Fanfic of Azraeos's original fic. Fem!Harry. Harry, through the selection of the Valar, is plucked from her home world and dropped in Middle Earth to complete a task that will ultimately help the Fellowship save Middle Earth. Hopefully, what she learns in Middle Earth will help her defeat Voldemort with the least amount of casualties.

Notes

Alright, ya'll, this is going to be the only AN. I don't own anything, blahblahblah, this story is cross-posted at FF.net, and all that other good stuff.
It was a dreary July day at No. 4 Privet Drive. Not to say that it wasn't usually unpleasant – it was normally boring and depressingly ordinary – but this particular day was increasingly dreary. This was in part because the Dursleys were in a remarkably nasty mood, which was taken out on Harry, and also because it was raining cats and dogs, which meant Harry couldn't go outside to get away from them even for a few hours. All in all, it made for a most unpleasant morning so far, and looked to continue into an even more horrid afternoon.

She was lying on her back on the rickety cot with her hands folded beneath her head, staring up at the whitewash ceiling. This was the position she had assumed every day for three weeks straight when she first returned to Privet Drive that summer. When not doing whatever frivolous chores her aunt assigned her, she was holed up in her room, agonizing over the awful end of the past school year.

After her furious fit in the Headmaster's office, Harry was all raged out. When she had the chance to think back on it, her anger frightened her. It made her brash, irrational, the very same trait that had her rushing forward and getting Sirius killed. It had her violently destroying what were clearly valuable possessions of Professor Dumbledore's when she just couldn't hold herself back anymore. Irrational and destructive; that reminded her too much of Voldemort for her peace of mind.

It was only after Moody of all people had unceremoniously grumped his way into her room one day – Dudley, oddly enough, standing hesitantly behind him – and gave her a firm shaking, did she crawl back out from her misery. Mad-Eye gave her a proper talking to, going on about the uselessness of moping, how she should realize how much harm she was doing to herself if the Dursleys had noticed, and how she should cheer up since the Ministry – in response to the confirmed return of Voldemort – had made an amendment to the under-age magic laws, lowering the age limit to fifteen instead of seventeen. He then tossed what looked like a wind-up cat toy at her, barked, "practice your aim!," and stomped off without a backward glance.

That last bit of at the end of the lecture had perked her right up, almost making her feel guilty of how elated she was when she was just so recently miserable.

Harry had then thrown herself into practicing her magic within the relative comfort of her room. Her aunt and uncle had turned a disturbing shade of white when Harry had gleefully told them of the new laws. Vowing to herself be less angry and vindictive, she took pity on them and placed silencing charms on her door, window, and walls so they could delude themselves into believing nothing had actually changed. All the same, she took to doing the indoor chores with Gertrude's Grimoire of House-witchery in one hand when the Dursleys weren't around.

It was the little things like that that had her steadily returning to her normal self. She received letters from her friends, especially Ron, going on how they were so relieved she was starting to feel better again and mentioning what their current favourite spells were and how to do them in case she wanted more spells to play with.

"Isn't it wonderful how much further along we can learn now that we can practice magic at home?" Hermione had squealed in a letter she had charmed to read the contents of the missive out-loud, much like a Howler but without the shouting. It was like Hermione was sitting right next to her, talking. "I found this marvellous charm in Enchantments for the Impaired and Incapacitated just this morning!

'Oh, Harry, you must give it a try; I stuck a copy of the instructions in the anthology maker I sent as
well. It's got this rather odd set of movements, the most difficult I've ever done, so it'll be great practice. Any defensive spell with awkward movements will seem more simple afterward. I know I feel the spells in Standard Book of Spells, volume 6 are easier now."

So practice, Harry did. After merging all her old school books – that anthology maker was really something else, she'd never misplace a textbook again! – she skimmed through the text, looking for useful spells she might have missed before. She even pulled a Hermione by owl-ordering the seventh year set in advance to look over while she went through the various little spells she was picking up from whomever was writing her that day. Anything to distract her from wallowing again.

At the moment, while she was stretched out on her bed and staring at the ceiling, Harry desperately wanted to go outside. It figured that on the day she really fancied herself a nice, long walk, it would be pouring down like it would go on for forty days and forty nights. Maybe she ought to send a letter off to Hermione for a spell to build an ark if it came down to it.

Dimly, she noticed that at some point or other, someone had plastered a hole up in that ugly ceiling. The paint looked less white and more drab in that spot. Probably a result of an accident involving Dudley and his old – now mangled – toy musket. Harry was about to lean over to pry apart the loose floorboard under the bed, when she heard a tapping sound. Immediately, she looked towards the window, assuming it was an owl delivering a letter.

There was nothing there.

Confused, Harry looked about her room, curious to find the source of the noise, but to her frustration, she couldn't pinpoint its location. She cocked her head to the side, trying to listen to the direction it was coming from. The only clue she received was that it seemed somewhat hollowed, as though whatever it was, was being tapped from inside something. Like a cupboard or a wardrobe.

Tap-tap. Tap.

Harry strode towards her wardrobe and yanked it open, half expecting Dobby to fall out and tell her that they were playing hide-and-seek, but there was nothing there beyond her hung-up clothes. Maybe Dudley was learning Morse code?

TAP. Tappitytap. Tap. Tap.

The noise continued on for quite a good bit of time before it gradually died away.

Harry was quite certain that, whatever the sound was, it was most likely of a magical nature; her luck over the years would hardly allow it to be of any other origin. On the off chance that it was Dudley suddenly deciding to learn Morse code, his attention span wouldn't have allowed him more than five minutes at it before he discarded it for another venture and that thing had gone on for at least twenty. In conclusion, it was either a magical creature or some type of magical object.

Perhaps it was her old pocket sneakoscope? Perhaps after a few years the magic runs out of the thing and it starts tapping to get your attention so you could recharge it? Like a magical battery, maybe. Somehow, Harry found it hard to convince herself.

Another hour passed.

Harry spent the time reciting the twelve uses of dragon's blood, the ABC's, the times table, reading her Divination books of all things, and whistling a tune that she made up on the spot consisting of six notes in various placements. It was only when she was contemplating singing the Greek alphabet to the tune of 'Joy to the World' that Harry realized the sun had peeked through the cloud cover.
It was no longer raining!

Resisting the urge to whoop like an idiot, Harry quickly donned a pullover that was previously draped over the back of her desk chair. Just before bounding out of the room, she doubled back to grab the umbrella she remembered seeing shoved at the back of the closet as well. Couldn't hurt to be prepared after all. Harry went down the stairs as fast as she could without sounding like an elephant, and just as quickly went back up them again.

Wouldn't do to forget her wand.

Now armed for battle against Mother Nature, as well as any dark wizards that could be lurking about, Harry stepped across the threshold of Number 4 and briskly walked out. Sweet freedom at last!

As she rounded the corner, she took a moment to fluff her feathery pageboy hair in the moist air and take a good sniff. It smelled fresh and dewy and English. The soggy grass beneath her sneakers only served to provide Harry's nose with a more natural scent. Jarringly, she was reminded of Hogwarts. Which was rather odd, as Private Drive had never done *that* before. There was nothing artificial about Hogwarts. No pollution, no muck, only nature and magic, and Harry found it surprising that the after smell of rain should make her feel that way.

Mentally giving a shrug, she ambled down Private Drive and into Magnolia Crescent. She only remembered when he got there that this was the very street where she'd first met Sirius.

*Sirius.*

Ruffling her hair again and rubbing her face to clear her mind of any unpleasant memories that were fast clogging up, Harry turned towards her favourite swing in the park, the one she always went to sit and think in. It didn't occur to her that the swing might still be wet from the rain, and that her bottom would be soaked to freezing if she sat on it. Well, at least that's what *would* have happened, if a tapping noise didn't distract her.

TAP. Taptaptap. Tap. TAP.

*There it is again!*

Harry froze in mid-step. It was louder this time. A *lot* louder. Amplified almost. Almost like it was tagged by a *Sonorus*.

TAP-TAP-TAP-TAP-TAP!

Harry spun around. She was sure she'd heard the sound right behind her. She peered at the empty space warily, not seeing or sensing anything. It could be someone with an invisibility cloak, she supposed, but she wasn't certain. Just to be sure, though, Harry rushed forward at the empty air, hoping that if anyone *was* under an invisibility disguise, they would be too surprised to move out of the way, and so Harry would run into them.

There was nothing there.

Harry stood with an arm outstretched in front of her, feeling a bit stupid.

'*Of course it isn't someone with an invisibility cloak,*' She thought to herself, still peering about nervously. *What sort of person can make a sound like that?*

Maybe it wasn't a person?
More than a little jumpy at this line of thought, Harry tried listening to the direction of the noise, but this time it seemed impossible to find its location, let alone its source. It seemed to be coming from everywhere at once, it was so loud. She wondered why no one was sticking their heads out of their windows to investigate. It was what the residents of Little Whinging seemed to be good at, spying. Why was no one else trying to find it?

Then it hit her! What if she was the only one who could hear it? It would certainly explain why the Dursley's hadn't complained about the noise when it first started up. They couldn't hear it. Maybe only wizards could hear it? Maybe it was a similar sort of thing with the entrance at the Leaky Cauldron, where wizards could see it but muggles couldn't.

But what was it?

Harry noticed what it was, was getting progressively faster. In fact, it was now so fast that it almost sounded like one continuous drone. And on top of that, a wind had picked up. The sort of wind that came just before –

*Crack! Shhhhhhhhhhhhh!*

Wonderful.

It was raining again.

In fact, it was *pouring* again.

Harry considered putting up her umbrella but decided against it. It was now raining so hard, with the wind whipping around so much, that Harry's clothes were immediately soaked through and she could hardly see anything through her rain-splatter glasses. She considered putting a water-repelling charm on her glasses but immediately tossed the idea; she was in a place were muggles could see so it would still be illegal.

Harry kept on ear on the noise, which now sounded more like one long perpetual moan. Her ears her beginning to really hurt. It was like standing right next to an amplifier with metal music blasting away. It was as though the sound was right in her ears. She wouldn't be surprised if they started bleeding soon.

Harry dropped the umbrella, abandoning any pretense of caring about getting wet, and sank to her knees in agony, clapping her hands over his throbbing eardrums. It did nothing to lessen the intensity of the sound! It was like whatever it was, was inside her!

She cried out in pain. Harry didn't know how long it had been since she fell, but she wished and pleaded and begged for it to stop.

And suddenly, miraculously, it did.

Hesitantly, Harry released her grip from her ears and brought her hands to push herself up into a sitting position. Her breathing was shallow and wheezy; she must look like a drowned rat.

She took a moment to catch her breath when something off caught her attention. The wind was still blowing, making the swings fail about on the normally squeaky chains but Harry couldn't hear anything. Not the heavy rainfall, nor the sound of the wind, nor the rumble of lightening in the distance. Nothing! It was like someone had just turned the sound off of the world.

Harry looked about with renewed misery. She could only hope this was only temporary and that Madame Pomfrey could fix it when she returned to Hogwarts.
And then, something touched her shoulder.

Harry cried out in surprise, jumped up and twirled around, whipping her wand out of her pocket as she did so.

Standing in front of her was Remus, a look of concern on his lined face, his hands held up in a sign of non-aggression. Just a bit behind him was Tonks, who looked equally concerned and a bit wary. His mouth made the motions of speech but to Harry's dismay, she couldn't hear anything.

"Remus?" she tried. She could feel her vocal cords vibrating but she still couldn't hear anything.

Remus appeared to speak again, Tonks seeming to add in something as well, but Harry could only shake her head in frustration.

"I can't hear anything!" she said, pointing to her ear, pretty sure she had spoken a bit more loudly than socially acceptable. She hoped she didn't sound as desperate and hysterical as she felt.

Remus frowned, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth. Tonks looked bewildered. Remus tried communicating again, this time with hand gestures. Eventually, Harry discerned that he was trying to tell her to put her wand away. She hadn't even notice that she had practically stuck it in the man's eyeball.

Harry nodded, and was just about to pocket it when she had a sudden suspicion. What if they were Death Eaters on Polyjuice?

"What's my Patronus form?" she asked suspiciously.

Remus smiled and quite distinctly mouthed, "Prongs."

Harry sighed in relief and pocketed her wand. Just as she was pushing off of the ground, the sound started up again, even more loudly and agonizingly than before. She screamed at the sudden pain, and roughly fell back to the ground, not even trying to block her ears this time. She just let the scream rip out of her.

It was as if someone took a knife and shove it into her ear canal! Just before she slipped into darkness, she registered Remus' and Tonks' looks of shock and panic as they bent over him. Her last thought was, 'I guess I'm not deaf after all.'
"Calm down, dear boy," Dumbledore implored, laying a soothing hand on Remus' tense shoulder. "She's fine now, just a bit worn out. Madame Pomfrey assured me that Harry will be completely fit to move about again the moment she wakes. Now, can you tell me what happened? From the beginning, if you don't mind."

Remus, Tonks and Dumbledore made an odd trio as they were gathered around the hospital bed of the unconscious Girl Who Lived. The former pair had arrived at the school in a state of high agitation, Remus especially. They had pounded through the halls, Harry slumped within the werewolf's arms, paying no mind to the startled portraits left in their wake that had rushed off to inform the Headmaster of their arrival.

Now the Hospital Wing was filled with an oppressive air. Harry looked small and fragile as she laid bundled up on the cot that had unofficially been declared hers. She looked almost sickly under the flashes of lightning that lit up the sky at random intervals, the only warning of their presence being the rumble and crackle of thunder. The rain had yet to stop pouring since Harry and her rescuers had arrived at Hogwarts.

Remus took a deep breath. "Alright. Tonks and I were positioned in our places. I was sitting on the wall outside Harry's house and Tonks was standing across the street next to a car." Dumbledore nodded. He managed to imply with that single gesture that he understood what Remus was saying, and also to urge him to continue. A typical Dumbledorish mannerism. "Then Harry came out of her house, walking towards Magnolia Crescent, and we followed her."

Tonks continued, "She started acting kind of odd." She looked to Remus and he nodded in agreement. "She started looking a bit agitated not two minutes into the walk. The weirdest part was in the park when she just stopped in mid-stride and started looking around as if looking for something even though there was no one else around. Then she suddenly ran in forward with her arms outstretched in front of her, like she was trying to catch something."

"Hmmm." Dumbledore stated, and Tonks and Remus looked towards him, searching his face for any tells.

"You know something, Albus." Remus stated.

Dumbledore inclined his head slightly. "I don't presume to know anything. But I could suppose that Harry might have heard a noise or something of the like that compelled her to assume that a potential danger was nearby. Hidden under an invisibility cloak perhaps." Dawning looks appeared on the two younger wizard's faces. "And then? Was whatever it was that Harry was looking for caused her to collapse?" Dumbledore prompted.

"Right, right. It wasn't, actually," said Remus. "Anyway, it started raining rather heavily; it was a bloody gale out there! I could barely see for the cloak was sticking to my face – "

"Knew we should've stuck water-repelling charms on them earlier," Tonks interrupted, grumbling. 

"Ahem," Dumbledore coughed, eyes twinkling. 

Tonks flushed. "Right. Sorry Remus."

"Anyway," Remus stressed, with a half-hearted look of admonishment in Tonks' direction. "It was pouring by the buckets but Harry just stood there, still looking around. I see now that she must have
been looking for someone but at the time I had no idea what was going on. What could have been so out of the ordinary at a regular muggle park?"

"Certainly not three wizards, two of which were under invisibility cloaks," Dumbledore said, a crinkle in the corner of his eyes. Remus grinned sheepishly and Tonks sniggered.

"Yes, of course. As I was saying, er, after looking warily around the park, she clutched her ears as if she was in pain. It must have been a considerable amount of pain since she dropped to her knees and cried out. That was when Tonks and I reached her. Harry seemed to have gotten a hold of herself though and stopped screaming already. I grabbed her shoulder and she – "

"She went completely mental, that's what! Jumped around faster than I'd've thought she could, and had her wand pointed at us faster than a tic. Nearly poked Remus's eye out. You should have seen her face, Professor, she looked . . ."

Dumbledore's eyes grew apprehensive. "What do you mean, Nymphadora?"

"Well, she looked so scared."

"Terrified more like." Remus amended.

"Then what happened?"

"We tried telling her to put her wand down," Tonks continued. "but she told us she couldn't hear anything."

Dumbledore's entire countenance grew wary. "You say she couldn't hear anything?"

"Yes," Remus said. "Whatever could have caused that, though?"

The headmaster didn't answer for a while, allowing the build of tension and suspense to accumulate among his younger Order members. Nevertheless, when he finally did provide an answer, it was decidedly anti-climatic: "I haven't the slightest idea." Dumbledore chose to ignore the looks of unamusement on his younger colleague's faces, "and then?"

"We did a security question" Tonks continued, placing her hands on her hips, and looking uncomfortable. "but then, after she realised we weren't Death Eaters and put her wand away, she fell to the ground and started screaming again! I would've sworn on my magic that she was being held under the Cruciatius if I wasn't standing right in front of her. It was just horrible, sir!"

"And then she lost consciousness." Dumbledore guessed.

"Yes," Tonks and Remus answered as one.

"Hmm. Quite the conundrum. I will have to think further on this."

"Albus, you don't think it's anything to do with Voldemort do you?"

"I do not believe so. While I'm sure he would delight in Harry's pain and lack of hearing, that is not reason enough to go through the trouble of long-distance magic that would have to be dreadfully overpowered to reach through the wards on Privet Drive. And Severus has not reported any plans involving incapacitating Harry in the near future.

"Nevertheless, I will stew on this dilemma. Hopefully Harry can tell us something when she awakes. In the meantime, why don't the two of you stay and watch over her. After all, you are still on Harry
duty, you know."

The young wizards blinked. "Er, of course, sir," said Tonks, puzzling over the abrupt end of conversation.

"Well, I must be going then. Good day to you Remus, Nymphadora." He nodded cordially to each in turn and swept out of the hospital wing, leaving behind two frustrated, yet oddly relieved wizards in his wake.

Dumbledore allowed the pleasant expression on his face to slip away as soon as the door to the hospital wing was closed. Instead he adopted one of overwhelming worry; an expression so unlike Dumbledore to display that if anyone was to walk by at that moment they would be convinced that it wasn't the venerable headmaster that was leaning against the double door entrance of the hospital wing, but a trespasser in disguise. Luckily for Dumbledore, no one tended to be around much during the summer holidays, not even many of the teachers.

The Headmaster sighed tiredly, and made his way down to the basement, or more specifically the kitchens. It was a bit out of the way, and he could have sent for an elf in his office, but the walk helped him think. And he might meet Severus along the way, which, while not a necessity, would be an added bonus.

As he stepped into the kitchens, politely ignoring and declining the looks of adoration and offers of various foods – though he did accept an egg custard – he asked the delightful little creatures for some hot chocolate and marshmallows – his favourite drink when he wished to sit and think. Then he backed out of the suddenly stifling kitchens and their eager to please occupants, and made his way to his office. Unfortunately, Severus had not made an appearance.

"Snicker-doodle," he told the gargoyle and it jumped aside even before he'd finished saying the password, recognizing him as the main inhabitant of its office, of which there were several; namely the Sorting Hat, Fawkes, and the portraits of all the previous headmaster's of Hogwarts, though the portraits were unlikely to be using the main entrance any time soon.

Dumbledore made his way up the moving, spiraling staircase and into his office. While formerly full of a cornucopia of odds and ends – and indeed, many people would still claim it was full to the brimming – Dumbledore now found his office rather bare, considering that almost quarter of his knick-knacks – all the ones that had been the nearest to Harry at the time – were destroyed. But while their lose inconvenienced him, he didn't hold anything against Harry for that. Indeed, he was actually rather thankful that her towering rage had not been taken out on those in the room that could feel pain; he'd rather not know what an exploded limb felt like. All in all he understood well what the pain of grief could force people to do.

Dumbledore settled his hot chocolate on his desk before walking towards the Sorting Hat and plucking it off the shelf. It was time for a little chat. Seating himself in his squashy desk chair, he took a large gulp of his drink, and plonked the patched old hat on his head.

"Well, then, what's this? Bit of a change of pace, isn't it? I doubt you'll be wanting to be sorted again, Albus."

"Hello, Hat. I was hoping you could help me. I have a bit of a problem."

"Ah, yes, Miss Potter again, isn't it? Isn't it always these days? Yes, I was wondering if you were going to ask me about this."

Dumbledore would have frowned if the Sorting Hat had eyes to see it. It was becoming entirely too
smug nowadays, probably from knowing it was in the rare position to receive information that no
one else was privy to and that no one ever censored themselves in its presence, even if they knew it
was there. Really, it would make the perfect spy; if only it could move about by itself.

"Really now, Albus, that wasn't very nice."

Dumbledore felt a rare flood of chagrin. "I can hardly stop myself from thinking my own thoughts,
rude or polite, can I? And it's not as if the thought was unkind in of itself; you could take it as a
compliment that all trust you so implicitly that no one would think to keep their words to themselves.

"In any case, it was not my intention to malign you. That wouldn't get me very for in asking you
about what you know concerning Harry would it?"

"Understandable, understandable."

"So, you know something then? Remus' description of the event sounded vaguely familiar but I was
worried something of greater circumstance would occur before I could properly identify the
situation."

"Yes, of course. Wizards in the time of the Founding Four often tried to experiment with it."

"They actually –?"

"Oh no, nothing like that. No, they never managed to find out how it works. None who attempted to
understand it ever figured out how it worked. All they knew was that it fixated on specific wizards,
and hoisted them away."

"Were those wizards ever seen again?" Dumbledore asked, dread in his tone.

"I'm not really sure. It wasn't a topic that was discussed particularly."

"So there is something you aren't privy to?" If voices could twinkle, Dumbledore's would have been
doing so. In any case, his eyes were doing it for him.

"Humph!" said the Sorting Hat.

"I apologize, Hat."

The Hat pouted for a few moments before it sniffed. "Apology excepted."

"Now, tell me everything I don't know."

"I'm sure the sum of everything you don't know could fill several books," the Hat quipped. It
appeared to be making itself comfortable on Dumbledore's head. Just this was indication enough to
the headmaster that it was settling in for a long discussion. "Of course I'll tell you, no use it keeping it
to myself is there?"

Dumbledore had the brief thought that the Hat might keep somethings to itself to keep itself entertain
before he regretted the thought.

"Really, I'm not so petty as that. This is hardly a subject to be taken lightly."

"I'm sorry, Hat."

"Don't be stupid Albus, you have nothing to apologize for this time." Dumbledore felt rather like a
chastised child who'd just gotten caught with his fingers in the cookie jar. "I am over a thousand
years older than you," The Hat responded, knowledgeably.

"You were saying?" Dumbledore prompted.

"Alright then, fine. Really, I hardly talk to anyone all year, the least you can do is accommodate me somewhat." Before Dumbledore could answer, the Hat began: "Where was I? Right. Well, as you know, the phenomena picks a certain wizard or witch – "

"Never a muggle?"

"Of course never a muggle! You might as well ask if Rowena's quill ever sends an acceptance letter to a muggle child. They aren't physically capable; they wouldn't survive the process. No, it's always a magical person, though I admit it isn't a common thing. It actually happened twice in Godric's time, the second time to a very good friend of his too but for the life of me, I can't recall anyone ever saying his name.

"Of course, Merlin was leap-frogging about all the time as well, so many mistook the phenomena with that."

"But you doubt it?"

"Certainly. The events leading up to the disappearances were too similar to be mistaken for any other cosmic occurrence, especially Merlin's personal brand of reality hopping."

"Did anyone have any idea as to where and why the chosen were taken?" Dumbledore sounded like he'd wanted to ask that question for a while now.

"Nobody knows why they were taken. Perhaps they were in the wrong place at the wrong time? Or perhaps fate ordained it from the moment of their births? I don't know. As to where they were taken? There were several theories."

"Being?"

"Well the first theory explored the idea of a space-time warp. Could take you to any particular location in time and space."

"You mean a distant galaxy."

"Not exactly. More like an alternate universe or an alternate dimension, if you like. I believe they study something like that in the Ministry of Magic."

"For certain they do. But they never do get very far in their pursuit."

"Albus!" said the Hat, sounding both shocked and grudgingly admiring. "You've been digging into unsuspecting people's minds again. For shame!"

"Why, thank you. I do like to keep on my toes. Now the other theories?"

"Right. The other theory that was widely accepted amongst those in the know is that it takes you to an exact location, an exact alternate dimension."

"You mean only one."

"Yes. There are most likely thousands, if not millions of alternate universes. But this theory focuses on their only being one, mostly likely because the same thing happens every time the wizards disappear. But you already know about that, what with the Potter girl going through the same thing."
"You don't believe there is just one?" Dumbledore's voice was filled with curiosity.

"No," The Hat stated, bluntly. "I happen to believe – from what I'd garnered from conversations I've eavesdropped in over the years – it is more of a whirlpool between the fabric of realities, rather than just a gateway from this dimension to another."

Dumbledore sighed.

"I know it will be harder to keep track of the girl this way Albus, but you probably will. There's never been a challenge you haven't mastered yet. And you can't interfere!" said the Hat at once. "It will come for her, and nothing will stop it. She will be taken, and there's nothing you can do to stop it. Even you aren't as powerful as one the mysteries of the universe."

"But you just said that I could master it."

"Yes, but only after the act is accomplished. You will get her back, Albus. I have faith in you."

"You're so certain she will return."

"With you looking out for her? Oh, without a doubt."

"But there must be something I can do now."

"Well . . ." said the Hat hesitantly.

"What is it? You know something you aren't telling me."

"Now you know what it feels like to be everyone else when they're talking to you."

"Sorting Hat!"

"Alright, alright, take all the fun out of my life," The Hat paused. "I suppose you could place some sort of beacon on her, perhaps a tracking charm. It's a place to start."

"Of course. And if that doesn't work, I presume I can always track her with a treasured object?" The Hat grew silent. "Thank you, Hat."

Dumbledore stood and returned the frayed hat back to its perch. Grabbing his now cold chocolate drink, he made his way out of his office; the curious portraits not even pretending to be asleep. In fact, most of them looked rather annoyed. Dumbledore inwardly chuckled. They hadn't been able to hear his conversation with the Sorting Hat because it was internal. He would probably be getting a lot of disgruntled complaints in the days to come.

Dumbledore stepped onto the escalator, knowing to prepare himself for the jump off. Just as he reached the back of the gargoyle he shot off to the side and ungainly stumbled into the secret doorway concealed with disillusionment charms. Straightening his hat and reminding himself that he had nothing to blush over, as no one was there to see him go from powerful wizard to staggering idiot, he proceeded to step through the door, which closed with an ominous sounding clunk behind him.

"The hospital wing." Dumbledore intoned distinctly, and the room spun. No one knew that the headmaster could travel to any cupboard in the school through this room. It acted rather like floo powder, except without the messy grates and tight squeeze of the fireplace. After a few seconds of dizzy whirling, the room grew still and Dumbledore walked out of the same door he'd come in. Only the view had changed.
Instead of seeing the moving staircase and the back of the stone gargoyle, Dumbledore observed the interior of the hospital wing supply cupboard. Taking care not snag his robe on any potent potions – he didn't even want to think of the consequences of that – he opened the door of the cupboard just a smidgeon and eyed the room as avidly as he could through the thin slit. He spotted Remus and Nymphadora chatting quietly by Harry’s bed with their backs turned to where he was hidden. Giving a small sigh of relief and thankfulness, Dumbledore carefully and silently stepped out of the cupboard and then closed it gently behind him.

Dumbledore waved a hand at himself until he could no longer see the hand that waved or his body, and turned to the direction of the hospital door. Opening it as softly as he could he stepped out into the corridor, making sure to shut the door behind him. He took a moment to remove the invisibility charm and compose himself.

Really, all these secret doorways and sneaking around were beginning to mess with his head. He felt like he was still a student, taking an illegal stroll out of hours in the corridors. Not that the Sorting Hat had been any help with discouraging those kinds of thoughts from his head either, what with the way it scolded him earlier. Sometimes one hundred and fifty years of life felt entirely too young, when everything else in your vicinity was a lot older.

Opening the door again – this time making certain to create the believable amount of noise – he stepped in. Remus and Nymphadora immediately turned towards him.
"Professor Dumbledore, sir, good thing you came now, Harry's just starting to wake up."

"My timing is impeccable as always then. Tell me Nymphadora," he began, and the pink-haired young woman bristled visibly. Albus knew you shouldn't tease the young lady so but she reacted so amusingly. "has anything unusual occurred while I was gone?"

"If by unusual you mean other than a bit of mumbling in her sleep, then no."

"Very good then."

"Professor Dumbledore?" said a tired sounding voice.

"Harry, don't try to sit up yet."

"Remus? Is that Tonks too?" Harry looked at the two older wizards. "Where am I? Why can't I see anything?"

"Sorry Harry," Remus leaned over Harry's bed and retrieved her glasses.

'But of course,' thought Dumbledore. 'The glasses would be perfect. She would rarely ever take them off and they would go with her everywhere.' He would have to put an unbreakable charm on them also, to make sure they didn't shatter. He wondered if turning Harry’s glasses into a portkey, and then activating said portkey when Harry reached the other world would work, but he immediately dismissed that idea. He wasn't sure if portkeys worked between worlds.

"Is that better?"

"Yes, thank you, Remus."

"If you don't mind I would like to speak with Harry alone for a moment."

Remus and Tonks nodded in assent before standing up and walking out the door. As they passed Dumbledore, he told them: "Come back in half an hour or so, Remus, after you two collect Harry's
things from her relatives house."

"Most of my things are already in my trunk," Harry chimed in. "but I have some stuff under a loose floorboard under my bed as well."

Albus nodded agreeably. "In the meantime I just want to clarify some things with Harry." He probably shouldn't have said that last sentence because Remus looked at him oddly, but what was done was done, and nothing could change it now. "Good afternoon, Harry," he said after Remus had shut the door.

"And you." The girl looked pinched and pale, her normally disorderly mop of curls now doubly messy. She swiped her fringe out of her eyes and squinted at him. "I suppose you want to know what happened."

"You mean when you heard an extremely loud, suspicious noise, which caused you to temporarily lose your hearing?" Dumbledore asked innocently, allowing himself to enjoy the expression of shock and bewilderment adorning the girl's face.

"H-how did you . . . ?" she said, stuttering a little. "Then you were there? You heard it as well?"

"Not just so." Dumbledore responded. A puzzled frown crossed Harry's face. No doubt she was trying to work out the proper meaning of the word in its context.

"What do you mean, sir?"

Dumbledore sat on the chair beside Harry's bed, and pored steam from his wand and into his now hot chocolate. "I mean that I wasn't actually there, and therefore I heard nothing of the sort, but that there have been accounts of what happened to you occurring all through time."

"There have?" said Harry, looking surprised and relived all at once. "So, what happened, sir?"

"Ah. What is still happening," began Dumbledore, observing Harry's unhappy expression at the word still, "has not happened in some time. It is something that is so mysterious, so complex, that even the greatest minds wizardkind has known thus far know little to nothing about it."

"I'm sorry, sir, but could we skip the prologue and get to the gist?" asked Harry, sounding annoyed, having long ago run out of patience for his dragged out way of speaking.

"Tell me, my girl, have you ever heard of the term Alternate Reality?"

Harry looked thoughtful, biting her lip. "You mean like in the movies?"

Dumbledore smile affably. "I have not seen any muggle move-ees, but perhaps if you can describe to me what you believe the term is, I could confirm or deny the claim."

"Well, it's like when there are different worlds alongside this one, isn't it?"

"I couldn't have placed it better myself."

Harry looked a bit apprehensive as she prepared to ask her next question. "What's this got to do with me, though?" she asked in a voice that gave away her bad feeling of the answer.

"Harry," Albus began gently. "That sound, the wind and rain, that lightning that you saw, and your lack of hearing, which, thankfully you've gotten back, is all a result of a space time-whirlpool choosing a person and opening up to take that person into another world."
There was silence for the longest of minutes. Harry sat there trying to process the thought of being sucked into a large black hole type of thing, and never being seen again. "What do you mean it chooses a person?" she finally asked.

"I mean that you have no choice in this and you cannot stop it; it will follow you. It will take you to a different world. And it's best if you don't try to fight it, it will be less painful that way."

"What?!" Harry said, aghast, her mouth falling open a bit. "Professor! Can't we do something?"

"I'm afraid there is nothing to do. Merlin himself was carried off in one of these things. Your best option would be to ride it out, from what I've heard of the phenomenon."

"And that's it?" Harry asked incredulously. "I'll be taken away, all by myself, all alone?"

"You'll be taking necessities to help you along, of course. We'll hardly let you go off with nothing but the clothes on your back, will we? Your trunk and your wand will be going along with you to be sure, and I'm sure we'll think of plenty of other helpful things that will be of use.

"In fact, I don't think that the Ministry of Magic can trace underage wizardry into different worlds, so you'll hardly be defenseless if you do fall into a spot of trouble. It might actually do you some good to get away from the pressures of this world; just think of it as a holiday."

Harry stared at Dumbledore as if she'd just realised that the headmaster was nuttier than a port-a-potty at a peanut eating contest.

"H-holiday?" she stuttered, sounding slightly on the edge of hysterical. "I won't be on a holiday, sir, I'll be stuck forever in some god-forsaken place with only my trunk and my wand –"

"Don't forget Hedwig," Dumbledore interrupted, jovially.

Harry just stared at him. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

"Harry, in this whole conversation have you ever heard me use the word 'forever' or any other term that implied eternity?" Dumbledore looked at him through the top of his glasses. "Hmm?"

"Are you saying I can come back?"

"Of course. I will bring you back. And to make sure I can trace you, may I please have your glasses for a moment?"

Harry took off her glasses and handed them to Dumbledore, who murmured something and tapped them twice with his wand. He gave them back to Harry, who placed them on his nose.

"Now that that's done you ought to prepare yourself, it will come for you soon, I imagine. Don't look so panicked, child," said Dumbledore soothingly, after seeing Harry's expression of horror. "Everything will be fine, you'll see. In the meantime . . ." Dumbledore raised his hands and clapped twice, and to Harry's surprise a house elf popped into existence on the other side of his bed.

"Headmaster, sir, be clapping for Twinky?" said the house elf in such a high-pitched voice, that it stung Harry's currently sensitive eardrums.

"Yes, thank you for your promptness, Twinky." Harry was even more surprised to discover that house elves blushed.

"What can Twinky be doing for you, sir?"
"If you please, Twinky, could you fill as much food and drink as you can into this?" Dumbledore held up what looked like a small moneybag. It wasn't at all eye-catching; in fact it was rather drab. "It has been charmed weightless and has been enchanted with a respectable space-expander, so you should have no problem fitting in at least a barrel of food and drink into it. Feel free to squeeze as much as you can in there."

Dumbledore handed the pouch over to the elf, who took it reverently, and disappeared with a small pop. "Now all we have to do is to sit and wait for Remus and Tonks to come back with Hedwig and your things. I daresay your relatives will be surprised when they see who's at their door."

Harry couldn't help but grin at the thought of that scenario. Then the discomfort of the looming unknown drifted back in. "Sir?"

"Yes Harry?"

"Where is it going to come for me? Will it wait until I'm outside again or will it blast through the ceiling or something? Maybe I should go onto the grounds where no one will be around? That lightning will be a serious bit of dangerous."

Both of Dumbledore's eyebrows rose in surprise, adding another few wrinkles to his already creased forehead. "You know, my dear girl, I hadn't actually thought of that. But now that I am thinking about it, I would say outside is the best place. We wouldn't want Remus to spot you and try to interfere, getting himself killed in the process, do we?"

Harry's mouth dropped open, a look of apprehension appeared on her face. "Is that actually possible, sir?"

"Most certainly, Harry; there have been accounts of it. This portal, this vortex, whatever you want to call it, was created for you, and for you alone. Anyone else trying to enter it will not survive the experience."

Just then a small pop heralded the return of the house elf.

"Your pouch, Headmaster, sir. Twinky is filling it with foods and drinks and putting them in stasis so they stay good for very long time."

"Thank you very much, Twinky, you did splendidly." The little elf blushed again before stuttering her thanks and disappearing.

"Well then Harry. I think you ought to get ready; we don't exactly have a schedule for this. When Remus and Nymphadora return I'll put the bag of food in your trunk then I'll teach you shrink it so it'll fit in your pocket. Less cumbersome that way. After all, we don't really know where you're going, do we? It's better to be prepared."

Harry gulped.

Dumbledore tilted his head slightly. "Ah, I think I hear them coming down the corridor now."

Bickering voice could be heard, growing louder by the second. "All I'm saying is that you should have made it last a bit longer. I mean he's only going to be stuck as a cockroach for fifteen minutes. I'd have done it for at least thirty."

"I shouldn't have done it at all; he's still Harry's uncle. Not to mention, I flouted the law for the baiting of muggles or whatever it's called."
Tonks burst out laughing. "Never thought you'd be one to lose your temper, Remus."

"Oh shut up, he had it coming."

The two wizards appeared at the doorway.

"Wotcher, Harry! Here ya go. Took awhile convincing your relatives to let us in, but Remus here managed to persuade them."

The ex-professor blushed ever so lightly. He pointedly avoided their amused looks.

"And how exactly did you do that?" Dumbledore peered at Remus through his half spectacles. Remus muttered something about "under my foot" and that was all Harry understood.

"I'm sure I didn't here a thing," Dumbledore told him, apparently fascinated by a stain on the wall opposite him.

"Er, right." Remus said, looking extremely uncomfortable and relieved at the same time.

"We'll just go then, Professor," said Tonks placing Hedwig in her cage next to Harry's trunk. Then she took Remus's arm and pulled him out the door.

"Right, back to business then." Dumbledore used the summoning charm and Harry's trunk and Hedwig (screching in her cage) came soaring towards Dumbledore and came to a rest by his knees. Dumbledore opened her trunk and placed the pouch carefully into a small compartment. Then he let Hedwig out of her cage, shrunk it, and placed that in the trunk too.

"You never know what you might need the cage for," Dumbledore explained to Harry's questioning look. "Now then. To shrink, you simply tap it with your wand and say Substrictus Minimus. To expand, you tap it twice with your wand and say Dilato Maximus. Do you understand?"

"I think so, sir."

"Excellent! Have a go at it then."

Harry stood from where she had been sitting and took up her wand. She successfully did the shrinking charm on the trunk and was about to attempt to return it to it's regular size when a thought struck her. "Sir, what about Hedwig? Won't she get hurt going into the vortex thing?"

Dumbledore tilted his head again and peered consideringly at the ceiling. "That's a very good question. If she doesn't mind I can put her in your trunk, with plenty of air of course. You can release her upon your arrival."

Both wizards turns towards Hedwig, who had an expression of deep mistrust on her face.

"What do you say, Hed? I promise you won't be uncomfortable. At least, not for too long." Hedwig hooted grudgingly, then shuffled across Harry's bed – a bit wonky-like. Owl talons really weren't meant to traipse across squishy mattresses– and came to rest by Dumbledore, who opened the trunk and gently placed Hedwig within. Then he closed the trunk and shrunk it again.

"I've placed a cushioning charm in there as well. If you suffer any bumps along the way, she won't be able to feel it. Speaking of, would you like me to place one around your person?"

"That's probably a good idea, sir." Dumbledore tapped her on the head with his wand and the next thing Harry felt was something like pillows pressing up against her on all sides. "Thanks, Professor."
"Not at all, Harry. Not at all."

Harry smiled awkwardly and began fiddling with the sheets beneath her hands. She absently thought the sheets were especially soft today and maybe she could get a wizard's tent and fill it with comfortable bedding in case wherever she ended up didn't accommodate inter-dimensional travelers. In fact, it was highly lightly they wouldn't, so she should really try to find a tent soon. Perhaps the Room of Hidden Things would have one.

She really didn't want to ask the next question she had flicking through her thoughts, but she didn't exactly have a choice if Dumbledore was right about that thing not leaving her alone. "I suppose I should go now?"

Dumbledore sighed wearily, looking more old and tired than Harry had ever seen. "Yes, you probably should." He rose from his sitting position, and offered Harry a hand. Harry took it. "I'll make sure no one follows you. Good luck, Harry Potter," he said, and with a small, secret smile and a twinkle in his eye, walked out of the hospital wing.

Harry took a deep breath. "Right then." She stood from the bed, stretching as hard as she could. She was stiff all over even though it didn't feel like she had been unconscious long. She walked over to the shrunken trunk and picked it up and pocketed it along with her wand. Even though she knew of the Cushioning Charm, she hoped Hedwig wasn't being tossed about in there.

She drew a shaky breath, wondering if it would delay the arrival of the thing if she took a much needed trip to the nearest facility. Probably not but Harry didn't exactly have much of a choice in the matter; it was either go to the loo or suffer an embarrassing situation later on in another world. She had sudden thought; what if wherever she landed didn't have bathrooms? Dumbledore had called it a time-space vortex, hadn't he? What if she landed during the fourteenth century in a different country? Shuddering with the potential disaster, Harry made her way to the Hospital Wing lavatories.

After taking care of her business, Harry quietly stepped out of the hospital wing and made her way to the seventh floor. She traversed through the empty halls of the school as quickly as she could, the knowledge that the vortex could rip through the castle and steal her away, unmindful of the damage it would do to the school, had her bounding forward at almost a run.

When she reached the hidden room in the seventh floor corridor, she immediately flitted about, grabbing everything that could be of possible use, including a thick, black robes-and-traveling-cloak set she had seen last year when she first discovered the Room and donned the outfit with alacrity; they were charmed with temperature regulators and would be comfortable to wear in both the hot and the freezing. Adjusting the wide-brimmed wizard's hat of a matching color, she then searched for the tents she had thought about earlier.

It turned out that the Room was in stock of several wizard tents that had been lost over the centuries that were all eye-catching and ridiculously larger on the inside. Harry lost herself momentarily in the speculation of who would ever need a crumbling citadel-style tent with ten bedrooms, six and a half bathrooms, a reception area, a sitting room, a dining room, a kitchen, a spiraling staircase, and a dungeon of all things! If someone were to go to all the trouble of such an elaborate set-up, why not just make it a house to begin with? Why did none of these tents come in humble, one bedroom cabin?

Harry decisively picked up a more modest – if modest could be used in conjugation with such an excessively done up thing – medieval jousting tournament-style tent with a large main room that doubled as sitting room and dining room, two bathrooms, a cozy kitchen, and four sleeping areas elevated off the main room on raised platforms with privacy insured by heavy curtains, mentally snubbing her nose at the rich tossers that had the money to be laid-back enough to lose such
obviously expensive merchandise. Served them right that someone else would be able to put them to better use without picking up the most ostentatious of the lot.

Then again . . .

Harry's eyes flickered back to the citadel tent; it really was an impressive spread. It would most likely end up that she would be living in the tent when she got to wherever it was the black hole thing would take her since, she doubted they would accept Galleons there, and she hardly had enough galleons on her for a place to live anyways. Her inner penny-pincher reared it's head; if she was going to live in a tent, why not make a really nice tent? What if she ended up making friends and needed a place for them to visit? What if she made enemies and needed a place to lock them up? And the pots and pans in that fancy kitchen were really good quality; she always liked to have a nice crockery set when she cooked.

The crack of thunder and lightning from the outside the window across the hall startled her out of her thoughts. Harry poked her head out from the Room and saw that the clouds were churning faster than before. Now was not the time to contemplate real estate. She rolled up the tournament tent and shoved it into her robe's inner pocket while climbing up onto the window's ledge.

"Hermione's not here to stop me now," Harry whispered gleefully while glancing about the corridor once again to make sure her bookwormy friend had not been summoned out of thin air at the mention of her name. Without pause, giving herself no time to second guess, the green-eyed witch threw herself out of the seventh floor window, into the stormy, open air, mounting her broom and whooping like an idiot along the way.

Harry flew her way to the outskirts of the Forbidden Forest. In the gale-like winds, she felt as if she was treading water deep under the Black Lake. She found herself near the outskirts of the grounds faster than she had anticipated and made to hide in the Forbidden Forest when she suddenly changed her mind and doubled back to go to the Quidditch pitch instead. Hagrid's hut had been in immediate sight, what with it being right next to the Forest, and she had noticed smoke coming out of the chimney; she couldn't risk the half-giant seeing her being taken and rushing to her rescue.

The Quidditch pitch was a much safer bet; if anyone were to look at it from the castle, they wouldn't be able to see her on the ground, since the wooden stands rose for twenty meters in the air all around the oval field. Also, the additional concealment of the house banners and house towers made for a thicker coverage as well.

Harry touched down near one of the scoring poles, and leaned against it, unshrinking her trunk for a moment so she could pack away her broom once more. She straightened her shoulders and waited at the ready.

It was as if the vortex could read her mind for the clouds immediately began churning and swirling faster. The rumble of thunder shook the ground where she stood and lightning flashed once more, not far from where Harry was standing.

Then it began.

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

Harry's entire body stiffened with a mixture of apprehension and excitement. Harry knew without a doubt what was coming next. And sure enough:

C-crack! Shhhhhhhhhhhhh.
Little by little, and bit by bit, the tapping grew louder and less disjointed and the rain continued to fall heavier. The howling wind picked up, ruffling her clothes to extreme proportions. To be on the safe side, Harry pulled her inner shirt tightly around the trouser pocket where she had her wand and trunk, and tied the loose excess into a knot on the other hip. She then carefully did up the rows of buttons of her double breasted travelling robes and drew her cloak around herself more tightly.

The sounds of the storm continued even louder, but not as ear-achingly painful as before. Harry remembered Professor Dumbledore telling her that if she didn't fight it, all would go smoothly, and it certainly looked that way.

Thunder rumbled heavily directly above her. In the split second it took Harry to snap her gaze from her muddying boots to the sky, a lightening bolt exploded jolted down from the clouds and struck her head on.
An Inauspicious Meeting

The first thing Harry became aware of was that she was freezing. She wasn't just rather cold, the kind of cold one would feel after standing in the rain for a goodly amount of time and was possibly developing a cold, no, instead she felt as if she had been turned into a popsicle that had been pushed to the back of a cavernous freezer and had long since been forgotten.

She opened her eyes in an attempt to discern where she was. Cutting her gaze about, she appeared to be lying in a frozen tundra with temperatures distressingly in the negatives. With her breath turning to frost not two inches from her lips, Harry was sure she'd never felt so cold before in her life. But as she focused on the bone-chilling temperature around her, she realized she wasn't shivering, which was certainly a very odd thing.

In the back of her cold-numbed mind, she vaguely remembered reading somewhere about getting so cold that you couldn't move your limbs, and Harry desperately prayed this was not the case. Her robes and cloak were supposed to be good even in extreme temperatures but she doubt the makers had experimented on how useful it would be in a place like Antarctica. She tried flexing her fingers and toes, but there appeared to be no awareness left in them. Commanding herself not to panic, she experimented a bit with her arm as well. The relief she felt when her limbs began responded once again was hard to describe.

Thinking quickly, Harry rolled into a ball and tucked her arm up under the front of her shirt, curling them together in the valley between her breasts, hoping that whatever heat was left in her body would warm her fingers enough for her to properly use her wand. It took a while of wiggling them about but she was eventually fully confident in their maneuverability.

She pulled up the side of her robes and blouse-y inner shirt and pulled her wand from her pocket. Then she began feeling for her shrunked trunk; she discovered it lurking low in the deep pocket brushing against her mid-thigh. Letting out a sigh of relief that all her important luggage managed to make the trip with her, she decided to keep the trunk tucked away. It was too cold to let Hedwig out of the trunk in any case. Once she managed to get to a safer, warmer location, then she'd think about it again.

Sometime during her search for warmth, Harry had closed her eyes again. She cracked opened once more a black-clouded sky, with eerie metallic green tints. It was snowing. Harshly. It was also extremely windy. Harry hadn't felt any of it because her body was so numb. Harry also discerned – with pooling of cold dread in her stomach – that she couldn't hear again. She briskly discarded the concern since she'd gotten back her hearing rather quickly before. Actually, what with everything that had happened – had she really been struck by lightning? – she thought it was a miracle she was still in one piece. She shifted a bit and felt a slight weight on her face; goodness, she still even had her glasses!

Slowly, painfully, Harry sat up in a crouch, using her left hand to balance and palming her wand on her other at the same time. Not for the first time did she realize how lucky she was to be a wizard. With growing satisfaction, she conjured a globe of green flames to float directly in front of her, even as she settled back down to sit on her rear. Never had she been so thankful that magical fire did not require wood.

After almost fifteen minutes of waiting, she began to wonder why she wasn't warming up, as she knew the fire to be extremely hot, what having made four training dummies that had surrounded the fifth that was on fire explode into ashes before. After several accounts of trial and error, she realized her problem and the reason why she wasn't dead from the cold – which she had been wondering
about. It was all because Dumbledore's cushioning charm was still in effect, protecting her from the elements. Feeling peeved at wasting time waiting for an ineffective fireball to warm her, she consoled herself by reminding herself that at least she didn't have to worry about developing hypothermia or frostbite.

Harry felt very grateful to Dumbledore then, and not for the first time began wondering if the old man had somehow known about Harry's destination beforehand.

Closing her eyes, bracing herself in expectation of the extremely biting wind and coldness, Harry counted to three before pointing her wand at her stomach.

"Finite Incantatum."

Immediately, the harsh, bitter wind flooded her senses and she started shivering madly. Conjuring four more globes of green flames in a circle around her, she settled on getting warm. Ten minutes of rubbing her flash back to life and sighing in relief, she didn't feel the cold at all. In fact, it was getting a little too warm for her liking, so she dispelled two of the five flames while unshrinking her trunk, pulling out her precious Firebolt. She determinedly ignored the pang in her chest when she remembered that Sirius had been the one that had given her the broom.

With swift economical movements, Harry re-shrunk her trunk and tucked it away once more. She decided to keep Hedwig inside, not willing to release her until she flew to less colder conditions.

With a negligent sort of wave of her wand, Harry dispelled the remaining three flames; a heavy-duty warming charm on her robes on top of the temperature regulators already on them would serve her better at the moment. After making sure there was no residual fire anywhere, she shoved her wand up her sleeve and buttoned the snug cuff so it wouldn't have a chance to fall out. As she did so, her hearing rushed back in full force. Harry cried out as the extra loud burst of whistling air and howling wind bombarded her sensitive ears.

Trying to ignore the throbbing of her eardrums, Harry clutched her Firebolt to her chest and proceeded forward. She'd be best off walking until the wind let up a bit before she tried flying.

She'd only walked about five meters when her right foot fell through empty air. Hastily jerking back, Harry tried peering through the blizzard, but she couldn't see beyond one foot in front of her. He knelt down and reached out with her hand, feeling icy snow and jagged rock beneath her palm. She inched forward ever so slowly until she felt nothing but air under her hand.

It came to her abruptly: she was on some sort of cliff, a mountain ledge perhaps. She could have walked right off of it! Of course, she had the Firebolt, and her reflexes were legendary, but it was still a disconcerting that she hadn't known that she was so close to plunging to her death.

"Graggh, why me?" Harry rocked back on her heels and tried to think about what to do. If she flew through the blizzard then she might fly head on into another mountain, or get blown around in circles, and if she flew downwards, she might crash into a protruding ledge, or even the ground. And she had no particular desire to stay on the blistering, biting mountaintop either.

This was going to take some serious planning.

Eventually, Harry had an idea that might work. It required shooting hot blasts of air from out of her wand to clear the falling snow in front of her, giving her a clearer line of sight. Unfortunately, it also required her to fly extremely slowly, something she was not keen on, but she had no other choice; she had to get off this mountain soon. She needed to release Hedwig so she could eat and Harry knew her owl would be in a right proper mood once she was out.
She mounted her broomstick and whoosh, off she went. It worked beautifully – despite being tossed about like a rag doll in a washing machine – and about an hour later she was out of the blizzard and away from the mountain.

Harry found herself looking down on picturesque landscape. To her left there appeared to be a bush of a forest. The vegetation there was denser than right below her, where a few trees dotted the, rugged, hilly landscape. To her far right, Harry could just make out what looked like a black tower sticking straight up in the air. It looked ominous, the textbook perfect example of what the home-base of a tyrannical over-lord looked like, and Harry decided not to fly that way at all unless some cloud cover obscured her. Unless directly confronted, she wanted nothing to do with the forces of evil; she had quite enough of that at home, thank you very much. Behind her were yet more forests, and in front of her was what looked like a chain of exceedingly tall mountains extending both left and right as far as she could see.

The world she got dumped in didn't appear to be too bad; in fact it looked positively peaceful if you ignored the resident bad-guy taking up air over in the corner. Harry wondered if there were any intelligent creatures here and if they spoke English. There would have to be even if they didn't speak English if that black tower was any indication. She also pondered on whether the world was entirely muggle or magical, or both. If it was muggle, she would have to hide her magic, since there was no use in scaring the inhabitants. If it was magical, then she would fit right in.

Hopefully.

Harry plunged straight down to the ground, laughing and whooping crazily. If she was to be stuck in an unknown world, at least she could have some fun. She could forget about everything when on a broom, and she loved it. The wind in her face, on her stomach, pleasantly somersaulting with the tilt of her broom, the wondrous, rapturous feeling in her heart as she tumbled through the sun-drenched atmosphere and left behind all problems and responsibilities and became Harry, just Harry.

Eventually, Harry landed on a low ridge crowned with ancient holly trees whose gray-green trunks seemed to have been built out of the very stone of the ground. Their dark leaves shone strangely and their berries glowed an ominous blood red in the light of the setting sun. Now that Harry's euphoria of flying was over, she felt a bit nervous. What did she really know about surviving in the wilderness? Yes she had sustenance, and even a place to sleep, but what about wild animals? What if there were some magical creatures here that wouldn't be bothered by her stunning spells or impediment jinxes? She didn't know any wards; she would have to sleep with one eye open. Or maybe she could get Hedwig to watch over her. Owls were night creatures after all.

Speaking of which . . .

"Dilato Maximus!"

Harry opened her trunk and was nearly bowled over by a white ball of fluff that shot out into her face, hooting angrily. How long had she been on that mountain?

"I'm sorry, Hed, I was unconscious." Hedwig bit Harry's nose with her beak. "Ouch! I tried to hurry. I'm sorry, all right? Merlin!"

Harry watched as Hedwig shot into the air and whizzed around angrily. "Don't be like that! It's not like I purposely kept you in there as long as I could." She'd never seen Hedwig so puffed up in fury before. Hedwig screeched sharply at Harry knocked down several leaves and even some branches during her enraged flight. "I'm really sorry, Hedwig. You know I never like keeping you locked up. Why don't you come down? I'll give you some water. I have some of you favourite treats in here as well," she tempted.
Hedwig appeared to consider her request before swooping down to land on her shoulder. She ruffled her feathers a little pompously and settled on glaring at Harry with her large, yellow eyes.

"Come on now, Hedwig, you know I'm really sorry," Harry implored as she rummaged through the food pouch and gave her some water from a flask. "You're my only friend in this place. We have to stick together."

The snowy owl hooted softly before nipping her ear, and Harry knew she'd been forgiven. "Do you want you treats or would you rather go look for something fresh?"

Hedwig took off into the air. She remained within Harry's sight for a good five minutes, before disappearing into the setting sun. Harry hoped she'd come back soon. She really didn't fancy being alone in the dark in a strange world she knew nothing about.

Only ten minutes had passed since Hedwig left, and the light of the sky was grayer now, when Harry first heard what sounded like the wings of an impossibly large swarm of wasps. Bewildered, frightened, and wondering if this were a common occurrence in this world, Harry stood up from her seat on a boulder she had found and thought about casting the disillusionment charm on herself. She immediately did cast it a few seconds later when she spotted a flock of the biggest crows she had ever seen fly overhead. For whatever reason, they gave her an awful feeling; she hoped Hedwig didn't meet up with that lot.

Night had fallen a little while later, by the time Hedwig showed up with half a dead mouse in her beak. Harry herself wasn't feeling particularly hungry, and having to listen to Hedwig gobble down the unfortunate rodent was hardly appetizing. She set to pitching up her tent with decisive flicks of her wand, but all the while wondered if she would be adequately aware of any of the unfriendlies out there, if any showed up. Never had she before wished that she had at least rudimentary skills in warding. Could a disillusionment charm be cast on a tent?

Harry cast the spell on the ready tent and found it serviceable. Circling the area and finding it effectively invisible if one didn't know what they were looking for, she decided that it would keep her camouflaged if anything that ate humans came sniffing around.

Harry was reluctant to take off the disillusionment charm currently on herself – it would be of no use to have successfully hidden her camp only to be caught herself – but she was forced to in the end when Hedwig – not having seen her – turned up and started flying in circles above Harry's general area.

Harry carried the owl perched on her forearm through the flaps of the tent and gently eased the owl onto a nearby wooden chair. The chair, a tall, straight-backed number, was set next to a comfortable looking settee that Harry was planning on using as a bed that night. The tent had sleeping areas but she wasn't willing to explore them until she was absolutely certain she wouldn't need a quick escape during a split second; maybe after she had slept undisturbed through a few nights.

She had just unfastened her cloak when she heard it. Howling! Wolf howling. Loud wolf howling. Implying that they were extremely close! Harry froze, holding her breath, her ears straining.

The howling got louder.

That was close enough! Harry jumped up and snatched Hedwig from her perch, bounding out of the tent, and threw the startled bird into the sky, apologizing fervently as she did. Four swift waves of her wand had the tent shrunk back down and already half way tucked into her pocket. She refastened the cloak at her collar and mounted her Firebolt. Let those wolves try to get her while she was up in the air!
"Come on, Hedwig," she whispered harshly into the dark night. The disgruntled owl flew towards her and perched on the end of her broom, and inched closer until she was once again settled in Harry’s lap and wrapped in the black cloak. Harry cooed at her owl penitently and spent the rest of the next ten minutes scouring the ground from the air in an attempt to find the wolves.

Gradually, the howling dispersed, but Harry still had no desire to get off her broom, she was too keyed up. What if they came back? The ground wasn't looking very safe at the moment. The moon provided her enough light to keep flying around, and Harry snatched that as an excuse to not even think about lighting her wand.

Hedwig eventually flew off to rest in a tree to get away from the constant flying. Harry hoped she herself would soon find a suitable place to hole up for the night, maybe a wide tree branch like Hedwig.

She'd been flying for a while in every which way direction, when she spotted the light of a fire below him. Fire meant people, but people could easily mean muggles; she needed to get out of sight.

Harry gently swooped down and landed on a thick branch in a large, knotty tree, with abundant foliage. The tree was part of a circle of trees that rested on the crest of a small hill, and in the middle of the hill was a clearing, which hosted nine of the strangest looking people Harry had ever seen.

Four of them appeared to be children, but when they spoke, their voices were clearly adult. Harry didn't know what to make of this, so she ignored her curiosity and turned her gaze to the person next to them. This one seemed to be made of hair and metal, and Harry got the distinct impression it was a dwarf, though he was nothing like the miserable fellows Lockhart had conned into dressing as winged cupids. The four other occupants were normal-sized, however, one could not be what Harry would term human. He certainly looked a lot like a human but the fact that he glowed belied his humanity.

The last man Harry was the most glad to see, because he was clearly a wizard. He had the robes, the hat, and a gnarled walking stick that was most definitely a staff. Suddenly, Harry was glad she was raised muggle, otherwise she might have missed seeing TV wizards and would have been fooled into thinking that the old wizard's walking stick was just that. She was especially glad she wouldn't have to hide her magic.

She only hoped that the old wizard’s magic worked at least similarly to her own but being in another world could make short work of that hope.

Harry leaned up against the tree, tilting her ear in the direction of the group. They were talking amongst themselves in a language she didn't understand. It sounded vaguely familiar, like she should know it, but the words just weren't making any sense.

There went her hope of communicating.

Then an idea struck her: If that old wizard – who looked curiously like Dumbledore on a bad hair day – could understand the significance of owl post, she could send Hedwig there with a blank piece of parchment. The old man might recognize that Hedwig was a wizard's owl – if wizards even had familiars here, that is – since she was highly intelligent. Then Harry could get Hedwig to befriend them and . . . it just might work!

Possibly.

Maybe.
She hoped so.

Harry snuggled down against the trunk of the tree and let her eyes drift shut. It would have to wait until morning when both Harry and Hedwig were feeling energetic enough to deal with more trouble.

Wargs had chased the Fellowship through most of the early evening and the new night. To defend themselves more easily from the wolves, Gandalf led the company to the top of a small hill. It was crowned with a knot of old and twisted trees, about which lay a broken circle of boulder-stones. In the midst of this, they lit a fire, for there was no hope that darkness and silence would keep their trail from discovery by the hunting packs. Wolves had those great noses for sniffing after all.

Sleep evaded the anxious group, so they spent the passing calm talking amongst themselves, mostly about mundane things. It was Sam who had gotten such a fright that he accidentally trod in the fire when a great white owl swooped out of nowhere and made its perch on Gandalf's head. For a split second the tired group was too bewildered by the sight of this magnificent bird to do anything but stare in mute silence. That is, until the wizard jumped up with a speed bellying his age, and plucked it off his head. Gandalf held the bird in front of him like a sack full of dung.

The company started when the owl screeched at Gandalf, sounding for all the world as though it were angry with him.

Hedwig had been having an awful day. Her wizard had received unpleasant news that resulted in her ending up stuck in a trunk for a drearily long time and no sooner had she been released from the trunk that she had discovered that the world as it once was, was no longer, and no familiar place could be reached. Then, when she was settling down to sleep off some of the unsettling feelings of disorientation, she had been tossed into the air by her fearful lady at the baying of meat-eating predators that were dangerous to them both. And now, after her wizard had fallen asleep in her perch, after Hedwig had come up with a basic plan to court allies, when Hedwig had thought she had found help for her wonderful but young lady, the help presumed to manhandle her so disrespectfully!

She couldn't help but screech out her frustrations.

"I'm terribly sorry, my dear," said Gandalf, sounding contrite, and, to the shock of the entire Fellowship, placed the bird on his forearm. The Fellowship got an even bigger shock when the owl dropped a rolled up bit of parchment from it's beak, onto Gandalf's face. They didn't know whether to laugh or be concerned at the look of shock that crossed the old wizard's face.

"This is most unusual," Gandalf mumbled as he unravel the paper. "Who sent you then?" he asked the bird, who hooted at him. Everyone watched with bated breath as the wizard skimmed the parchment.

"What does it say Gandalf?" one of the hobbits asked, after allowing the wizard a minute to peruse the note.

Gandalf looked up at them with surprise on his face. "Nothing, my dear hobbit. It says nothing. It is blank."
There was uproar. "Blank? Surely then it is the work of the enemy?" cried Boromir. "Alas that they have found us!"

"No, it is not so," said Gandalf, to the surprise and relief of everyone. "I sense no evil in this bird. I believe whoever sent her to me might be in need of my assistance. This is the feeling I get from her."

"Help? How should we help anyone when we cannot even help ourselves?" Gimli grumbled, glaring at the beautiful owl. "I still say there is something odd afoot."

"Without a doubt. But I do not think it is a bad odd," responded Gandalf.

"This is strange. In all my years I have never seen an owl deliver anything, let alone a blank letter," said Legolas, staring suspiciously at the bird.

"Nor have I. Which leads me to believe that it was a wizard who trained her."

"Saruman!" was the name more than half the Fellowship exclaimed to those words.

"No, he has no power over birds or beasts. But my cousin, Radagast the Brown, has always been able to understand and influence the minds of animals, more so than even I. I fear he may be in danger, if this bird is his."

"Then why was the parchment blank?"

"I don't know, Frodo. That is a riddle to sleep on, I'm afraid."

But no sooner had he said those words than a howl pierced the night. Bill, the pony, wasn't the only one trembling where he stood. The howling of the wolves was now all around them, sometimes nearer and sometimes further off. Shining, demon eyes reflected the light of the fire. Some advanced almost to the ring of stones. At a gap in the circle, a great dark wolf-shape halted, gazing at them. A shuddering howl broke from him, as if he were a captain summoning his pack to the assault.

At his command, many gray shapes sprang over the ring of stones. More and more followed. A great host of wargs had gathered silently and were now attacking them at once.

Gandalf released the owl into the air and strode forward, holding his staff aloft. "Fling fuel on the fire!" cried he to the hobbits. "Draw your blades and stand back to back!"

The hobbits watched from the safety of their circle as Aragorn passed his sword through the throat of one huge leader; with a great sweep Boromir hewed the head off another. Beside them Gimli stood with his stout legs apart, wielding his dwarf-axe. The bow of Legolas was singing.

In the wavering firelight Gandalf seemed suddenly to grow: he rose up, a great menacing shape in the darkness. Lifting a burning branch from the fire he strode to meet the wolves. They whimpered from the force of his power. High in the air, Gandalf tossed the blazing brand. It flared with a sudden white radiance like lightning and his voice rolled like thunder.

"Naur an edraith ammen! Naur dan I ngaurhoth!" he cried.

There was a roar and a crackle, and the tree above him burst into a leaf and bloom of blinding flame. The fire leaped from tree-top to tree-top.

Suddenly there was a startling cry, and out of a burning tree, a dark disjointed shape, big and black, came soaring overhead and disappeared into the night. This frightened the company, for no one knew what manner of creature could ride the wind with speed that fast, and utter a cry so terrible as
to send chills down their spines. Even Gandalf, for he did not realise the company was being spied on, and if it weren't for his burning flames, no one would have.

His fire seemed to frighten the wargs as well, as the whole hill was crowned with dazzling light. The swords and knives of the defenders shone and flickered. An arrow of Legolas kindled in the air as it flew and plunged into the heart of a great wolf-chieftain. All others but one fled; an either very brave, or very stupid wolf rushed towards the Fellowship and with a great leap jumped over Aragorn and Boromir, his intent was the ring-bearer, and he would have ripped him to shreds if Frodo hadn't learned to fly in the last second.

Gimli threw an ax into the throat of the beast as the rest of the Fellowship watched Frodo in horror, struggling in the talons of the great owl.

"We should not have trusted that beast," growled Gimli.

But he was wrong, as the companions discovered a moment later; the owl, with Frodo clutched firmly in her pincers, swooped down and gently dropped him on the ground, then flew to rest on a boulder near Gandalf.

The company didn't know what to make of this, and they looked to Gandalf for guidance. But it seemed even he could not make heads or tails of this peculiar bird, and he joined the others in their staring.

"This is a most unusual owl," he said, to the vexation of the entire Fellowship. "In fact, I am beginning to suspect that it's not a bird at all."

"A shape-changer then," offered Aragorn.

"Quite," said Gandalf, and he lifted his staff and pointed it at the bird. "Reveal yourself!" he demanded, a great power in his voice.

The owl pierced him with a glare.

Gandalf mumbled something and poked at the bird with his staff. It screeched at him, and, to the astonishment of the company, turned its back in a deliberate and obvious dismissal of the wizard.

"Well then," Gandalf humphed impatiently. "I shall have to do it for you." He raised his staff, lining it at the bird, and began to chant.

Before he even finished his verse, the owl spread her large wings and flew over his head, toward a heavy tree limb that was illuminated by Gandalf's fire. The Fellowship turned to watch its progress and was stunned when it landed on the outstretched arm of a black-clad figure, dressed not unlike Gandalf, complete with robes and hat. The odd duo then set to a strange ritual where they cooed, chattered, and rubbed up against each other. Was this another owl shape-changer in its natural form?

Shifting slightly on the branch it was crouched on, it lifted its head and the members of the Fellowship were pierced with the most extraordinary emerald eyes any of them had ever seen, set in a pale face. They were framed with round, thin sorts of apparatuses that sat just in front of the eyes. Black, wavy locks brushed past his eyebrows and fell a little ways passed his chin.

Those who didn't spend much time with elves thought he must be one of their kindred, while the others that did, wondered was sort of new creature now roamed Middle Earth.

The figure straightened to it's full but rather middling height, and as fast as quicksilver Legolas, startled at the sudden movement, strung a bow and let it fly at the stranger, even as Gandalf shouted
"No!"

Just as quickly, the stranger lifted a small stick and, as the missile flew towards his throat, muttered an unknown word. With a *clang*, the arrow struck an invisible shield and bounced off to the side.

There was silence in the clearing for some time after that, until Gandalf stepped forward in an attempt to communicate with the stranger, who was quite clearly now a wizard, no matter how unbelievable the fact. Of course Gandalf had never met two of his brethren, and this deceptively young looking Mage might be one of them, despite the fact that he was led to believe all the Istari were in the guise of old men. Besides, he felt great power in the stranger, but no underlying evil, and for Gandalf, that was enough to trust him.

"I am Gandalf of the colour Gray " he told his fellow wizard. "Who might you be? And what might your level be that you are clothed so? I never knew there to be a Black Istari before.

Harry watched as the old wizard stepped forward and gesture to himself before saying something the language that sounded so familiar but utterly incomprehensible. Every once in a while, a word would stick out, sounding exactly like an English word, but she had no idea if this was because of coincidence or this world spoke a variation of English. In fact, Harry didn't understand anything of what had been happening to her the entire night.

First she saw bunches of the biggest crows and wolves in the world, then she was frightened out of her sleep and nearly burned to death from that old wizard's spell – really, in what way did starting a forest fire defeat your enemies? – then the old man had tried to poke and prod at Hedwig, and Harry had been shot at! With an arrow no less! By a glowing man who looked like he'd been snatched out of a Robin Hood musical! And the arrows didn't exactly disabuse that assumption either. Harry thanked the powers that be that her Quidditch talent derived from natural reflexes; otherwise she'd have been dead with an arrow stuck in her throat right now.

It was in this agitated frame of mind that she concluded that she'd obviously landed in a primitive world whose motto seemed to be *kill first, ask questions later*. And after all that violent trouble, now the wizard was attempting to talk with her? Harry was tempted to behave like Hedwig and dismiss them completely, but she supposed she would have to respond if only to make sure they didn't come at her, swords swinging.

The young wizard shared a sour look with her owl, who was holding herself stiffly on Harry's forearm. Harry ran her fingers through Hedwig's plumage while she wondered how they would have a proper conversation when they didn't speak the same language.

The young wizard tossed her owl into the air and jumped from the branch she had claimed, years of escaping Dudley by any means necessary allowing her to land on her feet with a dull *thud*. Straightening from crouch she assumed upon landing, Harry carefully approached the cautious group, doing her best to ignore the ready weapons.

"Harry," she said, stepping further into the light and gesturing towards herself. It was a starting place at least. She gestured to the older man and tilted her head in question.

The old wizard's face showed a bit of surprise – probably the fact that Harry couldn't understand the language – but he responded none the less.

"Gand-elf," he said, pointing to his chest. Then he gestured in turn to each of his companions, saying their names, and having them bow in response. The dwarf was Gimling, the glowing man was – *snigger* – Legless, and the two muggles were Aragorn and – and . . . Bore-me-dear? They were all strange names, to be sure. But then, Harry *was* in a new world. She told himself not snicker out of
respect of the inhabitants, and somehow she managed it.

The four little people were . . . well, the only names that she could repeat reasonably were Sam something-or-other and Frog-o. As for the rest, he couldn't discern them. The little people themselves all looked so much alike – from their hairy feet to their curly locks of hair – that Harry couldn't hope to guess which was which. Actually, they kind of reminded her of house-elves – which she still had trouble discerning male from female let alone individual names – what with all the bobbing and bowing they were doing.

After the introductions were concluded, Legless, Gimling and the muggles turned to Gand-elf and started talking quickly with him. They sounded irritated, and they kept casting suspicious glances Harry's way. Gand-elf was shaking his head and every so often he too would turn to look at Harry, but understandingly rather than suspiciously. Harry could only hold herself still and look at nonthreatening as she could.

Finally, he beckoned an astonished Harry over, to the obvious protests of the rest of the group. It looked like she and the rest of the group wouldn't be having slumber-parties anytime soon.

Gandalf had been suitable surprised at discovering the unknown Istari did not speak the Common Tongue. That implied that he was not from Arda, which compounded Gandalf's curiosity of him; how did he come to be here, since he was clearly from far away? Then Gandalf's surprise had grown when he realized that the black wizard was even younger that he originally thought, looking like a boy still in his childhood, yet to have his first shave. The appearance of a young man Gandalf could understand, the race of Men would more readily accept help from one that looked as able-bodied as themselves, but what was the use of looking like a child? To deceive the enemy?

Gandalf had never before puzzled out such a riddle.

Timidly, Harry shuffled along and came to stand nearer to the old wizard; maybe he decided to give her a chance? In a flash, Gand-elf raised his staff and pointed it directly at Harry, who could only think she had to be stupid to fall for something like this again. In a great, booming voice the wizard shouted an obvious spell, causing Hedwig shriek and to take furious flight into his face, and Harry to fall over and go temporarily blind.

The next thing Harry heard was a voice asking if she was all right.

"My head's all dizzy," she mumbled, hold said head, delicately in her hands. Merciful Merlin, she felt as if some fool had overturned a Penseive full to the brimming of gelatinous memories into her ear while she had be unaware, and now they were oozing and bubbling around in her brain, trying to go back into a semblance of order, even though they were in the wrong head. And that she could be so descriptive while so mentally water-logged spoke for how alien the new information was.

Wait a minute.

"A bit of dizziness is to be expected," said Gand-elf, looking down at a wide-eyed Harry with kind, old eyes. Harry noted that he looked a bit scratched up around his face and hands while Hedwig fluttered over from where she had been clawing at his hat to land on her shoulder and began preening Harry's hair.

"How did you –?" Harry began, before abruptly cutting off in wonder. "I can understand you now!"

"Yes, yes," said Gand-elf, leaning on his staff, a hand patting at where Hedwig had been attacking. "Though, it is exceedingly odd that you couldn't before."
"What's he saying?" Pippin blurted, looking from one wizard to the other.

Gandalf frowned at the question. "Whatever do you mean? Are we not speaking the Common Tongue?"

"You are," Pippin answered. "The other fellow is speaking something else."

Harry looked about in confusion, wondering why she couldn't understand what the others were saying. She had thought she could suddenly speak the language of this world but maybe it was Gand-elf that had learned to speak English.

"Um," Harry started, drawing the attention back to her. She looked at the other wizard. "What happened?"

"I made it so that you could understand Westron, the most commonly spoken language in Middle Earth. Or," Gandalf amended. "That was my intent. It seemed the spell did not completely succeed. My companions tell me that to them, you are still speaking your own language, while I am speaking Westron. It seems that the only one to endure any change is me, for I understand you perfectly at this point in time."

"But I was the one that was struck by the magic," Harry protested. "Obviously I am being effected as well. I know I am since this flow of speech is unlike how I have spoken before; it's rather unsettling. Maybe as we speak, you are pulling knowledge of my language into yourself so it seems to you that we are both speaking this Wes-tron."

Gandalf hummed in acknowledgment of this theory, stroking his beard. "I did not consider that as a possibility; this has never happened before to any other I have granted the speech of the Common Tongue."

"I doubt you have ever done such a thing to another wizard before; maybe this is common among magic-users."

"You make a valid point."

"Enough of these pleasantries, Gandalf!" burst out the dwarf. "Who is this child?"

"We have yet to get to that."

"Well, get to it then! He could be a spy for the enemy," growled Gimli with ax in hand. "Why else would a child be so far away from civilization like this? And unable to speak Westron? It's a plot to trick us!"

Harry climbed to her feet at the aggressive tone; she didn't want to be unready if she was attacked. An arrow, an ax and two swords immediately followed her ascent.

Harry gulped against a dry throat, eying the steely edges of the weapons, and the steely eyes of their owners, then looked hesitantly at Gand-elf. "It might be worth noting that when you were not talking directly to me, I didn't understand what you were saying. Could you tell them that I don't know what I did to make them so angry with me but I don't mean any harm?"

Gandalf raised a bushy eyebrow at that but dutifully relayed Harry's words. Neither Gimli nor Boromir would be assured.

"He speaks as if an enemy would not make precisely the same assurance!" Boromir roared. "But how else would anyone that's not out to do us ill find us when we are so removed from any village?"
Gandalf translated Boromir's accusation and Harry frowned. The strange mind magic effecting her was tapering off and she began to feel more like herself. "You make it sound like I stumbled onto you on purpose; as if I was looking for you or something. I'd been wandering around this area for almost the whole day and eventually made camp a bit off. I was woken up by wolves howling and decided a tree would be the safest place to sleep until I was sure the wolves had left. I had thought to approach you for help since I'm rather lost but that you lot were camped nearby was pure chance."

Harry huffed as the group of suspicious men did not seemed inclined t believe her. She continued, "I wasn't even going to approach you tonight but it seems my owl, Hedwig, decided that now was as good a time as any."

Gand-elf frowned slightly at her words and focused on the last part. "So, this Hedwig is actually a bird?"

"Er, yes. I mean, what else could she be? She could hardly be a fish, could she?"

Gand-elf looked a little flustered. "Well, we were under the impression that she was a shape-changer . . ."

"Oh, I suppose someone who's never met her might think that but no, Hedwig's just really smart, is all. Is that why you attacked her before?"

"Attack is a rather strong word," Gand-elf hemmed, drawing wondering looks from his companions. "I was merely attempting to make her assume her true form. I realize now that it was for naught."

"Alright, then," Harry proceeded carefully. "Look, I'm sorry, but I really need to talk to you alone."

"Talk to me alone?" Gandalf echoed curiously. He would have assumed that being the only one to understand the other wizard would be privacy enough.

"Why alone?" said Gimli, gruffly, taking hold of the word suspiciously. "You think to lure him into an ambush, spy?"

There was a mumbling of agreement between the two muggles and Legless at this.

"My companions still insist that you are a spy," the Gray wizard told his younger counterpart apologetically.

"I'm not a spy," said Harry through clenched teeth, thinking she'd like to tell the dwarf just where he could stick his ax. "In fact, I don't even know what you're talking about!"

"Just the thing a spy would say!" said Gimli at once.

Harry wasn't entirely certain what the dwarf said but it sounded like an outright dismissal of her protest without even considering it. She turned back to Gand-elf and glared. "I'm not a spy, and I don't understand why everyone keeps insisting that I am. Do you accuse every innocent passerby of spying? And why would anyone want to spy on you in the first place?"

Gand-elf's enormous eyebrows shot up. He turned to his companions and hurriedly spoke to them. Harry hoped it was to tell them to get their heads out of their arses.

Gandalf kept growing more surprised and confused as the conversation wore on. This Harry was a complete enigma and seemed to believe that they were the ones being incomprehensible. From how he spoke, he seemed completely ignorant of the brewing war and of the ring. But how could that be?
An awkward silence followed, with neither side knowing how to continue the conversation with violence taking part.

Harry sighed and said, "I have to talk to you about . . . well, about wizardly matters, alright?" The little people looked scared when Gand-elf translated this. Harry paid them no attention. "If you choose to tell your friends about what we talked about later, you can, but I'd like a conversation free of interruption."

The group waited with an anticipatory build up of tension as Harry left Gand-elf to ponder her words. She stalked to the other side of the clearing and made her way behind a large boulder. If she had looked behind her at that moment, she would have seen the wizard verbally restraining the group. As it was, Harry was spared that offensive sight and few seconds later Gand-elf and Aragorn joined her behind the boulder.

"Why's he here?"

"Aragorn has been elected to stand watch over our conversation and he would like to know what you find so important to tell me. I trust him not to be overtly troublesome. Also, he would have your magic stick." Gand-elf gestured to Harry's right hand where Harry was tightly clutching her wand.

Harry's grip redoubled it's efforts. "I'm not giving him my wand!"

Gand-elf looked at her sternly. "Remember, we do not know you. These are troubled times. And it is only for safekeeping. We saw the potential your magic unleashed when you conjured that shield. If that little staff helps your power along, then we, as a whole, only have the right to take it from you during your questioning."

So basically, Gand-elf was telling Harry that there were more of them then there was of her, and that it would be beneficial to her health if she gave his wand up without complaint.

What choice do she have?

Reluctantly, Harry handed over her precious wand to Aragorn, who took it with the tips of his fingers, as though it might shoot out a spell if he manhandled it.

Gand-elf, nodding approvingly, settled himself cross-legged on the ground, and pulled out the longest pipe Harry had ever seen from out of his robes. He lit it up with an equally long matchstick of sorts that he must have brought from the campfire, and sat there puffing for a few moments, apparently completely comfortable with the situation. Aragorn followed Gand-elf to the ground, Harry's wand now sticking out of his belt once he'd realised that it wouldn't do him any harm.

Harry watched all this with dubious eyes as she settled her bottom on a patch of squishy grass. They had not hesitated in labeling her an enemy, so where were the threats from Aragorn? Where was the good cop/bad cop routine? The atmosphere wasn't even tense. What ever Harry thought, she never suspected he'd find himself sitting comfortably on the ground, as though out on a Sunday picnic.

"Er . . ." she began finally.

Gand-elf and Aragorn stared at her expectantly.

"I suppose I should begin then? Er . . . well . . . I guess I should start by saying that I come from a different world." She chanced a glance at the other two to find Gand-elf with his eyebrows raised passed his hairline, pipe lying forgotten in his lap, and Aragorn watching her with narrowed, disbelieving eyes.
"Er... you have heard of different worlds, right?" Harry asked hopefully.

"I have never heard of such a thing," Aragorn said, with a shake of his head. "But then I am not a wizard, and am not knowledgeable in such matters."

"Wizards," Gand-elf said, still staring oddly at Harry, "are not knowledgeable in such matters either."

Harry's stomach dropped. Did Gand-elf not believe her?

"However," Gand-elf continued, now chewing at the end of his pipe, which had gone out, "it is said that the Valar themselves can travel to different worlds. To journey passed the stars and the heavens, arriving at different pastures... So what you say is not unheard of."

Harry's heart leaped. He believed her!

"What I do not understand," sustained Gand-elf, leaning forward and speculatively looking over Harry's face, "is how a wizard could have the power do so. Unless there is more you have to say?"

Harry tried not to look guilty. "Yeah, there is. I mean, I personally didn't do anything to come to this world. It was an inter-dimensional whirlpool or something like that. At least, that's how my professor described it. I was chosen by the forces of the universe for reasons I don't know and was tossed into this world by a lightning bolt."

The two men blinked. Obviously, her description was lacking.

"Alright then, um... okay then." Harry drew a breath. It was probably best to start from the beginning "Where I come from, there's a whole world full of wizards and witches, probably around a million of them in fact!" Gand-elf's pipe dropped from his mouth to the ground and he rapidly translated Harry's words to Aragorn who looked equally shocked. Harry pretended not to notice. "I go to a place where wizard's are trained at magic until we're old enough to make our way into the world."

"And this world is full of wizards? No elves, or dwarves, or hobbits?" asked Aragorn.

"I'm not sure what a hobbit is. We have house-elves but I suspect they aren't at all the same things. We do have dwarves, though. We have hundreds of other magical creatures, too. Oh and muggles, of course." Harry saw the questioning looks of her two companions. "In my world, Aragorn would be classified as a muggle because he has no magic in his blood."

Gand-elf and Aragorn developed dawning expressions. "Ahh, mug-ales are your race of Men then," Gand-elf stated, knowledgeably. "But what I find most fascinating is that wizards are a race unto their own."

This time it was Harry that looked puzzled.

Gand-elf explained, "In Middle Earth, there are only five wizards. Our levels of magic are distinguished by the colour robes we wear, white being the most powerful. I am Gandalf the Grey, for instance. But a whole world full of wizards, I have never imagined. How do you keep stabilized? What stops you from warring each other?"

"We do! War, that is," Harry explained. "Actually, at this moment, there's a Dark Lord about to terrorize the magical and muggle communities."

Both Aragorn and — Gandalf wasn't it? — seemed to sit up at this.
"You have a Dark Lord in your world as well?" Aragorn asked.

"Well, yeah. I mean – " Harry froze. "You don't mean to tell me there's one here too?"

"Our world is plagued anew with a Dark Lord. Sauron is his name, and his armies are most fearsome. He has amassed orcs and goblins and wraiths to be the downfall of Middle Earth . . . " Gandalf stared not so much at Harry as through him.

Harry gulped. "S-so this world I'm in now is called Middle Earth?"

Gandalf nodded, picked up his pipe, and started chewing on the end again. "If you would explain to us how you came to be in Middle Earth . . . ?" he prompted.

Harry briefly told them Dumbledore's explanation, including the fact that whatever it was chose a wizard specifically and wouldn't leave him or her alone until it transported them to a different world.

"But Dumbledore said he's going to try and bring me back, because I don't belong here. He's a really powerful wizard, so he can do it."

There was a somewhat confused yet contemplative silence behind the boulder, until Gandalf cleared his throat, looking as though he'd just uncovered the answer to a particularly harrowing riddle.

"If the occurrence happened as you say, then I do not think your arrival in our world was an accident. It chose you specifically. And the fact that you came across us straight away – "

"But that's the thing, I didn't! I had no idea which direction I was traveling and I landed on top of this mountain first. There was a blizzard –!"

"How long ago did you land on that mountain?" asked Aragorn, looking anxious.

"Er . . . some time this morning, I think," answered Harry, who couldn't see what this line of questioning had to do with anything.

Aragorn looked triumphant. "We were on Caradharas Mountain this morning, in a blizzard. We near departed this life when a great lightening bolt burst forth from the sky and stirred the snow to fall down on us."

"Yes, we thought it to be Saruman at first – an enemy – but it could just as believably have been you. And that means that I was correct the first time. That thing bought you to Middle Earth for a purpose. You will join the Fellowship."

Aragorn tensed suddenly, and started jabbering away at Gandalf. Now that she had more time to think about it, she was starting to think it was Old English they were using. Fascinating. Harry got the impression they were arguing. And what was a Fellowship?

"Excuse me? But what am I supposed to join?"

Gandalf and Aragorn paused in mid-argument and looked towards Harry.

"Gandalf, you would endanger the Fellowship like this?" Aragorn whispered, disbelieving. This was a situation far beyond anything the ranger had been prepared for.

"I would not!" snapped Gandalf. "Harry is clearly not an enemy. You know this. You must also admit that he has been sent here to help us. That he is a wizard should be proof of that. But what force of power bought him to us only the Valar knows. In fact I suspect it was them, or something
Aragorn looked properly chastised.

Gandalf turned back to Harry and said, "I believe you to be sent by the Valar to assist the Fellowship in our quest."

Harry asked doubtfully, "What's the Valar? And what's the Fellowship?"

"They created Middle Earth and its people. They send protectors to defend and guard it. I am one of those protectors," explained Gandalf. "And the Fellowship is of a ring. The One Ring, to be exact."

"A fellowship of one ring?" repeated Harry uncertainly, thinking that Gandalf had smoked one too many pipes.

Aragorn coughed behind his hand; he could tell Gandalf was conversing with a skeptic. The Gray Wizard sighed impatiently. "Rather, it's The Fellowship of the Ring," he said, then went on a lengthy twaddle on the history of Middle-Earth, its people, Sauron, the one ring, and the Fellowship.

Harry's head was buzzing with Gandalf's story. And she'd thought Voldemort was bad? Well, he might be a lot worse magic wise – this Sauron bloke did sound a bit put down – but Voldemort was clearly a lot weaker supporter/minion wise. This Dark Lord had armies, with thousands of flesh-eating creatures in them. And those wraith things sounded too much like dementors for Harry's liking.

"And that is why I believe you were sent to the Fellowship specifically. You were meant to help us," Gandalf finished and drew a long drag from his newly lit pipe. This didn't do him too well, though, since he started hacking straight afterwards. Probably his throat was already dry from talking so much.

"If you give me back my wand, I could conjure some water..." Aragorn handed Gandalf a bladder from his belt, presumably filled with some sort of liquid. "... or not."

Gandalf handed the bladder back to Aragorn after taking a gulp, then turned to Harry looking a bit puzzled.

"You can conjure water?"

"Yes, can't you?"

