong, after all - they were all here, together, and Esgalwen knew that they would not separate again lest by some dark fate.

Esgalwen smiled warmly at her small friend as she dismounted from her horse. “And, t’would seem time has made you even more corded,” she said as she playfully squeezed his bicep. Before he could reply, she graced his forehead with a kiss, “It is good to see you strong and well, my friend.” Addressing all of them, “It is good to see all of you again. Indeed, my heart has longed to see each of you, and often I had asked for news. I am thankful that our paths come together once more.”

Grimbeorn favored her with a smile in return, a rarity for one called ‘grim.’ “It is good to see you well, too. We have all returned as there is much to do; only

now has the pebble fallen that may start the avalanche.”

The companions quickly moved to a table that Radagast had out under the boughs where he hosted visitors with bread and honey. The wizard was not currently present, but the abundance of food and wine was available and so they ate. Stories were shared as they caught up their doings over the last year and a half. Much had happened since the Folk-moot and so the day moved from afternoon to dusk.

Esgalwen learned that Radagast had taken them in, as their patron, though Arbogast had also made his home at the Black Tarn. He and Grimbeorn had traveled much, back and forth, between the narrows, working with Ceawin and his people to open roads to the east. They spoke of the labors of it all, and that much more work needed done, as spiders and other fell-beasts from the south would fill the clearings that they made, as soon as they moved on.

Bandobras chimed in with his tale or song, when he had the chance, as he, too, had taken part in the efforts - though he felt his contributions did not compare to that of the great woodmen. To this he was chided by the others, for he could not understand that merely his pleasant personality, with stories of home and table, had sheltered and emboldened the men's hearts when the forest was gloomiest.

They chatted long, perhaps made longer by the sweet honey-mead that they drank, until at last a voice hearkened to them, “What a merry gathering of friends!”

The companions turned to see two old men waking towards them - one in brown, the other gray. Radagast they recognized immediately, but the other none knew save in tales that they had heard. "Allow me to introduce to you, Gandalf the Gray, my dear friend." The Brown wizard then introduced the companions in kind.

"Well met," said Gandalf, a long-stemmed wooden pipe clenched in his teeth. "Might we, too, partake in your drink?"

Always a believer in showing hospitality to strangers, Arbogast filled mead-horns and passed them to the new arrivals. "And well met to you, friend of my people. Many tales have I heard of you and your travels. He who gave the lamp to the young Balthi will never want for bread or mead at any table in the forest! Drink and rest, for doubtless your way has been long and troubled. When you are more at ease, perhaps you will tell us what has brought you here, for to find two wizards together is no mean thing."

Bandy stood and bowed, "Welcome! Is it really you? Forgive me for asking before you have had refreshment and rest, but what news have you of the Shire? Many months has it been since I looked up on that fair land or heard news of its people."

Gandalf's face broke into a smile with his pipe clenched tightly in his teeth. "Well, bless me! Radagast spoke truly when he said that a Hobbit out of the Shire had returned to Mirkwood! And a Bracegirdle, no less! Forgive me, Master Hobbit, but I, too, am at a loss for news regarding the Shire. Since the death of the dragon, Smaug, and the flight of the Necromancer, I have spent

a great deal of time on the east side of the Misty Mountains. It has been a number of years since I have seen the green hills of your land, and though I do miss it, there are matters that concern me here. The Shadow has been driven from the south, yes, but we believe now this was but a feint. What we thought merely a lieutenant of the Great Shadow has proved to be Lord Sauron himself, who soon after proclaimed himself in Mordor!”

The name brought a chill to all who stood near the wizard. For some it had been a hearth-tale of old, or scary stories told by milk-mothers, but it could no longer be denied. The great Lord Sauron had revealed himself once more, and all wondered at the future. Elendil and Gil-galad were long gone - who would lead the Free-folk against the Dark Lord this time.

Seeing the ill-ease, Radagast broke in to lighten Gandalf’s somber words, “Yes, yes, but he is far from our lands under the leaves of Greenwood!” The use of Mirkwood’s former name caused the wizard in gray to cock an eye at his brother.

“But long is his reach, Radagast. You know this to be true. That is why we are here. That is why they are here. Tell them why you have summoned them.”

Summoned? Each of the companions wondered at Gandalf’s words.

“Very well,” sighed the Brown wizard. “Yes, I had you all summoned back to my home. I am in need of valiant folk such as yourselves - and though you might wonder, each of you possesses a strength yet seen. Each of you represent the Free-folk of this Middle-

earth, and so must play a part in guarding it. And so, you were summoned.”

With his words, Arbogast knew of what he spoke - he had felt a need to return to Rhosgobel. It was as if something had tugged at his heart. By the looks on his friends’ faces, he knew, too, that they had experienced it as well.

Gandalf broke in, “There is great need for information, but it may be quite perilous to procure. So, a task is presented to you, and should you decline...well, no ill will be thought of you.” Some of the companions made to interrupt the wizard, as each had tasks that they were already committed to with the coming of spring. Esgalwen thought of her hunt, the men of their task in the narrows, and Orophin of his homeland. The wizard’s eye was keen, and he knew their minds. “Fear not - you will all return to your duties once this chore is through. Perhaps you may find answers to the questions that hinder you.”

“We must go to the Hill of Sorcery...to Dol Guldur,” said Radagast.

“Dol Guldur!” Esgalwen whispered. “I have spent the better part of these last two years with the men of Tyrant’s Hill... brave men... stout hearted folk... who know well the Shadow’s lash and the Shadow’s spear. Even they barely whisper the name of the hill of sorcery for fear it might draw the Shadow’s attention. All who range the eastern nether vales and the southern woods give the place a wide pass. Hate-filled spirits wander the land, foul pets and discarded servants of the necromancer. Men say that even the trees are dead, yet they continue to grow, their limbs twisted from too

much spilled blood and dark sorcery.” Turning her eyes to Radagast, “Lord Radagast, what information could be of such great value to send us into such a miserable, forsaken place?”

Instinctively clapping his hands over his ears at the utterance of Dol Guldur, Bandy flinched as if avoiding a blow. “If you will...did not the White Council drive the Dark-lord from that dread place. What can we possibly accomplish that the wise and powerful did not many years ago? I do not mind saying that the stories of that dark place make my blood run chill. I would rather face a dragon than enter the abode of the Necromancer whether he was at home or not. Only the thought of having two powerful wizards at our side gives me courage.”

Arbogast casts a quick glance at the Hobbit. “I fear, my friend, that these two will not be in our company, and will instead be abroad on business less suited to the likes of us.” He then directed a steady gaze at the two wizards. “I swore in the summer after the folk-moot that I would lend you my counsel and my hand when you called for it, as did we all. So, shall I. Yet I, too, desire to know more than you have said. What is it that you hope to find in such a forsaken place?”

“Do not think that we would send you somewhere that the Wise has not walked before - and don’t be so quick to judge, Arbogast!” Answered the gray wizard.

“Yes,” said Radagast. “For I am coming with you!”

“Even the Wise sometimes fail to see the end of all things, Master Bracegirdle, and something rotten might have been left to fester within the ancient fortress. You will travel with Radagast to find any evidence of His

doings and any plans that might have been left, when he was driven out.” Gandalf took his pipe from his mouth, blowing smoke as he did. “You are not beholden to us, and thus may make your own choice as to whether you will aid in this task. But you must choose quickly, as Radagast wishes to be making for the Black Tarn at first light.”

Bandy smiled wanly, “I am glad of it, but even if Lord Radagast had declined to accompany us, I would uphold my duties and promises. A faithless friend I would be if I allowed my companions to enter so dark a place without my songs and stories to lift their spirits and lighten their hearts.”

Gandalf bent down to a knee and looked at Bandy, his eyes gleamed in delight. “I believe that it will be the bright spirit of Hobbits that will eventually see us through the darkness, but we shall see.”

Grimbeorn sat in silence, listening to the exchanges. “Gandalf, my father told me of your adventures when you passed back through with Bandobras’ countryman, a Baggins or Bangs or something. He said that you told him the forces there fled too easily against your power. But if that was so, surely you would have laid open all the holds and deep places of that accursed fortress? Why would you leave such a place that evil could once again fester?”

Grimbeorn’s gruff voice spoke in question and Gandalf’s face lost its smile. He patted Bandy on the shoulder, winked, and then stood back up to turn and look at the Beorning. “Wisdom is sometimes only gained in hindsight, Master Grimbeorn. When the White Council expelled the Necromancer, it was only

my voice that spoke in assertion that this was Sauron, our enemy of old. The Lady of the Wood, and even Lord Elrond, believed me - but it was Saruman that headed up the Council. He said that the Dark Lord had passed from this realm when his ring was cut from his hand, long ago by Isildur, son of Elendil. It was Saruman that decided that such displays of power need not be done against a petty foe such as the sorcerer within Dol Guldur. He counseled that if it was a remnant of the Shadow of Old, it had to be a Nazgul...perhaps even the Witch-king of Angmar.

“It was our folly that staved us from doing what needed done, for just a year later, Sauron did declare his return to Mordor...right after we had dispatched his foul spirit from Mirkwood.” Gandalf sighed, while Radagast bobbed his head in agreement, “But I ask you, Grimbeorn - whom do you suppose wields such power as this to lay open the foundations of Dol Guldur? You? The Steward in Gondor? Me or my Order? The Golden Lady? Or mayhaps the wisdom of Elrond? No... these things were spoken of in ages gone when the Valar themselves ousted the Dark Lord Melkor, but their power is not contained by any within Middle-earth. No, it falls to the valour of Men, Dwarves, and Hobbits to solve the problems of this Middle-earth. The Powers of old are fading...and though she still has reserves unseen, the Lady Galadriel will need all of her strength to see this through.”

The companions all looked at Gandalf who now stood looking off towards the east and seeming to talk only to himself.

Properly chided, Grimbeorn sat back down, as he found he was standing while questioning the wizard. "I know naught of the way of Wizards and Elves, but still would've thought that power enough to siege would be power enough to destroy. Pardon me my rash words."

Gandalf's smile returned, "No harm done, Master Beorning! Now come... let us partake in a meal and decide who will be taking this journey; then all that needs done is preparations."

Abashed by the wizards' response to his assumption, Arbogast sat in silence as Grimbeorn and Gandalf debated. Nazgul, Angmar, ancient elves... these things were beyond the little he had seen of Middle-earth, and the sudden realisation of its breadth and history unsettled the young Woodman. Still, in challenge lay opportunity. If Radagast was to accompany the fellowship to Dol Guldur, then Arbogast resolved to learn all he could of these things.

In the meantime, he had counsel to offer, for few, even if the Wise, knew Mirkwood as he. Drawing rough maps upon the wizard's table in charcoal from the fire, Arbogast speculated on where food and water might be found. "To Dol Guldur itself I have never been, but I am certain that I can scout the way."

Esgalwen listened intently as the Grey Wizard made his arguments. While she felt no closer to knowing the details of their mission, she felt more confident than when she first spoke - a Wizard, and Radagast no less, in their company was a boon for sure. Even without him, though, looking around at her companions, the Ranger felt a comforting peace. Here were brave souls, indeed. She had witnessed firsthand their fierce courage and

loyalty. The Wizard himself had said they possessed strength, did he not.

“I will go,” Esgalwen stated with grace-filled confidence. “I have wandered the lands near our destination and heard the whispers of many folk who have seen it with their eyes. If you will allow me, it would be my honour to guide the company to the gates.”

“Those who have grown up in these woods and know its nature should be the ones to lead us into the south,” said Bandy – countering Esgalwen’s offer. His cheeks blushed, but he did not feel the Dúnadan able to guide them to such a place. “I am not much of a hunter, as you know. But I have keen eyes and am little noticed, so I can keep watch as we proceed.”

“You need not ask if I will join, for who else is there to look out for you all? Orcs, spiders, whatever may be there will flee before us or be crushed,” said the bold Beorning, standing confident once again. “I fear not the road that lies ahead or its destination.”

The next morning came and the companions found the brown wizard already up and about. If Gandalf was still here, he was being reclusive, as there was no sight or word of him.

A small pack of ponies had been stocked with an abundance of food, waterskins, and other supplies that might be needed upon the road. There were also six backpacks sitting on the ground, also packed tightly.

Though Radagast did not say, it was presumed the ponies would only be going so far on this journey and so the companions began to sort out how they would carry their supplies.

Once done, a small breakfast was prepared, and the group set off into the woods heading east. No one questioned the wizard, as to his path as this was his land and he knew it better than any. They trekked several miles until at last they came to the bank of the Dusky River. Sitting among the reeds, a boat of strange design lay at anchor. It had a high prow decorated with the carved head of a bird, and low flanks swept back like wooden wings. A brown sail billowed from its tall mast. Radagast quickly clambered aboard and began to direct the others to unload the ponies - all the gear would be stored upon the river-craft. The wizard seemed in an urgent mood and said that he wished to make the transit to the Black Tarn before the sun fell beyond the Misty Mountains.

The companions worked as quickly as possible, and then were surprised to see as the ponies all turned, as a group, and trotted off back towards their sheltered home of Rhosgobel. With one hand on the tiller and his staff resting at his feet, Radagast welcomed the company on board.

The journey took only one day.

The boat seemed much too big for the narrow river, but it somehow it passed through even the thickest parts of the forest canopy without getting caught, as if the branches parted overhead to let the mast and sails go

by. Sometimes, the heroes heard bubbling laughter or glimpsed the shape of a woman in the water - and all knew one of the River-maidens was nearby.

At the Black Tarn, Radagast and the company disembarked on the south shore of the lake, far from the eyes of the villagers of Black Tarn Hall. The Wizard left the companions and climbed a green hillock rising above the lake front some distance away. When he reached the top, he was met there by a tall, dark-haired, dusky-skinned woman in a black robe. She and Radagast spoke privately for a few moments, then the Wizard returned. Radagast explained that the lady he had spoken to was another River-maiden, the eldest and most powerful. She had confirmed Radagast's darkest fears - something was stirring in Southern Mirkwood. The companions left the boat behind and set off marching south, their packs now fuller with the items that had been stowed.

Maybe it was the encroaching heat of a fast-approaching new summer, or the changes in the environ, but by the third day's march Arbogast was feeling the toil. The Woodman felt the bite of his backpack's straps as they cut into his shoulders and arms, weighing him down with each step. He was surprised by the weariness that he felt - he had spent the better part of a year working to build a home and clear routes through the Narrows. It had to be something more.

Each day south, the forest began to close in on the path. Light disappeared deep below the canopy and the companions began to wonder of the passing of time.

Branches now crossed their way and gnarled roots tripped up their footing. Old moss hung on the sides of trees and gave some of them ghastly bearded faces. The forest wildlife, too, seemed to disappear. The companions knew there were living things out there, watching them, but no longer did they hear the pleasant sound of songbirds, or the squeaks of frisky squirrels racing about overhead. The few travelers that they had seen back north, crossing between the Narrows from the new settlement of Sunstead in the East Bight to the Black Tarn Hall, or beyond, had stopped. Now it seemed they were alone in the world.

On the afternoon of the third day, the company spotted a tall tower rising above the tree-tops on a distant hill. Radagast explained to those unaware, that this was the Tyrant's Hill, once the northernmost outpost of Dol Guldur. Smoke climbed from many chimneys, and the tower was clearly inhabited.

Radagast turned to the others, "I do not wish for Mogdred, or his people, to know of our errand. Since the Folk-moot, we cannot count on his allegiance."

Esgalwen thought differently and Arbogast agreed, though he had only lent the Tyrant Hillman his support at the moot - nothing since. The Ranger of Ithilien, on the other hand, had spent a great deal of time with Mogdred and his people. Surely, they would take them in and shelter them for a night to rest and regain their strength. They might even provision them with more food and water.

The Ranger had felt a lightness in her step, in spite of the encroaching Shadow on the woods. Perhaps it was because the forest was becoming 'home'. Having

grown up within the Shadow of Mordor, even this darkness, though not pleasant or welcome, seemed somehow known and familiar.

And perhaps the lightness in her step was because she sensed they were heading towards Tyrant's Hill. While the Hillmen's leader was more stubborn than a dwarf's mule, Mogdred had shown the wandering Ranger kindness, hospitality, and favour... all of which she had not deserved. And, while she had spent many hours trying to persuade the man to forgive his people, his father, to no avail, Esgalwen saw a strength in Mogdred that had been through smoke and fire, and it was attractive. The hurt caused from living under the Shadow's lash, and the hate that had seeped into that wound, would last for a time, but Esgalwen held onto hope, even if the warrior kept none for himself.