Gandalf looked taken aback. "No, I can't. I can manipulate the elements; create a pond from a dewdrop, a forest fire from a burning branch, that sort of thing. But I cannot summon it out of thin air. We are clearly wizards of different moulds. I had suspected as much with that shield you created to halt the arrow. This only confirms my belief. Aragorn!" said Gandalf at once, causing Harry to jump. "Give Harry his stick back."

Aragorn plucked the wand from his belt, and with an apologetic sort of look, handed it back to Harry, who pocketed it.

"Right then," said Gandalf, standing up. "It is high time to properly introduce you to the rest of the Fellowship, I think."

The Company was in a state of a mixture of disbelief and fear, though, the latter emotion was expressed in the way the little people all stood together in a huddle, and Legless, Bore-me-dear and Gimling all fingered their immediate weapons. They clearly didn't know what to make of this
Wizard-From-Another-World, as they had taken to calling her. Well, at least it was a sight less
embarrassing than the Girl Who Lived.

Gandalf had – to Harry's embarrassment – told them everything, including the fact that her magic
was different from his, and probably far more potent in that way. The Fellowship had all looked to a
red-faced Harry with awe, confusion and incredulity then, measuring her up to see whether Gandalf
really was telling the truth, then dismissing Gandalf's idea because of how young she looked.

When Gandalf told them Harry was joining the Fellowship, Harry had to scramble back because the
anger emitting from Gimling, Legless and Bore-me-dear, and the panic emanating from the little
people was so potent, Harry swore she could feel it prickle her skin.

Gandalf snapped at them, then reminded them of the circumstances of Harry's arrival and how she
was a gift from the Valar, and a couple of other things Harry didn't understand, but it must have
convinced the Fellowship because after that, even Gimling didn't grumble, though he did cast Harry
probing looks from time to time.

After the initial explanation was over, the Fellowship, which now included Harry – though,
grudgingly – settled themselves around the fire and proceeded to fall asleep. Harry and Legless kept
awake, however. Legless because he was on watch duty and Harry because she was wishing
desperately for Hedwig, but knew the owl relished the free open space this world provided her, and
wouldn't come back anytime soon.

Harry also felt like reading, since she couldn't fall asleep, but that would mean she needed to light her
wand, and she didn't think the rest of the Fellowship were entirely comfortable with her and her
magic just yet. She wished this world had battery powered torches.

'Then again,' she thought with a snicker, 'I don't really need light since I could just use the glow
emanating off of Legless.' He was certainly bright enough.

Not for the first time did Harry wonder what exactly Legless was. He was certainly pretty; the petty,
girly part of her that she usually ignored wondered if he was prettier than her, but then again, that
long, blonde hair of his really did make him look like a girl. What if he was a Veela? Perhaps this
world hosted male Veela's, just like Harry's bore only female ones. It would certainly explain his
other-worldliness. But then Harry shouldn't talk, being from another universe and all. The
Fellowship probably thought she looked extra spooky. Suddenly, Harry decided that she couldn't
blame them for being defensive, especially when there was a war going on.

She sighed miserably.

She wanted Hedwig.
Of Monsters and Men

There had only been one time in Harry's entire life when she'd actually seen a dead person up close. The handsome Cedric Diggory – the one she had a bit of a crush on – had even died in front of her, dropping straight to the ground like a stone plunging into the ocean. She had seen Sirius die, but that wasn't the same thing – he hadn't left a body behind; it was more that Sirius had been taken far away and would never return. Now, only a few weeks after her godfather's demise, Harry hadn't thought she would have to witness a death so soon, and one that reminded him so much of Cedric's, too, so sudden and unexpected.

Legless.

He was dead.

Harry had awoken that morning to a small film of sunlight seeping over the horizon, shining faintly past the tiny leaves of the trees and casting odd shapes on the sleepers in the clearing. It seemed a perfectly tranquil setting, with no indication of the tragedy Harry was about to witness. No one in the Fellowship had troubled to wake themselves yet, except Harry, and as soon as she did, she wished she hadn't, because she'd immediately spotted a dead Legless.

Legless had been lying stiffly on the hard, cold earth, eyes wide, glazed, unseeing . . .

It was then that Harry had started panicking. Some thing had crept up to the Fellowship during the night and murdered Legless on his watch duty!

Harry didn't know what sort of creatures lurked in the night in Middle Earth, so her mind traveled – subconsciously – straight to the magical creatures on her own world that could have been responsible for this. Her immediate thought had been a lethifold. They were rather like dementors, in that a Patronus could stop them, and that they projected the feelings of horror and despair. They were just the sort of creature that could have killed Legless without attracting anyone's notice. Silent and deadly were the lethifolds, preying on the unsuspecting.

As soon as Harry had come to that conclusion, guilt had settled like a fiery rash in the pit of her stomach. If only she had been awake! If only she hadn't gone to sleep! If she hadn't been so tired, could she have heard Legless being attacked? She knew how to cast a Patronus; she could have defeated the lethifold, stopped it before it snacked on Legless.

Harry's panicked mind, which hadn't fully woken up until a full minute later, then fell into a forced calm as she tried to think logically. She couldn't be one hundred percent sure that it was a lethifold, could she? It was likely they didn't even exist in Middle-Earth, and even if they did, she wasn't any more at fault than any other of the Fellowship who also hadn't been awake to save Legless. She wasn't to blame just like Sirius' fall wasn't her fault.

Then, once Harry's panic attack was completely over, she awkwardly, reluctantly, stood on shaky knees and made her way over to Legl – the corpse. There was no use in thinking of the body as a person still when the person inside was gone. Harry stood staring stupidly, disbelievingly, at the dead man at her feet. How could this have happened? Why did it happen? Why now?

What if the Fellowship thought she had done it? They would certainly be suspicious if it; they already suspected her of spying as it was. Harry gulped against a suddenly raw throat at the sight of Gimling's battle-axe in the corner of her vision. Would the dwarf be happily cleaning Harry's blood off the sharp edges in the near future?
Harry gave herself a good, hard pinch. She was being stupid. They wouldn't blame her. Gandalf trusted her, after all. Gandalf would believe her.

Her decision made, Harry shuffled silently over to the snoring old wizard and peered speculatively down on him. His large wizard's hat lay on top of his face but despite that obscurity, he still looked a lot like Dumbledore. Perhaps it was a common theme for wizards to fit into this stereotypical image? Long white hair and beard, long crooked nose, spectacular robes that brushed the ground. Though, Gandalf's could hardly be termed spectacular. Monkish, would be a better description.

Harry ran her hand through her short hair and gave it a good tug. What was she doing? Stalling for time? Actually, now that she thought about it, it seemed she was doing exactly that. Nervousness didn't even cover Harry's feelings in that moment. Potential trouser-wetting might better describe her state of mind. She wasn't even surprised to feel her hands had gone all sweaty.

Harry took a deep breath, then leaned over to nudged Gandalf with her hands. The wizard made a sort of mumble in his sleep, but other than that, he showed no indication he'd felt Harry's hands on his shoulder.

Harry pouted but tried a different tactic: She leaned forward again and plucked Gandalf’s hat off of his face. If that didn't wake him then –

Harry jumped back in horror, nearly tripping over her own feet.

Wide, unseeing eyes, cold and hard . . .

He was dead!

Was everyone dead then? Harry quickly scoured the camping area, and to her relief, found the gentle rise and fall of breath on the rest of her companions, indicating that, yes, they were still very much alive and, no, she didn't need to drop to the ground like a wailing tot.

But wait! Something didn't make sense. Hadn't Gandalf been snoring? Harry looked down at Gandalf and, yes, he still was. Without noticing her actions, Harry reached up and scratched her head in that universal gesture that smacked of confusion and dumbness, the first time Harry was ever forced to put on such a display.

What was going on?

Harry looked from Gandalf to Legless, repeating this motion three more times, then finally stopping to peer intently at the glowing man. Was that a rise of his chest she just saw? Yes.

He was alive! Harry felt like whooping! . . . and then she felt like an idiot.

Obviously, in Middle Earth wizards and whatever Legless was, slept with their eyes open, no matter how odd it seemed.

She felt like a right sort of numbskull. She may as well bash her head over repeatedly with a sign that read: 'Really stupid twat here! 2 pounds for admission.'

Harry snorted. That would be a sight many would pay to see. The Girl Who Lived, publicly humiliated, even more so than before. Fudge would certainly dance to that.

Harry shook her head at the absurdity of her relieved thoughts. She had no cause to think of Fudge...
now. She had no cause to think of any of the problems she had while on earth. As a matter of fact, here, in Middle-Earth, she was free! No one knew who she was! No one knew she was famous; no one would stop to gawk, rudely pointing at her forehead. No one here knew about the Girl Who Lived and why she lived. And most importantly, they didn't care!

Harry's stomach gave a pleasant jolt that traveled up her chest and into her heart. She was finally a nobody and she loved it!

A large weight landed on her shoulder, talons digging uncomfortably, though familiarly, into her skin.

"Hello, lovely." Harry gave Hedwig's wing an affectionate stroke.

Hedwig rubbed her head against her cheek, all the while making a low, almost indistinct rasping noise, presumably out of pleasure. An owlish purr perhaps.

"You're awake early; did you get any sleep in?"

Hedwig hooted. Loudly.

Harry wasn't prepared for the reaction it caused.

Legless sprang to his feet with an odd flexibility Harry had only ever seen in frogs, whipping out his sling and arrows. Gimling shot up from his pallet, snatching his enormous axe, and stood with legs apart, breathing gruffly. Both the muggles rolled over and reached for their swords, not quite as fast or sprightly as Legless and Gimling, but fast enough to surprise Harry. Gandalf jumped up as well, but he held his staff parallel to his body, as if knowing that there was no real danger.

By the end of this stampede of action, everyone besides Gandalf had aligned their weapons straight in Harry's wide-eyed direction, looking like they might make use of them at any moment. The little people, however, snored on, oblivious to the raging conflict.

"Uh . . ." said Harry.

There was a small twitter in the distance as a bird greeted the new day.

"Put your weapons down!" snapped Gandalf. Clearly he was not a morning person. Harry absently noted that she now understood what he meant even though she didn't know the words he used. How very odd. She'd have to tell him later.

The four men obliged, but Legless, Gimling, and Bore-me-dear did so with great reluctance and a lot of grumbling – which came mostly from the dwarf. Aragorn was the only one who looked abashed.

"Well, this is certainly a festive way to start the morning!" exclaimed Gandalf, frowning a little below his eyebrows. "We shan't have another spectacle like this tomorrow, shall we?"

Everyone, including Harry, mumbled their apologies.

"Where's the breakfast?" a sleepy voice asked. "Don't tell me we're on our way, now. I haven't eaten anything yet!"

"Peregrin Took!" Gandalf exclaimed in exasperation. Harry almost snorted. "You would think of your stomach even if death were upon you." Peregrin Took grew distinctly red in the face. Gandalf continued. "But you are due to wake up now, and wake you will, yourself and the others."
The little man jumped to Gandalf's suggestion, first going to the chubby little darling called Sam – the mushy part of Harry admitted that all four of them really were quite adorable – and fairly ordering him to start breakfast, then went to nudge the rest from their sleep.

Half an hour later, Harry sat near Pippin – which she found out to be Peregrin Took's nickname – and another little person called Merry around the morning fire, enjoying a meal of hot sausages, cheese, tomatoes, and homemade bread. The sausages weren't bad either. They reminded her of Hagrid's the first time she and Harry had met in that hut on the sea.

Pippin and Merry were chattering gaily, every once in a while making a comment in Harry's direction, not letting her feel left out even if she didn't understand them very well. She appreciated how they didn't act awkwardly around her.

"Gimli is a dwarf, in case you didn't know," Merry said, waving about a sausage. Harry cocked her head at 'Gimli'; there was a word she recognized! "They're very strong you know, dwarves I mean – "

"Well they'd have to be Merry," said Pippin, in a half knowledgeable, half mischievous tone. "D'you see how big that axe is? Almost the length of me; give an inch and take off the bit that severs heads and the measure would be the same."

"Right you are, Pip!"

Harry sniggered at their cheery banter.

"D'you see that now? You made him laugh at me!"

"Well if he laughs it's nobody's business but his own."

A few words would jump out at her here or there, making her increasingly frustrated. Gandalf had said she was sent by the Valar to help the ragtag band on their quest, but she could hardly be as effective as she could be if she couldn't understand them.

Harry carefully placed her plate next to her on the boulder she was sitting on before leaning over to nudge a stone into her hand. She brushed the dirt off of it while her small companions looked on. She lifted the rock so it was easier to see and held it up to the one called Pippin.

Pippin looked at her, and then down at the rock in confusion before turning to Merry to share a bewildered look.

"D'you . . . d'you want me to take it?" Pippin asked, hesitantly reaching out. Harry saw what he was going to do and shook her head, pulling the rock away.

Harry pressed a hand to her chest and said, "Harry." Before they could ask, she pointed at the nearest small person and said, "Pippin," and hardly pausing before pointing and saying, "Merry." Then she held the rock up again and pointed at it, looking at them expectantly.

"Oh, I get it now!" Merry cheered. He pointed at the stone in Harry's hand and said, "Rock."

"Rock," Harry echoed and smiled briefly in accomplishment before reaching out for the next nearest inanimate object. She held up the plate she had previously set down.

Pippin caught on and said, "Plate."

They continued their simple game of Harry repeating whatever the two said, moving about the camp
and pointing out the various things laying around. They received indulgent looks from Gandalf and the other two little people, Sam and Frog-o, and blank looks of caution from those that were still uncomfortable around Harry.

The green-eyed wizard found that the more someone spoke to her in Westron – and she was doubly glad that theses particular someones were Merry and Pippin since they spoke quickly and therefore double what other someones would speak – the more she started understanding; now instead of just bits and pieces like last night and earlier this morning, chunks of phrases now made sense. Maybe Gandalf's language forcing spell was delayed because of how it reacted with her magic? Add on top that she was also learning by parroting her perky teachers and Harry was ready to give the *lingua franca* of Middle Earth a spin.

"What you?" asked Harry slowly in tentative Westron. "Er – What *are* you guys? I am wizard but not know what are you."

Harry was rather proud that she managed a sentence even if it was in broken Westron but wondered if that had been too rude a question. Fortunately the hobbits didn't think so. On the contrary, they seemed to get excited.

"Look how well we're teaching 'em!" Merry crowed, preening in the direction of their watchers. He turned back to Harry and said, "Well first of all, we aren't *guys*, whatever those are. We, my good sir, are hobbits," concluded Merry in a very formal tone and knuckling his forehead.

"*You* are hobbits," said Harry with dawning comprehension in her eyes. "But also, you are guys."

"I'm sorry, Harry, but I think I would have known if I was a guy," said Pippin.

Harry huffed in amusement. ",'Guy' is also word for 'man'. You are guy, Legless is guy, Gandalf – "

Harry stopped abruptly because Pippin and Merry had cracked into full-out laughter.

"What?" Harry ask. Had she accidentally made a joke?

"L-Legless!" said Merry, barely managing to gasp the word out, then went on chuckling.

"That his name, yes?" asked Harry, her tone hopeful and embarrassed at the same time.

"No, Harry," said Pippin, managing to calm down somewhat. "It's Le-go-las. But I see where you got confused. Elvish names can be a muddle in the head, my head anyway."

"Everything's a muddle in *your* head, Pippin," Merry said.

Before Pippin could open his mouth to reply, Harry jumped in. "I think maybe I confuse more names, too," she admitted.

"Not to worry," said Pippin, with a sly look at Merry, and for a split second Harry was reminded of the Weasley twins. "Just tell us the ones you think you got wrong, and we'll help you."

During the course of the next two minutes, amidst uproarious hobbit laughter, Harry discovered that his *Frog-o* was actually Frodo, *Bore-me-dear* – This one had them crying and holding their guts while the man in question looked on in a mixture of amusement and anger – was Boromir, and *Gimling* was Gimli, though, the last one wasn't much of a difference in Harry's opinion.

Then she remembered something. "What do you mean when said 'Legolas' elvish name?"
Pippin answered with a mouthful of bread and cheese. "'ell, 'e's an ef, 'arry. I taut n'dalf shai' eu 'ad evs in or world."

"What?"

Pippin gulped down his food and cleared his throat. "I said he's an elf. How could you not know? I thought Gandalf said you had elves in your world."

_An elf?_

"We have elves but they not look like Legolas."

Pippin frowned, puzzlingly while Merry looked up in interest. "What do they look like then?"

"I think they are not the same. They are maybe this tall," Harry held her arm out more or less the same height as the hobbits.

The two hobbits started sniggering. "Imagine that, Merry. Elves in Harry's world are the size of hobbits."

"I think they are not the same," Harry repeated, certain in her thoughts that house-elves and whatever kind of Elf Legolas was were as closely related as a fish was to a moose. "At home, they are very small, have big eyes, big ears —"

"Sounds like a baby goblin to me," Merry interrupted, a keen look in his face.

"Have goblins too but very different to House-elves."

"Why do you call them house-elves?" asked Pippin.

Harry wasn't sure if it was a good idea to go into greater detail about house-elves. It certainly wouldn't sound good if she were to explain their lot in life to people who have never met a regular house-elf in all its joyful, work-frenzied rapture. If Legolas was an elf, he was clearly from a race of free elves and wasn't treated at all like the elves in Harry's world. No point in bringing up trouble and offending people.

"Just what they are called," she told them.

Sam abruptly appeared before them, holding a quarter full plate of sausages. "Would you like some more, Mister Harry? They have to go now or they'll spoil."

Sam, thought Harry, was the one reminding her more and more of a house elf.

"No thank you, I am done."

Merry and Pippin however, looked delighted. "Gives them to us then, Sam!" they said, and snatched the remaining sausages from the plate. Harry had a feeling they often pilfered things without permission.

Sam squawked. "I was just going to ask Gandalf if he'd like some more. Thanks to your greedy guts, I've nothing but an empty plate to offer him."

"Better an empty plate than nothing at all," said one or the other. Harry wasn't too sure which since she was busy smothering her laughter.

"What's this?" said Gandalf, coming from his boulder to hover over them. "Cease this folly, Peregrin
Took! You as well, young Master Brandybuck. Why aren't you ready? We are leaving. Samwise, should you pack Bill, or should we leave without him?"

"Bill!" Sam exclaimed, and rushed off to tend the pony.

"The rest of you should best gather your belongings," said Gandalf, and walked off to the huddle that was Aragorn, Boromir, Gimli and Legolas.

The rest of the next few hours passed in much the same manner, with the hobbits teaching Harry little words, though, by the end of the morning, nobody really had time to talk much; they were too busy trying to catch their breaths.

Up, down, and in between small grassy hills they went, across boulders, through tree clusters, and passed lonesome landmarks every once in a while. For miles they traveled, Harry wishing she could ride her Firebolt, but feeling uncomfortable about traveling in relative comfort while the others trudged their way on foot; it felt rather like cheating. Not to mention her taking off from the ground would likely start a panic and Harry wouldn't put it pass Legolas to shoot her full of arrows in the confusion.

Still, as they traveled until well into the sun's zenith, Harry wondered when they were going to stop for a rest and some food. Pippin sadly informed her that they weren't going to stop until nightfall, something he had learned the hard way, it seemed.

But Harry had another problem; she needed the loo. The last time she had been was probably a day ago, so she wasn't exactly surprised but that didn't mean she had to welcome it.

What to do?

Every now and then, she would spot one or two of the Fellowship dropping behind, presumably for the chance to use the back of a tree, but Harry was neither very outdoorsy nor a boy, and even if she had been, she would have been just uneasy since she'd hardly be the type to boldly walk up to a tree and water the plants without a care in the world.

If only she could set up her tent again and use the loo there! That was one of the main reasons she brought the thing along, so she would always have a proper bathroom. Should she risk it? Harry wasn't sure if she wanted the others to witness more of her unusual brand of magic. If she dropped back now, to get a safe distance away so they wouldn't see her tent, everyone would know what she was doing. They might even stop, too, as they did with the hobbits, to assure there was no danger, completely negating the point of Harry dropping back in the first place.

And even if they didn't want to assure she stayed safe, she couldn't guarantee someone wouldn't follow her, perhaps on the thought that they might as well utilize the opportunity. Harry had a sudden image of Gimli squatting behind a boulder, hacking the leaves off the nearest tree with his ax, then putting the leaves to their much needed use.

Harry shuddered and cursed her vivid imagination.

Then there was also the awkward fact that Harry didn't feel at all comfortable with the Fellowship, besides Gandalf, Merry, and Pippin, whom she liked very much. An unfortunate majority of the dangerous ones – unfortunate majority, as in all of them – had tried to kill her after all.

A moment's deliberation yielded no alternative plan. She gripped the inside of her cloak and sucked in her bottom lip. There was nothing for it; she would have drop back.

Harry casually, and quite surreptitiously, so as not to cause notice, began slowing down. Half an
hour later she was near the back of the group and getting desperate.

'Just a few more minutes, Harry. Hold on for just a few more minutes.'

But Harry had forgotten something; the person bringing up the rear of the group was Boromir, hardly Harry's best friend. Highly suspicious, highly muscled, and – Harry could help but take a whiff as she stepped in line with the weapon-clad warrior – highly odorous.

'Sweet Merlin, why hasn't deodorant been invented yet?'

How was she ever going to sneak pass Boromir's notice? Harry put her hand in the pocket of her robes and fingered her wand. Should she?

Well, it was an emergency.

Her mind made up, Harry slipped her wand from out of her pocket and discreetly pointed it at the sword sheath tied to Boromir's belt.

"Descendo," she whispered. The tie unlooped itself and the heavy weapon clattered painfully onto Boromir's feet, causing him to yell out and stumble a little. Harry took the opportunity and shot off into a thick copse of trees the had just passed while the big man's attention was elsewhere. She hadn't counted on Boromir yelling out in pain and she was lucky she had gotten out of there before anyone turned around.

She dearly hoped no one noticed her missing.

A few minutes later, Harry stepped back out into the open, satisfyingly relieved and face freshly washed. She jogged to catch up with the rest of the Fellowship. They hadn't gotten very far, and Harry knew the two reasons why. The first was that the hobbits couldn't walk as fast as the rest of them, so the Company deliberately slowed down as not to leave any behind. It made for a leisurely walk, but meant that they wouldn't be getting to their destination anytime soon. The second was because it was past lunchtime and nobody really felt like rushing anyway, being too tired from the long trek as it was.

Just as Harry stepped behind Boromir, Merry asked, "Oh, Harry, I thought we'd lost you! Where were you?"

There were a lot of heads turning every which way as the Fellowship tried to find her. Finally, Boromir turned about and found himself with a face full of teenage girl.

"What are you doing back there?" he asked in, Harry's opinion, an excessively mistrustful tone. She shrank back, and shuffled closer to the hobbits, unwilling to seem confrontational to a person that swung his sword freely.

The rest of the Fellowship paused and turned.

"Shoelace," she lied, hoping there were such things as shoelaces in this world. "Also rocks in my shoes."

Boromir glared at her, but other than that, he gave no indication he might believe Harry. In fact, he turned right around and continued walking, the rest of the Fellowship doing the same.

Harry meandered along with the hobbits, thinking she had to be stupid to use magic on Boromir when she could have just used the excuse of tying her shoelace to lag behind in the first place.
The rest of the day continued as before, although with less cheer since the hobbits were too winded to be in high spirits. Gandalf and Gimli led the troupe nearer to a particularly clutched group of mountains. As they came closer, the ground grew less green and more red, and the trees virtually disappeared. No birds dotted the sky.

Eventually, they came across a deep channel in the ground, as dry as sandpaper. But near it was a path, broken and decayed, winding its way around the ruined walls and paving stones of an ancient highroad.

"Ah! Here it is at last!" said Gandalf, stopping briefly to stare. "This is where Sirannon, the Gate-stream ran. But what has happened to the water, I cannot guess; it used to be swift and noisy. Come! We must hurry on. We are late as it is."

They followed the winding road for many miles, Harry feeling footsore and tired. She was used to hard physical labor and insurmountable chores but her endurance had never been tested like this. She covertly wiped sweat from her brow.

'How much longer?'

They rounded corners and veered off in all directions until Gandalf finally pointed to a low cliff with a broken and jagged top. Over it, trickling water dripped through a wide cleft.

"Hmm," said Gandalf. "Indeed things have changed since last I was here. But if I remember correctly, there was a flight of steps cut into the rock at the side. Let us go and see if it is still there."

They found the steps, everyone besides Gimli slowly trudging up them. Harry learned, by questioning the hobbits, that Gimli's cousin or something lived to where they going, and that was why he was so excited. Finally, they reached the top of the steps, only to found that the cliff where the water was trickling out of wasn't a cliff, but a dam.

"Now we know where the Gate-stream water went!" said Gandalf, frowning a little.

The water, Harry saw, looked like a black, ominous lake. And at the back of the lake were vast stone cliffs, their faces pale and scraggly in the fading light. It looked like a dead end to Harry.

But not to Gandalf, it seemed. "There are the walls of Moria," he said, pointing across the water. "We will have to either produce a boat or go up the slopes to get to the other side of the lake. In any case, we cannot take Bill."

Sam cried out his protest in distress.

"Confound it, Samwise Gamgee!" snapped Gandalf, tired from the long trek and losing what little patience he had. "The beast has four legs and hoofs. He cannot climb the slopes."

Sam grudgingly complied, and went to get the packs from the pony's back.

Gandalf's expression softened. "He will be safer away from here, Sam. He knows the way home. He will be alright."

Harry thought she heard Sam snifflle.

As Bill the Pony trotted off the way they came, Gandalf led the group up the slopes – "We might as well climb to the sun," grumbled Merry – then down the slopes – ironically, Harry almost lost her hat while tripping over her shoelaces. By the time they reached the narrow strip of land between the cliff face and the lake, it was completely dark, the light of the moon their only beacon in the night.
They made their way across the strip. Harry jumped in alarm when she heard a loud 'plop' directly on her right. She then soon after sighed in relief; a fish had just flopped in and out of the water.

The rest of the Fellowship however, grew wary, staring intently at the black pool as it bubbled unnaturally where the fish landed back in.

Harry gulped. Was that supposed to happen?

Suddenly, Frodo, who was walking in front of Harry, slipped on the wet mud on the lake's banks, his foot plunging into the water. Harry shot forward and caught him before he became completely submerged.

"Thank you, Harry," he said, staring at the water and shuddering.

"No problem," Harry said uncertainly, stepping back from Frodo. Something wasn't right about this hobbit. He gave Harry an ugly feeling. Harry felt as though she wanted to be completely away from him, but completely near him at the same time. Perhaps it was that ring thing Gandalf was talking about?

They trudged onwards a little ways and came across two of the biggest holly trees Harry had ever seen; their gigantic roots were submerged like two great claws into the lake. Miraculously, on one of the branches of the trees, looking quite at home and completely comfortable, sat Hedwig.

"Hedwig!" Harry cried, and as the astonished Fellowship watched, the owl swooped down and landed on Harry's shoulder.

"How did she know to find you?" asked Legolas, coming to stand next to Harry.

Harry shrugged, stroking Hedwig's feathered breast with her knuckles. "Hedwig is very smart."

Then the Fellowship watched in complete speechless bafflement as Hedwig thrust out her chest importantly, and began to preen her feathers.

"It seemed as though she was waiting for you. She truly is a remarkable bird," said Legolas, staring in awe at Hedwig, the rest of the Fellowship mumbled their agreement.

Harry, meanwhile, was enjoying the novel experience of being completely looked over. As Harry Potter, never had she ever been completely dismissed and looked at with uninterested eyes; she rather enjoyed her unimportance in this universe. That Hedwig was getting her due admiration was the icing on the cake.

Gandalf stood between the holly trees, running his hand over the cliff face. "Well, here we are at last!" he said. "Here the Elven road from Hollin ended. The Elves planted holly on the West-door, for holly was the token of their people. Those were happier days, when there was still friendship at times between folk of different races, even between Elves and Dwarves." Gandalf looked pointedly and Gimli and Legolas.

"It was not the fault of the Dwarves that the friendship waned," said Gimli.

"I have not heard that it was the fault of the Elves," retorted Legolas.

"Be silent!" said Gandalf, and everyone looked startled. Gandalf seemed to be a lot crabbier than usual that day, and even the littlest slight set him off. "I am not in the mood for your bickering," he continued. "I will need your help before the night is out. The doors are shut and hidden, and the sooner we find them the better!"
Gimli moved forward, tapping the stone with his axe, Legolas leaned against the rock, as if listening. Gandalf however, stood there staring at it. "It mirrors only starlight and moonlight," he mumbled. Walking up to the stone, he ran his hands over it, as though tracing patterns. "Can you see anything now?"

To everyone's surprise, something like a silvery, gossamer, spider's web began forming, until it merged into the unmistakable shape of a doorway. Runes ran down the side and across its arch.

"What does the writing say?" asked Frodo, who looked like he was trying to read the inscriptions on the arch.

"They do not say anything important," said Gandalf. "They only say: The Doors of Durin, Lord of Moria. Speak, friend, and enter. And underneath that is written: I, Narvi, made them. Celebrimor of Hollin drew these signs."

"What does it mean by speak, friend, and enter?" asked Merry.

"That is plain enough," said Gimli. "If you are a friend, you speak the password, and you can enter."

Personally, Harry thought it was too obvious, but didn't say anything.

"Do you know the password, Gandalf?" asked Boromir.

"No!" said the wizard.

The others looked dismayed.

"What then was the use of bringing us to this accursed spot?" cried Boromir, glancing back with a shudder at the dark water. "You told us you had once passed through the mines. How could that be if you don't know how to enter?"

Gandalf let out an angry expulsion of breath. "I don't know the password, but I shall know it. I once knew every spell in all the tongues of Middle Earth. It will come to me. And as for your other question," he continued, a dangerous glint in his eyes. "Have you no wits left? I did not enter this way. I came from the East."

Boromir went rather like Ron did when he grew embarrassed.

Gandalf touched the rock with his staff. "Annon edhellon, edro hi ammen! / Fennas nogothrim, lasto beth lammen!"

Nothing happened.

An hour passed with Gandalf reciting various spells from several languages, and still nothing happened. Finally, Gandalf threw his staff on the ground and, grumbling, plonked down on a nearby rock.

The Fellowship stared with disappointed.

Suddenly Pippin leaped to his feet.

"I know!" he said, excitedly. "Why doesn't Harry try?"

Everyone, including Gandalf, turned to look at a flummoxed Harry.

Harry shifted uneasily where she had seated herself on a convenient boulder. Somehow she doubted
the unlocking spell would be of much use. Would her magic be able to interact with the enchantments here to begin with?

"Harry?" Gandalf prompted.

"Er . . . well, I suppose I can give it a try. I mean, I know a spell to open locked doors but I'm not sure how much good it would do on such a heavily bespelled entrance . . ." she trailed off as the Company, who were beginning to look hopeful, deflated again.

"Give it a try anyway, Harry," said Gandalf. Pippin pushed her forward to stand in front of the doors, Hedwig's sharp claws clutching her shoulder blade as the bird struggled to keep her balance.

Harry took out her wand and pointed it at the doors, not completely able to ignore the intense looks she was getting. Best to get this over with quickly.

She had just opened her mouth when she felt the faintest tremor wisp through her wand.

What?

Not a moment later, the tremor gave way to a violent vibration that had Harry's whole arm shaking with it.

The Fellowship looked on in apprehension. Hedwig hooted.

What was –? Of course! Harry turned her gaze on the holly trees. Could it be, that because her wand was made of holly, it was reacting to the aura stemming from the two trees? Didn't Gandalf tell her the previous day when explaining Middle Earth, that there were some plants here that had their own type of natural magic? Like the plants she studied in Herbology. If that were true, wouldn't it make sense that her holly wand reacted to its Middle-Earthian counterparts?

Harry decided to test her theory.

She took a step back, so that her body wasn't aligned with the holly trees and the palpitations in her wand halted immediately. Harry sighed with relief. She didn't know how much more bizarreness she could take.

He saw Gandalf in the corner of his vision, observing knowingly.

"Are you going to go about it then?" asked Gimli, with an irritated tone.

"Patience, Gimli," said Gandalf. "Harry's magic has reacted to the enchantment on the door, just as it was said that it would. But as you can see, it has now ceased. If you would resume, Harry?"

Harry nodded, not bothering to correct Gandalf's assumption. It would be too difficult to explain anyway. Besides, he had come close. Harry pointed her wand at the door. "Alohamora!"

A beam of golden light flared to life from her wand and traveled through the air toward the door. Unfortunately, before the spell could strike, the beam seemed to hit an invisible barrier. The magic crackled, bleeding out in all directions like foreign liquid in water, and dispersed before it could take effect. Harry slumped forward and ran her fingers through her hair in frustration.

There went that hope.

"There went that hope," Gimli grumbled, unknowingly echoing Harry's thoughts. "I thought Gandalf said you were powerful!"
Harry looked at him angrily but didn't contradict the surly denouncement. She huffed and plopped back down where she had previously been seated.

"Gandalf did say that their magicks were different," Merry said, defending Harry's lack of results while Pippin patted her knee in commiseration. "Maybe he couldn't break through the enchantment because the magic was too different."

"Merry is right," said Gandalf. "Our magicks are each potent in their own way."

A couple of minutes later found everyone brooding again. Harry watched from her spot by the first holly tree – her wand gently trembling in her robe pocket – as Boromir picked up a stone and chucked it in to the lake. The bubbles appeared again as they had with the fish, and this time they didn't go away.

"I wish you hadn't done that," she heard Frodo say.

Gandalf sat with his head in his hands, and looked to be in deep thought. Then he jumped up with a suddenness that startled them all. "I have it!" he cried, laughing. "A riddle. It was riddle all along, and an absurdly simple one." Picking up his staff and lining it at the door he said in a clear voice: "Mellon!"

Harry's jaw dropped. The door creaked open, showing blackness inside and nothing else.

"Ha-ha!" said Gimli, happily, standing from his seat on a low rock.

The Fellowship strode forward, Gimli in the lead, Legolas by his side, and Harry trundling behind them. Gimli was talking excitedly about, of all things, meat and hospitality.

Suddenly a cry of "Gandalf!" by Sam drew their attention. Everyone turned around just in time to see Frodo, wrapped in a slimy, green tentacle, hanging twenty feet in the air.

Aragorn, Boromir and Gimli rushed forward as Sam hacked at the tentacle with his short sword. It released Frodo into Aragorn's outstretched arms, and for one glorious moment, everyone thought they had won. But then, twenty more tentacles shot out, knocking everyone aside except Frodo, which one of tentacles grabbed again. Along with the writhing tentacles had come a gigantic, slimy head with a wide, cavernous mouth.

The giant squid? What was it doing here? Harry thought stupidly, not realizing the absurdity of her line of questioning.

Legolas strung his bow and let it fly at the head of the squid. It roared frighteningly, but didn't release the poor hobbit. It was Aragorn who finally saved Frodo, chopping off the tentacle that held him and catching the hobbit once again. Along with the writhing tentacles had come a gigantic, slimy head with a wide, cavernous mouth.

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Harry had never felt so useless, angry and irritated in a long while. She had rushed forward with the rest and drawn her wand, intending to blast the squid with abludgeoning hex, when her wand had started vibrating again. Harry, without noticing, had stepped in between the holly trunks. Her magic, it seemed, dried up completely when confronted by the two trees. She had meant to step back into the mine but an extra tentacle had attached itself to her and she was nearly pulled under until the monster was distracted by Aragorn chopping off the limb wrapped around Frodo.

Harry shook her head angrily. What was the point of being a wizard when she couldn't use her
magic? Was she always going to have problems of this sort? She hoped she would never come across another Middle-Earthian holly tree, or she might just take up Gimli's axe.

"We have now but one choice," said Gandalf grimly, tapping his staff on the ground so that the crystal on the top lit up brilliantly. "We must take the long, road of Moria. Be on your guard! There are older and fouler things than orcs, in the deep places of the world."

"Fouler things? Would that you had listened to me, Gandalf!" cried Boromir. "Now we are trapped, and who is going to lead us out?"

"I will," said Gandalf. "Just follow my staff."

"If only we had more light," said Frodo, staring around at the preceding shadows with anxious doe-eyes.

Harry was about to take out her wand when Gandalf answered, "No Frodo. Too much light will draw attention to us. Now follow me."

The Company trudged after Gandalf with heavy feet and heavy hearts. It was as they walked under an archway and into a huge cavernous room when Harry realised she'd missed something.

"Hedwig!" she exclaimed, struck with sudden worry.

Everyone stopped to stare back at her.

"She's gone!" Harry continued, directing her frantic speech at Gandalf. "She didn't come into the caves with us. She must have flown out when that giant squid attacked us!"

"She is in a better place than us then," said Gandalf. Then he stared curiously at Harry. "You know what that monster is?"

Everyone listened with curious expressions. Harry was momentarily stumped at the attention.

"Yeah . . . sort of. We have them in my world, but they're not as nasty. There was a giant squid that lived in the lake beside my school." She thought of Dennis Creevey in his first year. "It would rescue people when they fell into the lake . . ." she stopped because everyone was staring at her in complete disbelief. "It's true," she insisted.

"Would that we had met your giant skweed instead of that monster," said Boromir.

"Indeed, that would have made this day less of a hardship," said Gandalf. "Let us be on our way."
Gandalf sat with knobbly elbows resting on equally knobbly knees, absently smoking his pipe, and staring at nothing in particular. Gandalf rather thought nothing must be full of something at least, if the thoughts currently grinding through his head were any suggestion. The Fellowship sat scattered about the dim cavern they were currently holed up in, patiently – or not so patiently in the case of Boromir who had taken out his sword and was now shadow-fencing to distract himself – waiting for the signal that they were set to move on.

Gandalf was not doing what he was supposed to be doing; what he was supposed to be doing was thinking about which of the three tunnels in front of him would be best to take the Fellowship down into. Instead of his immediate concern and more urgent, he was thinking about the new piece of baggage the Fellowship had picked up.

Well, that was not fair, Gandalf supposed. Harry did not act like any piece of baggage Gandalf had ever come across; he did not slow them down by being cumbersome, unlike some hobbits Gandalf knew; he didn't complain; he hadn't threatened anyone; and he certainly pulled his own weight.

Why, just that morning, after their second night of sleeping in the mines, while they were tramping up the steeped staircases of Moria, Harry had saved Sam some future unpleasantness by offering to take his pack from him, so the little hobbit would not tire out by the time they reached the top. Yes, he was quite chivalrous for a young wizard of only three hundred or thereabouts. Gandalf wasn't sure, he couldn't quite guess at Harry's age.

Harry was an enigma to the old wizard. A magical enigma, which made him all the more interesting. And Gandalf was nothing if not interested in magical enigmas. He noticed, for instance, that Harry – whose magic Gandalf was sure could be used for practical purposes – did not exercise his magic at all. In fact, he hadn't tried to employ magic since before that skweed incident when he'd attempted opening Durin's doors.

And if Harry can conjure fire, as Gandalf suspected he could, he might have thought to actually make some occasionally, as the Fellowship had been left without kindling and torches when they had been forced to flee into the mines. Gandalf had not said anything, he assumed Harry had his reasons, or else he was just too reserved to show magic in front of the Fellowship.

But Gandalf could not work this out. He had seen Harry perform some truly amazing magical feats. Conjuring that shield with so little time to spare was one of them, and he could ride the air without wings. Gandalf did not know how this was possible, but he had worked out that it had been Harry who had flown over the wargs and the Fellowship heads with such great speeds from out of that burning tree. How else could he have reached that tree limb without alerting the rest of them of his presence?

Gandalf also noticed that Harry did not act like any young man he had before known. The boy was unaccountably shy in his personal habits, rather like a blushing maid. He did not stop at the ordained time with the others, but made excuses, or else, magicked Boromir's sword to fall onto Boromir's feet for a distraction, so that he could find some private time. Gandalf had been looking forward to seeing how he would cope in the mines of Moria. He had been amused when Harry would proclaim he'd lost his hat around the previous turn, or else his shoelace had untied, despite the fact that Gandalf could see the pointed tip of his hat sticking out from under his cloak, and that his unusual looking shoes were always tightly laced.

This behaviour was most bizarre. Could he not just say he needed some time alone, and that was that? Why all the blushing and hiding from the truth? It did not assist him overmuch with his relations
with Legolas, Boromir, and most especially Gimli. They were now even more suspicious of him, being of the mind that he was keeping some great, dark secret from them that he would one day dutifully bestow upon them with a knife against their throats in the dead of night.

However, Gandalf understood that Harry did come from a different world. No doubt things were done, ahem, differently there.

And where was his pack? He had not seen Harry lug a bag of any sorts, yet just this afternoon he had offered Pippin – who, as predicted, was complaining of hunger pains in his stomach – a small cake that, according to the hobbit, tasted of sweet, roasted pumpkin. Where had he been keeping this cake? Certainly not in his back pocket, for he would surely have squashed it by now if that were so. Yet, the cake had been completely whole, warm, and fresh when he'd given it to the hobbit. And unlike being able to conjure water or fire from out of the air, Gandalf did not think that Harry could do the same with solid foods. Water was an element, as was fire, they were made of an entirely different substance than a sweet, roasted pumpkin cake. It was most peculiar.

"Gandalf, Gandalf! There's something down there."

"Hmm?" Gandalf came out of his thinking to see Frodo's curly mane hovering in front of his face. "What was that?"

"There's something down there!"

"Ahh," he was wondering when the hobbit would notice. "It's Gollum."

"Gollum?"

"He's been following us for three days."

"Gollum," Frodo repeated.

"He hates and loves the ring," Gandalf explained. "Just as he hates and loves himself. My heart tells me that Gollum has some part to play in all this, yet for good or evil I do not know."

"It's a pity Bilbo didn't kill him when he had the chance," Frodo said quite passionately for a hobbit of leisurely character. Gandalf was surprised; yet he did not think it was the ring's influence, but rather, fear of the unknown Gollum.

"Pity?" Gandalf questioned, a touch of reprimanding in his tone. Then he explained. "It was pity that stayed Bilbo's hand. Many that live deserve death, and some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them Frodo? There are many forces at work in this world besides the will of evil. Think of Harry's presence. Surely it was a force of good that brought him to us, right when we needed him? And Bilbo's finding of the ring and you inheriting it, was that not also a force of good? Yes Frodo, Bilbo was meant to find the ring, just as you were meant to have it. And that is an encouraging thought."

Frodo smiled. Gandalf did the same, and as he did so, a smell, or rather, lack thereof, captured his nose.

"Aha!" he exclaimed joyfully. "It's that way!" He nodded his head to the tunnel at the right.

"He's remembered!" he heard Merry say.

"No," Gandalf replied. "But the air down here is not as foul as in the other tunnels. If in doubt Meriadoc, always follow your nose."
The Fellowship marched for twenty miles eastward amidst fissures, splits, and gaps in the rock that showed the dismayed Company that the ground was a very long time away indeed. This march took about eight hours or so, not counting the cracked and winding roads they traversed along, and the brief stops they made for rest. Occasionally Frodo, Aragorn, and Legolas, and of course Gandalf, would hear the patter of foottfalls a ways behind them, that they knew was not an echo of their own. Gollum, it seemed, was intent on pursuit. And all four knew he would remain on their path as long as the lure of the ring held him in its golden grasp.

They had marched to the depths of all things – or so it seemed to the Company, who had not had a proper rest since they began marching that morning – when they walked into what felt like a large open room with not much in it. It felt like this because cold, swirly wind, breezed before them like a breath of fresh air after only smelling mustiness and dust for the most part of their trek.

The hobbits huddled together, looking apprehensive. They were sure that this air, despite feeling so refreshing, was only a cover for something dangerous that lurked in the darkness in front of them. It was there to make them believe they were safe, they each thought in their hobbit minds. It was only a trick, they were sure.

The rest of the Company displayed their anxiety by glaring into the foreboding shadows. Gandalf saw Harry in the corner of his eye, place his hand on his pocket, the pocket that Gandalf knew housed Harry's magic stick. The old wizard, though, was completely calm; he knew now where they had traveled to, and what that cold breeze was all about.

"I chose the right way," he told the Fellowship, who looked relieved. "At last we are coming to the habitable parts. But we are high up, unless I am mistaken. From the feeling of the air, we must be in a wide hall. Let me risk a little more light."

Gandalf raised his staff, and as he did so, the glare intensified to enormous proportions, chasing away the shadows and lighting the room so completely that the Fellowship could finally see what had previously been only darkness. Great, fat pillars stretched all the way to the ornamented ceiling and along the polished floor, seeming as if they went on forever.

"Behold the great realm and city of the Dwarrowdelf. And that is all that I shall venture on for the present," Gandalf said, his staff dimming. "Let us unpack now and rest here for the night."

The Company spent that night in the great cavernous hall. All but one were huddled close together to escape the chill of the night air in the great open space. Gandalf discreetly observed Harry's slumbering form from his pallet. Everyone, besides the young Thrandullion, was fairly shivering under his blankets. The hobbits had even huddled together and spread their blankets over on top of each other, in order to get more warmth.

Harry, on the other hand, did not have a pallet nor a blanket, just his black travelling robe, yet he looked to be more comfortable than even an elf would, and most importantly, he looked to be warm. He was not shivering in the slightest, his lips were not blue, and his body was not curled in on itself, as it was with the rest of the group, who all felt the cold. The only conclusion Gandalf could draw was that Harry had used magic to warm himself up.

Gandalf, of course, had never heard of such magic, and again he wondered why Harry had not offered to warm the rest of the Company, as he had with himself. It would certainly put a halt to the continuous hobbit grumbling that was getting on the old wizard's nerves, and no doubt Legolas' as well.

Gandalf reminded himself that Harry was likely still shy, or otherwise intimidated by the Fellowship, probably thinking they would attack him – as they had when first they met – if he dared raise his
magic stick to them. Or otherwise he simply forgot to tell them about this warming magic, which was
a very dangerous thing to do in these dark, suspicious times. They needed all the aide they could get,
after all.

The next morning, after breakfast, Gandalf decided to go on again at once. There was no sense in
lingering in this drafty, wide-open chamber, where they were more likely to be seen by unpleasant
eyes.

"We are tired, but we shall rest better when we are outside," he told his companions. "I think that
none of us will wish to spend another night in Moria." Gandalf saw the hobbits and particularly
Harry, nod most enthusiastically at this.

After rolling up their pallets and packing away the breakfast tools, the Company followed Gandalf
out of the great chamber and under another archway. They found themselves in a wide corridor. As
they went along it, a faint glimmer could be seen up ahead behind a half open door, wooded, and
rusted at the hinges. They walked into the chamber. The light they had seen had been daylight that
stemmed from a small high window in the chamber. The small strip of sunlight fell slanting down
through the window, finally coming to rest upon a rectangular stone structure that could be nothing
other than a dwarvish coffin.

They had walked into a tomb.

Many bones and skeletons were laying scattered about the room, as though whoever did the
slaughtering held no respect for the dead, and indeed, probably did not. Among the fettered remnants
dwarvish skeletons the Company could also see broken swords, axe heads, cloven shields, and
helms, among that which were not only dwarvish in make, but also orcish, with blackened blades
and scimitars.

"A great battle has taken place here. There were no survivors, I'm afraid." Gandalf walked towards
the sarcophagus. "Here lays Balin. Son of Fundin. Lord of Moria," Gandalf read aloud the
inscription on the tomb, the answering sobs from Gimli his only response. "He is dead then. It is as I
feared," Gandalf added grimly and unnecessarily.

Harry, Gandalf saw, appeared confused at the proceedings, though, at the same time he looked to be
awkwardly sympathetic to Gimli's plight, as if he understood the meaning of death. This, Gandalf
thought, was highly unusual conduct for a wizard.

Gandalf looked down and saw, in the bony hands of a dwarvish skeleton, a crumbling book, of
which there appeared to be writings in both dwarvish and elvish. The paper crackled as Gandalf
lifted the heavy manuscript and turned the pages.

"It seems to be a record of the fortunes or unfortunes of Balin's folk. The first clear word is sorrow,
and the rest reads, day being the tenth of November, Balin, Lord of Moria, fell in Dimrill Dale. He
went alone to look in Mirror mere. An orc shot him from behind a stone. we slew the orc, but many
more . . . up from east up the Silverlode. The remainder of the page is so blurred that I can hardly
make anything out. But I think I can read, we have barred the gates. We cannot get out. Drums.
Drums in the deep. We cannot get out." The last thing written was in a trailing scrawl of elf-
letters: "They are coming."

The Company stood in silent horror at this last statement.

It was piercingly broken by a loud thud, followed by a serious of clattering clangs and scrapes that
echoed horribly in the dense stillness of the mines. Gandalf whirled around coming face to face with
a sheepish and scared looking Peregrin Took, who stood next to a well.
"Fool of a Took!" he snapped at Pippin, who looked contrite. "Next time throw yourself in and rid us of your stupidity!"

Gandalf had hardly spoken these words, when there came from the depths below them, a great noise, a **BOOM** that seemed to echo continuously and ominously in the mines, and in their hearts.

"They are coming!" cried Legolas, stringing his bow.

"Who's coming?" asked Harry with alarm, taking out his magic stick.

"We cannot get out," said Gimli, axe raised.

"Trapped!" cried Gandalf. "Why did I delay? Here we are, caught, just as they were before. But I was not here then, indeed, neither was Harry."

The wizard in question looked dismayed at this.

**Doom Doom** came the sudden drumbeat, now increased in its frequency.

"Who's coming?" Harry asked again, his eyes wide with nervous anticipation.

"Orcs!" spat Legolas, disgust evident on his face.

"Orcs?" Harry injected, a panicked pitch in his voice. "The flesh-eaters? They're here with us? Now? In the mines?"

"Thanks to Pippin," Merry grumbled, sliding out his sword.

"Merlin! Is there anything I need to know about how to kill them?" he asked. Unfortunately, the Fellowship, who were quickly gathering what weapons they would need, were not paying him much attention. "Do they have any weaknesses?"

Gandalf, seeing Harry's panicked stance, took pity on him. "Kill them as you would kill a regular person with your magic." He noticed Harry blanching at this. "The light of the sun also repels them. But I do not know how that little bit of useless information can help you, as there is no sunlight in these accursed mines."

Gandalf half expected Harry to panic at this last statement, but, if anything, the younger wizard developed a dawning expression, before putting on the most determined expression Gandalf had ever witnessed. This was Harry, the Wizard, as Gandalf and the Fellowship had never seen him. Quite obviously he has some sort of magic planned. It should be interesting to view what he had in store for those filthy orcs.

The screeching and thundering was getting closer now. Boromir, in a foolish endeavour, stuck his head out the door, only to almost get it pierced by two orc arrows.

"They have a cave troll," the man of Gondor said grimly, before flinging the door shut. He, Aragorn, and Legolas then threw long, unused dwarvish axes across its holdings. Not that axes could stop a fully-grown cave troll and a hoard of orcs, but it might slow them down enough for the Fellowship to prepare.

Gandalf whirled around. "Protect the little ones," he told Harry, whom nodded determinedly and moved in front of the circle of hobbits huddled by the pillars; his little magic stick – its size belying of the true power it held – raised like the greatest of wizardly rods, and indeed, it probably was.
"Let them come," Gimli growled from his perch on Balin's tomb. "There is one dwarf in Moria who still draws breath!"

And come they did. The screeching of the orc scum was a horrible echo that shivered down the Fellowship's spines. The orcs hacked first at the door, so that they made gaps in the wood. Aragorn and Legolas took this opportunity to launch a few arrows through the gaps. The squeals the Fellowship heard could only mean the arrows had found their mark.

But this brief moment of victory was obliterated when the orcs – who had been hacking relentlessly at the door with their swords – finally cut straight through the barrier and swarmed into the room like a horde of angry wasps that had just had someone trespass on their nest.

A screeching, dark, hideous and deformed sight they were, shaking their ugly manes, madly brandishing their weapons, and bearing their sharp teeth that seemed permanently inked with their black, putrid saliva. They would soon overwhelm the room with their great number, and Aragorn and Legolas abandoned their slings and arrows to fought instead with swords and knives.

They struck. First advancing on Aragorn, Legolas, Boromir, and Gimli. Some escaped the first group and lunged at Gandalf, who parried their killing thrusts with agile twists and turns of his staff and sword. The orcs that trickled past the offensive fighters and sprang at the hobbits and Harry, however, did not make it passed their first attempt at killing.

The group of particularly gruesome orcs – who had that blank look about them – endeavored first to slay Harry in order to get to the hobbits he was protecting. They didn't get a chance. A dome of violet light encircled the huddle of deceivingly little people, and after a few flashes of red light, the orcs were found slumped in awkward sprawls on the ground, their gazes surprised, and their weapons held loosely in their claw-like hands.

The hobbits could only gape at this spectacle, never before witnessing magic used in such a way. Indeed, never before witnessing any such strange magic. They turned to a bashfully grinning Harry with dropped jaws and wide-eyes.

"I think I'll stick with you from now on, Harry," Merry said, still nervously staring at the unconscious orcs and shuffling over to the young wizard. The other hobbits quickly followed suit.

Boromir had just lopped the head off the nearest orc when there came from the door, a heavy thumping noise before the remaining wood splintered as a great, fat club burst its way in. The club belonged to an even greater and fatter, not to mention eye-wateringly smellier, troll, whose tough hide looked like a mixture of damp dung and slimy mucus, and indeed, smelled like it as well. Its little, beady eyes were only comparable to its even tinier brain.

It looked around the room for a moment, blinking stupidly at the Fellowship, before it groaned deafeningly, and charged, its great body jiggling with the movement. Along with the troll had come a second wave of orcs, and half the Fellowship was distracted by them, while the other half attempted to subdue the monstrous creature.

The half trying to subdue the troll were Gimli, Legolas, Boromir, and Aragorn. It would charge at them with its club, raising it in the air before smacking it stone-crushingly on the ground, forcing the four men to scatter. Gimli, Aragorn, and Boromir hacked at the feet of the troll while it tried to whip Legolas – who had moved onto a stone pedestal – with a chain it had found lying on the ground.

Legolas was an elf, however, and he was too fast and agile for the troll's whip, dodging and ducking and swaying out of its path, his long hair flying in all directions. The troll finally made an error while attempting to hit Legolas; the chain curled, instead, around a pillar. The elf used this to his advantage
by securing the chain with his foot, and running up it and onto the troll's shoulders, where he tried to let loose a couple of arrows.

Unfortunately, the troll's head, as most heads of trolls were, was made out of the same thick hide that covered its backside, and the arrows merely bounced harmlessly off its skull, forcing Legolas to jump gracefully off the troll and back on the ground.

But by this time more orcs had filtered into the room like liquid in a glass, and the Fellowship was now forced to divide its attention between the troll and the orcs.

Harry however, had had enough. Her earlier panic had bleed away to strategic calm as the battle had awakened her natural self-confidence in the wielding of her magic. If it was true what Gandalf said about orcs being allergic to sunlight, rather like vampires, she had just the spell for them. As the orcs were starting to overwhelm the Fellowship, Harry thrust out her wand toward the ceiling and shouted in her loudest voice, "CURRUS APOLLO!"

A blindness obscured the eyes of the Company as a brilliant golden light erupted from Harry's wand, taking the ghostly form of a chariot on fire, and streaking to all corners of the room, the heat and ray beams frying the orcs where they stood. All that could be heard was a sizzling, shrieking sound, and all that could be smelled was burning orc flesh.

The light finally died down, and the spots in front of the Fellowship's eyes finally disappeared leaving them staring at the charred remains of about thirty orcs. In the midst of these remains, looking even more stupid than usual, stood the troll, who took one look at its fallen comrades before uttering a horrifying roar and turning to the nearest Fellowship member, who happened to be Frodo.

It happened in a split second. The Fellowship could not have stopped it even if they'd tried. The bulbous troll raised its large club, about to swing it down on Frodo's little head. Harry had a brief image of a cowering Hermione and a determined Ron before –

"Wingardium Leviosa!"

Deja vu struck Harry as she thought of her first year. The cave troll even made the same stupid expression as the one in the girl's bathroom had when it found itself without a club. It even looked up at the floating iron mallet above its head in a kind of dumb wonder, as though thinking that clubs didn't usually fly, especially ones only a troll could lift.

"Ghra-auh?" rumbled the troll.

Taking advantage of the troll's shock, Harry jerked her wand sharply downward, directing the giant club as it flew through the air.

THUD!

The troll groaned, inducing a little pity from Harry, and collapsed on the ground, its large belly wobbling almost laughingly.

A silence descended in the chamber. It was broken by the dull clatter of the troll hammer as it fell from the air and onto its owner's fat head.

Harry gulped, a victorious thrill churned in her stomach as she turned towards her companions, ready to revel in the satisfaction of a battle well won. But, it was not to be. She looked into the eyes of the Fellowship. The awed expressions on their faces caused her to duck her head down in a feeling of embarrassed anger.
In the wizarding world, she hated being stared at because everyone thought she was some big hero, and now, she felt exactly the same emotions stemming from the Fellowship. Even Gandalf looked amazed, and he was a wizard! But there was another emotion lingering beneath the surface, and Harry was saddened to discover, as he looked into Pippin's eyes, that it was one of fear.

If a group made up of hobbits, elves, wizards, and dwarves should fear someone like Harry, then there really was no hope for her. Likely they would declare her too dangerous and attempt to do away with her as they had before.

At least she wouldn't have to hold herself back anymore, Harry thought, straightening out of the hunch she had recently assumed to look as harmless as possible, staring them down defiantly. No more hiding her magic; if they wanted a fight, she'd give them one and show them exactly why they should fear the wrath of a witch.

"The will of good works in mysterious ways, I always say," Gandalf said.

Harry faltered and let her gaze cool. She hesitantly look to the older wizard and found Gandalf smiling at her knowingly. And after once more perusing the eyes of the Company, Harry finally smiled back, understanding that the old wizard had somehow understood Harry's predicament, and apologized for it. Everyone else looked more relaxed after that statement as well. Pippin even shuffled up to Harry.

"I'll tell you what, Harry," he said, looking up at Harry with eyebrows raised appreciation brightening his visage. "I now declare you... my new Merry, new and improved."

"And what's that supposed t'mean?" Merry retorted good-naturedly.

"It means while you're great fun and my best friend, you're hardly knocking down cave trolls and defeating orcs with a wave of your hand, now, are you?"

Nearly everyone laughed. Even Gimli chuckled appreciatively.

"Well, lad," he said in his gruff voice, "It seems I had the measure of you wrong. You've proven yourself more than worthy as a member of this Fellowship." He bowed so low to Harry that his beard brushed the ground, and added, "Gimli, son of Gloin, at your most thankful service."

Harry grinned and returned the bow, knowing that now, things would take a turn for the better in her relationship with the Fellowship.

Gandalf laughed at the Fellowship's still awestruck expressions. "Did I not tell you that Harry has come to us as a gift from the Valar?" he reminded them. Then he grew sombre. "But later for more of this. We must make for the bridge of Kazadum."

They ran through the halls and archways of Moria for the better part of half an hour, the Doom, doom of drums, and the screeching of the orcs were always on their heels. They finally stopped at the top of a staircase that was cut from the same rock as was beneath their feet. The steps wound around a corner so they could not see the bottom.

"Lead them on, Aragorn!" Gandalf said, placing a hand on the ranger's shoulder. "It is time I performed some magic now." Then he turned back the way they had all come and disappeared around the corner of an arch.

"But - " Harry began.

"Do not worry yourself over Gandalf, Harry. He will be fine," said Aragorn. "Now go!" he shouted
to the Fellowship, and they flew down the stairs, Boromir in the lead, Aragorn bringing up the rear.

Boromir was forced to halt suddenly when the stairs around the corner disappeared. He balanced on the edge of a crumbling step for a few seconds before Legolas rushed forward and yanked him back. They fell in a heap onto the ground.

"We shall have to take the long stairs," Aragorn said, coming up behind them. But just as they were going to veer off to the right where the second staircase resided, there came from the top of the stairs behind them a dazzling light, and even more BOOMS. A few minutes later, Gandalf came whirling down the stairs and landed face-down on the ground at the Fellowship's feet.

"I've done all I can for now," Gandalf told them, as Aragorn helped lift him up. "But I've almost exhausted my magic. We shall have to make do without light for a while."

"No," Harry said suddenly, taking out her wand. "We have light. Luminos Orbis." A ball of warm light grew from the tip of her wand and floated like a star captured within a bubble above their heads. White light, not unlike the one that usually radiated from Gandalf's staff, filled the previously dim corridor.

"Wizard indeed," Gandalf said, smiling. Then he frowned. "But don't just stand here!" he snapped at them. "Go on! Go on! Where are you, Gimli? You too, Harry. Come ahead with me! Keep close behind, all of you!"

They traveled for what seemed like ages, even to Gandalf, who was the oldest among them and had, indeed, seen many an age. Down, up, across crumbling staircases they went. At the bottom of the seventh flight of stairs Gandalf halted.

"Such a heat!" he gasped. "We ought to be down at least to the level of the Gates by now. Soon I think we should look for a left-hand turn to take us east. I hope it is not far. I am very weary. I must rest here a moment, even if all the orcs ever spawned are after us."

Gimli took his arm and helped him down to a seat on the step. "What happened away up there at the door," he asked.

"I do not know," Gandalf answered. "But I found myself suddenly faced by something I had not met before. I could think of nothing to do but to try and put a shutting-spell on the door. But even then the door can be broken by an orcish hoard.

"As I stood there I could hear orc-voices, they shouted ghash: that is "fire" in their own hideous language. And they seemed afraid. Something came into the chamber. What it was I cannot guess, but I have never felt such a challenge. It nearly broke me. I had to speak a word of Command, but even then the door burst into pieces, throwing me backwards down the stairs.

"And . . . I am very thirsty," he added tiredly, looking at Harry.

It took Harry a couple of seconds to comprehend the look. "Oh, right," she said, and rummaged in her robes. She produced a small square box. "To warn you," she added in her faltering Westron, looking at the Fellowship. "Do not be alarmed."

The Company watched as Harry placed the small box on the ground in front of him, pointed his stick at it, and mumbled some foreign words. They watched in fascination as the box grew to over hobbit-size so that it now resembled a travelling case. They observed as Harry crouch down over it, unlocked it, and take out a small, drab pouch. Then they looked on in disbelief as Harry stuffed his entire arm in the little pouch.
That is not possible, everyone besides the young wizard thought.

"Here we are," said Harry, taking her arm out of the pouch and holding up a large wooden flask, that, they saw again with wonderment, was even bigger than the bag in which it had resided.

"The water in here is cooler and fresher than I can ever conjure manually," Harry commented, handing the flask to Gandalf. "And there's more water in there than you would believe, so everyone can have a long drink."

This cheered the Company as Gandalf relayed Harry's words, and the flask was passed around for a good ten minutes while everyone quenched their thirst. Aragorn, the last one to take a drink, stood there with the still unemptied flask in his hand, observing it from every angle.

"How is this possible?" he finally asked Harry as he handed back the flask.

"Magic," Harry answered with a shrug.

"Do you have other things in that pouch?" Pippin asked. "Like that pumpkin cake?"

"Troll!" Gandalf exclaimed, disapprovingly.

"No, it's alright, Gandalf. And yes, I have a whole barrel of food in here." Harry ignored the dropped jaws. "But I have something better than Pumpkin Pasties." She pulled out a huge block of Honeydukes chocolate. "It's called chocolate. It perks you right up and makes you more energetic."

"Ah!" cried Gandalf. "That is good indeed. We will need all the strength we can get. And you best give the hobbits two helpings each, Harry."

"No problem," Harry said. She broke off pieces of the chocolate and handed it to the Fellowship.

"But this is delicious," Legolas said, after first declining the offered chocolate, and then at Harry's encouraging nod, accepting it. "I have never tasted anything of the like."

"I think the plant only exists in my world," Harry said absently to Galdalf when he asked about what it was made of, wondering when cocoa beans had first been discovered and who had invented chocolate.

"Plant?" Pippin echoed, chocolate smeared at the corner of his lips. He reassessed the chunk of mouth-watering confection in his hands. "Are you saying this is a vegetable? Why can't the vegetables here taste this good?"

"It's a . . . " Harry searched for the word but couldn't think of it.

"Don't be silly, Pippin. It's probably made from whatever plant Mister Harry mentioned. Apple pie is made from apples and grain but it's hardly a vegetable, now, is it?" Sam turned to Harry and smiled. "I bet my folks would love this; you'll have to show me how to make it, Mister Harry."

"Er, I don't know how," Harry told him, scratching the back of her head. "Someone else made the chocolate, and I just buy it."

"Ah," said Gandalf understandingly. "You buy this choke-let at the markets, then."

"Something like that, yes," Harry said.

Everyone munched on their chocolates for a couple of minutes, forgetting for a moment, the orcs behind them. Then Gandalf turned to Harry, looking serious. Everyone watched interestedly from
their positions on the steps.

"Harry I want you to be honest with me," Gandalf said, looking into the younger wizard's eyes.

Harry opened her mouth, looking offended. Gandalf didn't give her a chance to speak.

"I know you have been honest with us so far, you have not lied to us, but have you been telling us everything? You have been very secretive and I understand it has been for good reason but I have been wondering . . . were you the thing that flew out of the burning tree when the wargs attacked?"

Harry stiffened at this. "We thought it to be a spy of Sauron at the time, but it was you, was it not?"

Everyone stopped munching, looking between Gandalf and Harry.

"Yes," the younger wizard muttered reluctantly.

"There is no cause for you to be embarrassed, Harry. I only ask because I have never known any with such a skill. You can fly then, can you not? Wizards in your world can fly?"

Gandalf watched as Harry's eyes flitted about nervously before he finally said, "Yes," in the softest voice, that only Gandalf who was sitting next to him, and perhaps Legolas with his elven hearing, could hear. "Well, sort of," he added. "Wizards in my world can only float by our own designs but we can fly by using devices, such as enchanted broomsticks and carpets. I was on a broomstick when you saw me that time."

"A flying broomstick?" queried Gimli after Gandalf had translated Harry's words at the hobbits' urging. "Whoever heard of such a thing?"

Harry fidgeted. "Common where I am from." She turned to address Gandalf. "I could show you if you want."

"Another time perhaps, Harry," said Gandalf, head whipping toward the direction they had come from with an anxious look. "Now we must deal with those loathsome orcs sniffing at our heels. We have rested here long enough. It is time to go onwards."

They had run straight out for about twenty minutes when Gimli, with his dwarf eyes that could see in the dark, spotted something in the darkness ahead.

"It looks to be light," he said. "But it is not daylight. It is red."

"Ghash," muttered Gandalf. "I wonder if that is what the orcs meant: that the lower levels are of fire? Still, we can only go on."

As they traveled deeper into the mines, the air became very hot, and the red light intensified. They stopped at yet another arch, Gandalf stepping through, the red light briefly illuminating his face. Just as quickly he stepped back.

"There is some new devilry here. I know not what, but I feel it to be worse than even a hundred orcs. But one good thing I have seen. We have reached the First deep, the level immediately below the Gates. The Bridge of Kazadum is about a quarter mile further than that. Our journey through the mines is almost over."

"Good," gruffed Gimli. The others looked at him with some surprise. "This excursion has not been what I had imagined. I would rather feel the sun shine on my face than endure more of this darkness."
"You soon shall, my friend," said Legolas. "And even more than that, you will see the Golden Woods of Lothlorien. It is there, I am told, that the sun seems as if it shines perpetually, even at night."

"Glad I am to see the two of you extending the hand of friendship, but it is now time to continue," said Gandalf, and he gestured to the Fellowship to follow him through the arch.

It seemed like a monstrous chasm to the Fellowship. Pits extending deep into the ground glowed an eerie red that only a large fire, consumed with the reflection of shadows, could produce. Along the middle of the cavernous chamber, there were great-conjoined pillars, like the buttress roots of trees, and on top of the pillars ran a pathway. Sometimes a crack could be seen on the road, where hot wafts of air and red light spurted out.

It seemed, to some of the members of the Fellowship, as though they had come to the very base of Mount Doom. To Harry, it looked like they marching into Hell.

"Quietly now," Gandalf said. "We do not want to attract any orcish attentions. Harry, dim your light, we do not need it now. And stay with the hobbits."

But he had only just finished speaking when the DOOM, DOOM of drums sounded behind, ahead, and all around them.

"Tis too late for quiet!" declared Boromir, looking frantically around.

"Run then! Run!" cried Gandalf, and he led them across the hellish path.

The chattering and screeching of the orcs could now be heard coming from the far left walls of rock. A couple of arrows that came swishing down on them further proved the orcs' presence. One even found itself stuck in Gandalf's hat, where it rested like a dashing black feather. Another struck Frodo in the chest, and for a split second the Fellowship thought he was done for, but the arrow merely pinged off to the side.

Gandalf was not the only one whom turned to Harry, thinking it was he who put up a shield to halt the arrow. But he merely shrugged at them looking confused, clearly expressing that he did not save the hobbit.

Hobbits, quite a few of the Fellowship thought as they turned to gaze at a sheepish sturdier creatures than what they appeared to be.

As the Company ran along the path, they found themselves having to jump over relatively small fissures occasionally. They had already leaped over two such splits in the road when they came upon one that was too large for hobbit, and indeed even dwarf legs to jump over. The littler folk would have to be tossed across the gap.

And so it was with Legolas jumping over first, followed by Gandalf, and lastly Boromir, who tucked a Merry and a Pippin beneath each arm before leaping. By this time the path on either side of the gap began crumbling, before falling completely down into the fiery pit. The breach, now, was larger than it began.

This did not deter Gimli though, who, about to be tossed by Aragorn, exclaimed with all the obstinate pride of his people, "Nobody tosses a dwarf!" and sprang out on his stout legs, almost, but not quite making it across the gap. If it were not for Legolas' hand flashing itself out to take hold of Gimli's flapping beard, the dwarf would have followed the path of the crumbling road.

As it was, he still found time to shout, "Not the beard!" evidently valuing the fur on his face more
than his own life, as was typical in all dwarvish customs.

Harry was next to leap over, though, she first had to step back a few steps, taking a deep breath and telling herself not to look down in order to do it. Her wand still in her hand, she muttered, "Levioso," as she took a running jump, and veritably flew across the gap. She sighed in relief when she made it safely across.

Aragorn then tossed Sam across the breach, just in time too, as the road further crumbled, forcing the last two members of the Fellowship to leap back, or otherwise fall to their doom. The gap was now so large that even a troll could not have jumped over it.

The rest of the Company stared in dismay, now certain that Aragorn and Frodo, the two most important people in the Fellowship, were permanently stuck on the other side with orcs, trolls and Valar knew what else. And to make it worse, the entire road beneath Frodo and Aragorn's feet began shivering dangerously, apparently not having had to bear anyone's weight in a long while.

"Harry!" Legolas said suddenly. "Could you not use your magic to help them?"

Harry brandished her wand. "Only one at a time!"

Aragorn, who had heard Harry from the other side yelled, "Frodo first then, Harry!"

Harry nodded and pointed her wand. She shouted, "Accio Frodo!"

The hobbit cried out in surprise as he found himself suddenly whooshing rapidly across the gap and into Gandalf's outstretched, and very relieved arms. The Fellowship then turned to watch Aragorn's plight. They saw, horrifyingly, that the giant pillars holding up the road across the gap finally exhausted themselves, taking the road, and the possible future king of Gondor, down with them into the chasm.

All Harry could think was 'Sirius', as the summoning spell fairly roared out of her mouth. Three angst filled seconds later, they all saw Aragorn soar up from the depths in front of them, and land bone-jarringly on the path by their feet.


But Aragorn smiled up at her. "I am not," he told Harry, as Legolas helped him up. "I thought I was done for. You have saved my life, and for that I will always call you a friend."

Harry smiled back.

"Now is not the time to linger!" Gandalf said a mite snappishly. "We must be on our way!"

They fairly flew down the path, avoiding yet more orc arrows, but this time Legolas shot back, and in true elven fashion, he found his mark every time. They ran until they came to the end of the path, where another hall, though much less great than the Dwarrowdelf, stretched like a ford of black water before them. And beyond that, a little higher was –

"Look ahead!" called Gandalf. "The bridge is near! It is dangerous and narrow. Built in case of attack from the eastern side. Alas that the dwarves did not think to build the same defence at Durin's Door! Now lead them on, Gimli! Harry, stay by my side, I may need you yet."

They ran to the bridge, hundreds of orcs now following in their wake. Suddenly, Legolas cried out. They turned their heads and saw behind them, two more trolls, these ones lugging heavy catapults. But that was not what had made Legolas shout in fear. For out of the dark behind the hoard of orcs
came a shadowy figure, large, and wreathed in flame. In one hand it held a blade of fire, and in the other a whip of many thongs.

"Ai! Ai!" wailed Legolas. "A Balrog! A Balrog is come!"

"Ghash," Gandalf mumbled, faltering. He closed his eyes and leaned heavily on his staff, now, more than ever before, resembling an old man. "Now I understand. What a misfortune. And I am already weary. This foe is beyond any of you; run!"

They ran, not the only ones doing so. For the orcs took one look at the Great Demon and, screeching, disappeared to their many holes in the rock of Moria.

Losing one foe, only to gain an even more frightful one did not escape the Fellowship's notice. And they wondered, with dread, what this one was capable of. Finally they came upon the narrow bridge, the hobbits crossing first, the rest following. As she reached the other side, Harry realised Gandalf wasn't with them.

"Gandalf!" she heard Frodo cry.

Harry turned with dread, knowing what she'd see, but still wishing it wasn't so. Gandalf stood defiantly in the middle of the bridge, his staff raised against the monstrous Balrog demon, which hovered threateningly on the other side.

"You can not pass!" Gandalf cried.

The demon made a sort of sniffing sound; looking, Harry thought, a lot like Lucius Malfoy had as he glared down at a cowering Dobby.

Gandalf, however, was certainly no Dobby. He raised his staff even higher and spoke: "I am a servant of the secret fire. Wielder of the flame of Arnor. The dark fire will not avail you!"

The Balrog raised its fiery sword high in the air and brought it down hard on the old Mage. There was a blinding flash and Harry was certain that the next thing she would see would be two halves of one Gandalf. But as the light cleared Harry saw, with amazement, that the wily old wizard had conjured a light blue vapour that formed a protective shield around himself.

The fact that the Balrog had not been successful in its severing attempt only seemed to anger it, and this time it bought its whip into play, splitting it ear-wincingly through the air.

"He cannot stand alone!" cried Aragorn suddenly and ran back along the bridge. "Elendil!" he shouted. "I am with you Gandalf!"

"Gondor!" cried Boromir and leaped after him.

Harry thought for a second then shouted, "Hogwarts!" her wand raised. In the back of her mind, while she charged forward to help her companions, she couldn't help but feel exceedingly silly using her school's name as a battle-cry.

As they ran, Gandalf cried again, "YOU SHALL NOT PASS!" and he struck the bridge with his staff.

The bridge cracked right at the Balrog's feet and fell, along with the Balrog, down into the dark chasm.

"NOOOO!" came a deep, guttural cry that echoed in Harry's ears, but for the life of her, she couldn't
work out which of the Fellowship had said it. Surely they wouldn't feel pity for the terrible creature?

Harry shook her head. That didn't matter anymore. Gandalf was fine; he had survived without anyone's help. But as soon as Harry had the thought, the Balrog cracked its whip, and it lashed, curling around Gandalf's ankle. Perhaps the wizard might have been able to survive this by hanging on to the remaining bit of bridge until help came, but the Balrog had still been holding onto the whip, so that by using its weight, it rapidly dragged Gandalf out of sight, just as Harry, Aragorn, and Boromir skidded to a halt by the edge.

"Fly you fools!" The Fellowship would hear those harshly whispered parting words from Gandalf forever in their minds.

Harry tried, in one last desperate attempt to summon Gandalf to them, but it was for naught, because, she suspected, the spell was not strong enough to lift both Gandalf and the Balrog, who, Harry assumed, was still attached to the wizard via its whip. Or else the spell just didn't work on a person like Gandalf, who was full of Middle Earth magic. A magic that counteracted Harry's own.

Despair scrabbled at her chest and she moaned in anguish.

"Come, Harry! Harry! The bridge is collapsing, we must make haste!"

Harry felt someone grab hold of her arm and she didn't even try to shake them off, allowing herself to be dragged off the weakening bridge. Not five minute later she stood, blinking, in the glare of the sun. They were finally outside the Mines of Moria, and the person who led them here was not there to take the credit.

She felt like she'd been put through the vortex again. Sound did not exist to Harry, there was only the rush of wind and the throbbing of blood. There only seemed to be pain; the one long, endless constant in her life. It was always about pain, and love, she thought. Pain cannot exist without love, because you if you didn't care, it wouldn't hurt so.

And if it was hurting so badly for her, the one who had known Gandalf only for a relatively brief period of time, how much worse would the others, like the poor little hobbits, be feeling at a time like this? Harry's bearing rushed back at her, and with it the awareness of tears on her face, and Aragorn's argument with Boromir.

"Give them a moment for pity's sake!" Boromir growled, his own eyes suspiciously wet.

Harry stumbled over to the nearest hobbit, sweet little Sam, and held the sobbing dear gently to her shoulder, laying a comforting hand on his back when he clutched at her cloak and soaked it through with his tears. She gazed beseeching at their current leader as she bundled another halfling – Pippin this time – into her side, affecting the most piteous look she could, all enormous, glistening, green doe-eyes and trembling bottom lip.

But while he looked unhappy causing them such distress, Aragorn would not be dissuaded, logic conquering over compassion. "By nightfall, these hills will be swarming with orcs! We must make for the woods of Lothlorien at once."

Harry tuned the arguing duo out as she felt a pair of familiar talons settle on her shoulder.
Harry stood in the middle of a breezy meadow that the Fellowship had claimed for their camping ground the night before. Soft, pastel flowers littered the ground at her feet and if a butterfly were to flutter past, it would not be out of place. The day was idyllic in its beauty, an uncommon occurrence during these troubled times and Harry was determined to make the best of it even if she was currently about to perform like a circus monkey for the amusement of her companions.

After much prodding and nudging and grumbling from the Fellowship – Merry and Pippin decidedly of the nudging and grumbling parts – Harry bashfully and with extreme hesitance agreed to show them her method of flying. Gimli in particular was especially interested – though he tried not to show it – because, according to him, "Broomsticks were meant for sweeping the dirt on the ground, not the clouds in the air. 'Tis unnatural, this witchery!"

Now here Harry was, tightly clutching her Firebolt, which she had just plucked from out of her enlarged trunk. She was attempting to calm herself enough to climb onto her broom without feeling like a fool, but the vaguely disbelieving looks from the Fellowship made it difficult work.

She had resolved to just ignore them, and even tried to ignore Boromir and Aragorn when they started to spar, but it was extremely difficult; they were really going at it. The strange thing was, they weren't even sparing with swords, instead, they were fighting with a large cow horn and a silver crown.

How odd.

They even seemed to have made some sort of contest out of it; the theme of which appeared to be Who-so-ever Chucketh Their Opponent's Weapon the Furthest Wins. Aragorn won when he sent Boromir's horn soaring over the head of Frodo, who had been running away from the battle duo.

For some reason, Harry got the feeling that last bit was important.

Legolas, who had been observing the fight, then turned and looked extremely put out by the existence of Harry's Firebolt. He even made it a point to say that since Harry wasn't an elf, a twig like that couldn't possibly support his weight. Then he rounded up by staring very rudely at Harry's beautiful broom.

It was obvious to Harry that the elf thought he had made some sort of a point, if the gigantic swelling of his nose was any indication. Harry didn't bother asking why the elf's nose had grown to almost the size of the rest of his head in the space of a few seconds. Indeed, at the moment, it seemed rather natural. She also didn't bother explaining about magic and how a series of enchantments were the reason why she could ride on a broomstick. There was no point in arguing, they were about to get a demonstration anyway.

As she geared herself up, Harry saw a cow jump over the moon. How very strange. When had cows learned to fly? And the moon was being very rude, she thought, taking up space still, considering it was now the middle of the day.

She swung a leg over her broom, assumed a confident stance with her feet firmly on the ground – she would need a good take off in order to impress them – and –

"Just a moment Harry," said Gandalf, walking towards her. Harry noticed with a start that Gandalf looked different. His white hair and beard were now shorter and neater. The same could be said for
his clothes, which now looked like they had been ironed and bleached. His staff . . . well, it no longer looked as though it might be used for firewood. Rather, it resembled a large polished baton, except it was made of wood.

"You have forgotten something I think," said the old wizard, gazing at Harry with a sly smile.

Harry could not think what she had forgotten. She told Gandalf so.

"Ah," said Gandalf, holding up a finger. "Pat yourself on the head."

Harry told him she'd rather not as her hat was in the way and she didn't care to take it off.

"But if you pat yourself on the head, you will see what you have forgotten."

Harry reluctantly obliged, patting her head. She noticed with some surprise that her hat was not on it. She had forgotten her hat. How could she have forgotten her hat? It was too important! Where was it? Where was her hat – ?

Gandalf held it up to her.

Harry snatched it, relief sweeping over her. She had her hat; she had not lost her hat. Harry sighed once more, stuffed it on her head, nodded a thank you to Gandalf, and prepared to launch off.

"Remember Harry," said Gandalf leaning over the Firebolt to whisper in Harry's ear. "Do not forget your hat. Otherwise you may end up stuck; whether here or there will be up to you. And always remember; do not give in to temptation."

Harry nodded seriously, even though she didn't exactly know what Gandalf was going on about.

She soared into the air, leaving the green landscape below her. It was a wonderful feeling; the wind in her face, whipping her robes about. She flew higher, and higher, and higher. Se glanced down. The trees looked like mere dots on the ground; she could no longer see Gandalf or the others.

With a devil-may-care grin, she ascended to an even greater height. She was higher than the clouds; higher than the earth! She was in space! Spaaaaaace!

"Spaaaaaaace!" she yelled, only for her voice to be pulled away by the sucking vacuum of empty space.

Something was telling her, in a distant corner of her mind, that this should have been impossible, that broom were not engineered to travel this high, but Harry went along with it. After all, it wasn't everyday that one got to see space up close and personal.

The stars looked a lot closer than they did back on the ground. They were so big, as big as bludgers, and Harry found herself having to dodge them as she whizzed passed. She felt the hairs on her head singe slightly from the proximity of the burning globes.

Something began pulling her, tugging relentlessly at her. Had she entered the atmosphere of another planet and was now being pulled down by its gravity? Harry's fuzzy vision took in the sight of the wizard-eating monster grappling at her. It looked liked a swirly, dark violet, raspberry cheesecake, ice cream cone. It was a black hole!

"No!" she wailed, her hands grasping her broom in an attempt to steer it in another direction. She didn't want to be a dessert topping! "I don't want to go there. Leave me alone!"
It was like a vacuum-cleaner set on high, swallowing up any hapless, unaware dust bunny. It sucked
Harry to the edge and she tried with all her might to fly away, but it seemed as though even a
Firebolt would not be strong enough to fight off a modern house-wife's cleaning equipment. She
desperately hung on to her broom but even as she just barely held on, the wind in the black hole
ripped the hat off her head, sending it twirling away into the vast darkness.

"Nooooooooooooo!"

It had her hat! Her precious hat! She was going to be next. She was going be dragged in, lost in the
abyss. She was going to remain there forever –

"Harry? Harry!"

Harry jerked awake, almost choking on the gasp of air the she sucked in. Aragorn's unshaven face
was leaning over her, outlined by the morning light. "It is time to go," he said, clapping Harry on the
shoulder. He then went to wake the hobbits.

Harry breathed deeply; surprised and a touch disgusted to notice she was sweating. Ew, that was not
how she wanted to wake in the morning. A quick personal charm vanished the sticky moisture from
her skin, while she contemplated the cause of her bodily rebellion.

It had all been a dream, just a dream. The vortex, the stars, the sparring, everything. Well of course
she'd been dreaming! Gandalf was not alive. He was dead. Fallen off the bridge in the Mines of
Moria, and he'd certainly never looked like he had in Harry's dream. He was dead and he wasn't
coming back.

Harry felt bitter. Yet another friend gone.

It didn't seem to matter that she'd only known Gandalf for less than two weeks; she distinctly felt the
loss of the old wizard. His presence had been a comfort for her since she had arrived, and the loss of
it made her feel off-balanced and cold. She reminded herself though, that she couldn't be feeling the
grief as keenly as the rest of the Fellowship, especially Frodo. The hobbit had been looking
wretchedly miserable ever since their escape from Moria.

By questioning Merry and Pippin, Harry discovered that Frodo had known Gandalf all of his life. No
doubt such a loss was even worse than hers when she had lost Sirius, hesitant as she was to consider
such a thing, since it felt almost like betrayal to her godfather's memory. It had to be horrible for
Frodo, and with that ring around his neck adding an extra burden, well, Harry couldn't understand
how he managed to appear so well-adjusted.

Later on, before the Company started off again, Harry forced herself to wonder about the meaning of
her dream and why the possible loss of her hat had terrified her so much. She didn't remember
reading about any specific meanings behind losing one's hat in any of her Divination books. Was it
just silly, random nonsense? But why would she have Gandalf, a significant person she currently
connected to feelings of sadness, be associated with silly nonsense?

Now that she was thinking about it, she had lost her hat sometime the night before. They had been
trekking through the woods for a full day already. It had been dark, and they hadn't lit a fire because
the orcs would have been able to see it. The only light available to them had stemmed from Legolas,
and for a short time – before Aragorn told her to put it out – Harry's own wand. During their nearly
blind trek from the mines to the Silverlode River, Harry had absently ran her fingers through her hair
and noticed her hat was not on her head.

But somehow, she doubted losing a boring old hat would spark such a response.
Harry decided she would think on her hat later. Right now there were more important things going on. From listening to Legolas' and Gimli's conversations, Harry discerned the wood they were about to enter was called Lotho-something or other, and that it was run by elves. Wood elves, to be specific.

It turned out that in Middle Earth, there were different types of elves. Harry wondered if some might look like house-elves but was currently doubting it since Merry and Pippin wouldn't have laughed at the mention of house-elves being around hobbit size if they did look similar.

She did find one thing out; Legolas was apparently a wood elf, and if Gimli's grumblings gave any indication to the matter, wood elves were a highly suspicious lot, prone to jumping from behind trees and sticking their arrows into unsuspecting people's faces. But Harry already knew that, as she had been a first hand witness to Legolas' highly developed sense of distrust.

The Company were now walking precariously amongst towering trees of unusual girth. They were silvery gold in colour, and looked entirely too mystical to be real. They also seemed to let off the same otherworldly glow as Legolas did. Truthfully, it was spectacularly creepy being in that forest and Legolas certainly wasn't helping matters in the least bit, as he felt compelled to bursting into spontaneous bouts of song every now and then.

Any shiny kind of tree that made high-strung pretty-boys like Legolas get in touch with their inner Broadway divas should not be allowed in areas open to the general public.

In truth, while Harry couldn't relate to being so happy, you were performing your own Disney movie, she did understand that this Loth-loreen or whatever, was Legolas' sort of home; this was where his "kin" resided, as Legolas called the elves living in this forest. Harry felt the same way about Hogwarts; her home away from home. Not that Private Drive had ever felt like home to Harry, but it was where she had lived for the first eleven years of her life.

The next leg of travelling was spent basking in the radiance of the forest. Harry found out – with some surprise because she hadn't been expecting it – that it was winter. (Were they pulling her leg? She saw chipmunks frolicking not ten paces ago.) She also found, by discreetly observing Aragorn and Boromir, that the elves here were supposed to be friendly; though, only if you weren't evil and only if you didn't carry evil with you.

Er, yeah, so, did that mean everyone was safe? Aragorn seemed to think so but Harry was of a like mind as Boromir and wondered what these elves considered evil. While she thought herself a good person, Harry had a shard of Dark Lord in her forehead, did that count as carrying evil? And wasn't that ring Frodo was carrying supposed to be evil beyond measure? Their chances at safe passage didn't seem to good, at least, in her opinion.

They stopped to rest by another river, this particular one named Nimrodel, where Legolas just had to sing yet another song. The song featured the word Nimrodel quite often, and was supposed to rhyme, but because Legolas had had to translate it from elvish, it didn't sound as good as it was supposed to. So Legolas claimed, anyway. In either case, Harry couldn't understand it. After Legolas' enthusiastic performance, they set off once more, passing the river Nimrodel and venturing deeper into the woods.

For the first time since she'd arrived in Middle Earth, Harry found herself dearly missing Ron and Hermione. Here she was, on the adventure of all adventures, and they weren't with her to raise hell and take names. Somehow that didn't feel at all right to Harry. She felt hollow, as though the places on either side of her were just waiting to be filled with Ron's stupid jokes and Hermione's constant lecturing. Why couldn't have the vortex, or whatever it was, pick up at least one of her friends along the way? Then Harry wouldn't have to feel so alone.
She hadn't realised it until now, but she had never felt lonely since she'd arrived in Middle Earth because of Gandalf. In Harry's mind Gandalf was a wizard – no matter that he came from a different branch of magic – he was still a wizard, as was Harry. In his presence, Harry had felt . . . part of something more. Not so alone. She supposed it also helped that Gandalf had looked like Professor Dumbledore country cousin, so there was some familiarity there, too.

But now that Gandalf was gone . . . Harry sighed miserably. She really was all alone in this strange, new world. Unless, of course, she found another wizard to travel with but that was about as likely as Ron and Hermione turning up.

When he'd been alive, Gandalf had told her that there were four other wizards out there, beside himself. By name and reputation, Harry knew of only one; Saruman, The White Wizard, who, in actuality, was not so white on the inside. Gandalf – and to a much larger extent, Merry and Pippin – had been the soul suppliers of this gossip – but only if Harry bribed the hobbits with food first – and save for Harry brandishing an "I Love Sauron" sign under Saruman's nose, it really wasn't likely the wizard would go to the trouble of laying out the crumpets and tea.

If they even had crumpets and tea in Middle Earth that is.

That thought only served to depress Harry further, as she was once again reminded of her lonesomeness.

A few dragging moments passed as Harry pondered on this unpleasantly vast feeling. She would have continued to wallow in misery even further, if Hedwig hadn't landed on her shoulder. She glanced at her steadfast companion from the corner of her eye and saw a small grass-snake, already dead, thankfully, dangling from Hedwig's beak. Harry smiled fondly at her. She wasn't really all that alone after all.

Gimli chose that moment to scare the hobbits witless.

"Stay close, young hobbits," he stage whispered, and not a little nervously, holding tight to his axe. "An elf witch resides in these woods, of terrible power. All who look upon her, fall under her spell, and are never seen again."

Frodo looked particularly freaked out by this. His large blue eyes grew even larger and he began turning his head this way and that, prompting Sam to ask if he was alright.

Harry was ambiguous in her feelings. On one hand, she felt pleased she would be meeting another magic user – it got her wondering if the elf witch used a staff like Gandalf's – on the other hand, the way Gimli was describing her . . . well, it sounded like she was a Veela or a Succubus. Though, being an elf of Legolas' likeness, perhaps that wasn't far from the truth.

Gimli sniffed. "Well, here's one dwarf she won't ensnare so easily. I have the eyes of a hawk and the ears of a fox!"

Perhaps Gimli shouldn't have said that last bit because he only served to embarrass himself in the long run. About twenty arrows suddenly sprang up from behind the trees, or more specifically, their owner's sprang out from behind the trees. No one it seemed, not even Legolas, had heard these elves coming.

Harry blinked. It took her all of half a second to process that every one of them looked liked Legolas. The height, the hair, the eyes, the use of arrows as their foremost weapons; it was unnatural. Were they clones? Didn't their gene pool have any variation? And why had Harry yet to see one girl elf? Maybe they were like a hive of bees, with lots of male worker drones and a queen in charge of
everything; the elf witch could be the queen bee.

A stony-faced elf – the leader or maybe a diplomat apparently because he carried no visible weapons – stepped up in front of Aragorn, which alarmingly put him near Harry. Oh, no, no, no, she liked her potentially deadly strangers at least ten feet away from her at any given time. Harry had been alternating between walking next to Pippin and Aragorn the entire trek; she wished now she’d stayed near Pippin.

The elf had hardly opened his mouth and Harry knew he was going to say something derogatory; he had that snooty, Draco Malfoy feel to him. Harry knew; she had dealt with enough Malfoy’s to tell. Besides, the expression on his face told buckets.

"The dwarf breaths so loud, we could have shot him in the dark."

And there it was. Complete with sneering upper crust accent, too, it seemed. Was there an instruction manual given out on how to properly sneer that she hadn't been given? Behind her, Harry heard Gimli growl.

But she wasn't exactly paying attention to that right now. Instead, Harry was really wishing that the elf beside her, not the leader but looked similar enough to be his brother, would remove the arrow he'd planted under her left nostril. She, as a general rule, preferred her pointy objects pointed away from her.

The elf’s face was inscrutable, but Harry had a feeling the ponce was enjoying causing her distress. Harry clenched her jaw, before settling her expression into what she called 'the look': lips together, teeth apart, eyes at half-mast, nose lifted to exactly fifteen degrees. She had stared down Death Eaters with the exact same look had made Dolohov trip over himself after his attack on Hermione.

This look gave the elf pause, his arrow wavering slightly and air of wariness surrounding him at Harry's stony expression. Really, what sort of fellow got off on bully girls? It was on the tip of her tongue to tell the elf just where he could shove that arrow, when her undercover bodyguard took offence in a glorious vision of white fluff. It couldn't be better timed if Harry had planned it herself.

Hedwig – from either territorial indignity or on behalf of Harry's honour – lunged from Harry's shoulder and, screeching madly, scrabbled herself onto the elf’s head, her talons digging, probably not so gently, into his scalp.

"Ai!" cried the elf in alarm, dropping his bow and arrow in order to grab at Hedwig. But the owl flew upwards before he could get her, scratching his forehead and dumping the dead snake on his now messy platinum head. The elf, now looking especially ungraceful, flapped his arms comically in an attempt to get the serpent off. He finally calmed down enough to remove the thing properly, plucking it from his hair with forefinger and thumb, and – with the ugliest expression of disgust ever displayed by an elf – flinging it behind him into the bushes.

Her eyes wide, Harry had covered her mouth with both hands, trying desperately not to laugh out loud – she could only hope she looked shocked at the proceedings and not as if she was choking back hilarity. And she wasn't the only one; Boromir, the hobbits, but mainly Gimli, seemed to be holding back guffaws as well. Unfortunately, they weren't doing a very good job of it. A sudden attack of the coughs seemed to be the main cover up for the hobbits and Boromir. Gimli, however, appeared to be going for a less subtle approach in the form of outright laughing behind the blade of his axe. It obscured his face, but not the sound.

The elf in question was puce with angry embarrassment. Harry supposed having a missile of white feathers attack you would make even the most prudish elf act un-elfish. He looked to be arguing with
the head elf in their own language, and every once in a while he would gesture in Harry's direction. Aragorn and Legolas got involved in the argument, but they looked, at least, like they were trying to smooth things over.

Aragorn held up both hands imploringly and all three elves stopped their squabbling to listen to him.

Finally, after a few minutes of jabbering back and forth, Harry was summoned by Aragorn to join the quartet. Well not exactly summoned, more like Aragorn waved at her and Harry walked over.

Harry positioned herself between Aragorn and Legolas, feeling awkward and self-conscious at the glares of the two other elves.

"Harry," began Aragorn. Harry noticed he looked a bit reluctant to go on.

"Hmm?" Harry replied, cocking her head and assuming a face of perfectly innocuous confusion. This was the same look that got her out of more trouble with her professors than she would admit to; maybe it would save her once again.

Aragorn opened his mouth, but at that moment Hedwig, who'd been resting on a topmost branch of one of the trees, fluttered down onto Harry's shoulder and quite regally began preening her wings. No one present could mistake the symbolism of this gesture, even though the Lotho-elves found it to be completely bizarre behaviour for an owl. No doubt they couldn't work out how a bird should be so intelligent as to show arrogance and territorial feelings. It could be observed in dogs certainly, but not birds, and especially not owls, who were known to be wild and un-tameable.

The elf Hedwig had attacked clenched his fists, and he eyed the owl as though he'd like to see her spitted on a metal pike and put on a fire. Harry nervously eased Hedwig down to her forearm and wrapped her other arm around the owl in case the angry elf decided to attack.

"Ara-gorn?" Harry slowly prompted, playing up her accent. If this ploy was to work, she'd need to seem as unknowing as possible.

It was Legolas who answered. "Orophin would like an apology, Harry," he said.

Harry flicked through her most recent memories, looking for any instance she might have used or heard the word 'apology' before, and came up thankfully blank. She had rarely spoken much Westron before since Gandalf was always ready to translate and as of late, she hadn't been speaking very often since the Mines of Moria, due to a combination of her natural reservedness and recently acquired un-talkative mood. Add on top of all that that even though she had little trouble understanding what anyone was saying anymore, she was still a bit nervous about talking for fear she would trip up spectacularly, and she could play this to her advantage.

No translator plus perceived lack of practice meant she could easily pretend she didn't understand what they were on about and no one could hold it against her.

"A-po-lo-gee?" Harry echoed carefully, enunciating the word exactly as Legolas had. Her eyes flickered attentively from one person to the next, as if expecting them to say something else for her to parrot. She had wore the exact same look when repeating after Merry and Pippin and she did not doubt that Aragorn and Legolas recognized it.

The Ranger sighed in exasperation and ran a callous hand over his face. There was more jabbering in what Harry assumed was Elvish, during which she was sure her lack of understanding was brought up and questioned, judging by the incredulous looks of the other elves. This went back and forth for an excessive amount of time, taking into consideration that there were far more important thing to be
doing that talking about a wizard and her familiar.

Unfortunately, it looked like that Orophin douche didn't want to relent in his quest for Harry's penitence and made an obstinate face while insistently pointing his perfectly manicured finger in her direction. At this point, even the head Elf seemed to be thinking that squeezing an apology out of Harry was more trouble than it was worth but Aragorn seemed to be willing to give it another shot.

"Harry," the dark-haired man began, placing a gentle but firm hand on her shoulder. "Orophin – that is, this man here – is quite unhappy that Hedwig attacked him. It, um, hurt his feelings." Here there were snorts from the recently recovered gaggle of laughers. "So he would like an apology – as in saying sorry. Can you do that?"

Harry wasn't sure if she should be amused or offended that they thought they had to talk to her like a toddler to get her to understand. All the same, she said in her practiced halting way, "Orophin . . . say sorry?"

Aragorn nodded. "Please, say sorry."

Harry looked expectantly at the irritated Elf for a few seconds before looking in confusion at Aragorn once more. "Why he not say?"

"No, no, Harry. You say sorry."

"Me?"

"Yes, you," Legolas agreed, impatiently. "Twas your bird that attacked Orophin. You are in charge of Hedwig, therefore, you apologize."

Orophin, who appeared to only speak elvish, was infuriated that Harry didn't seem the least bit contrite. After asking the head elf something, and getting a short reply in return, Orophin grew even redder, before pursing his lips so much that he made Aunt Petunia look like an amateur. He glared at Harry a full ten seconds before exploding with a bashing of elvish that made Legolas's eyebrows shoot up and Aragorn's mouth to drop open. He obviously hadn't said anything wholesome.

"Please, Harry, just apologize," Aragorn said, sounding tired. Harry immediately felt guilty. More important things than her pride were at stake here, and she could possibly be alienating potential Fellowship allies.

She fidgeted the grass with the toe of her boot and then blinked up at them in a way that she knew made her look like a baby owl peeking out of it's nest. "Hedwig do bad?"

Her interrogators stared stupidly down at her, even the uppity ponce.

"Erm, yes," Aragorn confirmed.

"I say sorry for Hedwig?" she continued, making her eyes go wider and tilting her head just enough for the light to catch her irises, making them glitter.

"Yes," Legolas answered this time, a curious expression on his face. Harry wasn't completely sure what to make of it but he looked vaguely contrite himself so it couldn't be all that bad.

"Hedwig vair sorry," Harry said, and let a guileless smile brighten her face, making sure that her eyes crinkled, her nose scrunched up the tiniest bit, and her teeth flashed shyly. She whipped away from the dumbstruck four before they could remember their names and joined the rest of the Fellowship who were finding the proceedings as amusing as she did.
She heard Gimli stifle a snort.

As she eased Hedwig back onto her shoulder and shared a coo, she told herself that it wasn't her fault that her 'cute face' was so effective.

The 'cute face' was really a series of facial manipulations that had been developed with the help of Dennis Creevy – who could pull a 'cute face' even more effectively than Harry – that played up her delicate features and worked on friends and enemies alike. The theory that led to the development of the looks was that most people had a natural infant-instinct that caused them to subconsciously respond to anything that triggered it, like kittens and puppies, even if they weren't the type to express it openly. A subconscious instinct to perpetuate the species and protect young maybe. The look was scientifically engineered – and they had Hermione confirm that it was scientific – to activate those instincts by manipulating the facial features to portray innocence, helplessness, fragility, etc.

Harry wielded it mercilessly when it suited her.

Shaking off their daze when another elf warrior coughed to get their attention, the head elf – with a dreamy-eyed Orophin in tow – directed them towards a tree that he bade them to climb up.

A ladder appeared as if by magic alongside the trunk of the tree. It was silver in colour and looked like it couldn't support an ant let alone a full-grown person. But other than a bit of frightened grumbling from the hobbits (they were scared of heights, it seemed) the Fellowship followed the head elf up the ladder.

There was much confusion among the elves, however, about what to do with Gimli. Harry didn't understand this at all, she hadn't seen Gimli do or say anything offensive to the elves, except for laughing at them; surely that didn't warrant the outright hostile behaviour some of them were showing the dwarf. If anything, it should be Harry who should be so disliked by them what with her causing a bit of a scene and holding up the proceedings. Still, it had taken the elves a good five minutes of solid arguing with Aragorn to finally let Gimli climb their precious tree.

The dwarf, however, was not too inclined to follow their orders. It turned out that dwarves disliked trees as much as elves disliked dark, enclosed spaces. Gimli had to climb it in the end though, or risk being run over by a troupe of stampeding orcs. But he did so with a heavy dose of dwarvish grouchiness, among which, the words "dwarf-tossing" and "something . . . something – my axe!" were discernible.

It was a slightly despondent Company sleeping in the trees that night. None of them – besides Legolas, who looked to be right at home and Harry who had often had to escape into a tree to escape her Aunt Marge's dogs – had ever recalled having to spend the night in a tree before. It was, surprisingly, not so uncomfortable, only if you ignored that the ground was one hundred feet away and the only thing keeping you from splattering on it was a thin square plank supported by a couple of branches.

Legolas called it a Telan.

Harry was sharing one of these Telans with Merry and Pippin. The other members of the Fellowship had divided themselves on a couple of other trees. Earlier on, when they had climbed the ladder, they had found that the dense foliage had obscured a network of elvish constructions near the top of the trees. The elves had placed rope bridges extending from one Telan to another – that could be untied if the situation called for it – and some Telans even looked like houses. In fact, the whole place had the feel of a large, Amazonion tree-house society, but distinctly more civilized and clean.

Harry also learned that this was not actually Lothlorien – that was the actual name, supplied by an
indignant Legolas – but an outpost, where the guards of the city watched out for any dangers. The head of these guards was titled the March Warden. The particular March Warden, whose brother Harry had messed with, was named Haldir, who, it turned out, had another brother named Rumil.

Fortunately, Rumil, unlike his siblings, seemed easy going and quick to laugh. In fact, he had laughed as Harry walked passed him earlier to climb up the tree, but Harry didn't think it was from derision or scorn, but rather, humour at what Hedwig had done to his brother. Even though Rumil knew no Middle-Earthian, Harry still assumed he was the younger, may-care one of the three brothers. His cheery disposition certainly painted him that way.

Later on, before Merry, Pippin, and Harry were about to fall asleep, Legolas dropped by to tell them that Lothlorien City was still a day away. So that meant even more travelling, only this time with a group made up mostly of uppity elves, of which only some appeared normal and laid-back.

Harry was having another unpleasant dream. The difference between this one and the last one was that this time she actually knew she was dreaming. In the dream, she had gone through the same process as before; she about to mount her Firebolt, with Aragorn and Boromir competing with their crown and horn, respectively, and Gandalf dressed most peculiarly. This time, however, Gandalf didn't tell her to remember her hat; instead he said not to let it go. Harry replied by saying she couldn't let it go as she didn't have it to begin with. Gandalf had only smiled.

As Harry soared into space, avoiding the stars and reaching the black hole, she decided that – since she knew she was dreaming this time – there was no reason for her to fear the black hole, and she let it suck her in. The feeling of whirling incessantly was not terribly pleasant; she feared the contents of her stomach would violently expel themselves from her one way or another. Then she reminded himself that it was only a dream after all, and she couldn't, in actual truth, throw up and likely her stomach had no contents in it to begin with, as it didn't really exist.

The black hole swirled her in its depths for what felt like years. Finally, she and her Firebolt were spat out of the pointy end, landing on a cushioned cloud. Well, not exactly landing, rather they both fell through it, and Harry, who had lost her wits, presently found them again, and – as she was plunging to the ground – gathered those wits and controlled her Firebolt enough that she brought herself to a halt just before she reached the earth.

She noticed with some surprise that she had landed in front of the Herbology greenhouses at Hogwarts. It was night time, and the moon shone eerily on the window-paned roof, reflecting a silver shimmer back onto itself. This eeriness was perhaps why Harry thought she must have imagined seeing the dark shape, still as silence, sitting on the roof. Presently, the dark shape moved into a stream of moonlight and Harry was now looking at Fawkes the Phoenix. He was grey and ugly, to fit in with his surroundings. In his talons, he was clutching Harry's abandoned wizard's hat.

With a mournful trill, Fawkes dropped Harry's hat onto the ground at her feet and took flight, soaring up passed the battlements and through a window in one of the towers.

Harry reached out and snatched up her hat, placing it quickly on her head. She was never losing it again if she could help –

Whispering woke her up.

Hobbit whispering.

More specifically, Merry and Pippin whispering, which meant it was noisy enough to wake even those resting ten trees away.
"What's going on Merry? What do you think they found?" Pippin said, leaning in closer to Merry's ear. They were both lying flat on their stomachs and peering over the side of the *Telan*.

"I don't know," answered Merry. "But it didn't look to be an elf."

"Where was it going?"

"Up Frodo's tree. He saw it and called out. Now the elves are trying to catch it."

"You don't think it was an orc do you?"

"Orcs can't climb trees, Pippin," said Merry sounding exasperated.

"They can climb rock, and if they can climb rock they can climb trees – and trees have plenty of sturdy branches that you can grip, let me remind you – so it'd be easier for an orc to climb a – "

"But it wasn't an orc, Pippin! They travel in groups, and this thing was all on its own. And did you not hear Frodo telling Aragorn; it was a little creature, near hobbit-size."

"Lucky Frodo was awake then."

Harry moved over to join Merry and Pippin, stretching herself to lie flat on her stomach, and gazing over the side. She saw the silvery heads of a bunch of elves scattered below her, presumably searching for footprints or the like.

"Why the elves did not see it?" she asked Merry, who almost jumped out of his skin.

"I didn't know you'd woken up!" he exclaimed, clutching a hand to his chest.

"Sorry," said Harry, meaning it. She hadn't thought to scare anyone. "Why the elves did not see it?"

"I think they might have, but they were waiting to see what it'd do first, if you follow me."

"But now they have lost it," Harry guessed, telling herself not to snicker. She found she couldn't make herself care much for elves. All three of the ones she had personally spoken to were too much like Malfoy for her to attempt getting chummy with.

"Seems a bit foolish of them, doesn't it?" said Pippin, who felt no reserve to hide his tittering.

The three continued watching the elves scrounge about and converse with each other for another half hour or so, whispering to each other all the while, ("Oh, now all of a sudden, you can talk?" Merry smirked. "It's amazing how quickly you learned when earlier you didn't know the meaning of 'apologize'.") until they became drowsy and agreed it wasn't very interesting watching elves talk in a language any of them could hope to understand, so they went back to sleep.

Harry had lay down with Merry and Pippin but she found she wasn't sleepy any more, for now she knew the meaning of her previous dream, or at least, she thought she did.

Harry held up her black wizard's hat.

She had accidentally sat on it as she was lying down. Either she was going crazy and the hat had been with her the entire time, or, Fawkes really had given it to her in her dream. At some point in the past, Harry would have thought this occurrence, if she could call it that, would be an impossibility, but now, with everything she'd been through and all the wonders of magic she'd witnessed, she couldn't really dispute the fact that it might actually be a fact.
With this conclusion, Harry assumed Dumbledore had finally managed to contact her in some way. Perhaps he had put a spell on the hat? Made it into a portkey maybe? Harry reminded herself to examine the hat further the next day.

"It has disappeared," said Haldir, sounding exasperated. "You are sure it was this Gollum creature?"

"I saw it," explained Frodo, for the tenth time that night. "It was almost upon me when I saw its eyes lean over the top of the Telan, like those of a warg's glinting in the moonlight. I believe I never want to see those eyes again," he concluded with a small shudder.

"It must surely be a creature of great evil to be able to escape the piercing gaze of the elves," Haldir said, with a nod at Frodo. "What think you, Aragorn?"

Aragorn removed the pipe from his mouth. "I think this should be discussed on the morrow when we reach the city. Gollum is part of the reason we are on this quest, though only a small part, but a reason nonetheless."

"Very well, then. I cannot say I am glad you are withholding information, but Galadriel has already told me to expect that you might."

"Indeed."

"It is strange that this Gollum creature should choose to attack a hobbit, if that is what it was all about – out of all of you, they pose the least threat."

Aragorn only sighed.

"I understand," said Haldir, who had caught the sigh. "This is another topic you can not speak of as yet."

Aragorn nodded, puffing on his pipe.

"But perhaps you can speak of one; one that has me most curious," Haldir prodded. It was obvious to Aragorn what Haldir was implying.

"You speak of Harry," Aragorn stated.

"Yes," said Haldir shortly, sounding frustrated. "He is like no child of man that I have seen. He carries an owl on his shoulder – one who apparently obeys every one of his commands and whose colouring is not natural – his clothes are also peculiar, and his speech – you say he is from far away, and indeed his accent is peculiar, but how came he to be with you then? And where are his people? Surely a child of his age, cheeky as he is, would kept safely with his parents?

"He is exceedingly charming, I will not deny, but does not have any manner of decorum, nor does he appear to show respect to those older than him, though he is clearly the youngest in your Company. I know not how to explain it.

"And what is that jewellery he wears, perched on his nose? I've never seen the like. I might stretch and call it ugly – though in truth, it is just odd – and I always assumed such trinkets were worn to enhance not to deter.
"Does he come from beyond the sea? I hear the lands on the other side host peculiar habits there. Though I do not understand how he could be from any of the lands that send their people to trade with ours, for I have seen the like of those strange people, and his features are too dramatic and fine for it to be so. Indeed, I have never seen any man look quite like he does, not even you, and you have elvish ancestry in your blood."

Aragorn did not answer immediately; he sat there taking a last breath of pipe weed before indulging Haldir – though truth be told, he probably liked to leave the elf in suspense.

"This has you so confused because Harry is not a child of man," Aragorn explained. "He may not even be a child; Mithrandir had thought Harry might be three hundred years old, or more."

Haldir flapped a graceful hand. "That is impossible," he scoffed.

"It is not," Aragorn said, taking a drag of from his pipe.

"But he is not an elf! Granted, he is fairer of face than the average man, but that is all we share in common. I do not believe it; it is impossible!" Haldir said again.

"It is very possible," Aragron maintained persistently, yet calmly. "Because Harry is not a child of man, nor is he an elf. Harry is a wizard."

"Wizard!"

"A very powerful one."

"I do not believe it!"

"I have witnessed the feats of magic he has performed myself. I tell you true. Frodo, indeed many of us, including myself, would likely be dead if it were not for Harry and his stick."

"Stick?" queried Haldir, who was still so shocked by what he'd heard that he had jumped on the first available topic that seemed safe.

"It is his staff, his magic stick. Like Mithrandir's, but smaller."

"Never have I heard of such a wizard who looks like a child and has a twig for a staff!" Haldir maintained his post stubbornly like a first-rate March Warden should.

"No doubt," said Aragorn, detaching the pipe from his lips, "because he is not of this world. He has travelled here passed the stars and the heavens. Mithrandir believed he was sent by the Valar to the Fellowship to help us, and I have come to believe it also in the days past."

"Not of this world?" Haldir echoed. "That is even more ludicrous than what you previously said! None can travel between worlds, if such things even exist."

"You shall see," was all Aragorn said, and the two moved to other topics.

Harry woke up the next morning to Merry's grinning face hovering over her.

"Wake up Harry! It's breakfast time," he said happily, and turned away to join Pippin for an apple.

Harry sat up and yawned, her arms stretching to the sky. It was chilly, she thought. Perhaps she should get over the last of her bashfulness and just introduce the Fellowship to her wizard's tent if only so they wouldn't have to freeze their butts off any more.
Glancing around in case there were any probing elf eyes – though she doubted she'd see them even if there were – Harry discreetly slipped her wand from her pocket and enlarged her trunk. Digging through it, she bought out the food pouch and her cloak before shrinking the trunk again. She'd put the food pouch back later, maybe after refilling it with a bit of elvish food.

"Merry! Harry has the food out!" said Pippin, after noticing Harry pulling incongruously large packages from her small pouch.

Merry and Pippin, with Harry dutifully joining them, spent the next half hour discovering the delights of toast, kippers, and cornflakes, the last of which were new to the hobbits but were enthusiastically consumed once it was confirmed that they were delicious. They ate – delighting in the fact that the pouch seemed to go on forever – until they were fit to bursting at the seams.

Later, they – as in Merry and Pippin, known and celebrated gluttons – confused the elves and the most of the Fellowship by declining the food that was offered, which were the usual sausages Sam favoured, as well as a biscuity looking substance the elves complimented. It appeared only Aragorn, and possibly Gimli, had guessed as to why the hobbits had suddenly decided to go on a diet.

They finally set off for the City with the morning still young, turning west with Haldir and his brother Rumil. Orophin and the rest of the elves were left to guard the outskirts, and Harry could not say she was sorry to leave them behind. She wasn't going to miss sleeping in a tree either, no matter how comfortable it seemed.

Legolas was inclined to say goodbye to the Nimrodel River, and looked, to Harry, rather airy as he did so. Like Professor Trelawney almost, when she gazed into a crystal ball and foretold plague. Harry had silently snickered at the thought of her professor and Legolas coming face to face.

After a lot of walking through nothing but more forest for several hours – at this point in time, tempting Harry to toss the finger at whoever might protest and climb on her broom when the blisters that had been a long time coming finally made their appearance – they finally reached the upper part of the Silverlode River. Here, Haldir brought them to a halt.

"There is one of my people yonder across the stream," he said, pointing.

Harry could not see anything but then Haldir whistled like a bird and from the trees an elf stepped out, clad in greys and browns – a perfect camouflage. He, too, carried a bow and a quiver of arrows.

The Fellowship watched as Haldir untied a lengthy rope from his belt – as flimsy looking as the ladder – and toss it expertly over the stream, with no apparent forethought behind the act. The rope was caught just as expertly by the elf across the stream, and then tied off around the trunk of a tree. Haldir did the same with his end of the rope.

"We do not set foot in this river so far in the north, unless we must," he said, after securing the knot. "We do not build bridges either because it would be less easy for enemies to enter Lorien, if they should pass the Wardens. This is how we cross. Follow me!"

Haldir jumped onto the thin rope – that was wobbling alarmingly with the breeze from the rushing river – and with no fear whatsoever lightly jogged across the rope to the other side and back again, as though he was doing nothing more than walking along a footpath.

Harry could only think that Haldir was a bit of a show off, especially as there was only a thin string separating him from the cold, energetic, nasty river below him. And he had positively no idea how Haldir expected them to cross that string. Legolas was having similar thoughts apparently.
"I can walk this path," he told them modestly, and stepped up to the rope. "But the others have not that skill. Must they swim?"

Not likely, mate, thought Harry snidely.

"No," said Haldir. "We have two more ropes. One shoulder high and one half-high. With care, the rest of you can cross the river."

Harry eyed the high rapids and the fast swooshing water that had enough strength to drag a person down to the bottom. She gulped. The hobbits were of a similar mind. They did not fancy crossing a river on what seemed like a less than sturdy rope – even if it was of elven make. They protested though it didn't get them very far.

Harry wished she could fly across but though she might not exactly like elves as a whole, she didn't want to scare them, which she undoubtedly would if they witnessed her skills on a Firebolt. She didn't fancy having to deal with the inevitable fling of arrows that would come her way if she did.

If only wizards could fly here, Harry lamented. Then she wouldn't have to go through so much trouble.

Presently, Legolas, then Rumil, jumped on the line of rope and with as much grace as that of Haldir before them, casually ran across it. This agility, this flexibility of the limbs, this fearlessness, Harry assumed, was a trait available only to the elven race.

And so, after Haldir secured two more ropes, they crossed the stream. Everyone but Merry – whom seemed to be part elvish and fairly flew across the rope – shifted painstakingly along. By the time they reached the other side, their fingers were rubbed raw from holding tight to the cord for so long, and their legs felt as wobbly as the rope they'd just left.

It had been hardest on Gimli, however, because he was already so weighted down with heavy weapons and chain mail that it had been doubly difficult for him to cross. And if he should have happened to fall, well, he'd have sunk straight to the bottom. When Boromir – the last person in line – had finally crossed, everyone silently agreed on one thing; they were never crossing another rope above a dangerous stream ever again. Harry was ready to kiss the ground in relief.

"Now, friends," said Haldir as they forced their tired legs to step towards him. "You have entered the Naith of Lorien. We allow no strangers to spy out the secrets of the Naith. Few indeed are permitted even to set foot there. As we agreed, I shall here blind the eyes of Gimli the Dwarf, the others may walk free for a while until we come nearer to our dwellings."

There was instant uproar from Gimli. Harry would have voiced the unfairness of it all if the dwarf hadn't beaten him to it.

"The agreement was made without my consent!" he growled. "I will not walk blindfolded like a beggar or a prisoner. I am no more likely to betray you than Legolas or any other of my companions. I am no spy!" he declared, and Harry was reminded of the situation when he first met the Fellowship, and how he'd defended himself of the same accusation; an accusation made by Gimli himself.

Harry was, by nature, not a vindictive person. She could have sat back and laughed at Gimli's predicament, claiming it was all tit for tat or what goes around comes around. But, she realised with a sudden shock, she was friends with Gimli now, and she didn't even know how it'd happened. It was as if Gandalf's death had bought the entire company closer together, especially closer to Harry. Gandalf had trusted Harry, so maybe, on some subconscious level, the Fellowship wanted to honour his memory by grasping Harry into their folds. Now, at this moment, Harry felt like she was truly
one of the Fellowship. Because of this, she couldn't let the Lothlorien elves blindfold Gimli, it just wouldn't be right.

But before he could speak up Haldir opened his mouth. "I do not doubt you," he told Gimli. "Yet this is our law, and cannot set it aside. I have done much in even letting you cross the river."

Gimli maintained his stance. "I will go forward. Or I will go back and seek my own land, where I am known to be true of word, though I will perish alone in the wilderness."

Haldir sneered nastily, "You have entered the realm of the Lady of the Wood," he said, lifting an arrogant brow. "You cannot go back. You will be slain if you so much as attempt to cross the river again."

At this biting speech, Gimli drew his axe from his belt. Quick as lightening Haldir and his companions loaded their bows with a few very nasty looking arrows. Seeing this, Harry produced her wand; the Protego spell on the tip of her tongue should Gimli need protection.

Aragorn, seeing Harry remove her wand from her buttoned sleeves, thought things had finally gone too far. "No Harry," he said forcefully, clasping a hand over Harry's wrist; the one that held her wand. "No magic will be used today. I am still in lead here," he continued, turning to address the Fellowship. "And I say we will all be blindfolded, even Legolas. That would be best, though it will make the journey slow and dull."

Gimli approved of that. "I agree to this, only if Legolas abides by your words and is also blinded."

"A plague on dwarves and their stiff necks!" spat Legolas, going red. "I am an Elf, and kinsmen here!"

But it did Legolas no good to protest, and in time Gimli, Harry, the rest of the Company, and lastly a begrudging Legolas, were all blindfolded. It did not skip Harry's notice the specific order in which this process was done. The people the elves trusted the least had their eyes hampered first, and Legolas, who was an elf, was blindfolded last.

At length they set off again, first fearing that a trip over a tree root would be inevitable, but then becoming more relaxed as the hours passed. The elves steered them over any potential ankle-breaking dangers, and they were free to let their other senses wander, now that their foremost sense – sight – was no longer available to them.

With a jolt Harry was once again reminded of Hogwarts.

Now that she couldn't see, she could smell, and taste and feel – for lack of a better word – the nature, the fresh dew still lingering from the morning mist, the squish, – and on some occasion – the crackle of the leaves below her shoes, somehow feel the glow of the sun – not the warmth, but the actual glow – caress her face, and be able to smell the slight tingle of magic that seemed to encompass this forest. It was a scent, a sensation, she had always experienced at Hogwarts; only at Hogwarts.

What it was seemed like an embrace, a buzz of the senses she had always felt when she'd come too close to a magical structure or object. She felt it again now, in Lothlorien. Though somehow, the feeling was slightly different, tinged with an impassably older scent: timeless, almost. Less obscure than Hogwarts. Ageless, yet fresh.

It was wonderful. Harry loved it.

She was glad, suddenly, that she couldn't see. She never would have experienced this awareness if she could. She never would have been reminded of home. Strangely, that thought did not make her
After a few more hours of trundling slowly along, the company of elves, men, hobbits and not to forget a dwarf and a wizard, began to hear voices. They were quite obviously elven voices because there was a slight musical lilt in the tone. Plus the fact they were speaking elvish could have had something to do with it.

Harry heard Haldir start up a conversation with them.

"You are now to walk free," he told the Fellowship after a couple of minutes of chatter. "Even Gimli the Dwarf." Haldir sounded despondent as he said that last bit. Harry wondered why Lothlorien elves persisted on adding Gimli’s race in conjunction with his name. It wasn't like everyone didn't know what he was.

"New messages from Rivendell have come, and it seems the Lady knows who and what is each member of your Company," Haldir continued, then added, to Harry's shock, "Except the wizard, if he can be called that. The Lady made no mention of him. He shall continue to be blinded until we reach the interior of the city and the Lord and Lady have passed judgment."

Passed judgment? That didn't sound good. But what could she do? Based on how thoroughly they shut down Gimli, any argument she might put up would be useless since they care nothing for the opinions of those among them that were not elves and Aragorn would go along with them for the sake of keeping the peace.

If she had been some brainless boy with more testosterone-fueled recklessness than the conditioning from childhood to avoid conflict if she couldn't win, she might have called Haldir out on the unfairness of it all – especially considering they weren't going to blindfold her originally the first time – and sic Hedwig on them.

As it was, Harry was already too tired to waste her breath so she held her peace while her friends protested her situation for her.

After it was once more determined that the elves would be getting their way, an hour or more passed, this time Aragorn was the one leading Harry over any stumble-worthy forest nuisances since Gimli had snapped and snarled at any elf that had tried to help her. In Gimli's way of thinking, since they were the ones that forced Harry to remained blind-folded, they would not be allowed to try to lessen their guilt by helping Harry walk.

It was getting on to midday, Harry thought, and the sun was at its most powerful. No more was it shining pleasantly on Harry's face; rather, it was now starting to burn uncomfortably. She needed her hat.

She had stuffed the tip of it in her belt that morning, so that it hung like a pouch at her waist. She untucked it now, and placed it on her head. She didn't have time to feel relief from the absence of the sun, however, because something strange happened.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Potter. I'd wondered when you'd finally put me on your head. It's been terribly uncomfortable swinging from your hip like that.'

Her hat was talking.
Galadriel versus the Sorting Hat

Her hat was talking.

"Actually, I'm *not* talking at the moment, I'm thinking. There is a difference."

"What – ?" Harry began.

"Hush, girl!" the voice in her ear hissed. "Do you want everyone to hear you? If you want to talk to me, start thinking; that's the only way we can communicate without being heard. On second thought, don't think anymore than you have to. Your mind is about as chaotic as Albus' and I never thought that would happen. You're bound to give me a migraine."

'You're the Sorting Hat!' Harry thought disbelievingly. She couldn't imagine why it was suddenly impersonating her own hat. And how did it get here? Could it travel from hat to hat?

"All in good time, Ms. Potter. Now, what have we here? My, my, what an interesting place you've landed in. Middle Earth, is it? You've met a wizard, I see. Goodness me, those elves are quite a sight, aren't they? Hobbits? Orcs? I wonder why we don't have those as well.

"Oh, another troll as well! You seem to have excellent luck with those; you know, back when I was first made, you'd have been declared a Monster Slayer by now. That was a very good use of the sun spell, I must say. And what's this? There's a Dark Lord here as well! I dare say you certainly do know how to pick them, don't you, dear girl?"

'I didn't pick –!'

"Yes, yes, we all know *that*! Oh, you're rather angry right now. I see the elves you're with have blindfolded you. Very distrusting, these elves."

Harry wondered if it would be terribly rude of her to tell the hat to shove off.

"You can't shove me off!" snapped the Hat. "And, yes, it would be very rude. And start walking would you? If you haven't noticed, you've slowed down and the elves have ceased to ignore you."

Harry hadn't even realized she'd stopped. She quickly picked up the pace.

"Exactly," said the Hat. "That's the trouble with you, you hardly realize those little but important details. You'd think you'd know how to take a hint by now but clearly not. My magic's almost run out, you know. I hadn't anticipated this. No, no, not at all."

'What hadn't you anticipated?' asked Harry, almost stumbling over a stray rock on the path. If it weren't for Aragorn's hand on her arm, she would have went flying.

"Your negligence!" the Hat spat, causing Harry to jump. She could feel curious eyes on her and pretended nothing was out of the ordinary even while her hat berated her. "What do you mean by not putting me on? Didn't the dreams tell you anything? I'm important!" said the Hat pompously, and added, "Not to mention I nearly fell in that blasted river as you were crossing the rope. What would you have done if I went frolicking down stream, eh? Or drowned? I tell you what you would have done; you would have been stuck here forever! Unlike myself."

'What do you mean?' Harry asked in shock.
"My magic's almost run out, that's what I mean. I can't last here forever you know. You might say that I only exist in your head. Your hat is sort of an anchor for me. My essence will soon disappear. Of course, we could have had a much longer chat if you'd have thought to – !"

'Yeah, I know!' Harry interjected, annoyed. 'Now how can I get home?'

Harry didn't hear the Hat say anything for a good two minutes. She could tell it was considering just leaving her here since it really was rather petty for all its other good qualities. "It's been my experience," it said finally, "that the only people who are chosen by the phenomenon –"

'What?'

"I'm talking about the vortex! But I can see now I'll have to amend myself to lightening bolt seeing as that is what you associate with coming here. The only people who are chosen by the 'lightening bolt' are chosen because they are needed. You are needed here, Ms. Potter."

"So, what does that mean?" Harry asked apprehensively. She really didn't want to know what kind of trouble was happening that was so hopeless, the Powers that Be had to bring in outside reinforcements to quell the tides.

"What was that, Harry?" Aragorn's voice boomed into Harry's left ear. She jumped; she had forgotten that she wasn't supposed to talk out loud.

"What?" Harry asked, replying in Westron. "Er, no. Talking to myself."

"Alright then," Harry heard Aragorn say. He sounded bewildered and confused. Now that she thought about it, he often took that tone when talking to her.

"I see the fact that women are utterly incomprehensible to men is truth even here," quipped the Sorting Hat.

'Oh, shut up.'

The Hat tutted irritably. "Pay more attention," it said before returning to it's previous subject. "Now, you have to discover the reason you are needed here, Ms. Potter. You cannot go back to our world until you have completed whatever it was you were chosen to complete. Though with the way you were practically thrown at this Fellowship, I have a feeling it's this business with the Ring."

'–? –'

"That's most impressive! You not thinking anything at all," said the Hat in a complimentary tone. "Have you been practicing your Occlumency? No, I see that you haven't. Must have shocked you into Silence of the Mind, then. It happens to the best of us, not to worry. Although I should mention it only happens when the person experiencing it is about to go into a nervous collapse."

'B-but, how am I to know what I'm supposed to do? You say that it's most likely something to do with the Ring but exactly what about it am I supposed to do? And what if it really has nothing to do with the Ring and I end up missing the chance to do what I'm supposed to because I was distracted by the big things? How can I get back then?'

"I'm told dreams are very wondrous, complex things," the Hat responded, sounding, for a second, a lot like Professor Dumbledore. And just like Dumbledore, it gave her a riddle with nothing to go on.

Harry wanted to rip the thing from her head and curb-stomp it into the grass. Instead, she took a deep breath and distracted herself with another pressing question: 'How long can you stay?'
The Hat seemed to have picked up on her murderous intent for it readily answered her. "A couple more hours, maybe. But not to worry, I'm leaving you with a gift. Make sure you don't take me off your head until then!"

'What sort of gift? And you still haven't really told me how I can get back, unless you mean to tell me that all I have to do to go home is to click my heels three times like Dorothy and dream of home.'

"Excluding any heel clicking, that's exactly what I mean! You, of all people, should know that dreams can be very real; your experience last year should have told you that! Albus has worked out all the theory and mechanics behind it and I'm sure he'd be happy to explain it to you when you get back.

"But remember, no matter how hard Albus tries to remove you from here, the phenomenon will still not allow you to leave this world until you have completed your task, whatever it is, so you better get cracking!"

Harry wondered how she could get cracking on anything when she didn't even know what her mission was.

"All in good time," said the Hat again. That really was turning out to be her least favourite phrase.

"We are nearing the gates of the city, Harry."

Harry started; Aragorn's voice had startled her from her internal conversation again. She hadn't been expecting it, and it had sounded extra loud.

"Blindfold come off now?" she asked, turning her face in the direction of the man's voice.

"Not until you have council with the Lord and Lady," Aragorn told her, sounding reluctant and sympathetic at the same time. "I am sorry."

Harry only nodded. She was put out but she didn't blame Aragorn.

"He seems to be a good man, from what I can discern," the Hat stated suddenly. Harry forced herself not to jump this time.

'He is,' Harry agreed.

"Listen to him," the Hat suggested. "He seems wise. I'd like to have a poke through his head, see what I can find out. The quiet ones are usually the ones with a lot of interesting tidbits floating around in all the impenetrable corners of their minds. Well, impenetrable only to those who aren't adept at Legilimency."

'Right.' Of course the Hat would want to brag a bit.

"Speaking of Legilimency," the Hat continued snootily, no doubt picking up that Harry thought it was a braggart. "You're lucky, you know, that you put me on when you did."

The Hat paused. It seemed to be waiting for Harry's reaction. Harry supplied it with the appropriate amount of suspicion.

'Why?'

"Because someone is trying to poke around in here, that's why. It's that elf witch the dwarf was going on about. You're lucky she was too preoccupied with that hobbit, Frodo, to give any thought
about anything else; as soon as she heard from the scouts that a stranger had joined the Fellowship, one who wasn't part of the original nine, well, you can guess what she tried to do."

Harry would have been horrified about some stranger poking around in her head, if it weren't for the Sorting Hat saying that last bit. 'What do you mean, tried?'

"She can't enter your head, Ms. Potter, because I'm on it. The enchantments set on me make impenetrable to those skilled in the mind arts. I'm proud to say she seems quite frustrated at discovering a barrier where your mind ought to be. No one's mind has disallowed her entry before, you see. She doesn't know what to make of you, really.

"And now I'm sorry to say that your council with the Lord and Lady will not be so welcoming. They are usually very objective to strangers, because Galadriel, the lady, can read anyone's mind to determine their intent, but now, because she can't read yours – "

'Wait, so doesn't that mean I'll be better off without you on, then? If they're more likely to trust me if the lady can read my mind like everybody else?'

"Humph! I suppose you could call it better off," The Hat snorted derisively. He likely didn't want his purpose made no longer needed. "I thought you didn't want anyone taking a peek in here? Now suddenly you're willing to welcome in every Tom, Dick, and Harry?"

'Oh, put away that offended pride, I'm talking about what will make the situation go as smoothly as possible; let's leave our feelings out of this for a moment. I really don't have anything to hide and what's the point of knowingly thwarting the modus operandi of the people in charge of where we'll be going, if it's only going to make everything harder for me?'

"How scaled your golden fur is becoming, brave Gryffindor!"

'Don't make me sew flowers and ribbons onto you, you mouthy length of worn-out homespun."

"No, need for threats, my dear. I'll agree that your idea had merit but surely you'll not want her in your mind in any case. She's not the only thing I'm protecting you from. What of other mind-invading powers, eh? Surely you'll be better off just talking to that elf witch, conversation is just as good a source of information as plundered thoughts, I should think.

"Although I have to say, it's most impressive that she can extend her mind over such a great distance, and without eye contact, too. She must be a very powerful – !"

'Can you read her mind?'

"Oh my, yes. Well, only in the strictest sense. Legilimency is not without rules after all and for all my many wonders, I'm still a hat. I'm sure you know the mind is too complex a mystery to uncover all of its secrets. But technically, yes, I can 'read' her mind, but only because she was trying to enter yours. I can't now, though, since she's gone away.

"I should say she's had a very interesting life. Something about some sort of jewels in the background, there. And a war between elves? It might interest you to know that she is immortal too. Can't die, I mean, as all elves apparently can't. I gather she is more than eight thousand years old."

Harry was now forced to wonder how old Legolas and Haldir were, who looked only several years older than her and in his late twenties respectively.

"Quite old, I'm sure," said the Hat.
'Is she – is she nice?' Harry asked.

"From the flashes I saw, she seems friendly," the Hat told her. "Now why don't you pay attention to your surroundings, try to glean any useful information. Ask Aragorn where you are now; I shan't bother you until you need me."

The Hat immediately went silent.

'Hang on!' Harry protested, thinking of something. 'If you only have enough magic in you to stay for a couple more hours, how can I stop her from going into my mind when you leave? What was the point of this whole conversation if you're not going to be of any help only hours from now? And can't you mind-control people with Legilimency?'

Harry had a horrid thought just then: an image of herself surrounded by sniggering elves, gazing adoringly at a Fleur Delacour look-a-like who sat on a costly throne. The vision became worse as Harry saw herself reciting improvised poetry on bended knee before offering herself up as a vassal to tend to the elf-witch's every whim.

The Hat snorted. "You have quite a vivid imagination, Ms. Potter. Did I not just say she was friendly? Your wizard friend would hardly direct your group to her territory if she was the type to enslave people.

"I have to say it again, you would have done well in Slytherin; they are notorious for their imaginations, after all. Ambition, that's what it's all about. You need a healthy imagination to strive for ambition!"

Before Harry could protest the back-handed compliment, the Hat pressed on, "About the gift I was telling you about: If you continue to keep me on your head – that is to say, continue to keep your hat on your head, because, after all, I won't be here and your hat will be just that, an ordinary, or almost ordinary, hat – " Harry wished it would get to the point. "In a moment, Ms. Potter, in moment. Now that we have ascertained that you will keep your hat on your head at all times – and by that I mean don't take it off even when you go to sleep – your mind will be protected from any external onslaughts. Even that ring!"

Harry wasn't sure what to think about that last part. She had not felt anything in particular about the ring, besides that ugly feeling she'd gotten from Frodo, before the Company had entered the Mines of Moria. Was it just something about her? Perhaps it was because she was an outside force and not anything the Ring was used to ensnaring?

"That could very well be true, but we can't hold to that! What if, down the track, you do get attracted to the ring? No, it's best to keep the hat on, you understand, Ms. Potter, on!"

'Alright!' Harry snapped at the fussy thing. She was amazed that just one day ago she had been wishing for some familiar company from earth, and now that she had it, she wished it would shut up already.

"Tut tut, Ms. Potter. Most ungrateful of you," the Hat said. Harry imagined it would have been pursing its lips in annoyance if it had lips to purse. "Now ask the man walking beside you where you are." It became silent once again.

Harry cleared her throat, but before she could speak, Aragorn told her, "We have reached the interior of the city now, Harry. We are at the foot of the Lord and Lady's quarters. It is a long way to the top and with many a stair to pass over. We now have the Lady's permission to remove the cloth from your eyes, so that you may ascend them."
Harry would have beamed joyously if she knew it wouldn't make her look like an idiot. Instead, all she said was, "Okay," and allowed Aragorn to take off the blindfold, all the while making sure to keep a tight hold on her hat. A sticking charm would not doubt be helpful.

Harry pulled her wand out faster that the others had time to realize or protest and dragged the tip across her forehead while mumbling, "Posita Maneat." She then re-pocketed her wand before any fuss could be kicked up.

She blinked away the spots from her eyes, removing her glasses from her robe pocket – she'd had to take them off when the elves tied the cloth around her eyes– and putting them on. She was now facing what looked like a staircase made of glass or maybe crystal. It was glowing, like the elves. In fact, Harry noticed as she looked around in awe, everything to do with elves seemed to glow. The trees – which were humongous – the staircase – which wound in a spiral up an exceedingly tall tree – the clothes of the elves – which all seemed to be either green, grey, brown, or silver – and the elves themselves – who were entirely too pretty.

And they were entirely too pretty, Harry realised as she and the rest of the Company followed Haldir and a few other elves up the tree. They had just passed a female elf on the stairs, the first one Harry had ever seen. She seemed to be exceedingly pretty, but not in that bewitching, inebriating way a Veela was, but rather, making you turn your head for a second, third, and even fourth look.

If that's an ordinary girl elf, how would a queen look? Harry's inner school-girl gulped at the thought.

Finally, they reached the top of the stairs. Harry absently wondered why her legs didn't feel tired after such a climb, but then sudden realization bitch-slapped the errant thought away with the obvious answer: she didn't feel tired because in the passed week, she'd been walking everywhere, with nary a moment to stop and sit. The Mines of Moria had steps by the trunk full. Obviously, her legs wouldn't tire out on some fancy elven staircase that only took fifteen minutes to trudge up, as she'd already been though the truly heavy exercise of Moria, where it took you half a day to reach the top of a staircase, and at night you'd wake up with a chronic back pain from walking vertically for so long.

The Fellowship had arranged themselves in a sort of chorus line – or at least, that what they reminded her of – with the taller people at the rear and the shorter in the front. Haldir and his accompaniment of elves had moved off to stand at the side; their hands folded in front of them, looking for a moment, in Harry's eyes, quite serene.

This was quite a difference from their usual performance of Sneers–R–Us! They probably weren't allowed to act properly disdainful or anything in the queen's presence, wherever she was.

As soon as Harry had the thought, they descended from the top of a short flight of steps. Harry had never seen anything so bright in all her life, and she had often flown straight towards the sun during Quidditch plays. She took her glasses off and polished them on the side of her robes, thinking that it must have been a trick of the light, but when she put them back on again, the couple were just as dazzling as before. Though, Harry had to allow, that a higher percentage of brightness seemed to be radiating from the queen.

Merlin and Morgana, where was a pair of sunglasses when she needed them?

Harry noticed she wasn't the only one of the Fellowship who were in a daze of awe when the couple halted near the bottom of the stairs.

They might not have looked ancient – at least, not physically – but they certainly felt ancient. Ignoring the fact that she did, in truth, know that they were far into retirement their years, thanks to
the Sorting Hat, there was an air about them, an aura really, that made them feel so old. It could have been because of the expressions on their faces: So wise, yet so dispassionate, as though they had lived through every situation imaginable and could not be surprised by anything anymore.

Maybe her included? Harry thought hopefully.

The king spoke; "Nine there are set out from Rivendell, and nine stand before me. Yet one is unfamiliar." He looked straight at Harry, who tried for a politely neutral expression. "Tell me, where is Gandalf? I much desire to speak with him." Harry hoped that question hadn't been addressed at her; she wasn't ready to be put on the spot again.

The queen spoke then, in a low, melancholy voice, "He has fallen into shadow." The surrounding elves cried out in shock.

Harry, however, thought she looked rather creepy with her violet-blue eyes glazed over like that, staring into nothingness. The look put Harry in the mind of what Luna might look like if she completely lost all trace of reality. Quite obviously, the queen had read somebody's mind, and Harry had a nasty feeling it was Aragorn's, because Harry had been certain she had sensed his body tense up.

Neither the king nor the queen looked particularly surprised at the information that Gandalf was dead. Perhaps the queen had known before hand from reading Frodo's mind, and all this was just a show to intimidate the Fellowship? Or perhaps they were beyond showing any sort of expression at all?

The queen continued, "Your quest stands upon the edge of a knife. Stray but a little and it will fail, to the ruin of all." She looked directly into Boromir's eyes as she said this. The poor man looked terrified out of his wits. Harry began to feel a prickle of anger. What right did she have in intruding in people's minds? Just because she was a queen –

She still wasn't finished. "Yet hope remains while company is true," she said, looking at Sam. Sam, unlike Boromir, seemed to smile. "Do not let your hearts be troubled." She looked up now, her eyes, once again, glazing over. "Go now and rest, for you are weary with sorrow and much toil. Tonight, you will sleep in peace."

Harry almost slumped with relief. It looked like she would be getting a reprieve, at least for that night.

"However . . ." the queen continued, and Harry froze up as those creepy eyes looked straight into her own. Oh, shit. "We have not addressed the issue of the wizard, Harry. The rest of you may go." She seemed to have wilted slightly, looking almost normal, possibly because Harry was immune to her mind's influence.

Harry then watched as Aragorn, her usual salvation, walk down the steps with the rest of the Fellowship, an encouraging sort of smile on his face. She turned back to the king and queen and gulped.

The queen walked towards her. No, more like glided. Harry forced herself not to take a step back. Now was not the time to act like the frightened child she was. If she was to be taken seriously, she couldn't act like a wimp. The queen, who was at least a head taller than Harry, touched a hand to her chin and gently lifted it up, so she was forced to look into those all-knowing eyes. Harry could only hope that her hat wouldn't be pulled off.

"A wizard, so they say, from another world, with eyes like stars plucked from the skies to outshine
even Elendil. Such a beautiful shade," she muttered, her eyes bearing into Harry's. "Not quite of
grass, not quite of leaf . . . emeralds. Yes, emeralds. And hair so dark, it would disappear at night."

Harry discovered, in that one little moment, that not all elves were like Draco Malfoy. If the queen
had instead been a man, Harry was sure she would be swooning. As it was, she still felt flattered and
flushed.

"Why can I not read you?" she asked, and Harry stiffened. "Could it be because you have mind
power of your own?" Harry said nothing. "Could it be . . ." she repeated. "You have great power.
Great Magic," she stated. "I have neither seen nor heard of any like you in all my years. But I sense .
. . something. You are an innocent, that I do believe."

Harry would have sighed in relief, but the queen still hadn't let go of her chin. In fact the lady stroked
it a bit with her thumb. Harry couldn't help herself, her cheeks filled with blood and reddened
noticeably. She could only imagine what Haldir and his bratty cohorts were thinking of her right
now.

She'd never had physical contact with anyone except her closest friends – and grabby boys before
she opened a can of whoop-ass on them – and even then, they hadn't touched her face like Galadriel
was doing now. And Lady Galadriel was a very pretty elf, way prettier than the girl elf Harry had
seen on the stairs. She was certain Galadriel would inspire her to look back not only a fourth time but
a seventh and an eighth as well. She wouldn't be surprised if women before her had given up on men
because of the beautiful queen.

As her wandering thoughts flickered around batting for both teams, she also had a feeling that Ron
would be doing something incredibly stupid right now if he were in Harry's position – like cart-
wheeling across the platform and flipping off the edge. And this wasn't even anything like Veela
magic at all; it was plain female magic, which Harry had barely started to learn to wield herself.

Would Galadriel be open to teaching her a few tricks? Girls need to stick together and – and while
Harry violently pulled herself from the vaguely dirty turn of phrase, she desperately hoped she wasn't
getting a crush on the queen. That would be just . . . horrible!

"I have discovered that you understand very little of the Common Tongue." A small smile appeared
on her heavenly face and she looked at Harry as if they were sharing an inside joke. Did she know
Harry only pretended misunderstanding to get out of trouble? If she peeked in on Merry and Pippin,
it was very likely. "Though you do improve steadily. Mithrandir attempted to gift you with the
speech but for whatever reason, it was only partially successful." She leaned closer in until her lips
were only inches away. "Perhaps I can help things along."

When the Lady pressed her lips to Harry's forehead, a feeling not unlike the time Gandalf struck her
with his language spell shocked her brain. The churning and throbbing of thoughts and knowledge
did not startled her as much as before but Harry still suffered from what felt like a case of extreme
brain-freeze.

"Haldir," said Galadriel, not taking her eyes off of Harry as the young girl screwed her eyes up in
agon. Harry squinted blearily in the glittering light of the king and queen as Haldir stepped forward.
"Take Harry down to where the rest of the Fellowship now rests. We have badgered an innocent
child quite enough."

Harry blinked. That was it? No interrogation? And she certainly hadn't been accepting an apology of
any sorts, but she was grateful nonetheless.

Really now, she scolded herself. What did she expect? One kid that doesn't know anything important
– from another universe of not – wasn't going to be high on anyone's watch-list, especially not
millenniums old monarchs of an apparently superior race. It was silly to think otherwise.

Haldir offered Galadriel and the King two short bows. Harry, seeing him, did the same, but she
hadn't counted on how awkward a bow would feel to a person who'd never had to do one before.

Haldir was pure tranquility as he gestured for Harry to follow him down the stairs. Harry realised
something then as she observed Haldir's almost magnanimous expression: Everyone was a little bit in
love with Galadriel; it just couldn't be helped, rather like how Harry couldn't help being a wizard.
This, Harry assumed, then led them to do things that weren't generally in their character when
confronted by her presence, such as not acting prudish, and not outwardly insulting someone since
she would hardly look kindly upon such things.

Harry was not pleased to discover, a couple of minutes later on the stairs, that she had been right in
her assumption.

"You are fortunate," said Haldir, his sneer firmly planted back on his face. He had taken to a dislike
of her when he had shaken off her 'cute face' and had immediately thought she had put them under
some sort of mind control. He might have let go of the ridiculous idea if it wasn't for the fact that
Orophin appeared to have a crush on her. "The Lady appears to have taken a liking to you."

Harry tactfully ignored his disdain and continued to follow the elf in silence. She was not in the
mood for bickering, and with the pounding in her head, she'd undoubtedly let it escalate into outright
battle. She would not dig herself further in if she could help it and she could soothe her irritation with
the knowledge that people like Haldir – as she had learned from experience with the Malfoys
– hated being ignored.

When the wizard made no sign of answering back, Haldir scowled in annoyance and continued,
"Where is that bird of yours? She is not in Lorien, otherwise we would have seen her cross the
gates." He glanced at Harry through the corner of his eye, as if trying to gauge Harry's expression.
Harry didn't offer him one. "You will not see her for a while, I think. No animal can navigate Lorien
for long, especially an animal that has no business being here. She will be lost. She will circle Lorien
for days trying to find you and then she will give up."

Harry didn't bother to mention that unless Lorien had a ward around it that specifically stopped post
owls from finding the place, Hedwig could come and go as she pleased. She also didn't bother to
mention that Hedwig was about as stubborn as a red-wine stain and she wouldn't budge when she
thought something was right, or if some barrier got in her way. She also didn't bother to mention that
Hedwig was extremely loyal, and that she would never give up on Harry. Instead, all she said was,
"Hedwig is a wizard's owl," and left it at that.

Before she could see Haldir's reaction, Harry's stepped off the stairs, having spotted the Fellowship
walking in the distance.

Later, while passing under the trees of Lorien to a more heavily wooded area, flanked on either side
by a hobbit, Harry walked to the direction Aragorn had pointed to when he mentioned a pleasant
place to bathe. Harry had jumped at the excuse to get clean – before any of the Fellowship had
thought to utilize the opportunity – as had Merry and Pippin. The Mines of Moria were not exactly
bursting with places to take a bath.

Harry had made due with copious amounts of personal-care charms and clothes refresheners – and
she smelled as clean as when she had first arrived in Middle Earth – but that was not the same as a
proper wash up. She was ready to take off her skin, let it soak over-night, before drowning it with
highly concentrated detergent and pounding it clean with a rock.
It wasn't a very large pond, was the first thought Harry had as she and her companions stood by its edge. It wasn't very large – about the size of the average backyard swimming pool – but it still managed to maintain a little waterfall, gushing out from the boulders surrounding it. At least it was clean; the pond didn't look as though it were filled with mildew and pond scum. In fact, it was so clear that Harry could see straight to the bottom.

The visibility posed a problem for Harry. She had thought that the pond would be wide enough and deep enough and maybe even have some convenient boulders in it that no one would be able to see her bathing. She was, by personality and female nature, quite shy after all. Now instead of just climbing into the pond, she'd have to pitch her tent for any privacy.

At least she'd finally get the last of her secrets of now past caution out in the open. She really had been meaning to show the Fellowship her tent so they could rest in more comfort while they were on the road, but there had never been what felt like the right time to do it. Now she had no reason to keep making excuses to herself. Harry politely averted her gaze as Merry and Pippin stripped off. Really, the people of this age had no sense of body-consciousness. Not even Dudley, who had known her all their lives and barely considered her a human being, let alone a girl, would strip butt-naked in front of her.

"Sorry, Harry," said Pippin, waving an apologetic hand as they jumped in and splashed her a bit. Harry was then forgotten as the two hobbits frolicked in the water.

With extra toiletries in hand – some elves had given them soap, towels and fresh clothes earlier – Harry casually strolled the perimeter of the pond, peering about for a flat, open area that was spacious enough for her tent. Her eyes alighted on a spot just behind two of the larger boulders – about the height and width of two dwarves standing back to back – and wasted no time tossing the shrunk canvas tarp on the ground and twirling her wand in the movements she had used every time she need the loo.

She felt Merry and Pippin's curious eyes on her as she ducked through the flaps of the opening but ignored it in favor of the slice of heaven waiting for her inside. Paying no mind to the extravagance of a well-off wizard's home hidden in plain sight by an Undetectable Extension Charm, Harry made a bee-line for the bathroom. She was peeling off her clothing before the door even closed behind her.

The deep tub set into the floor and rows of taps generously filled with scented soaps put her in mind of the prefect's bathroom back at Hogwarts. Harry sunk into blissfully warm water and let the steam rising from the water sooth her aching limbs. She was about to lose herself in relaxation when something tickled the back of her neck.

A hand flew up to slap at whatever it was and she made contact with the brim of her hat. Harry almost groaned out loud. How stupid was she that she could take all her clothes of but forget to remove her hat? She was set to reach up and toss the hat aside when the memory of the last words the Hat told her before it left for Hogwarts and earth struck her:

"Remember, Ms. Potter, do not take off your hat, under any circumstances, while you are in Lothlorien, or near that hobbit. And get cracking!"

But surely right now would be fine? Frodo and his ring were no where near and really, Galadriel would hardly be hounding her lack of thoughts, just in case something became readable, would she? A queen had better things to do.

No, she couldn't let negligence be the undoing of her; she had promised the Sorting Hat, and for all that she had essentially made a vow to headgear, she had still given her word. Besides, she could
wash her hair through the hat and there was no reason to feel stupid about it because there was no one there to see her take a bath with a hat.

After scrubbing furiously at the hat and her hair, she submersed herself in the water, leaving only her face out. A flick of her wand had the magical record player she had discovered floating in from where it was kept and dropped onto the towel shelf. Relishing the luxury that had been long denied to her, she let the water and background music ease her into a light doze.

If Harry had paid more attention to Merry and Pippin before she retreated into her tent, she would have realized that they would certainly faff about in the water without a care, but ultimately would be concerned if she did not emerge as they rolled their pruned bodies from the pond and looked to return to the designated sleeping area.

"Whatever do you think he's doing in there?" Pippin asked, tugging on his new leggings.

"I don't know, Pip," Merry shrugged. "But knowing how wizards can be when they're caught up in their odd business, I think it's maybe best for us to mind our own business or tell Aragorn about it when we get back. Maybe he'll know what to do."

"It's very odd. Didn't he say he was eager for a bath? And yet he didn't set one toe in the water. But I know wizards are strange folk with their strange ways. Just look at Gandalf!" continued Pippin, then he seemed to grow sombre in remembrance of the old wizard.

"Hear, hear!" Merry agreed, though not so heartily. "I remember his fireworks."

A few minutes passed and the hobbits decided they were fully dressed. A light jog later found the two arriving at the Fellowship's designated sleeping spot – on the ground in the hollow of a great tree, much to the hobbit's satisfaction – and facing an irritated Boromir and Gimli, who'd been next in line to wash.

"Wasting time splashing about, no doubt, you rascals," Gimli grumbled, gathering up his own supplies. He paused after throwing his towel over his shoulder. "Where's the lad, then? Don't tell me he's still lazing about that pond."

"Well," Pippin began hesitantly, the uncertain tone of his voice at such an innocent question turned heads. "We're not sure what Harry's doing. Not half a minute after we got to the pond did he set up his tent and went – "

"A tent, did you say?" asked Boromir, as if unsure if his ears were hearing correctly or not.

"Yes, a tent," Merry confirmed, rocking on his heels and checking the faces of those listening for any understanding of what had happened. There was none. "I didn't even know he had a tent and quicker that wink, he had it pitched. He went inside it and hasn't come out since."

"Very odd in my opinion," Pippin continued, fluffing his wet hair. "He didn't even splash about first and he was the one that wanted a bath the most."

The Fellowship looked at each other, each wondering what to make of it. Frodo was the first to make a suggestion. "Why do we not simply go ask him? Perhaps he fell asleep."

"We could do that," Merry conceded. "Pippin and I were just concerned about disturbing him if he was in the middle of something important."
"What matters of import could be taking place inside a tent near a bathing pond?" Boromir scoffed, though he too looked wary of interrupting wizardly matters.

"That's exactly why we're wondering what Harry's doing!"

After much fussing and more discussion, it was decided that they would all go and see to Harry. Boromir and Gimli were going since it was their turn at the pond and they were going in that direction any way; Aragorn and Legolas were going since they were the most well-versed in the ways of the magical; Sam and Frodo were going because they were curious; and Merry and Pippin were going since they really should have been the ones to check in on their young wizard in the first place.

They now stood as an awkward crowd in front of where Harry had bundled himself away into and wondered why they thought they needed so many people to look at a tent. It was a mid-sized tent, really, a few inches taller than Aragorn himself and the width and length of the average tent used by knights during tournaments where they kept their weapons and sleeping roll. Besides looking newly made and clean, there was nothing out of the ordinary about it.

It was looking like they had made a mountain of a molehill when Pippin hesitantly called, "Harry? Are you awake?"

They waited but there was no answer. Further inquiry yielded them no results.

Sam scratched his head before shrugging. "Reckon one of us should go in and shake 'im awake? It's been a long day and he'll not thank us if we don't make sure he's up for supper."

Boromir, who had decided his participation was no longer needed and had began stripping off his clothes, paused after tossing off his undershirt and waved a hand at them. "Go on, then. Wizard or not, the boy is asleep. Wake him and be done with it."

Aragorn stepped forward and stepped through the flaps, calling out, "Harry – ?"

The sudden silence following the cut off word made those waiting nervous. As Legolas was about to duck under as well, Aragorn popped back out from the tent, his eyes wide as saucers.

"Aragorn, what's the matter?" they cried, fearing the worst, but the ranger paid them no mind, his eyes flickering about the profile of the tent obsessively. He reached a wary hand to the space above the tent and let a thoroughly bewildered expression cross his face as the hand passed through the space with no obstruction. He then just stared at the tent, unblinkingly, looking completely at a loss for words.

"Estel, whatever is the matter?" Legolas asked, concern colouring his tone.

A pregnant silence swept over the Fellowship. Suddenly, with barely a blink in warning, Aragorn made to duck through the opening again, saying, "Follow me."

They looked at one another, wondering if he meant all of them, and if he did, how he expected them to all fit inside the thing. It was Gimli that voiced these thoughts.

Aragorn's head poked out of the tent and he tugged the nearest person – Sam in this instance – forward. "I can not explain it myself, but suffice to say, it is a lot bigger than it looks." And to prove his words, his other hand latched onto Legolas, pulling both elf and hobbit in with him. Those still remaining outside were surprised to see that the tent showed no sign of any of the extra occupants now inside.
It was Legolas this time that poked his head out with a gobsmacked look on his face. They could hear Sam breathing, "Impossible," as the elf beckoned them forward. Curiosity taking hold of them, the five still outside lined up to enter the tent, despite how impossible they thought it all was.

What greeted them was impossible indeed. Every single law of nature dictated that what their eyes were telling them to be true was beyond the realm of imagination. More than one skeptical disbeliever rubbed at their eyes, as if trying to wipe away whatever illusion they must be seeing.

They stood in a well-furnished entrance hall, well-made bookshelves and carefully framed paintings lining the walls. An earthy green rug embroidered with swirling brown leaves, laying on top of the dark wooden floor, led the way to an open area where they could see lush furniture and a cozy fire. As if in a dream, one by one, the Fellowship drifted toward the open area, expecting to pass through whatever enchantment their young wizard had thrown up to confuse intruders, even as their feet sunk into the soft carpet and the fire from the fireplace warmed their flesh.

But it was real! Frodo could not deny how real it was when he stepped forward through the entrance hall and into an airy sitting room, and the plump sofa he reached for felt as soft and cushion-y as any of Bilbo's chairs back at Bag End. He sunk down into it with awe written all over him.

The rest of the Fellowship spread out across the spacious room, childlike wonder in their every movements as they allowed themselves to explore the wonder of magic before them. Sam, Merry, and Pippin called out in delight when they noticed the kitchen; Aragorn walked the length of the floor, taking in how the walls and canopy seemed to be made out of the same tan cloth they saw on the outside; Legolas had found the utensil drawers and was testing the weight of a finely crafted, silver dinner knife; and Gimli and Boromir were entranced by the tapestry hanging from the wall where the battle scene depicted within was moving with a life of it's own.

Impossible, they were all thinking, yet there it was before them, thumbing its nose at their perception of reality.

So caught up by the magic around them, they didn't notice a slender figure dancing its way towards them through an open door, eyes closed and humming, until the person jumped and yelped, startling them all into attention.

After her hour or so of soaking in water that would never turn cold, Harry lazily finished scrubbing herself, and climbed out of the tub. She reckoned she had never felt as deliciously comfortable as she did at the moment ever before. Just for that moment, all was right in her world.

Swaying her hips to the rhythm of the third movement of Vivaldi's Summer, Harry picked up the pair of dark green elven trousers that felt like they were made of suede, and held them to her legs; they really were nothing more than tights. Harry scrunched up her face, but knew she would offend someone if she didn't wear the clothes provided.

She carefully slipped the tights – or leggings, they were a bit thick for tights – on, feeling proud that she'd worked out that the flap in the front side of the trousers was to help tie it up. They were a bit loose – nothing a resizing charm wouldn't fix – but otherwise comfortable, even if they weren't her usual style.

Next was the shirt. It was long, thin, but felt like velvet, and looked a bit like it too. She pulled it over the specialized Quidditch camisole she always wore to keep her breasts from getting in the way, tucked in Undetectable Wizard-space. The shirt was a light tan colour and Harry had trouble
navigating it at first; she couldn't work out how to tie it up.

Arms through the sleeves, but after that . . . oh right, now she saw. It was a wrap-around thing, a strange tunic. The edge of the tunic flutter about her knees instead of hitting mid thigh like she had seen the elves wear it, and the sleeves fell over her hands so only the tips of her fingers were visibly. The shirt was clearly too big for her but instead of resizing it like she had with the leggings, Harry kept it as it was, the silly part of her taking the reigns for a brief moment and deciding that she looked rather cute with the tunic like that.

Next came the boots. They were the same dark green as her leggings, and rather Dumbledore-ish in design, except they weren't shiny and didn't have heels. She slipped them on and had her laces tied in a trice.

All in all, she had to admit, the clothes were alright.

She studied her image in the mirror – Ooh, she seemed to be getting a light tan, she looked kind of glowy. And her legs were looking really shapely! – before squelching her vanity with all her common sense and logic, plucking up her cloak as she went, and pointedly walking away from her frivolity. While it was fine to take time to enjoy herself, she had a task to complete and she doubted it would involve how pretty she could make herself. She was a girl at war but she would be no air-headed damsel.

Harry bounced and swayed her way back to the front of the tent, hat jiggling and rocking along with her, humming, "I can slay my own dragons . . . my knight in shining armor is me . . ." She was twirling around when a noise made her eyes flash open and a yelp of shock escaped her.

The rest of the Fellowship was in her tent!

"What are you lot doing here?" Harry blurted when she had their attention. This was not how she planned on showing them the tent.

"Harry!" Pippin cheered as he raced out from the kitchen, a small cauldron in his arms, and bounced in front of her. Same and Merry followed just as enthusiastically if at a more sedate pace. "This place is wonderful! I've never heard of such a thing. How much magic was used in making this tent? How come you never showed us before?"

"Pippin!" Sam scolded. "Harry doesn't have to share everything with us. You know very well that wizards keep their secrets close to their chest."

"No, it's nothing like that at all," Harry refuted, her dramatically improved speech garnering notice. "I had meant to tell you all after you were more comfortable with me but I could never think of a good time to bring it up. I was actually planning show you today so I suppose now is a good a time as any."

"You were nervous about showing us your tent?" Merry asked disbelievingly, having never before heard of such a silly thing. "Whatever for? It's amazing!"

"Well, yes, but at first you were all rather suspicious of me and I didn't want to make it any worse and then, after we started getting along better, I didn't want to spring it on you that I had kept something from you," Harry explained, rocking on her heels. She frowned at a sudden thought. "Though now that I think about it, the fact that I kept it from you in the first place is suspicious in of itself."

Gimli snorted. He marched over from where he had been tracing the edge of the moving tapestry.
"You're over-thinking the matter. We're here now and the fact that you didn't tell us about your inconceivable, mystical toy is not going to set us into a furious rage." He gave the fidgeting wizard a keen knowing look. "I am not going to settle into a furious rage."

Harry grinned sheepishly at them before another detail drew her attention. In her most confused voice, the young wizard asked, "What have you been doing in here that Boromir's standing half-naked in my sitting room?"

At night, the singing started. Harry had never heard anything so sad and so beautiful in her entire life, except perhaps when Legolas sang. But these were clearly female voices, and much more melancholic, or so Harry thought.

Legolas appeared in front of the hollow where the hobbits and Harry were lounging, having just arrived from his jaunt around the city. According to Pippin, Legolas had gone to visit some past acquaintances. Harry had wondered how 'past' these acquaintances were. Probably longer than she'd been alive, Harry had concluded.

"A lament for Gandalf," Legolas explained the sad song, staring off into the distance. Perhaps all elves did that?

"What do they say about him?" asked Merry, leaning forward slightly.

Legolas turned to face them, a hint of sadness in his eyes. "I have not the heart to tell you. For me the grief is still too near."

With that short explanation, Legolas walked off around the tree again, his expression clearly troubled. Gandalf was not mentioned again for the rest of the conversations the Fellowship had that night, instead, they talked of how they fared in the tree-tops the night before, the uncomfortableness of the blindfolds, and the Lord and Lady. Sam looked distinctly uncomfortable at that last topic.

Pippin, ever the nosy one, smelled something and questioned Sam on it immediately. "And why did you blush when she looked at you, Sam?" he said, a little cheekily. "Anyone would have thought you had a guilty conscience. I hope it was nothing worse than a wicked plot to steal one of my blankets."

"I never thought no such thing," said Sam, sounding deeply serious. "If you want to know, I felt as if I hadn't got nothing on, and I didn't like it. She seemed to be looking inside me and asking me what I would do if she gave me the chance of flying back home to the Shire to a nice little hole with – with a bit of garden of my own. It was then I thought, I didn't need her help to fly back home if'n I wanted to, fore I had Harry, if he can fly like he was saying."

Everyone looked between a blushing Harry and an equally red-faced Sam then – though they didn't know that Harry, as opposed to Sam, was not blushing in embarrassment but an almost fear/gladness that the elf witch now knew one of her rudimentary skills as a wizard. It was probably because of this that Harry's meeting with the Lord and Lady had not been as judgmental as it could have been.

"That's funny," said Pippin, getting over his shock at Sam's momentary forcefulness with someone as prestigious and powerful as Galadriel. "Almost . . . almost exactly what I felt like myself; only – only well, I don't think I'll say anymore," he ended lamely.

As Harry listened to the rest of the Fellowship's explanations on their experiences of being mind read, she noticed there seemed to be a pattern in Galadriel's questioning. Everyone had felt like they
was being judged, it seemed. The elf queen would offer them two paths; the path ahead where darkness and fear lay, or the path behind, where they could go home.

Gimli, Boromir, and Frodo were the only one's out of the Fellowship that would not say the specifics of what Galadriel told them, even though Boromir kept pressing for Frodo to do so. "She held you long in her gaze, Ring-bearer," he said.

"Yes," answered Frodo, looking stubborn, "but whatever came into my mind then I will keep there."

"Well have a care!" said Boromir. "I do not feel too sure of this Elvish Lady and her purposes."

Harry was inclined to agree though she did admire Galadriel very much. Aragorn, however, was not. "Speak no evil of the Lady Galadriel," he said sternly. "You know not what you say. There is in her, and in this land, no evil, unless a man bring it hither himself."

We'll just forget about the Ring then, shall we? Harry thought.

Aragorn continued, "But tonight I shall sleep without fear for the first time since I left Rivendell. And may I sleep deeply, and forget for a while my grief! I am weary in body and heart."

Then Aragorn slumped down even further on the couch he was sprawled on, and promptly conked out.

"What about you Harry?" asked Merry curiously. "She had a council with you all by yourself. What did she say?" Everyone, including Aragorn, whom, it appeared, was not fast asleep, turned to look in Harry's corner of the tree to await his explanation.

"Er –," said Harry. She couldn't, in truth, tell them what Lady Galadriel had said in her mind because she hadn't said anything at all. "Well, it was a bit different that what she talked to you about," she finally settled on. "She said I was very odd, and cast a spell on me since she knew I didn't speak Westron very well. After that, she said they wouldn't be so distrusting of me anymore since she could tell I mean no harm. She also mentioned something about my eyes being like Elendil or something."

The Fellowship, particularly Legolas and Aragorn, seemed puzzled at this. They looked as if they just didn't know what to make of this strange happening.

"Well," said Merry finally, after a minute of embarrassed, awkward silence – in which everyone looked at Harry like she'd sprouted arms out of her ears – he concluded, "I think that wizards are odd."

Harry surprised herself by laughing. "That's the most honest and truest statement I've ever heard."

Merry blushed, but looked thankful nonetheless.
The Mission, Should You Choose to Accept

Only a week had passed by since the Fellowship entered Lothlorien city and Harry was forced re-evaluate what she'd told Haldir earlier on the stairs. Hedwig had still not shown up.

Harry had grudgingly concluded that Lothlorien must have magical warding of some sort around it, considering that Galadriel was, in fact, a witch. Harry had to have been stupid to think that mind-reading was her only magical talent. The word 'witch' implied magic user after all. But it frustrated Harry that she didn't know what magical talents the queen did have, or what sort of warding resided about the city.

She was assured on one thing, though, and that was that Hedwig would never leave her. She imagined the owl had just found a nice tree outside the city gates and would find her when she stepped outside of Lothlorien boundaries. In the meantime, she hoped her feathered friend was perturbing the gate wardens.

In the week that had passed, Harry had entertained the elves who had delivered their clothes with transfigurations and charms to pay for the outfit she decided she wanted to keep. She considered wearing her jumper as it was chilly, but ultimately decided against it, as muggle clothes just didn't agree with a wizard's hat. She left off the jumper and instead wrapped a thicker cloak around her shoulders.

Harry had spent the last week walking about with Merry and Pippin, sometimes passing Legolas and Gimli on the way. Occasionally, the two groups would conjoin and explore the city together. This proved to be a good idea as Legolas was an elf and was familiar with the elvish language and customs. If they should happen upon any elves who spoke only Sindarin ("The primary elvish language," as Legolas had explained) he would translate any undecipherable sentences, and start up conversations where the hobbits and Harry seemed to be the focal point.

The elves in Lothlorien had never seen hobbits, it seemed, and they were equally curious of Harry, who, as the rumours went, was a wizard. Harry had wondered, cheeks red as people stared, how the entire city had come to know that about her, and only when a picture of Haldir's smirking face flashed through her mind did she give up wondering.

She was considering punching him in that pretty mouth the next time she saw him.

After breakfast that day, Merry and Pippin each grabbed a hand of Harry's and pulled her up from her regular lounging spot by the tree where she was often found reading or conjuring illusions for their entertainment. The rest of the Fellowship – besides Gimli and Legolas who'd already left on their daily outing – looked on with amusement.

Harry felt it was her right to complain. "Oh, come on! We're not going today. We agreed yesterday that we'd go next week!"

"That was before we knew Legolas was going to be there. He's one of the best archers in Middle Earth, you know!" said Pippin, fervently pulling her arm.

"No, I didn't," Harry said dully, then groaned because the two hobbits were already tugging her onwards. She appreciated sports, but archery was nothing like Quidditch. "Well, so what if he's one of the best? I can see him shoot arrows any old time, why does it have to be now?"

"We'll see him best all those other elves, that's why," answered Merry. The hobbits had gotten her
five meters away from the tree now.

Harry tried the stall tactic. "Well, what if he gets beaten? You're just setting yourself up for a disappointment."

At this, Merry, Pippin, and Aragorn all snorted.

"He's not going to lose, Harry, so onwards, we'll go! Why are you so opposed to seeing the archery range?" asked Merry.

Because it was full of arrogant, stuck up elf warriors, who, in Harry's mind, were what warden's were, and Harry had never liked them. Instead, all she said was, "How 'bout some second breakfast?"

The entire remaining Fellowship chuckled at that.

Pippin, however, shook his head. "It's too early for second breakfast," he said, and Harry gaped in surprise.

"Er, a between meal snack?" She was grasping at straws now.

"We will all go," Aragorn suggested, after observing Pippin become interested in Harry's offer. Harry glared at him. "'Twill be refreshing to see a competition of archery again. I have not witnessed one since before I toured the lands as a Ranger."

Harry didn't bother to ask what a Ranger was, but she assumed it was someone who didn't have a lot of free time on their hands.

So Harry was forced to go to the archery range because the rest of the Company were going too. Talk about peer pressure.

It took them half an hour to find it. Amidst the gigantic trees – that all looked alike – and the passing elves – whom all looked alike – they lost their way a couple of times, until they realised that the passing elves were more than likely walking to the archery range for the competition anyway, and followed them. Also, having the elvish translated by Aragorn – who told them the elves were going to the archery range – helped a lot.

When they arrived at the glade, they discovered that the competition was already underway, with ten candidates admitted to the semi-finals. Legolas, predictably, was one of them.

An assortment of male and female elves were gathered behind and to the sides of the remaining archers. The Company walked to where Gimli was standing along the side. He'd placed an intimidating hand on the butt of his axe, his stance resembled that of a wasp protecting its hive. That is, if wasps wore armor, stood on their hind legs, and carried axes.

He relaxed his hand when he saw that the Fellowship had surrounded him. "You've come just in time, too," he said. "The lad is about to shoot."

The 'lad,' looking serene and not in the least perturbed at the surrounding spectators, lifted his bow, took aim, and released. This all happened in the space of a split second. Everyone in the clearing watched as the arrow sailed, and sailed, and sailed – the target really was exceptionally far away – until it hit what Harry assumed was the bull's eye, if the cheering and clapping of the elves, and Legolas' nod of acknowledgment gave any indication.

She wondered how Legolas could have seen the target from where he was standing. It was simply
impossible! Unless, like walking on a tightrope without any reflection whatsoever, elves had better eyesight too? It wouldn't surprise Harry. But it did make her think on why this was so. Why was there an apparently perfect race? Or, maybe she should have thought instead, why there was a race that displayed such perfect physical attributes while the metaphysical left much to be desired?

But that isn't fair, said a small voice that sounded a lot like Hermione. Legolas was alright and Galadriel seemed nice, if a bit intrusive. She couldn't judge an entire race based on the few she had met.

Then Hagrid's words from fourth year came to the fore front."Yer get weirdos in every bunch!"

Harry decided to agree with the voices.

"Let's move closer to the target," suggested Frodo. "I should like to see what they're actually aiming at."

Everyone agreed, and they shuffled along until they almost reached the other side of the field. The target, they found, was a bunch of compressed circles painted in a spiral on a flat board and nailed to a tree, with the largest as big as a plate and the smallest the size of a thimble. Legolas' arrow protruded directly from the thimble-sized circle.

Aragorn, noticing Harry's gaping expression, chuckled. "Tis an elvish archery contest, Harry. No Man would win, should he enter."

"I can see that."

Then the rest of the elves had their go, too, only one of them just brushing the barrier of the smallest circle. After that, it was time for the finals, with only three contenders left.

An elf that was in charge of the target moved it a few meters further back. The Fellowship moved with it.

The first elf took aim and fired, his arrow landing directly in the middle of the target. There was much cheering from the surrounding elves at this. The second elf was Legolas, who didn't need nearly as much time to aim as the first elf had, and his arrow splintered the first elf's arrow as it landed. This produced even more cheering and clapping.

The last elf, however, was another story. Harry wouldn't have been interested in him at all, besides the fact that he could win the competition if he beat Legolas. Harry didn't think he was at all special, or that he would have anything to do with Harry at all, but of course, the universe, it didn't matter which, lived to contradict her.

It took a lot to make an elf drunk – half a barrel of mulled mead to be precise – and when the once-in-an-elvish-lifetime-event occurred, it was very unfortunate on the poor elf. Narien, currently being the third contender in the finals of an informal elvish archery competition, was drunk. Since early that morning in fact. The where and why was irrelevant as was how he managed to make it all the way to the finals – luck was involved, or pure coincidence – but suffice to say, that luck all but deserted him, and he wouldn't even be able to hit the side of an Oliphant if it stood but three feet away.

Drunk elves and archery competitions shouldn't mix, really, as Harry found out.

Narien loaded his bow. He took extra care in doing so, though nobody in the vicinity seemed to think anything was amiss. Even if elves got drunk, they hardly looked it, after all.

Narien took aim. This, however, produced some murmurs throughout the assorted hangers-on
because the elf seemed to have aimed at an angle slightly away from the target, and the audience knew, because they had that excellent sight of theirs.

The elf in question, however, seemed unconcerned, so his audience assumed he knew what he was doing. But that assumption was quickly laid to rest when Narien let loose the arrow without changing angles. This caused considerable surprise and shocked exclamations, but not nearly as much shocked and surprised as what Harry and the Fellowship would do when the arrow reached the other end.

The Company knew that the last elf had taken aim, but they hadn't seen when he'd fired the arrow, so when the missile suddenly appeared in Harry's hat, whipping it from her head and continuing to travel onwards – with the hat still dangling on the stem, and imbedding itself in a nearby tree – they were quite surprised. But none more so than Harry. She had only felt a momentary relief at not being shot, and that relief had quickly turned to terror when she realised that her hat was no longer on her head, as it was supposed to be.

"He did that on bloody purpose!" was all Harry could say, slipping into English in her outrage, before sprinting towards her pinned hat, ripping the arrow out of the tree, and stuffing the hat on her head. She could only hope that Galadriel hadn't tried to pry in those couple of minutes she'd been without her hat or she'd certainly catch it from the Sorting Hat when she got home.

On the other end of the field, Narien promptly passed out.

"A couple inches lower and you would have been – !"

"I know, Pippin," said Harry, for what felt the thousandth time.