The Ranger felt her cheeks grow flush as she caught herself wrapped up in so much thought over the man. She knew many back in Gondor, her father perhaps, would not approve of such love. The stories Esgalwen had grown up with described the Woodmen of Mirkwood as uncultured savages, tainted by the blood of lesser men and corrupted by the Shadow of Mirkwood.

*It's not so!* Esgalwen chided the voices of her past. *They are a good people, proud and strong. Sure, they have not the wealth of Gondor's treasury or the strength of Gondor's army. But theirs is of greater worth, a wealth of kinship and community, and the lean strength that comes from adversity.* Esgalwen knew well Mogdred and his warriors were as capable as any company of rangers. *So, what if I love him? He is a good*

*man. Still, a quiet voice raised a lingering doubt...or, at least, he will be, you hope.*

When the Wizard made plain that he actually wished to skirt around Tyrant Hill and avoid being seen by Mogdred and his men, turmoil arose in the Ranger's heart. "Lord Radagast, you are correct. Though I have lived under the grace of Mogdred and his people these past years, I cannot say that his loyalty lies yet with the Woodmen. Should we show up at his gate, I am sure he will take offense with nearly all in our fellowship. He does not soon forget the words and actions of others. Much diplomacy would be needed... and even then, I cannot say if his heart would be persuaded. Though I doubt he would harm us, he likely will not shelter us either.

"However, should we slink around his land like spies and robbers and we are seen, I say with certainty any hope to gain Mogdred and his people as allies and kin will be lost. Should we be caught, I would count our lives lost, mine most certainly, for Mogdred will feel I betrayed his grace.

"I would rather hold onto hope for Mogdred's heart and speak with him, trust him though he may betray me, and perhaps find a friend in this dark place, than to move amongst the Shadows and betray him."

As Rorin waited, his nose first got the hint of the rotten filth of the forest floor. To him it seemed that whenever the group stopped the ground would first grow damp, then water would pool about his heavy boots, to be followed shortly with the sickly smell of rot. The brown wizard was unaffected by this it seemed, but

the dwarf noticed that the same occurred to the rest of the party.

“Will this foul reek accompany us the whole way on this errand? First a river crossing and now this mire,” said the dwarf. The others in the company seemed to pay him no mind.

Arbogast, too, felt that this was not the same wood in which he had been raised and brought up. There was a sickness to it that seemed could not be washed away. The pall of rot that covered both the person and their spirit. As he thought about it, he began to wonder what living in such a place would do for a person’s health. He was glad, though, for the moment’s debate to drop his pack. Bending down to do so, he happened to look up at the tree tops from an awkward angle. There in the crook of a tree stood an old weather worn crow. The feathers of the bird seemed almost frayed and from its beak hung the organ of some small animal, perhaps its eye, while the bird itself seemed to watch the party and the proceedings with a keen un-animal like interest.

The Brown Wizard gazed intently at the ranger from the south as if weighing her words, when the party heard in the distance the braying of hounds. It urged the question from Radagast, “I don’t know if it is the sourness of the people, or the land that sours them. Shall we detour to the hill or press on. I will not, on this matter, overrule the will of the company. Bird and beast are my flock, I will not be a shepherd of men, too.”

This is a forsaken land, thought Bandobras. What unimaginable torments Mogdred must have suffered to be able to call this home. “I have no desire to meet Mogdred again, but neither do I want us to be found

slinking through his land like so many thieves. He would be within his rights to treat us as such. I would be glad to hear everyone's counsel, but for my part, I believe we should inform him of our errand. Begging your pardon Lord Radagast, he may have no love for us, your lady excepted, but will he not see that we struggle against the same enemy? You know him best Esgalwen, what say you?"

Esgalwen sighed, "I cannot say if he will see our common struggle, Master Bandobras. I can say he will see the Wizard who sat next to his father at the folk-moot and those that spoke against his cause. He'll see the Elf that wounded one of his men. And he'll see one of his disowned kinsmen. His anger will be furious, and his men with him. If I am fortunate, he may notice me... though his heart will ache that I have come in fellowship with you.

"But better to wait out his harsh tongue than face Mogdred's cold, pitiless wrath should we be caught crossing his land without his permission."

Keeping a wary eye on the ancient crow, Arbogast half-listened to Bandobras and Esgalwen's discussion as he considered the matter.

*Mogdred is a proud man, of that there can be no doubt. The harassment of my new home proves that he has not taken lightly the rejection of his father's folk. He will not kindly welcome travelers from the land of the Woodmen.*

*And yet, for all his spite, there has not been blood spilled between his people and the clans of the western eaves since the death of Beran. Though he may consider himself the enemy of my people, it may be that he does*

*not desire war... yet. For surely, if what the wizards say is true, the shadow that lies upon the wood will begin to work its will on him and whet his appetite for death and conquest.*

*It may be, then, that this is the last chance to prevent the irreversible sundering of Mogdred and the Men of Tyrant's Hill, and a war that would bring only suffering and darkness to those who fight it.*

*But what of the quest that brought us here? Having received us, will Mogdred lightly grant us leave to go? Is he cunning enough to reckon why we have travelled this far south? Radagast would not see the true object of our journey brought to Mogdred's notice, and such would surely be a risk. Even if he did not mark our purpose while we abide at his hall, he would not fail to have us followed once we left and would soon guess why we continued southwards.*

*And yet... And yet...*

*To prevent a war - one that might see Black Tarn Hall burn and many slain who could stand against the Shadow - is that not worth the risk?*

*Greatly conflicted in his heart, the young woodman looked to his companions.*

*Esgalwen feels a kinship with those who have accepted her, as is to be expected. Bandobras feels the burden of a polite guest. Orophin and Grimbeorn keep their own counsel and Rorin has a mind only for his boots! And Radagast...Radagast has no mire about his boots. The foulness of this place has no mastery over him. Does he not work his magic to hide his home in Rhosgobel when he desires? Could he not do the same to hide travelers in the wood? I have known men to*

*travel twenty paces into the forest and vanish beyond the ken of hounds, and this in the peaceful western eaves!*

Reaching a decision, he finally spoke, “We should go to Tyrant’s Hill. It may be that Mogdred’s hatred for his once-kin is greater than I have reckoned, but I think that we may yet have a chance to speak to the man, and not the Shadow whose torments he endured.

“But Radagast, I feel that you must not come with us. You are too much the tree that gives shade and fruit to those Mogdred despises. If this feud is to be resolved before steel draws blood, then it is for mortal Men to do it.

“Yet we cannot expect you to tarry forever. We may stay a day, perhaps two, before taking our leave by stealth, or force of arms, if necessary. Your need of us is great, and we must not delay this harrowing of Dol Guldur longer, for reasons of our own.”

By chance, his gaze fell on Esgalwen, as he said his last. *Do my eyes deceive me, he thinks, or is she...*

Grimbeorn broke Arbogast’s thought, “If the man claims this land, then we see him for his consent, regardless of how we feel about him personally. Even if we didn’t, I would never skulk in the shadows to avoid his gaze.” Grimbeorn growled, “But we all go, not to leave Master Radagast out in the cold. Whatever he might represent, having him there would offer more protection from harm, not less. Let us go and be done with this business and move on.”

“The Beorning speaks with the wisdom of his father,” said Orophin. “Though we may not be welcome, we shall not go skulking through another

folk's land." The Silvan Elf gave an eye to the dwarf, whose folk had crossed through Thranduil's realm unannounced, before the slaying of the dragon, and thus earned a time in his prison.

The final companion to speak and the decision made, Radagast nodded to all and they started up the hill. "Let us make haste, as I wish to be at their gates before the sun has set."

But there was no fear of that - the hill rose before them and all they need do is take the winding path that led to its peak. Not long after, the company of seven walkers were being challenged by the gate watch. "WHO APPROACHES THE HOUSE OF MOGDRED, OF TYRANT HILL?"

The Company revealed themselves to the wardens of the Tyrant's Hill fortress and they were led within the wooden palisade. Esgalwen was immediately recognized, along with the Brown Wizard, but only the Dúnadan was received warmly. It was evident that there was little trust between the men of the hill-fort and the mage.

The companions were led to the large long house that stood at the pinnacle of Tyrant's Hill, next to the tower that had been raised long ago by the Necromancer. The two structures were a dichotomy - one a symbol of the power that had oppressed this land for many lives of men; the other a home that had a future for the people of the southern wood. They climbed the stairs to two, large and open doors, both of which had been reinforced with iron and had gold inlay though the work looked crude.

This was Mogdred's Hall.

There was no fire that burned in the great, central hearth; the long table was empty of folk; and only an old hound lay near the round, stone dais that supported a throne of wood. A dove fluttered off the table and flew to the rafters above, but not before emptying its bowels upon a wooden plate. A serving woman gave a harrumph, as she shooed away another bird, and continued to collect the platters that covered the great table. It was clear that there had been a feast here within the last few days.

A man of forty years or more, approached and was introduced to the company by Esgalwen. His name was Ohdalf, son of Ondal, and he was chamberlain to the house of Mogdred. The company looked around and noticed that the Tyrant Hill was only filled with mostly women-folk, children, and elders. There were a few strong men, but otherwise the fort was empty. The Dúnadan woman knew that the women here were equally skilled at weapon as their men, but the men were absent.

"Welcome, Esgalwen," said Ohdalf. He cocked an eye at the remainder of the group and his mood stayed somber.

"Greetings to you, Ohdalf, son of Ondal," said Arbogast, steadily. "I am the Fire-watcher, born of the day passed down, whose voice rose loudest in support of your Lord at the folk-moot."

Ohdalf clicked his tongue as he stared down his nose at Arbogast, "Er... well met, Arbogast. I was not

present at this moot, but I do recall my master spoke of one of the Woodmen speaking for his cause. So that was you? You are welcome here.”

The young Beorning knew little of courtly courtesy and actually despised it. The obfuscation that his companion alluded to with his introduction irked him as well, “We are plain folk, speak that way,” he thought. “I am Grimbeorn, son of Beorn.”

Smiling at Grimbeorn’s taciturn introduction, Bandy bowed low, knowing the flourish would irritate the Beorning. “Greetings Ohdalf, son of Ondal. I am Bandobras Bracegirdle of the Shire. I thank you for allowing tired travelers such as ourselves into your master’s fine hall.”

The companions saw a smile break at the corners of Ohdalf’s mouth, when he looked at the Beorning’s face reading the thoughts of the large man. Then he saw the diminutive halfling bow low. “What a wonder to behold! A half-man! Not a dwarf, no?”

“No, he be no dwarf,” said Rorin, “that would be me. Rorin, son of Barin, of Erebor, and I am at your service. Bandy is a Hobbit from the Shire, and we have had the pleasure of dealing with him, and more of his kind, but be careful, for he can spin a yarn that will tire even a dwarf ear!”

Orophin stayed towards the back, as his trust for these men who lived so closely to the shadow was short. He did give a courteous nod and introduced himself, but no warmth was felt by any of the companions at his greeting. Radagast was there, too, with the Silvan Elf and he, too, greeted their host. “Hello, Ohdalf. I am Radagast...”

“We know of you, wizard, and all yer kind! Meddling in magics and peoples’ affairs as ye think ye should. I tells myself there be no difference between the weaver of magic in the Golden Wood, in Rhosgobel, nor the Sorcerer’s Hill! Ye all dabble in things that best be left alone.” He snorted his last words.

“Be that as it may,” said Radagast, seeming to take no insult from the chamberlain’s harsh words, “we are here to see the master of this house.”

“Yes,” chimed in Esgalwen. “We have come far and wish to take rest a while in the House of Mogdred and to announce ourselves - instead of being trespassers on his land. May we have words with him?”

Ohdalf jutted forth his chin and squinted his eyes, while looking over the companions. His mind wondered at things that were unknown, but he spoke, “The Lord Mogdred is not here. Where would you all be a’headin’ while traipsing over our realm?”

Grimbeorn met the elder man’s gaze and returned it in kind, standing tall and proud. He was more than willing to give retort to the clear challenge but waited to see if any other gave response. It came from Esgalwen, as she steadied her eyes on the chamberlain. “Ohdalf, you know well that I have spent many days searching these lands for my lost kin. My friends have agreed to help me in my efforts. I hope, with their strength, to push closer to the Necromancer’s tower... and beyond, if needed.”

The chamberlain lowered his chin, gave a sigh of acceptance and said, “Aye, Esgalwen, I know you have spent many hard months in the wilds looking for companions that are most assuredly lost. Ye take on

tasks that are much to grave for a woman to bear, but you are stout of heart and you love your folk." He looked over her shoulder at the others - a strange lot indeed but vouched for by this woman and the man who had spoken for Mogdred, he came to his decision. "I fear you be making a mistake if you decide to press further towards the shadow hill...but I will give leave for you to cross our lands. I will even give you a night under a roof, if you wish it."

Grimbeorn nodded, "Aye, we would. Our thanks to you and your master."

Esgalwen bowed slightly to the chamberlain, "Thank you for extending us the grace and hospitality of your master's house and lands. The shadows are still long in these woods, but the House of Mogdred gives me hope and brightens my path."

The companions, for the sake of Esgalwen, were given a place in the hall. Several of the benches were turned over and pushed against the wall to accommodate their sleeping needs. The more well-off members of the group considered the lodgings meager, but others among them said that this was the custom among the peoples of the wood and the Anduin River valley. In fact, their presence in the hall was considered a place of respect and privilege, as the fire would be going all night and it was closer to the seat of the lord. Arbogast thought they would have been placed in the stable, but sleeping here in the hall, he recognized it for the honor that it was. Esgalwen alone was not with them. She was given her old room off the main hall that she had been given during her previous stay.

The hall was mostly quiet, and the Brown Wizard kept his own council as to what had transpired during the day. Before the company had even dropped their packs, or settled in, they found the bird that was previously flying about was on his shoulder and two field mice, who lived in the thatch, had gathered to take council with the scraggly bearded man in brown.

Other than the animal visitors, the companions noted that the hall remained largely empty and uninhabited. The women of the hall gave them something to eat - presumably the leftovers from the previous feast.

As the sun began to set, the quiet of the hall was interrupted by the pounding of small feet and the steady sound of a wooden thump. Two children, both boys, rushed to the company calling for Esgalwen.

“Lady E! Lady E!”

The Dúnadan knew them as two youths from the village, Acca and Kenway. Both boys had often spoken to her while she was in the hall and had a constant thirst for stories of the south and the ‘olden days’, as they called them. The two stopped and were in a stunned silence when they spotted a Dwarf, an Elf, a half-man, and the wizard.

“Are these your friends?” asked Acca.

The first question immediately followed up with another from Kenway, “It’s a dwarf! Can I touch him?”

The woman from the south could not help herself and a chuckle escaped her, “You will have to ask him for yourself.”

Ohdalf appeared from the back of the hall at the sound of children and would have shooed them away if

it were not for the third person who had entered with them.

He was tall for a woodman, almost of a height of the Beornings, though clean shaven. His arms were massive and made to look even more so by the shriveled and twisted appearance of his stunted legs. The legs dragged behind the man, while under each arm were gnarly staves of wood carved as two crutches. His name was Aldwyn, and he too had once been a prisoner of the tower. Many of the folk of Amon Bauglir taunted and ridiculed the man, though Esgalwen knew him to be kind and a fierce warrior if strapped into his horse.

“They heard you were here, Lady, and could not be contained. I see you have brought your companions that you often spoke of.” The man looked the company up and down as if weighing each man in turn. “May I have a moment of your time?”

Esgalwen nodded to Aldwyn, “Of course. Acca, see that one there? His name is Arbogast and he is a Fire-Watcher and knows all kinds of stories.”

In moments, the two children had forgotten the dwarf had descended upon the Woodman.

Aldwyn dragged himself away from the group to address Esgalwen in private. “Lady, I am glad that you have returned. Milord Mogdred is much a different man when you are in our company.”

Esgalwen blushed a little at the man’s comment, and modestly avoided his eyes.

“When you were here last, you asked me about the surrounding lands and what I knew of them. I have copied a crude map for you, though I have little skill in drawing, but thought that it might be of meager use to

you. As you know, I have not been able to travel widely since I was taken to that cursed pit, but from memory I have added places that folk have lived or places where your kin may have sought out sanctuary. I can only caution you that not all folk are peaceful, and a lady such as yourself should not travel alone or be too trusting. Now, I must be going. Ohdalf does not take kindly to things that he doesn't know about and our talk will not go unnoticed. The shorter it is the better. Farewell, Lady."