"Alright, no need to get snarly!"

"I'm not getting snarly, it's just, how could this have happened? I thought elves were supposed to be experts at shooting arrows!"

The Fellowship, including Legolas and Gimli, had returned to their tree to discuss the morning's events – after Legolas went through all of the congratulations first, of course, and that alone took about half an hour. This was also where Harry discovered that Legolas must have been royalty by the way the elves who were offering their compliments seemed to be channeling jack-in-the-boxes', and had the tendency of saying, "Your highness," after every sentence. Or so Aragorn translated.

Harry knew she shouldn't be so grumpy, especially at Pippin, but she felt on edge from what had happened. Not the part where she'd almost been dead, but the part where Galadriel might have taken the opportunity to poke around, and now she kept expecting the Lady to pop up and invite for her a chat.

Legolas leaned forward, looking conspiratorially serious. The Fellowship leaned in closer in order to hear better. "Laer told me that Narien, the elf who shot Harry's hat, was drunk."

"What!" Harry squawked.

"Tis true," Legolas continued, seeming to enjoy the Fellowship's stunned reactions. "Last night there was merry-making in the woods, a little further away from the city, but still within its boundaries. There was much pleasure and drink to be had. It appears that Narien had too much."
"What's merry-making?" asked Harry.

Incredibly, Aragorn and Legolas both looked uncomfortable at this, exchanging glances and fidgeting slightly where they sat.

"Tis an elvish pastime," Legolas finally said, trying to avoid Harry's gaze.

Harry blinked slowly. *Merry-making? Making happy? Surely it was just a group of idiots partying. Surely he couldn't mean . . . ?* But what if he did? What if elves regularly went out and . . . She couldn't force herself to think of what Legolas could have been implying. In the woods? In a group? No, she didn't want to think about it.

"Yeah, so," Harry said, forcing her thoughts to safer subjects, "how did he make it so far into the competition if he was drunk?"

Legolas lifted one shoulder in an elegant shrug. "I know not."

"So it's just one of those things?" Harry said.

"What things do you speak of?" Legolas looked puzzled.

"I mean, *one of those things*, you know, you can't explain it, it just sort of happens, like lightening striking in the same place twice, or something."

"Ah, I see now," said Legolas, inclining his head. "You use a very strange dialect, Harry."

Harry reddened at this, especially when she saw that everyone seemed to agree. "Everyone talks like this where I come from," she muttered in her own defence.

"It must be very interesting where you come from," said Boromir.

Harry nodded, though privately, she thought that this was Boromir's polite way of saying she was loony. "It is," Harry told them. "You won't believe some of the things – er . . ." she trailed off because suddenly everyone seemed very interested. " – well, it's just a lot different from Middle Earth."

After saying that, Harry wondered why she was so defensive at keeping everything to herself when she had told them not long ago that she didn't want to keep any secrets from them. No harm would come if she told them about muggle things, or just things in general that could be found in the wizarding world, surely? It wasn't like the Statute of Secrecy applied in an alternate reality, did it?

"How different?" asked Pippin.

"Well, let's see," said Harry, warming up to the idea, and pulling her knees up to rest her chin on them. "To begin with, you have to know that there are two main communities that exist in my world. My people call them the Wizarding World and the Muggle World. The Wizarding World is full of magic users and magical creatures, and things like that, whereas the Muggle World is full of what you call the Race of Men here. Nobody in the Muggle World knows about wizards or any magical creatures; they're kept unaware."

This caused exceptional surprise with his companions.

"Why is this so?" asked Boromir, sounding a tad defensive.

"I was told it's because they'd want a magic solution to all their problems," explained Harry,
remembering what Hagrid had told her. "But I think it has more to do with the fact that what led to
the separation of Muggles and Magicals was the persecution of Magicals. I don't doubt that the
Muggle World and the Wizarding World co-existed thousands of years back, but just before we went
into hiding, muggles burned us at the stake, calling us abominations and evil."

Boromir looked shocked and also a bit sheepish at provoking such a topic. He winced at Harry
apologetically but Harry waved it off graciously. "It's fine, considering the fact that everyone more or
less co-exists peacefully here, it's no wonder you would be offended hearing the race of Men in my
world are kept unaware.

"In any case, I'm not sure if it would be the same now but we're really just too different. We have
evolved differently. The Wizarding World uses magic for simply everything; we literally cannot exist
without it. Our entire system would collapse if we were deprived of our magic. But the Muggle
World has created technology to help them live their daily lives, they have no real need for magic."

At the bewildered expressions she was getting, Harry assumed they didn't know what technology
was.

"An example of technology would be . . . um, computers. They look like boxes, at least some do,
and you can write on them, and store libraries of books and other information, and if another person
has their own computer, you can talk through them to people on the other side of the world . . ."

They weren't believing it.

"It sounds like sorcery!" said Gimli.

"I suppose you'd think it so, if you've never seen it before."

"What other things can be found in the muggle world?" asked Pippin.

"Well, there buildings, too."

"Buildings?" said the hobbits together, their tone disbelieving.

"What's so special about buildings?" asked Merry.

"Muggle buildings can be as tall as a mountain."

"As tall as mountains? I'd like to see that," said Sam. "What else is there?"

"Well, there are airplanes, which are like giant birds made of metal that travel around the world and
carry hundreds of people in them – " Harry ignored the stunned expressions. "Then there are cars, a
sort of horseless carriage that can travel faster than an elf can run. Um, oh, they've got these weapons
that can destroy entire countries with the push of a button. They're called nuclear bombs."

There was a lot of sputtering at this. "Entire countries? Sauron would rejoice should he know of such
a weapon!" cried Aragorn.

"Yes, well, we're lucky he doesn't."

"What about the world of Wizards? Tell us about the creatures there. We already know you don't
have hobbits, but you do have elves," said Pippin.

Harry wished Pippin hadn't said anything because Legolas sat up at his words.

"There is an Elven race in your world?" he asked. "Why did you not mention this before?"
"Oh they're not like you, Legolas," said Pippin, before Harry could open his mouth. "They're like hobbits, aren't they, Harry?"

Harry was suddenly unhappy being the focus of everyone's attention. "Er, they're not exactly like hobbits, though the height is similar," she said, hemming and hawing. Everyone seemed to be waiting for her to continue. "Alright then, um, they're little with pointy ears and live to serve wizards," She said. "Now, who wants to know about, er, giants?"

There was laughter. "No one heard anything, Harry," said Merry. "You ran your words together."

"Yeah, I meant to do that," Harry mumbled. Too late, she forgot Legolas could hear. Harry watched him now, frowning in puzzlement. "Fine then, but I ask that you don't become too offended when you hear what house-elves are like."

Everyone seemed even more interested at this, and they leaned in closer. Harry took a deep breath.

"The official name for elves in the Wizarding World is House-Elves, and they're called house-elves because they live in wizarding houses. I want to point out right from the start that they look and behave nothing like the elves here; they are as similar as a horse is to a horse-fly, really the only thing in common is the name, alright?" She paused to make sure everyone had nodded their heads in acknowledgment.

"House-elves are . . . " How to put this as gently as possible? "Indentured servants, only they love serving their masters. Or maybe guardians of the home is more accurate description. Their lives are tied to the family they serve. I don't know much about them beyond the fact that they love their wizards and some die of despair if they are sent away to be 'free'."

Harry cleared her throat before blithely changing the subject. "So, who wants to know about giants?"

Silence greeted her.

"Servants?" Legolas finally said.

Harry took another breath. "Look, elves in my world are nothing likes elves in Middle Earth. You wouldn't be able to pick them out in a crowd if I was to show you a group of assorted magical creatures because they are as like you as a cat is to a catfish. The fact that the word 'elf' is part of their name is pure coincidence."

Legolas nodded, slowly. "I see."

Harry let his eyes flit to each member of the Fellowship. Aragorn, Frodo, and Sam looked melancholy – a lot like Legolas – Boromir, Merry, and Gimli seemed contemplative, and Pippin who was munching on a piece of cheese, didn't appear to be bothered by what Harry had revealed, and surprisingly, seemed to be the only one who looked understanding of Harry's explanation.

"Look, I'm not explaining this properly. The only thing I can think of that properly explain the bond between a house-elf and the family they serve would be like if I turned Hedwig from an owl into a humanoid creature with increased intelligence.

"Hedwig follows me everywhere and happily obeys me. She is happy to obey and is very loyal because she knows I care for her and take responsibility for her, and the bond between us feeds her magic that keeps her stronger and more intelligent than a normal owl. We are both benefiting from the bond.

"That's not to say people do not abuse their animal companions or house-elves because they do; I
have a friend named Dobby – he’s a house-elf – that I helped escape from a horrible man, and Dobby was quite happy to be free of him, but I have seen that they are at their happiest when tending to a ‘master.’

"I think serving under a master is part of their nature since Dobby immediately went to look for work at the school I go to, where hundreds house-elves live, even though he said he was happy to be free. The satisfaction that work gives them is their sustenance in place of food – I’ve never seen a house-elf eat, that’s why I think they’re actually spirits taking physical form – and without it, the idleness of freedom literally kills them."

Legolas looked somewhat mollified so Harry figured a change of subject would get him into a better mood. She grinned teasingly. "Who wants to know about giants?"

Pippin took up the bait. "What are giants?"

Harry jumped straight into the description. "They're like trolls – well like the trolls back home, I'm not exactly an expert on the trolls here – except smarter – they can talk, you know – and bigger too, averaging around twenty to twenty-five feet tall, and resembles the race of Men in their looks. I'm not sure if you measure height in feet here, so think of an enormous brute of a man that's at least five times taller and wider, and you have a Giant."

Frodo shuddered. Sam looked on in horror. Pippin stopped munching as Harry enthusiastically continued.

"Groups of them have been known to fight each other to the death and they're very casual about violence. It goes without saying that their population is relatively small. They're also hard to take down since they are resistant to most magic, though I'm not sure how they fare against non-magical weapons."

"I should not like to meet a giant, then," said Merry, taking the remaining bit of cheese out of Pippin's slack grasp and stuffing it in his mouth.

Everyone offered mumblings of agreement.

"They live in the mountains, mostly," Harry told them. "And I haven't heard much on Giant attacks unless they were being incited to war by outside forces. Of course, we're rather leery of them in general so I don't actually know much about their natural temperaments.

"I can't speak for the entire race, but my friend Hagrid is a half-giant and he's the kindest man I've ever met who has a real soft spot for animals. He works at the school I go to as well, and during my first year, he found a dragon egg that we got to watch hatch. We even took care of it for a few weeks before sending it to a better location for a growing, fire-breathing lizard. Dragons are – "

"Dragons!" everyone cried, when they finally accepted that Harry had actually said 'Dragon.'

Harry was momentarily taken aback at the passion in their voices. She had thought she would have to explain what dragons were, but evidently Middle Earth had them too.

"Yeah," Harry said. "You have them here too? We have all sorts of different breeds –"

"Harry Potter?" came a voice behind Harry's back. Harry stiffened before turning her head. Never once since arriving in Middle Earth had she told anyone her last name. An elf wearing silvery, floor length robes was standing behind her, looking down with a single raised eyebrow.

Harry scrambled to her feet, feeling more than a little defensive and wary. "Yes?"
"You are to accompany me to the Lady Galadriel. She would like a word."

Harry forced her throat not to gulp. "Now?"

The elf inclined his head, as if puzzled by Harry's query. "Yes. Now."

Harry finally forced down that gulp. It looked like Galadriel had managed to see something.

Soft, dappled sunlight gleamed from the treetops a mile high, twisting, turning, and sometimes overlooking its chosen path to bounce off a stray branch or leaf, eventually finding itself on the forest floor. Sometimes a fat tree branch would catch an obscure ray, preventing it from ever reaching the ground. The aforementioned branch would then light up in filmy sliver, so that it appeared as if it were shimmering. This, then, would result in the entire tree flaring in the ethereal image, like a ghostly specter out on the moors. Every tree in Lothlorien had that effect.

Every.

Single.

Freaking.

Tree.

It was a wonder the elves had not all gone mad at such uniformed perfection all the time. Where was the spice of life that uncertainty and uniqueness could bring? It was all so perfect, so completed. There was nothing left to do with it because it was finished. It was amazing that boredom had not claimed more of their lives.

It all rather reminded Harry of fairy magic. It was funny what simple things people notice when they try to get their minds off unpleasant situations. At least now Harry knew how elves achieved the 'glowing' effect on almost all inanimate objects – besides themselves.

It was a pity Harry's mood didn't feel as welcoming or peaceful as her surrounding environment.

She was not stupid by any means, she liked to think that she had a good head on her shoulders, but she wasn't she as smart as someone like Hermione. Harry would be the second to admit that she could be a bit thick at times – Hermione, lovable swot she was, coming in first – but even she was surprised at how stupid she'd been this time around; and it shocked her to the bone, because when fighting for survival and acceptance, Harry usually and instinctively paid attention to the smaller matters around her. Smaller matters might soon turn into bigger matters later on, as she had found out the hard way.

She'd called herself thousands of different kinds of a brainless bitch for not remembering to replace the sticking charm on her hat.

She'd also asked herself why this had happened. Why did she kept forgetting the little things, the little spells that make a wizard's life just that much easier?

Harry thought about it, and realised she'd forgotten to use magic in other situations as well, where it could have benefited. Like her Firebolt; she could have thought to use that to fly down to Gandalf when he'd fallen into that pit, or at least to bring his body back to the Fellowship for a proper burial. She could have used the disillusionment charm or her invisibility cloak to cover herself, her broom, and Gandalf as they flew back out of the pit, so the orcs wouldn't see.

She could have used her Firebolt for a different matter entirely. She could have taken Frodo up on it
and flew them away to Mount Doom where the hobbit could have chucked the ring into the lava . . .
'There, the danger is over and we can all go home,' they would say. It would have only taken a
couple of hours.

No, that wouldn't have worked, Harry told had a task and helping Frodo with it might not be it. But
despite that, Harry knew there were instances that she wouldn't have even thought to use magic if it
weren't for outside interference. When Aragorn and Frodo had been stuck on the other side of the
crumbling road in the Mines of Moria, it had been Legolas who'd shouted for Harry to use a spell; it
had been he who had reminded Harry she was a wizard – a fact Harry had temporarily forgotten.

And she knew why all this occurred. Why she had simply appeared to have forgotten most
fundamental spells and ideas; it was her reluctance to show magic in front of the Fellowship and the
eves that had done it. Her fear of being ostracized as she had been all last year by her fellow
classmates; people she had called friends. It was her fear of a new world, her fear that her new
friends would hate her because she was different. All this mingled together produced a thicker Harry
than the one who'd first entered this world. And she hated herself for it.

And now, because of all this, Lady Galadriel had been able to see into her mind, and would question
her on it. It was the worst sort of luck.

Now, as Harry trudged up the staircase to the home of the king and queen of Loth lorien, the regal
looking messenger elf gliding in front of her, she told herself to think positively. After all, what could
Galadriel have seen in the minute her hat was pinned to the tree? She might not have even been
scrying; her attention might have been elsewhere.

Maybe it was for another reason? Maybe it was because of the 'from another world' thing? The last
time they'd spoken, Galadriel had told the king that Harry had been badgered enough. That could
imply that the Lady had wanted to talk more to her, but had refrained from it because Harry was
exhausted. It might mean that she wanted to speak to Harry now about whatever she couldn't before.
Maybe that was it!

Harry had almost convinced herself of that theory as she reached the end of her trek up the staircase,
until she spotted the heads of the rulers of Loth lorien sitting in two pearl-coloured thrones that
appeared nearly as bright as they were. Their imminent presence, doubled by they vision they
presented on their thrones, caused her to stumble stupidly over the last step, so that she ended up
almost face-down at the feet of the messenger.

The elf in question looked down on her with eyebrows raised, before turning to the king and queen
and formally introducing Harry, then walking back down the stairs.

Harry was, by now, scarlet.

Gingerly picking herself up in case she done herself actual harm, Harry walked the last few meters
until she stood directly in front of the king and queen. Remembering what the messenger elf had
done, she bowed and straightened, trying, without success, to avoid their weighty gazes.

"You, erm, summoned me, Your Majesties?" Harry said, not being able to take the penetrating
silence anymore.

There was a long pause before the queen answered. "It does me well to see you, Harry Potter," she
began, gesturing for Harry to sit on one of the many chairs on the chamber-like platform. Harry
didn't know what to make of this statement, but she sat down anyway on the chair almost directly
adjacent to the queen's, so that she ended up sitting sideways in the chair while looking at Lady
Galadriel.
"A-and you as well." Harry tried for a polite statement. Her scar from Umbridge's detentions prickled and she couldn't help but scratch at it, though she was trying not to fidget.

Galadriel smiled slightly. Or she might not have been smiling at all; it was difficult to tell what that expressionless face might reveal. Somehow, Harry felt like the queen was was though, and this feeling calmed her down slightly, so that she stopped scratching the back of her hand nervously.

"You have any inkling as to why I have requested to see you?"

Harry wasn't sure if that was a question or not, but she answered like it was. "Possibly. That is, unless you just wanted a bit of a chat . . ."

That almost smile again.

She tried once more. "Er . . . then, you saw into my mind and discovered things . . ."

"That would be nearly correct, Harry Potter," she said, nodding elegantly. "Your hat revealed a great many things, yet concealed none. I was beginning to wonder when you would deem it wise to speak with me. Did it not occur to you that it might be my duty to inform you of the path you must walk whilst you reside in Middle Earth?"

"What?" said Harry after a pause. The implications of that had her mind in a jumble. If Galadriel had just said what Harry thought she'd just said . . . Harry cleared her throat uncertainly. "Excuse me . . . Your Majesty . . . but – I mean, are you trying to say that, well, you actually penetrated the defensive barriers that were around my hat? But – I mean, before the Sorting Hat left, it told me that no one and nothing would be able to access my thoughts . . . and, well, you're kind of saying you did . . . and that really wasn't supposed to happen," she finished lamely.

The king made a noise then. It was a sort of half snort, half cough, that barely lasted half a second. Harry marvelled that any elf could make a sound that was usually so crude seem as commonplace as breathing.

The queen said simply, "Yes."

"Right, I thought so," said Harry after a long silence, when everything she'd heard so far since arriving at the dais sank in. "Right, so that means that – that you knew all along, then? You could've gone into my mind and broken through the barrier at anytime . . ." the queen smiled fully this time, " . . . and of course you could, this is your world after all, and I'm a stupid idiot for taking the words of a hat at face value."

"I am not an intrusive elf," was all the queen said to that.

Harry felt deeply embarrassed as she really how ridiculous she had been to have put so much faith in magic, for all the she had been avoided using it, that she was willing to believe whatever a hat had said was true. What would a hat know about Middle Earth magic, after all? Sorting Hat though it was? What would Dumbledore know? He'd never been to Middle Earth. How would they know if their brand of magic was stronger than Gandalf's or Galadriel's?

Didn't her experience with anything magical in Middle Earth – such as the holly trees and Gandalf – teach her that her magic reacted wrongly when exposed to them . . . ? No, that wasn't right – her magic hadn't worked at all! It had not made a dent in the enchantments she'd encounters; what had made her think it would in this instance?

The Hat had, that's what! She didn't even think to question it, and all because it was something familiar from her world that had momentarily taken away the feeling of lonesomeness in an unknown
land. The Sorting Hat had only observed Gandalf’s magic through Harry's own memories, it didn't have any firsthand experience. You can't base an opinion on word-of-mouth!

She was such a moron! It was only through Galadriel’s grace that she hadn't read her mind, not Dumbledore's or the Hat's so called 'gift.'

Harry finally recognised that Galadriel had only waited for an opportunity when Harry would temporarily take off the hat, so the Lady could tell Harry that without forcefully plundering her head. Galadriel was only being kind; she was only respecting Harry's privacy.

She was such an idiot; as was the Sorting Hat, and yes, even Dumbledore. Of course Harry realised that Dumbledore had only wanted to help her, and that, perhaps, her hat would offer some protection from the lure of the Ring, but it wouldn't completely shield her, it just wasn't strong enough. Then again, what with the way her magic responded to unfamiliar magical objects in Middle Earth, she had to re-evaluate her thoughts. Perhaps her hat wouldn't protect her from the Ring at all?

"Mayhaps," said the queen.

Harry's responding grin was chagrined and nearly a grimace. She'd just gotten her proof, hadn't she? Galadriel had managed to access her thoughts while she was still wearing the hat.

"Perhaps you should remove it?" the queen suggested, and Harry acquiesced, plucking the hat off her head and fluffing her hair. Immediately, she felt a cool breeze on her head and she nearly sighed in relief at how wonderful it felt. Without the stuffy, barrier of the hat to stop it, her head could finally breathe.

The king spoke, eyes icy blue, "What should we do with this young wizard now, Galadriel?" Harry tensed, forgetting the pleasant breeze. "Lying to the leaders of the high elves is crime worthy of the punishment of treason."

"I have not!" cried Harry, partly to explain, partly in terror, and mostly in anger at the accusation, which wasn't true. "Not once have I spoken a single false word while I've been here!"

"You do not believe withholding the truth is deception enough?"

"What business is it of yours if I wanted to keep my private thoughts exactly that: private? I didn’t exactly sneak in here, did I? I would accept your accusation of withholding information if you had bothered to ask me anything to begin with, but you didn't. What's wrong with actual conversation?

"And you couldn't accuse me of withholding anything even if you did ask, since I don't know anything! I was tossed into this world by some higher Power without the slightest idea where I was going. I know nothing of this world beyond the scant little Gandalf as told me."

"Indeed," the king drawled, sliding out of his chair and coming to loom over Harry, who couldn't help but lean back slightly at the elf's compelling presence. "It matters not whether you told lies outright, or concealed the truth or were simply ignorant of it all; it all unravels to the same ending: Do we trust you now? These are black times, and an unknown entity that deems fit to detain knowledge from the rulers of this land is not to be trusted."

Harry bit back the first retort that settled on her tongue, which went something along the lines of a sarcastic, "Why should I trust you?" Instead she settled with using logic, something Hermione would be proud of.

"You can trust me," she explained slowly, almost but not quite speaking like she would to a child, "because the queen can see into my mind now and judge me." She looked the king straight in the
eye, and while she couldn't withhold her wince, she didn't back down. "And I've no doubt she's been
doing just that. If I was evil, she would have told you already, and you'd be in the middle of a merry
chase to capture me as I escape."

Harry pulled a face. "As I'm still here, and we're having this conversation, and I've yet to be forced to
fly away, I can only conclude that you know all of this already. You must have already known that I
have a mission to complete – a mission given to me by your Valar – and she's the only one who can
help me."

The elven king stared at Harry for an unsmilingly long time – during which the Wizarding World's
saviour discreetly fiddled with the wand in her robe pocket – until finally he said, "Well spoken,
Harry Potter!"

"W-what?" said Harry, now completely confused. She had expected . . . well, she wasn't sure what
she had expected but something other than appreciation, that was certain.

The king threw her a bemused look. "So unlike any I have encountered before you," He told Harry,
walking back at a leisurely place and lowering himself back on his throne. So, he had been trying to
intimidate her into submission! How rude! "So bold. So steadfast to your convictions. You dismiss
the laws of courtesy that deem that should show deference to those older than you and those with
power over you, as if you were dismissing a lone ant that happened upon your path."

He waved an elegant hand at Harry. "You resemble an elf in that regard. We hold nature and the
natural instincts of a person in more esteem than common rules, even if, and especially when, you
might think otherwise." The king's narrowing gaze was so penetrating then, that Harry momentarily
thought he was channeling Galadriel.

Realizing what the king was saying, she became uncomfortable. It was true she had previously
thought most elves were snobby. But it was hardly without evidence!

"I'm sorry for withholding information," was what Harry told him, looking momentarily down at her
shoes, channeling the Twins in that she wasn't at all sorry, but understood that this wasn't the time to
act unrepentant.

The king inclined his head, which suggested he'd accepted Harry's apology.

"And . . . I'd be honoured if you would help me, My Lady," Harry continued, turning to address the
queen. Galadriel offered Harry the same gesture the king had given a few seconds before, an amused
smile playing on her lips.

Harry let out a small sigh of relief as the tenseness in her neck – the one she hadn't acknowledged
until now – dispersed.

"So . . ." said Harry, drawing out the 'O'. "I . . . I have to look into a mirror?" Her tone was slightly
bewildered, suggesting that she might not have bought what Galadriel was trying to sell.

"Indeed," the queen answered, gesturing once again to the large basin. "Have I not said so?" she
added not unkindly, as Harry went pink. She nodded quickly to dispel her embarrassment and let her
eyes rove around the clearing.

They stood, just the two of them, in the middle of a sort of large hole in the middle of a hill. The
boundaries were made out of raised earth and a single wooden staircase stretched a distance from the
top of the knoll to the bottom. On the other side of the place where they stood was a tiny waterfall that trickled into a small pond, encased with rock. In the middle of all this was a large basin which sat on top of a pedestal.

Harry stood in front of the basin, while Galadriel observed from behind. The queen had already poured some water from the pond into the basin, and had told Harry that she should expect to see some images from her past, present, and future. Harry didn't so much care about her past and present – she'd already experienced one and was currently living the other – it was the future she was more interested in, as that would help her discover her mission.

Or, so Galadriel believed.

Either way, Harry hoped the queen was right, as she had been getting quite irritated at not having a purpose besides being irritated all the time. She took a deep breath, glanced once up at Galadriel – she offered an encouraging nod – then leaned over the basin.

At first, there was nothing there but her own reflection staring up at her with a slight dotty look Luna often wore, which she hastily amended to resemble a more serious countenance. Absently, she noticed that her hair had gotten a bit longer and the locks that usually stood up in spikes and corkscrew curls were now less spiky and more wavy. When on earth had that happened?

She'd never had cause to cut her hair before because – well, it had never grown before! Long hair would only encourage Dudley's group of bullies to pull on it. It took Parvati complaining how she never wore her hair long for her to suspect that it was her magic that had stopped her hair from growing. She really had no patience for long hair, so her hair never grew, because she couldn't be bothered cutting it; she'd had no desire to. But now . . . she supposed Middle Earth was tampering with her magic again. She shouldn't have been surprised, really.

Shimmer.

Harry blinked. She had almost missed it. The mirror had . . . shimmered? It shimmered again, the water seeming to ripple in a tremble of silver. An image appeared. A tall, long-nosed, red-haired boy. Ron! He was playing chess at the Burrow with . . . Hermione?

Was she looking at the present?

Another image shivered into existence. This one was of Fred and George drolling out sweets in front of a shop in Diagon Alley. Another one came rapidly, of Ginny lying on her front, in her bed, and scribbling on a piece of parchment.

More images appeared then, one after the other. Sirius falling through the Veil at the Department of Mysteries; Gandalf falling into the dark abyss of Moria; Hedwig attacking Orophin; Boromir speaking with Aragorn . . . The image focused on Boromir for a while, flashing through images she didn't recognize before –

Harry jumped back in horror, a cry of alarm on her lips, stumbling backwards over the couple of steps that led up to the basin. She dared not look into the mirror again.

Unfortunately, this action was not enough to dispel the terrible image from her thoughts. It had been Boromir. Boromir lying with mouth open, eyes closed, clutching a sword to his chest, and quite clearly dead! There had been blood on his clothes! And hadn't there been arrows? Considering that she had spoken to Boromir not even an hour ago, this image had obviously showed the future.

Tears prickling her eyes, Harry looked up at Galadriel. The lady was staring at her with an
understanding that Harry knew, no matter how many years she might live, she would never be able to express. "W-why?" she stumbled over her wording again. "Why did the mirror show me that – those things?" She did not quite manage to keep the tremble out of her voice.

"Is it not obvious, Harry Potter?" Galadriel spoke in a low, husky tone that did not sound in the least patronizing. "The Son of the Steward of Gondor . . . he is the reason you have been brought to this world. He is your task."

"What?" That was absurd. A person couldn't be a task!

"Why ever not?" Harry started as Galadriel's voice suddenly came from inside her head. "It will be your duty to protect him from now on," she continued, this time aloud. "The mirror does not lie."

"He'll hardly thank me for it! I'm sure it'll gall him something horrible to have to be watched over by me. He thinks I'm just some little kid!"

"Surely, that is not true. Who would turn up their nose at a known Istar?"

"He still treats me like I'm one of the hobbits," Harry insisted stubbornly. "And even if he didn't, I can't be with him all the time. What if we're ambushed at some point and he's killed when my back is turned?"

"Such a situation you must endeavor to avoid, then."

"So, assuming I'll be able to save him, what then?" Harry said, not sure if she was panicking or not, but determined to get all her questions out in the open while she could still of them. But surely she couldn't be responsible for someone's life like that?

Galadriel walked ever so beautifully over toward the trembling young wizard, so that they were barely a foot apart. Harry stared into those deep blue eyes, not knowing that her own conveyed the utter hopelessness she was feeling. The queen's eyes softened slightly at the look. "I believe henceforth, if you manage to save him, you will be released from your task and be free to go back to your own world."

Harry hesitated before she asked. "And if I don't save him?"

She stared a goodly length at Harry. "I think, perhaps, it would be best if I explain a few things about Boromir. Come, sit with me."

Harry trailed after her as she went to sit on a knotty, though polished looking piece of tree that resided against the wall of the clearing. It was clearly a medieval version of a park bench, but surprisingly comfortable.

Galadriel looked Harry in the eye again, and began . . .

They talked for at least half an hour. Galadriel told Harry all she could about Boromir, and his current situation. Harry learned things she hadn't bothered to pick up on before, or just didn't care to notice. Boromir, Son of Denethor, had an honourable nature and was currently the scion to the Stewardship of Gondor.(It was here Harry learned that Aragorn, shockingly, was heir to the throne of said country. She'd mentally commanded herself not to act any differently toward the Ranger, as Galadriel said he expected no special recognition.)

Boromir, therefore, had responsibilities, duties, that other men didn't have. Gondor would fall if Sauron triumphed, in fact Gondor would likely fall before that. Boromir, for that reason, shouldered a heavy burden on his shoulders. He felt responsible for his City, responsible to find all the aid that
he could get for his City.

Enter the Ring.

Harry was astonished, and not a little dismayed to discover that the Ring was getting to Boromir. That it had, in fact, almost consumed him completely, and that it would not be long before he tried to steal it from Frodo. Harry must therefore always stay by Boromir's side, helping him, perhaps giving him subtle advice, and above all – making sure he didn't die!

Harry had dutifully promised all this to Galadriel, not just because it would get her home if she saved Boromir's life, but also for the simple fact that Harry knew Boromir. He was one of the Fellowship, and was a good person. Plus, the fact that Harry's Gryffindor ideals couldn't let her abandon someone to die, especially someone she had traveled in the wilderness with, fought Dark Creatures with, and, occasionally, had to bewitch so she could relieve herself. If Harry could get passed that embarrassing barrier, as she had with most of the Fellowship, then that person was worthy of saving, as far as she was concerned.

After her talk with Galadriel, Harry made her way back to the Fellowship and the hollow in their comfortable tree. She'd had to abandon them mid-speech, and was now looking forward on continuing the discussion about dragons. She had already promised herself to tell them about her experience with the Hungarian Horntail.

Harry would not hold anything back now. Not her knowledge from another world, nor her magic – she had made this promise to herself before but now, it was not only for her sake that she kept it. They had seen her use it before, she had known them for almost two months now and in that time, she had seen the kind of people they were and they had seen the kind of person she was. They shouldn't be scared of her magic. In fact, Harry was positive they weren't now, especially after her talk with Galadriel and Celeborn.

And if they showed discomfort by her everyday, seemingly never-ending supply of magic, she would continue to use it until they were comfortable. She would fling magic about even more freely than she had at the Dursley's that summer because she no longer had to be afraid.

Harry spotted the Fellowship now, lounging under their tree, having lunch. Some elves must have brought it over while she was with Galadriel.

Pippin noticed her first and waved her over. "We've saved some for you, Harry. And look, they've finally brought us wine!"

Harry grinned as she walked up the short slope that rested just before the picnic spread-out, and then plonked down next to Pippin, helping herself to some stew. "No thanks," she told the hobbit, who'd went to pour some of the alcohol into Harry's goblet. "I'm not old enough to drink yet."

Everyone seemed to think this was terribly funny. Poor Merry even choked on his own pipe smoke.

"What?" Harry asked, managing to express bafflement, amusement, and annoyance all at once. She had just gotten the feeling that she was the butt of some private joke, and the fact that she had no clue as to what it was made her a bit nervous.

"Not old enough?" said Pippin, amongst heavy chortling. He laughed so hard, some wine flew up his nose and he rubbed it a bit before continuing. "There's no need to be modest now, is there? We know the ways of wizards."

"Whuh?" was the inelegant sound that came out of Harry's mouth. Though, that could have been
because she'd just spooned in a mouthful of stew and could not do much else with her tongue, let alone talk.

"There's no need to be bashful, Harry," said Frodo, looking at Harry with smiling eyes. Harry was taken aback by that, as well as the mischief in his smile, all of which still didn't help her understand what in Merlin's name they were on about.

Merry continued, "Gandalf told Aragorn before he fell, Harry. You don't have to pretend to keep us comfortable. We don't mind. Go on, have some wine!"

Harry concluded that this particular hobbit must be stark raving bonkers.

"Umm . . . what exactly did Gandalf tell you?" queried Harry after swallowing her first bit of stew, even as she accepted the wine this time around. It was surprisingly good, maybe she should drink wine more often.

"Well," said Pippin slowly, lighting up a newly produced pipe, and giving it a few experimental puffs. "We know all the immortal races are older than they appear to be. Just look at Legolas over there."

Harry proceeded to choke on the second bite of stew she had put in her mouth when she took a breath to speak too soon. She was helped to swallow by Sam, who pounded on her back with both fists. Harry discovered then that hobbits were quite strong, and could be known to bruise on occasion.

"I'm fine Sam, but, uh, thanks anyway," Harry rasped out. She took another sip of wine to soothe her throat. "Erm, Pippin, why would you think I'm immortal? I'm not an elf."

"But you are a wizard," Aragorn insisted.

"Wizards are immortal," added Legolas, but he had cocked his head and was scrutinizing Harry. "At least in Middle Earth. You mean to tell us you're not?"

"I'm not," said Harry simply. "I mean, we do live longer than ordinary people because of the magic in our blood, maybe two hundred fifty years for the common wizard," Harry added, thinking back to the veritably ancient wizard examiners that came to test the fifth years on their OWLS. They had spoken of having done the same to Dumbledore, and if Dumbledore, as Harry knew, was over one hundred years old, then the examiners must be at least twice that.

Harry unsheathed her wand to the curiosity of the rest of the Fellowship and charmed her wine to be un-ending; there was no point in drinking all their precious alcohol when she could just stretch out what she already had. Gimli especially looked awed that her cup was still full even after several hearty gulps.

"Some of us live longer, of course," Harry continued, winking as she charmed Gimli's cup as well. "I once received a birthday party invitation from a fellow in his five hundreds, and one of my teachers studied under a gentleman that was six hundred sixty-five before he died. But we're not immortal and I'm hardly much older than I look; I hadn't even turned sixteen yet when I arrived," Harry told them, then took another bite of her stew once she was sure it was safe to do so.

"Not yet sixteen years? You're yet a babe!" Pippin exclaimed, looking Harry over with keener eyes than before. Harry shifted uncomfortably at the re-assessing looks she received. She held her cup closer to her body since she wouldn't put it past some of the more responsible ones – Aragorn and Legolas, most likely – to take her drink from her now that they knew she really was not old enough
"We've had a child with us this entire time?" Boromir muttered under his breath. He looked put out. "Couldn't be more than twelve summers or there about, if we're judging by looks."

"I don't know how long I've been here but I'm sure I've reached sixteen already," Harry frowned. There was no need for him to exaggerate so much. She was short and skinny, yes, but she didn't think she looked prepubescent. "I'm hardly a baby, wizards of my kind come of age at seventeen."

"Why so early? That's almost the same as the race of Men here," Merry interjected.

"I'm not sure exactly why, though we're used to live among the muggles long ago, so that might be the reason." A thought occurred to her. "'Early'? What do you mean early? When did you come of age?"

"Hobbits come of age at thirty-three," Sam was the first to answer.

"Thirty-three?" the wizard echoed incredulously. "How long do you live for you to be considered a child until then? How old are all of you?"

"Hobbits usually live around one hundred years," Merry said, getting nods from the others. "Which is why you, long-lived being you are, are the odd one here. With the way you mother us, one would think we were the children here."

"Do you mean to tell me you're all older than thirty-three? You barely look older than I am!"

"I beg your pardon," Pippin retorted, adopting a look of mock severity. "That is no way to speak to your elders, young wizard. The only baby face among us is Frodo," – this prompted a "Here, now!" from said hobbit – "and even he looks distinguishably older than you."

Harry lifted her nose in the air, imitating the look Haldir regularly gave her. "No need to get snarly just because I'm young and good-looking and you're not."

Pippin made a scoffing sound but left it at that.

No one said anything for a while after that, distracted as they were by their meal, until Aragorn finally spoke. "How is it you have such powerful magic, and be so young? How can a mortal body sustain so much power?"

Harry didn't know the proper answer to that and for the millionth time wished Hermione or someone else intelligent was there with her because she was sure Hermione would have started rattling off a complicated theory on physical limitations or wizarding physiology and such.

Alas, her friend wasn't here, so Harry made due. "I suppose it has to do with our innate magical core that actively maintains our health. Every wizard where I'm from is born with one – a core, I mean – and it only grows stronger as we age because the magical core is a natural part of our bodies, like any limb."

She paused that Aragorn's thoughtful expression. "Should I assume it's not the same here?"

"I know not if the Istari of this world would describe their powers in such a way. You simply made it sound rather mundane."

Harry hummed and continued. "With our magic healing our bodies and protecting us from illness, added on top of it growing stronger as we age, we're more durable and last longer than our non-
magical counterparts."

"You make it sound as if your power has a mind of it's own," Frodo said. "You say it heals you and keeps you from harm without you actively guiding it?"

"It is sentient to a degree," Harry confirmed. "When at rest, my magic will respond to my instincts to fight for life. It keeps me healthy and whole as long it can, since natural instinct make me want to live as long as I can."

"Well, boy-o!" Gimli growled suddenly, making the hobbits and Harry jump. His cheeks looked flushed. Oh, dear, maybe she shouldn't have charmed his wine un-ending after all. "I for one, am glad you are not immortal. Enough of them prancing about as it is! Of course, I mean no offense, Master Elf. For you, I make an exception." Gimli waved his newly lit pipe in Legolas' direction. The elf smirked back, clearly amused.

The topic soon turned to other things as Pippin discovered a mushroom in Harry's bowl and became offended because he hadn't known there were mushrooms in the stew to begin with. But that turned out to be a one off, as Pippin found out when he tried to dig for more in the pot. Harry was obliged, out of pity at the sorrowful little face, to give him hers, then watched as he and Merry fought over it.

Now that everyone's attention was on other things, Harry could freely examine the one silent spectator of the group. Boromir, Harry noticed, was looking particularly peaky today, and Harry had a nasty feeling she knew why as she observed the Gondorian glance discreetly at Frodo every now and then.

Harry suddenly felt a deep respect for Boromir. For all the stories she had heard of the Ring, and how powerful it was, Boromir had to have a strong will to resist it, especially when the Ring was manipulating him by using his love of Gondor and the duty he had to his country. And it was clearly giving it all it had, but Boromir still hadn't cracked yet. Such strength of character was admirable especially when stuck between a rock and a hard place.

The deep rush of loathing Harry experienced toward the Ring at that moment was enough to alarm her. She'd never felt such hatred beyond Voldemort. Such strong emotion was better left boxed up in the Ring's presence.

"What does the Lady speak of, Harry?" Aragorn's voice brought Harry's attention back to the proceedings and away from Boromir. Aragorn's question brought to mind Harry's promise to herself about not excluding the Fellowship anymore. She hated the fact that she would have to break that promise now. She couldn't exactly tell them that she had a mission in Middle Earth, or that the mission was Boromir.

"We just talked about how I was faring in Middle Earth, and how I can help improve my stay," she settled on. After all, it was the truth, though largely glossed over.

Aragorn seemed satisfied with that, and Pippin, having, at last, won the mushroom tug-of-war with Merry, turned to Harry and reminded her, with a mouthful of fungus, that she had yet to finish telling them about the dragons.

Harry, laughing, obliged.
Loitering outside the hollow tree the Fellowship had been using as their sleeping quarters, a sort of hazy cloud lifted from Harry's thoughts, as if she was waking from a light doze. It was the oddest thing, that sense of vagueness. It was as if she had been dreaming all along but didn't remember laying down to sleep to begin with. The dreaminess of it all made the passing of their time spent in Lothlorien seem both unendingly long but also unsatisfyingly short, though she did remember counting the stretching days as she sat under the boughs of the mallorn trees. Now, for all her waiting, she couldn't recall how long they had been there. It was exceedingly perplexing.

Something else that was perplexing was the assemblage of elves seeing them off, bearing gifts, courtesy of the Lord and Lady, for each of them. As she took in the looks on their faces – genuinely beaming with happiness at being able to provide the Fellowship with some extra comfort on the impending journey – She decided that it would be more unkind than modest to tell them that she already had a magic cloak. Certainly, if she were to say that a cloak she already had was one that could make her entirely invisibly, rather than one that worked much like a disillusionment charm, as the elven cloaks did, it would just be ungrateful.

So she had accepted it, adorned it, and found that it fit her perfectly in addition to being quite warm and comfortable. She and most of others had been surprised to learn that the cloaks had been made to each of their exact measurements. Harry didn't bother to ask how the elves had worked that out; she assumed their excellent eyesight was the explanation, and left it at that.

Finally, it was time to leave and the elves seeing them off led them toward their boats. As they walked, Harry positioned herself in the place between Merry and Pippin, which was unfortunate because that put her in front Boromir, and she would have liked to observe the man. Sadly, it could not be helped because the two hobbits had asked her to walk with them, and she couldn’t very well say no if only because refusing would hurt their feelings.

They trailed amongst their serene escorts, each feeling the sadness that their time in the Golden Wood had come to an end. For a while they had been in peace. The burdens they carried had not niggled at them half as strongly, and new friendships and understandings had formed.

Yes, they were each saddened to leave, Harry especially, because it meant she would soon be leaving the Fellowship behind. Just the night before, Boromir had stated his intention to go back to Minas Tirith, to see to his father, and Harry knew that she would have to follow. Every person in the Fellowship had look confused when Harry had said she wanted to go with him, thinking it very odd since they had thought that she would be seeing the Ring to Mordor with them.

Harry had used the excuse of needing to see more of Middle Earth, and that going with Boromir might be her only chance. The only people who hadn’t said anything to that were Galadriel and Celeborn.

As the Fellowship watched the crystal-clear water trickle through the little stone fountain, Harry's least favourite person in Middle Earth strolled across the lawn toward them. Harry had time only to give a mental sneer at Haldir before she spotted something on the elf's shoulder that caused her to abandon any nasty thoughts she had been harbouring.

"Hedwig!" she cried in delight, not even bothering to question how chummy the owl was looking with the elf.

Hedwig, hearing Harry's voice, abandoned Haldir's arm without hesitation and flapped her wings
until Harry finally caught her and cuddled her friend gently against her chest. She wasn't in the least bit surprised by the rush of relief and joy that filled her at the sight of Hedwig; she was Harry's only bit of home here.

Haldir greeted almost everyone with obvious delight. "I have returned from the Northern Fences, and am sent to be your guide again. The Dimrill Dale is full of vapour and clouds of smoke, and the mountains are troubled. There are noises in the deeps of the earth. If any of you had thought of returning northwards to your homes you would not have been able to pass that way."

He stopped before Harry and cocked his head in a curious manner. "Your owl found my post and stayed all of a month with me," he admitted, his lips twisting in what looked like a reluctant smile. "She is a remarkable bird, courageous and bold, and so very intelligent. I now see why you value her. She made an excellent sentry. Even Orophin has admitted to it. She watched over us in the night."

Harry felt all the tension drain out of her after hearing that. She had been sure Haldir would have said something derogatory; it had surprised her that he hadn't.

The elf reached over and gently stroked Hedwig's snowy head. "I shall miss her night music."

Harry nodded, understanding how easy it was to become fond of Hedwig. Resolving to put away her resentment, she said, "I'll send a letter some time." In response to Haldir's frown of bewilderment, she added, "Hedwig is a messenger owl."

Haldir inclined his head gracefully. A grudging, temporary truce had been non-verbally established.

They walked onwards for ten miles with Haldir leading them through the gentle, green slopes of Caras Galadhon, until finally, after passing through a literal wall of grass, they reached their final destination. Across the river's bank, Harry could see that no more mallorn trees grew. Instead, ordinary trees had taken their place. A group of elves were standing in a few white boats, floating on the water. Harry noted with satisfaction that the boats were packed provisions.

In addition to the generous amount of traveling provisions was rope, the same sort that the ladder Harry had climbed on her first venture into Lothlorien had been made from, as well as the rope she had crossed the rushing river with. They were lightweight and silvery. The elves explained that no one sane could travel far without a rope, especially one that wasn't of elven make. Then they and Sam got into a short and bewildering discussion on its physical properties.

Harry was strongly reminded of Professor Sprout's Herbology class.

Then, they set off.

Aragorn, Frodo, and Sam were in one boat; Boromir, Merry, and Pippin in another; in the third were Legolas, Gimli, and Harry. Harry would have liked to share a boat with Pippin and Merry, but since he and the hobbits couldn't hope to know how to paddle or steer the craft, especially with the Silverlode's swift current, they had to make do.

It was as they turned a sharp bend in the river that music was heard, floating gently with the breeze. They saw three large swan-like boats by the river's banks. In the boats were Celeborn, decked out in kingly style, a crown of white gold adorning his blonde head and Galadriel, strumming a harp and singing more beautifully than even Legolas could. On the land behind the boats were yet more elves, standing regally at attention.

Aragorn drew his boat alongside Galadriel's swan. "We have come to bid our last farewell," she said,
"And to speed you with blessings from our land."

"Though you have been our guests," said Celeborn, "you have not eaten with us, and we bid you, therefore, to a parting feast, here between the flowing waters that will bear you far from Lorien."

Everyone was very agreeable to this suggestion, and soon found themselves out of the boats and eating a delicious feast of fruit, bread, salad, venison and other meats, and drinking sweet, cold water out of large, golden jugs.

Harry tipped five jugs of the water into her drinking flask, feeling proud that she remembered that there would be no fresh water in the wilderness. She received a couple of strange looks from the elves sitting nearest to her – most likely wondering where all the water had gone to – but she paid them no attention. Continuing with her new found realization of how little luxury there was in the wild, Harry spooned servings from the platters in front of her into bowls from her tent and dropped them into her food pouch as her fellow feasters looked on in fascination, though they tried to be covert.

Though she still had a lot of the food Dumbledore had given her left, it was good to know she had even more now. Besides, if their journey turned out to be even longer than she already suspected it would be, it would not be particularly pleasant to hunt for her food, or to eat Sam's sausages, or to chew the lembas bread day in day out, no matter how good it tasted.

After the feast, they gathered on the grass in a circle, with Celeborn and Galadriel seating themselves on two small chairs. "Before you go," said Galadriel, "I have brought in gifts which the Lord and Lady of the Galadhrim now offer you in memory of Lothlorien." Then she called them each to come forward.

Aragorn received a sheath for his sword and a stone of some sort that he pinned at once to his shirt. Boromir acquired a belt made of gold; Merry and Pippin got belts as well except theirs were way smaller and silvery green in colour with little leaf designs.

Harry, gratefully though not without hesitation, accepted an elven sword, all shining blade and gilded hilt. Now, what to do with it? She didn't have experience in wielding swords beyond the stint in her second year with the basilisk. She did acknowledge though, that the fact that she had a large, pointy object that others knew to be potentially dangerous made up for the lingering concern over whether she would end up doing herself more harm than to enemies. Besides, how hard could it be anyway? The pointy end goes in the other guy; that's all that really mattered.

Harry and the Lady Galadriel shared a subtle glance as Harry looked over her sword, Harry looking on in speculation, Galadriel in amused respect. Ever since the day Harry had spent the afternoon with the elf queen, she had been the recipient of the questionable amusement of Galadriel. Harry still had absolutely no idea what had happened to bring it on; they had been discussing the differences between Middle Earth and the world Harry was from when Galadriel had paused mid sentence while explaining the history of the elves in a manner that fascinated her, that made Harry think of Ron accusing her of turning into a girl just like Hermione.

Galadriel's eyes had widened ever so slightly, and she had given Harry a once-over, as if she had realized something she hadn't noticed before. When questioned, the lady only laughed, saying it was nothing really. However, it was obviously not nothing, seeing as whatever the something was, Galadriel had yet to stop being amused by it.

Harry resolved to figure the puzzle out at her soonest convenience, so probably much later, after the Ring was taken care of. But she would still figure it out, that she swore to herself as she inclined her head to the king and queen in gratitude and made way for the next person in line.
Legolas became the delighted owner of a brand new bow and a quiver of arrows, such as the ones the Lothlorien elves used. Sam obtained a box of dirt for whatever reason, and Gimli, to the surprise of all, asked only for a lock of hair from Galadriel's golden head. She gave him three – a big deal, apparently.

Lastly, to Frodo, the elf queen gave... something. Harry didn't know what it was, only that it looked like water trapped in a fancy glass phial, but she did recognize that it was something important; something magical.

After that it was really time to leave. The Fellowship boarded their light, elven boats and made their way down the river once more, the farewelling tunes of the elves following in their wake.

Four days later, they still traveled along the river Anduin, now finding themselves in a virtually treeless land, and Harry swore to herself that she would never get on a boat again unless she absolutely had to. Four miserable days of cramped limbs and sea-sickness took away any enjoyment she might have gotten from the lovely scenery and peaceful air.

Harry had tried, a couple of times in the past nights, to talk to Boromir, as per Galadriel's orders, but it was growing apparent that the man either thought she was daft or mad, with the way he developed a look of such petulance after Harry told him the story about Ginny's experience with Tom Riddle's diary, and how the book had started controlling her bit by bit, eventually almost killing her. Harry had not tried to explain more after that, in case she bungled everything to an even worse degree. On the plus side, though, she now had time to think of a less transparent example to use, as she suspected that was why Boromir had gotten so crabby in the first place.

Four more days passed. The surrounding country had changed yet again, this time harbouring a forest of lush trees. On the night of the eighth day from their departure from Lothlorien, Aragorn decided they had to move on earlier instead of waiting for the morning. In Aragorn's boat, at the front of the group, Sam was appointed as the watchman on the look out for protruding rocks. It was around midnight when Sam finally spotted something. A few very large, very sharp somethings that would splinter their boats easily if they paddled in that direction.

Aragorn shouted a warning to them to start paddling to the banks as fast and as hard as they could. It wasn't easy with the way the current had picked up, and there were only so many paddles to a boat. Frodo, Sam, and Aragorn wouldn't have made it at all if Harry hadn't shielded their boat right before it crashed into the rocks.

On the bank, no one had time to feel relief from their near escape of a watery death before a volley of arrows came at them, made even harder to see in of the night gloom. One nearly pierced Frodo, but was repelled back immediately. Without further thought, everyone threw themselves to the ground.

"Yrch!" spat Legolas, looking furious.

"Orcs," Gimli translated, looking just as outraged.

More arrows flew overhead. Across the bank, on the other side, Harry could make out black shapes scattering here and there. Shrill, guttural cries sounded in the blackness.

Suddenly, Legolas jumped up and grabbed his new bow, glowing and looking very much like the male veela Harry had originally thought he had been in the dark. He stood at the edge of the bank, his bow strung, searching furiously for any mark to shoot at.

A dark gloom overcame them then. Something enormous and black had blocked out the moon, fending off its light. Harry saw Frodo clutch his chest as if in pain. She herself felt a coldness curl
around senses and she shivered unconsciously, remembering Gandalf telling her about the Dementor-like wraiths. She tightened her grip on her wand, and let her gaze search the skies.

"Elbereth Gilthoniel," Legolas sighed, and looked up. Even as he did so, Harry could just make out a large, winged creature. The voices across the river grew louder as it approached.

Swiftly, Legolas positioned his bow at the sky and let loose an arrow. It must have hit whatever winged creature was there because there was a harsh, croaking scream, and a thundering thump. After that, Harry could no longer hear orc voices anymore, or see any arrows pierce the night. The unsettling coldness had disappeared along with the creature's death.

They weren't attacked anymore that night, not the next day when they took off again. Harry had seen something unbelievable, though. Something she had not thought a medieval world would have the – to put it bluntly – brains, or technology to build. That's what she gets for being dismissive of seemingly backwards people. She knew that they were not to be underestimated.

Two large kings on either side of the wide river had stood tall and proud, their hands positioned in either a "Stop, you're not welcome" or a "Hi there, friend!" gesture. Aragorn had called it the Argornath, and explained that they were his kin. Harry had been utterly amazed at the grandeur, depth of history, and meaning of such colossal monuments. Merciful Merlin, the time and effort that must have been put into them! Nothing she had ever seen before could to compare to it.

Aragorn continued to lead them onwards for another ten miles until they reached the end of the river, coming upon a huge waterfall. By its banks they finally clambered out, lugging their supplies behind them. Harry had never been more glad to stretch her legs, and she was certain she wasn't the only one with a sore bum; she spotted Gimli grouching moodily and massaging his rear-end.

Harry sunk down on the ground next to Pippin, moaning at the shot of pain the action gave her. Resolutely, she gamely tried to ignored her aches, and helped Sam unpack the lunch supplies.

Gimli was still grouching after Sam had a nice meal going, this time at Aragorn. "Oh, yes?" he said in a way that made Harry think it wasn't supposed to be interpreted as a question. "We just go through Emyn Muil. An impassable labyrinth of razor, sharp rocks. And after that, it gets even better! Festering, stinking marshlands, as far as the eyes can see."

Pippin froze in mid-chew.

"That is our road," said Aragorn with a touch of impatience. "I suggest you get some rest and recover your strength Master Dwarf."

Gimli sputtered. "Recover my . . .? Pohh!" He chucked his axe on the ground.

Pippin and Harry sniggered.

Just then, Merry, who had been sent off to collect firewood, came back. He looked around the camp, the bundle of twigs still in his arms. "Where's Frodo?" he asked Aragorn.

Sam sat up from the tree he'd been leaning on, looking around wildly. By the expression on Aragorn's face as he looked towards the shield that was propped innocently against a tree, Harry did not need to ask whom else had disappeared. In alarm, she jumped up, surprising everyone with her hasty action. "Merlin!" she cried, and dashed off into the trees, ignoring Aragorn's earnest cry behind him.

After less than a minute of running wildly, Harry realised she was running in no particular direction, and that she would never find Frodo and Boromir if she did not at least pick a direction. If only
Hedwig hadn't gone hunting; Harry could have used her eyes eyes. Maybe she should have waited for Aragorn? The man knew how to track footprints. If only she could . . . Harry gasped at the realization of such an obvious solution.

Quickly, she drew her wand and placed it flat on her palm. "Point me, Boromir."

It spun wildly for a moment until it froze, pointing to her right, telling her that she hadn't even been going in the right direction. Swearing creatively, Harry wheeled around and full out sprinted across the ground. She only hoped she was not too late, and that Boromir hadn't managed to catch up to Frodo yet.

As she closed in on her target, she could hear the unmistakable sounds of swords clanging. Of all the damned things! A battle was taking place, with Boromir right in the middle, and Harry was not there to protect him!

She burst into the clearing only seconds later but halted to a full stop at the sight before her. She couldn't fully comprehend the sight in front of her eyes. Orcs, but yet not orcs. Huge orcs; even uglier than ordinary ones, running towards Boromir, who was deflecting jabs in every direction from wicked looking swords that came at him. Behind him, and safe for the moment, stood Merry and Pippin, watching in silent horror.

Boromir raised his horn to his lips and blew, the sound echoing through the hills.

It was then that Harry snapped to action, viable plans churning around in her head. She knew it would useless to try the sun spell, as these new breed of orcs were clearly not at all bothered by the sun. She briefly considered using the Killing Curse but immediately discarded the idea before the thought was even fully formed in her mind, knowing that for all that it would be supremely effective, she wasn't capable of such a spell. Working through instinct, she flung over-powered defensive spells at every moving target she saw.

So Harry found herself leaping into the fray a few meters away from Boromir, lashing out with a veritable tidal wave of stunners, knock-backs, immobilizers, full-body binds, and disarmers like a madwoman. Orcs were lifted off their feet and blasted into trees; swords were ripped out of claw-like hands by an invisible force, and flung dangerously about; blackened bodies stiffened in permanent surprise before falling over . . . It was chaos! Utter bizarre chaos that no one, not the orcs, Boromir, Merry, Pippin, nor even Harry could work out.

"STAB THEM!" Harry shouted to Merry and Pippin, indicating the orc that lay frozen. "THEY AREN'T DEAD! JUST KNOCKED OUT!"

They looked at her as though they had only just realised she was a wizard.

"WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?" she roared at them, flinging another orc backwards onto the sword of his comrade.

They jumped and nodded, moving quickly with their swords raised. The hobbits made short work of the helpless orcs while Harry and Boromir continued to fight, keeping the remaining orcs from reaching the hobbits. The creatures just didn't know what to make of Harry. A few of them, wisely, kept their distance – not that it helped much, because her spells could cover great distances – and others, stupidly, moved to attack her, only to get a stunner for their efforts – and a sword in their backs soon after, courtesy of a hobbit.

Harry was so involved in fighting the orcs that she missed the thick, black arrow launch itself straight into Boromir's right arm. She could not, however, miss the hiss of pain that erupted from the
Gondorian's mouth, or the clatter of the sword as it fell from his grasp, the pain in his arm being too
great to hold it up, or either it had damaged some nerves.

Harry whirled, scanning her surroundings. There were about a dozen orcs left that weren't dead, but
now, after seeing what Harry had done to their brethren, they were loath to approach her or Boromir.
Finally, she spotted the offending orc that had shot the arrow. It was just about the ugliest looking
thing she had ever seen.

"Get the Halflings!" it shouted. "Kill the brat!"

It had to repeat itself once more since the orcs, still looking warily at Harry, didn't move to follow the
order at first. They finally did move, just as the head orc strung another arrow. Harry tossed out
Freezing Jinxes, slowing two arrows down, before quickly casting a shield at Boromir. She only just
made it; the arrow had been continued on to its target, but it only pinged harmlessly to the side as it
struck the shield charm.

The head orc roared in confused frustration, and Boromir offered Harry a grateful look.

As Harry turned back to the battle, she discovered that she had taken too long in assisting Boromir.
She found herself with a face full of smelly orc as one of them plowed into her, dragging her down,
crushing her with its heavy body, and causing her wand to go flying.

CRACK!

"AAAAGH!" Harry shouted hoarsely as she landed awkwardly on her left ankle, breaking it.

The orc moved wildly above her, smothering her with its weight. Harry could feel its putrid breath
on her face, and she struggled frantically, bucking and hitting and clawing, but nothing could get it
off.

It cackled unpleasantly. "I'm gunna strangle you and put yer 'ead on a pike!" it told her before
wrapping its filthy hands around her neck.

Harry gasped desperately, clawing at the hands choking her.

Then the orc stiffened. Guttural, gasping sounds came from its mouth before it keeled over, right on
top of Harry. Above them stood a panting Boromir, sword clutched tightly in his left hand. In his
right was Harry's wand. He placed a booted foot on the orc's back and pushed. The body flopped
beside her, very dead.

"Thanks," Harry rasped, rubbing at the now tender flesh of her throat.

Boromir inclined his head. "Can you stand?"

Boromir performed a sort of ducking pirouette just as Harry snatched her wand up. But this time she
was too late. A second arrow hit Boromir right in the upper-chest area. The man opened his mouth
but no sound came out. He stared at Harry, blinking uncomprehendingly.

Harry looked on in horror. No, he couldn't die! She couldn't have failed! Boromir had to live!

But how could they have forgotten about the head orc?

The world around Harry watched in utter silence as the creature now ran toward them in seeming
triumph. She could only look on her fallen charge with stricken horror. It didn't register in her mind that all the other orcs were long gone and that Merry and Pippin were missing. It didn't register that Boromir could be dying at this very moment. It didn't register when Aragorn, Gimli and Legolas skidded into the clearing. All Harry could think on was the despair that filled her. That she had failed once again in protecting a friend, and that that friend was going to die – because of her.

A painful groan that escaped Boromir's bloodied lips snapped her out of her frozen state.

"EVERTE STATUM!" She shouted, putting all of her anger and confusion and loathing she had into that one spell. The orc, now having arrived two feet away from Harry, flew back at break-neck speed instantly, in a flash of brilliant red light, blasting twenty meters across the clearing before crashing into a mound of boulders. It laid still, its neck positioned at an unnatural angle.

It was dead.

Harry turned hastily to Boromir just as Aragorn ran over to them, coming to a halt by the other man's side. She pulled closer to the bleeding body, tears of desperation burning the back of her eyes. Legolas and Gimli kept a few feet away.

"They took the little ones," said Boromir, a tremble in his voice.

"Stay still," Aragorn told him. He gently prodded the arrow shafts that stuck morbidly out of Boromir's body. Boromir winced at the motion but did not protest.

"H-he's not going to . . . is he? " Harry couldn't bring herself to actually voice the word.

Aragorn threw her a cursory glance. "If we can remove the arrows in time, he might yet live."

"It is all right, young wizard," rasped Boromir, his face turning awfully pale. "If I go, at least I know I have fought for a noble cause." His breathing grew ragged.

"Legolas!" Aragorn shouted. The elf was there immediately. "Gimli." The dwarf soon followed. "I will need you to hold him down."

They both nodded grimly.

Suddenly, Boromir clutched Aragorn's shoulder. "Where is Frodo?"

Aragorn searched Boromir with an understanding gaze. "I let Frodo go," he whispered.

"Then you did what I could not!"

Aragorn looked down briefly, then moved to grasp the arrows.

"Leave it!" Boromir implored. "It is over. I deserve it!"

Aragorn frowned, not understanding.

"I tried to take the ring from Frodo," Boromir admitted, sobbing. "Forgive me. I did not see."

Harry's heart clenched at the confession. She was doing such a piss poor job at her mission! Her charge was in mortal peril and now she was finding out that she hadn't even been able to keep Boromir from going after the ring. If only the powers that be chose someone different to be Boromir's salvation; he deserved a lot better than Harry and her blundering.

"No, Boromir," Aragorn disagreed. "You fought bravely. You have regained your honour."
Boromir continued to pant horribly, and Harry could not believe what she was witnessing. They were talking as if – no! Boromir couldn't die like this. It was too demeaning of a death. If Madam Pomfrey was there, the arrows would be out already, the wounds completely healed, and the Gondorian resting in a comfortable sleep. It couldn't end this way. It just couldn't!

Aragorn motioned to Gimli and Legolas with a nod of his head, still clutching Boromir's hand. Gimli slumped down across the man's chest while Legolas sat on his legs.

Aragorn's hand curled around the arrow in Boromir's chest. "I will count thrice," he said and Boromir nodded wildly. Aragorn took a deep breath –

"Wait," Harry protested. They were just going to yank it out? But that would be slow and dangerous! What if the head caught on something on the way? He could bleed to death. It was inhumane. If Madame Pomfrey – but she wasn't here, so maybe Harry could –?

Aragorn shook his head, not looking at her. "Harry, it must be done, and must be done quickly!"

"I know," Harry agreed, what she needed to do quickly coming to mind. "But there's another way. A less painful way. A better way."

This got their attention. Aragorn asked, "What way?"

"I could – that is, it might be better if I . . . I just need to look through a book of mine. It won't take even half a minute. Is that too long?"

Aragorn gaped, but it was Boromir that answered. "Search," he croaked.

"Right," Harry nodded. Then she went through the motions of unshrinking her trunk, rummaging around until she found Standard Book of Spells: Grade Five, and flipping the pages until she located the healing charm she was searching for. Harry had never attempted this charm before, mostly because it hadn't been required of her to learn, but recently because she never had cause to practice it.

The Flesh Knitting Charm, (Incantation: Manderus Clapsia) can be used for healing major flesh wounds. However, it is not recommended for OWL Level as the caster requires a considerable amount of concentration on his or her part, due to the fact that an unfocused mind will result in the wounds opening even more, causing the patient to bleed to death . . .

Well, she had finished her OWLS a few months ago so it stood to reason that it was perfectly safe for her to use this spell. She just needed to clear her mind and be focused. Right, she could do that. What did it matter that 'clearing her mind' was the exact same thing Snape had harped on about to her during their Occlumency lessons?

Harry closed her eyes and determinedly tried to think of nothing. She didn't know if it was working or not, but when she opened her eyes again, Harry was filled with a familiar determination that made her feel it was possible to accomplish anything.

"I'm ready," she said to Aragorn, crawling even closer next to Boromir, and trying to ignore the sharp, twisting pain in her ankle.

"We will continue to hold him," said Legolas. Gimli grunted his concurrence.


Boromir jerked violently – Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli holding on – as the shaft whooshed out of
his left shoulder with a horrible squelching noise that made Harry sick and into her waiting hand. "Sorry," she whispered as she tossed the arrow away reflexively before weaved her wand through the air above the wound. "Manderus Clapsia," she mumbled with what she hoped sounded like conviction.

A soft blue light shimmered out of her wand, smelling faintly of mint. It enveloped Boromir's shoulder completely, pulsing from light blue to a darker shade in time with his heartbeat. As the light faded and vanish, so did the wound.

Harry wanted to sigh in relief as well as jump for joy. She had saved her friend's life on top of finally preforming proper magic on her first go at a new spell. A mindlessly giddy part of her wondered if this was how Hermione felt every time she stepped into a classroom.

Boromir looked astonished, as though he had thought anything Harry could have done would have been for naught. He flexed his arm experimentally. "Nothing," he breathed. "There is no pain."

Aragorn grinned and clasped Harry's shoulder. "You have done well, young Istar."

Harry beamed her joy, feeling proud that she had gained Aragorn's approval. Then she made quick work of the other wound, which, fortunately, was not as serious. When Harry had finished, Boromir was almost as good as new, except that he was dead tired and could hardly stand on his feet.

Harry sat in an awkward position at the foot of everyone's legs. As a slightly swaying Boromir was being held up between Legolas and Gimli, exhaustion settled on Harry, making her mind a bit fuzzy. She felt almost drunk.

Aragorn knelt down by Harry, examining her foot.

"Ah!" she gasped when Aragorn prodded a particularly painful area.

"I am sorry." Aragorn stared at her. "Can you not heal yourself using magic?"

Harry felt a trickle of sweat course down the side of her cheek. Of all the times to not be of any use! "No," she said tightly. "I don't know how to mend broken bones."

Aragorn looked grim. "I shall have to set your ankle. It will be painful."

Harry nodded. She knew a bone-setting spell, but for the life of her, she couldn't remember the incantation. "Do it."

"Gimli!" Aragorn called.

The dwarf extracted his arm from around Boromir's waist, leaving Legolas with job of keeping him up, and seized hold of Harry's arms, clutching them tightly to his side. "It'll be right, boy-o," he grunted, his eyes surprisingly warm.

Aragorn grasped a gentle hold of Harry's ankle and nodded, silently asking for permission. Harry nodded back. Aragorn executed a sharp twist.

"AAAAAAAAAHHH!" The exclamation of pain tore itself from behind Harry's clenched teeth and she fell back, panting in blinding pain and exhaustion. She didn't even notice when Gimli released her arms.

"Gimli, hand me Harry's sword."
Harry felt hands on the belt at her waist and heard a scraping noise as her sword was removed from its sheath. "What are you doing?" she asked Aragorn weakly.

"Your ankle needs support to mend. The sword will be that support," he explained. "I will need cloth."

Aragorn shrugged out of his Lothlorien cloak. Harry saw he was about to cut it up. "No! I have plenty of shirts in my trunk. And maybe we should find a sturdy stick instead? We might need that sword at some point."

Aragorn nodded his agreement, sending Gimli off to hack up a thin tree branch, and moved to search through Harry's trunk, finally producing one of Dudley's checked elephant shirts. Harry's head flopped back in exhaustion, now almost completely drained. She heard slicing, tearing sounds. Seconds later, she felt the smoothness of a shaved stick against her bare ankle and leg, then the warmth of cloth surrounding it. She hadn't even realised until then that Aragorn must have taken her shoe off.

The next second, she was being prodded to full awareness.

"We must leave Harry," said Aragorn, looming over her. "Could you make your crate small again?"

Harry nodded, lifted her trembling wand arm, and tapped the trunk. "Substrictus Minimus."

Then she was being lifted in strong arms and carried gently away. She didn't notice where, nor did she really care. She was feeling quite comfortable, despite the pain in her ankle, so comfortable that she stopped fighting her exhaustion and succumbed to a much needed sleep.

Harry awoke just as Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas were packing away equipment onto the elven boats. Boromir was lying next to her, resting in a light doze. Harry herself did not feel that she had slept for a terribly long time.

Aragorn came to squat in front of her, tossing his hair with a jerk of his head. "Good, you have woken. Here." He handed Harry her miniature trunk, then pointed to Legolas and Gimli. "We three will follow the Uruk-hai that have captured Merry and Pippin. We have decided that you and Boromir shall stay here. He is too worn in body to follow now, and you have a broken limb. You will look after each other. He will see to you once he has rested aplenty. When you are well and able again, you will travel to Minas Tirith with Boromir. This Boromir has agreed to, even though he would have liked to follow in the Uruks path and finish the battle he had started."

Harry just stared, not knowing what to think. "Um," she said finally, after getting an absolutely brilliant idea. "I suppose this'll be a good time to mention I have some Invigoration Draught in my pouch."

Aragorn looked curious. "What sort of draught did you say?"

"Invigoration Draught. Maybe some Pepper-Up Potion as well. They'll give you a boost of energy; Pepper-Up even cures minor sicknesses. If we give some to Boromir, he can go with –"

Aragorn shook his head. "What of you, then? No, he cannot –"

"But I can come too!" The ranger stared at her as though he thought she was completely insane, looking pointedly at her broken ankle. "I mean, I can fly! I have a broom."

Aragorn's expression cleared. Then he grinned, chuckling. "So you do. I had forgotten." He stood up. "We shall go together then. You shall give Boromir the spice potion, and trail after the orcs on
your . . . broom." He shook his head in bemusement, his eyes trailing over Harry's form. "A very strange wizard has come upon us. But a very valuable one as well."

"Aragorn," Harry asked after realizing something. "Where are Frodo and Sam?"

The man's expression darkened. "They are on the eastern shore. They are left to themselves now."

"What!"

"They follow their own path," Aragorn explained patiently. "They must, else the ring tempts another to its cause."

Harry nodded in understanding. A hoot sounded from the space above them. He and Aragorn looked up to see Hedwig perched in the tree. She smiled sadly, suddenly knowing what she had to do.

"Come here, lovey," she beckoned to Hedwig and the owl fluttered down on the ground next to her. Harry removed the food pouch from her belt, then enlarged her trunk and pulled out a bottle of ink, one quill, and a few parchments.

Aragorn came to squat beside her once more, staring with unabashed interest. "What do are you doing?"

Harry stared hopefully at the ranger, before presenting him with a corner of the parchment, as well as a quill and ink bottle. "I'm going to give Frodo and Sam a barrel's worth of food and drink, as well as a way to communicate with us. Could you write a short letter explaining to them what it's all for, and that Hedwig can be used to deliver post to me, or to whomever they want?"

If Aragorn was stunned or amazed by Harry's request, he didn't show it. Instead, he set about doing what Harry had asked him to. When Aragorn finished, Harry took back the quill and ink bottle, and the rest of the remaining parchment, and tipped it into the pouch. This, along with Aragorn's letter, she tied to each of Hedwig's legs.

Harry placed Hedwig on her forearm, wondering if she'd every see her faithful companion again. Then she scolded herself for being melodramatic; if any nasty business went down, Hedwig would be the most likely to survive it. "Take this to Frodo and Sam, Hedwig. Stay with them always, unless they need to send us a message. Protect them like you would protect me, okay?"

Hedwig hooted softly and nipped Harry's nose with her beak before she launched off, nearly scraping Legolas's head as she passed the riverbank. Fortunately for him, the elf ducked in the last second. Gimli was chuckling.

"That was a very noble thing you did, Harry," said Aragorn quietly.

"I suppose so," Harry agreed.

Aragorn stood once more. "Come, we must wake Boromir."

Twenty minutes later they were all ready to leave, Boromir having just drunk the Pepper-Up and proclaiming he had never felt so hearty in his life. Harry still sat, palming her Firebolt, which lay across her lap. It was time to go.

Boromir and Gimli grasped each of her arms and hefted her up so that she stood awkwardly, balancing precariously on one leg. Harry positioned her broom so that it rested under her bottom before nodding at them to let her go. As they eased their grips, she kicked off softly from the ground.
Even Legolas could not contain his amazement at finally seeing for himself a broomstick that hovered waist-height in the air and a person seated upon it as if it were a horse.

"Ready when you are," Harry grinned cheekily before SWOOSH!

The Firebolt had the capability to accelerate at one hundred and ten miles per hour. It was likely that her companions had never seen anything go that fast, and they jumped back in shocked surprise as she suddenly launched herself almost vertically into the air. In a few seconds, Harry could not even make them out anymore.

She peered down at the landscape. She was really too far up to see anything, let alone a party of ant-like orcs that must have traveled some way by now. She would have to go back down.

Harry descended at an incline. She would have preferred to travel down in a Wronski Feint, but she didn't think her ankle could take the pressure of the wind. Harry lowered the broom until she just skimmed the topmost branches of the trees. Some meters below her stood Aragorn, Gimli, Legolas, and Boromir.

"Most impressive, child!" called Gimli. "Now we have an advantage over the Uruk-Hai." The rest murmured in agreement.

"Indeed, you can scout ahead. Now, let us hunt some orc!" Aragorn cried before running up the slope.

The rest, including Harry, followed.
"We're lost Mr Frodo, and make no mistake," grouched Sam, staring at the endless expanse of grey, dreary, tumble-turvy rocks that made up Emyn Muil. "Everythin's lookin' the same, and there's a foul stench about!"

He and Frodo stood shoulder to shoulder, their little shoulders hunched in dejection, made to look even more dejected by the heavy packs on their backs. Hedwig, their wizard friend's owl, was perched stiffly on one of the many large boulders, her yellow eyes regarding them with a curious kind of pity. It had been three days since Frodo and Sam had left the Fellowship, three days in which they had traveled and climbed — and occasionally slipped — up knots of gigantic rock and barren slopes of stone. They had laboured under their heavy packs and under the foul stench that seemed as if it oozed from the very ground on which they walked.

Many times they had become lost — they were, in fact, still lost, but that hadn't really stopped them from continuing; even now when they both realised they had gone around in the same circle for perhaps the third time that day.

"I know," Frodo now said in agreement with his friend's previous conclusion. "I'm sorry, Sam, but there's not much we can do now about it. Why don't we rest and try to get our bearings?" he suggested before doing just that. Sam hunkered down next to him. "What food have we got?"

"Let's see then," said Sam, rummaging around in his pack until he pulled out a small, brown sack. "It'll be a surprise again, no doubt. There's no end to this thing of Mr Harry's."

"It's rather like Pippin's stomach, isn't it?" said Frodo in an attempt to achieve some light banter and lift the perpetual gloom off of their hearts.

"I'd say so, and I'm glad of that, indeed I am," Sam replied before sticking an arm into the sack. He kept it there for a short while, apparently searching for food, though no movement could be seen by Frodo's eyes. Sam's arm came out again, this time with a flagon in hand. He tossed it to Frodo. "Some water. As cool as ever, I'd wager."

Frodo nodded in relieved acquiescence after taking a large gulp. "Anything else?" he asked, handing the flagon back to Sam who drew a swallow.

"Hmm," said Sam now, with his arm back in the sack. "I think... I think I feel some of that choke-stuff. I've a feelin' as if there are little square ridges under my fingers."

"I should like to taste some again then, Sam, although it is very sweet. I imagine it should not be eaten as lunch. It tastes more like dessert, doesn't it?"

"That it does," Sam agreed before withdrawing the block of Honeydukes chocolate from the pouch. He broke off two large pieces and tossed one to Frodo. Then he packed away the chocolate and they both settled down to eat.

It had been a shock to them both, when, not even three hours after they had left the Fellowship, Harry's occasionally wayward owl had come flying towards them with a small yellow note and a brown sack strapped to either of her legs. Of course, Frodo and Sam had seen this brown sack before, and they were comforted by the knowledge that it contained a lot of food and a lot of drink. They had read Aragorn's note, which had briefly explained that at the request of Harry, Hedwig and the food pouch was at their disposal for the remainder of their perilous journey.
They had been overjoyed, for they had not been particularly endeared to the idea of eating lembas for the rest of their trek into the Dark Lands, or having to go without water when theirs ran out. And now they could actually write letters to the Fellowship, and the Fellowship could write back! And not just that, they could send Hedwig to anyone in Middle Earth, even Lord Elrond, far away in Rivendell, or Lady Galadriel in fair Lothlorien. They knew they could do this because Aragorn had explained it all in the letter.

After Hedwig had arrived, the hobbits no longer felt so small anymore in this vast, cruel land, for now they had a link to the world outside Mordor; the heavy, dreary presence on their souls had abolished slightly at this conclusion. Only, it had returned somewhat in the last few hours when they had started losing their way amidst the harsh environment of Emyn Muil.

Looking to Hedwig now still sitting perched on the bolder beside him, Frodo thought of something. It seemed to him a very good something to think of, especially since he had just been pondering on how lost he and Sam currently were. However, he had no clue if this something would work. He would post the question to his friend, and see what he made of it.

"It just occurred to me that Hedwig can travel to anyone we tell her to if Aragorn's letter is to be believed, is that not right, Sam?"

"I'd say so," said Sam, still munching his chocolate. "I gather all we have to do is tell 'er the name of the person we want to send a letter to. I can send 'er to my Old Gaffer if I wanted. At least, tha's the idea I've been gettin' from readin' Strider's note, if you pardon me, Mr Frodo."

"Of course, Sam. The same has occurred to me. I should very much like to write to Bilbo and hear what he's been up to in Rivendell since we left. But Sam, to be able to do that, Hedwig must have an excellent sense of direction. I expect it is because she is a wizard's pet, and has her own queer magic."

Sam caught on to what Frodo was trying to say immediately. "You mean if we asked 'er to, she could lead us out of here? Now that's an idea!"

Frodo nodded, smiling in relief, for he felt rather brilliant at the moment. "Exactly."

Then both of them cast their attentions on the great owl, who was now regarding them with a suspicious, squinting gaze.

"So how do we go about askin'?" said Sam after he and Frodo had stood up again. "There're no names to tell 'er this time, for we don't want 'er to find us a person."

Frodo bit his lip, now not so certain that his brilliant idea was so brilliant after all. "Perhaps if we ask her to fly ahead, and to always remain within our sight? Then we can follow her out."

"Now tha's usin' the old noggin, Mr Frodo. Shall you try or shall I?"

"I believe I want to. I must be polite to her Sam. Have you seen the way Harry speaks to her? As though she is person?"

Sam nodded, remembering. "Aye, I understand."

"And I have just the thing to say." Frodo stared at the white owl. The owl stared back. He bowed politely, cleared his throat, and began — very respectfully in his opinion. "Miss Hedwig, Sam and I shall be ever so grateful for your assistance at this moment in time, for you see, we are quite lost, and we most humbly ask you to lead us out of this horrid place."
Hedwig's only reaction was to cock her head to the side.

"I do not understand," said Frodo in exasperation, and after a few minutes of mutual staring between owl and hobbit. "Why is she not leaving?"

"P'rhaps we need to tell 'er where she's to lead us to?" Sam suggested. He, too, had been confused as to why Hedwig hadn't responded.

"You're right, Sam!" cried Frodo joyfully. "She must not have understood my question."

Hedwig hooted.

The hobbits jumped in surprise, before grinning at each other.

"Dya see that, Mr Frodo! She's speakin' to us," said Sam, looking on in awe. "Just like with Mr Harry."

"I see! I see!" Frodo regarded Hedwig with a critical eye. "Would you lead us out of Emyn Muil, Hedwig, and until you see the Black Gate? We would like you to remain in our sight at all times, if you please."

This time Hedwig hooted twice before spreading her large wings and launching off the rock. As she flew over their heads and into the free air she seemed to the hobbits in that moment, with the sun shining on her white, glowing body, as a symbol of hope. Their hearts lifting with the sight, they followed after her, though this time with a very definite lilt to their step.

That night, after replenishing their empty bellies with food and drink, Frodo, Sam, and Hedwig settled down to sleep. It was, perhaps, unfortunate for the hobbits that Hedwig had been awake during the whole day, leading them through Emyn Muil with the sun shining in her sensitive eyes, otherwise she would not have been so tired now, and so, would not have felt the inclination to close those sensitive eyes, or to place her head in a comfortably warm spot under her left wing. Despite being intelligent and magical, Hedwig was still an owl after all, and could not be expected to know what was required of her without explicit instruction from the hobbits. She knew with Harry, of course. Harry was her master and her best friend, and it was her job to know what Harry wanted of her before she even knew herself. It was all part of a wizard owl's physiology.

And so, with no instruction from Frodo and Sam, and not being able to read them like she could Harry, poor Hedwig fell into a very contented, very deep sleep, where images of field mice and other such rodents danced under her eyelids.

It was lucky the hobbits were not so very tired themselves. Or, more to the point, they were very tired, but they dared not sleep from knowing there was something out there, following them. It was Frodo who had realised something was sniffing at their trail, and that that something was not very far off.

"We are not alone," he had said to Sam earlier that afternoon.

Ever since then, the hobbits had been on their guard, knowing that the thing — which they suspected very strongly might be that Gollum creature — could attack at any moment, especially when they lay relaxed and unsuspecting under their warm blankets.

As it was, they heard him before they saw him.

"Thievesss. Thievesss. You filthy, little thievesss. They takes it. They takes it from uss." He spoke in a low, guttural hissing sort of voice that seemed to produce more incoherent muttering than actual
words. It was the first time the hobbits had heard that voice, and they felt a chill down their spines at the harshness of it.

As they heard the hissing sounds come closer, they opened their eyes just a little to find the creature already above them, clinging to the rock.

The hobbits moved as one, surprising Gollum so much that he hadn't the time to get on the defensive . . . unless he bit and kicked them. This he did.. Sam was forced to let go of Gollum's neck, while Frodo was flung unceremoniously onto the ground.

This action caused the chain, with the Ring attached, to make itself visible, catching Gollum's glinting eye. He leapt, snarling, his hands going for Frodo's little neck, but fortunately for Frodo, something happened to make Gollum change his mind.

In mid leap, Gollum was jerked to such a strong halt that his twiddley legs and large feet flapped upwards, almost colliding with his own face. He had stopped in mid snarl, aborting the sound into "Urgghahhssss!"

Then he was being lifted up in the air — high in the air — his body bobbing up and down like a cork on water with every flap of Hedwig's large, beautiful wings.

"Arrrrhhhhssss!" cried Gollum while he struggled in Hedwig's talons. He, the hobbits, and even Hedwig, knew that he dared not attempt to hit her or pinch her, because he was now so high up that Hedwig would have dropped him to his doom if he so much as attempted to pry her talons from his shoulders. But that didn't stop Gollum from struggling, and the more he struggled, the tighter and deeper went Hedwig's claws.

Eventually, Gollum had to stop, for the pain was too much. Then he let out such a pathetic howl at his own forced submission, that the Hobbits, especially Frodo, were inclined to feel pity at the wretchedness of his twisted mind and lost, corrupted soul.

"Bring him down, Hedwig! But do not drop him, even if he struggles!" Frodo shouted.

Hedwig did not just bring him down. She let herself freefall into a sharp dive that had Gollum screeching even louder and covering his eyes with a skinny forearm, so as not to witness the fast approaching ground.

A few meters above the ground Hedwig came to a halt, then she opened her claws and Gollum was dropped awkwardly on the hard rock. Before he could attempt to do anything, Sam slipped the elven rope about his neck.

Gollum howled.

He was still howling the next morning when the hobbits dragged him through a low ravine, with Hedwig flying a little ways ahead. Sam, who was the one holding Gollum's rope, couldn't take it anymore. Gollum had been tugging, and dragging, and screeching, and howling the entire morning, and when he tugged, and dragged, and screeched, and howled just then, Sam lost his patience.

"Be quiet!" he commanded, whirling around to see the creature perched on the edge of a rock.

"Sam," said Frodo, almost in warning.

Gollum screeched even louder, tugging at the rope at his neck. "It burns! It burns uss!"

"Get down!" yelled Sam, and snapped the rope so harshly that Gollum was one again face to face
with his large flapping feet.

"Sam!" Frodo cried, half in horror.

"Every orc in Mordor's going to hear that racket!" spat Sam, hating Gollum even more.

Frodo privately agreed, but he did not think this was the way to go about treating this creature. Instead, he moved to stand next to Gollum, who was writhing and moaning on the pebbly ground like a fox caught in a trap; a trap that, in Gollum's case, was the elven rope around his neck.

When he caught sight of Frodo above him, Gollum stood on his knees and presented the rope to the hobbit, looking with pathetic, imploring eyes. "Take it off uss!" he implored.

Frodo could not help but feel pity. "You know the way to the black gate." It wasn't a question.

Gollum now looked suspicious.

It took perhaps a couple more minutes of arguing with Sam, bargaining with Gollum, and more arguing with Sam, to finally convince the both of them that using Gollum as a guide through Mordor was a good idea. Sam argued using Hedwig as an excuse, but Frodo pointed out that after Emyn Muil, they really had no clue where any other place, or the name of any other place was, so they could not tell Hedwig. Sam conceded after that.

"And," said Frodo now, after removing the rope from Gollum's neck. "We can send Hedwig to the others explaining the new situation, since we do not need her currently. She can find us again later."

Sam accepted that idea, though grudgingly, and the hobbits, with Gollum watching on curiously, set about writing a note and tying it to one of Hedwig's legs.

After finishing, the hobbits petted Hedwig's soft, downy head, remembering that Harry had always performed this action for her. The owl leaned into their hands, a look of pleasure on her face.

"Please take that letter to your master, Hedwig," said Frodo.

Hedwig gently nipped Frodo and Sam's noses with her beak, surprising them greatly, before flapping high, and higher, and higher, and over the ravine, until they could not see her anymore.

Their spirits fell slightly at the sight.

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Merry and Pippin — felt among other unpleasant things — highly uncomfortable at the moment. For the passed three days . . . was it three? They weren't entirely sure. Of course they weren't entirely sure about a lot of things at the moment, but they knew they were the most sure that the hours seemed to blend together like a mashed up mushroom pie that had just been taken out of the stove, the steam piping up their noses in delicious woody swirls; and the combination of mushroom and lamb, with a hint of spicy sauce, tickling their tongues before sliding blissfully warm down their throats, coming to a plop in their bellies where it would rest comfortably for the next couple of hours . . . sigh . . .

With not much else to do but hang limply off of the fat, smelly necks of the Uruk-hai, they had also taken to daydreaming constantly. Mostly about food; other times with a longing for a clean privy. A bath was also longed for, although, that was something they had learned to do without in the last couple of months, so the lack of cleanliness didn't bother them nearly as highly as a lack of comfortable holes in which to do their business in.
Certainly, the Uruks had had to stop more than a few times on account of disgruntled hobbit complaints and grumbles.

And they had complained and grumbled, most frequently too. Not just about the lack of certain necessities, but also about the various aches, pains, and bruises they’d accumulated due to being tossed, jarred, jutted, bounced, rolled, and all those other unpleasant sensations that came from riding on a heavily armoured, fast running — sometimes up and down hills — Uruk.

Not to mention — the stench was unbelievable! It was quite obvious that these Uruks had not had a bath in like forever!

Merry and Pippin had frequently tried breathing through their navels, but after discovering that this was not a part of a hobbit's physiology —as opposed to a grasshopper's — they gave up. Well they'd had to, for fear of passing out from lack of air!

So, they'd had to stifle it, and endure smelly armpits — the stench of which could be likened to a hot, rotting carcass sweltering under the midday sun— bad breath — Old Proudfoot's very loud, and very proud gas expulsions after a breakfast of half-a-dozen eggs — and the overall smell of the Uruk-hai's themselves — which did not even bear describing, it was that horrible.

Suffice to say, Merry and Pippin had not had a good time of it. No indeed. This was why they had taken to daydreaming, or more to the point, hallucinating about pleasant things.

So when Merry and Pippin — still bouncing uncomfortably on the Uruk's backs — heard a whispered "Psst. Merry, Pippin!" by their ears, they, as anyone in their position would assume, thought they were having another hallucination — although this one seemed to involve a leak of some sort, which gave the hobbits the idea they needed to empty their bowels again.

But when the voice sounded once more, asking, "Are you two alright?" they thought that the hazardous stench they'd come to live with in the passed three days was finally effecting their brains, and that they were, in fact, loosing what was left of their wits.

Feeling uncertain — or perhaps just needing assurance that he wasn't going mad — Pippin cleared his throat. "Merry, Merry!" he whispered furiously.

"Yes, Pippin?" Merry returned, just as furiously.

"I'm hearing voices."

Merry didn't say anything to that for along time, until: "Me too, Pip."

Pippin's breath came out in little shuddering gasps. "D-does that mean we've gone mad?"

"You're not mad!" said the voice again, this time with a hint of irritation.

The hobbits jumped — or rather, they jolted. It was hard to jump strapped to someone's back.

"Who's there?" asked Merry with a frown, looking around.

Pippin had thought the voice sounded a little familiar, but he couldn't place it.

"It's. Me!" it said anxiously, and the hobbits finally recognised who it was.

"Harry!" they shouted, overjoyed.

"Shut yer filthy little gobs!" yelled an especially nasty Uruk named Ugluk up the front, "or I'll 'ave
'em fer breakfast!"

"Muffliato. That should do it. This lot don't seem too friendly," Harry whispered.

"Where are you? Why don't we see you? Do you have the Ring? How did you come here?" said the hobbits, talking over the top of each other.

"Er . . . magic," said Harry. "Look, Aragorn's sent me to check up on you. Have they, er, mistreated you in anyway? What I mean is, do you have enough food and stuff?"

"No," they said together.

"It's been horrible," said Merry.

"They don't feed us at all," Pippin continued morosely.

"I've got some Lembas bread," Harry said. "I can put some in your mouths if you open them up." Harry's voice now sounded from above them.

Obligingly, the hobbits did so, and the next second they saw a flash of silver and a hand appearing above them in midair, and a chunk of elven way bread dropping into their mouths, before there was once again nothing but blue skies.

They munched on the generous helpings for a couple of minutes.

"Listen," Harry now said, voice sounding beside their ears again, "Aragorn and the others are on their way, they'll catch up pretty quick. Legolas reckons their gaining on the Uruk-hai, something about 'whips of the masters not being as whippy,' or something . . . I'd take you right now but I'm not sure if we'd all fit."

"Fit where?" Pippin asked, peering in the direction of Harry's voice.

Before their eyes, it appeared as if the fabric of reality was folded and torn open like a split seam, revealing the smiling face of their friend.

"How are you doing that?" Pippin breathed in awe.

Harry's disembodied face drifted closer. "A cloak of invisibility. I'm also on my broom."

"A broom?" Merry asked.

"I told you I could fly," Harry smiled. "My broom is enchanted to fly." Then a frown. "I was hoping to snatch you up before they even noticed you were gone but I doubt even the stupid one you're riding on would miss you disappearing right on top of him. Help is on the way though, so just hang in there."

"If you hadn't noticed," said Merry, annoyance in his voice at the perceived mocking, "we're doing that already."

"Not . . ." Harry breathed. "I didn't mean it like that. It's just one of those things, you know. Things people say in my world. It means, erm, keep at it, stand your ground, stand firm, that sort of thing."

"Well, we aren't standing," said Pippin, half seriously, half stupidly.

"Forget it," was all Harry said to that, and sighed. "Just know that the others'll catch up soon. Have hope, and all that. " Then she paused before whispering, "I'd better leave. I'll come back s—"
"Somethin' the matter?" growled Ugluk, cutting Harry off in mid-speech.

There was a heavy sniffing, rumbly sound. "I smell Man-flesh!" was snarled by another Uruk named Lugdush.

There was a shuffling and clattering as every Uruk came to a halt and started sniffing maniacally.

Merry and Pippin heard a clenched, "Damn it! Finite Incantatem." before they felt a fluttering of something like smooth cloth against their cheeks, and a great swooshing sound, then nothing.

"He's left," said Merry.

But the hobbits were grinning. A gleam of hope had come to them. They now knew they weren't alone.

As Harry flew back in the direction of the remainder of the Fellowship, she cast off her invisibility cloak and stuffed it inside her robe pocket, wincing as she did so as part of the cloak snagged a little on her broken ankle. Aragorn had, of course, examined it just that morning, but it was still too tender to do much with it, so he'd left it like it was, though he had contended to tie an extra shirt of Dudley's around it, which made Harry look like she had a great fat pillow hanging off her leg.

Harry giggled to herself, thinking if Madame Promfrey could see her now . . .

*What was that?*

Harry halted in mid-air and cast her attention to what she was sure was the East. There it was in the distance, plonked between the mountains like a dirty great thumb. The Mt. Doom. Appropriate name, Harry now thought, especially since a whole load of black smoke was rising out of it. Harry felt a shiver encompass her body as she saw that blackness, the kind of shiver she got when she went up against Voldemort.

*Poor Frodo and Sam. Hedwig, I hope you're okay.*

Shaking her head to clear it of all unpleasant thoughts, Harry gently nudged her broom with her thighs and continued flying onwards. She wasn't flying at a very fast pace so her ankle wouldn't be pressured. The cool wind moved across her face and through her hair, mangling and massaging it so pleasantly that Harry wasn't aware she'd closed her eyes and plastered a dopey smile across her face.

*When will I get to go home?*

The thought came unbidden, sudden, surprising her.

She opened worried eyes.

When *would* she get to go home? Hadn't she already saved Boromir? Hadn't she already completed her mission? If Harry closed her eyes right now and fell asleep, deliberately dreaming of Hogwarts, would she — As Dumbledore theorized— be taken there? If so, what would happen to Hedwig? What would happen to her stuff? She couldn't just leave them stuck here! The very idea of never seeing her faithful owl, or her treasured broom, or her father's invisibility cloak, or her photo album, was so ghastly that Harry firmly told herself that she would never dream about Hogwarts until she figured out how to take everything with her.

But for that she needed to find one of the wayward wizards that Middle Earth hosted, but there were only three of them — four if she counted Saruman, which she didn't — and no one, not even
Galadriel knew where they were!

If only Gandalf was still alive, Harry was sure the old wizard would have an answer.

But for now, Harry decided to dismiss all this tiresome thinking and concentrate on finding the others, who seemed to have disappeared. Either that or Harry had flown over them without knowing. She could just imagine Gimli, agitated, waving his axe in the air to get Harry’s attention while Harry flew on, unknowing, a stupid smile on her face . . .

Harry pulled her broom into a stop once more and scanned the surroundings below her. All she could see were the usual rolling hills with bits of boulders stuck half in half out of them. Here and there were small cliff-like creations that was only sixteen or so feet high, but still carpeted heavily with grass, and —

Harry peered.

Was that movement on the little bluff?

"Yes!" she shouted triumphantly, and then mumbled, almost as an afterthought, "stupid elven cloaks."

In no time flat Harry found herself standing on the ground beside the others — with her good foot, using her Firebolt as a sort of staff/cane — and explaining the conversation she’d had with Merry and Pippin.

"It is true their pace has quickened," Aragorn was now saying, stroking his chin a bit.

"How did you —?" Harry began, flummoxed.

"Rangers are knowledgeable in most areas and hopeless in others," returned Aragorn, as if that explained everything. Then he seemed to stare off in the distance, as though seeing something only rangers could see.

"Right," Harry said, and blinked. "What do we do now?"

"We will go after them, of course!" exclaimed Boromir, looking at Harry as though he thought it was stupid to even ask. "Our little friends should not be allowed to suffer for more than they do already."

"Then what are we waiting for?" growled Gimli, his eyes glittering.

"Rest," explained Aragorn patiently. "We have journeyed far and my legs are tired and my soul is weary. We should eat and drink plenty also. We shall need it to endure the rest of the day."

Everyone agreed this was a very good idea, though Harry couldn’t help noticing that Legolas didn’t look the least bit tired.

After feasting — if a couple of bites of lembas bread and a few swallows of water counted as feasting — they set off again. They ran — or flew — onwards, with Aragorn tracking the ground and a few times lying flat on it to listen to the Uruk-hai footsteps that caused faint vibrations in the earth. A couple of times they stopped also, to see where the Uruk-hai currently were compared to themselves. The only people who could actually do this were Legolas with his elven eyesight, Harry who would sometimes fly a mile or two ahead or really high up, and Aragorn whom Harry had given her Omnioculars to.

When nightfall came, they rested for a few of hours of shut-eye, with Harry standing or rather sitting
guard since she was the least tired of the lot, before they set off again. Harry was extremely grateful to have her broom with her, as she knew she wouldn't have been able to keep pace with the others if she hadn't. As it was, just looking at Gimli weighted down with an assortment of heavy weapons, armour, and chain mail, but still trudging proudly onwards, made her feel tremendously weary.

The next day, sometime in the late morning, they came upon dry looking plains that extended further than human and even elven eyes could see.

"Home of the Horse Masters," muttered Boromir.

There was silence in the empty fields as Aragorn once again bent to lie flat, pressing his ear onto the ground.

Harry, who was hovering about ten meters up in the air, and so wasn't hampered by normal human or elven height — which couldn't see over the slight incline that rested before them — began: "Erm... Aragorn?"

Aragorn gestured for Harry to be quite and pressed himself even more into the ground.

"It's just that —"

"Shh," hissed Gimli flapping a gloved hand. "He's hearing something!"

"Yeah, I know, I wanted to tell you —"

"Riders!" Aragorn suddenly cried, shooting up to his feet. "Many riders on swift steeds are coming towards us!"

At this, Legolas immediately ran up the short hill.

"That's what I've been trying... never mind," said Harry, and she floated up several more meters in order to see better.

"Yes!" said Legolas now, after having reached the top of the hill. "There are one hundred and five. Yellow is their hair, and bright are their spears. Their leader is very tall."

"You see all that?" Harry asked in amazement, coming to hover head-height beside Legolas. All she'd seen was a bunch of shiny glinting metal stuff positioned on what she assumed were horses. She had only guessed that it was a group of people.

Aragorn came to stand on the hill beside them, Boromir and Gimli following. "Keen are the eyes of the Elves," he said, smiling. Then he placed the Omniocluars that hung around his neck over his eyes and scanned the horizon.

"The riders are a little more than five leagues distant," said Legolas, turning to watch Aragorn with a small smile.

Gimli humphed. "Five leagues or one, we cannot escape them in this bare land. Shall we wait for them here or go on our way?"

"We will wait," said Aragorn, not taking his gaze from between the lenses of Harry's Omniocluars. "I am weary, and no doubt you all are as well."

"The riders would surely have passed the Uruk-hai," Boromir suggested. "Theoden King does not allow foul creatures to roam his lands unchecked. If the riders are coming towards us, they surely
would have slaughtered every Uruk ere they came this way, which means that Merry and Pippin
must be safe."

"I see no hobbits," said Legolas and Aragorn together.

"But I do not doubt you," Aragorn continued, letting the Omnioculars rest back on his chest. He
turned to Boromir. "We shall have to wait here. Behind that boulder would be a good place to hide."
He pointed to a large protruding boulder a few meters away. "Then we shall see if they are friendly
folk or ones we need to raise swords against, though I do not believe it to be the latter."

Some time later they still sat behind the boulder, shifting uncomfortably on the hard ground. There
had been a bit of an issue of what to do with Harry, seeing as he couldn't walk towards the riders,
and nobody had wanted the riders to see Harry actually flying on a piece of wood used for sweeping.

"They will surely think some evil sorcery abounds!" Boromir had said.

"It doesn't even look like a regular broom! How would they even know what it is?"

In the end, despite Harry suggesting more than once that she could just become invisible, it was
decided that Harry should remain behind the boulder, and should only reveal herself if the others
were in dire need of it.

Harry did not much like this option, but she had given Gimli one part of an Extendable Ear and told
him to hide it in his beard, while she kept the other half. It had taken at least ten minutes of
explanation about what the Extendable Ears were used for, their purpose, their make-up, etc, until
Gimli was inclined to except his Ear. He tied it in the middle of his beard before concealing the Ear
by draping more beard over it, so the end result indicated there was nothing to be seen.

"We can talk to each other through these as well," Harry told him. Her brow crinkled in worry. "I
should have given Merry and Pippin one."

"We cannot all be as fast in wit as dwarves," Gimli informed, and patted her kindly on the shoulder.

"Ah!" Boromir suddenly exclaimed. "Hear you that?"

Everyone besides Legolas, who must have already heard long before now, tuned their ears' attentions
on the fast approaching galloping sound.

"The horsemen approach!"

They weren't just approaching, they were already upon them. A great galloping, crying, ferocious,
and snorting hoard they were; the horses' hoofs sounded like thunder on the dry earth.

Aragorn leapt from behind the rock and ran after the passing horsemen, the rest following.

"Riders of Rohan, what news from the North?" he shouted. He had placed his hand in a casual way
on the base of his sword.

Harry poked her head a little ways from behind the rock in time to see the entire one hundred and
five golden-haired warriors ride back and encircle her friends, pointing their long spears at them so
threateningly, that they could hardly move for fear of getting pierced.

Well, that was a bit of not good.

Aragorn placed both hands up in an offering off peace, but Harry clenched a hand around her wand,
her heart thundering.

A deep voice spoke from the hoard, Harry listening through the Extendables. "What business do two Men, an Elf, and a Dwarf have in the Riddermark?"

When no one said anything immediately, a rider came forward. "Speak quickly!" he ordered.

"We track a party of Uruk-hai westward across the plain. They have taken two of our friends captive." Harry might have imagined it, but she thought Aragorn's voice broke a little at the end. "We are friends to Theoden and to his people."

Harry sat back around the boulder and leaned against it when her ankle began to pain her. Unfortunately, this meant she could no longer see anything, but at least she could hear.

"Theoden no longer recognizes friend from foe," said the stranger. "Not even his —shherkkk! Crackle. Crackle. Clang!"

Harry stared at the Ear in her hand, shocked. What in God's name was that sound?

". . . he walks in the woods they say —" craaaaaaaaaaccckkle! Shwoosh. Swish. Shwoosh.

What the . . . ? Harry gave the Ear a little shake.

"Give me your name, Horse Master, and I shall give you mine!" declared Gimli proudly.

Must have been a spur of the moment sort of thing, thought Harry, not sure whether she was commenting on the strange sound, or what Gimli had said.

"I would cut off your head, dwarf!" spat the stranger. "If it stood but a little higher from the ground!"

"You would die before —"

Legolas's voice was cut off as, once again, the strange crackling sound appeared. From then on, much to Harry's furious irritation, the sound came almost constantly, and, on occasion, the only distinguishable thing Harry could hear was, "slaughtered during the night", "Arod!" and, "It has forsaken these lands." By the time the others came back around the boulder, this time with two horses trotting behind them, Harry was fully convinced that whatever the strange sound had been was entirely Gimli's fault, and as soon as the dwarf came into view, Harry — much to Gimli's alarm — pounced, lifting the dwarf's beard so that the Ear came into view.

She finally realised what that annoying sound had been. The crackles and the swishy swooshy-ing had been Gimli's outrageous beard brushing up against the Ear, and the clanging had been the Ear banging on Gimli's armour.

The dwarf was sputtered as Harry untied the Ear from his beard. Everyone else looked on in amusement.

"Sorry," Harry said, realising she was making a fool of him. "But the stupid thing would only pick up the sounds nearest to it. Like your beard. I could barely hear what was being said!"

Boromir coughed politely into his hand.

Gimli harrumphed and muttered under his breath, trying to pretend he wasn't blushing, and then said very gruffly. "We should be off. The hobbits are waiting!"

A short while later after explaining everything to Harry they mounted their transports — Legolas and
Gimli on one horse, Aragorn and Boromir on the other, and Harry flying beside them — and they thundered across the plains until the pile of orc carcasses came into view. Everyone except Harry dismounted and started picking their way through the burnt up flesh.

Harry came to hover by Gimli as he scrounged through the pile of burnt bodies, finally unearthing something. "It's one of their wee belts," he said, looking up at Harry, then at the others with a sort of questioning stare.

Harry suddenly had to fight a hotness behind her eyes. Merry and Pippin couldn't be dead, they just couldn't! She had spoken to them not even a day ago!

Aragorn sank to his knees and let out such a deep howl of anguish and grief, and Boromir and Legolas just looked so shocked, as if they couldn't comprehend that the hobbits might actually be gone. Seeing them, Harry finally allowed the tears to trickle down her cheek.

They let a heavy silence engulf them.

"A hobbit lay here," Aragorn said eventually, palming the grass at his feet. "And the other."

Harry felt like yelling — who cares if hobbits lay there, their not laying there anymore! But as soon as she had the thought she was ashamed of herself.

"They crawled," Aragorn continued, standing up to follow the trail. "They were followed." His voice began to get hopeful, and Harry couldn't help but think — is it possible? "Their hands were bound," said Aragorn, examining the ground. He bent down to pick something up and produced a rope, covered in dried grass. "Their bonds were cut!" he said half surprised half excitedly, lurching forwards.

The rest followed, just as excited.

"They ran," said Aragorn, coming to a stop, "into Fangorn Forest."

"Fangorn," breathed Gimli. "What madness drove them in there?"

Before anyone could answer a shrill screech sounded from above them. Harry's heart lifted; she knew that sound! Everyone looked up, including Harry.

"Hedwig!" she cried. The bird was flapping furiously in their direction, a piece of parchment tied to her leg. Harry then felt like an ice cube had dropped into her stomach. Why would Frodo and Sam write to them now, so shortly after having left?

Harry forced herself to wait until Hedwig came to a final flap, perching on the end of her broom.

Harry hugged the owl to her as the others crowded around below. Thinking it would be rude to just float above their heads like this when they were so obviously interested in what the letter held, Harry lowered herself until she was about waist high.

"Why would they send Hedwig now?" asked Legolas, worry briefly flashing across his face. "Surely something has not happened?"

"I don't know," muttered Harry. "But we're going to find out." She untied the piece of parchment from around Hedwig's leg and opened it. She clutched the paper tightly in her hands. "Damn it!" she said, and the others jerked forward.

"What does it say?" they all demanded to know.
"I've no idea," Harry moaned, frustrated. "I forgot that I can't read Westron!"

Aragorn laughed weakly and shot Harry a narrowed look that involved a little head-shaking, before plucking the parchment out of the wizard's hand and scanning it. The others crowded around him.

"Ai!" said Legolas. "That Gollum has found them!"

"The creature that escaped two score of elven folk?" said Gimli a bit cheekily.

Legolas ignored him.

"They are using him as a guide through Mordor!" said Boromir, shock evident in his tone. "Are they mad?"

"They are hobbits," returned Aragorn. "We shall have to hope that their judgment be good on this." He folded the parchment and stuffed it inside his tunic. "But now we go yonder into the forest."

"Hang on, shouldn't we write back?" Harry asked.

Aragorn didn't even hesitate. "Aye. They will wish to know they are not alone in this, and that we consent their decision."

"Right," Harry said. Then she un-pocketed her trunk, dropped it on the ground and enlarged it. When she found the ink, parchment, and quill, she gave it to Aragorn and the ranger proceeded to write. When he finished he tied the letter around Hedwig's leg, just as he had seen Harry do.

"Frodo and Sam," Aragorn told Hedwig, throwing Harry a questioning look.

Harry nodded.

Then they all waited.

And waited.

Hedwig wasn't moving off the end of the broom.

"What is it, Hedwig?" Harry asked, suddenly afraid she might be ill. "Are you —?"

Hedwig screeched at her indignantly.

"Oh, sorry, I forgot." Harry mumbled hastily, realising what Hedwig wanted. Her cheeks pinkened as she saw that everyone else had seen how her owl had reprimanded her.

She rummaged through her trunk until she found the owl treats. She gave Hedwig a few and she munched happily for a minutes before shooting into the air.

"Good luck!" Harry yelled after her. "She'll be fine," she told the others. "The hobbits will be fine with Hedwig looking after them, too. She's very territorial."

Aragorn nodded, his eyes shining. "Come!" he called, and with strangely heavy and excited hearts they followed him into Fangorn.
Fangorn forest at first glance appeared perfectly, if a little claustrophobic. It had lush trees as most forests held. It had little streamlets running along here and there, and it had mulch on the ground. It looked like an ordinary forest, yet it wasn't.

Harry had felt something was off as soon as she'd stepped inside, and when her wand started twitching in her pocket she'd known she was right. There was magic in the air. It was a magical forest. Probably had a holly tree somewhere within its borders. Harry doubted her wand would work.

That was a day ago. Now she, Gimli, and Legolas were all gathered around a cheerful fire which they'd built in a little hollow. Despite all previous attempts to get them to make use of the kitchen in her tent, they simply had no clue what to do with modern kitchen appliances, so they made do with a campfire. Gimli was sharpening his axe with a smooth rock he'd found along the way and Legolas was stretched out on the ground, his elegant hands folded across his chest. He was sleeping, or something like it. Aragorn and Boromir had gone off to hunt for rabbit, and would probably be back soon.

Harry was staring down at her one shoe, which had become a bit the worse for wear since she'd been walking a lot up until a few days ago. Her Firebolt lay beside her. She desperately felt like polishing it — it had gotten dusty from all the flying she'd been doing — but that would require unshrinking her trunk to get out the Broomstick Servicing Kit, and she didn't want to risk any magic in case something went wonky.

"Do you think we'll find Merry and Pippin?" Harry whispered to Gimli, if for no other reason then to break the stillness of the night gloom that penetrated the encased hollow.

The scraping noise of rock sliding against metal stopped as Gimli looked up at her with knowing brown eyes. "You believe 'tis your fault that the two hobbits are lost?" he whispered back slyly, and Harry could feel her cheeks turning hot.

"Er," she said, unsure whether to confirm or deny.

"Aye," Gimli gruffed, his eyes flickering over Harry's face, "You do."

"I can't help it," Harry said, waving her hand in frustration. "I was right there! I was actually talking to them. I could've done something to help them. I could have levitated them, or — or done something. I could've given them an Ear!"

Gimli hmphed, a faint tint of colour appearing on his cheeks, for he had not forgotten about the Ear incident. "Think you an ear would save them from the Uruk-hai?"

Put like that, it sounded absurd. Harry was struck by a vision of Merry and Pippin crouching behind a gigantic ear that was hopping furiously after a group fleeing Uruk-hai, who all had looks of terror on their faces. But Harry still wasn't sure whether or not Gimli was joking with the question. Most likely not; they took things very literally in these times.

"These creatures are vicious and bloodthirsty abominations of Saruman and his wicked magic," Gimli continued, confirming Harry's suspicions. "Hither and thither they trapse on the soft earth, eating the flesh of men and hobbits and elven folk; and most times eating the flesh of their own kind when there is none other available for them to gnaw!"
Harry grimaced at the imagery that Gimli spouted, reminding herself that it was common to speak thus in Middle Earth.

_I'm even starting to think like them._

She expelled a breath. "That's not the point, Gimli. I mean, I understand what you're trying to say, but I would've heard Merry and Pippin yelling for help if I'd have given them an Ear."

Gimli sighed gruffly and plonked his axe down beside his belongings, then leaning forward slightly and pierced Harry with a hard stare. "I have seen you do a great many wondrous feats that no dwarf has never imagined. No elf or wizard, or any Maia for that matter, could match you in strength, and Sauron would be wise to fear the power that you wield; the power that you wield as easily as dwarves dig.

"You have no cause to be feeling sorry. For yourself or the young hobbits. You did what you could. You followed Aragorn's command. And yes, he has not all the knowledge of everything you can do, and I admit that hinders his judgment, but you are also a child — and do not say you are not!" Gimli reprimanded when Harry opened her mouth to protest. "By natural years and experience in this world, you are a child, and can be forgiven for not knowing what to do, or how to think, or how to act in dire circumstances."

Harry lowered her gaze sullenly, but Gimli continued, "Ought a few spells make a wizard?" His steely gaze seeming as if it could look into Harry's very soul. "Or is it the courage to do what is wise as you see it? You could not have known that the Uruk-hai would encounter the Rohirrim. How could you have known that the hobbits would escape, blundering blindly into the wilds of ancient Fangorn, hunted by an orc? You may be a wizard but you are no seer!"

Then Gimli pulled out a pipe from beneath his mantle, took a small stick from the fire, and lit it. All Harry could do was stare incredulously at the puffing dwarf who had suddenly displayed so much insight. But at the same time Harry wanted to shout and tell him it had been pure forgetfulness on her part, and a lack of common sense.

"Think on that, young wizard," Gimli added from between piped teeth, before staring off into the flames.

Quite against her will, Harry did reluctantly think on it. Gimli's Professor-like words, so unbiased, so neutral, made her feel ashamed. Ashamed that she had only been looking, if subconsciously, for someone to tell her that she'd done the right thing by Merry and Pippin. She hadn't wanted to feel guilty anymore so she'd looked to Gimli to tell her she wasn't. But the dwarf had been too wily. He'd seen right through her.

"Thanks," Harry told him softly, ducking her head to stare at her shoe. Dimly, she noticed her shoelace was untied.

"Gimli son of Gloin is always at your service if you would but accept him," Gimli announced importantly and with what seemed a little hint of an irritated prod, as though he wanted Harry to finally reciprocate in the same way. Harry looked up just in time to see the dwarf bob his head.

"O-of course I'll accept him," Harry caught on, feeling it was appropriate to make a little bob of her own. "And I'll be honoured if Gimli son of Gloin would accept Hadrienne Jaimee Potter at his service."

Gimli chuckled mightily and suddenly thumped Harry hard on the back with a leather-gloved hand.
so that her body jerked forward alarmingly close the fire. "You're learning, you're learning!"

An emotion that felt suspiciously like a mixture of pride and happiness rose up in Harry. Without knowing how or why, she'd earned a special — if unconventional — friend in Gimli.

That night, they all had roasted rabbit for dinner. Aragorn had also managed to scrounge up some wild berries that Harry was positive were of a dubious nature, but after seeing everyone else tucking in quite vigorously, she decided she'd best stop hesitating and do the same — that is, until, she'd discovered some sort of squishy bug in hers that looked like a cross between a small cockroach and a maggot. After that she'd decided to forgo eating the berries, promptly excusing herself and making her way to the back of a tree some distance from the campfire.

Her stomach feeling slightly less full than before, though refreshingly empty at the same time, Harry returned to her companions and almost lazily stumbled off into the tent. As was taking first watch and Harry was lucky enough to get the last watch, hours later. She planned to get as much sleep in as she could until it was her turn.

She climbed up the elevated platform to the bed she had claimed as hers and stretched out on her back, closing her eyes. She thought it pleasant to fall asleep with the sound of Legolas' deep melodic voice wafting through the air in a mournful elvish tune. Of course, Harry did not know what the song meant, but she had gotten used the elf's singing and found that it lulled her to sleep almost immediately.

A lazy smile on her face, Harry finally succumbed to sleep.

Through the pipe smoke curling about his face, Aragorn could see that their youngest companion had tuned in for the night. With his broken ankle most likely paining him and sapping his strength throughout the day, Aragorn had to wonder how Harry could have coped staying awake for so long.

Because he is a wizard? The Ranger thought.

He was an enigma, to be sure, but Aragorn had long stopped wondering about him, feeling it less stressing to just accept the young wizard as he was. The fact that he did not understand many of the things Harry could do, or many of the things Harry would say, also helped to dispel any pondering he might be curious to do.

His lip curled fondly at the light snore he detected that mingled with Gimli's harsher noise. It seemed all wizards were the same, no matter what world they were born to.

A movement at the corner of his eye brought his attention to Boromir who had straightened from his seat across the dying fire, and was frowning lightly in the direction of the open flap. Knowing what would happen next, but still determined to observe, Aragorn watched as Boromir moved to follow Harry into the tent.

Nodding his goodnight to Legolas and Gimli, Aragorn casually entered the tent as well, ambling toward the spoilingly soft bed that had been designated as his. Holding his pipe in his mouth and pulling his boots off, he watched from the corner of his eye as Boromir stood consideringly at Harry's bedside.

The boy had sprawled out in his cot, blankets kicked off and clutching a pillow to his chest. In his too-big sleepwear and mused hair, the boy looked deceptively fragile.

And cold if the shivering was anything to go by.
Shaking his head ruefully, Boromir gently lifted the boy's blanket from beneath his feet and draped it over him, finishing by tucking the blanket in at the sides. Straightening, his eyes met Aragorn's from across the fire, glowing like yellow jewels, courtesy of the orange flames. Aragorn grinned widely and tipped his pipe at him, feeling just short of chuckling.

Looking almost bashful, Boromir offered him a shaky smile, shrugged, and made his way to his own sleep area where he lay down to fall asleep to Legolas' voice.

Aragorn sat on his bed and resumed his puffing, staring into the fire just outside.

Boromir, whether Harry noticed or not, had been acting very peculiar of late. Ever since Harry had rescued the eldest son of Denethor by a demonstration of very odd healing magic and "summoning" the orc arrows into his hand, Boromir, with no such words or outside implications, had assigned himself as Harry's protector.

But actions, Aragorn had found, spoke louder than words. Boromir's actions revealed the paternal feelings Aragorn knew he was harbouring toward the young spell-caster. Aragorn suspected that Boromir did not mind these feelings. In fact, he was fairly certain Boromir would have felt as such even if they were all still under the false impression that Harry was three hundred years old, making him older than Boromir and Aragorn combined.

In fact, Harry had earned a place in all of their hearts. Gimli especially had managed to make a very good friend in Harry, and Aragorn had often seen them exchanging long words and smatterings of laughter at night. With Legolas Harry had not laid bare his feelings and thoughts as much, and it saddened Aragorn to know the reason was because Harry was uncomfortable with elves.

Oh, Aragorn knew Harry considered Legolas a friend, but there was still just that touch of discomfort, that hint of self-censorship, and Aragorn was not blind to see that Legolas had sensed it as well. Elves were far more intuitive than mortals after all.

In spite of this, the elf was not offended, knowing that the reason laid more in the way of Haldir and several of the Lothlorien folk than anything Legolas had done. But elves were known for their patience, too, so Legolas would wait until Harry was more at ease with him. The songs he sang at night helped, as did his very nature. Nobody could find disfavour with Legolas for long; he was too kind an elf for that.

Legolas' singing ended abruptly, forcing Aragorn out of his reverie.

"Aragorn, nan na edas," said the elf softly, yet forcefully.

Aragorn sat up and quickly extinguished his pipe by banging it against the palm of his hand.

"What do you see?" Aragorn asked quickly, pulling his boots back on.

"A white shadow moving against the trees," Legolas replied. He had straightened up also, and his eyes appeared as twin pricks of blue ice in the darkness. "The cloth of which whispers in the dark."

"Eru," sighed Aragorn. "We must be quiet," he told Boromir and Gimli who had just woken up from the light drift they had been in.

"What of the lad?" Gimli whispered, gesturing to the slumbering Harry.

Aragorn frowned and sighed. "Let us hope that the white shadow, whatever it is, will think the sound to be a tree. They seem to have minds of their own in this forest."
"Why not wake him?" asked Boromir.

"I do not want to think of the consequences of two very powerful wizards, with two very different yet potent magics, meeting in combat, Boromir," Aragorn told him, and the others nodded in agreement. "Besides, I fear that Harry's magic may not be keen to perform in this forest, just as it did not perform in front of the Mines of Moria. Have you seen him use his wand at all since we have entered here? I suspect there is something of a magical nature in Fangorn, or else we are too close to Isenguard and Saruman's heinous magic is effecting his own."

"He still flies his broomstick," Gimli pointed out with all the stubbornness of the dwarves.

"Aye, that he does," Aragorn sighed. "I know not why this is so, but it could be because the enchantment was laid upon it beforehand. Although, I am not certain. Knowledge in the ways of wizards, above all wizards that hail from other worlds, is not part of my skills as a ranger."

"It does not matter," Legolas said, his head cocking to the side. "The white shadow is gone. I hear it no more, and my eyes are only filled with the sight of trees and nothing else."

"Nonetheless, watch will be maintained. I will go first this time since sleep has been driven from me. Shall we agree that the boy would be better off asleep in this case? Gimli will take his watch instead. Guard from midnight to morn, or thereabouts; shorter if I am not as weary."

"Just nudge me," Gimli told him, and plonked down again. "But right now I go to the land of small hairy women, and jewels the size of swords hilts."

Taking in his companion's soft laughter, which was just the response he'd been hoping for, Gimli snorted gruffly, threw absurdly soft blanket over himself so that it covered the top of his head, and hunkered down to sleep.

The next morning the group of five ventured deeper into Fangorn Forest. They passed hollows that were tightly enclosed about with creaking trees. They skirted over little streams and rotted logs overgrown with damp moss.

Bushes that — more often than not — displayed bent twigs and a dashing of orc blood told them that the hobbits and their pursuer had come this way. Aragorn was prone to suddenly stop the group with a back of a silent hand and crouch to the ground, examining it gently with experienced fingers. Then he'd jump up and say "This way!" in a quiet whisper that nevertheless seemed to echo inside the still forest as though he had screamed it.

Harry's broom had been doing the same thing. The light whooshing noise that she'd come to associate with her Firebolt suddenly seemed to be a lot heavier and could be heard much more clearly. She'd offered to fly up to skirt the tops of the trees but Aragorn hadn't let her, saying that it would be wise to travel as a group now that they didn't know what else was out there. He'd also mumbled something about Isenguard — which Harry knew was very close to Fangorn and was also where Saruman lived — so Harry didn't think to argue.

Eventually, they came upon a bit of Fangorn that was so enclosed, and the trees so tightly placed together, that it became somewhat difficult for Harry to manoeuvre around all the twisting, outstretched branches. She'd taken to going over or under some of them, once hitting her head on protruding knob, another time accidentally poking Legolas in the face with the tail-end of her broom. The elf had sputtered, and Harry had apologized immediately, but even now, half an hour later, she was sure she'd spotted Legolas discretely spitting a bit of broom-tail from out of his mouth.

"Hold," Aragorn said now, again lifting up a hand.
They had come to yet another stream, though this one appeared a lot bigger than the others they'd passed.

Aragorn crouched down and observed the soft muddy bank near the water and even Harry, with her unexperienced eyes, could see that someone had stepped in it.

"This is good tidings," said Aragorn, his gaze not leaving the markings on the ground. "The hobbits have drunk the water and bathed their feet. Yet the marks are two days old. And it seems that at this point Merry and Pippin left the water-side. From then it is difficult to follow their steps. They are light and the wetness on their feet has long disappeared. The dried grass has soaked it all."

"Then what shall we do now?" asked Gimli, scratching his bearded chin with the tip of his axe. "We cannot pursue them through the whole vastness of Fangorn. Even Harry could not do it, for unlike the plains of Rohan, the trees block the movements of those under their canopy. There's no way to spot the hobbits in the distance like a hawk. The trees here are so close together that not even an elf would see through if he was to peer down at them from a great height.

"But if we do not find the hobbits soon, we shall be of no use to them, except to sit down beside them and show our friendship by starving together," Gimli finished.

"If that is indeed all we can do, then we must do that," said Aragorn with a bite of impatience. "Let us go on."

They continued onward with the scenery not changing much at all, until Harry, who'd taken to hazing out, suddenly found herself in front of a steep hill of rock that looked more like a diagonal wall than an actual hill. Looking up, Harry could see that the hill extended to a height above the trees, and that by the time they had reached it, the forest had thinned out a bit. It seemed like they had finally found an open space in Fangorn.

The others had already stopped beside her.

"Let us go up and look about us!" said Legolas, scanning the surface of rock. "I should like to taste a freer air for a while."

With that said he placed one foot in a small crease in the rock, and one hand in an indent a little higher than his head, and fairly flew up the surface, rather like a monkey. In no time he was at the top and staring down at them all.

"Come!" he gestured, his long golden hair falling over his shoulders like some mystical waterfall. Then he straightened up and examined the expanse of forest in front of him.

All Harry could think was that Legolas would make a really good Quidditch player if he was a wizard.

_He'd make an even better seeker, with that eyesight of his._

The rest scrambled up the hill until even Harry was standing with her one good leg on the patch of flatness on top of the mound. She leaned on her broom for balance as she scanned the surrounding trees. Not that she found anything except more trees.

"I am almost sure that the hobbits have been up here," said Aragorn, drawing Harry's attention. He was once again inspecting the ground, smoothing over bits of dried grass with the palm of his hand. "But there are other marks here. Very strange marks . . ."

He sighed, stood up again, and looked about.
"We have journeyed the long way around," Legolas said solemnly, glancing apologetically at them, as though he thought it was his fault for having to tell them.

"What?" Harry groaned.

"Well, we could not have taken any other way," Boromir said unconcernedly, shading a hand over his brow as he glanced around at the forest. "All we could have done is follow the Ranger. And all the Ranger could have done is to follow the markings the hobbits left behind."

"We could have all come here safe together," Legolas argued, "if we had left the Great River on the second or third day and struck west. Few can foresee whither their road will lead them, till they come to its end."

"But we had planed to take the road Frodo and Sam are journeying now. We did not wish to come to Fangorn," Gimli protested with the air of one who was explaining something complicated to a small child.

"Yet here we are — and nicely caught in the net," snapped Legolas. A pained frown crossed his brow and his eyes looked curiously for a second, staring at something in the distance. Suddenly they grew wide and he pointed sharply in front. "Look!"

Harry whipped around just as Gimli said, "Look at what?"

"There in the trees!"

"Where?" Gimli growled. "I have not elf-eyes."

"Hush! Speak more softly! Look!" said Legolas again, pointing. "Down in the wood, back in the way that we have just come. It is he. Cannot you see him, passing from tree to tree?"

"Saruman," Aragorn whispered and everyone placed hands on their weapons. "Turn around and draw your weapons. Do not let him speak. He will put a spell on us."

Harry's heart thumped loudly in her ears as she mimicked everyone else's movements and drew her wand from out of his pocket.

Saruman.

What did she really know about this wizard? For that matter, what did she really know about wizard-magic in Middle Earth? According to Gimli, she shouldn't be afraid of Saruman because his magic was less powerful than Harry's own. But what did a dwarf know about magic?

The bottom dropped out of Harry's stomach as she suddenly remembered something horrible, something she had forgotten in all the excitement. She looked down at her faithful wand clutched tightly in her hand. Her knuckles appeared horribly white against the black wood. Her wand had never failed to deliver magic before he had come to Middle Earth. Did it even work?

Maybe it does? she thought hopefully. *I'm not technically in the forest anymore. I'm on top of it.*

It could be true. Her wand wasn't shaking anymore, after all.

Her spirits lifted slightly at acknowledging that fact.

There was a shuffling behind them and Harry knew that Saruman had finally come to stand at the bottom of the hill. The knowledge that he was looking up at them now caused Harry to shiver.
"We must be quick," whispered Aragorn beside him, breathing deep. "Now!"

They whirled as one.

Gimli didn't waste anytime and chucked his axe down in a perfect line straight at the white brightness that was Saruman. The wizard brought up his staff as the axe was about to imbed into his skull and BANG! It shattered in a million pieces before it even made contact.

Horrified and confused at the power that the White Wizard wielded so easily, they hesitated for a split second before twang! Legolas had released his arrow, but the same thing happened as with Gimli's axe, and the thin shaft exploded in loads of tiny wooden splinters.

"Harry!" Aragorn shouted and the girl turned and saw that his and Boromir's swords had turned molten hot — they'd been forced to drop them.

Seeing that she was the only one who still had a viable weapon, and one that was full of magic, she spun back to the bright vision below her — that appeared to be getting brighter by the second — as she yelled "STUPEFY!" in her loudest voice, putting as much power behind the spell as she could.

The next few seconds appeared as if in slow motion.

The jet of red light erupted from Harry's wand in a great, electric boom that seemed to shake the trees of the forest and the very earth on which Harry stood. It traveled down in a perfect line straight toward the incredibly bright light that emanated from the old wizard. Harry, her hopes rising along with the beat of her heart, watched as the red light made contact with the white light.

The subsequent explosion ricocheted back at both Saruman and Harry. And Harry, who had not been expecting this, had no time to move as her own spell and something else, which she suspected might be Saruman's magic, made painful contact with her chest and blasted her into the air, off the hill, and over the trees in a high arch.

Then she was falling, falling, and falling . . .

The only consolation Harry had as blackness took her, was that Saruman had been visited with the same fate.

"Do you think she's really alright? I mean, she did get hit pretty hard on the head."

"Bludgers've given Harry a harder knock then, well, whatever it was that hit her this time . . . And would you stop clutching my arm, Hermione, you're cutting off my circulation!"

"Sorry."

"Still, that's one heck of a nasty —"

"Hey look, I think she's waking up!"

"SOMEONE GET A HEALER!"

SMACK!

"Ouch! Hermione! Blimey that smarted!"

"Shut up, Ron! Can't you see your shouting's hurting her?"
A lot of red blurred in front of Harry's eyes as she forced herself to open them, painfully.

"Gimli?" she mumbled.

"What did she say?" whispered a furious voice.

"Something about a Gumble, whatever that is."

"George, go get the Gumbl — I mean healer!"

There was a scramble of footsteps and several loud thumps.

"Mmmggrph."

"What was that, Harry?"

"Move, Ron, let her breath!"

Thwack!

"Ouch! Hermione! Dammit, woman, this is abuse!"

"Now, what did you say, Harry?"

"M'hurts."

"She's hurting!" a shrill voice screeched.

A loud bang suddenly sounded and a stern voice ordered, "What are you lot doing hanging over her? She needs rest —"

"Please, Healer Puttergill, Harry's just woken up, and we were —"

"What?" There was another scramble and Harry felt something cold touch her forehead. "Merlin's beard, but does the girl have a temperature! Out everyone! Out now!"

"Really, it was Ron's fault, Healer Puttergill —"

"What? No, it wa —"

" — only five more minutes —"

" — we want to see how she is —"

Another bang as the door opened yet again.

"Is it true, Healer Puttergill? Has Harry woken up?"

"Yes, she has, thanks to this brood!"

"Oh, my word!"

"Mrs Weasley, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave and gather the youngsters up as you go, if you will. Harry will not be getting anymore visitors for a while."

"Oh, o-of course. Come along Fred, George, and the rest of you!"
"Aww, Mum —!"

"You heard Healer Puttergill. Now move!"

As the bang sounded for what seemed the millionth time, Harry sank back into blissful oblivion.
Move Along

In the confusion of the collided spells simultaneously throwing their recipients backwards, Gimli found himself leaping — something that dwarves did not do if they could help it — from the high mound of rock along with the others as it shook and threatened to fall in on itself.

He fell on his buttocks — hard. He rolled over, and saw the elf land next to him on his two graceful legs, the likes of which Gimli had come to seriously abhor throughout the length of their trek. Walking on snow; running swift-footed on a rope that hung tautly over swirling waters; climbing stone like an unnatural beast. In this last attempt to sabotage dwarvish pride, the elf had leapt from the tower to look down on Gimli's sprawled form.

But never had the dwarf been so glad that Legolas was an elf. For Legolas now took up Gimli's arm and, displaying all the strength and skill and speed that his elvish heritage had no doubt bequeathed him, he hastened Gimli forward — lifting him bodily from the ground — before diving behind a large buttressed tree where Aragorn and Boromir had already taken shelter.

Behind him, Gimli could hear the mound of rock crumble at last. Feel the air and shards of stone strike the tree of which they all hid behind.

At last there was naught but silence in Fangorn, as there was always tend to be.

Aragorn sighed and straightened up from his spot against the tree. "We must find Harry and Saruman. Wither they went I know not, but I thought I saw Harry go yonder." He stepped from behind the tree and pointed.

They followed his actions and saw that the direction in which Aragorn was pointing now lay behind the depressed, crumbled mound.

"Gimli and I will go and seek Harry," said Legolas, looking into Aragorn's eyes. "I will pray to Elbereth that he be unharmed."

Aragorn nodded. "Boromir and I will find Saruman. If his wizard rod is still within in his grasp, the most we can hope is that he be wandering the land of dreams, whether they come to him or not."

"Aye," Boromir agreed. "Would that the power both wizards displayed is never again seen with mine waking eyes, and I shall be happy. But I know before this war is over I shall see more and not enough of it than I desire of it."

Aragorn placed a hand on Boromir's shoulder in comfort, nodded at Gimli and Legolas, and then the two men walked back whence they had all come from behind the tree, in search of Saruman.

"It is only you and me, my dwarvish friend," Legolas smiled, looking down at Gimli.

"Aye," Gimli agreed. Though something was put upon him. He had a vague sense of discontent and he liked it not. But the weather was pleasant and the task that loomed ahead of them encompassed their thoughts and Gimli's feeling of discontentment soon faded from his mind.

They dithered around aimlessly for a few yards that stretched from the crumbled mound. Legolas peered into the forest with his elf-eyes in hopes to spot a glimpse of a pale arm or a pointed wizard's hat, but none could he see.

"We will have to go deeper. The bushes and branches bar my sight. I cannot spot even a small bristle
from his broom-end."

Gimli was not certain, but he thought Legolas spat something out of his mouth in that moment.

The dwarf grunted. "First we go to find the hobbits, and now we go to find the wizard. Before the end of this journey is come, we will go to find ourselves!"

Legolas laughed.

They walked into the fleshier parts of Fangorn, and nothing could they see but more Fangorn. Gimli had the urge to throw his axe in frustration. Already it had been too long since Harry had been lost to them, and the thought that he — just a boy — might be lying injured and alone on the cold forest floor with who knows what manner creatures about did not comfort them.

"How long have we been searching?" Gimli finally growled to Legolas.

"The better part of an hour," Legolas replied grimly.

"I do not believe that," was all Gimli said.

The elf smiled. "Indeed, it does not seem that way. But..." Legolas halted in mid-speak. He tilted his head on its side so that his fair hair shone brightly in the small patch of afternoon sun that seeped through the canopy. "Do you hear that? It sounds very like —"

"...many times must I tell you?" a grumpy voice was grumbling. A very familiar voice. "I am fine, Boromir. The spell did naught but take breath from me. And you need not look as though I am the only one to have arisen from the dead. Recall if you will, Glorfindel?"

Seconds later a haggard looking figure in white — attached on either side of him, an astonished Boromir and Aragorn — stumbled from around a moulded tree to stand in front of Gimli and Legolas.


"How can this be?" Gimli asked, certain his eyes were playing devil's tricks.

"As I have hastily explained to Aragorn and Boromir already, and in much fractured speech, I died and I was brought back until my task is done. I am now Gandalf the White. Now get up." He sounded very bothered. "We have another wizard to find. If I am not mistaken, the combined spells have done more damage to him than they did me as he was thrown from the mound and across a large amount of trees, whereas I was already on the ground and have taken not as many bruises." He shuffled along in front of them.

"Ai!" Legolas cried out suddenly, causing the rest to stop and look at him. "He has a broken ankle!"

"All the more reason for us to hurry and find him," Gandalf said, hastening even more quickly along.

"We have tried," Gimli said. "We have not found a speck of anything. It is like he has vanished. Or else he has flown."

Gandalf wasn't listening. "I sense something," he mumbled, looking this way and that. "Some strange residue. It is magical in nature. It feels very like Harry." He froze suddenly and lifted his staff. "Hmm... I think... Yes, it's this way."

"I hope you are not going to say that you followed your nose, Gandalf. For I will not believe that,"
said Gimli, clutching his axe tightly.

Gandalf sighed exasperatedly. "You are surely worse than Peregrine Took, son of Gloin, when you want to be."

"And proud of it!" Gimli spat back. "Honourable folk are hobbits. They run not from danger but charge into its fray. I have often thought that hobbits could be descendent from dwarves."

"Indeed," Gandalf said, but he did not appear to be listening.

Gimli grumbled to himself.

"Ahh!" Gandalf exclaimed after they had all walked a little more. "Look here." He reached up to a branch that hung over his head and pulled something from it.

"It is his cloak!" Boromir said, snatching it from Gandalf's grasp. The wizard expelled an irritated breath. "Alas that the wizard is not in it," Boromir continued, looking solemn. Legolas lay a hand on his shoulder.

Gandalf moved forward, his face curious. He bent to the ground and then straightened. When he turned they saw a black pointed hat, now crooked, held in his hands.

"What means this?" Aragorn said.

Gandalf shook his head looking perplexed. "I know not. Unless Harry has decided to frolic nude in this accursed forest, I cannot hope to know what these empty clothes mean."

"And look there!" Legolas exclaimed, pointing above them. On the topmost branches of the canopy, between sparkling beams of light, there hung Harry's robes; looking travel-stained, but none the worse for wear.

"Legolas, if you will?" Gandalf said.

The elf leaped onto the lowest branch of the nearest tree — which was easily six times Gimli's length when measured from the ground — then climbed the rest of the tree in all his effortless grace. When he reached the top, he danced along the branches from tree to tree until he finally came upon the black robes. He unhooked them and let them float down. Gandalf caught them with the end of his staff.

In the middle of untangling the robes from his staff Gandalf paused. "What's this?" He reached a hand into the robe and pulled out —

"That is his crate!" Boromir said before anyone could comment.

"This is most odd," Gandalf mumbled before placing the crate back into the robes. "These are his things but there is no Harry around to claim them."

In the course of the next few minutes they found yet more things. Shoes (wherein Gimli, with his dwarvish curiosity of forging things, spent a while examining the metal buckles between the laces and wondering how such a craft was achieved); very short stockings of a most unusual shade and picturing (they all drew back in shock when the ducklings on the stockings started quacking); his "glasses" as Harry was wont to call them (nothing unusual happened there); and they also found a pair of somethings that Gandalf mistook for hats lurking in between the leaves. They was green, as were the leaves, so they had been hard to see at first, but upon feeling them and seeing the way they shone in the sunlight they could not see how Gandalf could have mistaken them for hats.
In the end, it was Legolas who worked out that they were some obscure form of undergarment. The finely stitched cloth with leg holes they took for a sort of loin-cloth, but the other thing was beyond them.

"Very unusual indeed," Legolas added, holding the one that baffled them up to the light. The strange garment appeared almost as a harness, though what the two bowl-like cushions were for, they could not guess.

Gimli took the thing from Legolas' hand and held it up to the elf's body. Shaking his head, he then slipped his legs through the straps and hooked it around his waist like a belt. It stretched mightily to fit his girth. "A contraption to carry hidden weapons perhaps?"

In the end, they decided odd clothing were the least of their troubles, so they put it out of their minds.

"I have no doubt there are more items of Harry's tossed about that we have overlooked," Gandalf commented once they had placed all of Harry's belongings together, "but we cannot search for them now. Already we are running late and must journey swiftly across the Entwash and to the Golden Hall of Meduseld — or as swiftly as our steeds dare take us. And yes, Boromir, that means we must abandon our search for Harry."

There was uproar.

"Be calm! Have you all forgotten that the boy is a wizard? If he is, as I assume, unconscious, we cannot wait until he awakens and comes looking for us. He has a flying broomstick, and no doubt other wizardly methods of finding his way." Gandalf paused to draw a breath. "We will leave his belongings here. He will want to clothe himself when he awakens. Let us be off."

Not wanting to anger an already irate wizard, and finding the situation hopeless, they set off to venture out of the depths of Fangorn, hoping, in their hearts, that the lost one in their company would soon come forth.

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When Harry's eyes opened, she was nearly blinded by the brightness of the room she was in. Quickly shutting her eyes against the searing light, she cracked an eye to ease herself into the lighting. Blinking a bit she took stock of what she saw.

White sheets, white walls, white furniture and pastel still-life portraits. As if blinding her into healing faster just to escape, the room was offensively bright except for a small patch of shadow in the corner where a chair sat. From her position on the bed, Harry could see that it was not vacant. The edge of a violet silken robe hung over black, polished, gold-buckled boots, and Harry knew who the person was without having to ask.

"I'm back, aren't I?"

It wasn't really so much as a question than an observation. Harry knew that she was back. Such a room was far too modern for ye olde Middle Earth. A hazy memory of the voices she heard from the last time she had woken passed through her mind. Ron and Hermione, Fred and George, Ginny and Mrs Weasely — and someone called Healer Puttergill.

She was in St Mungos.

Once more Harry perused the room. It looked bare of any essentials, except for the aforementioned still-lives and a vase filled with flowers that stood on the table by her bed. The room also held a distinctly hospitalised smell that reminded Harry of the infirmary at Hogwarts. It was not a smell that
she had come to associate with a muggle hospital — the sterile scent of chemicals — but a smell that could be found only in a wizarding hospital. There was simply no smell at all in a wizarding hospital. Magic, she supposed, took care of any curious potion scents that would otherwise have filtered and clogged the lungs of sensitive patients.

Dumbledore answered, "Yes. Though I sense that this is somehow not a good thing."

He leaned forward now so that the gold twinkle from the edge of his half-moon glasses caught the light first, then the rest of his body followed. He looked so much like Gandalf in that instance, with his thinly veiled concern, that Harry had to repress a blur of tears that threatened to fall.

Harry shook her head. "Not really," was all she said. Her voice trembled slightly, and Dumbledore noticed.

"You must tell me everything, Harry, and perhaps I can help you."

"You can't help me, Professor — unless you somehow know how to send me back."

Harry did not know when she had decided that she didn't want to leave Middle Earth, but here she was, wishing she had never left. It seemed to her that she had not decided at all, but that it had already been decided for her before she had even awakened.

A knot of something hot churned through her stomach as she realised that she already missed Middle Earth so much because the pressures of this reality were once more at the forefront. She hadn't had to be Harry Potter there. She hadn't had to worry about Voldemort, or the prophecy, or . . . or Sirius. There was no need to worry about anything except the next day's adventure, or when to have a bath. There was no Ministry or Daily Prophet in Middle Earth either. Despite all the responsibilities Harry had here, back in plain Earth, she still desperately wished to go to that curious dimension that seemed to have no end in its surprises.

With the Fellowship, she had not been the main character in the story of the Ring of Power and the journey to destroy it. The responsibility had not been hers. She had not been expected to lead the people and defeat the Great Evil. Now that she was back in her original dimension, she had to take center stage again.

Dumbledore spoke now, looking curious, "You wish to go back? Haven't you completed the mission you were supposed to? I don't understand. You could not have come back otherwise."

Harry was silent. She knew Dumbledore was waiting for an explanation, and that she had to provide one. It was just hurting excruciatingly since she had no idea how to go back. Could she go back? She didn't even want to linger on the thought if she truly couldn't. But it would help in the long run, and she had to tell Dumbledore as he was the only living soul who knew that Harry had gone in the first place.

"It's probably best that I tell you everything, Professor . . . from the beginning I mean," she said.

"That would be best," Dumbledore agreed, and his eyes were sympathetic and understanding.

So Harry did.

She told Dumbledore of arriving in an entirely magical world called Middle-Earth, of finding the Fellowship and discovering the variety of races. Of feeling so overwhelmed at first and so stupidly embarrassed at every turn. Of feeling like she would be abandoned if they ever had any cause to fear her magic.
The holly trees.

The giant squid.

Explaining how it felt to lose Gandalf to that huge demon snake thing – finally realising what that deep resounding "NOOOO!" had been when the Balrog had fallen.

Meeting the elves and Galadriel; discovering her mission through the mirror, and finally the acceptance of her own magic within Middle Earth.

Saving Boromir from the orcs — thus fulfilling her mission — and breaking her ankle along the way.

Having to fly everywhere to get anywhere.

Tracking Merry and Pippin.

Fangorn. Saruman. The backlash of the two spells. And finally, waking up in St Mungos and realising . . .

"That is quite a story, Harry," said Dumbledore in the end. At some point during the telling, he had stood up to pace the length of Harry's bed, pausing to stare when a death — or an almost death — or a kidnapping occurred. Now he sat back in his chair with a loud sigh. "Quite a story. . ." he repeated, staring at the floor.

When Dumbledore next lifted his head, Harry was shocked to see a tear make its lonely way down a wrinkled cheek.

"Professor — " Harry began in concern, but Dumbledore held up a hand.

"I am so very sorry that you had to go through all of that, my dear girl. You have had enough pain and hardship in your life without adding to it, and that this phenomenon should happen, should take you right after you had lost Sirius . . . forgive me. I feel responsible."

"No, Professor," Harry protested, stunned at the distress her normally unruffled headmaster was displaying. "It's not like you asked it to choose me."

"No," Dumbledore shook his head sadly, "I did something much worse."

"What?" Harry asked, not understanding his guilt.

"I left you alone," he explained, sounding so old and tired. "I left a young girl of fifteen to find her own way in a completely alien dimension with only an old hat whose magic would not last more than a day to keep her company. Who does that, my dear?"

Harry did not answer the weary question. She was feeling more than a little alarmed at the despondency she could almost taste in the air between them.

"I stand in loco parentis while you live at Hogwarts, yet we both know our relationship is more than that of student and teacher," Dumbledore continued. "It remained unspoken between us until now. Sending you, someone I care very much for, letting you travel to this Middle Earth by yourself — it was not a wise action on my part. Even though I told myself at the time that I had done and provided all I could have for you in this thing's pursuit of you."

"Exactly!" Harry exclaimed. She had been listening diligently to the headmaster, feeling proudful in all the right places and annoyed in others. "You did do all you could. Professor." She attempted to
bolster his mood by adding, "You even brought the Sorting Hat to me! Crossing time and space, and — and different worlds! And you had no choice but to leave me alone. You told me yourself that if anyone tried to rescue me, they'd die. Besides, you didn't really leave me alone. Hedwig came —"

Harry froze abruptly. "Hedwig . . . Professor?"

Dumbledore's head bowed. "I am truly sorry, Harry, but Hedwig did not come back with you."

The lump in Harry's throat became ever more painful. "You know, I didn't think she would," she admitted. She cleared her throat to rid it of the lump. "How exactly did I get here?"

Dumbledore did not waste time explaining. "I suspect that this Saruman person's spell, combined with your own, had absolutely no bearing on your returning home, other than that it knocked you unconscious and gave you quite a nasty bump on the head. In your comatose state you must have dreamed of Hogwarts, and thus you came to be there."

"I landed on Hogwarts grounds?"

"Not only that, but you landed in the very spot from where you left . . . and at the exact same time."

Harry's eyes snapped up. She had noticed the pause that Dumbledore had taken before concluding his sentence. "What do you mean, sir?"

"I mean that it was as if you had not left at all. You simply blinked out of this world in one second, and blinked back into it in the next — minus your clothes and glasses, sporting what appears to be a spontaneous growth of hair and a very becoming tan. Not to mention an extra bump on the head, a broken ankle, and a few heavily bruised ribs. You will find everything is quite well healed now."

When Harry realised her mouth was open, she closed it again with a dull thud. "You mean no time passed at all? I'm still fifteen?" A touch of hysteria entered her tone. "I-I didn't arrive with anything on?"

Oh, Merlin, how many people had seen her naked?

Did that mean that to anyone else, she had had suddenly aged like three months in a second?

Why had she come back without any clothes or her glasses?

"Because you dreamed yourself here," Dumbledore answered, obviously interpreting the expression on Harry's face. "The manifestation of your physical self within your mind offered nothing other than what you were naturally born with — your own self, and nothing else. Not even your wand or your belongings came with you."

"B-but . . . why is it — I mean, when I traveled to Middle Earth, that didn't happen the first time. I had all my stuff, and my clothes."

"Ah," Dumbledore leaned forward in his chair. "That happened because you were already chosen to begin with. Do you understand, my dear You were not supposed to come back, just as anyone who is chosen by this phenomenon is not supposed to come back. Merlin did not come back when he was chosen. I suspect he either died, or hadn't completed his mission."

"So it just dumps you in any world where someone needs saving and doesn't bother taking you back out again?" The anger in Harry's voice was very apparent. Stupid, selfish universe!

Dumbledore nodded, tiredly. "You must understand, while you might believe you were needed to play a seemingly insignificant role in the course of major events, you were needed all the same to do
it because out of all worlds, only you could have saved this Boromir from certain death. And I do not just mean only you were powerful enough to. Circumstances, and the way we cope with them, play a part also."

Dumbledore paused. "Understand that the fact that you were able to leave means that the Powers that Be no longer require you to participate more than you already have. Your mission has been fulfilled, though you had been expected to stay. You have your own world now, where you are needed, and in a position that plays a much, much, larger part, and we both know what that is.

"But," Dumbledore continued before Harry could think to say anything, "I once told you it is our choices that shape who we are, and what sort people we will become. I believe that the fate of our world, Voldemort's fate, can wait while until you choose to decide what time is best to leave your friends in Middle Earth."

Harry could hardly dare to believe it. "Are you saying I can go back? That it's actually possible?"

Dumbledore beamed. "As long as an item of yours, something that represents you utterly — such as your wand — is left in Middle Earth you can journey back and forth between the worlds at any time you choose. You need not worry about the difficulties of journeying back to Earth because you were born here and your very presence is set into the fabric of this world, into the very particles and elements that make up all living things. Besides, it is not as if any time would pass here while you're gone." Dumbledore's eyes twinkled as he said: "Only don't stay so long that you become an old woman. You still have your NEWT years to finish, my dear."

Harry grinned along with Dumbledore until she realised something. "Professor, does that mean my wand, and Hedwig, and my belongings, will always be stuck there?"

The light in Dumbledore's eyes dimmed slightly. "Well —" he began.

"But then, how . . .?" Harry interrupted.

"While you were sleeping I approached Mr Ollivander with a tail feather from Fawkes — his first this season as a matter of fact. I asked him to reproduce the exact same wand. It has never been done before, as Ollivander, and all wand-makers for that matter, take pride in all their creations being entirely unique, but he has agreed to pursue my request."

"So I'm going to have two wands? One in Middle Earth and one here?"

"Only until you learn to keep any and all external objects you desire to have when you travel, by utilising your subconscious mind." Harry's face must have shown incomprehension because Dumbledore explained: "In other words, you must teach yourself how to keep the clothes on your back and your wand in your pocket —"

"But that means my stuff . . . and Hedwig! I can get them back!"

"Exactly, if you had —"

"Thank you, Professor!" Impulsively, Harry leaned forward and embraced her headmaster, but only for the tiniest of a second, before releasing him. "Sorry, sir." Her cheeks were red from embarrassment, but she couldn't stop the relieved grin from burgeoning on her face.

Dumbledore only laughed delightedly. "It's quite alright, Harry. Youth is at times unpredictable and spontaneous. And I don't know if you have realised this, but when you learn to travel between the worlds — properly I mean — you can also take someone with you. I have no doubt your friends will support you. Miss Granger especially will not give up an opportunity to learn about various different
"However," Dumbledore added, his eyes flicking over Harry's own, "You will not be journeying there now. You will take time to recover from your ordeal, and then, when you feel the time is right, we will be going to Middle Earth."

"Okay," Harry nodded. "Hang on . . ." Her eyes moved sharply over Dumbledore's face. "'We'?"

"Did I not say I should never have let you journey there by yourself, even if I could not stop the sequence of events from taking place?" Dumbledore replied. "Now that you can journey there anytime you choose, I can follow you . . . and I need not worry about dying in a vortex or —"

"Lightening bolt," Harry supplied.

"Exactly."

"But, Professor," Harry said. "How can you travel to Middle Earth if you don't have any bit of yourself there to begin with?"

"Very good, Harry." Dumbledore chuckled, weaving his fingers together as they rested on his lap. "Well you see I don't, but Fawkes does. If you remember, I once told you that your wand contains a feather from Fawkes. He and I also share a connection. Despite what some might think, I am more Fawkes' pet than he mine. He is my protector, you can say. He will carry me along."

Dumbledore chortled at Harry's bewildered expression. "Phoenixes are very intelligent, very remarkable, and very inconceivable birds. They have secrets that the human mind cannot hope to grasp, and vice versa. They can apparate, as you know. In this instance Fawkes will apparate to Middle Earth, following his own essence through your wand . . . And he will be taking me along."

"Right," Harry agreed, a bit distracted by the mechanics of it all.

"However, I believe it is prudent to warn you —" Harry's head snapped up from the bedcovers she had been staring at "— that we will be arriving in Middle Earth sans clothes, for lack of a better term. No matter how remarkable Phoenix's are they are still only birds. Fawkes will not be able to envisage us with our clothes on; he has not the power for that."

"But I do?" Harry asked, feeling bewildered. Then she thought of something. "Hang on . . . that means you won't have your wand with you!"

"No," Dumbledore said jovially, unbothered.

Harry stared. "Er . . . isn't that a bad thing?"

"I can do a bit of wandless magic, as you know."

"But that won't help!" Harry burst out, sitting up in the bed. "There are all sorts of nasty things there. Like orcs and trolls . . . and demon Balrogs—"

"Calm down, child." Dumbledore held up his hands. "If we venture into any dire circumstances I can always apparate. You don't need a wand for that. Or, I can simply use your wand. Similarly, I can use your wand to conjure some robes for us when we arrive."

"Oh." Harry leaned back on her pillows. Dumbledore had made it sound all so simple, as though travelling between worlds was as easy as getting up in the morning. "Sir, can I ask you a question?"
"You just did, but I will wait expectantly for another," he answered, folding his fingers together.

"Well, I just want to know . . . how did you know all that? I mean about using my wand's essence to travel back to Middle Earth?"

"Simply," Dumbledore answered, unthreading his fingers and leaning forward once more, "because every single person or creature — be they magical or muggle; every single plant or mountain or element; every single house or television, or any miniscule thing that exists, is part of an integrated series of roots, if you will, that connect together everything on this planet, this galaxy, and this universe. We are all part of a collective root system made up of the same material — stars; or rather star dust. A result, I am told, that stemmed from the supernova explosion that triggered the Big Bang and created the known universe. I'm sure you know all about that from muggle school?"

Harry nodded, astonished by what she was hearing.

"Very good," said Dumbledore, pausing to collect his thoughts. "Now, considering that you are part of this root system, and that you are connected to everything, it is simple logic to work out that you can use the connection you have to this earth, this galaxy, and this universe, to find your way back into its sphere. Do you understand?"

"I think so," Harry said, biting her lip. "And does that work both ways? Is that why I'll be able to travel back to Middle Earth? Or is it only because my essence is in my wand?"

"Exactly! Your wand carries your essence, and even more important, it carries your magical essence which gives it a boost, if you like. Your wand is still connected to this universe and because of that you — and I — can travel to Middle Earth."

"Is that how you were able to get the Sorting Hat to me? By using the connection it has to every Hogwarts student that it reads?"

Dumbledore looked pleased by her conclusion. "Yes, I did."

"And it didn't have a lot of magic to keep itself there because it doesn't really have a magical essence, or a lot of any essence for that matter. Even after everything it's still only a hat?" Harry guessed.

Dumbledore beamed. "Excellent deduction."

"Well, I wish I'd known about this magical essence thing while I was still in Middle Earth, then I wouldn't have had to worry about how I was going to get back home without leaving my stuff," Harry said, exasperated.

"Yes, well, the Sorting Hat would have told you, but you did not put it on until very late . . ."

Harry grinned sheepishly as Dumbledore gave her a raised-eyebrow look.

". . . at first we thought it was Death Eaters or something because Lupin told us you were acting really weird, like you were bewitched—"

"But then Dumbledore told us a falling tree branch hit you in the storm. Oh, Harry, it was frightening when we heard! And you had a concussion! I'm surprised Madam Pomfrey didn't notice it actually. She's usually a lot more diligent with her work."

Ron and Hermione looked at her with gentle and relieved gazes as she lay before them in the Weasley's lounge, covered — at Mrs Weasley's instance — with a warm blanket that reached up to
"Well, I'm better now," Harry told them. "Although I could do with a bit more of that fudge."

Ron jumped up to get it at once. Harry knew she was being terribly advantage-taking, but it had been so long since she had tasted anything but lembas bread and water — unless she counted the rabbit and those maggot-berries, which she didn’t — and Mrs Weasley's cooking was always so nice. It made her think of lovely warm kitchens and homey smells. . .

Besides, Hermione and Ron wouldn't let her get up to fetch it for herself, so it was only right that they do it for her. Harry had tried explaining that she was perfectly fine, but because Dumbledore had told Mrs Weasley — who had told her whole family — that Harry was still a bit woozy mentally — meaning she was still getting over the ordeal of transferring world and, on top of that, temporarily losing Hedwig— so they had decided to behave as if she still hadn't recovered.

They had all been coddling her since they had bundled her from the hospital that afternoon. It wouldn't have been enough to drive her mad if she hadn't been reveling in it. While the Fellowship was nice and the guys eventually treated her kindly, they weren't the cuddly type. Harry almost laughed out loud at the thought of Gimli in a frilly apron, force feeding her pie while Boromir tried to shove her into a knitted sweater.

Mrs Weasley had taken to mothering her even more than usual, always hovering somewhere in the background. Harry was glad that out of all the other Weasleys, only Ron had been caught up in the frenzy of treating her like an invalid. With Hermione fussing enough for two other people, if even Ginny started worrying, Harry would have imploded.

"Here you go, mate," Ron said, plonking down in the armchair next to Harry with a plate full of treacle fudge in hand. "Fleur's bringing some milk," he added, making Hermione scowl in disapproval. "Oh look, here we are."

The quarter-Veela sauntered into the living room with a pitcher in one hand and a topped glass of milk in the other. She set them down on the little table next to Harry's sofa before straightening up and sighing shortly. Her long, silvery-blonde hair was in a plait today and it swung forward to fall into Harry's lap as she gave the younger girl two small pecks on either cheek.

Something that prevented Harry from feeling off from being back home was Fleur. It had been a pleasant surprise to discover that the other girl was currently living at the Weasley's for the summer. She looked so much like an elf — even appearing to emanate a faint, silvery glow — that Harry's 'Middle Earth sickness' faded in her presence. And the fact that she was Bill's fiancée meant that she would always be around.

"Bonjour, 'Arry," she greeted, stopping briefly to lay a cool hand over Harry's forehead. She tsked. "Much too warm."

"That's because she's covered up in a thick woolly blanket during summer!" Ginny had walked into the room and now stood beside Hermione. Both of them wore unhappy looks at Fleur's presence. Harry could tell by the way the irritation didn't burn as hotly as a freshly formed resentment that this had been a long-standing conflict. Fleur had likely been here since the very beginning of summer.

"And I was just going to say that Harry really shouldn't be eating fudge for breakfast either," said Hermione, backing up Ginny. "It's much too unhealthy, especially as she's just come out of a coma."

Fleur waved a delicately boned hand. "Pish," she said, sounding remarkably English.
"Yeah, Hermione,'pish,'" Ron sniggered. Harry swallowed a snort.

Hermione pursed her lips. Ginny crossed her arms. Fleur flipped her hair, cool as a cucumber. Turn up the tension any higher and they'd need to bring out a mud-wrestling pit for the three to duke it out.

Harry drank her milk and didn't comment. She could sort of understand where Hermione was coming from since Ron had proved to be shallow when it came to attraction, but Harry was sure what Ginny's problem was. Was she upset about not being the prettiest girl in the house anymore?

"Breakfast, everyone!" Mrs Weasley called from the kitchen. "And don't you even think about getting up from that couch, young lady!" she added as Harry threw a leg to the floor. "Ron will be getting your breakfast for you. Won't you, dear?"

"Yes Mum," Ron droned, but he threw Harry a wink.

"But Mum," Ginny added, walking towards the kitchen, "you don't actually expect Harry to eat by herself do you?"

"Well —"

"She'll be all lonely." Here Harry suppressed a disbelieving glance at Ginny. "Either we eat with her — meaning we'll have the bother of moving all the plates and cutlery and whatnot from the kitchen to the lounge — or she eats with us."

Harry had to commend Ginny's ability to deal with Mrs Weasley. Out of all of the Weasley children, Ginny was the only one who could talk circles around her mother, or lie with a perfectly straight face. Fred and George came in a close second.

"Alright, alright," Mrs Weasley gave in. "Harry can eat at the table."

Harry shot Ginny a reluctantly grateful look and jumped to her feet.

They all moved to the kitchen. Bill was already there, looking, as always, very cool and handsome with his dragon-hide clothing and long hair. Fleur immediately made a beeline for the seat next to him and they went about feeding each other for the rest of the meal. Harry saw Mrs Weasley, and especially Hermione and Ginny, make faces at this. Though Mrs Weasley was the only one being politely discreet.

"More, dear?" Mrs Weasley asked, thrusting the pan quarter-filled with egg and bacon under Harry's nose.

"No, thank you," Harry declined, feeling overstuffed.

"Are you sure, dear? You're looking far too thin!" Mrs Weasley leaned over and plumped the pillow behind Harry's back which she had, against protests, placed there earlier.

"Actually, Mum, I think she looks right good," Ron commented, peering speculatively at Harry. Hermione looked conflicted. "What have those Dursley's been making you do? Work the lawn all day, every day?"

"Something like that," Harry answered, covering the lie with a gulp of milk.

"Well I certainly don't approve of that!" Mrs Weasley said. "Did they refuse to let you have scissors to cut your hair as well? I don't believe I've ever seen your hair so long before. I can't imagine how it could have grown so much in such a short time!"
Harry floundered a bit. "Ah, well . . . you know, I've been thinking that it wouldn't be so everywhere if it was weighed down with more length. Easier to handle when I can actually get a grip on it."

"I like it," Bill said, grinning. "It looks sort of like Sirius' but you know, in a girlish way."

No one said anything to that. Mrs Weasley went pink and began gathering up the dishes with her wand. Harry expected to feel upset, or at the very least guiltily at the first mention of Sirius, but to her surprise, she felt something wonderful blossom in her chest. She suspected strongly that it might be pride. She grinned at Bill in gratitude.

She later wondered if it was normal for a girl to be happy about being called similar in looks to a man.

After breakfast was over, Harry was once more settled on her sofa — this time without the dreadfully warm blanket — with Hermione and Ron taking up the seats nearest her. Ginny had left to help Mrs Weasley with something upstairs, and Fleur and Bill were cuddling up in the backyard with the gnomes.

Although it did not seem dreadfully horrific to her any longer as it had been when Harry had first heard it so many months ago in Dumbledore's office, she still made the decision to tell Ron and Hermione of the prophecy and the part she was supposed to play in it. She would also tell them of her time spent in Middle Earth. Harry was positive they wouldn't believe her at first, but she knew Hermione — who was a stickler for listening to authority — would change her tune after Harry explained to her Dumbledore's involvement. And if Hermione believed her, than so would Ron.

"So what's all this about?" Hermione said in her usual brisk tone. "You wanted it to be just the three of us — and let me tell you now, Ginny is not happy being excluded like this."

"I realise that," Harry said calmly, "but the less people who know, the better."

"Does this have anything to do with those extra lessons Dumbledore's promised you this year?" Ron asked, looking like he was trying not to seem very eager.

"Partly," Harry said, amused.

Before he had departed from the hospital, Dumbledore had told Harry that he would be giving her private lessons in his office during the school year, but only after Harry had finished her business in Middle Earth. Harry wasn't completely sure why it was so important for her to be done with Middle Earth first since it didn't effect what happened here in regular Earth — or Upper Earth as she had been calling it in her head — in any way, but she had acquiesced. Whatever the reason, she still got more practical experience in combat without technically using up any time.

"Well," Ron urged, "Go on then!"

"It's about the prophecy . . ." Ron and Hermione leaned forward, their faces a curious mix of excitement and apprehension. Harry took a deep breath. "It looks like I have to be the one to finish him off; Voldemort, I mean. I don't know the exact mechanics of it but The Dark Tosser made it so I'm the only one who can actually do it."

The three gazed solemnly at each other.

"Well," Hermione said finally, looking unusually resigned, "that's that, isn't it?"
"But that's means the Prophet's got it right," was all Ron said when Harry stared at him, but he looked vaguely confused, as though he thought the Daily Prophet couldn't get anything right when it mattered.

"I don't know about the Prophet," Harry told them. "I haven't really been paying that much attention to it." Which was perfectly true.

"What have you been doing holed up at your relatives house then?" Ron asked in puzzlement. "I thought the Order told them to back off? Don't you have any time for yourself?"

"It's not that," Harry said, avoiding his eyes. The moment of truth had come at last. "They left me completely alone this time around so I had plenty of time to keep up. Just didn't care much, you know? Been wrecked over Sirius."

"Oh, Harry," Hermione whispered, reaching out to hold the shorter girl's hand.

Harry accepted the hand but also shook her head. "I'm better now, but that's because I was caught up in something else. I wasn't really at the Dursley's much this summer."

"What?" Ron and Hermione exchanged looks. "Where were you then?"

Harry combed through her fringe with her fingers bashfully. "Would you believe me if I said another dimension?"
The wind was fierce that day as the three travelers plodded, scraped, and otherwise slunk steadfastly onward. Fierce enough to discourage the hearts of two of the travelers who — as they were only hobbits — would never fully be used to such ferocious and constantly changing weather. Their spirits were also dimmed for some unforeseen happenstance had managed to invite itself into their lives the previous day, and what was once four had dwindled down to three . . . if one was to count Gollum, which the hobbits didn't. So really, it was only a meager two that now made up the company.

"What could have happened, Mr Frodo," Sam mumbled to his master as the unlikely trio eased their weary feet to a halt in front of the Dead Marshes. The endless expanse of rotted peat, foul water, and grey mist stretched before them like the plains of purgatory. Completing the picture were ominous black mountains pierced the horizon. Their hearts, amazingly, sank even lower.

It was Gollum who answered in his usual singsongery. "Flown away, she has. Flown away to her Master and deserted the hobbitses. Birds like she are tricksy —"

"I don't believe th'!" Sam snarled, leaning menacingly forward. " Harry told her to stay put. She would never think about desertn' us!"

But Gollum only hissed and slithered like a serpent forward into the mist. The hobbits did not follow him, knowing that the creature was likely scouting the area before he would signal to them to follow.

"Perhaps she was hungry?" Frodo offered, his worn face saddening at the thought. "We could have fed her better, or given her more water. Perhaps that was why she left."

"But she feeds 'erself," Sam said in a tone meant to placate, but all it did was cause Frodo to feel even more horribly.

"Yes, Sam, but the rodents here are scarce. Oft times Hedwig would come back with nothing at all, if you remember."

"I'm not surprised. There's nothin' here in this dead land but more . . . dead. I'd like the sun to be shinin' at least. But Mr Frodo," Sam turned to the hobbit by his side and regarded him with soulful eyes," Hedwig, no matter how hungry, would never abandon us because of th'! You don't need to go blamin' yourself. You have enough things to be thinkin' about now." He looked pointedly at Frodo's chest.

Frodo stiffened and clutched at his chest in response, an action that did not escape Sam's notice. But then the little hobbit seemed to ease. "You're right, Sam. You're right. And Hedwig will be back . . . later if not soon. But I cannot help thinking that perhaps Gollum may have had a point, at least for one thing. I believe something has happened to Harry. Only that would cause Hedwig to leave us. Did you notice how oddly she acted before disappearing?"

"Aye, she flew in circles up high near the clouds, as if . . . as if she were confused by somethin'."

"Yes, I noticed it also."

"But what could it be?" Sam wondered aloud.

Neither hobbit had an answer. Unfounded though their thoughts were, they could not help but feel that only some large misfortune could have taken Hedwig away . . . and what that then led their
thoughts to . . . well, it was rather some time before they had calmed down at all.

A figure, bent and slippery, came at them through the mist. Gollum, his eyes alight with excitement, bounded forward, skidding to a stop at Frodo's feet. "Come, come, come," he sang in his raspy voice. "We's found the way! We thought we might have forgotten it at first, but the smell lingers, yes, yes, it does!"

Sam could not help but wonder if the smell Gollum was referring to was a remainder of his own stench after all this time. "Wonderful," the hobbit grouched. "More foul smells. If my nose don't fall off by the time we reach Mordor I'll seize my sword and do it m'self."

Frodo smiled for the first time in days. "Whatever will I do without you, Sam?"

"Grow bored, I expect," Sam said, but he wished he had a bit of grass to chew on. Or a weed. It had been so long since he'd tasted Longbottom leaf on his tongue. Or the Old Toby. Now there was a plant that lingered long after the pipe was put out for the night.

The hobbits, following Gollum, set forth.

Two days later they were still trudging on to the realisation that the Dead Marshes really were dead. Dead bodies lay in the water and Frodo had met with them at one point, almost drowning in the process. After that the hobbits kept their eyes to the ground, thinking that heeding the advice of Gollum/Smeagol — they weren't sure which since he answered to both names now — was probably a good idea.

Ring wraiths had also set upon them. Ring wraiths riding what the hobbits could only describe as a type of dragon creature that had yet to be named. They were inclined to think it was most likely a hybrid abomination, like an orc, but they didn't dwell upon it for too long. Already Mordor approached.

The stench in the Edoras stables was overpowering.

Legolas did not let such things bother him usually, but on this new noontide a grim feeling had settled upon his heart, as though a heavy stone was holding it in place. And he was not the only one to be feeling so. He knew this. The entire Company, or what was left of it, was feeling it also. His keen senses, bequeathed to all elves, could distinguish the waves of despondency as soon his ears heralded the approach of their footsteps.

It had been too long since Harry was lost to them.

Too long to trust in the hope that the young man would somehow find his way back to them. Gandalf was long gone; riding out of the stables just this morn as swiftly as if he'd never been there at all.

The White Rider.

Even he had not been certain of Harry's fate. It had been too long.

The elf sighed and leaned his back against a support post, letting his eyes flit to the people inhabiting the stable. They scampered this way and that, preparing for the long move to Helm's Deep. In a horse stall, the occupancy of which had been long since abandoned, a blind crone was fiddling with a few shells of straw — later to be weaved as a basket no doubt. Legolas briefly pondered on this woman. She, blind, frail, and old in the way of mortals, was most likely one of the ones — of which there were so little — to really understand and see the absurdity of this move to Helm's Deep. She
who had never seen anything now sees much in the end. As is the curious way with all Edain who have been unfortunate enough to lose their sight.

This woman fascinated him. Her frailty, her withered face, everything about her fascinated him. It occurred to him suddenly, he who had not much experience with mortal death until very recently, that this was how Aragorn would turn out to be if this war was won. Frail, withered, and dying. Possibly even blind and deaf. What little hope that lingered in his heart almost diminished upon that thought.

What was the point of hope when all that went with it on this Earth would die anyway? It was not like an elf to be this way; allowing the prospect of gloom to weave through his thoughts. But that his journey from Rivendell should lead him here, with one of his very dear friends missing and the others bordering on abject misery and the bleakness of impending battle . . .

A movement caught his attention. A small, yellow-haired boy carting a piglet in one arm scurried forward, his leafy eyes sprouting to an impossible width as they spotted him in the languid yet alert pose all elvish warriors learn to master. Legolas offered the boy a small smile in hopes to comfort him, for it was not lost on the elf that mortals found his presence, and indeed the presence of all his kin, to be . . . disquieting upon first notice. And the boy was so very young; not more than six winters. A mere speck in the lifetime of an elf.

"Do you have a name, little one?" he asked the boy in his most gentlest voice.

"H-Hanaard, milord," said the boy, barely containing his awe that an elf should wish to speak to him. "Hanaard is my name."

"Hanaard," Legolas repeated, smiling at the sweet sound of the young voice. "That is a very strong name. And where do you go with that piglet, Hanaard?"

Hanaard glanced down at the squealing piglet in his arms then reached up to wipe his nose with the sleeve of his tunic. Legolas had to hide a laugh at the childish gesture. "Felin is my pet. Only three weeks old and a runt of the litter. I saved him and he's not going to ever be eaten. Mama said so. I'm hiding him in the cart, that way no one can find him but me."

"I see." Legolas frowned thoughtfully. He had never heard of anyone keeping a pig as a pet, but then children were very strange no matter the Race. He himself remembered a carefree time spent playing in the trees on the outskirts of his father's palace with a worm he had found whilst digging in the dirt one day. Alas, the worm had died not long after he had discovered it — being a worm, its lifespan was much, much shorter than even an average dog's — but he had mourned that slippery creature, it being his first experience with death.

"Are you really an elf?" Hanaard asked, shifting the wailing piglet in his arms so that the little snout rested on his shoulder blade.

Legolas leaned down upon his knees in order to better speak with the hobbit-sized young one. "Yes."

"Do all elves look like girls?"

Legolas did not even have time to blink as a hearty guffaw sounded from behind him. Gimli.

"Is there something you wish to add, my friend?" he asked, shifting around to be met with the still laughing dwarf. "It was naught but an innocently worded question, as is the way with all children. They cannot know better."
Gimli hmphed. "What they are is too honest by half! And if you do not turn around you'll never discover that I'm right!"

Legolas, still squatting, spun on his toes. The space before him stood empty but the path before him did not. Hanaard was already sprinting — as fast as he was able with the piglet in his arms — out of the stable doors to be lost among the countless other passers-by.

Legolas stood, disappointed. "He is a sweet child."

"Worth dying for," Gimli agreed, and at that moment Legolas knew he was right. This was what they were fighting for; better futures for all the precious little ones like Hanaard. And a stubborn dwarf had comprehended this a lot sooner than he had. An elf.

He smiled inwardly. How very proud he was of his friend. "You're right, Gimli. He is worth dying for."

"Enough of this melancholy," Gimli said after a few moments of silent thought. "Too long have we mulled over this thankless emotion of late. Though, I admit, not without a good brew by our sides. Agreeable that was, very agreeable to a dwarf. Theoden serves good ale. Have you seen the cellars? Mightier than the entirety of Edoras. Ha ha!"

"Have you been drinking?" Legolas teased.

"Only a pint, elf, only a pint." At his friend's look Gimli amended, "Or ten."

Legolas allowed his musical laughter to spill forth. He never noticed that the sound halted the workings of everyone in the stables. A bit awestruck, a bit alarmed, they stared nevertheless, utterly captivated.

Gimli snorted, shaking his bushy mane. Leave it to an elf . . .

"Come, my friend," Legolas said at last, wiping a tear from his eye. "I suddenly find myself insatiably thirsty. What say we find Aragorn and Boromir and hasten them down to the cellars? I have yet to sample this brew of Rohan. If it is as good as you claim, then I would not mind a sip or two."

"Better than good it is, lad," Gimli assured. "And I'll soon have the stomach to prove it!"

Legolas' tinkling laughter sounded again as they walked from the stables.

Gimli resisted the urge to roll his eyes as he spotted several lassies, who had been hovering outside the stable doors for a glimpse of the elf, attempt to straighten their hair. Legolas nodded to them politely and they all three blushed the colour of freshly ripened raspberries. Which Gimli knew to be very red indeed. Glittering, red jewels they reminded him of, especially when freshly washed.

As they made their way up the hill and to the Golden Hall, Gimli muttered, "If you would but cease to laugh, and smile, and nod, they would be less inclined to follow us. You might as well remove yourself from their sight altogether and hide in the cellars."

Legolas smiled, proof that he was not oblivious to what was going on around him. "I must give them some hope in these dark times, Gimli. If they believe I wish to bestow my attention upon them —"

"Courtly attention, you mean," Gimli interrupted, muttering.
"Aye. If they think that, all the better. They would not be concerned with what is happening around them. I am giving them a focus. Something for their hearts to aspire to."