Esgalwen secreted the map into her leather shirt, as she clasped him on the shoulder. "You have shown me a great kindness, Aldwyn, like dawn's first light after the long night watch. What can I do for you for such a gift? For I do not wish my thanks to be words only, but also deeds."

The crippled man only smiled asking no demand for the map, and then made to leave the hall. The children, however, were not so quick to do the same.

Bandy was curious to discover why the men were absent and moved closer to Arbogast, as if to listen to his stories. "Hullo," he said cheerfully to the boys, "my name is Bandy. It must be fun to have the run of the place while the men are away?" The last was spoken quietly to prevent Aldwyn from hearing. "Where have they all gone anyway?"

Acca stared wide mouthed at the halfling, "I didn't know you were really real! Lady Esgalwen told me about you, but I thought it was another story like the ones the river folk tell. Do you really haunt boats and fish with your hands?"

Kenway spoke next, "They have gone to war. They always go to war. My father says we own only what we have the strength to hold and fight for. When I grow up, I want to go to battle and have fierce dogs at my command. I'll have a whole hall hung with the pickled heads of stinkers! Or put them on sharpened sticks to scare away my enemies. Maybe both, that way far and wide they will know that a great warrior has his hall."

Arbogast looked, mock-serious, at the two boys. "Then you will be a greater warrior than I, certainly, for there are things abroad in Mirkwood that chill the stoutest of hearts! My friend promised you a story, and you shall have one - be still a moment and listen."

Then he lifted his voice to sing...

*I slept one night in an empty hut on the side of a  
lonely hill.*

*I never cared much for empty huts, but the night  
was dark and chill.*

*So, I lit a small fire and ate my food, and saw  
that the door was shut*

*Then I wrapped myself in my blanket by the side  
of the ancient hut.*

*I chanced to wake in the dead of night, still  
feeling cozy and warm,*

*When standing near to me I spied a horrible  
ghostly form!*

*It had horns of a most prodigious size and a  
sting like a monstrous bee*

*But what on earth was it doing there? And what  
did it want with me?*

*All I saw, you may say, was the shadows at play,  
or call me an outright liar  
But oh! Had you seen it plain as day with its  
eyes like coals of fire!  
Then it gave a moan and a horrible groan that  
curdled my blood with fear  
And 'there's only two of us here,' it said. 'There's  
only two of us here.'*

*I kept one eye on the door of the hut and one on  
the monstrosity.  
I only wanted to dress myself, get out the door  
and flee!  
But I couldn't find where I'd left my boots, so I  
couldn't get out and clear  
And 'there's only two of us here,' it moaned.  
'There's only two of us here.'*

*I hadn't a thing to defend myself, not even a  
stick or a stone  
And 'there's only two of us here,' it said again  
with a terrible groan!  
I knew that I ought to make some reply, though  
I thought my end to be near:  
'By my father's beard, when I find my boots  
there'll only be one of us here!'*

*Well, I found them at last and got them on, then  
out of the door I ran  
And I covered the path like an arrow loosed to  
the home of my welcoming clan!*

*And I haven't slept in a hut since then, and I  
tremble and shake with fear  
When I think of the horrible thing that moaned  
'there's only two of us here!'*

The two children stood silently, while the song was sung, their wide-eyes staring up at the Fire-watcher. The tune was a common one to the Woodman, and it took little concentration to utter it. While he sung, his attention was instead upon Esgalwen and what she was doing. He had noted earlier that every time Mogdred's name was mentioned, she grew slightly nervous or agitated. She was the one to insist that the companions come here to the hall, against the advice of the Brown Wizard, and call upon Mogdred. Now here, she had separated herself from the group and now spoke to one of Mogdred's men.

Just as the song was finishing, Arbogast saw the crippled man pass something to Esgalwen, and they both smiled. The lady from the south seemed more familiar here than she had been with her earlier companions.

"What did the hut look like? Do you sleep with your boots on now?"

"It's a song numbskull, he didn't really sleep in a hut? Did you sleep in a hut?"

"Again, again. Let's hear it again."

"I liked the coal eyes part. Do dwarfs and tiny men sing songs, too?"

Bandy had been blowing smoke rings, while Arbogast had sang, to also amuse the boys. Their last question left him coughing, as he laughed. "Yes, yes, we

tiny men do sings songs. Once we start you can hardly keep us quiet. Here is one that I heard Mr. Baggins sing. You know who he is, right?”

The children’s attention now on him, Bandy began a song of his own...

*Roads go ever ever on,  
Over rock and under tree,  
By caves where never sun has shone,  
By streams that never find the sea;  
Over snow by winter sown,  
And through the merry flowers of June,  
Over grass and over stone,  
And under mountains of the moon.*

*Roads go ever ever on,  
Under cloud and under star,  
Yet feet that wandering have gone  
Turn at last to home afar.  
Eyes that fire and sword have seen  
And horror in the halls of stone  
Look at last on meadows green  
And trees and hills they long have known*

As he finished, Bandy felt that he was on a road that went ever, ever on. Laughing with these children reminded him of home.

“Your fathers, and all the men of Amon Bauglir, are brave men, and you will be, too,” said the halfling. “My companions and I will lend them aid and destroy a few stinkers, as we help Lady E search for her friends. Remember though that a true warrior fights because he

must, not because he loves battle. A warrior protects his land and his family. A warrior loves peace more than war.”

While the Hobbit sang, Arbogast could now focus all his attention on Esgalwen and the chamberlain. He could just make out the man’s last words, “...our talk will not go unnoticed, the shorter the better.”

The woodman attempted to catch more, but he was called back by the children’s exclamation and the puzzled look on their faces. “What is a Baggins?” asked Acca.

“Well bless my soul, you haven’t heard of the famous Bilbo Baggins. Why he is my kinsman, albeit a distant one, from the Shire. The Shire is beyond the Misty Mountain, and it is the land of Hobbits. By the way, we do not catch and eat fish with our hands. Where in Middle-earth did you hear that? A few years ago, Mr. Baggins in the company of Gandalf the Wizard, and the great Thorin Oakenshield - my friend Rorin can tell you all about him if you like - crossed the mountains and had a great hair-raising adventure. They were kidnapped by goblins and chased by wolves and made prisoners by the Elves.” At that, Bandy made an exaggerated, angry face at Orophin.

Grimbeorn also sat nearby, and listened to the exchange between the Hobbit, Woodsman, and the children. *Hair-raising indeed! If they only knew what really happened, but it is good that they don’t*, he thought. Stretching himself out, the heir of Beorn settled in. More than once he caught himself thinking of the similarities of this place to his father’s hall before

sleep took him, not uneasy but neither restless in anticipation of the coming day.

With snores from the Beorning now filling the hall, Bandy continued his detailed account of the destruction of Lake-town and the death of Smaug, calculated to thrill and frighten young boys. "So, you see, you may mistake us Hobbits for children, but we are really quite fierce and formidable."

Arbogast chuckled to himself at Bandy's ability to make so many words, and then quietly excused himself from the long table. Keeping his expression as neutral as he could, he walked to the door, passing close by Esgalwen. He pretended to be unconcerned, sparing but a quick glance at Aldwyn's map, as he walked past.

He walked out into the night air and saw the crippled man struggling across the yard, "Your pardon, sir," he said, "but might I speak with you a moment? I am the fire-watcher, and a friend of Esgalwen."

Aldwyn stopped and turned to face the woodman. Arbogast was surprised at how large he was - taller than he thought and the strength of his arms and shoulders was prodigious. He looked about to see who was near and then said, "What can I do for you?"

Tactfully posing his words, Arbogast engaged the burly, but crippled man in conversation. Speaking around the subject as much as he could, he probed many times to find out about the relationship between Esgalwen and Mogdred, while sharing stories of hunts and skirmishes with the darker denizens of Mirkwood.

Aldwyn stood patiently and after a few moments, he held up his hand, "Fire-watcher, you did not stop me

at the edge of the hall to tell me the tale of the slaughtered boar. What is on your mind?”

Arbogast was slightly taken aback by the response, and so came more directly to his point. Aldwyn continued to respectfully listen, only interrupting enough to remind Arbogast that this was not his home – and these were not his people. The Fire-watcher realized that while he obviously had spent much time with them and spoke the dialect of the south almost flawlessly, there was something else in Aldwyn’s bearing and his idiom that told the Woodman he, too, was a stranger. An outcast.

The probing questions about Esgalwen’s business on Tyrant’s Hill caused Aldwyn to raise a hand, “Fire-Watcher, there is one great rule here in the Hall of Mogdred. No one is to speak of what occurred or what their past was during the Dark Years, when the tower to the south was strong. I will say only that not all who fled from the tower when the Wizards came were in bondage to the Dark One - some served willingly.

“Those days are, however, behind us all. Mogdred says that this is a new place for us and the history and deeds of the past do not matter, so long as we stand together. You think that the mothers of those two boys in there can tell you with any certitude who their fathers are? They were born soon before the tower fell and had they been imprisoned there any longer, they would have been food for my tormentors. Now in the security of Mogdred’s hall we are all their father. Those dark days are gone and held at bay only through the strength and sharpness of blades.

“Do not pry into the history of the people here too deeply. Were Ohdalf to hear you ask these questions, he would use them as a reason to have you sent from the hall. As for my Lord Mogdred, I will say only that he has taken a liking to the Lady from the south. They were often in each other’s company, while she resided here looking for her friends. While she did so, my Lord seemed more at peace, his decisions more, shall we say, even-handed. Now, I will say no more and must be going.”

As Aldwyn moved into the gloom of the night, Arbogast pondered the words. *Pasts that are not to be spoken of, but which included willing service to the Necromancer... no, to the Shadow itself, for they are one, and with one purpose! Notes passed to the Ranger by a fellow foreigner, and a softening of Mogdred’s harsh manner when she is by his side. What can this mean? And what can it mean for my people?*

Speaking nothing of his mind to the others, he found a quiet place on the edge of a fire-ring. *For now, even the darkness of the wood was preferable to the company of others.*

When the tale was done Acca laughed, “You’re silly! Everyone knows that Bard the Woodman killed the dragon. Then the dwarves and elves tried to steal the treasure.” Kenway piped up, “You mean you came from over the mountains? Is that why you don’t catch fish with your hands? All the stories of the *Holbytlan* we hear tells that they live much closer. Some say they haunt the banks of the great river or secret themselves on boats and do odd jobs when everyone is asleep.”

And then Acca next, “And then there are the stories about them taking women and children off boats into their secret lairs. That’s why girls and children are bad luck on a boat. But all the stories say that they float like turtles on the river and catch fish with their hands.”

Flabbergasted by the two boys’ tongues wagging, Bandy chided, “Now I never said that Bilbo killed the dragon, only that he was there and did important things. You can be brave and useful even though you are small. I’ll bet you two are brave. You are already bigger than I and will get bigger yet. And Bard was not a Woodman, although I am sure he would have wanted many stout Woodmen with him when he fought the orcs.” But then the halfling’s interest was piqued, “Acca, Kenway, what are these *Holbytlan*? I have heard stories of Hobbits living east of the mountains but thought they were children’s’ tales, begging your pardon. If your stories are true, how different they must be from my own people. No respectable Hobbit would take women and children off boats! No respectable Hobbit would go out in a boat! Only Bucklanders take to the water, and they are queer folk.” Bandy pondered the boys’ replies as he took out his notebook and pen. “Tell me more. I am collector of stories and I will put your stories in this book for myself and others to read.”

“I only know one song about them and not the whole thing. I haven’t gotten to the fishing part yet.” Acca stood as if he was at song, hands behind his back and staring at an indeterminate point in the distance.

*Of old was the age, when Yvanna lived;  
Sea nor cool waves, nor sand there were;  
Earth had not been, nor heaven above,*

*But a yawning gap, and grass nowhere.*

*The sun, the sister of the moon, from the south  
Her right hand cast over heaven's rim;  
No knowledge she had where her home should  
be,  
The moon knew not, what might was his,  
The stars knew not where their stations were.*

*In their dwellings at peace they played at tables,  
Of gold no lack did the small folk then know,--  
Till thither came up giant-maids three,  
Huge of might, out of Jotunheim.*

*Then sought the folk their assembly-seats,  
The holy ones, and council held,  
To find who should raise the small folk  
Out of Brimir's blood and the legs of Blain.*

*The race of the Holbytlan in Dvalin's throng  
Down to Lofar the list must I tell;  
The rocks they left, and through wet lands  
They sought a home in the fields of sand*

*Then from the throng did three come forth,  
From the home of the gods, the mighty and  
gracious;  
Two without fate on the land they found,  
Ask and Embla, empty of might.*

“There is more Master Bandy, but I don't know it all,” said Acca, only to be nudged by his companion. “That's not a story numbskull that is a song. There are

all kinds of stories of the river people doing all kinds of magic and mischief. I have heard the name Brandybuck before. A man named Brandybuck opened an Inn. I heard one of scouts tell me.”

“He didn’t *tell* you that, you were snooping.” Acca protested, “And my song was good! Master Bandy, wasn’t it good?”

The Hobbit clapped loudly and enthusiastically, as he laughed, “It was wonderful! Well done Master Acca! You have a talent for song. Will you teach it to me when I return?” Yet, Kenway’s comment caught Bandy off guard. “Did you say that a Brandybuck has opened an inn nearby. Where is it? Do they look like me? This is a mystery I must investigate.”

Both shrugged their shoulders and yawned at the same time. Weariness had caught up with them and it was evident that they had only heard a partial tale.

*Brandybucks, indeed,* thought Bandy. He smiled at the two boys, “You are bright lads, the both of you, and have both given much to think about. It is late now. You had best be off to bed. I promise I will return so we can sing songs and trade stories.”

The boys gave a muted cheer and left Bandy alone, his head wreathed by the smoke-rings that he blew. Grimbeorn’s snoring and the faint glow of the Hobbit’s pipe were the focus of Orophin, as he too sat quietly in his Elven-way. Beside him, Radagast had laid back with his hat over his eyes.

The morning came quickly for the companions. The howling of the dogs was sporadic during the night, but just before the dawn the animals seemed to take it as a

sign to rouse the camp. Instead of the crowing of a cock, the village came to life to the baying of hounds.

The companions were given a cold breakfast, by the steward of the hall, and while he was polite to Esgalwen, he was quick to send them on their way. Ohdalf spared no words for the Brown Wizard, although Radagast gave a respectful bow.

And they were gone.

Once a good distance was cleared from sight or hearing of the walls, Radagast pushed up the brim of his hat and motioned for the companions to gather around.

“Well, I hope that was a fruitful stay for you all. I believe it to be an unwholesome place, slow to release the stain of the Shadow. Our welcome was better than I expected, nonetheless. Mogdred and his men our out and about somewhere ranging. Many *friends* told me that he left two days ago and took many men. Either they are expecting a fight or there are other machinations at work. I cannot guess Mogdred’s intentions and would like the clans to know he is out in force.

“Alas, as we grow closer to the Hill of Sorcery, the beasts of the forest know less, as they will not go there. Hence the purpose of our quest!”

Radagast rummaged in his robes and mumbled to himself, “The road will grow darker from here on. This was the realm of the Great Enemy, for many years, and while he dwelled here the land festered and corrupted. You may see or hear things. Your dreams may become troubled or worrisome. Hold to your courage. I seek

only information that my *friends* cannot obtain for me. The road is rough and made more so by the weight of the enemy, but I will do what I can to aid us as we go.”

Surprisingly, the wizard whispered over their feet, each in turn...

*Vanya sulie*

*Quel fara*

*Aa' lasser en lle coia orn n' omenta gurtha*

*Aa' menle nauva calen ar' ta hwesta e'  
ale'quenle*

*Aa' menealle nauva calen ar' malta*

*Lissenen ar' maska'lalaith tenna' lye omentuva*

*Tenna' ento lye omenta*

Next, he held forth the rummaged item from his cloak – a waterskin, of sorts. Radagast handed it to Grimbeorn, “Here is a strong drink, something like what your father makes in the north. Beware this liquor as it has been distilled with rare herbs deep from the forest. One sip only at a time and it will help alleviate your hurts should we run into greater trouble than I expect. Remember, one sip only.”