"You will not think so when they start chasing you, lad. Women, no matter what Race, become worse than orcs when in pursuit of something they desire. I'd bar my chamber door tonight if I were you. Put a chair across it! And do not dare laugh, elf!" for Gimli had spotted several women slinking along the smithy wall beside them.

"I would not cause you discomfort," Legolas said.

They walked in companionable silence all the way to the Golden Hall. A few times the elf garnered much attention — even from some of the older women and most men who could not help but stare — but most times everyone else was busy packing provisions for the long journey to Helm's Deep.

"They've never seen an elf," Gimli growled as he and Legolas stepped into the hall.

"Aye. The people of Rohan think us to be walking legends, far out of their reach."

"Well, they can certainly reach you now, and not for want of trying!"

Legolas smirked at Gimli's meaning. "If it would please you, I will cease to encourage them."

"You encourage them by existing, Legolas. Nay, you cannot help it. It is their hearts that are so overcome by your comely features, and hearts have a way of speaking for themselves. You have naught to do with it."

Legolas clapped Gimli on the shoulder. "Thank you for existing, my friend. We have been through many perils, yet forever do you stand by my side. Elf-friend I name you. And forever shall you be."

"A distinction worthy for one such as Gimli." Aragorn sat on a wooden crate beside a small table smoking a pipe. He tilted his head at them. Gimli and Legolas then watched, amusedly, as two men scurried forward and bade him get off the crate. Looking resigned, Aragorn did so.

As the men hefted the crate out of the hall he shrugged. "No sooner do I sit on something then they come and take it away for loading on the wagons. I think that one was full of shields." That said, Aragorn settled down on the right corner of the table.

Both Legolas and Gimli wondered why he did not just sit on the stools available that every table hosted, but looking about they could see that the stools were no longer in place, but packed against the far wall of the hall. Everything was slowly emptying.

"Where is Boromir?" Legolas asked, for his perusal of the hall did not reveal the young Steward's son to his eyes.

"He is with Theoden," Aragorn replied, still casually puffing. "I know not what they speak of, but I am certain you can guess as well as I."

"Indeed," Legolas frowned. "It is a useless attempt on his part to convince the king, for Theoden is about as stubborn as a dwarf. But I must commend him. He tries at least."

Gimli held up a hand and drawled gruffly, "I thank you for the compliment."

Legolas felt his lip twitch. "Gimli and I were hoping that you and Boromir might join us for an interlude in the cellars... strictly for the purpose of tasting, of course."
"I myself have already tasted ten pints," Gimli said. "What say you, Aragorn? Care to join us for some more tasting? There is naught else to do except sit and wait."

Aragorn nodded, pretending to think. "Tempting. I—" The ranger stood up, eyes widening onto something over Legolas and Gimli's heads. They did not have a chance to turn around for a flash of something large and white hurtled over their heads.

"Hedwig!" Legolas cried, as the bird flew above their heads in dizzying circles, fit to bring upon the whole of Edoras with her hooting. "What is wrong with her?"

"I do not know," Aragorn breathed. He stretched out a gentle hand to the agitated bird. "Hedwig, mani naa ta?"

The bird stopped her racket immediately in response to the elvish and settled onto a crossbeam near the ceiling, but no matter how much they coaxed her she would not come down. Eventually, Aragorn plucked a bit of leftover bread from his lunch plate and placed it onto the table. Seeing this, Hedwig swooped down, landing awkwardly on the flat surface which was not designed to host owl talons, and gobbled it up. Next, she moved on to Aragorn's plate to pick at the bit of meat still left on the bone.

The three companions watched her eat with somber eyes. At last, Gimli voiced what they had all been thinking at some point. "Something has happened to the hobbits."

"It is possible," Aragorn said. "But they would have written a letter, or offered her a piece of their clothing to let us know if they were really in trouble. More likely she is here because of Harry. I believe she cannot sense him anywhere, and that is why she came to us, believing he was here as well."

Their previous teasing mood had long since abated at the appearance of Hedwig, for she brought the young wizard into their thoughts. They could not think of anything else he could be but passed away, even though Gandalf insisted he was not. For, they argued, how could a person stay unconscious for days on end? Of course there were people in the world who had that misfortune, but not Harry; otherwise Hedwig would have found him, was that not so? The fact that she did not led them to think the worst.

Harry was dead.

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Harry's dreams had been torturous lately.

More often than not, she was accosted with images of orcs; their great razored mouths devouring something red and chunky, almost making Harry gag in her sleep as she could only guess what that chunky something was. She'd had half a week of reprieve after arriving at the Weasley's, and then the dreams had started.

She hadn't mentioned them to anyone save Hermione and Ron, who had been, perhaps, the least helpful in helping her to figure it all out. They had gotten over Harry's dimension travelling, it was true — although, not without thinking about reserving her a ward in St Mungos first — but they were still slightly overwhelmed by it all, to the point where they had taken to somewhat ignoring it whenever it was brought up by Harry. So when Harry told them about her dreams Hermione either changed the subject in her usual flippant way, or Ron remembered something important he had to do for Mrs Weasley, like peel the potatoes or clean the toilet bowl.

Harry would never admit it, but the brush off hurt. She though her best friends would have been
fascinated at learning that their best friend was a dimension traveler and would then, subsequently, demand to be taken to that dimension. She had even prepared a speech to explain why she wouldn't be able to take them yet. But they hadn't been excited. They seemed almost . . . Harry wasn't sure if 'afraid' was the right word, but . . . 'permanently startled' was closer but still not exactly the right description.

Determination was how Harry got through it. Determination to ignore how Ron and Hermione were acting and just enjoy the days she could spend with his best friends before it was time to go to Middle Earth again. And that was another thing Hermione and Ron were not pleased about — that she would be going back at all! They didn't understand why Harry had to go back even though she had offered a number of explanations ranging from the repossession of her belongings, to helping her new friends.

That mention of her new friends added to the tension as well. Harry wasn't sure what to think. Tension or no, Harry had not dared to tell them that there was currently a war brewing in Middle Earth. She could just imagine Hermione's reaction: "Oh, Harry, a war? You do realise you could die, don't you? I mean, they have swords and stuff. You're not going, and that's final!" and Ron would probably think it was cool at first, but be terrified for Harry later. In fact, she wouldn't put it past them to tie her up in her sleep and leave her there until September first.

Despite all the conflict, she'd been having a restful time at the Weasleys, noticeable by all by the healthy glow she admitted. Even Mrs Weasley had noticed, commenting that she had never seen Harry look quite so well and happy. Harry's time spent outdoors in Middle Earth and the subsequent frolicking under the sun in the Weasley's garden granted her a golden tan that shone with vitality. Hermione had even observed one afternoon that her green eyes now stood out even more dramatically from under the tan of her skin.

"You've gotten even prettier than before," she had added, peering speculatively at Harry's face. "You should really lose the glasses though. You're eyes would stand out so much more without them. Besides, they're going to be too bothersome in that, um, place you're going," which was the only time Hermione had ever, willingly, mentioned Middle Earth without any prompting from Harry.

She had gotten a shock one morning not long after arriving at the Weasley's when Hermione plonked several large texts that Harry immediately recognised as their assigned school books onto the kitchen table, and ordered for her and Ron to begin their summer homework.

"Hermione Granger!" Harry had said, hands on her hips in exasperation. "I was alone for almost a month with nothing to do but homework and practicals, don't you think I'd have finished my homework during that time?"

"Did you?" Hermione returned challengingly, crossing her arms.

The two stared each other down. When Harry tilted a stubborn chin in response, Hermione huffed in defeat.

"You should still revise with us," The curly-haired girl insisted, not willing to concede farther than that.

Revise they did, Harry barely remembering what it was she had been assigned that summer. Hermione, predictably, had already finished hers but Ron hadn't, and Ginny still had an essay to write so the three, with Hermione lecturing on the side, sat at the kitchen table while Mrs Weasley's cooking scents floated tantalizingly about the room. Ron would sometimes nick a newly baked sweet or two from the cooling rack when his mother's back was turned.
Sometimes Fleur and Bill would join them when they had some time to spare and Bill would use his wand to summon a few cakes — but Mrs Weasley always caught him at it. Even going so far as to say one time, "Ron hasn't even tried to steal any! Really, I'm disappointed in you, Bill!" Such a statement produced much choked sniggering from everyone else, leaving Mrs Weasley bewildered.

Fred and George would join them for dinner most nights, or rather every night they got hungry which was pretty much every nights except when they ate at the Leaky Cauldron. These nights the twins would regale them all with stories of characters that entered the pub to eat there. Fortunately — or unfortunately fortunately depending on how you looked at it — none were Death Eaters. They had also seen a hag at one point, and Fred swore he'd spotted a vampire slink into the pub from the back entrance but no one except George had really believed him.

As Ginny had pointed out, "Vampires wouldn't dare to lurk about any wizarding establishments, let alone in them for that matter! They're not stupid."

No one except perhaps Mrs Weasley got to see Mr Weasley. He left for work before the sun was even up and came back long after it had set again.

"Now that Scrimgeour is the new Minister, things are actually getting done," Mrs Weasley had said while pottering about the kitchen one morning, stopping only to flip a pancake or two. "He's got your father working on that case with the exploding trunk up in Nottinghamshire. Not to mention all the other things that have been happening. Just last night some poor old dear acquired a set of false teeth that'd been enchanted to bite her tongue every time she had the urge to eat or drink. Well, you can imagine how horrible . . ."

"Why?" Harry, Ron, and Ginny had asked leaning forward so far in their seats that they were in danger of falling off.

"It's all this You-Know-Who business. It's got people antsy. Even if they're not on his side, well, all I'll say is that there're some funny people out there — people who aren't exactly that fond of muggles. Now help me set the table, Ginny. You can start with the placemats. Here you are, dear."

Voldemort, Harry realized, was impossible to ignore as she had so foolishly tried to. But that did not mean that Harry actually had to think about him all the time, and she stubbornly told herself that she wouldn't, especially since she still had to think about her return to Middle Earth. It was comforting in a way that there was a place where Voldemort couldn't influence and the realization of that pulled her away from the overwhelming despair of it all.

For the time being, Voldemort and his Death Eaters would only linger in the back of Harry's thoughts, not take up most of them. The relief Harry felt at actually being able to do this was substantial, and it was all due to her dimension traveling. Again, she could not be grateful enough to that lightening bolt for having shot out of the sky and zapped her into Middle Earth.

A few nights after Fred and George's vampire sighting had passed, Harry, Ron, and Hermione were lounging in Harry's room. The room used to belong to Fred and George so still had a few odd and interesting titbits lying about or hidden in mouse holes or under the bed.

Harry was telling them about her adventures with the Fellowship — for once interesting Ron and Hermione so much that they didn't even think to leave or change the subject — and had just gotten to the part of the cave troll in Balin's tomb when Fred and George themselves clattered into the room. Harry's mouth froze in mid-speak as the twins eyed her suspiciously.

"You're quite the storyteller, Harry. Never knew you had it in you. Excellent imagination," Fred said casually, sauntering past Harry on the bed, his twin right behind him.
"Er . . ." Harry said, and scuttled back when it looked like Fred was about to sit on the bed.

Fred only eyed her a moment with an arched brow then said, "Huh."

"What are you two doing here so early?" Ron asked. He had been lying across Harry's pillows in order to better see the ceiling for whatever reason and now lifted himself onto his elbows to glare at the twins.

George spared a glance at Ron, looked at Hermione — who was settled in a corner, an abandoned book in her lap — then stared at Harry, who tried for a politely innocent expression. George shook his head almost disappointedly. "Ah, Harry, you've got it all wrong. Take it from the experts. If you want to look innocent, you don't act as if you've drank a gallon of laxatives."

There was a strange sort of cough/gurgle/splutter in the corner where Hermione was sitting. "Don't mind me," she rasped when they all looked at her. But her face at gone extremely pink.

"Alright, so you found me out," Harry grumbled, not that put out or horrified at whatever imagined repercussions would result. "What now?"

"You tell us what all that was about, that's 'what now'," Fred said, making himself comfortable at last. "Hey!" Ron yelped when Fred pushed his long legs off the bed in order to make room for George.

The twins, identical in face and expression, then stared at Harry expectantly.

Harry stood up, rubbed her suddenly bleary eyes beneath her glasses, focused on a small stain on the wall opposite, and began:

"It's really none of your business but about a week or so ago there was this storm in Surrey — you know the one — and all through it, I kept hearing this odd noise. It sounded like tapping and it would come and go. It worried me a bit since I had no idea what it was and . . ." Harry explained about the storm and the deafness the continuous sound had caused her, her conversation with Dumbledore, the fact that the phenomenon had chosen to take her to another dimension, and finally, the lightening bolt from the thundercloud sky. "... and then I landed on this mountaintop in the middle of a bloody blizzard."

"Hang on," Fred said slowly as Harry took a breath. "Just hang on a tic. You mean to say that you actually journeyed to another dimension? Literally? Like, without being sedated?"

It only took Harry a split second to grasp what Fred meant. "Yes!" she snapped, offense heavy in her tone.

"Right," Fred's face looked twisted in a strange half-confused, half-amused hybrid of thought. Harry looked at George, who was mimicking the same expression.

"I'm not making this up," Harry told them, her eyes flitting between their faces. "You can ask Professor Dumbledore."

"No, no, no!" said George, waving his hand flippantly. "It's not that at all. We believe you, munchkin, full on! It's just, well," he threw a glance at Fred, who glanced back, "We're all sorts of disappointed it didn't happen to us!"

"Oh," was all Harry could think say. That was the last thing she had expected to hear.

"Yeah," Fred continued. "All the wicked things always happen to you. But, all's fair and that sort of
thing I suppose. With all the fun come the worst luck as well. A question though . . . can we come?"

Harry started, blinking. "What?"

"I mean, the next time you decide to go there, can we come with you?"

"Oh, she hasn't figured out how to do that yet." Ron was lying prone on the bed once more now that
Harry had taken leave of it, hands folded casually over his stomach. He wasn't even looking up at the
rest as he spoke. "Still got to teach himself."

Fred frowned at Ron. "I guess we'll have to wait then."

He had said this so confidently that Harry could not stop the image of him and George atop a talan in
Lothlorien, offering Haldir a Puking Pastille in a gesture of good will.

She nearly choked on her snort. Fortunately, no one else noticed.

George slapped Fred on his shoulder. "We'd best be off then, we left Verity in charge. She gets a bit
. . . antsy."

With that the twins skirted off the bed, straightened their clothes, and were just about to leave when
Hermione ordered "Stop!" in a tone not unlike Professor McGonagall's. The ex-pranksters obeyed at
once. They whirled around, pinning equally innocent gazes on the bushy-haired girl.

She snorted. "You should think about taking your own advice," she said dryly, before straightening
up. "Why would you leave your store now, at this precise time, only a few hours before closing?"

The twins shared a look, their eyebrows raised. They leaned towards each other and exchanged a
mumble of words, among which "you idiot" and "not my fault" were discernible. At last, George
slumped. "You do know that you can be very irritating sometimes, Hermione?"

"Yes. I do," Hermione said proudly, and Harry and Ron were left wondering what on earth was
going on right under their noses that they had no clue about.

"What the bloody hell is going on?" Ron voiced in his usual subtle way.

"They already knew that you had traveled to Middle Earth," Hermione explained as Harry and Ron
jerked their heads in the twins' direction. "Before they pretended to stumble into the room and tried to
intimidate you."

"How the sodding . . ." Ron trailed off. It seemed as if a shrug had entered his voice, as though he
was so used to the twins’ antics by now that even attempting to decipher them was a useless
endeavour and not worth bothering about.

Fred took off an imaginary hat and bowed to Hermione. "If you would explain, madam."

She sighed and briefly straightened her skirt so that it fell neatly over her knees before explaining.
"They'd obviously overheard us at some point, probably when you first told us about it, Harry, and
realized that you were being serious. Their curiosity could not keep them away for long so they
concocted a somewhat hasty plan to confront you today, now, in hopes they would catch you talking
about it, not realizing that it would have served them better to wait until after work to catch you at it
then. You speak about Middle Earth often enough, I'm sure it wouldn't have been hard."

Ron and Harry only stared at Hermione disbelievingly. It was ridiculous how she could so quickly
come to such conclusions!
Harry could not believe they hadn't noticed Fred lurking about like some sort of... lurking pervert. It wasn't as if the Weasley's had a big house. "Where were you exactly?"

"Stairs," Fred grunted. "Afterward, I apparated back to the store and told George all about it. Of course we were excited as all heck. I mean, traveling to different worlds... it would only happen to you, Harry!"

"It's not like I go to several worlds. It's only the one."

"Still, you traveled to a world, didn't you? One completely different than this one? You will let us know when you actually manage to perfect that technique, won't you?" This, from George.

"I—"

"Because Fred and I want to come with you. Purely for work purposes of course, Strange, unpronounceable plants that no one can find in our world will be a great benefit to us. Competing stores like Zonkos won't be able to steal our ideas then. We would never think of, say, tagging along only to have a little fun and cause loads of mischief."

"No, never that," Fred assured, excessively solemn. "And would you look at the time," he said checking his watchless wrist. "We really must dash. We'll see you tomorrow night at dinner. Tell Mum we dropped by."

There were two pops and nothing but empty air in place where the twins had stood.

Ron turned to Hermione. "You know, I don't buy that story you told Fred and George. You can't have guessed everything accurately."

Harry was impressed. It was not like Ron to be so insightful.

"You're right," Hermione admitted, to the surprise of the other two. "I knew someone was on the stairs that day Harry told us about Middle Earth. I heard a creak and saw a shadow and a flash of ginger hair but that was it. I thought I must have imagined it at first because the only redheads in the house at the time were busy being useful somewhere else, but when the twins stumbled into the room like that today looking so... contriving, I re-evaluated my earlier thoughts.

"I mean, Fred and George were put into Gryffindor for a reason, weren't they? So they can't be sly if their livelihoods depended on it! They're all about charge first and think about the consequences later, aren't they? It was easy enough to guess where they were going with their needling."

"For you, maybe." Ron said.

"Gerroff, you l'ttle— aaaaaghhh!"

The gnome flew the length of sixty feet before landing in the next field.

Hermione shook her hands and did a sort of jig on the spot. "Did you see that?" she squealed, beaming. "Did you see what I did?"
Harry and Ron only stared at her, too dumbfounded to speak.

"I gave that gnome what for!" she continued, this time emphasizing her words by punching the air in the direction of the fallen victim, who now drunkenly climbed to its feet. The tiny figure then dived — just as drunkenly — into a nearby rabbit hole. But not before popping out for a quick one-fingered salute.

Hermione hmp hed, hands on hips. "Well, how rude!"

"We don't know if that's what it really meant, Hermione," Ron said, giving Harry a look full of mischief. "I mean, it could have just been picking its nose," he finished matter-of-factly.

Harry found her snort of laughter turning into a not-very-cleverly disguised cough as Hermione spun around, gaping. "I doubt that very much, Ron! And for future reference . . . that just might have been the most disgusting thing that's ever left your mouth."

"Clearly you've never heard him talk about girls with Dean and Seamus when they think no one's listening," Harry interjected blithely.

"Harry!" both Ron and Hermione exclaimed, the former in mortification, the latter, scandalized.

"Anyways!" Ron said loudly, cutting off Hermione before she had a chance to comment. "You're acting . . . not yourself. I thought you hated it when we remove gnomes. You're always complaining about it. 'Oh, leave the poor creatures alone!'" Ron said, in a mockery of Hermione's voice. "'They have a right to be here, the same as anyone else!'"

Hermione crossed her arms. "That sounds nothing like me."

"You sound like a banshee that smokes too much," Harry agreed.

"That's not the point," Ron continued, not letting himself be dismissed. "You did used to hate it when we tossed gnomes. Why the change of heart?"

Hermione slumped, and looked up at them through her bushy hair. "One of them thought it funny to . . ." she trailed off, her face scarlet.

"What?" Harry and Ron said at once.

Hermione expelled a harsh breath. "When we were out here the other day doing homework, well, one of them thought it funny to relieve itself in my knapsack! Travelling with Trolls is now beyond repair because . . . well, because that thing smudged its . . . business all over the ink. And I can't Evanesco it or I risk erasing the words on the pages!"

Harry and Ron did not dare to look at each other, afraid they would laugh otherwise. Shuffling their feet seemed like a better alternative and that's what they did, whilst trying not to blink at the same time. "Oh," Harry said, her eyes watering and her upper lip twitching. "So, you thought to get revenge on the little, erm, blighters . . .?"

Hermione nodded sharply, "Exactly."

To save Ron and herself from the bodily harm Hermione would afflict on them if they laughed, Harry pulled out her wand from where she had it behind her ear and flicked it about at a pile of stones that sat next to the stone fence of the Burrow. "Ini pupas."

J jerking and bubbling, six of the stones turned into little rock golem that stood in two lines.
Harry grinned at her friends. "If we're going to go to battle against the gnomes, we need soldiers."

"What was that one?" Hermione asked, impressed. She pulled out her own wand.

"Temporary golems. It's a sustained spell so you can't cast anything else while you're maintaining it, but they can attack multiple targets."

"Where'd you learn this one?" Ron asked, crouching down to poke at a golem. Harry hadn't given them any directions yet so they just bumbled about.

"One of those cheesy romances Ginny sent me had a character that was a puppeteer." Harry shrugged. "It was actually closer to a horror story than romance but I guess everyone has their kinks."

Ron grimaced. "I don't want to think of 'Ginny' and 'kinks' in the same thought."

Harry rolled her eyes as her friends gave the spell a try. They ended up with her original set made of stone, a set made of leaves, and one of dirt. Her eyes narrowed as she saw gnomes peeking out from where they were hiding to assess what the wizards were doing.

She pointed her wand at a cluster of gnomes that looked disdainful and her golems fell into formation, standing at attention. "Shall we go to war then?"

Not much happened in the days after Hermione had set the record for the longest gnome throw ever witnessed in the Weasley garden.

Remus visited a couple of times, the last looking even more tired and subdued than usual. When Harry asked what had happened, Lupin smiled wearily.

"I haven't been getting much sleep lately. The werewolves have been congregating in even larger numbers, which means I need to keep on my guard constantly now. They still don't trust me because I associate with wizards."

"Aren't they wizards themselves?" Harry had asked, confused. She'd assumed werewolves were normal wizards who got fuzzy once a month but lived relatively ordinary lives, if a bit poor.

"No. Not trained ones at least. Most were bitten before they were of school age so they never had the chance for a magical education. Especially those that Fenrir Greyback has bitten. Those wolves are almost complete animals and have never even thought of getting a wand. I was fortunate."

Remus had stared over Harry's head, a far away look in his eyes. Instinctively, Harry knew he was thinking of the Marauders.

He shook his head and looked in concern at Harry. "But what about you, Harry? Are you feeling alright? Are you feeling . . ." He leaned in closer, glancing about covertly despite the fact one of the others were listening in. "Are you feeling prepared?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, things are really starting to heat up and I've been worried about you. That and all the other dangerous business you've found yourself in." Remus then produced a shabby, dog-eared book from out of an equally shabby knapsack and handed it to Harry. It read, *Uncommon Curses and Jinxes for Uncommon Situations.*
"You know full well how I feel about you going to this Middle Age place," Remus continued, staring steadily at Harry. "I mean, I'm not thrilled with the idea since it sounds far too dangerous but Dumbledore's assured me that he'll be going with you this time so at least there's that. Though, why he had to be so secretive about all this when Tonks and I first found you in Privet drive . . . Anyway, I want you to look that over." He nodded at the book. "Memorize as many spells as you can. I know you won't be able to take it with you, so you'd best start now."

Harry was touched by the gesture.

"Oh, another thing." Remus led her out of the room. He quietly asked if there was a place they could talk that wouldn't disturb the others and Harry curiously led him to the room she was bumming in.

Remus spelled the walls and doors so no sound would be heard outside the room. After a brief pause, he also spelled the floor.

"What's all that for?" Harry asked.

"Ah, right. Sorry about that," Remus said, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly. "It's likely going to get noisy very soon and I didn't want to disturb the whole house."

"Noisy?"

Remus nodded. "You see, we're in a bit of a bind. We meaning the Order. Last week it was discovered that Siri—" He choked up a bit and stopped.

Harry moved closer and hugged his arm. "Something to do with Sirius?" She asked softly.

She received a jerky nod in reply. "We found his will and it turned out that he left you everything he owned. That includes Grimmauld Place."

"So what's the problem? I'm perfectly fine with the Order using it as headquarters."

"We've cleared out just to be safe. Black family tradition had the house being handed down the direct line, to the next male with the name of 'Black.' Sirius was the very last of the line. While his will makes it perfectly plain that he wants you to have the house, it's possible that some spell or enchantment has been set up to ensure that it can't be owned by anyone other than a pureblood."

Harry snorted in disgust. "I'll bet there has. Still, it's not like it's a big loss if you can't use it. The place is still a dump."

"Normally I'd agree but if such an enchantment exists, then the ownership of the house is most likely to pass to the eldest of Sirius's living relatives, which would mean his cousin, Bellatrix Lestrange."

Harry gripped at his arm and snarled, "No!" Like hell she was going to let Sirius' killer inherit his house! She'd burn the damn place to the ground and dance on the ashes on front of muggles before she'd let that happen!

"Obviously I don't want that either," Remus said, placing a comforting hand on hers. "Now here's where it gets muddled; the Blacks were a Noble and Ancient House and on top of leaving everything to you, Sirius also made you his heir. That means he left you a Ladyship."

Harry looked at the man skeptically. "You're kidding me, right? I'm suddenly nobility?"

"You always were; the Potters were a Noble House as well, though not as old as the Blacks. The problem is, we're not completely sure if Sirius actually managed to make the inheritance stick. That
pureblood male tradition was magically enforced." Remus rubbed at his face. "Quite honestly, this would have been much more straight-forward if you were a boy. As it is, as a girl, you can't claim ladyship until you're seventeen."

"So how do we found out if it worked?"

"Fortunately," Remus said. "There's a simple test." He extricated himself from Harry's grip and pulled out his wand. "You see, if you did manage to inherit the house, you'd also have inherited —"

He flicked his wand. With a loud crack, a house-elf appeared.

Snout-nosed, giant bat ears, enormous blood-shot eyes, Kreacher flung himself to the floor and wailed.

"Kreacher won't, Kreacher won't, Kreacher won't!" was croaked out with growing volume. The grimy thing kicked his gnarled feet, pulled at his ears, and beat on the floor. "Won't, won't, won't! Kreacher wants to go to Miss Bellatrix! Kreacher belongs to the Blacks, he won't go to the Potter brat!"

"As you can see," Remus said loudly over the noise, his eyes hard as he took in the miserable elf. "Kreacher is rather unhappy about the situation."

"What the hell does he even matter?" Harry growled, yearning to kick the stupid thing. "I don't care what he wants. I don't want him either."

"Won't, won't, won't —"

"He has to stay or else he'll go to Lestrange. He's heard too much."

"Won't, won't, won't —"

"I say we Obliviate him back to infancy and chuck him. After we give his traitorous arse a proper beating, of course," Harry retorted, not failing to notice the gleam of interest in the werewolf's eyes.

"Won't, won't —"

"Shut up, Kreacher, before rip off your arm and choke you with it!" Harry finally snapped, the last of her patience gone.

Kreacher appeared to spasm for a bit, his limbs jerking out of his control. He grabbed his throat and gaped his mouth. No sounds came out. A few seconds of silent, frantic gulping, Kreacher admitted defeat and beat on the floor desperately in a violent but entirely silent tantrum.

"Get up," she hissed. Reluctantly, stiffly, the elf did as it was told.

"Filthy half-blood mistress," it mumbled under it's breath, narrowing its eyes at her.

Without thought, Harry's arm shot forward and gripped the elf by one of its huge ears, twisting the appendage harshly back and away from its head, making the creature hiss in pain and stand on it's toes.

"Did I say you could talk?" Never had Harry felt so livid as she did right then. Her tone fell into a hash snarl. "Filthy you say. So says the traitorous elf that couldn't even take care of its house and led his master to his death!" Harry's words seemed to strike at a nerve. Kreacher face twisted. "You think you can talk down to me when you can't even succeed at your self-assigned position? The
position you take such pride in? Show some respect for the heir your late master decided on; it's the least you owe after your disgusting betrayal."

Harry flung the house elf away from her, wiping her hand when she was rid of him. Kreacher huddled where he landed.

Remus looked conflicted for a moment but eventually settled on relieved. "Well, I guess Sirius knew was he was doing. Though you really didn't have to be so mean."

Harry rolled her eyes. "That thing earns the cruelty it receives. I'm not one to have indentured servants, Remus, but I'm not going to put up with a creature that claims loyalty as it stabs you in the back. What do we do with him now?"

"Erm," Remus glanced at the creature on the floor. "I'm assuming you don't want him underfoot?"

"Definitely not."

"Maybe send him to the Hogwarts kitchen? The other elves could watch him there."

Harry's face brightened. "Good idea. Yeah. Kreacher," she addressed the sullen thing. "You'll go to Hogwarts and work with the other elves. You'll help them and do as they say and you'll stay in the castle at all times." A thought occurred to her and Harry's eyes narrowed. "You won't go searching out others related to the Black Family and you will not talk to anyone about what you've seen, heard, read, or perceived in any way at Grimmauld Place or in my presence unless I tell you can. If you go sneaking around, you'll join your ancestors prematurely and as a free elf."

Kreacher looked up at Harry from where he was, a look of deep loathing and almost respect in his eyes.

"New mistress is cruel, she is." With that, he vanished with a loud crack.

After a second of silence, Remus placed a hand on Harry's shoulder and smiled tiredly at her. "At least that's now out of the way."

A few days after Remus' visit, Harry received an owl from Dumbledore at breakfast. It had first made itself comfortable on her toast but she'd been able to retrieve the letter nonetheless.

Harry,

I do hope you are enjoying your stay at the Weasleys. I myself have just arrived from a long overdue trip to Tibet. Most fascinating, those monks. The yaks milk is also very curious.

Mr Ollivander has informed me that the wand I promised you is now completed. I will be opening the Floo connection to my office at exactly two minutes passed five o'clock this afternoon. This passage will stay open one minute only, so be prompt.

Come alone as we have much to do and discuss.

"What does it say?"

Harry looked up. Everyone was watching her read curiously, but it was Hermione who'd spoken.

"Oh, er . . . I'm to meet Dumbledore this afternoon in his office."

Hermione and Ron looked sharply at each other.
"Well, do make sure to brush your hair, dear," Mrs Weasley said, bustling about with a plateful of egg and bacon and placing it on the table in front of Harry. The Hogwarts' owl screeched at the sudden intrusion to its space and knocked over the plate of water it had been drinking from. Mrs Weasley's "Oh, dear!" didn't stop it from spreading its large wings — in turn, knocking a couple of glasses — and taking flight over Harry's head.

Ginny sniggered into her tea. "Well, at least it's had something to drink."

Mrs Weasley dithered around the table, wand held aloft. "Goodness, look at this mess; feathers everywhere! It's very unsanitary. Have you all eaten? Harry, you haven't finished your second helpings yet! But I suppose you wouldn't be that inclined right now would you, what with that nice fat feather sitting right in the middle of your plate . . ."

"I rather think it makes a nice garnish," Ron put in.

"Oh, it doesn't matter!" Mrs Weasley said tetchily. "Off you lot go then." She shooed them out of the kitchen before any of them could protest, but she also shoved a buttered scone into Harry's hand in the process.

"That's so unfair," Ron complained a while later as they descended to the make-shift Weasley Quidditch pitch. He had spoke in response to Harry's hearty bite into the warm, delicious scone, of which Ron and the others hadn't tasted and which was to be eaten only at lunch. Since lunch was a few hours away, Harry felt Ron had a right to complain. But that did not mean Harry had to share.

"I mean," Ron continued with gusto, his glare turning even more resentful as Harry took another lusty bite, almost finishing the scone in the process, "what's so special about you? You get a treat and we get a boot!"

"Tough luck, Ron. We can't all be pretty," Harry said with not the least hint of amusement, and Ginny and Hermione howled with laughter.

Ron only gaped for a few seconds. Then his ears, slowly, reddened.

"Besides," Harry continued, quite enjoying herself, "you all had second helpings. I didn't."

Ron muttered but didn't offer a counter-argument..

Hermione and Ginny were still sniggering quietly as the quartet settled under the leaves of a giant tree just at the edge of the Quidditch field, leaning their backs comfortably against it. Ron had brought along an old deflated football that Mr Weasley had found in a rubbish bin to use as a Quaffle, but as they hadn't brought their brooms — and therefore, couldn't play Quidditch — Ron ended up tossing it back and forth with Harry. Ginny would have joined in, but then Hermione would have been left out as she was bad at sports, and Ginny didn't want the oldest girl to be the odd one out.

Ron and Harry tossed it to each other lightly to start off but gradually grew to using elaborate throws. The pace grew until the ball was barely touching their hands before it was being thrown back. The girls noted that Ron's throws got aggressive not five minutes in, a frown appearing on his face as he repelled the ball away from him vigorously.

Ron finally stopped, catching the ball as it came at him, a thoughtful expression on his face. "Why do you have to go back, Harry?"

The black haired girl could not have been more surprised by a question. Neither it seemed could Hermione. "We agreed we wouldn't talk about that!" she hissed.
"Talk about what?" Ginny asked, looking between the three. "Where does Harry have to go back to?"

"None of your business, Ginny." Ron was staring at Harry with an odd look in his eyes. Harry decided she didn't care for such an expression being sent in her direction.

"It is my business!" said Ginny, firing up at once. "You brought up the topic with me sitting here; therefore it's my business as well!"

"That's not how it works." Ron glared at his sister. "Go back to the house. Mum probably needs your help with lunch or something."

Hermione put her head in her hands and shook it.

"Merlin, Ron," Harry groaned. "Do you have to be so — what was the word you said before, 'Mione? — misogynistic. You can't just dismiss her around like that!"

Ron was stubborn in his stance. "We're talking about this and Ginny's not going to hear about it." He jerked his head at the house. "Go on, Gin."

Ginny's lips pursed so much that the blood rushed out of them. "Fine! Alright. You don't want me around. That's fine." She shot up so fast that she knocked Hermione's knee in the process. Stopping only for a short "Sorry," to Hermione, Ginny stalked off in the direction of the Burrow. They could hear her muttering loudly until she was too far for anything to be heard.

Ron turned back to look at Harry. "Well?"

"Ron . . . you mustn't . . ." Hermione said weakly. Her cheeks at two high spots of colour on them.

"You big he-man, you," Harry snarked. "Please tell me what to do, Ron, it's not like I have a mind of my own. Why don't you just club us over the head next and drag us off by our hair to your cave?"

"What are you—?" Ron began.

"That's enough of that!" Hermione spoke over him.


"Yeah?" Ron said angrily, hands clenching tightly to the football. "Like a what?"

"I'd say a misogynistic swine but I'm not sure you'd know what that means."

Ron's face reddened in anger. "Are you calling me stupid?"

"I don't have to call you anything; you are what you are either way!"

"You smart-arsed bi—!"

Hermione finally exploded "Shut up, the both of you! We're not going to get into a pointless argument over this!"

"It's too late for tha—"

"Yes, I know, thanks to this idiot!" She glared at Ron, who turned away, punching the ball from hand to hand.
A glaring silence preceded Hermione's outburst. Harry began to realise that she had not felt this way since fourth year, when Ron had looked at her just as oddly before their horrible argument. But the difference was that now, Hermione was in on it too.

"Harry," she started, but seemed to trail off when Harry didn't give her any encouragement. She closed her eyes. "Alright. I'm assuming you know what we're talking about. You want to know the reason we don't want you to go?" She breathed deep. "Ever since you told us about Middle Earth . . . well, it wasn't so much that you'd been there, that wasn't your fault after all . . . but . . . well . . . when you told us that you would be going back . . . w-we didn't like it."

Ron's eye twitched.

Harry looked incredulously between them. Hermione dropped her gaze when theirs collided. "You don't want me to go back? Is this more jealousy shit like back in fourth year?"

Before Ron could retort — his ears had gone red again — Hermione beat him to it. "That's not it at all! We just don't want you going back! I mean, why do you have to go back at all? I understand that you didn't say goodbye to your new friends and you might be feeling a bit of guilt over that, but, for what other reason I can't imagine!"

"Because there's a war!" Harry finally shouted, disbelieving that they could be so stubborn. "My new friends, as you called them, are in a war and I have to help. That's why I have to go back. I'd do the same for either of you if you lived in a different world. And have you forgotten about Hedwig? And my father's invisibility cloak? You think I would just leave them there?"

Hermione had clasped her hands over her mouth, looking horrified. After a few seconds of mutual staring she set them aside and spoke. "B-but Harry, you could get hurt! We need you!"

Harry felt like swearing but couldn't get the foul words out when she saw Hermione looking so small. Still, how could they be so ridiculous? "Because I'm 'The Chosen One'?" she said a touch bitterly.

"No," Ron said seriously. Harry saw that he no longer held the squashed football. A brief glance around showed that it was sitting downhill a fair few meters away. "Not because you're 'The Chosen One'. It's because you're our best mate. We . . ." he faded off, his entire face lit up tomato-like.

"What Ron means to say," Hermione continued, her eyes glassy, "is that, we care about you, Harry. We just don't want you getting hurt."

Damn it all. Why did they have to be like this? "I get hurt all the time here! That hasn't stopped me from still going to Hogwarts, has it? And Dumbledore's going to be with me when I go so I don't see the problem."

Hermione's eyes briefly flitted to Ron before coming back. "We know that, but he's not going to always be around, is he? Not every second or every minute. There could be all sorts of strange creatures there. What if one of them sneaks up on you or something?"

Harry had to concede the point. After all she had no idea what sort of things might be lurking in Middle Earth. "Alright. I get that. But still — That's life in general. A person is always at risk, whatever they're doing. What is all this about, Hermione? I'm actually going to be more protected than usual. Surely you're happy about that?"

"Of course I am!" she said shrilly. "It's just . . . ooooh!" Harry and Ron drew back as Hermione banged the ground with her fists hard so that bits of dirt and grass scattered into the air. Sweet
Merlin, that girl was an Amazon when she was angry. "Don't you get it? Ron and I can't be sure you're always going to be alright! We want to go with you, and the fact that we can't . . . it's frustrating! It's a horrible feeling when we know we can't be there for you!"

"So that's it?" Harry queried, glancing between his best friends. "You don't want me to go because you can't come along? You want it to be like it always is . . ." As Harry finished, she realised she was no longer questioning them. She finally understood what they had been driving at.

Hermione bit her lip. "As stupid as it might sound, we want to protect you. We want to be there for you . . . like we always have. You shouldn't go alone."

Harry sighed. Alright, she could see where they were coming from. She wouldn't want Ron going off to a strange world where Harry couldn't be there to protect him either. In fact, she would be right furious if Ron was to leave her behind. But she had no choice! The only person who could come with her was Professor Dumbledore, and that only because of the connection he shared with Fawkes, whose feather resided in Harry's wand.

Both wands now.

"Listen," Harry implored tiredly, speaking with a degree of calm and reasoning that surprised even herself as well as Ron and Hermione. "Let's stop carrying on about this. I'm going. I understand now why you don't want me to but I have to go. I've told you why; the friends I've made are in danger and I can't leave them to it anymore than I could if you two were in danger.

"Now, the question is, can you accept that? Can you let me go without acting like gits about it?" Ron snorted. But Harry could see an amused tilt appearing in the corner of his mouth. "I don't want to leave in the middle of an argument, I'll end up endangering myself and others that way. I'd be too distracted by thoughts of you two being angry with me."

"We're sorry, Harry," Hermione smiled and sniffled at the same time. "I guess we have been acting a little selfish. I just like being left out like this."

"Ron?" Harry entreated, turning towards the ginger-haired boy.

"S'ppose I have been acting like a right stubborn git." He smiled a small smile. "But you know mate, if you get yourself killed in that Bottom Earth or whatever—"

"Honestly, Ron, 'Bottom Earth?' The number of times we've talked about it . . . Sorry," she apologized when Ron glared at her for interrupting.

"Anyway, just don't kick it too soon, alright?"
Harry shifted slightly where she lay sideways in an over-stuffed armchair in the Headmaster's office.

"Are you ready, my dear?" Dumbledore posed this question after a lengthy explanation that went mostly over her head on all that was supposed to happen for her to return to Middle Earth. The important part for her to remember was that the professor and Fawkes would have to be in direct physical contact with her for them to be pulled along.

Harry had Floo'd into Dumbledore's office not half an hour ago, and upon stumbling in had been presented with her second wand, which looked exactly like her first. Grabbing hold of it, Harry had again felt that same overpowering sense of rightness as had overtaken her years ago in Ollivander's shop. With that wand, she was complete. All the same, she placed the wand back on Dumbledore's desk, knowing it wouldn't do her any good to hold onto it. Its purpose was to stay here so she'd have a wand in both realities.

Now all Harry had to do was fall asleep and dream of Middle Earth. But how on earth was she going to be able to go to sleep when she was so... excited, nervous, and all those other un-sleepy feelings?

"I don't feel tired at all though," Harry answered, placing her head on a cushioned arm.

Dumbledore was sitting in a chair beside Harry's, Fawkes perched on its arm. As per usual, he was decked out in the height of eccentric wizarding fashion, this time wearing a dark burgundy colored robe with sleeves that draped to the knees and a stiff collar that circled about his neck in a way that reminded her of the stereotypical vampire. A wizard hat of the same colour sat to dangle over one shoulder with what looked like a Christmas bauble attached to the end. Oddness upon oddness, the outfit actually appeared to be pajamas. The tartan slippers gave it away.

"Perhaps a warm drink will do you some good," he said. "Some hot chocolate?" At Harry's nod he summoned a house-elf and requested two mugs. The elf returned promptly with steaming mugs on a polished serving tray. "Excellent, excellent," the professor murmured as he sipped.

At the sight of the elf, Harry asked, "Do you know how Kreacher's been doing, sir?" She received her mug with a soft, "Thank you."

"Your newly acquired elf that you've sent to work in the kitchen, correct? I've not looked in on him myself but I've not heard of any discontent so far."

Harry hadn't given Kreacher another thought since that day almost a week ago that she had sent him to work at Hogwarts. In her mind, there were more important things to think about — like her friends in Middle Earth, the Voldemort problem, and the up-coming school year; a crotchety old house-elf that was on the edge of senile didn't even make the list. Her fury at the beast only bolstered the opinion.

Now after she had had time to cool off her temper and wasn't so preoccupied in urgent, life-threatening things, Harry admitted to feeling a touch guilty about being so heavy-handed in her punishment of Kreacher. It was one thing to send him away and hang a harsh punishment over his head should he disobey, it was quite another thing to give him a good smacking around. She knew what it was like being in that position and she never thought she would be the one dishing out the hurt. The sight of a Hogwarts house-elf looking so adoringly at the Headmaster as he served them drinks brought her unease to the forefront.
Alright, so maybe she was more than just a touch guilty.

A thought occurred to her. "Is he going to be alright when I'm gone?" Harry asked slowly. The professor gave her an inquisitive look. "I mean, house-elves are bound to their families, right? Since I'm going to be in another universe or reality or whatever, would that be like me being dead here? You know, since I'll technically not exist for a bit? Would Kreacher be alright?"

"An interesting question," Dumbledore replied, stroking his beard. "I believe in Kreacher's case, he will be fine since he will thrive off of the ambient magic of the school. It does make me wonder though what would happen to an elf that attends to you personally since those feed directly off of a wizard instead of the home."

"They eat magic?" Harry asked curiously. "I knew they bond to us to be able to use magic but I didn't know they actually eat it."

"They do not consume in the way that we do, but it is a fair way of describing it. The relationship between wizard and house-elf is symbiotic in nature. The origin of our co-existence is unknown but we provide them with food, shelter, purpose, and means in exchange for service and loyalty. Rather like the hippopotamus and the Oxpecker bird."

"So he'll be fine," Harry reaffirmed for her own peace of mind. Well, there was no use in fretting more on the matter, she'd find out how well Kreacher was after they returned. She chugged the rest of her now comfortably warm hot chocolate and placed the cup on the Headmaster's desk with a soft sigh.

Blinking slowly at the man seated opposite of her, Harry snuggled down into the warmth of the chair. They sat in companionable silence and she grew steadily more drowsy.

"I think I'm ready now..." Harry mumbled, her breath growing slower and deeper. As she closed her eyes for the final time, Harry vaguely registered two warm presences drawing closer to her.

The smell of grass and dirt was what woke Harry. Or maybe it was her own violent sneeze when something flew up her nose. Whatever it was, Harry was suddenly awake and wary.

The first thing she noticed was the feel of grass against places where her skin should not have felt grass. She was naked as the day she was born. She startled up onto her feet and frantically looked about for covering, noticing that there had been a blanket covering her from complete nudity that had been shaken off during her jolt upward. Wrapping the blanket around her, she realized in relief that there was no one but her in the immediate area. Her thudding heart unclenched a bit in relief.

She stepped cautiously about the base of the tree she had been laying under, taking care not to trip over the trailing hem of the blanker wrapped around her, and wondered where her belongings were. Had the Fellowship taken her things with them when they couldn't find her? But then how would she get clothes if they did?

Her worry was relieved when she caught sight of her missing Firebolt, elvish sword, cloak, shoes, hat, and socks piled on top of her curiously unshrunk trunk. So her friends had left her belongings behind for her to find. That was considerate of them. Without further ado, she pulled on her clothing swiftly.

Now that she was properly dressed, Harry wondered where the headmaster was. Hadn't they come together? Surely he would be somewhere nearby if he had made the trip.
The sound of birdsong caught her attention. Normally, such an everyday sound like birdsong would go ultimately unacknowledged by her, but birds did not sing in Fangorn and even if they did, no bird could replicate the beauty of phoenix songs.

Fawkes' crooning led her to a sunken in, grassy indention at the base of a tree the length of two Privet Drive houses away from where she had awoken. The phoenix was perched on a low hanging limb just above where his wizard was snoozing, somehow already fully dressed. The headmaster was lying propped up against the tree trunk, his hands lay folded beneath his long beard and he was snoring away peacefully. With every expelled snore, his mustache would quiver slightly.

They were on the outskirts of the forest Harry decided, judging by the stretch of plains she could see through the lightened branches of trees. Now all she had to do was locate her wand and then she'd be ready to wake the professor.

"Hello, Fawkes," Harry said quietly as to not wake the slumbering man. The bird twittered at her in greeting. Bringing up a hand to stroke soft plumage, she asked, "Do you know where my wand is? I haven't found it yet."

Fawkes nodded at his sleeping wizard and Harry then noticed that a familiar holly wand was almost falling out of a pajamas pocket. So Dumbledore had already found it then; that was a relief, now she wouldn't have to go searching for it.

"That's all sorted then." Harry turned to Fawkes and jerked her head in the headmaster's direction. "Mind waking him?"

Fawkes fluttered over, landing on a shoulder before preening Dumbledore's hair for a moment. When that caused no reaction beyond a mumbled, "Delighted to make your acquaintance as well," Fawkes ditched the gentle plan and pecked at the headmaster's forehead like a woodpecker.

Harry discovered in that moment that Dumbledore did not wake up like normal people. There was no making of the groggy, sleepy noises or rubbing of the eyes as happened when a person usually woke up. No, none of that. Dumbledore just opened his eyes and that was it. One second he was asleep the next he was awake. She wondered if it was a mark of a great wizard to be exceedingly odd.

"Ah, yes," Dumbledore was said, and stood up with a grace that belied his age. His long robes swished with the movement. They were so long that Harry couldn't see his feet. "I believe this belongs to you, my dear." From out of his pocket Dumbledore retrieved Harry's wand and handed it to her. She pocketed it with a nod of thanks.

Dumbledore then unhooked what looked like a golden pocket-watch from his belt and flipped it open. Planets, stars, and what looked like the entirety of space whirled around in that small container before he clicked it closed with a small sigh. "It doesn't matter," he muttered before turning to Harry with a smile. "Would you like some breakfast or perhaps brunch? I don't know what time it is exactly, though it feels like late morning."

Breakfast or brunch, they ended up enjoying a meal of roasted chicken and pumpkin juice that Dumbledore had transfigured from a fruit they had found in a tree and creek water, respectively. Apparently, it was perfectly safe to eat transfigured food as long as the base object was originally edible as well.

The ease with which he did it did not escape Harry's notice, especially as he was using an unfamiliar wand. It was mind-boggling, the sort of power he wielded. Harry recalled back to the time she was put on trial for the use of underage magic, how Dumbledore had conjured a chintz armchair for
himself, and how the other wizards and witches of the jury had looked on enviously. The idle
thought that the headmaster might be able to teach her his tricks was promptly dismissed as she
remembered that Transfiguration wasn't one of her better subjects.

"It took few tries to get out landing just right but it seems we've arrived properly this time and in one
piece," Dumbledore mentioned after a bite of his chicken. Their meal was set before them on a fine
but plain china plate he had made from a rock.

"What do you mean, sir?" Harry asked, sipping her pumpkin juice.

"You were asleep for it, my dear, but we originally arrived in another forest a distance from here,"
the headmaster answered. "There was a strange aura about it so I moved us as soon as I got us
properly covered. I found your belongings not far from where we landed and Fawkes carried us out.
I planned on finding a safe place for you to wake up.

"Then the strangest thing happened; we somehow slipped back into the space between worlds. I
suspect your dreams shifted, pulling us back out."

"That's possible?" Harry asked in surprise, about to take a bite of chicken but forgoing it to ask her
question.

"So I believe. We flickered back once more, but in that instance, I only had enough time to bring us
into this charming grove before we slipped out again. When we came back this time, we remained in
place long enough for me to decide that a nap wouldn't hurt. I hope you don't mind me borrowing
your wand; I transfigured you a blanket since I found that sleeping in the nude in the wilderness to be
quite unpleasant."

"Oh, I don't mind at all!" Harry assured him, cheeks heating a bit. "Thank you in fact."

After 'elevensies' as Pippin would call it, they packed all their necessary provisions — such as the
extra chicken they hadn't been able to finish and about half a bottle of pumpkin juice — before
Dumbledore proclaimed it was time to get going.

"Though where we have to go is up to you," He added. "I have no knowledge of this world except
that which you've told me. I'm in your hands from now on. But if I might make a suggestion. . ."

"By all means!" Harry said quickly. She did not exactly relish the thought that Dumbledore — the
most flippantly capable wizard she had ever known — was now dependent on her.

Dumbledore had transfigured a pair of half-moon glasses for himself and was now looking at Harry
from beneath them. "Before you came back to Hogwarts, I believe you and your friends were
searching for two, er. . ."

"Hobbits, sir."

"Thank you. Hobbits; delightful name." Dumbledore blinked as if to clear his thoughts. "You were
searching for two Hobbits. Might you wish to continue that search?"

Harry tapped her chin in thought. "Well, if they haven't been found yet, looking for Merry and
Pippin would also lead us to the rest of them as well."

Dumbledore nodded encouragingly as Harry took out her wand and placed it flat on her palm. "Point
me Pippin."

A slow sort of spin started first, as was customary with this spell so Harry didn't think anything of it.
But when her wand sped up alarmingly so that it now resembled blender blades Harry hastily reversed the spell before she got cut.

Dumbledore, in his typical way, revealed, "That's not so unusual. If the person or object you're looking for is quite a far distance away then that spell might not work."

Harry bit her lip in concern. "Yes," she agreed. "I've also found that our magic doesn't work very well when interacting with the magic of this world. Maybe they're somewhere magical? The forest we were in at first houses strange magic; they might still be there."

"Shall we leave this forest and try again in a moment then?"

"Good idea, sir."

The pair trotted through the thinning trees and made short work of breaching the edge of the forest. The Headmaster took in the expanse of rolling, green plains and the mountains in the distance as Harry attempted her spell once more without any prompting. She was disappointed by another lack of results.

Harry tried not to show her frustration but Dumbledore must have picked up on it anyway. He smiled comfortingly. "Don't discount your other friends. Try the spell again. It won't hurt."

Harry agreed.

It was touch and go from then on. While trying to find Merry's direction, her wand did the exact same thing as when she'd tried to find Pippin. Both Harry and Dumbledore agreed that the two hobbits must be together. Just to confirm this, Harry did the spell individually for Frodo, Sam, and after a thought, Gollum as well. They were all in the same direction. Aragorn, it turned out, was the only one who was by himself, but he wasn't that far away from Legolas, Gimli, and Boromir, who were also all in the same direction.

"Have you any thoughts on whom you want to seek out?" Dumbledore asked as Harry had lowered her wand.

"Aragorn," Harry said immediately. "Aragorn should be our best bet. He was sort of... the unofficial but undisputed leader after Gandalf died. He should know what happened to Merry and Pippin and everyone else." Harry clenched her fist around her wand. "I wonder how much time has passed though. It can't have been a split second like going home since there's no way they could have gotten so far away in that amount of time. It has to have been a few days at the very least."

"I suppose it doesn't matter anyway," she said eventually, setting her gaze out in the direction of the main body of the Fellowship. "When we find Aragorn, I'm sure he'll tell us how long I've been gone."

"Very well then," Dumbledore acquiesced. "Are we ready to depart?"

Harry paused mid-nod. "Hang on, Professor... How will you travel? Are you going to sit behind me as we fly? You don't have a broom."

A slight smile began on the ends of Dumbledore's wrinkly mouth. "No, I don't," he confirmed. "But I have something better, as do you."

Somehow, Harry instinctively knew what Dumbledore was talking about, and she let her sights rest on the phoenix standing on the ground between them, pecking away at some grass. Fawkes could do that flame traveling thing; he could take them along with him, maybe? That, or he'd carry them all the
way to Aragorn's destination.

"Fawkes will carry us along in his flames?" Harry guessed, looking expectantly at her headmaster.

Dumbledore, however, shook his head. "No, he hasn't the mental image for that, and neither do I. If either Fawkes or I try to apparate to Aragorn when we haven't ever been to that place, we could end up hundreds of miles away from our intended destination."

Harry looked down at her Firebolt that was clutched tightly in one hand. "So I'll ride my broom... and I guess you'll hold onto Fawkes."

"That may be the best thing to do," Dumbledore agreed, staring thoughtfully up at the sky. "That way you can periodically check your wand for directions."

Harry had to agree it was the best way, though she still wished Fawkes could have flamed them there; she still felt anxious to find Aragorn. She could help but be impatient.

"Could we flash over to him once we see him in the distance?" Harry wheedled. She offered Fawkes an imploring look as well.

The magnificent bird twitter magnanimously as Dumbledore smiled indulgently at her. "Whatever you think is best," the bearded man answered contentedly.

It had been a mere hour or so since he had seen the conglomeration of the Uruk-Hai soldiers marching onwards in what appeared to be the direction of Helm's Deep. A great salivating, irrepressible force they were daunting in their numbers, and definitely not as gormless as their orc cousins. Aragorn could perceive the intelligence simmering from their maniacal eyes, even from a distance away. Nay, these were not orcs.

Aragorn clenched his teeth as a particularly vigorous bounce from Brego jarred the no doubt purpling bruise on his side. The spine of rock he had tumbled over had struck a scant instance below the ribcage — a fleshy, vulnerable spot. But he had survived. A feat he had not thought could be accomplished after falling from a cliff a terror of a distance high, and with a great slavering, wriggling warg still attached to his arm. But he had done it.

Would that the pain would only cease, he thought to himself in a grumble. But he was grateful as it was, grateful to be given another chance. Eru knew he had enough of those, though. It brought to mind his adventure with the orcs just outside of Bruinen, near thirty winters passed. He had been spitted like a boar on a skewer ready for the feasting but he had survived in credit to the hasty actions of the Peredhel twins and the skills of their father, Lord Elrond. He had not even a scar to show from that escapade.

The ranger sighed to himself. He could not help wishing now that his brothers-of-the-heart if not in blood were with him. Though, they would surely have a good laugh at his expense.

"Estel," Elladan would say whilst frowning a little, "Must you always be getting yourself into scrapes you only just manage to escape from?"

"Aye, he does that so well. And leaving us with the cleaning up, is that not so, brother?" Elrohir would finish, just as sternly.

The use of the words, 'cleaning up' had always been their teasing way of demonstrating the seriousness or lack thereof of his wounds.
Wondering vaguely just when his luck would run out ("For surely the blessing the Valar bequeathed him would have run out by now," as the twins were fond of saying) Aragorn nearly fell from his horse as it reared in response to the great \textit{boom} that seemed as if it split the sky. Not even seconds later, bright flames of sunlit orange and yellow sprang in a glare before him.

This so startled the normally composed ranger (it was not a usual occurrence to have flames appear in front of one's face out of mid-air after all) that this time he did fall off his horse.

"Ahh!" he cried, landing on his injured side.

Ears that had been honed in the depths of silent forests throughout his travels in Middle Earth, and which, consequently, could hear better than those of his mortal brethren, caught the sound of an old surprised voice saying was sounded like, "Mér-lins bi-ahd," almost conversationally. As though all this was only an everyday occurrence. Though he knew not the meaning of the words, Aragorn still almost snorted. Only a wizard would behave so.

"That's Aragorn, Professor!" Was that...? But it couldn't be. A brief shuffling scuffle before, "Aragorn? Aragorn, can you hear me?"

A shadow moved over his face, blocking out the light of the sun. He squinted his eyes. Back-lit by the high afternoon sun was the smiling face of a lad he thought gone from he land of the living. "Harry Potter," he said, wonder in his voice. He thought his ears had deceived him when he heard that familiar voice.

Harry smiled, his fair green eyes alight with happiness. "Yeah, it's me. What are you doing way out here in the middle of nowhere? D'you need help getting up? Wait, don't answer that."

"We thought you dead." Aragorn groaned quietly as the lad grabbed a hold of his arms and hoisted him up.

"I was gone that long then?" was the worried answer that he received. "That's no good. But never mind that now. As you can see, I'm not dead. I was just blasted back to my original world, and had to take a while to come back. I brought my headmaster, Professor Dumbledore back with me and it's a good thing too, judging by that army of orcs we almost got skewered by on our flight over here. A troupe of them attacked a pack of travellers as well and we stopped to fight them off. I'd say we're gonna need a lot of help."

Aragorn did not process the rest of Harry's sentence beyond "Professor Dumbledore." He simply stared at the man Harry had pointed to, truly stunned.

He was a wizard; there was no questioning that, and he looked so much like Aragorn's dear friend Mithrandir that the ranger cocked his head to the side and let his eyes narrow, unaware that he was doing so. The old man wore a robe of stars that captured the heavens in all their glory. Never had the ranger seen such a garment as this. T'was as if he had plucked the stars right out of the sky and set them into the tapestry of his robe to forever reside in silent, twinkling repose.

But who knows, Aragorn thought to himself suddenly. \textit{Mayhaps he did just that.}

He had no knowledge, after all, of the sort of magic wizards of Harry's sort wielded, and seldom had he seen the magic of an Istar used at all except in a few instances when the Fellowship was still unbroken, and Gandalf had used a spell to light fire and other such things.

The man, Pro-fess-uhard as Harry had called him, had a beard longer than Gandalf's, and hair of the same length, all pure white. He had perched on his nose a pair of the thin wires filled in with glass
like the ones Harry had worn (Curiously, Harry was no longer wearing his and his eyes glowed like they were lit from within), though unlike Harry's, they were only half circles and golden instead of black, as if they sat there on purpose to capture the glinting sun. Briefly, Aragorn wondered whether all wizards in Harry's world wear such jewellery, and if this jewellery was a means to see passed long distances, like he himself had done with those Omnioculars, for surely they had some purpose other than to frame the eyes? Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of his appearance was the magnificent creature perched majestically upon an outstretched arm, no less unusual-looking than its master. Gold and red was this creature's feathers, and its eyes held a peculiar intelligence, more so than even Hedwig.

Aragorn was reminded of the Maia. But this bird could not be that, it had come from a different world after all, and as far as he knew, there were no Maia there.

"Good day to you, sir," Aragorn said, remembering his manners too late. He also thought what a fool he must have looked like standing there staring for such a long while.

But the wizard merely inclined his head, looking puzzled.

"Oh, no," he heard Harry say. Then the boy started jabbering away at his mentor in a completely alien language. Those shocking eyes flew back to his own. "I forgot that Professor Dumbledore doesn't speak Westron."

"Dumbler-door?" Aragorn asked, bewildered. Surely they didn't address each other by such long names all the time. Pro-fess-uhard was quite tongue twisting enough.

A blank look was what greeted him, before Harry blinked. "Oh, sorry. I forgot to introduce you. Er, Aragorn, this is the headmaster of my school, Professor Albus Dumbledore..." The boy jabbered at the older man once more before he added, "But he says you can call him Albus if you'd like since it's easier to pronounce."

Aragorn placed a hand over his heart in the customary elvish gesture of greeting. "Well met, Al-bus," he said, stuttering a little over the foreign sounding the name.

Despite not knowing the words Aragorn spoke, Albus must have guessed what he had said, and gibbered something in return. It must have been akin to "Delighted to meet you," the ranger thought, because he smiled as he said it.

Then something truly bizarre happened. Albus extended his arm, his hand held out.

The ranger stared at it.

"You're supposed to shake it," Harry grinned to him, snickering in amusement.

A little awkwardly, Aragorn did so. Eru, but these wizards were strange!

Harry watched Dumbledore and Aragorn shake hands, wanting to give herself a good shake. She had completely forgotten that she had hadn't been able to speak Westron when she'd first arrived in Middle Earth. As soon as she'd realized, she asked Dumbledore if he could do some sort of language translating spell, but the old man hadn't been able to. Apparently, the person doing the spell had to know the language that needed to be translated and the language that it would be translated into to be able to cast the spell. Harry theoretically would have been able to cast it but it required a mastery of Charms she just didn't have yet. They'd have to do without with Harry being translator for whoever wanted to talk with the professor.

"Listen, Aragorn," Harry said to the ranger after he and Dumbledore had finished observing each
other, "We saw that great smelly army marching in this direction and they look like nothing but trouble. We figured you could use a lift to wherever you have to go, I'm guessing to where the others are. Have you found Merry and Pippin, by the way? I couldn't locate them with magic."

Aragorn's head tilted ever so slightly to the left, as if he troubling working out what to answer first. "Aye, we found the hobbits," he confirmed at last. "Or rather, Gandalf found the hobbits. Nigh on two weeks past at the least though know not I how long I was unconscious. And yes—"

"Hang on a tick, backtrack a bit there. Unconscious? And what d'you mean 'Gandalf?'" Harry asked quickly, and not giving Aragorn a chance to answer he continued, "Gandalf... I mean, he's dead... isn't he? You can't just come back to life, can you?"

"Be at ease, mellon," Aragorn said quietly, placing both hands on the boy's shoulders. "Gandalf is a Maia."

"And that means...?"

"It means they are immortal. Very rarely do they die, and when they do, they are brought back to life... apparently."

Those beautiful eyes blinked. "Oh." Then narrowed in suspicion. "And, you didn't know that before?"

Aragorn shook his head.

"Oh," he said again. "Anyway, do you want a lift? I mean, a horse is nice but we could go faster. We need as much speed as we can get, especially with that army of orcs. I'll be riding my broom, and Fawkes will take you, Dumbledore, and..." Harry paused as he stared at Aragorn's horse, who was munching away happily at some grass, "...and, um, your horse."

Though Aragorn had no idea what a 'Farks' was, and certainly had even a lesser idea of how the Farks would be able to carry two men and a horse, he had learned not to question wizards recently because they were often in the right. He had instead begun to trust their mysterious doings. That, and they would frequently become bad-tempered and irritable ere you said anything to oppose them. Aragorn was a smart man and readily agreed to Harry's plan.

"We make for Helm's Deep. The fortress refuge of the kingdom of Rohan, where King Theoden bid his people to retreat to."

"Brilliant!" Harry said now, his cheeks aglow with enthusiasm. "So, Helm's Deep it is then."

Naught five minutes later, the ranger found himself dangling from the old wizard's gnarled hand, his own holding onto Brego's stirrup. A curious feeling of lightness encompassed him, as if he could float away with the breeze, and Brego suddenly weighed no more than a mere feather, if that. "Farks" had turned out to be Fawkes, the strange orange bird, who, as it also turned out, had even stranger magic.

Aragorn gazed about in wonder, finally knowing what Harry must have seen every time he rode his broom. His eyes were where no man's eyes had ere sighted before. The rocks and trees below him seemed mere specks on the ground.

Fangorn looked immense even from this distance, yet still old and proud, clumped in rigidness. Beyond Fangorn and its surrounding mountains stood the high tower of Orthanc, no more than a paltry toothpick. Aragorn could even see Helm's Deep at this very moment, sitting amidst neighbouring mountain ranges, so high up were they. He had ne'er travelled so swiftly before. Most
times the ground below looked only as a haze of colours and shapes, blurring together as if satchels of paint had been spilt.

The ranger also imagined he should feel the biting coldness of the wind against his skin as he was certain they were higher than mountain tops, but he did not. All he did feel was a pleasant tingle. The magic of Fawkes, he suspected, was once again at fault.

Harry flew by their sides, occasionally glancing down at his wand. Oft times he would confer with either Albus or Aragorn, then he would glance down again.

"Is that Helm's Deep?" Harry shouted over the roar of the wind.

Aragorn nodded. His belly was suddenly feeling a might tumble-turvy, and did not trust himself to speak, lest he... well...

"All right," Harry muttered. "Professor..." and Aragorn did not understand ought else he said, as it was all in his foreign tongue. Albus and Harry conferred with each other a little while, then they stopped their progress of flight completely. Aragorn had to shake his head at these wizards. T'was an odd sight they made for sure, hanging together in nothingness with only a bird's tail feather to keep them from falling.

"Aragorn," Harry said, and the ranger to look at his young friend. "We're thinking about apparating to this King Theoden. Apparating is, er, how am I going to explain this?... Apparating is going from one place to another in a split second."

Aragorn was silent for the nonce. "This is possible?" he finally questioned.

"Er, yeah," Harry said, then shrugged apologetically. "Just to warn you though... what?"

Aragorn was shaking his head. "Tis only that I hate it when you say that. Some strange new wonder is wont to greet me in return."

Harry merely grinned. "I have to warn you because it's not really a pleasant sensation. It's going to feel like... a giant hand is squeezing you through a tiny pipe."

The ranger gaped. "What?"

Oh, it won't kill you," Harry said quickly at the uneasy look on Aragorn's face. "It feels unpleasant to people who aren't used to it but it doesn't last very long so it's not so horrible. You get used to it, though!" Harry finished cheerfully.

Aragorn merely shook his head. "I would not think that I should 'get used to it.' I do not plan on travelling this way again. But, I have trusted you thus far, and your magic has only been used to help. I have observed this. I will continue to trust you, Harry, if only because you are my friend and I know you are an honourable child."

Though Harry bristled at being called child, a wonderfully pleasant feeling blossomed in her chest nonetheless. Pride. "Thank you," she said sincerely.

Aragorn nodded sideways in return.

Harry grabbed hold of his arm. "We're ready, Professor," she told Dumbledore, who'd been watching her and Aragorn's conversation with knowing eyes.

"Very good," Dumbledore said and looked up at Fawkes.
"A moment, I bid you," Aragorn interjected. Harry reached out to grab Dumbledore's sleeve to stop him from giving the call. "Was it apparating what you did when you appeared before me in that blaze of fire?

Harry nodded. "The fire was because of Fawkes being a creature of fire."

"As I thought. I fear the reaction such a travel would inflict of Brego, he being a simple horse. Not to mention the fright we might give to King Theoden and those around him should we appear before him so fantastically."

Harry looked at him consideringly and relayed Aragorn's words to Dumbledore.

"How about we fly down and land near the gates then? That should be easy enough."

Shouts of exultation from the gate guards as they recognized Aragorn. Exclamations to open the gates abounded and the ranger led his two companions forward into the stone fortress, Brego following docilely under his hand.

"Lord Aragorn!" cried one of the young guards standing by the gates. "We thought you were dead! King Theoden and your men will be most relieved!"

Aragorn nodded his acknowledgment. "It pleases me that I can lighten their grief if only this small bit. Where is his Highness at this time?"

It was then that the young man noticed Aragorn's odd companions. He gave them wondering looks but answered all the same. "My lord and his council have been tucked away in the Great Hall, planning the defense since early this morning. I think them to be there yet."

"Thank you, lad. We will go there now."

"Might I take your horse to stable, my lord?" the young guard asked as the group made to leave. "T'would be no trouble."

Aragorn handed Brego over with a nod of gratitude and ushered the two wizards through the crowd of refugees. As they walked, people nodded in respect at the sight of Aragorn, some ladies even curtsying with surprised looks on their faces. Looks of curiosity and small wonder were expressed when Harry and the headmaster were taken in, Fawkes drawing many admiring looks.

Harry took in the sights of the stone fortress with an expression of curiosity. Though it was distinctly rustic in architecture, the masonry and layout reminded her a bit of Hogwarts. Certain not magical but still awe-inspiring in it's magnitude. She noticed Professor Dumbledore doing a similar assessment.

"Aragorn," Harry sighed as they climbed up another level of the castle. "Exactly where is it that we're going? Where are the others?"

"The Great Hall is within one of the higher levels of Helm's Deep, a place away from the gates to retreat to should the enemy enter the city."

"Is it much farther?"

"Three more levels up, by my reckoning," was Aragorn's unbothered answer, as if he had all the time in the world to climb stairs.
Harry stopped short and shot him an incredulous look that he returned blankly as if not understanding what was troubling her. She turned to Professor Dumbledore in exasperation and the older wizard gave her an amused look.

"Shall I assume you wish to make use of Fawkes' convenient means of travel now?" Dumbledore asked blithely.

"Yes, sir, I do."

Harry lightly grabbed onto a tail feather as Fawkes spread his wings dramatically and flashed an arm out to latch on to one of Aragorn's arms just before they disappeared in a flash of combustion that badly shocked passerby.

One second they were on a well-trodden stone road within the safety of Helm's Deep out gate and in the next second they were all on fire. Harry felt a squeezing sensation that was very like a giant hand wrangling the life out of her, or maybe as if she was a cork popping out of a bottle of champagne, before voices raised in heavy alarm greeted them. Shouts, exclamations, Harry even thought someone yelled something about Saruman and his magic before Fawkes deposited them gently onto the floor.

Aragorn immediately bent forward to catch his weight on his knees as he fought with himself to not heave up with little he had in his stomach onto the already dusty floor. He groaned and rubbed at his forehead with the heel of his palm while the two wizards present appeared ultimately unruffled, taking in the scene they had popped into.

They had landed in the Great Hall, though not at all near the size of Hogwarts'. People rushed about in complete panicked confusion at the spectacle they had no doubt made by popping in like that. Though there were not a lot of people, Harry had to admit. Boromir, Legolas, and Gimli she all knew. They were standing off to one side, their mouths wide open. The few other people that were there must have been the king's council but she figured the king must have been among them as well. The man in question had shoulder length blonde hair and a beard of similar colour. He held himself like the members of the Wizengamot did and he was richly dressed.

Boromir, Legolas, and Gimli finally snapped out of whatever stupor they had been in, and rushed to their sides. Legolas and Boromir actually hugged them and Gimli patted them so hard on the back in his happiness that their knees buckled. Both she and Aragorn were greeted with various degrees of disbelief.

"My eyes must be deceiving me," Boromir said, his hands on both of one of their shoulders. "First Gandalf, and now you two. Will a member of this Fellowship never stay dead? And dead you should be, the both of you, yet here you stand as if nothing ever happened. And the manner of your return . . ." he trailed off as he spotted Fawkes and Dumbledore standing politely off to the side, a bit behind Harry.

There was silence in the hall as all looked at Dumbledore. They could clearly see he was a wizard, but not like any wizard they had ever come across.

"What goes on here?" the king said, looking as if he could barely contain his shock, bewilderment, shock, and annoyance all at once.

Harry, jittery at getting to meet an actual king, shoved her elbow into Aragorn's side and mouthed, "Introduce us," when it looked like he was going to brush aside their dramatic entrance.

Taking a hint, Aragorn ushered them toward the bewildered king and said, "King Theoden. May I
Harry Potter, a dear friend of mine and wizard of notable skill, along with a mentor, erm, here he paused and glanced at Harry beseechingly, obviously not yet capable of pronouncing the headmaster's name.

"Professor Albus Dumbledore," Harry chimed in. "Highly respected among my people. Known for his skill."

"They have come to aid us," Aragorn continued.

Harry and Dumbledore then bowed in the proper manner for greeting royalty, a practice not often used since Wizarding Britain currently had no royal family and the people rarely came across foreign royalty. Like a cross between regular bowing and a curtsy, they tucked their right leg behind the left, bent their knees, spread the right side of their robes, pressed their left hand to their chest, and inclined their upper body. Straightening, they lifted the hand they had pressed to their chest out toward the blonde king with their palms upward, as if asking him to dance, showing with their motions how elevated he was in their regard. It was a movement Harry had learned during her fourth year during dance lessons for the Yule Ball.

It was nothing King Theoden had ever seen before and he didn't know how to react beyond inclining his head deeply in response. "I welcome you. Your assistance is most appreciated."

"Introductions aside," Aragorn interjected. "I regret to inform you that an army of Uruk-Hai marches forth from Isenguard. Ten thousand strong at least."

Theoden froze. "Ten thousand?" He repeated, horror visible on every feature of his face.

"They were bred for a single purpose, to destroy the world of men. They will be here by nightfall tomorrow."

"So, that was Gandalf I blasted across the clearing in Fangorn," Harry observed as she and Gimli made their way down to the Deeping Wall where Dumbledore and assorted other curious peoples were standing by the sewer entrance. "Was he hurt then?"

"Nay," Gimli said hoisting his battleaxe over one shoulder. "Just petulant, as usual. But wizards tend to be that. . ." he trailed off and looked at Harry, as if thinking it wouldn't be good for his health to finish that sentence in front of a wizard.

Harry laughed. "It's alright, Gimli. Gandalf is kinda grumpy sometimes."

Gimli chuckled, obviously pleased by Harry's good mood. "Aye, he is that. Now what is that fellow up to?"

It was the day after they had arrived and Harry was taking the time to explore the fortress with Gimli accompanying her. They now came across the headmaster setting wards up.

Dumbledore, with Harry's wand in hand, was flicking away — much to the bafflement of the people around him. Phosphorescent blue, white, and gold beams of light would shoot out occasionally to be absorbed into the wall. "He's putting up wards. Sort of like extra walls made of magic. He's reinforcing the wall that already exists. Making them stronger in other words."

Gimli nodded approvingly. "Theoden must use all the help he can get. I must admit my spirits have long since risen once I knew we would have the use of two wizards in this battle."

Harry didn't want to tell Gimli that there wouldn't even really be a battle after Dumbledore was
finished. She'd already garnered enough odd looks this afternoon; she didn't need one from her friend also.

They had reached the sewer entrance. People hurriedly made way when they saw Harry. A young boy of no more than three hid behind his father's leg when Harry smiled at him.

"Worry not, lad," Gimli whispered to her. "They think elves are strange folk, and wizards even stranger. Your Albus' magic is no doubt scaring them out of their wits."

"Then why do they stay and watch?" Harry asked.

"Curiosity has been the downfall of many a man," Gimli said wisely, and Harry imagined that if he had a pipe, the dwarf would be puffing it now.

"Good afternoon, Harry," Dumbledore said as she and Gimli came to a standstill beside him, making sure not to step in the large puddle of water that sat under and a little ways after the wall. He nodded to Gimli in greeting. "I have yet to do the main gate, but the wall is almost completed. Have you told your friends not to worry...?"

"No..." Harry said slowly, and looked away when Dumbledore stared at her reprovingly.

"You cause them to worry needlessly then."

"I don't want them looking at me strangely, Professor," Harry defended herself. "They've never seen this sort of magic before. In fact, magic in this world is hardly ever used defensively; it just doesn't work that way. They wouldn't understand. It's better if they see if for themselves."

"If you think that's best..."

"I do," Harry said.

"I'll leave the decision up to you then. You would know more than myself on such a matter," Dumbledore sighed and flicked his wand one last time. "That's that. I'm off to the gate now."

Before Dumbledore had a chance to disappear, Harry asked, "That won't stop us from being able to go out again, will it?"

Dumbledore chuckled. "I am no amateur, my dear." And with a muted crack that left the surrounding people skittering back in awe and terror, Dumbledore disapparated. He re-apparated in front of the gates (where luckily, the king, Aragorn, Boromir, Legolas, and couple of other important officials had only just vacated) and started casting spells almost immediately.

Gimli sputtered. "Such power. And you can do that?"

"No," Harry said, a little wistfully. "Not yet. I'm not old enough. I'll start learning when I go back to school but I have to wait until I'm seventeen to get a license."

"And you like it not," Gimli observed. "Very handy in a tight spot, that technique."

"I never thought about it, but I guess your right," Harry said thoughtfully. "It's just, in my world nearly every wizard I know can apparate, no matter if they're evil or good. I guess it doesn't seem really important when the other side can do it too."

"But you are not in your world now, lad," the dwarf pointed out.

Harry blinked, surprised. "You're right, Gimli. I can learn it right now if I want to, and the Ministry
Harry obviously didn't know what a Ministry was by the look on his face, but he seemed pleased that Harry was pleased.

"Now, what's a person got to do around here to have a proper bath?" Harry asked. She would have pitched her tent in the room she had been given but it felt awfully ungrateful and exceedingly odd even for her. It was only her exhaustion from the night before that stopped her from asking for one the night before.

"A bath?" Gimli echoed incredulously, as if he had never heard of such an absurd thing. "You're nowhere near a state of needing a bath! You are cleaner than the elf is at this point and that's with his delicate elvish sensibilities."

Harry snorted and crossed her arms. "Among my people, it's common to bathe once at day at the very least. I normally have two, as do many of my friends. You'll excuse me if I'm feeling grimy from not washing up the night before."

"Wizard's and their oddness," Gimli grumbled, leading her up the stairs they had taken to enter the sewers after he had realized Harry wasn't joking. "Two baths a day, now there's a waste of water if I ever heard one." He glanced up to see Harry amused expression and sighed in resignation. "We'll get you your bath, little wizard, though why you would want one when you're sure to get dirty from orc blood later, I don't know."

Harry had been lead back to her room where a servant had been sent out to fetch her a bathing tub and plenty of water. The servants were far too busy touching up the armour to warm it for her, but she had re-acquired her wand from Professor Dumbledore as he had already finished warding not long after she started hankering for a bath. While her professor napped on a day bench in the Great Hall, Harry luxuriated in warm water.

It was with freshly scrubbed body and clean clothes that she then ambled back through the halls to where she hoped to find one of her friends. Perhaps Boromir would like to teach her how to better wield the sword she had received from the Elves. She didn't use the sword as a general rule — and really, she didn't need one with her wand — but to be able to use it at least passingly appealed to her.

The sounds of raised voices that had her slowing her pace and moving more hesitantly.

"I want to fight!" a distinctly feminine voice snapped. There were sounds of furniture scraping across the ground and things pounding against stone.

"It is not your place to take up arms!" A familiar male voice growled back. It was the voice of King Theoden.

Harry paused at the corner she was about to round and peek covertly around it. King Theoden stood in the middle of the corridor, expression as unbending as a brick, a posse of three guards with him, shifting uncomfortably as they stood facing a woman standing in the entrance of a bedroom, staring down their king.

She was thin woman, as thin as Harry but looked even thinner since she was several inches taller. She was exceedingly pale, similar in colouring to the Swedish people of Harry's world, hair like corn-silk and eyes a light colour that Harry couldn't distinguish at that distance. She wore a sort of leather vest over a white gown of better quality than Harry had seen on any other woman in the fortress. She stood braced against the open doorway, a fierce expression on her face.
"I can fight as well as any of your men!" She answered back. "Far better than those untrained boys you have no qualms about suiting up and thrusting a sword into their hands."

"Eowyn, this is not the sparring with your instructor that you've always known. We will be under serious attack; we won't have time to be keeping an eye on you lest you be cut down by orc blades as you stand unprepared!"

"And yet it is perfectly fine for those boys and elderly men to be out there? Think you so little of me that I am now less than those who barely can hold there blade? Why should I be withheld from showing my valour? Shall I always be left behind when the Riders depart, to mind house while they win renown, and find food and beds when they return?"

"'Tis the lot of a woman's life to do just so!" the King roared. Eowyn glowered in response and Harry could not help the frown that found it's way onto her face as she listened to the conversation. She knew this was an era of little women's right, just like back in her own world, but that didn't mean she liked it any better. Harry could overlook the women and children being bundled off in the caves for protection, those were untrained women and innocent children, but it was clear from the way Eowyn held herself and her confidence that she knew how to wield a sword. It was understandable that King Theoden didn't want her near danger, what with her obviously being someone important to him, but to dismiss her capabilities in such a way was crossing a line.

"I've had enough of you attempting to sneak off with a set of armour to be able to join the battle when no one is looking," King Theoden continued, steeling his gaze. He motioned his guards to huddle in closer. To the blonde woman he said, "You will be confined to your room until the battle is over. We are fortunate that these sleeping quarters are close enough to the caves the other women will be in that you will be safe here."

"Confined!" Eowyn echoed, an outraged expression on her face.

"Confined," the King confirmed. "Locked in to be precise. My heart will be at ease knowing you are away from those vicious beasts we will be battling."

"You can't do this!" she protested as the guards began to close in on her. Harry couldn't stop the loud gasp that she sucked in at the sight. Knowing that the jig was up, she decided to behave as if she had only just stumbled across them instead of having stood there listening, Harry stepped out from around the corner and retreated back a step when eyes landed on her.

"Harry Potter," the king said as he saw who was before them. His eyes flickered to Eowyn before they returned to Harry. "Well met, young wizard. Aragorn informs me that you can perform magic useful outside of combat."

"Erm," Harry wasn't sure where he was going with this line of questioning. "Yes?"

"Would it be possible for you to magic up a lock that my niece will not be to pick, thus ensuring she stays in this room?" He waved a hand at the room in question with the woman in question watching him with aghast visage.

He wanted Harry to help in forcing his niece to stay in her room? Not only did he actually intend to lock her away like a shameful prisoner but he actually wanted a magic lock as well? Harry wasn't sure if she was more offended that she was being asked to assist in something that she fundamentally disagreed with or sympathetic with the other girl's plight at having an uncle willing to lock her up to get what he wanted.

Not that she could say any of that out loud; it was generally accepted that one did not contradict
royalty so outright, especially in front of their subjects.

Harry ended up stuttering out, "W-well, yes, I can but — "

"Excellent!" Theoden continued, apparently not noticing that Harry hadn't finished her statement. "I will leave it to you to restrain her then. Eowyn," he turned back to his furious niece with a pointed look. "I look forward to not seeing you on the battlefront." With that he turned away and strode down the hall, his guards following along.

There was a moment of shocked silence between the remaining two before, "Ooooooohh!" Eowyn huffed, stamping her foot in frustration. She smacked an open palm against her door before turning her glare onto Harry. "I supposed you will try to 'restrain' me now?"

"Wait a mo—"

"As if I need restraining!" the furious blonde continued on, not giving Harry enough time to reply. Clearly, she took after her uncle in that regard. "And it's outrageous that he would expect a scrap of nothing like you to be able to!"

Well, that was insulting. Harry scowled but wasn't given a word in edgewise.

"You don't even reach my chin but it's obvious from what I've heard that you will be out amongst them. Can you even wield a blade? My uncle claims you to be a wizard but everyone knows that wizards are old men, grey with age, so you are clearly not so; no magic a conjurer of common tricks can perform is of any use on a battle field. The thought of it is laughable!" She was really working herself up into a good froth.

The angry woman stalked up to Harry, a hand on her hip, the other gesticulating wildly."That an under-trained boy your age should have the chance to show his worth and claim glory in battle while I am pushed aside is injustice in its truest form!" Wait, what? "Boy? "Why should I not be granted my chance when those less capable are given said chance without a second thought? I am a Shield-Maiden of Rohan and I know the ways of a sword as well as any soldier currently sharpening his blade in the smithy!

"Oh, were that I was a man!" Eowyn lamented, overlooking the dark look on Harry's face. "If I were a man, I would have been free to join my brother when he rode east in his banishment instead of told to stay put and keep house. If I were a man, I could spar with the soldiers whenever I wanted instead of kept waiting until my instructor has time to teach a woman. If I were a man, I would be expected to fight along side my uncle and gain renown on the battle field like a true warrior of Rohan. I would be able to gain the honour I've always longed for!

"Curse the female form! You do not realize it, what with you being uneducated in the ways of women," — here Harry scowled more deeply — "but it is as if we are built to be useless in every way beyond minding children and keeping house! Soft flesh! Weak limbs! Such lack of strength in our arms that we must look to men to carry things for us. Useless, useless! What use are wide hips when they make it easier for us to be caught around the middle and tossed around? What use are bosoms when we are stabbed through the chest?

"Oh, were that I was a man," the distraught woman repeated, clenched at the roots of her hair. "If I was a man, I would not be plagued by such a restricted way of life!"

Harry had had quite enough. Not only had her gender been insulted, but she herself had been dismissed as useless. Declared useless because the snobby princess decided that Harry couldn't be what she said she was because she was too young, as well as doubly useless because she was a girl!
And then the blasted woman stood there moaning about how she'd rather be a man since men were apparently superior in every way. Harry knew this wasn't an age of gender equality but a woman outright insulting herself and every other woman just for being female was more than she could stand. All because she wanted glory; it was almost disgusting.

Harry strode forward and caught the blonde woman by her arm, startling her from her pity party.

"What gentleman would manhandle a lady so?" Eowyn protested as Harry dragged her back into her room. She was trying to use her gender to her advantage for gentler treatment now despite denouncing it not half a moment before? Outrageous.

"No gentleman that I know, though it doesn't matter either way as I am no gentleman."

As Eowyn stumbled into the middle of the room where Harry had almost shoved her, Harry pulled out her wand and pointed it at the offended blonde woman. Eowyn straightened cautiously, eyes on the wand aimed at her.

"Being what you are born as is not good enough for you? Too weak to make the best of what you've got?"

"You know nothing of the troubles of being a woman!" Eowyn protested. "Too weak is what we are from the beginning!"

"I know nothing about being a woman?" Harry parroted back, her voice pitching higher than usual, growing shrill in her growing ire. She drew herself up and assumed the haughtiness she had seen on many Slytherin children. "Perhaps I haven't introduced myself. Hadrienne Jaimee Potter, Lady Black, Countess of Souscolline. I like to think that I don't have to learn how to be a woman, being female from birth already!"

The gaping visage of Lady Eowyn did nothing to cool Harry's raging temper. Jerks and twirls of her wand followed the pattern she had memorized to change the gender of the slobbering beast of a dog that Dudley had bought that summer to bother her. She had learned it and used it to serve as a warning to Dudley of what she could be pushed into doing should be keep messing with her. The spell now had a new purpose.

A sharp jab accompanied Harry's comment of, "Since you want nothing more than to be a man, I find it within myself to grant you your wish! Be a man then!"

Skin rippled and limbs contorted as Eowyn's body reconfigured itself. Sounds of tearing filled the room as the blonde became too big to fit into her dress. She gasped and groaned in confusion and fright but Harry felt no sympathy for her, already knowing that the process was not painful, having already tried it out on herself once.

Harry strode purposefully through the door and slammed it shut decisively behind her. She tossed up several locking charms she had learned from sharing a dorm room with people that didn't understand personal space, like Lavender, and stalked off without a backwards glance, fuming.

She was then caught up with business of the upcoming battle and would not give Eowyn another thought until much later.

The sky continued to darken in the few hours that Gimli and Harry travelled around the keep. Occasionally they met up with either Legolas, Boromir, or Aragorn and they would join them for quick tour. Already the alleys had been emptied of all women and most children. The ones nine and
above were to fight in the battle. Harry watched as a little boy that looked no bigger than eight got outfitted in full armour complete with sword and shield. Harry shook her head but she smiled. *They won't need to fight.*

Everyone insisted that Harry get armour at least, even though she told them not to bother.

"You're magic cannot always protect you from an orc arrow you cannot see ere it strikes you in the back," Aragorn said in a very fatherly way, and yanked a suit of chain mail down over her head.

"But Aragorn," Harry protested, her voice muffled.

"Not a word, young one."

And that was the end of Harry's protesting.

Harry, Gimli, and Boromir were puttering around the armoury, the dwarf describing in minute detail the strength, durability, steel, etc, of every sword they came across. "Of course, not as good as Dwarvish make, but then, there can be no match," he said very conversationally.

Boromir snorted. "Axes and scythes mayhap, but sword-make I must credit to the Elves."

Gimli blustered indignantly. "I'll have you know, Son of Denethor, that Elvish weapons are made more for the show than for the strength. Why look at this." He plucked Harry's sword from its sheath and gave it a few experimental waves. "As a light as a feather. Not much damage can be done I'd wager, whilst using this. An axe, strong enough to sever Uruk heads with its mighty steel, give me, and we shall see which weapon will come out the winner!" He emphasized this sentence by swinging the sword around once more, accidentally nicking his other hand in the process. "Oh!" he yelped, and sucked on the offended finger.

Harry and Boromir exchanged looks then had to turn away when they threatened to burst out laughing.

"You ought to be careful with that, Gimli," Harry said. "Elvish swords are quite sharp, I gather."

Gimli merely harrumphed and grumbling, handed Harry back her sword.

It was around this time that Legolas and Aragorn got into an argument about something that no one could understand, as they spoke in Elvish. But they sort of got the gist when Aragorn shouted, "Then I shall die as one of them!" before storming out of the armoury.

It was quiet after that.

Harry decided to find Dumbledore as he had disappeared for a nap a couple of hours ago after the wards had all been put up. It didn't take her long. Her headmaster sat lightly snoring at the end of the great hall, Fawkes perched on an armrest. Theoden and his councillor, Gamling, were bent over a table, no doubt organising a strategy. They looked up when Harry entered.

"Sorry, I just wanted to talk to Dumbledore, but he's asleep now so I guess I'll just go." She turned around, intent on walking out of the double doors, but the king's voice stopped her.

"I would like very much to speak with you, young Potter."

Harry tried to act like she wasn't surprised, and walked towards the table. Gamling nodded at her, looking a little wary. "Erm, it's just Harry, if you want."
The king blinked. "Very well. Harry. I have spoken to Boromir, Denethor's son, and he has told me of the magic you and Albus Dumbledore have placed around this keep. And I have seen this magic with my own eyes. Rohan is not your country, nor does Helm's Deep hold any special significance for you. You did not need to expend the effort to defend it, yet you have done so. For that I thank you as well."

"I didn't really do anything," Harry protested. "I mean, Dumbledore. . ."

Theoden flapped a hand. "Nonsense. You did much. Aragorn spoke very highly of you when he thought you still dead. He told me of your deeds and of your courage."

_Aragorn told a king that I'm brave?_ Harry tried not to smile. "Okay."

"I was much heartened with the knowledge that two wizards would fight with us against Saruman's foul abominations."

"You're not the only one," Harry said. Was this the way to talk to a king?

"I imagine not. Many are feeling the weight of impending battle ease most considerably now the rumours have spread that you and Master Dumbledore are in our midst."

"Oh, well, it was nothing really."

"Modest, as most wizards, I see," the king smiled almost fondly. "Nothing changes in that at least."

Harry only smiled politely.

The king smiled back, glanced at Gamling, then Dumbledore, then back at Harry. "I will leave you alone." He gestured for Gamling to follow him out the doors, stopped for a moment to place a hand on Harry's shoulder, then both men were gone.

Harry stared at the doors the king had just walked through. She had the feeling Theoden was very grateful but Harry never really did well with praise. That was more Hermione's forte. But this time, she felt she should accept it gracefuly and continue on. Theoden had seemed almost. . . relieved.

Harry shook her head and walked up to Dumbledore. She stopped in front of the throne chair, staring at Fawkes, who stared back.

"_Ahem, Professor._"

Dumbledore made a mumbling sound and opened his eyes blearily.

Harry frowned. Dumbledore didn't usually wake up like that, did he? "Are you alright, sir?"

Dumbledore smiled wearily and sat up in a more comfortable position. "A little tired, Harry. The magic I expended in order to cast the wards wore me out unfortunately."

Harry sat by the step next to the day bench her professor had appropriated and looked up. "Is that even possible? I thought we couldn't really exhaust our magic. It's part of us, isn't it? That's what Hermione says anyway."

Dumbledore nodded approvingly. "Yes, that's true. But ever since I came to this world I find myself becoming more and more. . . fatigued."

Harry sat up in alarm. "What? Are you going to be alright?"
Dumbledore held up his hands. "Calm down, dear girl. For now, I'm fine. I just shouldn't use anymore magic."

Harry relaxed at that, but something was niggling at her thoughts nevertheless. "How come that hasn't ever happen to me? I used a lot of magic when I first came here."

"That is because you belong here, Harry," Dumbledore explained, enjoying the shocked look on his student's face. "You were meant to be here. I wasn't. My very presence in this universe is causing a disruption of sorts, which explains my tiredness. It is, in theoretical fact, telling me to go away. If I were a muggle I expect I would have passed out long ago. . . That is why I'm going to have to go back soon. After the battle is over," he added when Harry opened her mouth to object. "If I leave now I suspect all my wards will leave with me. Similarly, if I use anymore magic I am likely to fall unconscious, thereby destabilizing the wards anyway. I cannot use anymore magic, but I will stay to keep the wards up."

The only thing Harry could think to say to all that was, "What about Fawkes, is he tired?"

Dumbledore allowed himself a smile. "Remarkably, no. He is immortal, after all, and entirely magical. Perhaps it takes longer for him? As it took longer with me in comparison to a muggle. Don't fret, Harry," Dumbledore said kindly, patting her on the head as a beloved grandfather would do. "It was meant to be. Only you can exist here comfortably, and the rest of us must content ourselves with hearing about your adventures after the fact. It is a lesson one must learn, and I'm happy to say that I have learnt it. No more dimension travelling for me.

"I do apologize," he continued. "It appears that I won't be able to keep my promise of staying with you."

"No, it's alright, Professor," Harry protested, more concerned for his well-being that having him all to herself. She glad at least that Dumbledore had come here just in time to help against the orcs. "It's not exactly your fault, is it? I should have known something like this would happen, though. It's typical of Middle Earth. But you're all right to stand up and walk around and all that? You're not going to pass out?"

"No, no," Dumbledore said cheerfully, and as if to prove that he could in fact stand up, he did just that. "It's only if I start using an abundant amount of magic will I get tired more quickly. This way, I have at least a day before I am completely worn out. So I assume."

"Good. But if you do happen to feel tired, I want you to go back to Hogwarts right away. It's not worth it to risk you in such a way."

Harry felt her cheeks flush as Dumbledore continue to gaze at her. She even thought she saw his eyes glisten beneath the half-moon glasses, but that could have been a trick of the candlelight.

"I promise," Dumbledore said quietly. "After all, I will meet you there as soon as I get back."

Harry frowned for a moment, confused. But then smiled, remembering that no time would pass on Earth while she was in Middle Earth, which meant she and Dumbledore would, in a sense, show up at the same time. Bloody confusing, as Ron would say.

A short while later after asking several boys her age — all of whom looked on in awe as though she were some sort of mystical elf-goddess or something — where Aragorn was, (and getting stuttered reply's in return, one of which she was positive finished with the title "milord." What was with that? Did everyone around here think she was a boy?) Harry trotted into the back keep and down the stairs to the now almost empty armoury. Sure enough, Aragorn Legolas, and Gimli were there, chatting.
away happily, the elf and the ranger apparently having forgiven each other. Boromir, Harry saw, was no where to be found.

"Ah, Harry!" Gimli announced, looking comical in overly-long chain-mail. "Perhaps you can settle a debate."

"What, another one?"

"Cease your cheek, wee one!" Gimli growled, giving her a fond tap on the arm. "Though you might want to keep at it when the elf's back is turned," he added in a whispered aside. "Ahem, no, Legolas here was saying that he can best more than fifty Uruks this night, and I —"

"Let me guess," Harry injected, pretending to think, "You said you'd best over fifty-one, or something."

Aragorn's hearty laughter cut off the dwarf's surprise. "Harry knows us too well, and Gimli especially."

"So what's to settle?" Harry asked after the chuckling had died down. "I guess you can keep count."

"But we wish to make it more interesting," Legolas said, leaning a hand on his bow. "I suggested a wager, but the dwarf is too lily-livered, afraid that his beard will be shaven off —"

"Lily-livered?" Gimli sputtered.

"Sorry," Harry breathed between guffaws, but still able to observe Legolas and Aragorn's smirks. "What will happen if Gimli wins?"

"You settled on a wager then?" Legolas asked, but didn't wait for Harry to answer. "I will be forced to . . ." he grimaced. Whatever it was, it mustn't be pleasant.

"What?"

Gimli said only one word. "Bald."

Harry did not even have a chance to react as a haunting, yet beautiful noise sounded into the room. As one, they turned in the direction of the sound.

Legolas' eyes lit up. "That is no orc horn!" he said, and dashed out of the room and up the flight of stairs, Aragorn following. Harry and Gimli exchanged looks, but stayed where they were.

"Elves," Gimli said unnecessarily. "I am grateful for their presence, mistake me not, but even now more than ever do I wish for a company of Dwarves to come. We would split the Uruks' shields with our mighty axes and cleave their heads in two! Now come, help me out of this Eru-damned thing!"

Harry assisted Gimli out of his suit of chain-mail (with the dwarf grunting and grumbling, and both of them sweating with the effort. "Too tight across the chest," Gimli growled) and they both spent the next couple of minutes searching for one more akin to his size.

"Look here," Gimli blustered, appearing insulted as he held up a very small suit. "They have them in hobbit size, but not in Dwarf!"

Harry snorted and shook her head. "It was probably meant for a small boy."

Harry was just about to offer her services with an enlargement charm when: "Ho!" Gimli breathed, his eyes lighting on something in the corner. He absently thrust the hobbit chain-mail into his Harry's
chest, bounded to the corner, and from under a ratty looking shield pulled out — his exact measurement in chain-mail. "Ha ha! We lucked out! Faith, I say. Always have faith!" And he did a little jig for good measure.

And that was how Haldir found them.

Harry could only stare open-mouthed at the elf that had just come down the stairs as if floating. Aragorn, Boromir, and Legolas (looking immensely pleased) stood beside him.

"An entire troupe of Elves has arrived, with Haldir as their Captain," Legolas told them excitedly, dashing forward to grab each of them by the shoulder. "Near three hundred warriors. Now come, we must. . ." He looked around, a frown appearing between his brows. "But where is Master Dumbledore?"

"Dumbledore's already done his part," Harry answered, looking down. "He's exhausted his magic putting up those wards. He's resting now, but he'll probably stroll by later and check to see if everything's holding up."

Dumbledore had wanted to be where the action was, but Harry hadn't wanted to hear of it. "You can't use magic, Professor. If by some miracle the orcs manage to access Helm's Deep, you won't be able to protect yourself. And you're getting weaker," Harry had scolded, ushering Dumbledore back into the Great Hall.

"Stroll?" Haldir repeated disbelievingly. "This will be a battle! One does not take a – a stroll into battle!"

"And a big cheery hello to you too," Harry said dryly. Gimli was the only one who made any sort of funny noise. Aragorn just sighed, and Legolas looked disappointed. Harry rolled her eyes. "Look, maybe an elf can't take a stroll into battle, but Professor Dumbledore certainly can, and not end up getting hurt in the process. We have. . . methods. But that doesn't matter, as no one will be getting hurt."

"And you can be so sure of that?" Haldir asked incredulously.

"No, not one hundred percent sure," Harry admitted. "But nothing is certain is it?"
T he days past had been lush indeed. Bright tangles of colour weaved around the horizon at dawn and came back all the more magnificent at dusk. Gandalf thought to himself just how good it felt knowing the sun would always shine no matter if Sauron won or not.

After riding hard for two or more days Gandalf had found the Rohirrim encamped upon an open plain just to the south of the Westfold mountain ranges.

Eomer had exclaimed with all the passion of the Rohirrim blood in his veins when the wizard had ridden upon them unexpectedly.

"We thought you dead!" he had cried, weeping tears of joy. His was not the only dry eye, and Gandalf had been unexpectedly moved. Of course he was known in Rohan quite well, but he had thought only as the Grey Pilgrim Wanderer who occasionally took it upon himself to abscond with Theoden's prized horses, and generally created havoc in the king's stables with his wizard muttering. Never had he expected the sort of welcome a long, lost grandfather might deserve, yet he realised that was what he was to these good people; a grandfather who lived forever, and might some times wander into their lands to tell them stories of old, and stories of their own grandfathers.

But still they mostly remembered him for his love of Theoden's horses. The Rohirrim had stared at Shadowfax in silent appreciative awe, no doubt remembering that this horse had in fact belonged to their king before the wizard had come along. Gandalf had let them their little musings, but after a moment or so, scolded them. There were less unimportant things to be doing, he had told them, and, after explaining the affair of Wormtongue and his treachery and the king's subsequent recovery, finally got them up and moving.

"So my Uncle is free at last of Saruman's poison." Eomer said now in a very satisfied sort of way. "These are good tidings. Rohan will be enslaved no longer!"

Gandalf allowed himself a small smile. "Yes, Eomer. And no one, I am sure, is gladder than you of this happening."

Eomer smiled a brief moment, then his mighty shoulders slumped as if a great weight were pushing down on them. "But tell me, Gandalf. Is my sister well? The last I saw..." Eomer trailed off.

Gandalf noticed a thickly gloved hand clench into a fist at his side.

"If you are worrying about Wormtongue and his perverted affections for Eowyn, have no more worry, for that lecherous snake is no longer among us and Aragorn has dealt with him in his own way."

"By pardoning him?" Eomer scoffed.

"Sometimes an act of mercy will be all the more better for both parties in the end," Gandalf said sternly.

"The end of what? Bah, you still speak in riddles, wizard!"

"You are not the first to have told me," Gandalf said. "But come, enough of this talk. We must ride swiftly and you are distracting with your endless questions. Saddle your mount." Then Gandalf had ushered Shadowfax to the already assembling cavalry, unaware that he had left a bemused young man behind.
Then it had been time to go.

Their journey had been steady and as well as any journey could go up until half a day ago when five of the horses threw a shoe. That cost them some time. Eomer took it in his stride, and even helped with the impromptu blacksmithing despite the fact that the delay lessened their chance of arriving at Helm's Deep on time.

They made a camp on the fourth day in an enclave between two large hills. If anyone was to come upon them they would not see them until they reached the top of the hills, so it made a good hiding spot. Gandalf sat cross-legged on his blanket, smoking a pipe with pipe weed he had purloined from the pack of one of the younger Rohirrim. Not as good as the Old Toby, but it would have to do in these circumstances, Gandalf thought. He'd attempted chewing on some of the smoked meat that Eomer had offered him, but after ten minutes or so gave up. Rohan men must have stronger teeth than wizards.

It was at this point that Gandalf noticed something. It was very easy to notice because it seemed to scream out of the very air around him. And not just that, but the ground as well. And the mountains, the trees, the rocks... At first Gandalf was taken aback by this sense, for he was still not as used to his new powers as he would have liked. All he knew was a feeling that whatever it was did not belong, as though the air, the mountains, the trees, and the rocks, and everything, were want to complain about this new happening. The whole world seemed to shift out of focus suddenly, as if the wizard were looking at it through an ocean of water, then everything shifted back with a small sigh.

The Rohirrim of course had not felt anything out of the ordinary. But Gandalf had, and with this feeling also came the knowledge that a great power had entered Middle Earth. It was not an evil power, quite the opposite actually. It took a while but Gandalf noted that the power he was feeling was, in fact, two powers. One was very old and ancient, even more so than Gandalf himself. The other was stronger, but not as old. That, at least, Gandalf was sure of.

At this point Hedwig showed up, perching herself on his knee. Gandalf was particularly surprised, for she had no letter attached to her leg, which suggested she had come here on her own accord. He sensed no great discomfort from the bird, which meant Frodo and Sam were, for the most part, well. There was a lingering of something distressing, but Gandalf did not think it to be associated with the two hobbits currently wandering Mordor. Rather, Gandalf felt it had to do with Harry. But since it was only a lingering sense, he guessed that whatever it was that had distressed her so was now passed.

_Harry must have awakened_, was Gandalf's thought, before sending the owl on her way. He had thought, also, of writing a letter to Frodo, but then decided against it, mostly for the fact that he had nothing to write with and no parchment to write on. Unless Eomer had a quill secreted in his breastplate Gandalf could not see what else he could use to write with.

The fact that Hedwig had shown up right after he had sensed this new power did not escape Gandalf's shrewd nose. But what connection Harry had with it, Gandalf did not know. He contented himself to wait until they reached Helm's Deep to find out.

Saruman sat on his throne head in hand. To the casual observer — not that there were any casual observers here, they wouldn't dare — he seemed as if in deep thought. But he was not, not at all. He was in fact extremely vexed. Something that had not happened in... ever. Not even when Gandalf threw his control of Theoden over into the swamps.

Three hours ago. It had been three hours ago now.
"Tell me again of this wizard, Wormtongue," Saruman said. "Leave out no detail, no matter how small."

The man known as Wormtongue shuffled forward from his spot against the far wall. "I did not see him, Sire. That dwarf only mentioned him in brief to one of his companions. The elf I think it was."

Saruman hit the man over the head with his staff. "Do not think, Wormtongue, you have not the mind for that! Tell."

Wormtongue stifled the urge to reach up and rub his throbbing head. "I guessed he was not among them anymore. They lost him in Fangorn, I thi—I believe."

_Fangorn_, Saruman thought gleefully. That opened many possibilities. But if this wizard was the new power Saruman had sensed, then... his face grew as a thundercloud at the unfinished thought and unbeknownst to him Wormtongue drew back in terror. "What was it that was said, exactly?"

"Theoden had discovered my treachery by this time and the dwarf said, 'If the wizard were to come now, he would put into a sleep so much like death that none could wake him. That will solve all problems.' I knew they spoke not of Gandalf, for he was standing right there. And I knew they spoke not of you for, i-it did not seem..."

"You did well," Saruman toned, to Wormtongue's relief. "You may leave now. Help yourself to some Old Toby in the stockroom."

"Thank you my Lord," Wormtongue gushed, fairly tripping over his feet in his haste to leave.

Saruman waited until he knew Wormtongue was out of hearing range before throwing his staff across the room. It hit the doors opposite and clattered onto the stone floor. The wizard got up to pace.

It was not possible, yet the proof had been easy to come by.

_Another Maia!_

Saruman snarled. It was not enough that the Valar had sent five wizards they now had to send one more. Or two more. He stopped in mid-pace. He had felt two powers, but the older of the two — one that was older than even Saruman himself — he was not certain that it was a wizard. It seemed too pure for that.

His pacing resumed.

Never had he expected this; that the Valar would intervene. Was it not enough that Gandalf had come back from the dead, and worse, that he had become a White Wizard?

_But no_, Saruman stopped again, _this new wizard has been around for longer than that. He travelled with Elrond's Fellowship. Who knows how long he has been here. Months, or even worse, years? And right under my nose._

He shook his head at his thoughts. No, years would not be right. Gandalf, the trusting fool, would have told him.

Unless this new wizard had secreted himself away until the time came to reveal his presence, then even Gandalf would not have known.

But that still did not explain the second power Saruman had sensed. The ancient power. Unless this
new wizard could somehow duplicate himself. . . as farfetched as that idea was, Saruman was at the point where he would believe anything.

It wouldn't do. If a wizard, or two wizards, this powerful were now traipsing around Middle Earth, then Saruman was not sure whether his army of uruk-hai could actually defeat those flea-bitten Rohirrim.

He would have to send something else. Something improvised. There weren't many options available, and it was not as if he could cook something up in a pot. It need not be most spectacular, only something that caused some damage, and hopefully annoyed the wizard, or even better, harmed the wizard long enough for his uruks to blow up the Deeping Wall.

Luckily, he was very clever.

Never had the atmosphere been grimmer as it was that night in Helm's Deep. The elves and their unexpected arrival, of course, helped to better that atmosphere as did the two wizards, but against ten thousand uruk-hai, smarter and stronger than the average orc, all carrying ladders, and spears, and orcish weapons, and. . . well. . . the men thought it was all rather pointless. But, prepare to fight they did, stationing themselves along the walls and behind the walls, and a couple standing by the entrance to the caves where the women were hiding. The elves commandeered an entire right quarter of the keep, and then some.

A few of the older boys, ten and seven winters or thereabouts, were inclined to tilt their heads and look for that mysterious Istar with the youthful face and the strange green eyes, but seldom did they spot him. It seemed he was with the elves at one time, and the next they looked he was strolling out of the side doors, cheery as you please, chattering with Lord Aragorn. At one point he even seemed to be eating something. Roasted chicken if they were not mistaken. How one could eat at a time like this was beyond them. The uruks had yet to arrive, it was true, but they could still be seen on the horizon with their glowing torches held steadfastly aloft. Wizards, they decided, thinking back to Gandalf and his mysterious ways, were odd. They always seemed as if nothing could faze them.

Harry Potter herself was oblivious to this intense speculating. First she was woken from a short nap in the armoury — twenty pleasant minutes or so — by Legolas and some of his elven chums who were taking a tour around Helm's Deep. They had seemed taken aback that she had actually fallen asleep before the big battle at all.

"I was tired!" Harry had defended herself. "What use would I be if I fell asleep in the middle of it all?"

But this only served to make her appear even more strange to their eyes. Legolas, of course, thought the whole thing was amusing as he was used to Harry and her antics by now.

"Leave him be," he had said to the other elves in elvish. "If he wishes to sleep and save his strength, then all the better for him."

"Yeah," Harry had agreed, nodding along, not actually knowing what was being said but assuming Legolas had defended her.

Before Legolas could disappear with the other elves Harry had asked to borrow one of his arrows for a short while, promising to return it before the battle began — prompting an odd look from the blonde elf, but he had obliged. Harry gave him a cheeky wink before trotting off in the general direction of where the caves the women and children were hiding in, plans churning in her head.
Not too long after that, everyone had to be in position. After reappearing from where she had ran off to, Harry found herself scrunched in between Gimli and another elf with a pretty-sounding name, Elenril. Closely translated, it meant 'star gleam,' according to Aragorn, whom Harry had hailed in passing. He didn't speak Westron, but they had fun teaching themselves how to pronounce each others' names.

"Erenlil," Harry had attempted, scrunching up her face.

"No, no," the elf had replied in heavily accented Westron, waving his bow around as if to emphasis the seriousness of it all. "El-en-ril."

"Ell-en-rril. Elenril."

Harry must have gotten it right finally because Elenril had nodded, looking pleased.

The orcs were almost upon them now, and though they were taking a rather long time since they weren't running but marching in a steady gate. They were eventually close enough that Harry could make out some detail in their armour and shields. The elves, she was sure, could name her the number of every single crease and line on their faces as well as what they had for breakfast, likely. Harry was tempted to ask her new elven friend just how many wrinkles the leader had on his face, but after thinking it over, realised it wasn't exactly the appropriate time. That, and she wasn't sure she could make herself understood.

Harry turned around slightly in order to better see the mountain behind them. On a high, high ledge overlooking the keep from a vertical drop were about fifty elves.

"Reinforcements," Aragorn had explained when Harry asked why they were there. "In case the uruks breach the Deeping Wall."

Of course, Harry could only just see the elves as they were so high up. A faint glow permeating from their bodies was the only certain thing she could make out. Right behind was yet another contingent of elves acting as reinforcements also.

Harry leaned forward a little over the wall to better see the other side of Helm's Deep. Somewhat above the gate, but not completely, stood Theoden and his foremost councillors. Beside the king was Boromir decked out as heavily, if not more so, than Gimli; he even carried the ax he'd unearthed from under a pile of chain-mail in the armoury slung across his back. It had been the only ax besides Gimli's in the keep. Boromir, seeing her stare, gave her a nod and a smile as if to say that everything was alright. Harry smiled back, the exhilaration of the moment making her beam like the sun breaking through the clouds. Inexplicably, Boromir flushed a bit and looked away, an expression of confusion and something else mixing on his face.

Harry tilted her head in bemusement but let her eyes drift once more. Just as they landed on Haldir — who was staring unblinkingly and with a hint of dislike at the still approaching uruk-hai — it started raining.

Harry wrinkled her nose as she pointed her wand at her face. "Impervious."

Gimli, obviously seeing what Harry had done, asked quickly, "What was that spell you did?"

"It repels water," Harry explained, readjusting her Firebolt, which had tipped over onto the ground when she'd taken her wand out. "It'll make sure my face stays dry so I won't be blinded by the rain. Do you want a go?"

"I find myself intensely interested," Gimli admitted, stroking his ax. "If anything it will keep my
beard from tangling. You may perform this repelling water spell on my face also."

Harry sniggered a little at the proud dwarf but did as he asked.

By the time the orcs — uruks, Harry reminded herself — came to a standstill in front of the keep, tensions were high and irritable, but fear overrode any of that. Harry could almost taste it in the air. And if Harry could, the uruk-hai were sure to.

As Aragorn began speaking to the elves in what was obviously the standard pre-battle speech, Gimli and Legolas started a conversation of their own.

Harry had long since felt sorry for Gimli; the stone wall they were all standing behind came about chin-height to Harry, but the poor dwarf couldn't see over it at all.

"What is going on? What is happening out there?" Gimli was growling and jumping, trying to see over stones. But as dwarves weren't made to be lightweights, in addition with all that heavy armour he had on, Gimli didn't get very far in his pursuit.

"Shall I describe it to you," Legolas asked, smirking a little. "Or would you like me to find you a box?"

Gimli looked stumped for a moment — in fact an utterly bland look appeared on his face —but then he chuckled heartily. At this point Harry, who had been listening earnestly, thought it would be a good idea to assist Gimli as well as teasing Legolas, so discreetly, and with the utmost silence, pointed her wand and levitated the dwarf.

"*Levioso.*"

At first, no one seemed to notice anything, not even Gimli himself as he was still busy chuckling, but even a dwarf would realise something amiss when he was suddenly nose-height to his elven companion, and getting higher.

"Oh!" Gimli exclaimed when he finally looked down. There was a moment of pure disbelief as he blurted, "Now this is peculiar," before his arms flapped mechanically and he began breast-stroking the air.

The elves around Gimli scooted back, staring up at this utterly bizarre spectacle. *Who would have thought?* They seemed to think. *A flying dwarf!*

"Get me down! Get me down! Wizard! I know this is your doing!"

Legolas was laughing heartily, the tinkling sound drawing many curious looks, Aragorn among them, who now sported a half-grin, half-frown of disapproval on his face. The surrounding elves, having got over their shock, snorted behind their bow handles. Some turned their noses up at the spectacle, no doubt thinking that there was a time for fooling around, and this wasn't it. Harry would agree with them ordinarily, but she hadn't been able to resist the opportunity. Besides, the situation wasn't as dire as everyone was thinking... 

Aragorn shook his head at everyone and motioned for Harry to bring Gimli down. Grinning, Harry did so, glad to have provided some amusement at a time when things were getting too serious. She even thought she spotted Haldir covering up a smile, but that could have just been wishful thinking on Harry's part. Haldir could have been covering up a frown, as it were.

At the far end of the keep, having just observed this spectacle, Theoden King said to Boromir, Son of Denethor. "He's mad. This is a battle!"
"What do you expect of wizards?" was Boromir's fond reply.

"Now that was uncalled for!" Gimli was harrumphing to Harry after having been gently lowered back down. "Dwarves were meant to stay planted. Planted!" He emphasized the word by stomping his right foot each time he said it.

"But look at it this way," Harry said, affecting undertones of mysteriousness into her words like Trelawney was prone to do. "No other dwarf can say that they've ever floated before. You'll have something to tell your grandchildren at least. A story by the fire on a cold winter's night and all that."

Harry could see Gimli was pleased by the idea. "Aye, there is that," he said slowly.

"Besides, you were the one who wanted to see over the wall. I only gave you a little... push."

"I didn't see a thing," Gimli protested. "Too busy trying to get down. Shocked, I was. Shocked enough to miss the scenery. And what are you laughing about, elf?" Gimli demanded, turning to his friend. "I only need say the word and it will be you floating about our heads. You pointy-ears are light enough, as you are fond of saying. Soon you'll be lighter than the air if I have my way!"

"As are we all," Gimli agreed. "But what then of Aragorn? He flew to Helm's Deep by way of holding onto that Fee-niks bird. Was he not flying? Did Eru Illuvatar ordain that men must fly? I think not."

"You are being sneaky, Gimli," Legolas said, waving an arrow at the dwarf. "Using Aragorn as an excuse. But do not forget, Aragorn is to be a King of Men. He is allowed certain liberties."

"Pah! Elves and their riddling ways. You are the sneaky one, not I!"

"See what you have started?" Aragorn said, leaning in behind Harry to whisper in her ear. "Now they are bringing me into it. Enough, friends!" he added loudly. "The time for battle is come, and pray leave your verbal sparring for a day more suited to it."

"'Twas not sparring," Gimli said steadily, "but friendly banter. But yes, I would rather fight the Uruk-hai. My ax shall taste evil blood tonight, and plenty, I am hoping, shall be left for the rest of you!"

With that said, everyone became serious once more.

The uruk-hai were banging against their armour and chanting in their guttural language — sounding as though Hagrid's three-headed dog, Fluffy, had taken up residence in their throats. Aragorn yelled something in elvish and Harry had to duck to Gimli's height as Elenril's elbow almost knocked into her. The elves were getting their bows ready and armed. On the other side of the keep, Harry could hear Theoden do the same to his soldiers.

"A fine mess we're in," Gimli muttered.

Harry slid down against the wall at her back until her bottom hit cold stone. There she arranged her legs so they leaned up against her chest, and got comfortable. Elenril's eyes flicked down to her, puzzled, but Harry just smiled. She wondered what the elvish word for 'waiting' was, but couldn't be bothered bothering Legolas or Aragorn for the translation.

Gimli had watched her go through this business with a suspiciously raised brow. "Not so fine a
mess," Harry muttered back to him, waving at the elves standing before her, some of whom had also glanced perplexingly. "Soon everyone will be sitting down here, or going to have dinner, or talking, or sleeping, or whatever. At least for a little bit."

"If that is the case," Gimli growled, plonking himself down next to Harry, "I shall do the same. More of your wizardry, no doubt. What have you and Master Dumbledore cooked up?"

"You'll see," Harry said, smiling a little.

Aragorn had been walking between the rows of elves, speaking encouragingly to them, and now came to a halt at seeing both dwarf and wizard staring up at him unblinkingly from their position on the ground. An odd sight they made for sure when everyone else was on alert, and they looked to the ranger as if they were about to break out pipes and start smoking.

He turned to Legolas, questioning, but the elf merely grinned and shook his head as if to say "You try and stop them."

"I am not even going to ask," the ranger mumbled and turned away.

A short swish and a heavy plod, then angry growls pierced the silence.

"HOLD!" Aragorn shouted, whirling around and holding up an arm.

"An old man has fired an arrow," Legolas supplied without their having to ask. "His arm was too feeble to hold it secured."

"Here we go," Harry mumbled. Strangely, she felt a little fear at the thought of those Uruk-hai, which was normal, she supposed. Magic wasn't entirely invincible after all. Some things could go wrong, and she'd have to fight. But she was more afraid of disappointing everyone as a result of that than actually fighting.

The first volley of arrows were released when Aragorn yelled a command in elvish. The fluency of the act was so perfect and graceful that Harry held his breath without realizing. Rarely had she seen anything more... she didn't want to sound sappy, but 'beautiful' was what came to mind. The elves were so organized, yet at the same time so... cold. No, that wasn't the right word. Detached. That was better. They were detached from what was happening around them. No emotion showed on their faces. Which was good, Harry reflected. It makes it much harder for the enemy to bait you if they think you're not affected. If only Harry could learn that trick. Asking Legolas for a few tips after the battle seemed a good idea... .

The second volley of arrows came swiftly after the first, from Theoden's men. Harry, her heart hammering, waited for the Uruk-hai's retaliation.

She and Gimli exchanged looks as they heard the first release of the evil arrows and then—

**PING! CLUNK! BANG! THUD!** and a series of faint blue lights erupted like light spells from behind the wall and above their heads in conjunction to every sound.

Aragorn stood in front of them, breathing, "What in Valar's name... ?" He seemed to have momentarily forgotten Gimli and Harry.

Then there was complete uproar. First from the Uruk-hai, who started growling and chanting and stamping deafeningly in confusion, then the elves, exchanging excited mutterings with each other, and occasionally glancing down in Harry's direction.
Harry, I think you had better get up." Aragorn was staring at her with a sort of puzzled wonder. "Stronger walls, yes, but this," he swept an arm, "I never expected. Come and see what your magic has wrought."

Already knowing some of the charms Dumbledore had put up, but still oblivious to half the others, Harry, along with Gimli, stood up curiously and looked over the wall — Gimli scrambling up on his toes and grumbling, "Where is that spell now, wizard!"

Harry saw what Aragorn had meant at once, at last understanding some of what Dumbledore had done and applauding his genius.

It seemed that when the orcs had fired, intent on skewering the elves and men like animals, the arrows had been intercepted by one of Dumbledore's wards, which had rebound them back to their recipients and, consequently, killed them. A line of dead Uruks stretching the entire length of the valley now lay before Helm's Deep. The live Uruks were looking beyond confused, but also furious.

"Dushatâr!" they shouted more than once, and even Harry knew that the word must have meant either wizard, or sorcery, or something similar. They were heaving their weapons around manically, sometimes, Harry noticed, stupidly hewing the Uruk next to them in their anger.

But they soon got over their anger and came charging, and scattering, and screeching at the keep with enormous ladders prepped against their shoulders. After the second attempt of trying to shoot more arrows, the Uruk-hai still didn't desist despite the fact it got them killed. The elves and men reacted swiftly to the charge and fired more arrows at them, but no matter how many they killed, the Uruks just kept coming. There were thousands after all, what was it to them if hundreds of their own got killed in the process when they had them growing out of their ears?

But the Uruk-hai had underestimated Dumbledore's wards again. No sooner did they touch the Deeping Wall than there was sizzling and shrieking and exploding of wood and metal. Everyone ducked simultaneously, and not just because of the gruesome sight. Not only had the Uruk-hai fizzed and melted, becoming statuesque blobs, but all the ladders had blown up, resulting in pieces of chips bursting upwards like a fountain of wood and metal instead of water. But no one on the inside of the wards needed to have worried, as the wards repelled the chips as well.

Thunderous stamping and spine-shivering growling followed this new humiliation as the Uruk-hai backed away, wary at last of the magic wall.

Harry felt a rush of satisfaction seeing this. She felt like doing a loop of victory around Helm's Deep on her broom, but thought that everyone might have had too many shocks today as it was, so settled for bouncing on her toes and clapping delightedly. When she glanced around behind her, she could see everyone — and she meant everyone, down to the rats — were scurrying about excitedly, speaking rapidly, pointing at the Uruk-hai wildly.

Harry was suddenly shuffled forward by an anonymous hand at her back, and only when she reached Aragorn did she turn around to see a grinning Elenril. When she turned back Legolas, Gimli, Boromir, the king, Haldir, and a number of other people had joined Aragorn. Some were grinning, others, like Haldir, were frowning, but they were all silent.

"All you have to do is keep shooting at them," she told Aragorn when no one ventured to say anything, "and they won't be able to do anything in return. The wards prevent that..." She trailed off. Something was wrong. "What is it?"

"You must take your shields down," Haldir said resolutely.
Harry gaped. "Have you gone completely 'round the bend? You can't expect me or Dumbledore to actually do that? It defeats the purpose of constructing the wards in the first place! People will die!"

"Have you a better idea then? The Uruks are not attacking, and our arrows will be out of range if they move back any further! We cannot wait all night!"

Harry almost swore at Haldir. It was as though the elf had a death wish!

"So instead of being safe and keeping the people within alive, I should get rid of the thing ensuring hundreds of lives aren't lost? Just because you want to to kill the orcs right now?"

"Do not presume to speak for me, child!" Haldir snapped. "We cannot wait!"

Half an hour had passed since the Uruk-hai had slowed their attack and eventually stopped, and everyone was spread out, as Harry had predicted, either sitting on the ground or lounging about. No one, however, was completely free of all fear and tension, not even the Uruks, and even they had retreated, having set up little fires here and there.

Harry shook her head and turned to look back at Haldir. "I don't see the problem. Who cares if you have to wait to kill them! I mean, they can't exactly go back to Saruman and say they've failed, can they? Those things were built solely to destroy, only now they're smart enough not to approach the keep because even they know they'll all get killed, but they'll eventually attack again since they can't go back to Saruman and say that they failed. They'll attack again, and when they do you'll kill them, won't you?"

"You seem to be forgetting, little wizard," Haldir spat out the word as if it were something disgusting, "that our stocks cannot last forever. Nor can arrows. We have nothing to replenish them with."

Both elf and wizard ignored the fact that the group conversation between the king, his officials, plus the remaining Fellowship, and a few other elves, had now turned more in the way of a two-way argument.

"As a matter of fact," Harry contradicted, deeply pleased she could do so factually. "I duplicated hundreds of arrows earlier on, and I can duplicate more. And if push comes to shove and we have to stay here for days or something —" though that wouldn't be possible as Dumbledore was leaving in the morning and his wards with him, "— I can also duplicate food. And if that isn't good enough for you, I can pull them into the wards and destroy them easily."

There was silence among the small group of important people as Haldir stared down at Harry. Then he looked away. "I am grateful for what you have done," he said at last, surprising Harry and everyone else. "But even you cannot defeat ten thousand Uruks on your own."

"That's... true perhaps," Harry admitted. "But I'm not taking the wards down. In any case, they'll only be up for tonight anyway, as Dumbledore's going back to Hogwarts tomorrow."

"What is this?" Gimli said, his hands resting on his ax.

"Dumbledore doesn't belong in this world as I do, and it's exhausting for him to stay. He has to go back in the morning, and I'll have to take him back. The wards won't be up then since his magic goes with him. I suppose I can put some of my own up, I've read a little about them... but I'm still not fully trained to do so yet, and they likely wouldn't be as strong. I'm still being educated. Dumbledore's my teacher, but he won't be here."

"And neither will you by the sounds of it," said Theoden, looking shocked. "Why have you not
"I'll be here," Harry insisted, ignoring the confused looks. "I know it seems like I just contradicted myself, but I'll be back before I'll be missed."

"Yes, well, if you are not taking down these... wards," Boromir said, hand stroking his chin. "We must find some other way of counter defending ourselves. I agree with Harry, the Uruks will again attempt their assault on the keep. They will have something else up their sleeves, or Saruman's sleeves, to trick us with. The White Wizard is not someone to be trifled with. You as well as I know that he would not have sent just them," he swept an arm jerkily in the enemy's direction. "There will be a surprise yet, we can be sure of it."

"And until then, what?" Haldir said coolly, lifting an elegant brow. "Do we be as sitting ducks and wait for this surprise?"

A vague tightening of Boromir's jaw was the only indication that he was annoyed with the elf. Harry was glad she wasn't the only one. "Nay, we must arrange another defense now that we know what all these wards are about."

Harry might have imagined it, but she thought she saw Boromir cast an exasperated look in her direction. Why would he do that? Unless he's thinking she should have told them about the wards beforehand, so they could have thought up a new strategy earlier.

Harry cringed inwardly. There was that, wasn't there? She had been stupid not to tell them what the wards would do, she admitted to herself. But even she hadn't been entirely certain of their overall purpose. She had known no arrows or anything would have been able to penetrate, but the melting orcs and exploding ladders had been as much of a surprise to her as everyone else.

"Right, you lot do that then, and I'll go and... kill some orcs."

Everyone stared at her.

"Gimli, d'you want to come?" Harry offered as a way out.

The dwarf grunted his assent and, shouldering his ax, followed Harry away from the group.

For the next hour Harry amused herself, Gimli, a couple of the younger boys, and anyone who showed interest, by levitating Uruk-hai three hundred feet in the air and repeatedly dropping them. Sometimes she would levitate their own arrows and stab them with them. The first time this happened a group of ten or so Uruks rushed at the keep in anger, only to get melted.

As time went on the Uruks drew back further and further away from Helm's Deep, but Harry's magic didn't exactly have a range — as long as she could see her target — so they were still not safe. The Uruk-hai now seemed completely helpless and completely stupid, looking more like jittery orcs than the great evil warriors they were supposed to be.

Some were running about roaring madly — these were the first that Harry dropped — others Harry set on fire by using Incendio, which, she discovered, if left to travel over a long distance ballooned into an enormous fireball. That alone wiped out twenty or so Uruk-hai and any others that happened to be stupid enough to get in the way. She found it all to to be an effective way to chip away at their numbers, a good 1/3 of the enemy forces already dead from their initial attack and Harry's blasting away at them.

By this time everyone had their own favourite method of killing that they wanted Harry to do. A
young boy by the name of Eorling — who, like Gimli, had to stand on a box in order to see over the
call — kept on tugging at Harry's sleeve excitedly and requesting that she "Make them fly, please,
Harry," only to get scolded by his father for "addressing a wizard so informally."

Even Gimli had a favourite request, one that the dwarf had made up himself, and which Harry found
particularly gruesome. Spiking, Gimli had dubbed it, and you didn't need to be Hermione to work
out why it was given that name. Harry would levitate a spear in the orc encampment then direct it
through as many Uruk-hai as she could. Her highest record had been fourteen before some Uruk was
smart enough to sever the spear in half and then proceed to cut it into unusable pieces.

"There is always more," Gimli would growl wickedly.

Harry was surprised when Rumil and Elenril showed up and offered some suggestions of their own.
Ones which they had trouble getting across because they both couldn't speak Westron. But Harry
sort of worked out what they wanted when Rumil pointed to a ladder that was lying on the ground a
couple of meters away, and Elenril went to sit on it and demonstrated a hilarious rendition of Uruk-
hai hanging on for dear life. The younger boys in the group laughed squeakily at the performance
and clapped for more.

Harry shook her head. It was like a dream. Here they were under siege and Elenril, with his long
black hair flapping about, sat on the ladder and rocked from side to side as if in a boat. Even more
stranger was when Eorling and his friends went to sit on the ladder with him and started singing a
jaunty tune, presumably a children's poem. Even Rumil looked surprised at this new happening,
especially when Elenril joined in with an attempt to mimic in his rusty Westron.

A little further away, standing around a makeshift table made of stones, was the king and his
councillors, the remaining Fellowship, the captain of the elves, and a few curious hangers-on.

"What in Elbereth's good grace is that?" Aragorn said, lifting his head in the direction of children's
voices raised in song.

Haldir merely raised a hand to his temple and shook his head. "One of my elves."

"Ah, I see," said Aragorn, but he clearly didn't see because he shook his head. "Verily, I am more
and more astonished, Haldir. So we are agreed then?" he addressed the king.

Theoden stood with a hand over the map of Helm's Deep which was spread on the table. "It is the
only thing we can do in these circumstances. According to Master Potter, the Uruks cannot breach
the wall so it is pointless stationing more elves on the mountain where they cannot get to the enemy
by neither arm nor arrow. I agree with Boromir, they would be of better use down here."

Boromir nodded in acknowledgment. "I have something more to add, though. An idea hath come
upon me," he said dramatically, and effectively, garnering the attention of everyone around him. "I
was remembering how you, Harry, and Master Dumbledore appeared at Helm's Deeps the noon
before, Aragorn..." He looked at them of each in turn.

"I can guess what you are hinting at," Legolas said, his eyes glinting. "You mean to use Fawkes for
something. To transport something, or someone."

"Yes, Legolas, I thank you," Boromir said, nodding. "I also had the thought that there are plenty of
fissures and such in the surrounding mountains."

Haldir looked steadily at him. "You mean to put my elves there for an ambush. An attack from all
sides. It is a good plan," he admitted, "worthy of a leader. Although I must ask the wizard first. The
bird will likely not listen to us if it is as I think it is."

"You have felt it too then," Aragorn said.

Haldir sighed. "Yes. That bird is immortal. I am not sure of its age, though, but I know it is wise, and has its own mind. There is something about its Master as well. He has great power, though I cannot begin to guess at his age."

"I have felt it as well," Legolas said, hand on his chin. Then he tilted his head. "But why must you ask Harry? The pair of you are not exactly... well, to put it plainly, you do not get on well together, Haldir. He is likely to curse you as help you."

"Our wills are strong and from that first meeting in Lorien we did not get on well with each other," Haldir admitted to the curiosity of the surrounding people. "I must confess I thought we had settled our differences when the Fellowship departed the Golden Wood, but oft times Harry sees things personally when they should be seen impersonally. He does not understand that my attitude is not an affront to him."

"It is your tone that is an affront to him," Legolas mumbled, and Haldir looked sharply at him.

"Nevertheless, I will ask him. If only to gain a newly forged friendship, if he is willing. I begin to see his is not all talk." All the surrounding people nodded seriously at that. They had all seen Harry's fires and were most impressed.

"It is settled," Aragorn said, glad that Haldir had finally seen Harry's worth. He wondered if Harry would do the same. "Haldir will ask Harry while the rest of us will get everyone in position again."

He settled a hand on the elf's shoulder. "Good luck my friend," he said comfortingly, leaving a bewildered Haldir behind as he marched off to direct his soldiers.

A group of three or so important Uruk-hai — by which of course it must be understood that they were in charge of the rest... barely — sat in the middle of the encampment around a newly extinguished fire. The rest of their brethren had also done the same upon order. The angry fires like dragon's breath that had come from the Deeping Wall had killed some of them and forced them to scatter out of line, so they happened upon the thought — as you do in such situations and if you're an army of mutilated creatures — that if that wizard couldn't see their fires then he wouldn't get ideas to cast any more. Also, they thought if the wizard couldn't see them at all then that was a bonus. Which they hoped he couldn't because almost all the campfires were now extinguished.

They had thought they'd witnessed everything when their own weapons started attacking them, not to mention the flying, but the fires had come as nasty surprise. And no doubt the wizard was up there plotting more ways to kill them, which they didn't like at all, and it made them very angry. So angry in fact that a riot had broken out between some sitting to the far left of the mountains and thirty or more now lay dead by their own hands. By this rate the enemy need not engage them in battle, for they would have killed themselves beforehand.

"Pickle, pickle, pickle," growled one of the five, the biggest, with increasing fervour. "I 'ate being in a pickle. And tha's what we's in, aint we lads? But I aint gunna eat my way out!"

Elf-cleaver was his scimitar's name and his own was Vadoksog because he was nastier as well as larger than his companions and his favourite sport included dicing up elf-men and eating their more delicate parts. The ears he left as a keepsake and threaded them through with warg hair so as to hang about his neck as a trophy. Twenty-six elven ears were currently dangling there, which meant he had
already killed thirteen elves, and was no doubt wishing for more to kill and eat right at this very moment. But because he couldn't actually get to more elves that wish was fast becoming a long forgotten thought.

"Saruman! 'E never told us there were gunna be another wizard 'ere!" complained an Uruk named Krûfuk, whom the others didn't like much because he was always complaining, but this time they all felt it was warranted.

Flâgît snarled. "We kill 'em now, I says! Be'er now than later. They'd o' thought o' somethin' by then. Them elves is tricksters." He wasn't particularly bright for an uruk. In fact he wasn't an uruk, just an overlarge orc that somehow managed to sneak into the army as it was marching out of Isenguard. No one else had noticed the difference, except to comment that he was stupider than a goblin at times and that his voice was curiously high-pitched. How he got to be one of the three in charge was anyone's guess.

"Shut yer hole, scumbucket, afore I fill it with irons!" spat Krûfuk, fed up with Flâgît's stupidity. "Wha' ye mean, we got to kill 'em now? They aint no gettin' near that wall. By shaft or foot!"

"An' there aint no gettin' back to Saruman by life or limb intact if we doesn't try!" Flâgît spat back.

All three lapsed into silence at that, and not just because Flâgît had said something intelligible at last, but because what he said was the truth. They couldn't go back to Saruman unless they had a special fondness to spend the rest of their miserable existence staring into that accursed Fangorn Forest from the top of a pike. By which of course they meant that their deaths would really not be more miserable than their current existence.

They cared not much for their own deaths anyway, these uruks, as they were bred for the purpose of being suicidal. But that purpose contained killing all the inhabitants of Helm's Deep along the way, not being picked off one by one by a wizard's spell, the likes of which they had never thought possible and which they could not get near enough to stop. It sent them into a rage just to think about it, and for a few moments they stomped about in the newly charcoaled fire until their metal boots began overheating from the still hot faggots of wood.

Vadoksog kicked at a passing uruk and watched it roar in pain and attempt to engage in him combat, before ending up with its head rolling some feet away courtesy of Vadoksog's scimitar.

"Settle yer 'ead down!" roared Krûfuk, somewhat appropriately. It was unofficially decided that he was the leader this night, as he was the most lax out of all of them and didn't tend to loose his wits as often.

Vadoksog grunted and plonked down next to Flâgît. "What we got to eat?"

"Nothin'!" Flâgît growled back. "We thought to eat men remember? But there's no eatin' 'em now!"

All three snarled again at that, but unlike before, didn't loose their wits. "There's still tha', what's it called, of Saruman's," said Krûfuk.

The 'what's it called' Krûfuk was referring to is a giant bomb filled with Wizard's Fire that the wizards had created and which sometimes Gandalf used for his fireworks. It had only ever been used for that actually, until recently when Saruman had begun using it to blast bits of Fangorn up and also to make caverns under Orthanc.

"How we gunna get it there?" Flâgît said. "They'll be shootin' us with their arras!"

"There whats?" said Vadoksog and Krûfuk together.
"Arras!"

"We march up usin' shields fer protection," Krûfuk said at once. "There'll be no elves able to kill us!"

"Wha' about that wizard?" asked Vadoksog.

"We deals wiv 'im when we get there."

Flâgît scratched his head. "There's somethin' I doesn't get."

"Tha'll be a first," growled Vadoksog loudly.

"How can we be sure that thing aint gunna blow up like the others when we reach the wall?"

"Idiot!" Krûfuk grunted, slapping Flâgît's head. "It's s'posed to blow up, ain' it?"

"Aye, but. . . them walls are still protectin' 'em."

"Ye don't know if ye don't try, now shut up and get everyone assembled."

Flâgît growled in annoyance, but went to do as Krûfuk asked.

Harry walked to the direction of the king's chamber, still somewhat stunned by the conversation she'd just had.

Haldir had approached her — of his own free will — and asked for Harry's help.

She was still dazed from that.

The king had lent Dumbledore his chamber before the battle had begun — not that it'd started at all — and the headmaster was currently snoozing away on the bed, hands folded over his chest. Harry would have to ask Dumbledore's permission if she could borrow Fawkes, but Harry didn't think Dumbledore would mind. Harry didn't think Fawkes would mind transporting elves either. According to Haldir, elves were creatures of nature and pure of soul, so they were just like Fawkes in that respect.

Harry walked over to the other side of the bed where the Phoenix sat clutching the headrest with his claws. Giving his wing a brief stroke Harry turned his attention to the old man on the bed.

"Headmaster."

Not even a mumble greeted her this time.

Harry told herself not to become worried. This was expected after all. She then firmly shook Dumbledore by the shoulder for a few seconds, until, at last, he woke up.

"Ah, yes," Dumbledore said as if he'd been expecting Harry to wake him all along. "Had quite a pleasant sleep, though the straw in the mattress made it rather uncomfortable at times. And, I dare say, itchy in the most awkward places."

He didn't bother to prop himself against the headrest but remained where he was in his flat position. He did, however, stuff another pillow under his head.

"I assume you wanted me for some reason. What can I do for you?"
He sounds so tired, Harry thought, with a momentary guilt. She cleared her throat. "I need to borrow Fawkes, sir, please."

Dumbledore chuckled tiredly. "Fawkes cannot be borrowed, Harry. And I am certain that if you stopped to think you'd know that." Harry was about to open her mouth and say she hadn't meant it like that when the headmaster continued. "He is his own animal. In fact, perhaps you should ask Fawkes if you can borrow me some time." He chuckled again.

"Er, right." Hearing that Harry felt like a dope. Dumbledore had been humouring her the whole time. "It's just we need him, sir, we need his help. But I thought I ought to ask first."

"What has happened?" Dumbledore looked serious at last.

Harry explained in brief what the wards had accomplished as well as Boromir's idea. "That way they'll be able to set up a sort of ambush. And the Uruk-hai won't be able to get them either because they'll be too high up."

"A good strategy. I must admit — abashedly I might add — that I never thought about the repercussions strong wards might bring about to those they are defending. I'm used to dealing with wizards who can apparate away to avoid the entire confrontation — anti-apparation wards notwithstanding."

"Even enemy wizards, who after a few hours or so might learn how to work their way around the defensive wards, is an indication that the battle shouldn't last long. Wizards play by certain rules, magic being among them." He sigh was long and drawn out and old. Even his gold-edged spectacles seemed to have lost some of their glimmer. "I should have taken that into account."

"It isn't your fault," Harry said loyally. "You weren't raised muggle, Professor. I, on the other hand, was. I should have figured it out."

Dumbledore patted her hand. "Very noble of you to try and shoulder all the guilt but I cannot allow you to do that. Perhaps a smidgeon can go into your corner for not telling your friends about the wards' purposes—" Harry cringed "— but I am the adult after all. I was supposed to know. I expect I can blame some of it on my fatigue, though."

Dumbledore stared thoughtfully at the ceiling as Harry grinned. "No one can think too clearly when they're tired," she agreed.

"Well at least they've conducted a better strategy this time round. Now off you go. Fawkes will accompany you. We don't want to waste any more time."

"Thank you," Harry said sincerely, but Dumbledore had already closed his eyes, and Harry wasn't sure if he'd heard her. The effort he'd exerted to talk to Harry must have really exhausted him.

Fawkes was too large to fit on Harry's arm or on Harry's shoulder so she gestured for the phoenix to fly ahead of her. Harry wondered briefly why Fawkes wasn't showing the least bit exhaustion yet, but put it down to him being an immortal firebird.

A short while later they came upon the rest of the company. Everyone was pretty much assembled as to how they'd been before. The fifty elves that had been on the mountain behind them were now waiting in front of the great hall to be taken away from the keep and onto the surroundings mountains. All chatter stopped when Harry and Fawkes came into view.

Harry was pretty much ignored in favour of Fawkes, whom the elves couldn't stop staring at. Wait til they hear him sing.
Haldir came to stand beside her, giving a nod of acquiescence. "I will translate for you."

Harry nodded. "Okay. Erm. Fawkes!" The Phoenix flew over to Harry and settled himself on one of the stone steps. Then Harry began the cringing process of describing exactly what was required of the elves. Fawkes, she told them, would transport everyone — not at the same time, but in large groups — over to the mountains. "It'll feel like dying," she said as cheerfully as she could manage. "But you won't. Die, that is. It'll just feel really horrible, like something large is squeezing you to the point of death."

She felt, more than saw, Haldir's incredulous look before the elf sought to translate. He must have described it better than Harry though, for the elves looked calm and collected as always.

"Just one question, Haldir," Harry said, feeling more than a little awkward using his name, as he'd never done it before. "Will everyone have enough arrows, or should I make more?"

"Where are the shafts you created before?"

"Here." Harry untied the sack from her belt and handed it over to Haldir.

He looked skeptical. "All this? There could not be more than twenty arrows in here."

"It's enchanted," she explained, trying not to sound dry. "There are hundreds of arrows in there."

Haldir seemed to accept this because he said "Thalion!" and an elf with midnight black hair stepped out of the group to take the sack from her. Harry assumed he was to be the leader of the elves on the mountains.

"So if everyone could just arrange themselves in whatever group they're supposed to be in. . . ."

Haldir translated and at once the elves split themselves into two straight lines with about twenty-five persons in each. The ease and coordination with which they did this made Harry gape. It was like they could read each others' minds or something. Fawkes then swooped up without Harry having to tell him and hovered in front of Thalion.

"If he could just grab hold of Fawkes' tail. . . ." Harry told Haldir, feeling very much like an adult explaining something to a group of small children — admittedly, though, very well-behaved children. This translating business was very annoying. "Also, everyone will have to be holding on to each other."

There was a brief shuffling as the elves placed a hand on the shoulder of the person in front. "That's good," Harry said, again surprised. "Alright Fawkes, it's up to you now."

Fawkes trilled a serious of notes in concession and Harry had only a split second to see the delighted smiles that enveloped all the elves as a result before there was a burst of flames and the first group disappeared.

Harry thought it best to wait until Fawkes came back before she went to her position beside Gimli, but the loud shouts that came at them all the way from the wall stopped her. Theoden, who was standing fifty meters or so away in his usual spot waved at Haldir and Harry, shouted something, and pointed to where the uruk-hai were camped. They didn't stop to exchange looks but ran towards the wall.

They must be stupid, was Harry's first thought as she and Haldir pushed passed some people in order to better see the field. The uruk-hai had apparently decided that waiting around doing nothing was far worse than trying to attack Helm's Deep again and getting killed, because they were all standing
up and marching steadily towards the keep. They also looked to Harry, if it could be possible, even more determined in this second assault then they had been in the first.

Haldir answered Harry's speculations without her having to voice them. "They are up to something," he breathed, not taking his eyes from the creatures. "This is no doubt the surprise we have been expecting at last. Come, Harry, we go and prepare our defense, for that is all we can do."

Slightly surprised at the gentle tone Haldir had used Harry complied and they both walked back to the remaining elves who were waiting to be taken up onto the mountains.

Just as they arrived, an explosion of fire heralded the appearance of Fawkes.

Just as Fawkes arrived nearly all the elves in the entire keep cried out in alarm and pointed far into the distance. There were many "Ai's!" being thrown around. Harry felt as though a cold slimy fish had made its home in his stomach as Haldir, his eyes widening, began shouting orders left, right, and centre. He could hear Theoden and Aragorn do the same, despite the fact that the king musn't have known what was going on. There was a flurry of movement as elves and men cocked weapons and scrambled this way and that.

A third explosion of flames saw Fawkes and the remaining twenty-five elves disappear.

Harry was pushed along by Haldir until she reached an outcrop of stone where a catapult of some kind lay on it.

"What—?" was all Harry could manage before the elf put a hand on her shoulder saying "Wards cannot guard against creatures that fly, Harry, they will need your magic more than us," and he disappeared passed the throng of men and headed towards Aragorn.

And at last Harry and every other person could hear what the elves had known long before now. It was a sound Harry had heard only once since coming to Middle Earth. She had thought it alarming then as well, and she vaguely remembered likening it to a hoard of wasps.

In the distance, for the most part disguised by the night, were crows. Large, black, flapping crows. The largest Harry had ever seen. And they were coming towards Helm's Deep. She felt like swearing. Haldir was right, the wards wouldn't protect against crows because they could easily fly over them.

Harry noticed that the crows weren't their only worry now. The uruk-hai had begun to run manically to the Deeping Wall again. The whole of however many there remained came sprinting up brandishing their weapons, and getting melted. The smell of burning orc was horrible! And the exploding orc weapons were flung about in the confusion. It was chaos! The uruk-hai were getting slaughtered non-stop! But still they didn't stop coming! The bodies of all the melted and exploded uruks were piling up unceremoniously against the wall. Harry was beginning to thing they really were brainless.

CRAWW! CRAcrawCAWcawcaawCRAWW! CRAAAAAAAAAAW!

Harry's head jerked up. The crows had finally arrived.

They came rasping, and cawing, and screeching, and flapping with talons extended and beaks glinting in the firelight from the torches. They were huge! As easily as large as a German Shepherd.

She blinked. Was it Harry's imagination, or did the crows look like they were diving, specifically, in her direction? She watched as the crows dived one after the other, bypassing the men and elves, and... she couldn't believe it! They WERE!
Harry didn’t stop to think but mounted her broom just as the first crow almost reached her and...

. *woooosh!* She kicked off, shooting diagonally into the air. A delighted grin spread on her face. There was nothing to worry about now, nothing mattered while she was flying. The crows, whose "caws!" were sounding more and more furious at her clever evasion didn’t matter at all. They were a mere nuisance; they would never catch her on her broom!

Harry turned her head and saw that the crows had followed her all the way to the elves on the mountain, whom Harry was flying passed right at this very moment. Harry’s brain registered the shocked looks on their faces. She gave them cheerful wave then faced forward again determinedly.

*Alright,* she thought. *The ugly birds want to play? I’ll give them something to play about!*

She turned sharply to the right.

A glance behind showed that the crows followed. Harry was delighted to discover that some of the elves were shooting at the crows also. They gave her a wave back and Harry grinned at them.

*What was that?* Harry’s grin widened as she spotted Fawkes hovering by the elves.

Without even knowing she was going to do it, she fell into a vertical dive gaining speed as the ground, which was filled with uruks, rapidly approached. She only had a split second’s satisfaction at watching their yellow eyes widen with horror just as she was about to hit them before. . . *That had hurt!*

Harry had delivered a perfectly executed Wronski Feint which some of the crows, with their momentum, hadn’t been able to get out of. They were currently lying flattened on some uruks’ faces. But the Feint she’d executed had been jerky and her arm muscles were now throbbing from having done a wild about-face.

She soared to the clouds, watching as the crows, who were now looking and not just sounding furious, flapped speedily after her. She turned back to the front and —

"GAAAH!"

— ducked hastily under another group of crows.

Harry realized she’d been tricked. *They must have split up at some point and thought to shepherd me into a trap.* Harry didn’t get angry; instead she grinned, delighted, and proceeded to show the crows just how attacking and evading was done properly. It was like playing Quidditch with a whole bunch Crabbes and Goyles with dozens of Bludgers. All Harry had to do was duck, and dodge, and skirt, and dive to avoid getting scratched, or bitten, or poked, or head-butted by a particularly zealous crow. This was easy as the birds were slowpokes compared to a Firebolt.

*And I’m getting some really good practice in.*

It was made even better when Fawkes joined in, tempting a group of crows away from Harry for a while. There was a positively glorious moment when the phoenix started singing, the haunting sound echoing across the valley for a few moments as the crows and the uruk-hai either roared, or stamped, or dithered, or scurried ,or flapped about in helpless pain at the sound.

Everyone else, however, was given an uplifting feeling of hope, Harry included.

Then Harry thought she’d best get started actually knocking off the crows instead of merely avoiding them. She flew straight at the Deeping Wall, making sure she was out of range of any orc swords. Fawkes kept off any would be arrow-launches with a few well-placed knocks upside an uruk’s head.
Some of the more stupid crows ended up splattering flat onto the stones before exploding in a mess of guts and black feathers, courtesy of Dumbledore's wards.

Laughing, Harry turned about and rocketed straight into the air again. She hadn't had this much fun since the last Quidditch match that she battled against Malfoy.

In all the confusion and laughter and delight, Harry failed to notice the formation of uruks that had been slowly and steadily and patiently moving from their ensconced protective position in the midst of the entire army and were now somewhere near the end, almost reaching the Deeping Wall. These formation of uruks were protecting Vadoksg, who was to be the torch-bearer, a highly distinguished position, despite the fact that he'd be dead when his job was completed. But Vadoksog didn't mind dying, he was a bit miffed at not having sampled any more elves it was true, but it was all for a greater cause.

They had grinned fearsomely when the Crebain showed up. They hadn't expected extra help, and it made Vadoksog's job a lot easier in that the wizard was now distracted and wouldn't be shooting off anymore spells in order to stop them.

Now, as the uruks on either side of him flung themselves at the wall and screamed as they died, Vadoksog got ready to do the same. He took to a sprint, about to reach the sewer entrance —

*THUD!*

He howled in pain as an elf-arrow imbedded into the soft fleshy underside of his arm. Snarling, he took a few seconds to glance upwards and noted a golden-haired elf ready to shoot yet another arrow at him and a dark-haired man pointing and screaming in that foul elf-language. Not wasting any time Vadoksog jumped into the hole.

*BOOM!*

The entire wall shook as the bomb exploded. There was a brief moment of pure panic as everyone on the keep thought that to be the end of it, but a rumbling noise sounded instead as if the wall had just belched, then... .

Silence.

Even the uruk-hai were silent.

But not for long. They roared in furious anger at their failure. Their last possible resort was now obliterated. They ran at the keep, not caring anymore about Saruman, or failing their mission, or getting killed or anything like that. It took a while for them to notice that nothing was happening to them; they weren't being exploded or melted or spattered!

The people on the keep noticed the same thing at the same time. They watched in horror as the uruk-hai cheered and started bringing out the ladders.
A few minutes previously . . .

Albus Dumbledore jerked upright, breath expelling in harsh gasps, hand clutching his chest. Little beads of sweat dotted his forehead, some gaining enough substance to stream down his face and into his beard. Painfully, slowly, he rested his legs over the side of the bed and gripped the nearest post with both hands in order to speed the process along. He stood — and instantly fell back onto the bed again. Dizziness overcame him and nausea churned in his belly. Taking several deep breaths he stood up again, even more slowly this time, on legs that trembled in fatigue and exhaustion before shuffling, slowly, into his boots.

So it had begun.

Albus was not stupid. Indeed, most would call him rather well-informed, but he knew nothing better than he knew magic. And his own was waning. Even more so now that the battle had truly begun and the battering his wards were taking would only withstand as long as he did. Which, at the moment, did not seem very long at all.

He was past the age where wishes could hold any hope for him, so he didn't wish. No, he straight out hoped. He hoped that he would last long enough for the wards to hold, because if he didn't . . .

*BANG!*

He gasped, swayed, and clutched the post as another wave of nausea enveloped him.

Yet another assault.

*Harry. . . Harry needs help. I must help her.*

Those were his only thoughts as he scraped along the wall, leaning more against it than on his own legs. He must have looked rather comical at the moment. And his feet didn't seem to be cooperating much. . .

*Albus, you old fool. Look what you've done.*

"Harry. . . Must get to Harry."

It was a long, slow, painful slog against the wall for the headmaster. Many long minutes past under the pain of high discomfort, but the wizard was oblivious to them. His only thought was his young student, for he knew he was not much longer for this world.

A few minutes before that . . .

Boromir watched in resigned horror as the Crebain swooped from the sky, heading toward Harry Potter and making noises loud enough to raise the ancient dead. But the boy just stood there staring wide-eyed and wide-mouthed, as if he couldn't—

"Harry, move!" he shouted, arms waving, but his voice was lost amongst the many caws, shrieking uruk, and various other battle sounds.

Boromir need not have been concerned, though, for the second the Crebain reached the young
wizard, he was off on that flying broomstick of his, shooting faster than Boromir had ever seen him go, almost faster than his eyes could follow, but not, it seemed, faster than the Crebain could follow. By the time Boromir finally spotted him all he could see was a speck. Harry was too far away, his cloak too black, too concealed by the night sky.

Shaking his head a little he looked around. Theoden stood some meters away engaged in quiet discussion with Gamling. He had been very silent of late, and very stubborn. But Boromir understood his need to protect his people. What he found most chilling though, was the calm exterior Theoden presented, even when uruk-hai by the dozens were being slaughtered against his own walls. Dazed he looked — as if his body was there but his mind was elsewhere, lost in dreams of what he believed might come to pass.

A great many persons were standing by the hood of the Deeping Wall, most of which were elves, and looking into the sky. The elves would oft times cheer and point, which prompted merriment from the men beside them in response. Harry must be doing something spectacular, as was usually the case.

The shrieks of the dying uruk were deafening as the son of Denethor made his way over to his friends of Fellowship. Elves and men both were letting their bows sing in almost perfect succession, and there was much cheering abroad when a particularly vile explosion signalled the death of an uruk and its weapons. Little blue lights, ethereal in the night sky, often sprung just over the edge of the wall, testament to the uruks' useless pursuit of arrow-shooting.

Boromir frowned, halted in time to avoid bumping into a young boy who bounded passed squealing in excitement, then continued on his way. It seemed all too simple. All too easy. Something was bound to go wrong, despite Harry's assurances. And the young wizard had not been all that assured either from the looks of him.

"It is madness," he muttered now to Aragorn, having just arrived on the other side. Legolas and Gimli were some meters away watching the commotion down below, the dwarf occasionally cheering.

"Yes," Aragorn agreed. "But they do not die needlessly. Already they are planning something. See the cluster in the middle?"

He pointed, but Boromir had already spotted them. "Yes."

"We shall have to be on our guard. Harry is occupied and will not see that anything is amiss. Fawkes as well. We shall have to put everyone on their guard."

"They act too careless by half."

The ranger shook his head. "No, Boromir, they merely hope the danger is over, but still have enough sense not to be reckless. They do not put all their trust and their faith in Harry's magic, because it is a magic they do not understand. That, at least, is some comfort."

Boromir scoffed. "They do not understand? We do not understand."

Aragorn merely grinned and continued watching, Boromir following suit. When Harry pelted at them suddenly from the night sky, dozens of Crebain in fast pursuit, and almost crashing into the wall but pulling away at the last moment, the two men did not blink. Not even when the Crebain exploded, shrieking, in the wizard's wake.

"Shall I put up the call, or shall you?" Boromir asked in a tone that suggested he'd seen all the
wonders he ever could, and would, and so was not entitled to be shocked or surprised by anything Harry did anymore.

Aragorn chuckled. That was answer enough.

Sighing resignedly, Boromir tromped onward, signalling to both men and elves as he went. When he reached Theoden he was not surprised to discover that the king had also noticed the formation of uruks ensconced in the middle of the loathsome army.

"But what would you have me do?" he said now, eyeing Boromir with a steely gaze. "The walls are protected. And our soldiers are defending admirably even though they tend to be having as near enough a good time as there can be had wenching. . . there is nothing more to do."

Hardly believing Theoden had actually said that, Boromir closed his mouth, and tried a different tact.

"That is what I am concerned about. This is a battle; they should not be having so much of a good time, even if the good time seems unlikely to be impeded. At least have them on guard, for pity's sake!"

"You were not so concerned when the wizard was plying his tricks!" Theoden said in a scoffing tone.

Boromir's eyes narrowed. "Harry has magic. He can look after himself better than any of us can. Think you he does not know that? Harry knows when he goes too far, and he hasn't, as yet I've seen. What was done to Gimli was done in harmless jest, nothing more. It did not hurt anyone, except, perhaps, the dwarf's pride. Our soldiers, on the other hand, can have something happen to them. We are still not sure if these wards will even hold—"

Boromir had only just finished speaking when a great lurching rumble reverberated beneath his feet. He almost unbalanced, but grabbed onto a stone balustrade in the last second.

What in Valar. . . ?

Moments later he saw Aragorn shouting at him, but his ears had become as if a blanket were being held over them, and so could not hear him. He turned back to Theoden — and promptly froze in the gesture.

_Éru._

The top of a great ladder, blackened with rust and age, had crashed itself onto the upper tire of the wall. More ladders swiftly followed.

Boromir did not waste any precious time. "The wards have collapsed! Man your places!" he shouted, running between the clustered groups of elves and men. Luckily, most were near or already in their stations, and did not need to be told twice what to do.

Uruk came swarming into the keep, doubly furious now than they would have been had they had the opportunity to do so before. They hacked and slashed without remorse, and many men and elves died in that first assault.

Boromir swallowed pent up bile and drove his sword into a particularly grotesque uruk, whose breath hissed upon him in an evil smell as it died. Mentally blocking his nose Boromir worked his way along the wall, stabbing, and kicking, and punching, and blocking, and —"Ahh! What is it?"

A sharp thing that wasn't a sword or a dagger had pierced his arm, then flapped away.

*Flapped?*
"Crebain!" someone cried, and the warning went up as did the shields. A whole swarm of black crows were now diving upon them, flapping above heads and trying to get into all the vulnerable, fleshy parts with their sharp as steel beaks. Boromir, his arm paining him, transferred his shield upon his head and swung his sword up — it encountered soft, spongy flesh. When he withdrew his sword and placed it by his side, a large Crebain was skewered to it, its wings extended as if in worship. Grimacing, he placed his foot on the dead beast and — shluck!

He parried his blade just in time to avoid getting pierced on an orcish scimitar.

The growls, and snarls, and grunts of the filthy beasts were unbelievably loud, and with his shield arm paining him, and the other parrying and striking at random uruks, Boromir was incapacitated. He could barely keep up with the birds that were striking at him from above. The Crebain had obviously only chased after Harry until the uruks could get inside the keep. Now, they did not seem to care who they went after, or if the wizard killed them or not.

Speaking of which, where is that boy?

Harry could still remember the day she'd first arrived in Middle Earth. It had been sometime around late afternoon and the sun was just setting. She remembered seeing bushes with red shiny berries, made even shinier by the setting sun. She remembered how Hedwig and she had come upon the Fellowship.

As far as Harry knew, all of the Fellowship was still alive. But they wouldn't be unless she helped.

Sh thought she had helped, though. Dumbledore and she.

But...

The wards had failed miserably, a fact that reinforced itself to Harry with every new assault of the uruk-hai forces upon Helm's Deep. There was no time to dwell on this. In fact, the thought of dwelling did not even cross her mind. It was as though she had no control over her limbs, as though she had been put under the Imperius Curse. All Harry knew was that her wand was attached to her hand, which was attached to her arm, which was linked to her mouth, which was shouting spells. Her broom seemed to have developed a mind of its own as well as it led her, swooping, over the heads of the attacking uruk.

They were avoiding her for the most part, though whenever she swooped down upon them they'd either duck — their eyes manic — or throw themselves backwards.

Fawkes had disappeared a while ago, as soon as the wards had broken down. He'd exploded into millions of ashes, accompanied, in succession, by what could only be described as a sighing shriek of pain.

Harry hadn't known what to make of this, and would have been highly concerned if it weren't for the fact that she'd known Fawkes to be fine. The battle at the Department of Mysterious at the end of her last school year had shown her that phoenix's could not die, not even when hit by a Killing Curse wielded by the most fearsome Dark Lord the Wizarding World had ever seen.

Instead, Harry was only marginally concerned. After all, she still didn't know what had caused the phoenix to spontaneously combust like that, but she had a shrewd, and — she hoped — false suspicion. Since the phoenix combusted as soon as the wards had broken down, and because the wards were linked to Dumbledore, who was linked to Fawkes... well it didn't take a genius to work it out. But Harry was now concerned about the Headmaster. If a powerful magical creature like the...
phoenix had combusted, what sort of effect had the broken wards had on Dumbledore who was human?

But Harry didn't have time to think about that right now. Dodging an arrow from one of the uruk, which was climbed half way up a ladder, Harry shot it with a fireball then jerked upwards to avoid crashing into the Deeping Wall.

What she saw as she flew over the keep was enough to freeze her stomach completely. Forget ice cubes, the entire North Pole had taken up residence in there.

It was complete, overwhelming chaos! Her brain just didn't know where to look. She saw uruk jumping upon elves and men. Elves and men jumping upon uruk. Swords flashing, shields parrying, hair flying, lungs screaming, uruk screeching, crows flapping, limbs being severed, people dying . . .

Something very much like a hiccup caught in her breath as she spotted Eorling, the friendly little boy she had gotten to know only an hour ago, lying in an awkward position to her left on top of a dead uruk.

*Where was his father?* was Harry's brief thought before she realised that he must be dead.

Not wasting precious any time, she flew down and landed jarringly next to the bundle of boy and orc. All it took was a look at Eorling's face to confirm that the boy was alive, unconscious, but in pain.

She pointed her wand and cast a full-body numbing spell on him. At least he wouldn't be feeling any pain now.

"Protego!" she said quickly, and the arching orc sword bounced harmlessly off the barrier. The uruk responsible growled in rage but Harry incinerated it, then turned her attention to the boy. She didn't have much time.

She wished she could somehow banish Eorling into where all the women and children were hiding, but she hadn't learned that far in school yet, and . . . wait a minute! Heart thumping madly she looked down at her wand, then at Eorling's sword, which lay loose in the boy's hand. If she could somehow make the sword into a portkey . . . She had seen Dumbledore make a portkey in the atrium of the Ministry last year so she knew the incantation, and Hermione had gone on enough about them over the summer holidays at the Burrow that she had a pretty good idea of how one was supposed to be made.

Picking up the boy's sword, she concentrated, thought of the caves, and said in what she hoped was a confident voice, "Portus."

The sword glowed blue for a minute, then became cold steel once more.

*Great!* She thought happily. As long as Eorling doesn't end up in Mordor or something.

A swish, a heavy thud, then something striking her in the back caused Harry to jump up and whirl around in alarm.

Gimli, chest heaving, yanked his ax from out of an uruk's chest. "I have not yet noticed eyes in the back of your head, wee one. Wizard or not, that strike would have felled you where you so carelessly sat."

"Gimli!" she cried in relief.
The dwarf humphed, killed an onrushing uruk, then wiped sweat from his beard. "Do what you must with the boy then concentrate on the battle. I will cover your back!"

"Right." Harry gently rolled Eorling off of the dead uruk — wouldn't do to have it turn up in the caves — then placed the sword in his hands. In an instant he was gone.

When Harry turned around again Gimli was being lifted in the arms of an uruk — rather like a football player would do — and knocked jarringly into the nearby wall. Before Harry could help, Gimli arched his ax over the top of the uruk's head and sunk it deep into its back.

It dropped like a stone. It didn't even reach the ground before the dwarf threw his ax at Harry, who, eyes wide, ducked hastily. A squelching noise from behind confirmed that Gimli had gotten to yet another target.

"Ha-ha!" he yelled. "Twenty-nine!" Then he took off past Harry, grabbed his ax, and ran on stout legs alongside the tier of the wall.

Harry shook her head; she needed to concentrate more. Twice she'd nearly been killed because of carelessness.

With her never before used elvish sword in one hand and her wand in the other, Harry fought. Instinctively, she knew she was the most advantaged person there. She had magic on her side, which she used to help men and elves on occasion, but mostly to protect herself. Her sword flopped awkwardly a couple of times when she tried to use it. It could have been because it was in her left hand, but most likely it was because Harry had never learned to use one properly before. Second year in the Chamber of Secrets didn't count as the basilisk had not owned a sword that could parry and defend against her own, just a couple of fangs and a fast, snappish body.

Finally, when an uruk tripped over the dead body of one of its brethren and actually fell onto her sword, Harry knew it was time to abandon that approach. It was unlikely that the same coincidence would happen again. She hooked her sword to his belt, and moved on.

As Harry mounted her broom and flew to the far right side of Helm's Deep a shout caught her attention. She raised her brows in shock. It was true she had never liked Haldir — the elf was far too much like Draco Malfoy for her to even contemplate that emotion — but they'd come to a truce earlier that evening. She had even found that Haldir was grudgingly tolerable and possessed a wry sense of humour that, when not directed at Harry, was quite amusing.

He was currently surrounded by no less than five uruks.

The shout had been because one of them had slashed his back with a scimitar.

Harry knew that if she had been further away she wouldn't have been able to hear the elf as the various battle sounds would have swallowed the shout. Not even thinking about it, Harry unclipped her sword from her belt, swooped down, and sunk it into an uruk that was just about to empty its blade into the elf's belly.

Haldir nodded to her gratefully, if a little puzzlingly, and continued fighting. It was obvious that the elf was still in pain, though.

For the next ten minutes Harry fought with hr magic. Fire spells, lightning spells, stunning hexes — the recipients of which would quickly get pierced by her sword — cutting hexes, bone-breakers, shields — anything Harry could think of, she used; she even got creative and cast Pepper Breath on herself, taking out at least five at once by breathing fire.
Shooting into the air once again, she surveyed the battle. There was still many, many uruk-hai throwing themselves over the wall. She tried to look for her friends but couldn't seem to find them. Any flashes of silver-blond hair that caught her attention belonged to elves Harry had never met, and the shortest people there were certainly not dwarves. The children were, for the most part, safe, hiding behind their father's legs or huddled together behind a large boulder protected by a group of men.

Finally, Harry spotted something. And a stone sank into her stomach when she did.

Boromir was standing on the battlements over the main gate and fighting in the midst of what looked like black pillows with all the stuffing come out of them. But they weren't, they were crows and they were attacking him from all sides. And not just crows, but an uruk as well.

The steward was slashing and cleaving at the air with his blade, but only managed to get some of them. Those he did strike were being pierced one by one on his sword, rather like a kebab. And, like a kebab, the amount of length that the crows were getting pierced on was soon to run out. On top of that, the sword must have been getting quite heavy with all the dead birds impaled to it. Add to that the large uruk attacking him constantly with its scimitar — which Boromir could only block with his shield as his sword was occupied — and he seemed to be in quite a mess.

"Boromir, duck!" Harry shouted, positioning her broom. The steward did so, not even looking around to see who had spoken.

Harry shot forward over her friend's form and rammed into the crows, splitting them straight in the middle, rather like bowling pins. They squawked and screeched and one of them soared, twister-like, straight into the mountain of rock where it splattered. The remaining crows, those that hadn't been knocked unconscious or killed by the force of Harry's attack, scattered.

Harry: a bajillion, crows: zilch, she thought amusedly.

Swish!

Harry gasped and jerked back just in time to avoid becoming the scimitar's next victim.

In a great crunching noise that Harry knew would stay with her to the end of her days, the orc sword severed the top of her broom, avoiding her right hand by a mere centimetre. All that was left were large, jagged prickles where the top bit of his Firebolt used to reside. That, and air.

"No!" Harry was stunned. Shocked. Poleaxed. So much so that she almost missed seeing Boromir kill the uruk responsible.

"Just think of it as twelve years worth of birthday presents from your godfather."

Her eyes felt hot. She knew she was being stupid. The damage was hardly irreparable, but she couldn't seem to help herself. Perhaps it was because she wouldn't be able to fix it until she worked out how to travel between dimensions with all her stuff. But she couldn't fly it now; unless she held a particular fancy for being jerked, bounced, and butted about.

She was so shocked that she didn't even remember getting off of the damaged broom, but she must have done because she was now standing on the stone ground, broom in hand, unmindful of the battle going on around her. All she seemed to be seeing was the jagged edge of her faithful Firebolt,
where twenty centimetres had been lopped off. And where had those twenty centimetres gone? Harry suddenly got a mad urge to go and search for them.

She didn't get a chance because an anxious voice shouting, "Harry! Harry! For pity's sake!" snapped her out of her urgent daze.

Boromir, sword in one hand and battle ax in the other was standing before Harry, parrying and shielding various attacks from all sides. He had also been defending Harry, who, in her dazed state hadn't noticed that she would have been killed from the rampaging attacks.

She noticed now.

As a particularly grotesque uruk with sharper teeth than usual slipped passed Boromir's defences and ran towards her, irrational fury, the likes of which she had only felt once before when Bellatrix Lestrange gloated about killing Sirius, filled her. She felt the fire of her Pepper Breath escape her as she panted and her fingers tingled with crackles of lightning.

Stabbing her wand at the uruk, Harry bellowed, "Crucio!"

And wonders of all wonders, it worked. It worked better than it had at the Department of Mysteries that was for certain, and her elation at succeeding in causing such pain for one of those that caused her such anger only fueled the force of her spell.

The uruk instantly dropped to the ground, clawing its eyes, thrashing, screaming — ah, Merlin, the screaming. How it screamed. It wasn't a human sound, definitely not, which was perhaps the reason why Harry was able to prolong the curse for so long. It was like a mixture between an eagle screech, a lion roar, a cow yelp, and something else entirely that cause shivers of nervous sweat to seep down her spine.

Within a minute it was over. The uruk, dead. She had actually managed to make it feel such pain that it died.

Harry didn't feel anything. Unless being numb was considered a feeling. She knew she shouldn't be feeling numb though That thing wasn't even a person. Hadn't she killed many of them before? And in much more grotesque and innovative ways? What made it so different this time? Harry had a horrible feeling she knew what it was. she had to face the terrible truth — it was because she had killed something using dark magic. It didn't matter that that something was a dark creature in and of itself; Harry wasn't. Harry wasn't a dark creature. Harry was Harry. Harry Potter, that was her; daughter of James and Lily Potter; goddaughter of Sirius Black; she wasn't meant to use such disgusting magic.

She was crying and didn't even known it.

The battle had stopped and she hadn't even noticed.

Everyone was watching her, and had since she'd first started cursing the uruk, and she hadn't even known it. She knew it now.

Every uruk was dead; Harry had killed them all.

Helm's Deep was still five hours away when the white wizard felt it. Magic. Dark Magic. Certainly not evil — the intent had been good — but heavily dark just the same.

Something had happened.
Throwing a shout over his shoulder at the still riding Rohirrim, who had obviously not felt anything out of the ordinary, Gandalf urged Shadowfax faster.

Something had happened.

"I shall use you for kindling!" shouted Saruman up in his tower, enraged at the trespassing Ents that were causing unprecedented destruction to his home. He had been a fool not to think that they could have been a threat. But Ents minded their business and kept to their own affairs; they had been so distanced from the world outside Fangorn that they had forgotten many things in the long ages past. What had changed?

He howled again as a great tower of water — water from his dam — collapsed over the cliff. He waved his staff at them in rage, but there was naught he could do.

Then instantly he stopped raging.

Eyes flitted manically; fists clenched white knuckled over his staff as a foreboding intruded upon his thoughts. Something was using dark magic. At Helm's Deep.

The wizard!

Enraged anew at this happening Saruman ran inside and locked himself in his tower. The magic might have been dark, but the user was more than a beacon for good. Something told him he would be next on the list.

"Nice one, Merry," Pippin complimented as his cousin pitched a rock at an orc's head.

"Oh, well done, Master Merry," Treebeard hoomed in his deep, deep gravely voice.

"Thank you," Merry said graciously. "I was actually aiming for . . . Treebeard?"

The Ent whose shoulders — if shoulders were the appropriate term. Perhaps 'head; would have been better — they were riding on turned around as fast as he was able and let out a deep, thoughtful "Hooooommmmm."

It was only then that the hobbits noticed, by looking twitchily around, that every single ent had done the same. They were all staring at some far flung distance over the mountains. Glancing at each other in confusion, the hobbits shrugged, and did the same. They had no idea what they were looking for.

They had both felt it. She and Celeborn. Galadriel did not need her seeing pool to tell her what had occurred; the recoil of dark magic was potent. Anyone with power would have felt it, if they were not too far away.

"It has finally happened, then? He has done it?"

Her eyes blinked slowly, ethereally. "Yes, my lord. All has come to pass, just as I have predicted."

"He will be the better for it, my wife" Celeborn assured her. "It can ultimately only help him to aide his soul and his mind. All his decisions now will have a root at which to look back and observe. . . and heal. It will be the truth both in his world and in this one. You have foreseen it."

She turned loving eyes to her husband. "Nothing is certain."
In Mordor, despite the destruction of Saruman's army and the invasion of Isenguard, The Great Eye laughed.

"He walks in waking dreams." Anyone present could have made this observation, but the one who did was renowned for being wise, and so was taken more seriously than if any one of the others had made it.

"Can you help him, Gandalf?"

The old wizard shook his head and looked upon the prone boy lying on the mattress of straw, staring at the ceiling, unseeing. "I could. He used dark magic, powerful dark magic. Even I felt its power leagues away. It is not a natural sleep in which he dwells. So yes, I could help him." Gandalf the White then turned kind, gentle eyes on the man beside him. "But he does not wish me to, Boromir. He wishes to fight this himself."

"I do not understand why this is happening!" The son of the Steward of Gondor paced. "He has saved us all, yet he feels guilt?" His expression portrayed bewilderment. "So what if he used dark magic? Against a man, now that is a different matter. Yet uruk-hai were the focus of his attack. Surely he cannot be thinking...?" Frustrated, he raked a gloved hand, still caked with dried orc blood, through his hair.