The Brown Wizard sniffed at the air, turned in a ruffle of cloth that resembled the sound of feathers and stepped off into the wilderness headed south.

The man fell to his knees, flinching from the pain upon landing - but he did not cry out, there was strength still left in him.

The manacles that latched his hands to his waist were heavy and had bit deep into his skin. Similar ones wrapped his ankles and the chains from them had made him stunted, being unable to stand to his true height. They had broken much of his body, but his will was another matter. He looked at the person before him with his peripheral vision, unwilling to gaze directly for fear of another lash across his back. The orcs had been cruel in their ministrations of torture.

The large one, Slurg, spoke, "My Master ordered me to bring you this, and for you to tend to it. It must be kept alive, though he did not command a condition." The orc gave a guttural laugh.

"And why do I want this man? Why do I have to deal with penning him here within my tower?" asked the tall shadow in black robes.

"Because the Master commands it and we do what we're told!" said Slurg, defiant in his orders.

"Who is he?"

"I do not know, but I have been told he is important. He has the blood of Westrenesse in his veins, and the Master despises those folk. We all despise them!" Slurg gave the prisoner a kick to his ribs, which pleased him with a whimper. "He was found snooping around the eaves of the forest with a band of his kind - they wore the badges of Gondor and Ithilien! I am sure the Master would prefer him dead, but there must be a reason why they are here...a reason he wants you to find out."

The robed figure licked at thin lips, "Oh yes...I will certainly find out."

**South** of the Tyrant's Hill, their journey changed dramatically. The company was now in the haunted woods of Southern Mirkwood, where the shadow still lay heavily over the forest. Even with summer blooming to the north, the woods here were slimy and dank and foul.

The journey to the edge of Dol Guldur covered sixty miles and took ten days. Paths would abruptly end or would weave back round on themselves causing confusion for the guides. Large deadfalls would bar their way and the company would need to troop around them, sometimes going far astray. At times the path would submerge into foul pools or streams and again their journey was thwarted. Even Radagast began to show signs that his spirit was tried and he, too, would suffer from the oppressing gloom and noxious vapours that rose in the morning and dissipated by midday.

On the sixth day out from Tyrant's Hill, Esgalwen who led the Company as their guide climbed up a thick twist of roots - the tree growing on the edge of an embankment. Her hand reached the ground, as she pulled herself up, her fingers squishing into the moss and mud. The sight before her made her stifle a scream. The Dúnadan had seen much in her time along the borders of Mordor, but the horror before her was pure cruelty.

The hiss of her breath caused Arbogast to scramble up beside her, followed by the rest of her companions. Strung between two trees - its branches roped together with vines to make a truss - was the body of a man...or

what had been a man. He hung upside down, his face black from the pooling of his own blood. The body had been opened at the stomach and the viscera hung down like the vines of the forest. It was evident that creatures had taken interest in the dead man and cruel bites pocked the flesh.



Esgalwen at last let loose a cry when she saw among the littered items, under the body, a cloak that she knew belonged to a Ranger of Ithilien. The woman scrambled forward towards the dead man but was grabbed by the strong hands of the Beorning - there was naught she could do, and the body was foul. They would need to bring it down and give the man a proper burial, but she should not be the one to do this thing. It was her friend and she did not need to see the pain to which he had been subjected.

Radagast whispered a word to the Vala under his breath as the trussed branches were cut and the body fell to the ground. There was an unpleasant, muted cracking sound as the man landed on the soft earth. Rorin and Bandobras were already at work making a hole, while Orophin, Grimbeorn and Arbogast drew the dead man to where they dug. Esgalwen sat, rummaging through the articles of his person that remained. She knew who he was - Ardil, son of Hardon, and he had been only thirty years old. Young for a Dúnadan, but he had been brave and fair. She remembered when he had taken his station among the Rangers of Ithilien, brandishing his father's sword that had been bestowed to this young son who had taken on such a mantle.

Where was it? she suddenly thought, looking around and underneath the nearby foliage. She found nothing.

Arbogast regarded the ruined body of a man he never knew, now to lie in a resting place far from his lands and kin. He tried to pay no mind to the dark, scuttling shapes that emerged from the disturbed soil, for such things are the darkest part of the forest and best not dwelled upon by those that walk in the light. The Ranger was laid upon the remains of his cloak, and yet still seemed ill-prepared for his journey to whatever fate awaited the souls of Men.

As the fellowship began filling in the grave, he held up a hand. "This man was kin to Esgalwen, whom we know. To go unarmed into death is not fit for one such as he." Then he carefully lowered himself down beside the body and placed his spear beside the corpse. He

gave a slight nod of satisfaction, then climbed out of the grave.

It was dusk by the time they had completed their work. Radagast spoke, "We can go no further this day. Our hearts are burdened with the sadness of this scene and the light of day is behind us. We will continue in the morning."

Morning came like a gloomy omen. Rain fell from the sky and pattered down on them through the canopy. Rorin went to their bags to grab a bite of food for all of them, so they might break their fast. He gave a slight cry to the others when he saw, "OUR BAGS!"

The companions looked to see where the Dwarf stood, brushing something from the supplies. Rorin shook his hand with a yelp as something bit him. They all came over to see that their backpacks had been invaded overnight by a pestilent, black mass of insects. They crawled over and inside the packs and had tainted all the food that had been stored within.

They now had nothing to eat.

With the gloom hanging over them, the oppressiveness of the woods and rain, and the terrible evil that seemed to cling to the area, the companions sat quietly and brooded. Were they defeated? Could they make it to that horrid castle, find what the wizards needed, and then make it home?

As if aware of their thoughts, Radagast's voice filled the thick silence. "We must tighten our belts and move on. Sitting here will accomplish us nothing. Perhaps

along the way we can find safe things to eat, but the sooner we make our way the sooner we can leave this awful place.”

Rorin stared in disbelief at the boiling mass of pestilence that their food bags had become. He picked up his own bag and dumped the contents on the ground hoping that something remained untainted, but every scrap of food was covered by the bugs. Even the package of salted pork that he had brought was now inedible. He looked for somebody with whom to share this loss, but the group’s mood was somber, and all he could say was, “My father always told me to be wary of these cursed woods. It seems the old dwarf was wiser than he seemed. Would that I had sturdy rock beneath my feet.”

Numb and withdrawn, Bandy looked between the grave and the spoiled food and felt as if he has suffered an inconsolable loss. He had no words for the occasion or for his friends and only wanted to escape this dreadful place. Wearily, he said, “Let us not tarry here any longer.”

“I am a hunter by heart,” said Grimbeorn in his deep voice that drowned out the defeat of his companions. “I can find us something to eat. Or do you think, Master Radagast, that what might be found should not be eaten?”

Radagast scratched at his beard in thought, “Normally I would advocate the eating of roots and plant life. However, due to your need and where we are, I would say that they would be the most dangerous. Many of the animals here, even the ordinary ones are quite feral and ill-tempered. For our purposes,

I would say that any game animals that you find would be fit to eat. That may not be the case the closer we get to the fens and the hill, but that will be self-evident when you see their appearance. Eat only animals that are free of missing fur or open wounds, and if they smell foul when cleaned do not eat the meat.”

“Your words are noted. Do any wish to join me in the hunt?”

Orophin stood at the Beorning’s posed question, “Aye, it would help my mind to go for a hunt. There is much darkness here and to share in the delight of a hunt would remind me of my home far to the north. While we are away, perhaps someone can empty the packs and see what can be salvaged? We will also need a fire for certain.”

To this, the Elf looked towards the Dwarf. It was not unknown to the Company that it had been Rorin who piled their backpacks where he did, after the burial. In truth, it had been both Grimbeorn and the Dwarf who had set the encampment, while the others either stood watch or prepared the dinner. The fact that the Dwarf and Man had no idea that the packs would be infested by the terrible insects was irrelevant to the Elf – they were to blame. Even after the northern war, the relations between Elf and Dwarf were strained.

Radagast broke into the tension that was felt by all, “Though it would seem appropriate to go and hunt to bring us food, it is not the time. We must push on quickly and perhaps cinch our belts a little tighter. The dead Dúnadan was a warning for those that trespass in these woods, though it is uncertain to whom he

offended. The Necromancer is gone but his shadow lies on the land...and the hearts of men.”

Esgalwen looked to the wizard at this statement, “Perhaps it was orcs, or some other fell thing?”

“Perhaps,” answered Radagast, “but we neither have the time to sort it out, nor the strength. We are but a day’s travel before we come to the fens of Dol Guldur and then our decision is before us to either take the Fenbridge, which could be held by orcs, or traverse the fens themselves. Either choice is dangerous, but it is a choice that must be made. Fear not, Grimbeorn and Orophin - there will be time for us to garner food if any can be found.”

The wizard stood, his staff in hand. He lifted his hat and atop his head was a nest, streaks of bird droppings running down his bald pate. Within the nest a bird flitted about and Radagast raised a finger to allow it to hop on, as if a perch. He brought the bird close to mouth and he whispered. The small creature seemed to understand and then it was off - flying north through the woods. That done, the old, brown man began to walk south. “Come along now,” he said.

The companions all watched him in wonder and then grabbed their things and made to follow. Only Esgalwen hesitated - looking back to the grave of her fallen friend. She nodded, whispered a prayer and an oath under her breath, and then she, too, followed.

The rain continued through another day of their travel. The soft patter on the leaves above reminded Bandy of the sound of bacon as it popped and sputtered over a fire. It did not come down hard, just constant, and they

were saturated to the core. Their hoods up, hung low over their faces from the weight of the water and drips dropped annoyingly from the brim.

Rorin rubbed at his neck, over and over, as he constantly feared that the insects that had crawled all over his pack were now on his back and in his hair. But though his fears were assuaged by Orophin, who followed close behind, still the Dwarf reached to rub and scratch.

It was late afternoon on the seventh day since they had left the comfort of Mogdred's hall when Esgalwen suddenly went low to the ground and took cover. She held a hand up to her friends to do the same and to be quiet. In the distance, just barely covered by the patter of the rain, the sound of cruel voices could be heard.

"Ay now, Kor, let's say you hand it over so's we can all see what you 'ave?"

"I'll hand over nuthin'! I found it in the dirt and leaves and I will do with it what I want."

"No, no, no... we're a pack and we's share amongst the pack, Kor!"

"And I'll shove my fist inta yer guts if you don't shut yer trap! I found it! I keep it! And if any of you lugs thinks you can take it...then try."

"Shut up!"

"What's that you say, ya filthy maggot!"

"I says shuddup! Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

For a moment, Esgalwen's heart froze thinking that their Company had been heard, if not seen. But then, she too heard the clomp of heavy boots. She bent to

look around the tree and saw another group of orcs come running towards the first. To her left, Grimbeorn also leaned against a tree - his face a grim mask.

“YOU CURS! Whatcha be doin’ in our woods, here?”

“Your woods? These woods are everyone’s now that your dark master has left you behind!”

“Why you... he was your master, too, until you and your filthy friends here decided to make good with those...men! Whatcha got there?”

“We’s go where the power is and it is growing! You are no more than filthy lapdogs licking at a pot that’s empty! And what I have is mine own - now get ya gone! Run back to that rotting fortress on the hill.”

“You maggot! I’ll spill your stomach for that and watch as your lads eat what’s left. Now...what do you have there? Looks like pretty fine steel - much nicer than any of you boys could make. Where did it come from? You find it here in my woods?”

“Your woods? ...”

And so, the argument continued.

Hearing the words and thinking about her friend, Esgalwen peered once more around her tree to take a closer look. In the hand of a large orc, the one that had to be named Kor, was a sword. A finely crafted sword. Was it the treasured weapon of her friend’s house?

The gloom, hunger and suspicion that could not be dispelled lay heavy on Arbogast’s mind, as he crouched in the sickly undergrowth. There was no question – they needed a plan of action. He took the space of a few breaths to look over the tangled woods ahead - hardly

the perfect terrain for an ambush, but certainly not the worst.

The Fire-watcher began to work his way closer to the orcs, certain that his companions - as seasoned warriors as he - would be doing the same...and then thought of Bandobras. The Hobbit was far from home and likely had no desire for a deadly clash of arms. And yet, if the orcs were not slain, they could potentially pick up the Company's trail and ambush them in turn, as they neared Dol Guldur. So, a decision - if Bandobras was for battle, then so, too, would Arbogast.

He looked back to his closest friend, cocked his head towards the orcs and raised an eyebrow. *Well? What do you think?*

Bandy had withdrawn further into the underbrush and now readied his bow. Thorns tugged at his cloak and he feared the orcs would hear him. Exerting all his will, he stopped and remained motionless. He looked to his companions in hopes that they, too, would have the good sense to let the beasts fight themselves. The slaving brutes were not as big as he imagined, but they looked wickedly cruel and were still much larger than he.

Bandy cursed to himself when he saw Arbogast creep toward the orcs. *What was he doing?*

Arbogast turned to the Hobbit, his face suggesting a path. *I must trust to friendship and experience,* he thought.

It all was for naught, as Grimbeorn - not one to just sneak past an enemy as despicable as these orc - followed the lead of Arbogast until a twig snapped

under his boot. Around him, the other companions all froze in place.

The snap of the branch popped in the stillness of the woods. To Bandy, it seemed louder than any noise should have been in such a wet and muffled environment. Even with the noise of their argument, the orcs heard.

“What’s that?” asked one.

“Dunno...came from over there,” said another.

“You have more of your lads out here ready to ambush us or something,” Kor screamed at the other orc leader.

“If we was gonna ambush you, you’d be dead already!” was the retort. “There’s something else out there.”

As a group the orcs drew their weapons and began to move towards where the companions kept cover.

In her rage at the death of her friend, Esgalwen heard the orcs draw weapons. She immediately pulled forth her own sword then charged - the blood of the West burning hot in her veins.

Behind her, Orophin nocked an arrow to bow string and stepped out from behind his tree to offer aid to his friend. Around him, the other companions went into action.

“Esgalwen, wait!” cried Grimbeorn, but she was already running. Heir to his father’s blood, he hefted his axe and rushed after the Dúnadan, giving a great battle cry. In his ferocity, the youth seemed to grow in stature and feral in nature.

Almost before he could process what was happening, Rorin saw Grimbeorn and Esgalwen rush headlong into battle. Realizing that the company was outnumbered and fatigued from their journey, the Dwarf looked for any advantage the wooded area could offer.

Bandy, too, bent his bow and took aim at one of the bandy-legged orcs. With battle now joined, he felt a strange sense of calm, as he released the arrow.

Much to the Hobbit's dismay, his arrow sunk deep in the shield of the orc leader, while Orophin's flew straight and true. It cleaved through one of the goblin's eyes and killed it instantly. The company was inspired by the amazing shot and felt their hope rise as they engaged.

A Black Uruk, named Slurg, raced to meet the woman that raged towards him. The Dúnadan's keen sword flashed in the shadows of the woods. Behind her, the Silvan Elf's bow sang once more.

This time, Orophin's arrow did not hit its intended target, but Esgalwen drew blood – the Uruk-hai panting, as he defended himself.

Bandobras Bracegirdle was also pleased when he saw his arrow strike a goblin archer that stood across from him, among the trees. It squawked as the thin Hobbit arrow took it in the throat.

At the same moment, Rorin raced up to stand at Esgalwen's side. The Dwarf's massive hammer in motion and being wielded like it was naught but a wood mallet instead of hafted steel.

Rorin hated orcs. They were the bane of his folk and his blood still boiled at the memory of them swarming the field before the gates of Erebor. He spun his weapon in a wide arc, over his head, and brought it down on the skull cap of the other orc leader, Kor. There was a terrible crunching sound and a croak from his throat, as his head and neck were smashed. The orc collapsed dead, its companions looking on wide-eyed at the terrible wrath that was Rorin, Dwarf of Erebor!

As the carnage erupted around him, Arbogast hefted his axe, narrowed his eyes and advanced on one of the enemies yet engaged. The time had come to put some battering to his new shield. The orc met Arbogast's eyes and charged, bellowing with Shadow-fueled rage. Before it could swing its bent sword, though, the Woodman shifted his footing and the orc tripped on an unseen root. Arbogast's axe followed it down, even as the fallen orc wildly slashed. There was a satisfying clang as orc-steel met the boss of his shield, even as Arbogast smashed his own axe into its skull.

"Kill them all! Leave none alive!" bellowed Grimbeorn in his rage, as he buried the blade of his axe in the neck of the first orc he met. Putting his foot on the creature's carcass, the Beorning yanked the axe free and moved to the next orc in line.

The goblin archers that stood to the rear of the combat began to quaver, as they watched three of their companions instantly slain by the charging heroes. But still, the large black Uruk, Slurg, stood strong as he brought his shield and sword down on the human

woman. They let their arrows fly once more past the crowded melee and at the enemy archers beyond.

Slurg growled at Esgalwen, his chest covered with a black ichor from where she slashed. "I am going to eat your heart, girl! You will wish that you had never come to this place! Maybe instead I will just remove the pretty steel from your hand and take you to HIM!"

His powerful arms flexed as he bashed and slashed, and so the other orc warriors maintained their line - even those that had followed the now dead Kor, into these woods.

Esgalwen ignored the verbal threat of the foul orc, her ears filled only with the deafening beat of her own heart pumping fury through her veins. The companions were now hotly engaged in the battle, oblivious to anything else save the foe before them, fighting out a life or death struggle.

Only Orophin became aware that Radagast was chanting. A light seemed to be coming from the rear of the company, centered on his staff. It was the soft words and concentration from the Brown Mage that kept another force, far more threatening, from becoming an active participant in the struggle.

It was the forest.

As the blood of the combatants spilled onto the ground, the flora took notice and strove to consume all it could. The dark, lichen-covered trees bent their boughs in effort to wash their leaves and branches in it. The ground, instead of absorbing the ichor as it should,

seemed to pool it so it was within reach of the straining branches.

A fervor rose within the forest, as the flora now reached out for both the living and the dead - only Radagast was keeping it at bay. The light that shone from his staff was no brighter than a candle, but it served to push the forest back from friend and foe alike. Where he thrust the light, the branches recoiled and the insects that now began to roil up from the soil, scurried away. Some dark force, oblivious of whose blood was shed, ignorant of the winner or the loser, was drawing power from the violence that was occurring in the woods.

The Silvan Elf shivered and turned his attention back to the fray. The wizard was doing his job and so must Orophin - he loosed another arrow. Not far away, Bandy fired, too, and both shafts struck true.

Arbogast and Bandy felt the exhilaration of their first kills of orcs. The nightmare of the Shadow-spawn had threatened so many for so long that the bloodlust was not sated – instead it grew. The Hobbit drew another arrow and looked for a new target, while Wood-man shifted his position to find another of the vile orcs.

Rorin knew the will of these creatures could be broken by slaying their leaders. Not far from him, Esgalwen slashed the Uruk-hai who quickly reeled back. Slurg tried to regain his stance but was immediately smashed under the hammer of Rorin. The large, black orc fell to the ground and did not stir.

Esgalwen looked in utter surprise at the Dwarf who now stood at her side, but it quickly changed to a smile

of appreciation for the aid. “Wary be all that meet your hammer,” she said with a gracious nod.

With both of the leaders dead, the remaining orcs, craven as they were, began to disengage and run. Bandy and Orophin sent arrows speeding after them.

The fire in Arbogast’s veins strove with the desire to remain and ensure that none within the fellowship had been harmed. *I don’t believe any slipped past me, he thought, yet in the gloom and confusion, who could be sure? Still, the risk is too great if any survivor were to report our presence to whatever foulness that holds sway over the southern wood... over Dol Guldur.*

As the surviving orcs turned to flee, Arbogast gave chase, but a voice cried out to him, “Hold, Arbogast! They will trouble us no more.” The Woodman turned to see Radagast and there was an assured look upon his face. With a nod, Arbogast let them go.

The remaining companions took a moment to relax from the combat, panting from the exhaustion. Esgalwen wiped her blade across Slurg’s filthy tunic, leaving more of his blood to stain the cloth. Rorin stepped over the dead, eyeing each as he did with his hammer at the ready.

The forest seemed to pulse, and each could feel it in rhythm with their hearts and breath. The bloodlust left them and the stink that had emanated from the forest morass ebbed, too. Arbogast perked an ear up as the sound of fluttering wings took to the air from some hidden perch – another ill omen.

Radagast quickly made rounds to each of the companions to check them for wounds - orc poison was notorious and even the most minor of cuts could kill a man. Once done, he took a seat himself. The others could see he was spent from his engagement with whatever foe had been present.

Esgalwen walked to where the dead form of Kor lay and saw near him a longsword in its scabbard. The work was meticulous, and she immediately recognized the maker's mark. It was Ardil's blade - the one given him by his father before he had left Gondor those many months before.

The faint, raspy voice of Radagast was heard breaking the new silence. "We are close now," he breathed. "Within the next few days we will be at the foundations of the sorcerer's hill." The companions could see that even the Brown Wizard was troubled by the terrible corruption that was southern Mirkwood. "We must decide...do we make for the Fenbridge or risk the swamps that surround the hill?"

The weight of the decision and the task still at hand fell on all of them, and each companion took a moment to rest. Before them was the tangled weave of Mirkwood that they would need to pass through until at last they came to the foulness that was Dol Guldur.

Arbogast weighed the matter for a moment, considering the choice, then answered. "I am for the swamps. I know nothing of the Fenbridge, but though the Necromancer may have left his fortress, the taint of his presence clearly has not. Any useful stronghold will doubtless have been claimed by orcs or yet fouler things and will be watched."

“Tell us of this Fenbridge, Wizard,” said Rorin, sitting now upon a log. “I’d gladly give anything but my beard to leave this forest and have hard ground under my feet again.”

“Foul marshes surround Dol Guldur on three sides,” replied Radagast. “The easiest way to cross these swamps is via the Fenbridge, a snaking line of orc-built crossings that run from hillock to hillock, and the only way onto the Fenbridge is through Fenbridge Castle. Though it sounds odd, but the Fenbridge would be an easier route to the Sorcerer’s Hill then to trudge the swamps.”

“I do not like the idea of mucking around in swamps and passing by a fortress that, yes, could have enemy, but also could be a safe haven for us,” said Grimbeorn. “Even if it is held, we should at least attempt to gauge its strength. We came for information and we should gather all we can.”

“But orcs hold the Fenbridge, yes?” asked Orophin.

“We do not know,” answered Radagast.

“But we do know, wizard. The man we found in the woods, nigh on two years ago, the one that Mogdred’s people came to slay...he reported that orcs did indeed hold the way.”

“That was two years past,” argued Radagast.

“What are you saying, Radagast? That the news this man brought is no longer valid due to time?” Orophin was not haughty towards the wizard, in fact he enjoyed the strange man’s ways, but neither was he willing to throw his life on a hunch. “If it is held, can we cross the swamps? If it is held will it provide the information we seek?”

“Yes,” said Radagast, becoming frustrated. The companions could see that the dismal wood was beginning to affect his mood. “We could cross the fens, but I fear more danger and time lost using that route. Like Grimbeorn said, better to know. As for the information we seek - no, we must make our way into the black fortress.”

Bandobras strode over to where Esgalwen sat on a fallen tree, holding a longsword over her knees. He determined the debate on which way to go was best left for wiser minds. The Hobbit noticed first the etching that ran the length of the blade that was traced in thin gold. The craftsmanship of the weapon was clearly that of a master-smith and he asked, “You know this weapon?”

Esgalwen looked up at the Hobbit. She had not heard his approach and she was suddenly embarrassed, as she wiped at her eyes. She nodded and proceeded to tell the young Bandy the story of Ardil, son of Hardin.

“He was a handsome, young Dúnadan - not but thirty years of age. I know that may seem normal for a man, but the lives of the Dúnedain are longer than most, and so he was just entering service to the ranks of Gondor. His father, Hardin, was lame after a wound he had taken during the Fell Winter of 2911 when Ardil was not yet born.

“When his son came to age and put forth his desire to join the Rangers of Ithilien to safeguard the eastern fences of Gondor, those that met with the boundaries of Mordor, Hardin could not have been more proud. He bestowed unto him this blade. Ardil took to naming it

Celegurth, the swift death, though I believe it had a name much older. Ardil's father is of direct Númenórean descent and it is said that this family heirloom came across the sea with the Faithful, having been forged in the Land of the Gift." Her eyes were far away as she spoke.

Whatever its history, the young hobbit could see that this weapon was of certain great value. Esgalwen smiled at the hobbit with soft eyes. "You are very kind, Master Bandy, and courageous. I am glad to share these adventures with you."

Tying her own sword to her pack, she fixed Ardil's blade to her belt. She would, of course, look to return the blade to Ardil's family. For now, though, she wished the blade to be allowed to avenge the death of her kin. She had little doubt that the opportunity would present itself soon enough.

Turning her attention to the others and the conversation regarding how they should approach the Necromancer's tower, the ranger agreed with the many of her companions. "A dark spell seems to remain on these woods. Did you see how the land eagerly soaked in up the spilt blood? And who can say what dark pets of the Necromancer lay under the surface of those fetid waters? I say we should look to stay on the path, straying only in great need."

Orophin having heard the Brown Wizard's knowledge of their goal, and then Esgalwen's argument of why they should take the Fenbridge, came to his own conclusion. "No path is wise in this part of the forest, nor is our task, but still it must be done and to do so is

to confront the enemy you know. I am with Grimbeorn and Esgalwen, let us take the bridge.”

“The bridge it is then! I’d rather face orcs than this rotten land,” grumbled the Dwarf.

Arbogast glanced at Bandy, but the hobbit merely shrugged. “It would seem I am the odd man out. Very well, then - the bridge, and let us see what we shall see.”

And so, with arms weary from combat, the Company set off once more towards their goal.

They marched south. A day passed only to have a new one dawn, the morning slow in revealing itself. Their bodies ached, and their stomachs growled from the lack of sustenance. Grimbeorn and Orophin did their best, but the only quarry they were able to catch were the squirrels that nested in the trees. The fare was poor for there was little meat upon the animals, and that which there was, was hard to stomach.

Mists rose from the forest floor thickening through the day, the sunlight too weak to burn it away, which made their travel even more perilous. The very air had a foul taint to it - a taste that was both bitter and metallic that no amount of drink could remove from the mouth.

The terrain also changed. The land rose around them in a series of hills that ran through the forest from west to east. Any hope that this would elevate them out of the mire was dashed, as the hills created valleys where the muck and the ooze could collect.

Topping one of these hills, it was then that the Company saw Fenbridge Castle, at last.

The castle – more of a gatehouse, really, which had been added to and built upon until it sprawled - was on the downward slope of the rise on which they stood. An odd place for a fortification, until one realized that it defended a raised earthwork surrounded by the swamps and fens, as far as the eye could see. The reek that emanated from water was worse than ever and it made breathing hard.

This was where the Fenbridge began – and the Company knew it must find a way to secretly move down its length. It was rumored that the series of bridges covered near twenty miles of swamp.

Radagast spoke, “We will skirt the castle by moving through the bogs.” A voice rose to interrupt him, but the wizard quieted all resistance with a hand. “I will cover our passing, as we gain the bridge on the opposite side... if there are any within to see us. This will be the only length of swamp and fens that we will need pass through – the rest of our trek will be upon the bridge itself.”

Grimbeorn sighed moodily, “Then let us be done with it.”

They strode down the hill and quickly the ground turned to marsh. Radagast held tight his staff and began to chant in a whisper. A thick fog gathered around them, though they all could see, and a cacophony of frog croaks and insect buzzing filled the area. Though the water sloshed under boot, they passed unheard...and unseen.

Whether Fenbridge castle was garrisoned, as the Wizard’s man had reported, or if it now lay empty, the Company would not know. The swamp was

treacherous, but at last they pulled themselves up onto the wooden planks of the bridge – the odd castle now behind them.

Casting only a cursory glance behind, the Company began to move with great haste along the crude Orc-way. They needed to put these last miles behind them and Radagast pushed them to see it done.

All expectations of a bridge were gone in moments. The rotten timbers and planks that passed for the bridge wove hither and yon through the fog, each span anchored on a hummock of grass or solid earth. Nor was it of uniform width - at times it was wider and would have supported four or five men marching abreast and enough room for at least one wagon. The sure footing seemed to be more to the center and the companions could tell that while not used frequently, someone or something passed along the bridge from time to time.

In places the hummocks were quite large and seemed to have been flattened or paved on the tops. Here the remains of fires, or the rotted remains of wagons, were found. Clearly these were rest stops, or traffic points, that allowed wagons and folk to pass each other on the otherwise narrow passage way through the fens.

From bridge to hillock and then to bridge again, they traversed the chain of islands. Hiding occasionally in fen or wood, with the aid of their mage, they were not seen or heard – but neither did they see or hear any foes. The threats they thought were there never revealed themselves.

An unknown amount of time passed in the fens of Dol Guldur.

Twice the Company needed to halt and camp – their bodies both weary and hungry. With the discomforts came short tempers and moods. Little talk passed between them, and when it did, the words were sharp and filled with ire.

The loss of the food stores had made them reliant on Grimbeorn and Orophin's hunting, but little could be found here. The occasional fish was caught, but it never seemed enough. Instead, the Company resorted to consuming insects – primarily the slugs that teemed along the water's edge.

Rorin, adept as he was, saw to making small fires in hollows that he dug in the soft earth. Though everything was saturated with moisture, still was the Dwarf able to make a cookfire, for each of their camps. They boiled water to make it drinkable; fired the slugs to make them edible and suffered for their sleep.

It was during a stop that tempers overcame their wits and cruel words were said. Arbogast, as he handed out the evening's ration of cooked slug to his starving companions, came first to Radagast and offered the food with considerable deference. Next was Bandobras, Grimbeorn, Orophin, and Rorin – but to Esgalwen he said, "Not a single morsel shall you have from me, friend of Mogdred! For a year passed while none heard from you - a year in which the Men of Tyrant's Hill robbed and raided my folk. With my own eyes have I seen you receive instructions from his men, you who searched for your kin for so long yet find but one, and

that only after his recent death! Mogdred prepares for war, that much is clear to me, how can it be otherwise to you? If you are to have meat tonight, I would have you tell me where his first blow will fall. On my home at Black Tarn Hall, perhaps? And while I moulder here, lost in this thrice-cursed bog!”

Esgalwen felt her cheeks flush, as if the Woodman had slapped her hard across the face. *How dare you*, she thought as anger rose to usurp her feelings of surprise. For a moment, the Ranger thought of drawing Ardil’s sword and cleaving Arbogast’s hand from his wrist before driving the blade through the man’s gut.

The unending fog, the dank smell of the fens, and the weighty gloom of this land had taken its toll on the pure-hearted maiden. She was weary. The Shadow was taking root in their hearts. Even the Bandobras, whose positive outlook in all things had given support, now brooded. Dark thoughts filled his mind of *Radagast the Crazy!* Of Arbogast stepping between him and the troll, *like he needed a nurse-maid!* And then the Woodman’s angry words, and accusations of disloyalty, at the fair woman that sat across from him.

“Arbogast!” the Hobbit hissed. “What right have you to accuse Esgalwen of treachery when she seeks lost companions? Would you forsake us so quickly if we disappeared? Look where we are,” he said, pointing vaguely at the dismal swamp. “Look where we are going.” He lifted head toward the eerie glow emanating from the fens. “You sow division when our very lives depend upon the fellowship we have created.”

Bandy's interruption gave Esgalwen a moment, allowing herself to breath, close her eyes and take a step back from the Woodman. When she opened them once more, the ranger nearly wept. Listening to the Hobbit's words, she knew the answers to his questions in her heart. The taint of this land was already clouding Arbogast's judgment, and *the Shadow is already searching for a home in your heart*, she chided herself.

With sadness, Esgalwen backed away further, "It is okay, Bandy. I will answer Arbogast's accusations." She moved to where her pack lay and slowly removed Ardil's blade from her belt, fearful of what she might do should the weapon be close at hand. She faced Arbogast, her voice - though frayed by grief, anger, and hunger - was controlled. "Arbogast, you have charged me with being a friend of Mogdred. You have spoken truthfully, for I am indeed his friend. I spent much of the last year, when not wandering the Woods in search of my kin, in the company of the Lord of Tyrant's Hill's. He has shown me unmerited kindness, providing me, a stranger in the land, shelter and food from his table and good council in my search, though I have nothing to offer in return.

"And you have spoken truthfully when you say that men have raided and robbed your folk. Though I cannot confirm that it was Mogdred and his folk. I have seen the spoils of his looting with my own eyes. And, as I have eaten from his table, I am guilty of living off his ill-gotten gain... but never have I heard them gloat of these acts being against their kin to the north.

"You have charged me with receiving instruction from Mogdred's men. Here, Fire-watcher, your eyes and

ears have not discerned clearly. I have received no instructions and Mogdred's will is his own and he keeps his own council... as do I. Had you listened carefully, you would have noted how the chamberlain guarded his tongue on Mogdred's whereabouts, and how he kept watch in the shadows to ensure we would not stir up trouble in his master's house. He took a risk allowing us to pass through his master's lands with so few questions and no escort. Why do you think that is, Arbogast?

"It is because as a clan, they are untrusted or believed by any of their kin to the north. Why? Because they were once chained within the Necromancer's service, and their crime was they survived. I argued with Mogdred many long nights to turn away from his anger of your people and believe that there could one day be unity. I argued that he needed to keep focus on the true threat in these accursed Woods – these orcs, spiders and worse filth – so as to protect his people.

"Here me well, Fire-watcher, I believe Mogdred to be a just lord. I agree with Mogdred that much of the prosperity that your people experience has been at the cost of his own. I know well the price Mogdred's men have paid. I have seen the wounds caused from orcs' blades and spiders' bites. Where have the men of the Woods and Mountain been, while Tyrant Hill kept the Shadow at bay? Were they not building their lodges and raising their crops and drinking in their feast halls these last good days? Should not your kin share in these blessings? No, the will of the Mountain and Woods was to cast Mogdred and his people aside. Twice abandoned, he and his people are.

“Though I can understand the Necromancer’s treachery, I do not understand how their kin could be so unjust. You once believed that, too, Arbogast, when you spoke clearly at the Folk-moot. I believe Mogdred’s cause just, it is his methods that I do not think noble or good. Yet, I save hope that one day the clans might be reconciled and strong together again to face these troubles. I believe Mogdred has good left in him.

“Lastly, though it is no business of yours, Aldwyn is a friend of mine and he had new-found information for me. I had asked of him in my search for my own kin...” Esgalwen paused for a moment to stoop down and fish out the scroll case containing the map she received. She tossed it gently to Arbogast. “Here... may your eyes see more clearly. It is a map of the surrounding land so that I may find my way. I did not think that it would concern you, or I would have shown it sooner.”

Hesitantly, Arbogast took the map from Esgalwen’s hand. His own shaking as he regarded Aldwyn’s careful work. The Woodman sat down heavily without finding the strength to reply.

When his voice did come, it was quiet and despairing. “That I should have so wronged one who has come so far from home, and who has ventured into this dark place, at risk to life and soul, only to ensure the safety of her friends! Esgalwen, my shame is great. In my folly, I have come to see enemies about me when the true foe lies without the fire-light. In my heart, I believe as you do - that the folk of Tyrant’s Hill are yet my kin, and that there must be peace and good will between us. For the darkness that gnaws at Mogdred’s heart, as it does at mine, would have us divided and

batten itself upon kin-shed blood.” Wearily, he met the Ranger’s eyes. “You have lifted a darkness from my heart that I allowed to settle. If you have done as much for Mogdred, then I am greatly in your debt.”

Esgalwen accepted Arbogast’s apology with simple nod, not patronizing or dismissive, but rather an acknowledgement of grace. Wisdom told her there were no more words that needed to be spoken to the Woodman. Gathering her things, the Ranger found a space near the fire to lay down.

Arbogast avoided the gaze of his fellows, preferring the dance of the flames, and spoke that night not another word.

Bandy sat beside his friend and silently watched the fire. Taking his pipe from its sack, he slowly, ritualistically filled the bowl and with a hot ember lights the fragrant weed. Puffing slowing, he wondered whether the fellowship would survive the journey.



At last, along the Fenbridge way, a moathouse appeared – broken but still sturdy and defensible. In the distance, upon a larger hill, stood the arching domes

and pillared arcades of another structure. This one rose to a greater height and the soft lines and worked stone of the principle structure was made more horrible for its beauty than if it had matched the orcish structures that they had passed along the way.

Radagast looked at the old fortress, "There is our objective, friends. There is the Hill of Sorcery, once home to an Enemy I will not name, so near to the place of his haunting." A cloud passed over the sun, dimming it further – a sickly, green glow emanated from where their objective stood.

As quietly as possible, they began to move towards the new structure, all the while each of them strayed once more in their thoughts – those thoughts molested by the surrounding tainted evil of the Shadow, now harboured resentment and loathing.

Arbogast kept a keen eye on the moathouse, as they approached, and once more the muck became more prevalent than the dry ground. While he was predatorily alert his mind began to wander back to his home in Woodman Town. *Would any of them have come this far south?* he thought. *Certainly not any of his kin folk, they were happy enough to hide behind a hedge and call their worn timber hall a home. If any there knew what he was undertaking they would call him a fool. However, the Black Tarn was different. There was someplace new, someplace where he could be a leader...*

Bandy's thoughts were turned towards the Shire. As often was the case, he occupied his mind with bits of song and thoughts of warm meals. *What fools they all*

*were at home – fat and simple. Life was easy and boring if all one had to do was plow and plant the same piece of earth. How surprised they would be to see him when he returned home. Bandy the knowledgeable! Bandy the story teller! Anyone could sneak into the lair of a dragon - the act took courage yes, but sneaking was easy for Hobbits. Here, however, Bandobras plunged headlong into the den of the Enemy himself, in order to find his secrets.*

Esgalwen's mind was troubled. Her companions had taken little notice that one of her friends had been trussed up in a tree like a play thing! Someone close to her that she had known far longer than any of these others. In fact, she knew Mogdred perhaps better than she did the people with which she traveled. Grimbeorn was greatly annoying, stopping and looking at her in an expression that said hurry up. *What was the rush?* She could take her time, make sure her footing was solid. The straps of her pack needed adjusting, the new blade at her side felt awkward and the position of the carry was not quite right...

Grimbeorn's axe felt good in his hand. The attack against the orcs was just a taste of the retribution he would inflict upon the enemies of his folk. *How many of the slime are in this hole?* thought the Beorning. *The others stood back in the fight, or clumsily charged ahead. There was no merit in that way of fighting. Only getting in close, when the axe cut, and the blood sprayed would there be the satisfaction of the kill. They were slow; why were they holding him back.* Arbogast

slipped on a stone and Grimbeorn could have caught him, but instead let the man's hand stop his fall and sink up to his elbow in muck. *That's for speaking on behalf of the folk of Tyrant's Hill...*

Rorin marched beside the others. They picked their way, but the dwarf marched. He meticulously kept the grime and filth from his armor and it gleamed from what light there was in the fog and fens. Grimbeorn, too, was determined to be at the fore but Rorin matched his pace if not his stride. *Who does this late comer think he is? I am a son of Durin and this place has housed the enemy of my folk since the First Age. Perhaps Dol Guldur was home to the orc who killed my father? They will all know my vengeance!* The dwarf barked at his companions, surprising them all. "We must hurry."

Arbogast slipped into the water, interrupting Bandy's thoughts. The Hobbit looked to his friend, having only the faintest desire to aid him. He then heard Rorin's orders and quickly hissed a retort, "Quiet Rorin! Don't be in such a hurry to die. We shall meet whatever haunts this place, soon enough."

Rorin was taken aback at the Hobbit's rebuke and felt his grip on his axe tighten. The look in his eyes made the halfling cower with fear. "Do you not understand to whom you speak!"

At his movement toward Bandy, Grimbeorn stepped up to intervene and a greater wrath filled Rorin's heart. Evil was there among them, living in their minds and hearts, and it was gaining control... but then,

the dwarf paused and let out a deep breath. Grimbeorn saw the change and he, too, relaxed. "Forgive me Bandy, you are right of course. Just like a hobbit to keep a cool head, no matter where he be."

It was as if a hand released its grip on them all. The Beorning set down his axe and moved to where Arbogast still struggled to regain his feet. Behind him, Rorin continued, "I think it unwise for any of us to go off alone this near to our goal, and I also fear that any delay could be the end of us. We are growing weaker every minute, and our hearts and minds are now tormented. We must press on."

"Rorin, my dear friend, forgive my sharp tongue," said Bandy with a nod. "This sour place is having an ill-effect on me. Dark thoughts crowd my mind. How shall it be when we pass the gates of that dread fortress?"

"I do not know what awaits us but fear not! We have a wizard! What could possibly go wrong?" Rorin patted Bandy on the shoulder, hoisted his pack and crossed the distance to aid Grimbeorn. The Beorning grumbled an apology to Arbogast and a thank you to the Dwarf.

"My friends, if I may, let me take the final watch before we enter the old fortress." To his companions, Orophin seemed untouched by the haunted wood. Yes, he had been quiet, but he had not complained of their road or hunger. Even his clothes were mostly unsoiled as the light-footed Silvan Elf did not sink into the quags, as did the others. Wherever he could find firm earth, even if it were a muddy bog, Orophin stepped lightly over while the others sunk up to their knees. He climbed the huge

gnarled roots as if they were ladders in his home. In this way was he able to keep in advance of the party's guide and help to lead from one patch of dry land to another.

Though his demeanor belied his thoughts, in truth the Elf was feeling the torture of the wood and land. Orophin was only one-hundred and seven years of age, having only seen a short span of the current Age, but his memories ran deep - as did all Elves. Long before the beginning of the First Age, the Elves of the Great Journey traveled westward through the lands of Middle-earth from whence they had awoken. Coming to the Great River Anduin and the high peaks of the Misty Mountains, some of the Elves of the clan of the Teleri fell away from the journey and settled in the woodlands east of the Mountains. These were the original Silvan Elves, who lived on either side of the River. At this time in their history, his people still lived close together, with some dwelling in the land that would later be called Lórien, and the others settling around the hill of Amon Lanc in the far south of Greenwood the Great.

It must have been in the time these Elves were living closely together that the Silvan Elvish language appeared. As history passed, the Elves moved away from one another and mingled with other tribes, and so their language became extinct. Nonetheless, relics of that ancient tongue survived in some well-known place-names and personal names, such as Caras Galadhon, Amroth and even Lórien itself.

The Silvan Elves dwelt in their twin woodland realms for many centuries, but in the Second Age the emerging power of Sauron began to drive them apart. Oropher was the ruler of the Elves who dwelt in the

Greenwood, and he began to seek safety by moving his people northwards, away from Amon Lanc and away from the Silvan Elves who lived to the west of the Great River. Thus, were the people separated and so did Greenwood begin to feel the ravages of the Shadow. Soon it was renamed Mirkwood and the Silvan Elves had retreated as far north as they could.

Orophin looked at the forest and the land. The smell of decay filled his nose and lungs. No birdsong filled the air. He was not surrounded by a living forest. The Elf did all he could to maintain his hope. I cannot journey here again, he thought to himself. How did his companions suffer such a place?

But he realized that they, too, were being dragged down into the Shadow, just as the bogs wished to drag them under the earth. Nights before, when they had made camp and he watched the Woodman turn on the Gondorian – he knew that they were close to despair. It was Bandobras who brought them back! The happy-spirited Hobbit from across the mountains. *What a pleasant folk, thought Orophin, the world should be filled with more of his kind and certainly it would be a better place.*

On the borders of Dol Guldur, Orophin broke his silence. It was an old song of his people, but it told of the forest in its youth when the First Age was still new. It told the tale in his kin's original tongue, and though none could understand it, it painted images of happier places and happier moments within their minds.

Orophin did not sing loud, as he did not want to call down upon them any horrors that might be near. He did sing with strength and passion and his propensity to be

merry shined through. His companions could not help but smile - even under the shadow of Sorcerer's Hill.

The evening passed.

The song of the elf pushed away the dark thoughts and despair that was worming its way into the hearts of the companions. None seemed to sleep deeply, and the mumbled words of Radagast were heard all night. It was Orophin and the brown wizard who shook the companions awake in the dim light of the following morning. None would have believed they slept if not for the Elf telling them so.

They assembled quickly, rolling up their blankets and other gear. The fire had guttered out long ago, and there was no warmth from the ashes. The peace that had come from the Elf-song and Bandy's pipe had disappeared with the smoke.

A dark presence now weighed them down, as if a physical barrier retarded their progress and made it a supreme effort of will to continue. Radagast's voice seemed to croak in the gloom, "This is the outer wall, and our destination lies within. The wall surrounds the hill, and this is the first of three gates through which we must pass. Speak softly and do not leave the path. DO NOT LEAVE THE PATH." The brown wizard emphasized his last comment. "When we pass through the gate, we will cross a bridge that spans a marsh. It looks no different than the one we just traversed, yet this is a deception. The waters beyond are haunted by the dead who hunger for the heat and blood of the living. They may appear fair as well as foul, they may call for help, or

lure you with lights. Do not go in the water for any reason and stay close to me.”

The Brown Wizard led them forward toward the rising wall and gate house. The battlements were vacant, and the party saw no lights or fires anywhere. The gates were cast open. Great wooden doors, banded with iron and engraved with strange sigils and runes, now lay like jagged broken teeth in a gaping maw. The brown wizard disappeared into the darkness of the moat house, and as the companions followed, they saw that it resembled the one at Fenbridge Castle. This one, however, seemed more ominous and oppressive than the last.

Now passed through, they beheld the moat of Dol Guldur. While the marsh had stunted trees and mire, the moat was a bog crossed with a causeway from the open gate. The eye was drawn naturally to the structure atop the hill – the Hall of the Necromancer. The ever-present fog outside the gate was gone. The mist seemed to rise from the very towers of the hill and formed a dark cloud that hung over the citadel, plunged down at the walls, and crept over the land.

Beyond the moat was another wall and the slope of the hill revealed a large open area, a place to muster the armies as they spilled from the unknown depths of the pits beneath the citadel. Within the area, low, haphazard structures could be seen, but no fires or signs of occupation.

From their position at the gate they could see how darkly appealing and beautiful the high keep looked. Flowing arches and open arcades were visible in the distance. The high keep invoked the thought of a

majestic bubble rising from the water, rippling and rolling as it did, while the person who released it into the water marveled at its beauty and then drowned.



Radagast hurried across the causeway and up to the inner wall. The gate here stood open as well. This gate was not simple iron and wood, instead it was made of a black stone substance covered in sigils. Neither Elf, Dwarf, or Man knew where the substance was mined, wrought, or grown from. At this gate Radagast paused.

“This gate is not broken like the last. The magic within eluded our ability to destroy it. Saruman, the head of my order, alone had the skill and power to gain access. It is a good sign that it remains open, for only the dark Enemy or his servants could close it again. We are close to our goal friends, remain stout of heart.”

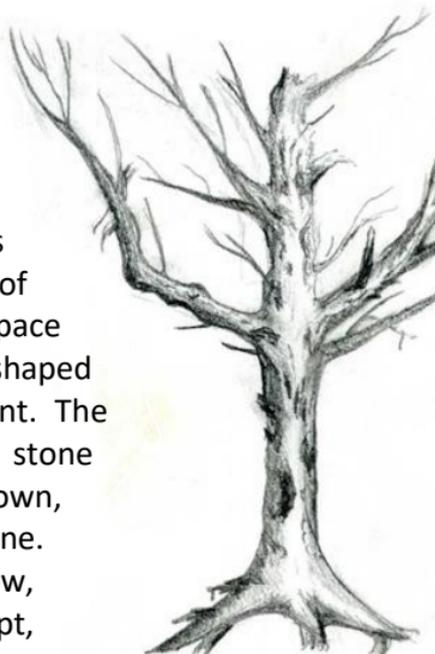
As the companions passed the second gate, it was easy to pick out among the runes those which were known to be foul and dark curses. Save only the Hobbit,

who understood its intent could read naught that was carved upon the door.

Crossing the causeway, Arbogast kept his axe hanging at his belt, leaving a hand free in case a friend needed to be pulled from the mire. By the time they reached the black gate, however, he found the weapon in his hand despite having no memory of having drawn it. His teeth were clenched so hard that his jaw ached.

Exiting the second gate house, they wound their way around the hill ever rising and drawing closer to the High Keep. The silence of the place was almost unbearable and only Radagast seemed to be able to speak freely and when he pleased. So, in silence the party passed into the inner courtyard.

Orophin knew where they were at once, but the recognition was slow to dawn on the others. It was the Elf-song from the previous night that brought clarity – they stood in what remained of the Elf-king's garden! This was no construct of the foul-folk. This was once the majestic work of the Elves! The open space possessed galleries and shaped fountains that were silent. The pale marble of the stone seemed to glow on its own, shining like polished bone. Garden beds were fallow, and the soil was corrupt,



where skulls and other bones decorated the absence of flowers and other naturally growing things.

All of this appeared in the periphery. The conscious mind was drawn to the mallorn trees. Twelve of them stood in a circle, their leafless, skeletal arms outstretched from the trunks. There was evidence of cruel hacks and slashes – they had died by torture and were left like criminals in a gibbet for all to see. Arranged around the circle of the trees were six statues in pairs of two. The large figures were roughly man-shaped but had the heads of giant vultures and eyes that seemed to glitter and shine with an unnatural awareness. Two stood at the entrance to the garden, two before a stair that rose up to the great hall of the citadel, and two more stood at the entrance to the high keep, the objective of the companions.

Bandy, unable to look any longer at the wretched sight of the ruined trees, turned his eyes toward the hideous statues. Their almost sentient gaze held him transfixed.



The statues in the barren garden were awful things, and Arbogast longed to lash out in atavistic hatred and fear. But as awful as the silence was, the ringing of steel on stone would be worse. Instead, he stepped forward, trying to keep his breathing steady.

He could not do it. For a long moment, he stood still, his eyes tightly shut and his heart pounding like a war-drum beat by a madman. When he opened his eyes, he saw Bandobras, bow in hand, hairy feet moving silently as a cat across the flagstones. Arbogast found himself hoping, absurdly, that he would not soil himself. He was, after all, a warrior of his people - one of the steel-eyed sons of Mirkwood! What dread could ancient stones have for him? *Shall a Woodman be foiled while a Hobbit, of gentler lands, goes on? NO!*

Sweating, nearly weeping with fear, Arbogast pushed on. He was surprised at the effect of this new-found resolution. He was able, briefly, to meet the baleful eyes of the second set of statues as he approached the High Keep.

To take his mind from the watchers, the Woodman began to explore the area. While everything was derelict and deserted, through careful observation he noted that someone had come this way recently, possibly pursued or followed by orcs. Of their return however he could not decipher from the limited information he had at hand.

Pausing just inside, he let his heart slow and his breathing calm. As his companions followed, he motioned them to silence, for slight noises stirred the air both inside the keep and out. The minute sounds, the smells, the flicker of shadows at the corner of the

eye, all gave valuable clues as to what awaited the fellowship.

“Go quietly,” he whispered to the others. “Orcs pursued some quarry this way not long ago, and we are likely not alone.”

Bandy felt the vulture-headed sentry bend its will on him and dark thoughts filled his mind. At that moment, he was utterly alone and exposed. Exerting every effort not to flee, he wrestled with the creature for control of his emotions. His head throbbed, and muscles tensed with the effort. And then, Arbogast’s shadowy form passed between him and the malevolent gaze, Bandy wrested free and stumbled forward toward the keep and the second set of watchers. The struggle had left him drained and forlorn.

Rorin also felt fear – the likes of which he had never imagined. One by one, he saw his companions master themselves and push forward past the terror, and yet, his feet would not move. He said to himself, *I am Rorin, son of Barin! My beard is long, and my hammer is dented! I have felled scores of my enemies and have never run from a fight! I will not let some cheap sorcerer’s trick undo me now!*

Orophin held onto his memories of home, as he walked towards the dark fortress. He looked at the ancient architecture, some of which had been built by his kin long ago. Dol Guldur was once the home of Oropher, King of the Silvan Elves, but he had retreated from the naked hill and led his people north.

Orophin steeled his heart and broke past the Watcher's and entered the castle. He was a merry Elf, normally full of song and laughter, but this journey had left a shadow on his soul that would take many days to fade away.

A gruff voice broke the silence, "I cannot enter this place." The Company turned to see Grimbeorn standing there, shamed and afraid. "I have come all this way only to find that I cannot go any further. The terror this place exudes quails me and I dare not go forward."

"There is no shame, Grimbeorn," replied Radagast. "Strength is measured in many ways. Stay here and guard our rear - we shall be as quick as we can, and then we all must away. To stay longer will cause us to descend into a despair from which we will not escape. So, use your keen eyes and ears and make sure our path out of Dol Guldur will not be impeded."

The wizard's words calmed the tall Beorning and took away any self-doubt that he may have felt, restoring his strength and commitment.

"I will stay and guard the rear with you," said Rorin ashamed. He too had been bested by fear, trying to hide the fact with false bravado.

The Silvan Elf nodded at the decision, "There is wisdom in this. We would not want to come out of the keep only to find all our efforts for naught, due to a large host before us. We will make our stay inside only as long as needs be. Hold the door, my friends! We shall be back."

Bandy's heart quailed when the two stoutest members of the fellowship could go no further. For a moment he was angry. How could they survive the Keep

without Grimbeorn's axe scything through enemy ranks and Rorin's hammer smashing goblin helmets? He envisioned his own death. The pained looks on his companions' faces reminded Bandy that had Arbogast not broken the watcher's gaze, he might find himself in their position. He felt pity for them both but dared not show it. "Thank you Grimbeorn and Rorin," was all he could think to say.

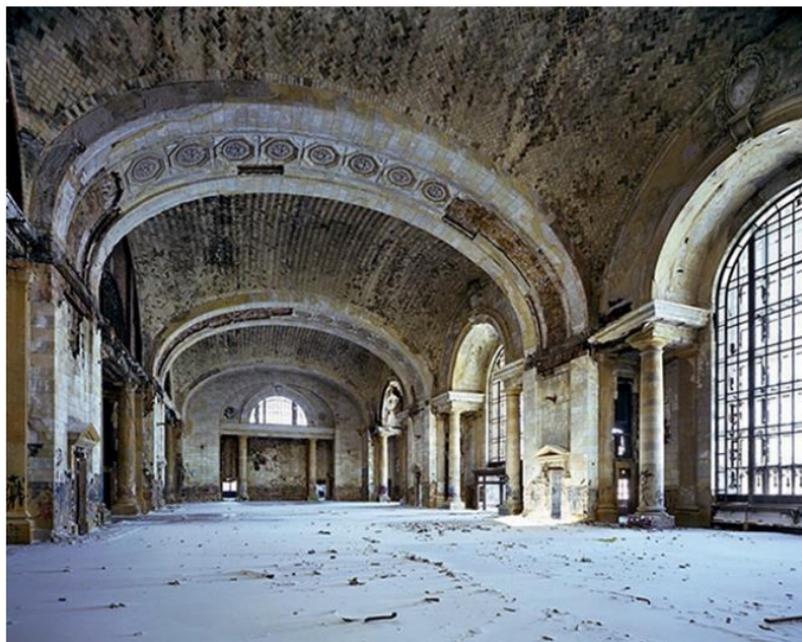
"Come," said the wizard to those that could.

They watched their companions enter the maw of the high keep and vanish in its shadowed halls. Unwillingly, Grimbeorn and Rorin cast their eyes onto the garden and the watchers that waited. They stood back to back but even in this they felt anxious standing in the open. Both were glad that their errand did not force them into the keep proper, but still the brooding presence of Dol Guldur pressed upon their hearts.

Their footsteps echoed, as they proceeded down the walkway of the high keep. The companions were confused, at first, by what they saw. Instead of the dark horrors they expected, they walked into a palace. Though it was dirty, vacant, and abandoned, the walls and niches were decorated by the pillaged treasures of lost kingdoms. The ranger of the south was not certain, but due to similarities in architecture and style she thought they belonged to the lost kingdom of Arnor. Even the hobbit recognized some of the styles from the relics and mathoms that had come down to the Shire from the north.

Orophin waited for Radagast to take up the lead, for only he knew what they sought. “What are we looking for, Radagast?” inquired the Elf.

The Brown Wizard whispered, “This was the hall of our foes most trusted servants and spies, as well as the administrative center of his dark workings across the land. I’m afraid our assault was already known to the Enemy when it came. The Council of the Wise searched this place quickly – most of the documents were already removed when we arrived. Let us take a closer look and see what it is that we may find for ourselves.”



As the companions spread out into the hall and noted the passages and side rooms, there came an evident change. The initial feeling of being in a wondrous place abandoned them, and the companions felt a malignant

will take its place. Continuing became an extreme challenge, as dark thoughts began to interrupt their concentration. Surprisingly, it was Orophin who revealed the most apparent signs as he would stop and stare blankly at nothing.

Esgalwen was the first to call, motioning her companions to come to her. As they arrived, they saw slumped in the corner the dead remains of an orc. Marks on the floor showed that he had crawled from somewhere within the keep to die here in the hall. A blade protruded from the ribs of the brute, the flowing silver lines of its grip showed clearly that it was an Elven blade.

Orophin cried out when he spotted it and drew it from the body, "This was made in my homeland to the north! They are sometimes traded or given as gifts to the men of Dale and Esgaroth."

Arbogast took a more patient approach to the examination of the dead orc. He prodded the beast and examined him, "This foul creature was not dead very long. Despite the proximity of the swamp, he has not begun to corrupt. My guess is that he has only been dead a day or so, this fight occurred recently."

The ranger of the south quickly sought to trace where the creature had crawled from, but the trail went cold. The orc's trail was only evident from its death throes.

Again, the companions fanned out.

Orophin, blade still clutched in his hand, wandered from the dead orc and began to examine the intricate carving

on the pillars and arches of the hall. As the group moved away, Bandy noted the lagging Elf and shepherded him on, so he would not be left behind.

Esgalwen stalked deeper into the keep – her eyes searching for any clue that might reveal who had slain the orc. In time, she came before an iron bound door that stood out from the others. On its surface was a large gouge, as if an axe had been repeatedly smashed into it. “Bring the wizard,” she said, “this door was not smashed open. Someone has recently picked the lock here.”

Orophin knew he was being overwhelmed by the miasma of the fortress and he worried he might soon become a liability. The Hobbit had had to bring him back to the present - to where they were. What was happening to him?

The Elf tightened his grip on the ornate knife in his hand. He looked at the architecture that had been wrought by skilled hands long ago. This was no work of the Shadow - no work done by orcs, crude and without beauty. No, this was a work done by the Elves of old...his folk.

The sound of Esgalwen speaking returned him once more to their current task. Orophin moved with the wizard to where the door stood closed and draped in sorcery. He slid the Elven knife into his belt and then drew his Mirkwood Bow, nocking an arrow to string. Orophin waited, as the door was opened, ready to fire if any threat revealed itself.

Nothing was heard on its other side, and so Arbogast moved to open the door. At his side, Bandy

breathed heavy with fear but was resolute. The two put hands upon the cold metal and gave a great heave on the door. Surprisingly, it swung open quickly and quietly and the Hobbit arced back against the wall with a thud. Beyond was only a corridor, lined with shelves and small chambers. Each of the party members let out a collective breath that they did not know they were holding until that moment.

“We have found the library,” said Radagast breaking the silence.

It was apparent to the companions that the halls and rooms once contained a great many books and scrolls. From the state of things currently, it looked as if someone had cleared out most of the items in a hurry. The discarded scraps that littered the corners and the lone pages that remained on the shelf were left due to haste.

“Come,” said the wizard, “let us see what we may learn here.”

They spread out and began to explore the passages and gather anything that might be important for Radagast to assess. Many of the items were in diverse languages, some wholly unknown to the adventurers, but each was inspected by the wizard. He would make some comment and either toss it to the floor, or occasionally fold it up.

His comments were sparse and almost absent minded, ‘This is elvish’, ‘Ah Haradrim, odd’, ‘Black speech! DO not read that aloud here’. Each document they brought, no matter how strange, the wizard was able to read and grasp in an instant.

From the documents, they quickly gleaned that the library contained the messages and reports of Necromancer's spies. Most alarming of all was both the depth of detail and the range in which his spies collected their knowledge. Reports of missions into the Anduin Vales; scouts exploring and reporting on the conditions of roads; crop yields among the Woodmen with some going back many years; names and places of people who no longer lived; and finally, a report that outlined the military forces of Lake-town that as recent as last year.

A cry from Bandy broke the search and the others came in haste. The Hobbit pointed to the remains of a man who lay in a corner room of the library. His clothes were well worn, and his cloak was covered in mud and blood. His staring eyes looked to the ceiling, while his hand clasped a jagged wound in his stomach. The ribbon of his entrails protruded between his fingers. It was unknown why he had died here, but it was evident from the style of dress that he was from Lake-town.

Esgalwen spied the orc blade at his side, the instrument clearly had condemned the man to death. Arbogast looked at the man and the area around his feet, "He was surprised and attacked from behind. There, his empty sheath, it must be the mate to the blade you carry, Orophin."

The man carried no gear, but Arbogast easily found his pouch of silver pennies. Spilling some of the sixty coins into his hand, he examined them. "Those are pennies from Thranduil's Hall," said Orophin. "We use them when trading with outsiders."

While the large folk examined the body, the hobbit continued to explore the room. He noticed that the man had crawled, or stumbled, to the position he now lay. Looking closely, Bandy noticed a grate in the floor where he spied a handful of papers jammed into the opening, some stained in blood.

His small hand reached easily into the grating and extracted the papers. He quickly unfolded them and smoothed them out from habit. The Hobbit ordered them and then quickly scanned the pages, noting that they were in the common speech.

“Hi, this looks important!” The others turned their attention to where Bandy read. “Orophin, this says the Elves keep a watch of three companies upon some path, and deployed around a glade of some sort near...”

“IEEEE!” Came the high call from the Elf as he snatched the papers from the Hobbit’s hand. “Cease your tongue!”

Trembling, Orophin read the words and was struck, as if from a physical blow. The Elf moaned, and tears sprung from his eyes, while his skin became a grey, translucent pale.

The documents spoke of the defenses of his home to the north. Each detail assaulted him like a knife wound – each description a blade twist in his stomach. As he read, his mind’s eye conjured up a vision of each place in question, but that image was overrun by shadow and death. The Enemy had complete knowledge of Thranduil’s secrets. In a moment, Orophin despaired.

Like the Noldo Kingdoms of old Beleriand, his home would be raped and despoiled. Dropping the pages, he ran from the hall. The Elf was undone.

Radagast grabbed the papers, "Come! There is nothing more to learn here that is more troubling than this." The wizard stood back from the door and ushered the others out. "Quickly, follow him. I know not what he might do."

The companions, with the wizard in tow, fled the halls of the Necromancer.

**Orophin** ran into the gloom outside the keep. His foot falls, light across the ground, did not sink into the deep morass. A rage was on him and he strove to regain his wits.

*There is a spy in my home*, he thought to himself. His mind raced through ideas as to what he should do. The Elf wanted to continue running - all the way to the Hall of his king to report this treachery. But he could not abandon his friends, could he? These people were now more than just acquaintances, more than people he had met at a gathering, they had shared bread together. They had bled together.

Grimbeorn grumbled at his passing and Orophin turned a wicked eye on the man. How dare he! It was not the house of Grimbeorn that was being betrayed, evidenced by the parchments found within this foul place!

Arbogast moved as quickly as he could, trying to keep Orophin within view. The possibility that his friend

may be lost to despair in these halls forever - or until the forces of the Shadow returned to reclaim it - drove him on, though the Elf's feet be fleet and his passage quiet.

The Woodman found Orophin panting and pulling at his hair. So far! He was so far away from his home. Even now the treachery could be poisoning his folk and the realm could be afire. Arbogast spoke calmly and reassuringly to the Elf, and Orophin allowed the words to ease his mind. These were friends and allies - and as he would do all that he could to not see their house burn, so he knew that they would, too.

It was as if an oppressive will suddenly released him and the Silvan Elf righted himself. He turned to Arbogast and gave a wan smile, "We must away from here lest this place takes us all." The woodman nodded his agreement and they turned back to see the others approaching.

Radagast led the way, his stride long and urgent. "We head home via the quickest route. Pull tight your belts and muster your strength - there will be no warm beds nor food until we reach Rhosgobel. Let us hope that nothing bars our way!"

The Company stepped up their pace to that of the Brown wizard's. They pushed through the inner gatehouse, to the large outer yard beyond leaving behind the Watchers and the dead Mallorns. They trodded the path as it weaved and wound through the orc warrens and terrible holes of the expansive yard. What this place had once been - a garden and arbor full of grapes and fruits - and what it was now began to

once more erode the Elf's will. The party heard faint, far off cries, sad and forlorn. Maybe it was the land, or maybe there were still individuals trapped in the Necromancer's dungeons within the warrens crying out for a freedom that would never be theirs.

Still, as hoped by the wizard, nothing barred their way.

The outer gatehouse was before them and after would be the bridge over the moat, the moathouse, and then the Fenbridge. It seemed a daunting and unending path of danger and weariness, but Radagast did not break stride, and his encouraged pace bolstered the Company. Their boots echoed through the hollow of the gatehouse and then the moat loomed, barring their way save for the thin span across it.

Eerie mists that glowed with unnatural light was animated above the water and along the bridge. When they had entered, the moat had been covered with the gruesome fog, but it had not grasped at the bridge as it did now. A low, fearful moan filled the air and panic welled within each of the companions – even the wizard took pause.

It seemed Radagast's hopes of a clear path were for naught.

Bandy heard a song start to swell from within the moaning mists. It was distant and beautiful, and he found himself enchanted. The voices called to him and told him of rest and peace and to be forever alive. All he had to do was join them... go to them. The Hobbit moved out of the ring of his friends and started to walk

towards the mists that grasped the edges of the bridge. Finger-like tendrils reached above the span and out towards the small fellow. The young Bracegirdle found he could do naught to resist, even if he had wanted too.

Unknown to Bandy, two of his other companions had heard the cry and were also entranced. Orophin and Rorin both were called and they greatly desired to enter the mist and be with those that beckoned. Even as Grimbeorn reached out to grab the Dwarf, Rorin shoved off the large man's hands and strode quickly to the bridge's side.

Below, the quagmire that was the Dol Guldur moat lay fetid and thick. The candles of the dead shone brightly, and the fog became more luminous.

Grimbeorn's attempt to restrain his companion was unsuccessful and so he was unsure as what to do next. "Radagast, what draws them? Mayhap we knock sense into them?" He looked about erratically, hoping for some inspiration.

Hearing no response and thinking Wizards more trouble than their worth, the Beorning heir tried one more time to grab his Dwarven friend and had success. With Rorin grappled, the large man began to usher him across the causeway.

A few feet away, exhausted as he was, Arbogast's reach was short and he missed Bandy as he strayed nearly to the water's edge. There was no time for words. The Woodman made a panicked grab for the hobbit's hood.

With fabric now bunched in his fist, Arbogast pulled the wool of the cloak. There was a tearing sound of

fabric and the cloak gave way around the fastening pin. Hearing the sound, Arbogast lunged for his Bandy's hand but both were slippery from sweat and grime. Bandy, half-staggering half-sliding, went down the bank. Without thinking, the Woodman launched himself full-length after him, coming to rest in the sloping muck with one hand awkwardly pinning the Hobbit's arm and another firmly gripping a handful of hair. He suppressed a shudder at the look of baleful entrancement on his friend's face, as he struggled to pull him up to safety.

With the Hobbit controlled, Arbogast hoisted him up, as if a child, and ran across the bridge.

Esgalwen saw Orophin, lost in grief, teetering towards the foul swamp. Her mind raced for a way to reach her friend, to call him back from his deadly course. The words of an old song came to her; words she heard once before, sung by the Elf himself. She prayed her voice would not fail her, but the words seemed to fumble from her mouth.

Orophin pushed past Esgalwen, her hands slipping from the grasp on his arm. The Elf did not hear her words! He walked towards the edge of the bridge, even as Grimbeorn wrestled Rorin to the far end, and Arbogast the young Hobbit.

The Silvan Elf did not jump, he fell forward - his face and chest smacking into the stagnant water below. The motion of his body caused the mists to billow out, but then the tendrils quickly closed back over where he fell, like a terrible hand. Esgalwen only saw the morass, green and fetid, before Orophin disappeared within. But before the mists enclosed his fall, she saw grizzly,

undead faces looking up from below the water - the flesh of their mouths drawn back in horrid dead grins, and each seemed to glow with an eerie white light.

*Corpse Candles*, she thought, her mind racing back to the tales of the Dead Marshes and the Will'O Wisps that were said to haunt the region.

With the mists covering where he had disappeared, the Dúnadan saw only two choices - jump in after him or leave him behind. All her other friends were safely across the causeway – there was none left to aid her. Only Radagast stood near, but the wizard's face was contorted as if in shock, while he seemed to wrestle with some greater challenge.

The horror of the dead faces made her decide. "You shall not have him!" she cried out to the swamp. Dropping her pack, Esgalwen unsheathed the blade at her side and dove in after her companion.

"Esgalwen, no!", cried Radagast as the Ranger disappeared off the bridge.

And then she was gone.

The wizard stood alone on the span, looking over the edge into the swirling mists. Save for the initial splash, and a following swish of water, no other sound was heard.

Now on the far side of the bridge, Arbogast and Grimbeorn could feel their charges returning to themselves, shoving against their grip and asking what and why.

"Rorin, someone, rope!" cried Grimbeorn, unsure if any could help. The Beorning rushed to the edge of the fell waters – his friends somewhere below.

Arbogast spared a glance at Rorin and Bandobras, but both were still listless from the violation of their minds. The Dwarf was carrying what little rope the fellowship had brought with them – they came to sneak into a fortress, not climb a mountain – but there was no time to shake him into alertness. Instead, Arbogast drew his dagger and sliced through the bottom of his pack, letting the contents spill out. Mercifully, the coil of rope was there.

He quickly handed one end to Grimbeorn and the two men ran out onto the span. Letting the larger man brace himself and prepare to pull, Arbogast went to the edge of the bridge, as close as he dared, and strained to listen over the sound of his own heavy breathing for the slightest sound of motion in the mist.

*Surely, he thought, surely, they will stir the muck. Surely, I will hear...*

Bandy stared blurry-eyed and disoriented into the distance, as if he had been rudely awakened from a comfortable dream. He found himself now shivering with both a chill and a fright, in a fog with no knowledge of where he was. The Hobbit slowly turned his head to see Rorin standing nearby, also in daze. *Where are the others?* A sudden fear gripped him, “Arbogast! Esgalwen!”

Looking about, he saw Arbogast and Grimbeorn on the bridge working frantically with the rope. Grabbing the Dwarf hard with both hands, Bandy shook him as hard as he could, “Something is wrong Rorin! We must help!”

“What are you doing? Tie it on your waist and get in there!” said Grimbeorn. “Two tugs and I’ll pull you out!”

The look Arbogast returned the Beorning spoke more eloquently than mere words ever could – “you wade into the fetid swamp if you so keenly seek a restless death!”

Yet the son of Beorn was right – alone of all the fellowship still retaining their senses, he was mighty enough to pull more than one clear of the mire.

Arbogast nodded and lowered himself to now sit upon the bridge’s edge, axe drawn and rope about his waist. His bellow of “ESGALWEN! OROPHIN! ANSWER IF YOU HEAR ME!” was like a battle cry, focusing his courage and setting his trepidation to flight.

Rorin awoke to his hobbit friend shaking him by the shoulders and yelling frantically. He felt as though he had slumbered for a week and had no recollection of where he was, or why. As his will slowly became his own, once more, the Dwarf began to unravel the frantic scene before him. The hobbit was pointing at Grimbeorn at the edge of the bridge, and Grimbeorn was barking orders and bracing himself while holding a rope. On the span’s edge sat Arbogast, and Rorin could hear the man yelling at the water below to both the ranger and Elf.

Realization struck him like his maul, “Bandy! Help the wizard with whatever he should need! I must lend my hand to Grimbeorn.”

With that Rorin charged out to where the stood Grimbeorn, and he took up the slack in the rope. Glancing over the edge, the Dwarf saw the faces in the

water and for a moment they enticed him, like old friends waiting to welcome him home. He shook his head to clear the thoughts and he saw them for the horrific evil they were. Rorin braced his feet and tightened his grip on the rope, his determination redoubled.

“I know not the plan, friend, but say pull and that is what I will do,” Rorin grunted to Grimbeorn.

The compulsion to do something, anything, sent Bandy scurrying to the Wizard’s side. But what was he supposed to do? Too small to help Grimbeorn and Rorin, he felt helpless and useless. Tears welled in his eyes even as he drew his sword and cried, “Radagast! Do something! You are the only one who can save them from this sorcery!”

Bandy moved as close to the edge as he dared and brandished the sword at the hideous, twisted faces below. Words tumbled from his mouth that he little understood, although faint memory was there of hearing them from Orophin. “In the name of Elbereth, release my companions!”

The companions now looked at the Brown Wizard and dismissed him as unhelpful, but he had not been idle. While the chaos unfolded upon the causeway, Radagast murmured low unintelligible words while slowly raising his staff towards the foggy sky.

Warding.

The company needed warding from the evil that was upon them.

But the spell was not easy in this place that held so much awful evil power and hate.

There came a murmur of songbirds within the hellish nightmare of Dol Guldur. From seemingly nowhere, birds began to alight upon the staff and each added to the song, growing louder.

Around them, the companions could see the mist rising off the water, topping the causeway, and reaching out. Even as they tried to save their friends, the relentless mire exuded its power to ensorcell them all, once more.

Arbogast stared at the water, afraid and unsure, while in his mind whispered words pleaded for him to fall. Grimbeorn heard them say to let go – release his friend to the comforts of the mist. The undead were striving once more, but above all was the bird song. It cleared the thoughts and bolstered their hearts. The song overcame the call of the undead.

Things then transpired rapidly.

The wizard suddenly called to Esgalwen, scattering the birds, as if he were aware for the first time. He looked on in horror as Arbogast prepared to jump into the water below, while beside him, Bandy pleaded for his aid.

Recovered from his *spell of warding*, the wizard rushed forward in a speed that belied his age and

pulled Arbogast back from the edge. “DO NOT TOUCH THE WATER!”

Reaching down, he struck the surface with his staff. There was a blinding flash, magnified by the fog, causing all who saw it to cringe at the light’s intensity. The fog, like a solid object, was blown away from where the wizard stood – the air now fresh around him. The marsh water where his staff had struck had turned to icy glass.

The silence was broken by a mournful howl, even as as Radagast stepped down onto the ice, and then quickly reached into the mire. The Dúnadan women appeared at the surface, her leather armour held firmly in the wizard’s frail hand. The companions could see incorporeal hands pulling at her body, choking her throat, and cruel nails digging into her flesh. Her skin resembled grapes that had been left too long on the vine, the dried out and shriveled.

With a strength that none could believe, Radagast pulled her from the water into his arms, stepped back up onto the causeway, and in long strides had her across the bridge where they both crumpled to the ground.

For a moment stunned silence ruled them all, even as the dark twilight of the swamp returned. Then, a ripple emanating from the tower of Dol Guldur rolled through the fog. The companions realized that there had been a light – a pure light – that had surrounded the wizard, but now it was gone. Instead, the pale, green glow of the mire returned and intensified. From behind them, they heard a single bell toll somewhere within the High

Keep. Next came the howl and screeches of unknown horrors.

The little candles that had previously hovered just under the water now moved – unhindered by the wizard’s magic. Like fireflies, they rose above the surface revealing long, slender forms. Some were dressed in flowing robes of silk, others geared as if for war in ancient and forgotten styles. Each turned to stare at the companions on the causeway, even as more lights rose from the waters around.

“It is time we go,” came the stern voice of Grimbeorn. He knew that it meant abandoning Orophin, but there was naught else they could do. They needed to get off of the causeway.

With a defeated nod, Arbogast and Rorin agreed. The trio began to walk, even as Bandy cried out, “We can’t leave! We mustn’t go!”

“Come, Hobbit,” was Grimbeorn’s terse order. “He is gone!”

With tears streaming down his cheeks, Bandobras Bracegirdle ran to the safety of his larger companions. Behind them, the shades followed with ill-intent.

They moved at a fast step and finally felt the soggy earth under foot, on the opposite side of the bridge. Arbogast turned back to see if the ghouls followed, but they had stopped a few feet from where the water met the land. In his head, they beckoned, but he shook the voices away. Maybe it was because they were once more near the wizard, though he lay prone, or perhaps they had reached the edge of the undeads’ influence. Either way, he was firm in his belief that the only threat

near them now was what *living* may come across the bridge.

The Woodman knelt by Radagast and reverently lifted him from where he had fallen. The Brown Wizard was ancient beyond the reckoning of Men and his body was like a bird's – bony and deceptively light beneath his voluminous robes. As gently as he could, Arbogast handed him to Grimbeorn, "Bear him well."

Pausing for only a moment to cut himself free of the rope, Arbogast turned next to Esgalwen. His heart lurched as he beheld what the malign spirits of the swamp had wrought on the woman's body. He doubted that much could be done for her, but he must try. "Bandy," he said, "have you a little wine to bring strength back to her limbs?"

Without waiting for a reply, he crushed some strong-smelling herbs between his palms and rubbed the resulting paste under her nose and inside her cheeks. Then he set himself to trying to rub some warmth back into her skin. He looked up after a few breaths, hoping to see some trace of Orophin emerging from the fog. Instead, he only saw the spirits and ghost-lights begging their return. "By the light of the Lamp, you shall not have her!"

The companions felt the sudden weight of the marshes upon them. They knew the land to be oppressive and dismal, but in the wake of the wizard's actions they now felt the full volume of malice and hate. A dark presence was aware of them. Each companion in his own mind felt as though they stood naked and alone upon the

shore of the bog. The dark petty thoughts they felt earlier were nothing compared to the despair now felt in their souls.

“He knows.” The words escaped weakly from Radagast’s lips and his eyes fluttered open. He looked up at the Beorning who still cradled him in his arms. “I am well enough now to walk, Grimbeorn.”

The warrior lowered the old man to his feet and made sure he was once more sure-footed, with staff in hand, before he let go. Radagast nodded in thanks, and then said, “I have revealed myself and He knows that I am here. Come, we must redefine the meaning of haste or be caught here, in His realm and destroyed. I pray I have not doomed Greenwood to the Shadow, in my rashness. Through the outer gate quickly, lest we be overpowered in the swamp, or we find the Fenbridge held against us.”

The Woodman looked at the woman – to his eyes she appeared neither living nor dead. Bandy forced the wine between her lips. She coughed. She moved.

“Rorin,” Arbogast cried, “help me carry her! Bandy, Grimbeorn, run! Run! Alas for Orophin, but we must flee or perish!”

“Move! I will follow behind!” said Grimbeorn, hefting his axe. He waited until they were all moving and set off trailing the group, but not before giving a silent missive to his lost friend.

In her mind, the nightmare continued.

She was underwater and there were things around her. No - not things, people. The maligned spirits of folk that

had once lived and died here or were forsaken in this place. They floated around her, clawing and gnashing with teeth that were bared of any flesh. The hungry eyes desiring her life energy, even as they stole that of Orophin.

### *The Elf!*

The thought of her Silvan friend came once more to her mind and she saw him - he was laying on the bottom of the moat, the weeds and water plants wrapped around his arms and legs, like hands clutching his body to the ground. He was drowning... or maybe he had drowned, for he did not struggle. The lights of the undead surrounded Orophin, making him glow softly, even as they drew from him every ounce of his life energy, consuming it for themselves.

Esgalwen wanted to scream. What had she thought she could do? Why had she jumped? Her feet were snagged, of a sudden, by the vine-like plants of the moat. She was being dragged down!

The Dúnadan woman screamed then. Her mouth filled with the putrid waters and she wanted to wretch, but her body could not. It heaved on its own, trying to breath as her lungs filled with water. She knew she was dying. The lights were now all about her, and in them were faces of the damned. They closed in and began to consume her.

Of a sudden, a sweet taste entered her mouth and she gave out a croaking breath, and then a terrible cough. The ghosts faded and the friendly, concerned faces of

Arbogast and Bandy took their place. The Woodman was horrified at her appearance – drawn and aged, as if he held a woman of seventy-plus years. With Esgalwen showing signs of life, Arbogast called for Rorin to aid him in carrying her. The tortured look on her face made the Woodman pause, fearing that she might be lost after all. But then, with each breath, her body began to slowly transform back, as if the stolen life force was returning.

Scooping her up, he and Rorin ran with Bandy and Grimbeorn close behind – the wizard leading the way.



Esgalwen looked back over the shoulders of the two friends who carried her, at the horrible bridge. The vision that she saw caused her once more to give a

scream. The shriek caused the hair on Bandy's neck to stand.

"NO! BY THE VALA, NO! HE WAS NOT YOURS!" she cried to nothing there.

But in her mind, he stood on the bridge. A sentinel now to this place, to watch for and draw in victims of his own. He wore the armor of his kin of old, but Esgalwen knew him and he would haunt her for the rest of her days.

## Epilogue