Gandalf merely sighed and leaned against his staff. "You worry needlessly. Harry will awaken when he feels the time is right."

He paused. "I sense that this magic Harry unleashed is somehow supposed to be more potent than any other magic he knows. It is supposed to cause pain while it kills. That is what is troubling to him, I believe. In fact, I do not even think it is supposed to kill. Or kill so many at the same time. Perhaps it is only because they are... were uruk-hai.

"It could be that the curse was not meant to be cast on anything but men. After all, there are no uruk in Harry's world; Men and Wizards are the dominant breeds. Nonetheless, I shall have to think on this. If only I had stolen some of the weed from Saruman's stockroom. I would have liked sitting down with a pipe in hand. Most conducive to thinking.

"Though," he continued, sounding put upon. "Now is not the time to be dwelling on things that are out of even a wizard's reach."

Aragorn, who had been staring at the young wizard for the whole while, spoke softly: "It chilled me."

The others knew what he was speaking of at once.

"It was a most horrid sound," Legolas agreed. "Mistake me not I have no sympathy for yrch," he added, sounding horrified himself at the mere thought of the suggestion, "the screams, however; they were piercing to the ear. Never had I heard such... pain. At least not when expressed by those abominations."

Gimli nodded thoughtfully and stroked his beard. "Aye, it was that."

Gandalf hemmed importantly. "We shall leave him to rest now. No harm will befall him here. Theoden is most grateful to him, and no doubt wishing he can thank him. I must speak to Theoden myself as well. Likely he is feeling very overwhelmed at the moment. Men have never understood magic and regard it with high suspicion. The Dunedain are the exception, of course," he added, nodding at Aragorn.
For a minute they stared at the silent boy on the bed.

"And no one knows what became of this Head Master wizard?" Gandalf said.

"No," Aragorn sighed. "Here he slept while the battle commenced, yet he was gone when it ended."

"I should have liked to meet this Dumbledore, if he is as wise and powerful as you say, but I was right with my earlier thoughts. He was not supposed to be here, and neither was that Fawkes creature. Which is why I was permitted to sense them. Luckily, they are not here anymore, and luckily Saruman had run out of time and cunning to send anything more devious than the Crebain."

"Luckily we had Harry with us," Gimli mumbled.

"We are indeed lucky, Master Gimli! But come, let him rest, we shall pop in again in an hour or two."

The wizard ushered what remained of the broken Fellowship out of the room and gently closed the door behind him.

They arrived on the keep, looking over the wall and upon the field where the thousands and thousands of uruk-hai were being thrown into large piles and set alight. The burning fires of rank orc flesh seared the eyes and played havoc with the lungs. Coughing, Gandalf motioned with a gnarled hand and withdrew from the Deeping Wall.

He did not manage to find Theoden in the antechamber next to the main hall, nor did he manage to find him in the main hall itself. He concluded that the king must be asleep, eating, or bathing. He did manage to bump into Haldir. Remembering what Aragorn had told him, and how Harry had saved the elf, Gandalf could not resist a little riddling.

"Hardly the time it is to walk about, young elf," he said. The main hall was playing host to the wounded, as was Haldir, despite the injury to his back. "Those that died today would be most put upon to think themselves lucky. And those that didn't die today would think exactly the opposite. Though, either can be reversed if the person wishes them to be."

The elf cocked his silver-haired head to the side and regarded the old wizard with speculation. "I would not pretend to know the riddling ways of wizards, Master Gandalf, and I would not pretend to known what you are talking about either. I will merely hold my tongue until you decide to tell me."

Gandalf laughed, "Well said, March Warden! No one being can fall into a trap of words if they but simply stand and listen."

Haldir allowed a few comfortable seconds to pass in which he and Gandalf observed both elf and human healers alike tend to the wounded. Some had lost limbs, others worse injuries such as the loss of sight, but all would live. He asked quietly, "How is the young one?"

"If by 'young one' you mean Harry Potter . . ." the wizard sighed. "His eyes are awake but his mind is elsewhere. He is coping as best he can."

The elf took this news seriously. "Can you not help him?"

"I could, yet Harry's mind forbids me access. It is most strong. I feel that the Ring, when it was part of the Fellowship, quite possibly had no effect upon him at all. He might have felt some inkling of power from it, but that is all."

"Why is that, do you think?"
"It could be any number of reasons. Harry is from a different world than our own, so his body might not have been adapted to our world yet, therefore his essence, his soul, was not recognized by the Ring. It could be simply because Harry is a Wizard, and perhaps wizards in his world have a special magic to protect themselves from such things.

"It could be only that the Ring felt it would not benefit being worn by Harry because, just as he was not originally part of Middle Earth, that also means he does not have connections with any high and influential persons living here. And Sauron would not have been able to exploit Harry's power for his own gain either because if Harry took the Ring he, as a wizard, would be powerful enough to hold on to it. Then Sauron would have lost everything. And we would have had a new Dark Lord to deal with. But who knows, it could even be all those reasons combined."

Haldir looked thoughtful. "Have you any ideas as to why that spell so affected the yrch?"

"I have given it some thought," Gandalf replied carefully. "But I would not discuss such with you, Haldir, unless I had Harry's consent first. No no, take no offense! You might be getting along better with him but it is, to be frank, none of your business. Elves are usually not so inquisitive. Why are you?"

Haldir took that as an insult, as was his due. "I am merely concerned, Mithrandir. Am I not allowed to feel remorse for his situation?"

Gandalf patted him on the shoulder. "Forgive me, of course you are."

The wizard left Haldir to his musings and continued on his way. He found Theoden's sister-son walking up the corridor toward him.

"Ah, Eomer," he greeted cheerily. "Do you, perchance, know where your uncle has drifted? With the way he has disappeared I find myself thinking he might have escaped under a rock to avoid speaking to me."

Eomer grinned and replied in kind. "In a way he has, Mithrandir. I last saw him at the caves. Though that was over an hour ago. I do not know where he could have gone in that time."

"Many thanks."

Theoden was not in the caves. He was, however, in his rooms. Gamling, Theoden's manservant, left hastily at the wizard's prodding eyebrows, shutting the door behind him. The king was at his bath.

Gandalf made himself comfortable on the end of the large bed. He felt around his robes for his pipe but did not withdraw it, remembering, in the last second, that he had no pipe weed with which to smoke.

Theoden sat tucked in the wooden tub, arms hanging off the sides. "He sleeps, then?"

Gandalf refrained from sighing, and quickly explained Harry's situation for what was the third time in the past hour.

"I cannot thank him enough," Theoden said quietly when the wizard was finished. "I shall make him a citizen of Rohan. Always will he be welcome in my halls, and on my lands."

"Just do not offer him any special considerations or honours," Gandalf warned. "If I know wizards —" he chuckled here, "— and I do, we do our duty, we do our purpose, and that is all. Harry especially embodies this. Harry would be most gracious if you were to gift him with either reward, but he would be most uncomfortable and modest as well. He would not know what to do with it."
Secretly Gandalf told himself that Harry's reactions would be unpredictable. Dark Magic clouded everything, and Harry's thoughts were unfocused now.

"I thank you for your wisdom, Mithrandir," said Theoden, and Gandalf knew he would heed his advice.

They chatted for a few more pleasant minutes before Gandalf made his way back to Harry's room. He strolled inside, and froze.

"What are you here?" he bellowed. The young men who were gathered around Harry's bed jumped guiltily and whirled around.

Gandalf had no patience for them. Now Harry's condition would be spread throughout the whole of Helm's Deep by the hour. The boy did not need that at the moment. "Out! Out! All of you! Can you not see he is resting?"

They did not move. "Who, Gandalf?" a boy of fifteen winters asked bravely. "If you mean Master Harry he is not here. That is why we came, to see him. We have entered the wrong room, 'tis obvious. Though how can that be, when his tunic and robe is still here? I do not understand how..."

Gandalf was moving as soon as the words 'he is not here' were said. Dashing as fast as his robes would allow him toward the bed — the boys scattered at his approach — he came to a halt.

The bed was empty of any boy wizards, but his clothing was indeed still there, lying exactly in the position Harry had been in before.

"It has happened again," was all Gandalf mumbled.

The boys merely looked at each other in confusion.
It was not a very cold day outside nor should it have been, being summer and all, but the Hospital Wing made the air seem of cold stone, and sterile smells, and newly washed bedpans, all things that Harry associated with iciness. This was where Harry was now.

Dumbledore lay on the bed. Harry stood next to him, and she watched as that little bit of mustache quivered every time he breathed out.

"You may go now, Ms Potter," said Madame Pomfrey, who was fussing over Dumbledore's forehead.

"But —" said Harry.

"It's too soon," she interrupted impatiently. "I keep telling you, he won't get better yet, and you keep coming anyway. If there's a change, I'll owl you, or floo you, whatever the case."

"Right," said Harry dully.

For a moment, Madame Pomfrey looked as if she might relent at her bland tone, but then fierce determination settled in her eyes. "Off you go; Molly would have my head if you three didn't come back before dark."

With one last glance at Dumbledore — who was now being helped to drink water through a magically suspended funnel — Harry left the room.

Hermione and Ron were waiting for her in the Room of Requirement, which was shifted to mimic a cosy tea room. They stood as she entered, concern on their faces. Cool pumpkin juice appeared next to the little teas, jams, and toasts on the minute table. Harry took a goblet and drained it.

"Is he any better?" asked Hermione, sitting down again when Harry plonked in the seat next to hers.

"It's only been an hour since you last saw him, Hermione," said Harry.

She bit her lip, and said quietly. "That's what I tried to tell you ten minutes ago."

Harry said nothing.

Ron sat down. "McGonagall can't work out what happened with Fawkes?" he asked, when the silence became just that tinge of awkward.

Harry shook her head. She had gone to visit McGonagall's office before she'd went to see Dumbledore again. Earlier, she had been forced to tell McGonagall and Madame Pomfrey about her forays to another dimension when the latter had spotted her levitating an unconscious Dumbledore onto a bed in the Hospital Wing. Not that she wouldn't have told Madame Pomfrey eventually — she would have had to, if she were to treat Dumbledore — but she had caught Harry unsuspected.

"He didn't come back when Dumbledore and I came back. I think," she looked down and drew a breath, "I think he might have taken the brunt of the onslaught into himself so that Dumbledore would have a chance."

Ron gulped. "You don't mean to say that Fawkes is... well, you know?"

Harry shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. I mean I saw him explode into ash, but that's what
phoenix's do, right? But there were no flames... and he's not here, is he? I," she glanced up at them and said quickly, "I have this crazy theory that he might be trapped in a void between dimensions or something. Like a black hole."

Hermione raised her brows. "That's a very broad theory, Harry. And very... well, very advanced. How did you come up with it?"

"Nothing like what you're thinking. Just a dream I had once," Harry muttered, thinking back to the Dumbledore-induced nightmare she'd had about chasing after the Sorting Hat on her broom through the brunt of space. "But it sort of makes sense, doesn't it?"

"I'll have to go the library," Hermione said, looking a bit perked up at the thought of something new to explore.

Harry almost smiled at her.

Ron took a jam tart and stuffed it into his mouth. "How are you doing, mate?" he asked, for once swallowing before attempting to speak.

Harry did not miss the implication of Ron's question. Nor the emphasis on that 'you'. "I'm fine... Really," she added at her friends' look of doubt. "It might have taken me a couple of days, but I've gotten over what I did. They weren't human anyway. They were... well they're monsters and I'm glad I cursed them. It just took me a little bit to realize. That rest I had really opened my eyes. Merlin!" She reached up and raked her hair in a combined gesture of frustration and relief. "I was stupid. But it was a good sort of stupid. I learned some things about life and death... and vulnerability."

"Well of course it's good," agreed Hermione in her typically overbearing tone. "I mean if you hadn't killed all those uruk things, people would have died. Children would have died."

Harry took a sip from her newly replenished goblet. "That's what I ended up realizing. That, and the fact that sometimes you have to do what you have to do."

"I think," said Hermione, her eyes gentle and proud, "that that's a very mature way of looking at it, Harry."

The subsequent silence, unlike before, was pleasant.

Eventually, Ron stood up. "Let's go," she said, looking between them. "Mum expects us home in five minutes and I don't fancy hearing her screech if we're late."

One by one they flooed out.

Mrs Weasley was there to greet Harry as she stepped out of the fireplace. She took her cloak and pinned it to the hooks next to the mantelpiece.

"Come along, Harry, dear," she said, ushering her towards the kitchen, "I've made supper. Is Albus any better?"

Harry really didn't want to think about Dumbledore just then, especially after her discussion with Ron and Hermione, but she found herself explaining anyway. Dumbledore, after all, had been Mrs Weasley's headmaster as well, and was now her friend.

"Madame Pomfrey says he'll be all right in a while," she told the older woman. "He's not in a coma, like we first thought, but his magic was depleted so he's 'metaphysically exhausted' to use her exact
words. She says she's never seen anything like that before."

"I'd imagine not," Mrs Weasley said restlessly. "It's very unusual for a wizard's magic to exhaust itself. Though I can't imagine what Albus has been doing to warrant an attack on his own magic like that." Then she gestured to a chair at the end of the table before rushing off to the oven.

Bill and Fleur grinned in greeting as she sat down between Fred and George.

"All right, Harry?" they chorused.

Harry's first response had been to assure that everything was fine, that she was fine, but she found she just couldn't lie at the moment. "No. Not really. But it's alright, because I think I will be."

A hint of surprise registered on the faces sitting around the table, but that was quickly forgotten when Mrs Weasley set down a large plateful of delicious pot roast under their noses.

Harry lay in the twins' old room, tucked under the sheets of George's former bed, having just awoken. She was sat up and stretching a bit, rubbing sleep from her eyes and yawning.

She had been dozing peacefully, in that state of slumber just between true sleep and consciousness, when it suddenly struck her that she hadn't checked in on Kreacher yet. She immediately bolted awake only to almost slump back down when her body fought the action. However, Harry was nothing but willful, and not even her own body was getting in her way when she decided on doing something.

Ruffling her bed-head a bit, Harry moved so she was sitting with her legs on the ground before she called out, "Kreacher?"

Instantaneously, there was a small pop and Harry's ghastly servant was looking up at her distrustfully.

"Cruel mistress is calling for Kreacher?" The ghoulish house-elf croaked, holding himself with caution.

Harry gave her best thoroughly unimpressed look at the slinking creature. She wouldn't lie to herself and say that she could look beyond the past and treat the house-elf like anyone else, but she wasn't going to dismiss future attempts at being kinder. Now, if only the little monster wasn't so easy to dislike.

"I did," She said finally after allowing herself enough time to keep her tone civil. "You may not have noticed, Kreacher, but I was quite far away the day before. Now, I know a little bit about house-elves and their bonds and I was wondering if you were alright while I was away."

Kreacher dithered for a moment, the cautious look not leaving his face. Eventually he answered, albeit warily. "Kreacher was being confused yesterday. New mistress was being fine one moment then suddenly it was feeling like she was dead. Then before Kreacher could do anything, mistress was alive and fine again. Kreacher is not understanding."

Harry nodded, not exactly expecting such an answer but not surprised either.

"I have found myself with the ability to travel between this reality and another," She told him, observing as his expression grew surprised. "From what I can tell, when I go to that alternate reality, I cease to exist in this one for all of a split second before I reappear again, no matter how long I stay in the other world. I was concerned that my lack of presence would effect you badly; I suppose I'm
relieved that you're still alright."

The house-elf and young wizard regarded each other guardedly, uncertain as to how to continue. Unsurprisingly, it was Harry to break the silence between them.

Getting out of bed, Harry stepped closer to the house-elf — who warily backed up at her approach — before dropping to her knees to address Kreacher on a more even level. She was the one in charge here; she was the one that had to set things straight.

"Kreacher," She said straight-forwardly, looking seriously into his beady eyes. "I'll be plain with you; at the moment, I don't like you in the least bit, as I'm sure you already know. And I don't doubt that you hate me for whatever reasons beyond the fact that I was very harsh with you the other day. I accept your right to dislike me and I won't hold that against you."

Kreacher shifted uncomfortably but didn't disobey the silent command to stay put.

"At the moment, I'm very tired of violence and hate; I'm tried of being violent and feeling hate. I don't have it in me right now to continue being furious with you for aiding in Sirius' death," Here he cringed, "and I'm willing to never mention it again if you're willing to cooperate. Are you willing to cooperate?"

Kreacher hesitated but finally agreed when he saw the dangerous glint in her eye that he had observed just before she took him to task as stridently as Miss Bellatrix once had when he displeased her. Somehow, he knew his new mistress would not appreciate the comparison.

"Good," Harry said, letting her approval show with a lightening of her features and the smallest of smiles. "Now, I know of something I think we can both benefit from. Grimmauld Place needs to be properly cleaned, both of the filth and of dangerous artifacts, and I'm sure you'd like to keep some of the things I won't have any use for. If you go back to Hogwarts and recruit some other elves to help you straighten up the place, I'd be happy to let you keep whatever you'd like that means something to you as long as it's not dangerous to yourself and others."

Kreacher's eyes widen at the compromise. "New mistress would let Kreacher have Master Regulus' things?"

"Regulus was Sirius' younger brother, right? He was your favourite?" Kreacher nodded hesitantly. "Yes, I will. I don't see any reason why you can't keep anything you want as long as the place stays livable."

"What of the things that the filthy thief stole before new mistress was new mistress?"

Harry paused at the question. Then she scowled. "You mean to tell me that someone from the Order stole from headquarters? Who would da—? It was Fletcher, wasn't it?"

Kreacher nodded. "The one that smells of poverty and dishonesty was the one. Filthy thief even stole Kreacher's treasure right out of Kreacher's sleeping place."

Harry fumed. The nerve of that man! And he even sunk so low as to steal from a house-elf? Pathetic.

"If I give you free reign to get back all Dung stole, would you be able to do it?"

The house-elf grinned a distorted, grisly grin. "Kreacher would."

"Then we are in agreement? Grimmauld Place will be properly taken care of and you will cooperate
with me without a fuss, and in return you may have whatever you want of your former masters’ belonging as well as being free to do as you please to get back what was stolen?"

"Kreacher accepts mistress's terms."

"Good. You're free to go then."

Such was Kreacher's delight at their agreement that he actually bowed to Harry before he left, and looked like he even meant it.

The grass on the hill beside the Burrow was still slightly damp from the previous night's drizzle, but Harry found herself not caring, even when the wet seeped through her jeans. Dawn had only just disappeared, and the sun was stubbornly climbing the sky, giving birth to a rupture of orange and reds. It was the sort of scene Harry hardly ever noticed, but it seemed viable as a distraction right now.

"I'm going back tonight," she said quietly.

Silence greeted her on either side.

Finally, sighing, Hermione revealed, "I sort of thought you would be. You've been slightly vacant the last few days, ever since you came back actually."

"I'm going to try and take stuff with me this time. After all, it worked for my broom."

Harry had arrived three days ago in Dumbledore's office at the same time Dumbledore had. Both had been unclothed, with the exception of Harry's broken Firebolt tightly clutched in one white-knuckled hand. Harry had surmised that, because of her recent loss of almost a quarter of the broom — and as she had so desperately been thinking about it — that she had unconsciously taken it with her.

"What sort of things are you going to try and take?"

"Well, for one, clothes on my back ought to keep me from landing in an embarrassed heap at the foot of almost kings," she told Ron.

They snorted. "What?"

Harry grinned, but didn't bother to elaborate. "But besides that, I'm taking my new Nimbus 2000... if I can. I'd rather take that than the clothes, to be honest."

Two days ago, with Tonks and Moody on guard duty, Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Ginny — who still didn't know about her dimension-hopping — had gone to Diagon Alley on the pretense of buying the rest of their school supplies for the coming Hogwarts year, which would begin in a week's time.

They had bought the supplies, but Harry had also purchased a new broom since her Firebolt was unrepairable — at present. Harry still held onto the hope that McGonagall might be able to fix it, but she couldn't stop thinking about her first broom and the toothpick-like splinters that it had been reduced to. Nothing on the level her Firebolt now looked like, of course, but McGonagall had told her — much to her disappointment — that the more magic put into a broom the harder it was to fix, as it would need a similar amount of magic put back into it. And Firebolts were the best of the best. But whatever would happen, Harry would still keep her old Firebolt as a memento to Sirius.

Hermione had suggested getting it glass-cased and put on a wall. Harry had taken to the idea...
until she'd remembered the Dursleys.

"Well, I think you should at least take some potions with you. If you can't brew them in time — which you probably won't if you're leaving tonight — you should take some ingredients and last years potions book instead. I mean, you're going to be in the middle of a war! Healing potions will do wonders."

"I agree. It's just. . . I'm a little worried I won't be able to keep everything with me. I mean, what if it gets lost between dimensions or something?"

Hermione stared. "Maybe. But I still think the most disadvantageous thing you can do is unintentionally leave it here. Besides which, I wouldn't think that our potion ingredients could be found anywhere in your Middle Earth. You told us about this *Athelas* plant that that Aragorn man used on that hobbit. . . I don't even know what that is, and I've looked everywhere for a reference."

"It's a Middle Earth plant."

"I think she's figured that, Harry," said Ron, eying Hermione's increasingly red face.

"Yes, thank you," said Hermione tersely, then turned to Harry. "But I wish you'd bring back some when we see you again next time. It'll be fascinating to observe its properties, and what reactions it'll have to this or that root, and so forth."

"You're getting a little ahead of yourself, Hermione," Ron said as she whipped around to glare at him. "I'm just saying. . . Harry can't afford to think about things like that right now. As you said, she's going to be in a war."

Harry and Hermione both blinked at Ron's suddenly serious tone.

"That's just. . . that's true," she admitted, then blinked again.

Harry and Ron exchanged amused glances. It wasn't often that Hermione had nothing to say, and when she did, it was awfully funny. She looked lost.

"Well, as long as you're careful, that's all that matters, Harry," she said at last.

"I will be," Harry promised.

Ron disappeared a couple of minutes later and came back with a pot of tea and three cups. They ended up drinking while watching the scenery.

Harry set down her cup. Now was the time to speak. After what had happened with the uruk-hai on Helm's Deep, Harry knew she couldn't afford to be let off guard again, and she didn't just mean in Middle Earth. No, she meant with Voldemort.

"I want us to train," he told them.

Ron picked up his cup. "What d'you mean?"

"I mean I want to train. I have to get better. You have to get better, too."

Ron opened his mouth, perhaps in retaliation, but then decided against saying anything.

Hermione frowned. "What about that book Professor Lupin gave you?"

"I've read it, and I've tried some spells — and they actually worked, surprisingly — but it's not the
same as having someone else to practice with." Harry looked at her. "I want to start up the DA again."

Hermione's brows rose.

"It won't be illegal this time," Harry reminded her, "So there'll be no one to rat on us."

"I'd forgotten about that," she frowned thoughtfully. "And I've just thought of something else. The time you spend in Middle Earth, well it's the perfect opportunity to study, isn't it? I mean when you're not fighting," she hastened to add.

"I've already thought of that. That's why I read Remus' book before going back that last time, but that's not precisely what I meant about the training, Hermione."

Hermione looked at her. "What are you talking about?"

"I wanted to ask Remus about, well, about becoming an animagus."

Ron choked on his tea. He came up spluttering. "Wicked!"

But Hermione was frowning. "As much as I like the idea, Harry... and I expect it'll be very useful against Voldemort, especially if you go the unregistered route — Harry didn't bother to mention that she hadn't considered any other route — but it's also really dangerous. Do you realize the repercussions if you do something wrong? You could end up a half elephant."

Ron was suddenly overcome with a fit of sniggering, and a bit of tea shot out of his nose as a result. "A-a-a half elephant," he managed, before snorting even more violently.

Hermione sighed irritably. "Yes, Ronald, a half elephant. Or half anything actually—"

"But if Lupin will be there. . ." Harry trailed off.

"That's an extra precaution, Harry, but still no guarantee."

"Let me put it this way," Harry said, leaning forward. "Would you do it if a trained Ministry official were to oversee the process?"

Hermione didn't hesitate. "Yes."

Harry arched her brows.

Hermione sighed. "Oh all right. If Professor Lupin agrees. . ."

Harry grinned. "You were going to give in eventually, Hermione."

"Yeah," Ron added. "No way would you have passed up the opportunity to learn something so advanced. Nor would you have let us get away with learning something while you just sat in the background, twiddling your thumbs."

"Oh, shut up," Hermione said, but she was smiling.

Harry went to see Dumbledore one last time before her trip to Middle Earth. She didn't make it past the threshold.

"I keep telling you, Ms Potter, that he's not awake yet. You've already visited five times yesterday
and once today, all of which I've told you the same thing. I'll endeavour to explain once more, and that is it: It is unlikely that Headmaster Dumbledore will wake up anytime soon. His magic is just too exhausted."

"But—"

"Rest assured that I'll inform you of any change. Now shoo. He needs his rest."

Harry was tempted to point out that Dumbledore had been resting for the past four days, but thought twice about it when she spotted the hard gleam in the hospital matron's eye.

"Worse than Pince," Harry mumbled after the matron shut the hospital wing door in her face.

"I heard that!"

Harry got out of there sharpish.

Ron stepped into the room and closed the door. "Hermione's just arrived. D'you have everything? Besides the obvious, I mean."

Harry, lying flat on the spare bed in Ron's room, counted her items absently. "Not yet, Ginny's still out flying. Did Hermione manage to sneak into the library?"

Ron flapped a hand. "Course. With no Pince to waylay her... you know, I think she got lost in there for the first time."

Harry laughed.

Hermione slipped into the room. "Sorry about the wait. Mrs Weasley wanted to confirm a recipe of my mum's. Here we are," she said, holding up a thin leather-bound text entitled: *So You Want To Become an Animagus?: Steps for the rudimentary learner*. The cover showed a pencil-drawn rendition of a man morphing into a tiger, and back again.

"Did you find that in the Restricted Section?" Harry asked, accepting the book with a grateful nod.

"No," Hermione admitted. Then smiled. "It was actually behind Madam Pince's counter, locked in a cabinet."

"Locked with magic?" Ron asked, an interested look on his face.

"Strangely, no. Alohamora opened it." She shrugged. "I expect Madam Pince thought no one would dare look behind there. And since there are usually no students at Hogwarts during the summer holidays, she must have thought it was safe."

"We'll have to put it back before school starts, then," said Harry, placing it in her knapsack along with the other items.

"Or transfigure a new cover over some blank cardboard," Hermione suggested.

They stared.

"What? There's no point putting that book back; there's only a week of holidays left, and we can hardly work everything out in that time. If we put it back we'll never get to it otherwise. We might as well keep it."
"That's stealing," Ron said, still staring.

"Yes," said Hermione, slowly. "But it's not stealing if the recipient doesn't know about it. Besides, I doubt Madam Pince even looks at it. It's more likely she'd confiscated it from some hapless student years ago. Why else would it be in a locked drawer?"

"Because it's dangerous," Harry proposed, feeling odd at taking the place of the voice of reason since Hermione had decided to embrace her delinquent side.

"If that were the case, it would have been in the Restricted Section. There are books in there that are far more dangerous." She motioned for Ron to shuffle over then sat next to him on the bed. "Now that that's out of the way... you will promise to study it, won't you? When you have the time, of course," she added hastily. "That way you can give it straight to us when you come back."

"Excellent," Ron said. "Wastes less time."

Harry nodded. "It's a good idea."

"And," said Hermione, looking exited. "You might want to think about asking that wizard for some advice, if you see him. He's magic may be different from ours, but he's lived for thousands of years. The knowledge he must have access to..." her eyes were shining strangely and a dreamy smile had taken over her face.

"I'll, er, do that," Harry promised, trying very hard not to grin. "I'll tell him he has a fangirl as well."

Hermione blushed and opened her mouth to protest when raised voices caught their attention.

"... told you I don't want it! Find someone else to test it out!" Ginny's voice sounded extremely irritable.

Another voice, either Fred or George's, answered indiscernibly.

"You can't bribe me!" Ginny threatened. "You didn't want to give me the Pygmy Puffs when I asked for them! It's too late now!"

Ron's door opened forcefully as Ginny stepped through. Her cheeks were rosy and she was looking very windswept. In her hand she held Harry's new broom.

She handed it over with a smile. "Thanks, Harry. Might not be as good as your old Firebolt, but it's still one of the best brooms on the market."

Harry accepted the Nimbus and put it alongside her knapsack. "Have a good fly I take it?"

Ginny grinned at her like she shouldn't have asked. "Of course." Then she looked around. "Mum says dinner should be ready in another half hour. Want to play Exploding Snap?"

Harry arrived on a bed in a room she didn't remember seeing before. Something dug into her back and she turned over.

Her wand!

She continued looking, eyes growing wider. Her clothes — which must have been stacked in a neat pile, but were now squashed because Harry had landed on them — were lying at the foot of the bed. As was her minute trunk.
She stood up then felt something thudding against her side. She looked down and grinned. "My bag! I did it!" She checked inside to make sure everything had made it. It had!

She perused herself, amusement crinkling her lips as she saw what had happened to her clothes. Harry had one sock on her left foot, and a shoe on her right. Her trousers were missing, but her jumper was in the right place. All in all, Harry was pleased with herself. . . until she remembered what she hadn't seen.

Her new Nimbus had not made the trip.

"Blast," Harry mumbled, brooms weren't exactly cheap. But there was nothing she could do about it; she'd just have to try harder next time around.

She quickly dressed in all the missing items, pocketed her wand and trunk, and walked out.

Helm's Deep still wasn't deserted, thankfully. Harry had been a bit worried about that, but she really didn't know how the time passed between realities.

"Barmy," Harry muttered, and quickly nodded in response to Gamling's greeting. But the man still looked at her as though she were mental. Harry figured that talking to oneself was as much of a sign of madness in Middle Earth as it was at home.

Harry did not take into account that Gamling might have been staring in awe and perhaps a little fear. As luck would have it, the second person she came upon was Gandalf, who was sitting on the stairs positioned in front of the great hall, enjoying an early morning pipe. Harry noted, as she sat down beside him, that he looked cleaner than he had the last time Harry had seen him.

Gandalf drew a puff, turned, and blinked. Then puffed out.

Abruptly, he came out of his stupor, eyes shining. "Forgive me, Harry. You gave me quite a surprise, though not as much of a surprise as you will give the others when they see you, I think." He patted Harry's hand. "It is very good to see you, young wizard."

"And you," Harry looked him over properly. Gandalf the White. "I-I thought you were. . . I mean Aragorn told me you were alive. . . but it's still difficult. . ."

Gandalf nodded, sighed. "I understand. Believe me, I understand. Even for me, for one who has experienced it, it is a difficult concept to comprehend. . . and you have a message. Oh my," he blinked and chuckled. "I have just remembered."

Harry blinked at the changed of subject. "Pardon?"

Gandalf continued as if Harry hadn't spoken. "I must deliver it, as it was given to me to be passed on to you." He paused a moment, then, "Galadriel says, 'Congratulations,' and we will leave it at that for the present. I assumed you know what she means?"

"Boromir," Harry whispered, her eyes wide.

Gandalf smiled like he had a secret, or like he knew Harry was going to say that. "Yes, that. No, no need to be alarmed. Galadriel told me all." He chuckled. "You'll find that there are no secrets between what is left of the White Council. A bit of foreknowledge does help in the extreme."

He dragged in a bit of smoke, then loop-holed it back out until it formed a very correct bow. Harry
watched it float away with the breeze. "Rohan weed. Not as good as the Longbottom Leaf, but it was the only one I could find. Now—" he banged his pipe against his palm until it extinguished —"have you had breakfast, yet? I hear the women are preparing something spectacular in honour of the elves leaving us, and I dare say there are quite a few people wishing to converse with you."

"Erm, may we hold off breakfast for a bit, sir?" Harry asked, not particularly fancying being converged on by a hyperactively grateful crowd. "I-I'd like to talk to you."

Gandalf picked up his staff and draped it across his lap. Harry wondered how Middle Earth wizards made staffs, and what sort of wood they used. It was such a random thought, that Harry blinked at herself.

Gandalf hemmed. "I imagine I know what you wish to speak to me about... and breakfast can wait, as you said. After all, I doubt it has been made yet. Most of the residents of Helm's Deep are likely still warm from their beds."

Gandalf stared at her with eyes so wise and old that Harry had to look down. She had the not so comfortable feeling of being gently stripped of all emotional barriers, something which she'd only experienced with Dumbledore, and Snape, and Voldemort.

Perhaps Gandalf was a Legilemens? It wasn't so odd a notion. "I guess — I guess I wanted to ask about... well, do you know why my magic reacted that way to the uruks? The curse I used... I mean, they weren't all supposed to die. In fact, none of them were. It's only a pain curse. Admittedly, it's known as Unforgivable, but the mechanics of it are quite simple."

Gandalf hummed and stared at a spot on the ground. "It is the nature of dark magic to be unpredictable," he said at last, looking at Harry sideways. "Though I suspect that not to be the case for your sort of wizard. But there is another option, Harry, and one which I have been mulling over ever since you saved Helm's Deep. I do not know if anyone has told you of this, but the Orc was not always a race of Middle Earth. In fact, they only started existing in the beginning of the Fourth Age of Stars... and I have just remembered that I might have mentioned something to that effect when first we met."

"I'm pretty sure you did," Harry grinned.

"You are cheekier than Took at times, young Potter," Gandalf humphed, then lit his pipe again. "You know that the orcs have all been twisted, and tortured, and created in a most foul use of the darkest of dark magicks?"

Harry nodded.

"And you also know that because of that, they are an unnatural race. Abominations of nature. Though even calling them natural would be stretching it, but they had to have come from somewhere after all, and in fact they have come from elves."

"It's hard to believe," Harry said quietly, trying to link the foul creatures to the unearthly beings that were elves.

"Indeed, yes, though not for the goblins themselves, which is why I suspect they harbour more resentment for elves than for the other races." Gandalf took a fresh puff. "Now, what you battled here at Helm's Deep was not orc, it was uruk, and uruk was created by Saruman from the orc race."

Harry bit her lip. Gandalf was looking expecting. "I think I might have an idea of what you're trying to say. I mean, my magic's been reacting oddly, or sometimes not at all, when faced with anything..."
Gandalf nodded, pleased. "Indeed, most astute of you, and that was exactly what I was going to bring up. Uruk-hai were created by Saruman, but more specifically, they were created by Saruman's magic. Perhaps this common bond of theirs is what caused them all to feel your curse, and respond to it accordingly. It was most beneficial to us, and I, for one, could not be happier. I'd wager Saruman had not thought of that when he first began creating the uruk in the bowels of Orthanc."

"I rather doubt he'd predicted my arrival," Harry said.

"No," said Gandalf, eyes shining. "Indeed, he did not."
Dude Looks Like a Lady

Ganadalf continued puffing his pipe as they strolled Helm's Deep.

"I doubt anyone has awoken yet, as you have already mentioned," he had told Harry earlier. "Besides Gamling, perhaps, but I doubt he will be so anxious to raise the king from his sleep. Last night was merry for all, and many a potent drink did fall into thirsty throats and greedy bellies. The king is not the only one whose head is throbbing this morn, I have no doubt.

"So now," he had stood up, "let us amble. I need to stretch these old bones and I feel that you should see in the very least some of the good you have brought to the people of Rohan. I wish for you to understand that is it not . . ." he had sighed. "Well, you should not have to feel as if the light in your life has ended, Harry. No darkness resides in you, and I want for you to understand that. It is very important that you do."

"I understand, Gandalf," Harry had said, staring up into the kind blue eyes. "I understand completely now. I might not have understood earlier, but right now . . . right now I do."

Gandalf had stared for a full ten seconds — again through Harry, as opposed to at Harry, and then he had smiled. "I see that you do indeed. Still, perhaps we should take a stroll?" he had suggested once more, and Harry had given in. It had been obvious that the wizard had wanted to talk more. Or perhaps he hadn't? Perhaps he had really fancied a stroll?

He hadn't.

". . . hit him over the head. Just like that," Gandalf was saying now. "As any well-meaning person can imagine, he was quite shocked, indeed he very much was. But that is a story for another time." He stopped to look over the Deeping Wall.

Harry followed.

The slight waft of breeze brought with it a smell that was overwhelmingly disgusting, and it made her eyes water. Harry didn't try being discreet and not hold her nose.

The smell didn't seem to bother the white wizard, however. "This is what you have wrought, Harry," he said, and gestured majestically at the field of burnt uruk carcasses before them.
"Yuergh," Harry said, and tried not to cough.

"Yes, very much so," Gandalf sighed, as though Harry had said something profound. He leaned on his staff and looked at Harry from under bushy brows. "Indeed, young wizard, surprised am I that you had not thought to ask me the greatest and most puzzling question of all."

Harry's face must have shown puzzlement on its own, because Gandalf explained.

"I do not doubt you have been puzzling over this yourself. Perhaps consciously, or perhaps not —"

"I’m really not understanding what you mean, sir."

Gandalf gave Harry a most disbelieving stare. "The sudden and unexpected collapse of the wards your mentor erected gave you no —?"

"Wait," Harry interjected, realization finally dawning. "Sorry, but are you talking about what happened with Saruman's bomb?"

"Bomb?" Gandalf looked thoughtful, then pleased. "Yes, most apt . . . the name, that is. Bomb. Hmm. There is a delightful pop to it . . . it rather sounds like the sound of the thing it represents, does it not? And I have just noticed, pop also shares the same quality."

Harry laughed at the wizard's half satisfied, half flummoxed expression. "Yes. There's actually a word for that where I come from. We call such words onomatopoeia."

Gandalf hemmed and puffed a little. "In answer to your question, yes, I was speaking of Saruman's bomb."

"You're going to enjoy saying that, aren't you?"

Gandalf chuckled.
"Does it work using the same principle, then?" At Gandalf's slight puzzled frown, Harry added, "I mean, does the same, er, idea apply as it did when I cursed the uruk. Saruman's bomb . . . well I assume it was made of a little bit of magic, right? His magic, and when it came in contact with Dumbledore's wards . . ."

Gandalf laughed lightly. "Again, most commendable. I know none here would ever have solved such a puzzle, but that could be because they do not understand magic as you or I do. But yes, I suspect it to be because of the different colours of magic, you can say, coming together and canceling each other out.

"Do you remember," he added, and gestured for Harry to follow him along the path of the wall, "the first time you journeyed back to your home world? Hmm? You assumed I was Saruman. We both cast spells. None of them did what they were supposed to do but merely . . ."

"Bounced back?" Harry offered.

Gandalf nodded. "And do you also remember the holly trees that stood on either side of the entrance of the Hollin Gate? Of Moria, that is. Your magic refused to work then as well."

Gandalf drew a breath, but Harry interrupted. "Actually, I know the reason for that one."

"Oh good, because I do not," said the old wizard. "Not entirely."

Harry blinked.

"I was about to ask you, you see," he said, perfectly reasonably. "I have thought about it, but could receive no conclusion as to why you could not access your magic. Saruman's influence had not been felt in Moria at all. It very much leads one to ponder, as I did."

As confusing as Dumbledore, was Harry's brief thought, before she shook her head. "Right, well, er, you see my wand,"— she unpocketed it — "it's made of holly, and the holly trees at the entrance —"

"Of course!"
Again, Harry blinked.

Gandalf noticed, and smile. "Holly is a very magical wood . . . or tree, depending on how one uses it. And the fact that your wand is made of holly leads me to suspect that it must hold magical properties in your world as well." At Harry's nod, he continued. "Those particular holly trees that stand so beautifully at the cursed West-gate entrance were, in fact, brought by the elves in order to guard Moria's gate in order to bequeath travelers with a little bit of elvish knowledge. You see, Harry, they represent something very important: the end of elvish territory and the beginning of dwarvish — which is Moria, of course. It could also be said that they represent something even more important: the Two Trees of Valinor."

"Valinor is the elvish heaven, right?"

"That is correct."

"Then, are you trying to say elvish magic also has an effect on my —" Harry stopped abruptly as something occurred to her that never had before. "Of course it does," she added softly. "Galadriel could read my mind through my hat. She penetrated through the mind of the one of the greatest Legilemenses in my world."

Gandalf arched his brows, looking inquiring. "I am unfamiliar with this word."

Harry looked up. "To explain it very loosely, a Legilemens is a mind-reader."

"And your hat is a mind-reader?" said Gandalf slowly. His eyes traveled from the brim of Harry's black hat to its tip, as though expecting it to strike up a conversation.

"It used to be," Harry grumbled, adjusting her brim, "but not anymore. It — its presence sort of went away."

Gandalf started laughing. His shoulders shook with the force of his mirth.

Harry half pouted in discontent. "What's so funny?"
"Harry, dear child, no object can be as powerful as that of a living person! no matter how much magic is put into it," said Gandalf, looking kind. "Unless it is a staff or wand, of course, but still they will only work for the will of the caster. You must understand . . . a magical object's power is only sufficient enough to keep within the limits of the magic it holds within itself. If a stronger being comes along, say, a certain White Lady, then . . . and remember that Galadriel is a most powerful being. Compared to a hat — forgive me, but you must understand how amusing I find this."

"No," Harry said wryly, "I can see why you're laughing. It does sound pretty stupid when put like that." She paused. "I can't believe I hadn't thought of it before."

Gandalf jabbed the end of his stick into the air. "Let us get back to our previous discussion."

"So, about that, was it only because of Galadriel's power that she could read my mind, or because she was an elf, with elf magic, that canceled out the one on my hat?"

"Judging by the holly trees that stand in front the Moria gate . . . oh, thank you —" Harry held the antechamber door wide open so the wizard could walk through, as his hands were occupied with his pipe and staff, then shut it again. "— I do believe that elvish magic has some sort of effect on your own . . . but I am missing something. Something is niggling at me. Something that I feel as if I have taken note of for a tiny moment, but which has slipped from my thoughts before I could examine it at length."

"What do you mean, sir?"

Gandalf stoked the end of his beard. "I know not, but I am certain it will come to me." Something loud gurgled and Gandalf looked down. "But now it is really time for breakfast. A pipe is not a sufficient enough meal, I am sorry to say."

The antechamber was a room that sat to the right of the great hall. It was used mainly for the storage of food stuffs these days, but long ago it used to be a magnificent bedchamber for very important guests, so that they wouldn't have to go through the inconvenience of walking all the way from their rooms to the great hall. Or so, Gandalf told Harry.

Harry pondered on that as the old wizard took her arm and led her out of the side door. Hermione had been right, with age came knowledge. Gandalf was extremely old and extremely knowledgeable, and had managed to figure out things about Harry's own magic that wouldn't have occurred to her. He also talked in riddles mainly, and sometimes Harry was forced to think about what was being said before she gave an answer.
It was extremely satisfying. Which was why Harry was surprised at herself. She didn't get into problem-solving, usually — that was Hermione's forte. But after thinking about it she realised that, yes, she did indeed — perhaps without meaning to — do it. Who had worked out all those puzzles in fourth year when no one else could? And what about that sphinx? Harry's problem-solving often came at her in bursts, when she most needed it. Hermione had the sort of brain that made it all easy. All she had to do was read it, and solve it, which was what Gandalf did. That was why Harry was satisfied. She needed to think like that; she needed to evaluate everything, look at everything from all angles. That was what Voldemort did. Gandalf, whether he knew it or not, was teaching her.

"... and so I want to start as soon as I can," Harry told him now as they walked into the Great Hall.

"I never knew for it to be possible to turn into an animal," Gandalf mused. "Unless you are Beorn, of course. Ah, he is a skin-changer and can turn into a bear," he added at Harry's inquiring look. "But I shall help you in any way I can, if you need it."

Harry stared. She hadn't expected this. "That'd be — that'd be fantastic, sir! And you needn't worry about any conflicting magic. See, it's not really so much magic, as focus. Well, obviously there's some magic involved, but you won't have to do anything as it's all internal for me . . . But it's still mostly focus. I just need to concentrate to become an Animagus. Usually it takes years of study and research, but I can't afford years."

"You will find, Harry," said Gandalf, "that you are not the only one who cannot afford that."

Harry knew he meant the current war with Saruon.

The great hall was littered here and there with sleepy people. Usually at this time of morning everyone was already awake planting crops and baking bread and other stuff, but last night had been an impromptu celebration whereby the king started drinking and everyone followed his example. Or, so Gandalf had explained. Harry expected no one would want to go out and plant fields now, not after such a big battle like that.

A young woman just about to lay out a plateful of round cheese was the first to spot them. She dropped the cheese. People reacted to the noise, saw her face, and looked to where she was staring.

"Is that . . .?"
". . . Gandalf stands with . . ."

As one, they walked, then rushed, to Harry's side.

Harry's arm was clapped then dropped, then clapped again.

"— feat, Master Harry —"

"— cannot say, but —"

"— my husband had not told me, I would not have believed it —"

"— my boy, Eorling. Master Gimli told me you had saved him —"

A wave of intense déjà vu hit Harry. She hadn't felt like this since her first time stepping into The Leaky Cauldron.

"Now do not become bashful, Harry," Gandalf whispered into her ear. "They are genuinely grateful, if still a little dru—er . . . enthused. That is a wizard's work. I rescue people all the time. Think you I retreat to the shadow's like a . . . a Wormtongue?"

Harry burst out laughing. She didn't know what a worm-tongue was, but it sounded too ridiculous to be allowed.

Harry didn't see it because she was too busy trying to muffle her laughter with her hands, but everyone paused at this. A very strange sight it was to them to see two such respected beings, one in white the other completely in black, laughing as if they were normal people.

This time, when the people moved forward, Harry accepted their thanks gratefully. Something else Gandalf was teaching her. Were she at home, she'd become angry, or run to the nearest fireplace if she could and Floo out to avoid the stares, the handshakes, the pointed exclamations . . . no, she needed to deal with this, with her fame. Harry couldn't expect to hide forever, could she?
"That was most becoming of you," Gandalf told her once all the people had dispersed to their various chores. "Now they will speak that you are noble as well as brave."

Harry pinkened. There were some things she still needed to work on.

"HO!" came a gruff voice and Harry started and whirled. Standing just behind them on the threshold, in all his coarse finery, was Gimli.

Harry thought, then said, "Erm, ho?"

The dwarf chuckled mightily, ran forward, then embraced Harry, thumping her so hard on the back that breath left her body in a painful whoosh.

Harry straightened woozily. She wheezed, "Good to see you too, Gimli."

"Of course, I knew very well you would return!" the dwarf boasted loudly, holding Harry by the arm. "There were some who doubted. The elf, mainly, yet—"

"Pardon me," said a gentle voice from the threshold. "I never doubted. I even recall telling you yester eve that—"

"Pah! Do you forget that yester eve we were all a might deep into the cups, my good elf? If I forget to remember something, blame it on that. And I have forgotten to remember whatever it is you had told me."

"Convenient," said the blonde, but he was grinning.

Harry smiled. "Good to see you, Legolas."

Legolas clapped her on the shoulder, eyes shining. "And you. My heart sings that you have returned to us unharmed."

"Did I not tell you that would be so?" Gandalf chose to say at that moment. He had started a new
pipe and his head looked like a malfunctioning chimney. Harry couldn't be sure, but she even thought the old wizard had smoke coming out of his ears. It wasn't the first time Harry thought she should point out that smoking wasn't really healthy, and it wasn't the first time that she remembered Gandalf couldn't die. At least not by usual means.

"I thought you were planning on eating, Gandalf?"

Gandalf blinked and stared down at the pipe in his mouth. "Oh . . . habit," he mumbled, before extinguishing the pipe and placing it in his robe pocket.

"Where are the others?" Harry asked as they walked to the tables. Already, people were eating; the ones that had greeted Harry, but also a couple of new people. Boys and girls around Harry's age. They stared, and nudged, and avoided her eyes, but didn't try to bother her. For once, Harry was thankful of how suspicious these people could be, and how they regarded anything they didn't understand with either awe or fear.

"Still abed!" Gimli snorted. "Cannot hold their ale!"

Gandalf sighed. "It is more than that, Gimli. Did you happen to forget that Aragorn is still injured? Eru," the wizard grumbled, "he fell off a cliff into ravaging waters not two days ago! On top of that he fought in the greatest battle against the worst of odds, which would have turned even more wretched had Harry not been there. And I have just remembered — Harry."

Harry, who'd been about to take a seat beside Legolas, froze in mid-squat. "Yes?"

Gandalf looked at her with gentle eyes. "You have magic that can heal almost instantaneously. Would you be so kind as to look over the wounded for us? Perhaps your magic can help in ways our methods cannot."

Harry didn't try to protest, not that she wanted to. Of course she would help! She told Gandalf so. "Besides, Mrs. Weasley's custard tart has yet to go down, so I'm not really hungry anyway."

Gandalf nodded as though he had expected nothing less. "Splendid. I shall steal a piece of bread and some cheese and we'll be off . . . and perhaps some mutton as well. And a drink if my good dwarvish friend would be so kind."
Gimli grumbled but went to fetch the wizard a goblet of something from the barrels along the far wall, which he came back with a minute later. The goblet, not the barrels. He and Legolas elected to come as well, for they would not miss the opportunity to see Harry's magic at work.

When Harry pointed out their lack of breakfast, they dismissed it. "We are used to it now," Legolas told him. "Months of being on the road with nothing more to eat but that which we hunted ourselves . . . and in certain parts the game was scarce. Well, you know how it was, Harry. Moreover, elven bodies are better at coping without food than the other races."

"Not to mention," Gimli added, "I am not especially hungry now—"

"No doubt," Gandalf interrupted before Gimli could continue, "because your belly is still full of that evil drink from last night. And I also do not doubt that your head must feel as if Helm Hammerhand's horn is blowing in it . . . and you should know all about that, my good dwarf."

Gimli sputtered, but could not dispute fact.

They met Boromir in the first room they stopped at. He'd been over-looking a small group of men whose injuries were serious, but not life-threateningly so. The wives and families of the men sat beside them, looking anxious.

"It does my heart good to see you," he told Harry when he saw her, clasping her on the shoulder.

Harry accepted the clap on her shoulder with one of her own. To think, if Harry hadn't ever come to Middle Earth, Boromir would have . . . She gave him a wobbly smile. "And you."

"Harry has come to offer healing magic," Gandalf explained. "As an extra aid."

The Gondorian's eyes lit up. "That is good news indeed, for know I would not be here now, had it not been for Harry's magic."

This was heard throughout the whole room, and Harry didn't know it, but it brought hope to the hearts of those who were wounded, and their families.
"I'm not really an expert," Harry began. What an understatement. "But if you can point me to the worst injuries . . ."

Eventually, Harry was kneeling next to the pallet of a man who already looked dead. He was so white and pale, that Harry was positive — until she saw the slight chest movement.

"W-what . . . what exactly is wrong with him?"

Gandalf leaned down beside her. "His injury was not that great, at first. A simple wound to the shoulder, but the infection has spread. Orc poison. This man's wound is the worst here. We thought he would live, but the poison has spread. The elves, of course, have been a wondrous help, but even their cleansing magic cannot cure him now. We were too late . . . we give him now to you. If you cannot help him, he will not last the day."

Earlier, Harry probably would have panicked at being given someone's life into her keeping, but oddly, she was now almost . . . calm. Accepting. Looking at the woman on the other side of the prone body, so hopeful . . . Harry couldn't afford to panic. She gave the woman a small smile of assurance and felt a little better at noting that she seemed less tense.

"All right, just . . . let me think for a bit."

If only she had a vial of Phoenix tears, or a bezoar. How would Madam Pomfrey do it? She'd have her potions, wouldn't she? But Harry don't have many potions with her, at least not ones that would help in this situation. And the spell she used on Boromir won't help now, either, except to close the wound. She couldn't close the wound, it had to remain open.

Harry stilled in her thoughts. Why did it have to remain open? So the poison could come out. But how can the poison come out? This was where her mind drew a blank. It wasn't as if Harry could summon the poison out like she'd summoned Boromir's arrows —

She blinked. "That's it!"

Gimli started at the sudden exclamation. "What?!"

She whipped around. "Someone fetch me a goblet."

Gandalf thrust his own under Harry's nose. "It is half full of mead still," he said.

Harry shook her head. “Thank you but the mead doesn't matter.”

She took hold of the goblet while everyone crowded around. Harry didn't notice, She was too preoccupied. She placed the tip of her wand at the wound's entrance. "Accio poison," She said softly but firmly.

Almost at once, black ooze appeared at her wand's tip. Harry slowly — carefully — lifted it away from the wound. As she lifted, the poison stretched so that it looked like a string of thick, black, melted tar.

"Eru . . ." someone breathed.

Harry directed the poison into the cup, where it sloshed gently, mixing with the amber mead. Summon, draw out, collect in goblet, and repeat. Over the course of the next ten minutes she coaxed more poison forward, ending with it plopping into the cup. By the time all the poison had been extracted, the cup was almost overflowing.

Releasing a satisfied huff, she gave it back to Gandalf.

The wizard raised caterpillar eyebrows as he looked into the goblet. "I don not believe I shall be finishing this."

The subsequent laughter broke the awkward silence. Harry was clapped on the back at least a dozen times, and thanked over and over again by the man's relieved family.

Harry, however — as she stared at her now almost healed, fully breathing patient — blinked at herself. She . . . she had done that. She had saved somebody's life by being creative. She couldn't believe that it had actually worked!

She was being ridiculous, Harry thought suddenly. She probably wasn’t the first to have used such a method. Who knew, perhaps that was the usual method for extracting poison? Perhaps Madam Pomfrey used it herself?
As the thought intruded, she felt — though she tried not to — a little prouder with herself. She had worked something out without the help of books; without the help of anyone but herself. She had trusted in her own magic, and it hadn’t failed her.

Over the course of the next couple of hours, Harry found herself for the first bewildering time in her life playing nursemaid, healer, doctor, friend, and saviour to a bunch of men and elves.

One particular elf, Thalion, who Harry had very briefly met before, had three pieces of bone missing from his forearm, courtesy of three uruk arrows that had shot clean through. This was usually a crippling wound, as the recipient would not be able to retain the use of that arm, or hand; especially as said recipient was a soldier, which made it doubly worse. No more lifting of swords or notching of bows. No more battles. The most strenuous work he could hope for now would be to weed the palace gardens. That is, until, Harry offered him some Skelegro which she’d filched from Madam Pomfrey’s cupboard the last time she’d tried to visit Dumbledore.

"Regrowing bones . . . It's horrible," Harry told the elf bluntly, upon being asked. "There's this kind of tingling, itching pain in the place where the bones start growing back — sort of like ant’s biting you on the inside — and you won't be able to sleep because of it."

"You have personally . . .?"

"I had to regrow all the bones in my arm once. But that was a lot worse than your injury, so I'm sure it won't hurt as much."

Though Harry suspected that Thalion wasn't as much afraid of it hurting (he was a warrior after all) as how foreign and mysterious all this wizard healing was.

Thalion, looking a little pinched, glanced at his injured forearm, then at Harry. She nodded encouragingly. Sighing, the black-haired elf tipped the quarter-full goblet of Skelegro back — and just as quickly spat it out. Gandalf, who’d been observing patiently with a fresh pipe in hand at the foot of the pallet, was forced to jump out of his seat and scuttle comically to the side.

"Ai, it is as foul as orc blood!"

"You have tasted orc blood, have you, Master Thalion!" Gandalf snapped, embarrassed now that the drama was over. His pipe had somehow ended up hooked over the pointed tip on his hat, but still
continued to smoke faintly.

Thalion glared at both wizards. "Nay, but I like it not all the same."

"You have to drink it," Harry urged, pouring another round of Skelegro into the goblet. She ignored the stubborn frown directed her way, and thrust it back at the elf. "Or do you want to spend eternity ripping out weeds?"

Although that last remark got Harry a strange look, Thalion accepted the goblet.

"Try holding your nose," she suggested.

Another strange look came her way, but Thalion took Harry's advice and — "Ai! The stink in it has not diminished. What potion is this? Not even my lord Elrond has any as foul in his healer's cabinet."

"It's called Skelegro. A potion made for the restoration of bones."

"You have mentioned that," he grimaced. "But what is it made of?"

"Ah, we studied it during lessons last year but we didn't brew any ourselves. The only ingredients I can remember are the scarab beetles, puffer-fish eyes, and the Chinese Chomping Cabbages." Harry flushed at the incredulous look she received. "Rest assured, all of that is perfectly fit for consumption. The Cabbage gets a bit aggressive when you're trying to prepare it, but by the time it goes in the cauldron it's just like any other vegetable."

Thalion looked like he was starting to question if having full use of his arm again was worth it. "And it will cure my leg as well?"

Harry glanced down at Thalion's leg, mostly because she wanted to avoid the elf's hopeful gaze. "No, it won't," she told him quietly. "It doesn't work on broken bones, only on missing bones. Look, Aragorn and the king's nephew —"

"Eomer," Gandalf supplied.
"Right, thank you. Aragorn and Eomer. They told me that you'll have full use of your leg in time, so it'll be all right. I'm not a real healer, I just know a few spells and I've brought along a few potions, just in case . . . If I were a real healer I could probably fix your leg in seconds, but I don't know how."

Thalion had those eyes that noticed everything, as all elves' did, and they searched Harry’s own. Harry fought not to look down.

"I see now," he said gently. "If I have given the impression that I am not grateful, Harry Potter, forgive me. You have done more than enough. Because of you I shall have full use of my arm by cock’s crow on the morrow."

Harry thought it might be a bit sooner, but didn't bother to tell Thalion, she may be wrong after all. "Aren't you going to be, er, on the road tomorrow? With the other elves?"

Thalion nodded, looking pleased. "We shall be a league away. We leave this noon."

"Should you be traveling with a broken leg? Not to mention your arm. And what about the other injured elves — what?"

Thalion’s shoulder shook with amusement. "And you say you are not a healer? You certainly cluck like one."

Harry stared incredulously — and thought of Madam Pomfrey and her mother-hen like nature when faced with even the smallest injury that needed mending. And to be told by this elf, who Harry only just met, that she might have gotten a little too much into the spirit of things . . . She flushed. "No! I'm just an ordinary wizard. I just know magic; I don't know anything about healing."

"There are some here who would disagree," Thalion said simply.

Harry merely packed away the Skelegro and ignored her hot cheeks as best she could.

Gandalf smiled quietly from his new position by the wall.
Harry was struck with the remembrance of the situation with the king’s niece when a serving-woman came to tell her that the king was awake and had requested Harry’s presence to release Eowyn from her room. Harry’s eyes grew large and round at realizing that she had forgotten all about the other (former) girl during the pressing matter of battle and that King Theoden would likely not appreciate getting another nephew.

Then again, Harry thought hysterically, maybe he would. Maybe there was nothing that would delight him more. These medieval types were all about their firstborn sons and patriarchal lines; a girl of the family turning into a boy might just make them jump for joy.

Harry got to her feet as if being summoned to her own execution.

“What is this matter concerning Lady Eowyn?” asked Boromir. He, Legolas, and Gimli had left Gandalf and her in the infirmary to bring back breakfast after a long stretch of observing her tending to the patients. They had been in the middle of eating when the serving-woman found them.

“Ah, well, King Theoden asked me to place a spell on Eowyn’s door so it wouldn’t open even if the lock was broken,” Harry explained. She ruffled her hair ruefully at their bewildered expressions. “That’s exactly what I was thinking. Apparently, Eowyn has a habit of throwing herself into battle whenever she can manage it and King Theoden didn’t want to risk her trying something similar when there was actual danger.”

“So the Lady is willful,” Boromir commented as if it all made perfect sense to him now.

Harry’s eyes narrowed ever so slightly. “I suppose she is. I never thought someone having a mind of their own and wanting to show their worth was something to be punished for though.”

Boromir gave Harry an odd look. “A commendable trait in a warrior to be sure, though I know not what use such a disposition would be from a lady.”

Harry could not put into words what she thought of such a statement and decided not to say anything at all. She gave Boromir a flat look he clearly didn’t understand and followed the serving-woman out of the infirmary.
King Theoden and Eomer were waiting at Eowyn’s door when Harry arrived. The king looked much less stressed than she had last seen him and Eomer was less grim. Both were freshly bathed and much more noble in their bearings than she had seen them before. The lack of threat from an invading force would do wonders for ones disposition it seemed.

“Ah,” King Theoden said when he saw Harry. “There you are, young wizard. If you would be so kind?”

The serving-woman dismissed herself without a word and left the three to their business.

Harry blanked her face into a mien of cool professionalism. Without showing her great reluctance, she knocked on the door firmly. “Eowyn?” she said. “We’ve come to let you out.”

There was no answer but a quick shuffling sound.

Harry raised her wand to the door. She didn’t miss how Eomer edged closer for a better look. With a tight swirl and a flick of her wrist, she incanted, “Laxant.”

The door shimmered with the dismissal of her original locking spell. With another flick and a “Alohamora,” the physical lock was disabled as well. Inclining her head, Harry stepped to the side to make way for the two men to enter the room. Maybe if she didn’t act guilty they wouldn’t blame her.

And maybe pigs would fly without the help of a Hover Charm.

“Uncle, it’s the most wondr—!”

“Who are you?! Where is Eowyn?! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH HER?!”

Harry steeled herself. Just because she had given the bratty princess a gender-change in a fit of anger didn’t make her reasoning any less valid. If Eowyn couldn’t appreciate what she had — A loving uncle that did his best to keep her safe in his own way, a brother that was willing to patrol the borders of the country while in exile to protect her, a comfortable life in which she didn’t even have to do the duties expected of other women because of who her family was — she didn’t deserve to have any of it. If anything, it was in the job description of witches and wizards to teach ungrateful
idiots lessons by putting them under spells; fairies and kindly old ladies did it all the time in the
tale.

She stepped into the room with her head held proudly and took in the scene of the drama. King
Theoden stood shaking with outrage as Eomer held a sword pointed at the transformed Eowyn.
Eowyn was dressed in some roughly sewn together shirt and trousers, standing backed against the
wall. The girl turned guy had his hands held in surrender as he tried to explain himself.

“"It is me! I am Eowyn!"

“What drivel is this?” Eomer snarled. The sword was jabbed threateningly. “Where is my sister, you
cur?!”

“I am she!” Eowyn insisted. “The magic-maker charged with keeping me within these chambers
transformed me into a man!”

“You seek to slander one of the wizards we have to thank for our very lives in an attempt to hide
your misdeeds? You dare too much, you scoundrel!”

“Tell them, Black Wizard!” cried Eowyn, shooting an imploring look at Harry. “Tell them how I am
Eowyn!”

Heads turned toward Harry lingering in the doorway. Very deliberately, she entered the room
properly and closed the door behind her. Her professional mien had yet to waver. She took in the
sight of the transformed Eowyn with a critical eye. He resembled Eomer but wasn’t nearly as tall or
broad, sort of lanky and boyish; exactly what Eowyn would have looked like if he had been male
from birth and had lived exactly the same way he had as a girl.

“Well?” said King Theoden when the silence continued on, a frown on his face. In the background,
Eowyn had begun to look nervous. “Is what this young man says true?”

Harry inclined her head. “He is Eowyn. Though I do wonder how he managed to get those clothes.”

Incredulous looks were her answer.
“What madness possessed you?” the king cried, aghast.

“Madness!” Eowyn exclaimed before Harry could respond. “’Tis a gift! I know not brought this on but only good can come of it! No longer must I be held back from serving my people as I have longed to do; no longer am I too weak to show my worth!”

Eomer looked lost as he slowly lowered his sword, taking in the sight of what was now his brother.

King Theoden turned on Eowyn. “A pox upon your ill-gotten fancies of valour! I am not surprised that you see nothing but your own benefit in such ensorcellment!”

“How can such a thing do anything but better me?” Eowyn countered.

At this point, Harry had realized that what was supposed to a wholesome lesson in appreciation had turned from punishment to reward.

“How can you say such a thing?” Harry exclaimed, crossing her arms. Her temper was growing. “There’s nothing wrong with being a woman!”

Eowyn cast a disbelieving eye at Harry. “I know you magical folk are strange in your ways but surely even you would not claim the female form to be on par with that of a man’s.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “And what is that supposed to mean? Where I come from, men and women are considered equals! In every profession, we are treated no differently. Our government is filled with an abundance of competent women that do just as well if not better than the men. Even at the school I attend, the top students are an equal mix of girls and boys. When I was thirteen, my friend Hermione, the girl acknowledged as the most intelligent student in our year, knocked a boy flat on his behind and sent him off running! Don’t talk to me as if women were inferior; it goes against everything I know to be true!”

Eowyn was not impressed. “Then your menfolk must be weak indeed.”

Oh, this obstinate chit! Harry indulged her temper by stomping a foot and screeching in wordless frustration.
“Hold your tongue, Eowyn!” the king scolded. “I know not what lunacy has overcome you but I will not allow you to blight yourself further by insulting those with powers beyond our comprehension.”

Eowyn’s eyes widened momentarily. It seemed she had forgotten that Harry was a wizard.

“Harry,” said Eomer before another round of shouting could start up. “Is it possible for Eowyn to be restored to her natural form?”

“No!” Eowyn cried before an answer could be given. “I will not be made useless again!”

Harry glared. “It doesn’t matter either way what you want. As far as I’m concerned, you can stay as you are forever! If you can’t appreciate what you’ve got, you’d better get what you can appreciate!”

“Wizard, be reasonable!” King Theoden cut in. “She will only do herself harm! Angry you may be at her but surely you would not wish her injury!” He was almost pleading at the end.

“I never once did myself harm when I was a woman,” Eowyn snapped. “And I certainly will not now that I am a man!”

Harry was unmoved by the king’s words. “No,” she said coldly. “Did this foolish child not insult me, accuse me, point her fingers at me, and fling all her spoiled beliefs into my face without concern of retaliation just the other day? And is he now still as unbothered by punishment that I’m again insulted and accused? No.” Here Harry pulled out her wand again and pointed it upward. “Until the former lady Eowyn understands what is being taught to him, he will stay a man.”

A shower of sparkles shot from Harry’s wand, solidifying her oath. The sparkles fluttered around her head for a moment before they flew across the room and surrounded Eowyn. Before anyone could say anything, the light sunk into Eowyn’s skin, strengthening the original spell.

Eowyn laughed in delight. “I hope I never understand then!”

“Eowyn, hold your tongue before you are bewitched into something worse!” Eomer shouted.

“Worse you say! The only thing that could displease me now would be to be turned back!”
Harry growled in irritation. “It’s a good thing you’ll be stuck like this forever then because such horrid manners are appalling on a girl!”

“My manners!” Eowyn squawked. “Have you not kicked and screeched like a child just now? And what of your appearance? At least I have to be transformed to look like a man!”

Their shouting contest was cut into by King Theoden. “What are you carrying on about now? Have you not had proof enough that you do yourself little good by slinging slurs at a Wizard?”

“And another thing!” said Eowyn, turning back to Harry, getting back into it. “They call you wizard! What self-respecting woman — witch or not — would allow such a misnaming to continue?”

“Is an Elf still not an Elf whether they are male or female?” Harry snapped back. “Wizard is my race; witch is my gender! Just as whether you are man or woman, you are still of the race of Man! And you have some nerve talking about self-respecting women when you certainly weren’t one on them!”

“What?” the two men uttered in chorus.

“A woman?” said Eomer, a gobsmacked look on his face. “Certainly not!”

Harry stopped. She looked at them incredulously. “You don’t mean to tell me . . . ?” She took in their genuinely confused expressions. “Why in the world! Do you mean to tell me that everyone actually thinks I’m a boy?”

“You say such a thing as if it was surprising,” Eowyn sniffed. “And yet even after you gave me your name and titles, I could hardly mark you as female.”

“Names and titles have nothing to do with it! It ought to be enough that you have a pair of working eyes!”

“You say you are a woman!” Eomer exclaimed. “But—but . . . why are you dressed like a man then? You look nothing like a woman!”
Harry bristled. Nothing like a girl! These people had been spending too much time around Elves if they thought she looked nothing like a girl! She had been considered pretty since even before going to Hogwarts! She had been among the first girls in her year to start developing a figure! Nothing like a girl, he said; were they blind or something?

Harry unhooked her cloak and school robes from her shoulders and tossed the heavy fabrics off. With a quick fluff of her shoulder length curls, she crossed her arms and cocked her hips in the petulant stance signature to teenage girls the worlds over. In a thin tunic top and leg-hugging jeans that extenuated her hips, even with her bust hidden away in her Quidditch camisole, there was no denying her femininity.

“I hadn’t realized that people paid so much attention to clothing here that gender could be so easily confused,” said Harry dully. “It makes me wonder what sort of confusion would happen if I went out and jinx’d the clothes of random men into dresses for the rest of the day.”

“Have you no maiden modesty?” Eowyn scolded, hurrying up to her and shoving her behind him, out of the line of sight of the king and Eomer. The two other men had adverted their eyes as soon as they registered what they were seeing and were now looking pointedly at the stone floor.

Harry brushed off the hands trying to drag her along. She gave the former girl a flat look. “I’m fully clothed. There’s nothing to be modest about.”

“Nothing to be—? Your legs are visible! You wear trousers and say nothing of it!”

“Of course not. Everyone wears trousers where I’m from; it’s not limited to men.”

There were no responses to what the three Rohanians considered an outrageous statement.

The king dragged a hand down his face. He muttered, “What a mess!”

King Theoden eventually left, dragging his nephew behind him, after accepting that he’d be having a second nephew for what would likely be forevermore and charging Eowyn to get Harry out of her ‘scandalous’ clothes and into something befitting an honoured lady of Rohan. Not yet capable of aligning their thoughts of the warrior that killed over a thousand orcs through powers they could only dream of with the young slip of a girl that butted heads with their own stubborn chit, they chalked it up to more wizard hoopla and left it at that.
“You can wear one of my old dresses,” Eowyn said as he eyeballed Harry’s measurements. “I grew out of them years ago but I have kept the ones still fit for wearing. I daresay you can have all of the dresses that fit you as — big or small — none will be serving me any further!”

“You could stand to sound more bothered by it,” Harry grumbled. “You know very well it’s supposed to be a punishment. The least you could do is be more impressed by my powers.”

“If giving me what I want is a punishment, I can hardly bear the wait to see what you would do to reward me,” said Eowyn, holding up a light green gown. “And how could I ever be impressed with anything you do when I have seen first hand exactly what kind of a brat you can be?”

“You’re one to talk about being bratty!” Harry scowled. “Thrown any more temper tantrums at random strangers lately?”

Eowyn said nothing in response to Harry’s rebuke and tossed the green dress over her head. Ignoring her sputtering, he told her to try it on while he hunted up things to do her hair with. As she was still bothered by the fact that no one had realized she was actually a girl, Harry allowed the princess turned prince to get her ready for the Elves’ departing feast.

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The feast that the citizens of Rohan had prepared for the elves’ departure that evening was not magnificent. There wasn’t much to work with after all, seeing as most of the really good food/crops had been burnt during the pillaging of the wild men. Still, no one minded over much.

From her position just outside of the great hall, leaning against a small doorway connecting the hall to a waiting room for important dignitaries, Harry eyed a tray of rolls. She idly tapping her wand to her cheek. There was a decent spread, especially with the shortage considered, but it would be so easy for her to make it even bigger. A few charms to multiply the food, some spells to make the drinks never-ending, maybe some enchantments to brighten the place up.

“What are you doing over there?” said a voice from behind her, chiding. “You’re supposed to stay in here until the hall is fully set up!”

Harry rolled her eyes and turned around. From another door that led into the waiting room stood Eowyn in his newly polished glory. He cleaned up well enough in the clothes borrowed from his brother though Harry detected an awkwardness to his bearing. It was likely from the fact that he still
didn’t know how to hold himself like a man.

The two of them had fallen into an odd sort of kinship despite — or because of — their spectacular clashing of personality and opinions. Harry was still irritated at him, but when Eowyn was not making a bother of himself he was surprisingly no-nonsense. He had also taken to treating Harry as if she was a troublesome little sister that needed her hand held lest she get herself into trouble. It was incredibly annoying, especially since he was the one that made a bother of himself and she was a better candidate for the responsible position. If she to compare their interaction, she would say it was similar to Ron and Hermione’s snapping at each other when Harry wasn’t mediating.

Harry wondered if this was how Ginny felt when her brothers tried bossing her around.

“I was wondering if I should magick up more food because I’ll surely end up stuffing my face with half of what’s out there already by myself. And Gimli will gobble up the other half even if he has to hurl up his belly-ful of beer to do it!”

Eowyn snorted. “Indelicate of you. How can you call yourself a lady when you speak as crassly as a stable boy?”

“Tch. ‘Crass.’ I haven’t started being crass yet! I’m not sure what kind of stable boys you have been talking to, but I can tell you right now that they’ve been saving all their best vulgarities for when high-born ears aren’t around to hear them!”

“And what would you know about that, Lady Black?” said Eowyn, crossing his arms. “I cannot imagine that a wizard, especially one that is a lady, would have any intimate acquaintance with the working folk.”

Harry snorted. “Don’t say ‘intimate,’ it makes it sound like something improper. And for your information, my mother was born into a family of working folk that couldn’t do a lick of magic. She married another wizard who was a lord, but when my parents died, I was raised by my magic-less, working class aunt and uncle. And I can tell you straight from the horse’s mouth that my cousin and I cussed like heathens when we couldn’t get in trouble for it.”

“Ah, so you are actually a dressed up bar-room wench!” concluded Eowyn, nodding solemnly as if everything finally made sense. He sent her a mocking look. “’Twould explain how you could be so comfortable traveling with a group of men as if it were every-day affair.”
“Does your brother know the disgusting way you think?” Harry countered, waving at Eomer who was already in the hall. “I wonder what he’d say if he knew the way you turn every interaction into something dirty and sexual. Do men and women only flirt and fuck in your mind?”

Eowyn flushed hotly and slapped a hand to cover Harry’s mouth. “That you can say such words so boldly!”

Harry shoved off the hand. She stuck her nose up. “I’m not the one making innuendos.”

“There is making implications and there is speaking as if your mouth is a privy!”

“Well, I’m not one to dance around a topic. I believe in saying what you mean and meaning what you say.”

“I strip you of your title of Lady,” Eowyn said, shaking his head. “A true lady would die of mortification before such utterance passed her lips.”

Harry was not impressed. “Says the one that would rather be a boy. I don’t doubt that you’ve been as disgusting as you’ve always secretly wanted to since the moment you grew a prick.”

Eowyn looked tempted to gag her with his handkerchief. Covering his eyes with a hand, he moaned, “Ladies do not speak of — of . . .”

“Penises?” Harry supplied cheerfully. “Stones; rod; cod; ding-a-ling; dong; schleng; knob; prick; dick; cock; junk; wang; willie; package; pecker; chub; doinker; phallus; staff; shaft; sausage; sword; family jewels; trouser snake; pants python; marriage tackle — I could go on if you want.” Harry didn’t know what it was, but there was something about Eowyn that made her want to scandalize and horrify him. Mostly horrify him, of course; she had yet to forgive him for brushing off her ‘curse.’

An egg could have been fried on Eowyn’s face; he looked ready to swoon. He grew progressively more horror-struck the longer Harry spoke and looked ready to bolt when she asked him he wanted to hear more. He closed his eyes, covered his ears, and shouted wordlessly as if to drown out Harry’s words.

“What’s going on in here?” said a voice sharply.
Damn, it looked like her fun was over.

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Eomer wasn’t sure what to think of the madness concerning his sister and the incomprehensible boy wizard. Or — as it was now — his brother and the (impossibly) female wizard. He supposed he shouldn’t be surprised that Eowyn had gotten herself into a situation wherein she had infuriated a powerful being to the point of retribution, but he had imagined her mouthing off and getting cursed with a hideous disfigurement; being turned into a man was never a possibility that had occurred to him.

Well, changing genders could be considered a disfigurement, couldn’t it? Her figure had been distorted, to the point of . . . so . . .

He decided to leave off that train of thought before he went down a path not safe for his sanity.

What boggled him without hurting his brain was the fact that the Black Wizard was a girl. He had thought that Wizards were only ever old men. Was that not what he had always been told? The Wizards of Middle Earth were sent by the Valar to aid the Free People. They had taken the form of old men since the very beginning and they had only ever been old men.

He had been bewildered when Aragorn had told them — and Gandalf had confirmed — that there was another Wizard now roaming the lands, but this one took the form of a young man. When the two new Wizards had arrived in spectacular fashion, he saw that ‘young man’ was actually stretching it; ‘boy’ was far better suiting. He knew the other races aged differently, but his eyes told him that the person that stood before him looked to be eleven or twelve at the most, likely a scholar for how pale and slight they were, and had probably been very sheltered with how soft and wide-eyed they were. Not exactly the image of worldly young man he had imagined.

And then it came to be that he wasn’t even a boy. A girl —younger than even his former sister — had been the one that stood shoulder to shoulder with their warriors, had stood among them as comrades, had leaped into battle without a care of self, had skewered orcs as if they were insects, had killed thousands with one spell, and had saved countless lives from permanent crippling.

She didn’t even come up to his chin. It made absolutely no sense to Eomer.
Maybe it was so inconceivable to him because he was thinking ‘girl’ instead of ‘Wizard.’ Wizards were not actually male or female, were they? They took the forms of Men, but they were actually spirits, if what he had learned was to believed. The original Five Wizards took the form of old men so the people would be at ease with them and respect them as they did their elders, but that did not make them true old men. With this reasoning, Eomer could suppose that Harry took the form of a girl to... make the enemy underestimate her? Yes, that made sense. In this war against the dark forces of Mordor, they needed every opportunity that could get; an underestimated Wizard would only bolster them.

It was with this conclusion in mind that Eomer decided to retrieve Eowyn and Harry from the waiting room they were to rest in before the feast began. His uncle hadn't want them making a scene at least until he had started the meal with the proper ceremony for a victory celebration and so had told Eomer to make sure the two spectacles behaved properly until they could be escorted in without circumstance.

Uncle Theoden should have known that sticking those two in a room together was a recipe for shenanigans.

When Eomer entered the waiting room, Eowyn was hollering wordlessly with his hands over his ears as if he were two. Meanwhile, Harry was grinning provokingly, looking exceedingly pleased with herself.

“What’s going on in here?” he said sharply. They had been together only a few a moments and they had already degenerated into childishness.

Harry looked up and smiled winningly at him. Bema, if she was not the image of the high-born daughters that flitted through his uncle’s halls during peace times! He had said that she looked nothing like a woman when she was in her wizardly robes, but the truth was that he had only said so because he could not believe that he had overlooked the fact. As soon as she had declared herself female, Eomer was wondering how he could have missed it. With her standing there in the very becoming green dress with her hair threaded with flowers and ribbons, Eomer would have considered asking for her bride-price if he did not know how thoroughly she could trounce him.

“Eowyn was struck suddenly with a fit of insanity!” said Harry brightly. “I tried to hold him back but there was little I could do for such a diseased mind.”

Eowyn shot her a scowl but said nothing to counter the words.

Eomer shook his head. “As you like it. Uncle has likely finished his address by now. Let us join the
revelry.” He offered his arm to Harry but she declined with a wicked smirk.

“Oh, no. Thank you kindly, but I think Master Eowyn here should escort me,” Harry said slyly, threading her hand into the crook of Eowyn’s arm. He looked startled. “Isn’t it the duty of a man to lead his female companion to and fro? Here’s your first chance at being manly,” Harry drawled at the younger of the brothers. “Surely you won’t be too much of a girl to do your duty?”

Eomer watched in exasperation as the two glowered at each other. Honestly, they only ever pestered each other. Harry knew what she was doing though, for Eowyn immediately cast off his nerves and drew himself up proudly.

He draws himself up to make a fool of himself, Eomer thought wryly as Eowyn attempted a confident stride that wasn’t nearly as masculine as he thought it was. Eowyn didn’t seem to realize it, but he still took the small, light steps signature to women. Harry realized it though, and Eomer could see that she was holding back her laughter.

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To say the crowd of feast-goers were confused when Eomer arrived with two people none of them recognized was an understatement. When he had slipped out of the hall as King Theoden began his address, those that witnessed his retreat assumed he was off to retrieve his sister and the Black Wizard from wherever they were. That he returned without either of them and instead with pair never yet seen before puzzled them.

Harry, determined to ignore that she had been thought of a boy until now and that Eowyn was unrecognisable, pretended as if nothing was out of place. As Eomer led them to her friends and Eowyn strode stiffly in his uneasiness, Harry smiled sweetly at anyone that looked at her.

“Shall I assume you will be alright to be left with your companions?” Eomer asked her. “We two will be expected to dine with our uncle. We will not be too far off, of course.”

Harry scoffed lightly. “I have been perfectly alright since I arrived in this world, the fact that people didn't realize something so trivial about me won’t be changing anything.”

“Trivial, you say,” Eowyn murmured. “And yet you grew so offended when it first came to light that we had not realized it.”
Harry eyeballed the cheeky bugger before sniffing primly. “I was offended because doubts and insults were thrown at me. If **everyone**” — here she sent a pointed look at Eowyn — “had behaved themselves, there would have been no fuss.”

“Let us not be drawn into argument once more,” said Eomer when he saw that Eowyn was ready to retort. “We are here to celebrate; leave the bickering for later.”

Harry was delivered to her friends with no further discussion.

The two princes nodded amicably at the remainder of the Fellowship and left Harry behind to do as she pleased. Her friends clearly didn’t understand why who they believed to be a stranger was delivered to them and left behind so abruptly but they held their tongues as to not be impolite.

Feeling wicked, Harry didn’t immediately introduce herself. Instead, she grinned brightly at them and sat down. They obviously wanted to know what the hell was going on but none of them wanted to breach the topic.

Harry was sat next to Aragorn who was conversing with Haldir, neither of whom had noticed the addition to their number. The Elf didn’t seem to see her she supposed because she was hidden from his line of sight by the bulk of Aragorn blocking her.

Their conversation wasn’t too interesting . . . something about Elrond, who Harry knew was the elf ruler over at Rivendell. They also talked of Elrohir and Elladan — names Harry had never heard up until now.

". . . could not journey," Haldir was saying as he forked a couple of potatoes into his mouth. He used his left hand, because his right was bandaged.

Legolas, Gimli, and Boromir continued eating awkwardly but made no motion to bring Haldir and Aragorn to attention about their addition.

Aragorn nodded. "Yes, they are likely still hunting orcs with the Rangers. The wilds are not known to be forgiving. They shall lose themselves in there — purposefully, I do not doubt. But they will have the gall to feel cheated upon returning home and finding out that Lord Elrond has sent his elves here without their services as compliment."
Haldir laughed. "No doubt. The sons of Elrond are not known for their patience. But they are good friends."

"They are even better brothers."

"Why? Because they do not tease you as they are prone to teasing others?"

"Nay, I am doomed to share that fate as everyone else is, perhaps even more so because of that very reason. They did raise me. They are more like mothers than brothers, to tell true."

Both men laughed.

Harry was surprised. She hadn't known Aragorn had brothers. They had to have been really old if they'd raised Aragorn. Then she remembered . . . Haldir had said something about them being sons of Elrond. Did that mean then that Aragorn had been raised by elves?

Harry let their conversation flow over her, and allowed her gaze to travel over the assembled group in front. Everyone could fit into the hall . . . just. Elves and men conversed freely. Wine flowed. Harry, newly turned sixteen, permitted herself a goblet of the same mead Gandalf had been toting that morning and was surprised to note that it wasn't that bad — the slightly sweet, spicy, cinnamon taste was actually quite pleasant.

People stared. They couldn't help but stare, Harry knew, and she mentally gave herself a pat on the back for not reacting to it. But she would meet their eyes occasionally — accidentally — and it was they who looked away first. Especially the boys. For some reason they were intimidated by her.

It finally came that one of her friends couldn't bear the suspense any longer. It was Gimli that finally asked her to explain herself.

“I beg your pardon, Miss,” Gimli said as Harry took another sip of her mead. “I do not believe we have been introduced. Gimli, son of Gloin, at you service.”

Haldir and Aragorn were drawn out of their conversation. They started slightly when they noted Harry sitting there so innocently.
Harry couldn’t help the giggle that escaped her. “An honour, Master Gimli. Hadrienne Jamiee Potter, daughter of James and Lily Potter, at your service.”

There was a moment of silence.

“HARRY?!” Gimli exclaimed, nearly falling out of his seat.

“Harry?” the others echoed, expressions of confusion on their faces. They looked like they had just been slapped with a fish.

She nearly snorted up her drink as she shook with laughter. The expression of complete bafflement on Legolas’ and Haldir’s faces was one she would treasure until her dying day! That the serious and proper two could make such faces was worth the embarrassment of being thought a boy.

“Harry?” said Boromir, looking as if he had just been told that the cake was a lie. “But—but—what?”

She adopted a nonchalant look. “I’m not sure what you mean. Am I the only one wondering why Gimli suddenly needs to be introduced to me again?”

“You are Harry?” asked Aragorn, peering down at her. “But... how can this be?”

Deciding she had had enough fun, Harry crossed her arms and looked them over with admonishment. “It’s been brought to my attention that no one had realized I’m a girl until just today. Could you tell me exactly what about me is boyish? I didn’t know my gender would be considered ambiguous here.”

“But you fought the... and then you —! The battle!” Gimli sputtered. He leaned over the table and gave her a hard stare. “If I was not seeing with my own eyes and hearing with my very ears, I would not believe it!”

Harry huffed. “I suppose I should have known,” she said grudgingly. “I had thought it was strange that a group of men so easily let a teenaged girl travel with them considering what your culture is like.”
Many a face paled at her words, though a couple flushed instead.

“The impropriety . . .” Boromir breathed helplessly as if afraid someone would hear him. He was one that was red-faced.

“I don’t know what impropriety you’re talking about,” Harry snorted. “You treated me like a spy at first and then like a child. Nothing I would consider scandalous.”

“But why did you not say anything?” asked Legolas.

“Is that how you introduce yourselves around here?” Harry countered. “‘Hello, I am Legolas of the Woodland Realm. By the way, I’m also male, just in case you were wondering’? You would assume automatically that everyone would already know! Why would I assume differently?”

No one had an answer to that and they looked away, abashed.

“Oh, c’mon now,” Harry sighed when they awkwardly picked at their food. “It’s not that big of a deal really! We’re supposed to be having fun!” She turned to Gimli when the other still looked embarrassed. “C’mon, Gimli, why don’t you come with me as I brighten this place up? I think many a gentleman here would appreciate a charm to make their drinks never-ending!”

Reliable, go-with-the-flow person he was, Gimli was all for making the beer and ale never-ending. He followed after her as she darted from table to table, waving her wand over the food and tapping on the pitchers and barrels.

As the exclamations of wonder went up at the increase of food, Harry shot multi-coloured sparkles into the air that arranged themselves into a moving firework show of their victory over the army of orcs. She laughed brightly as the cheers and requests came.

In her distraction, Harry didn’t notice the admiring looks she received from many of the men.

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The elves were seen off after their honorary feast. The wounded were carried in old carts pulled by
some of the best of Rohan horses — a sort of thank you from the king. It was generous of King Theoden considering how dearly the Rohirric people thought of their horses and the fact that horses would be needed later as well.

Gandalf strolled over to Harry's side as the last of the elves passed through the main gate. He had been the last to find out the Harry was actually a girl and he had taken it the best. He had merely raised his brows and shook his head in amusement.

"I think you have impressed him," Gandalf murmured.

Harry looked up from where she had been watching the wave of Elves march out. "Who?"

"Why, Haldir, of course," said Gandalf, as if Harry should have known.

"Oh." She supposed, now she thought back on it, that Haldir had been impressed. It would be hard not to be considering all the magic she had flashed around since he had arrived. He had likely appreciated it as well when he'd gone to visit his injured soldiers and found most of them already up and healed.

The two wizards left then and made their way to the hall once more.

A thought suddenly occurred to her. "You know, Gandalf," said Harry, sitting down on a seat by the table. "Everyone thinks I'm immortal. Why is that?"

Gandalf paused. "You mean to tell me that you are not?"

Harry shook her head slowly.

Gandalf's enormous eyebrows rose. "My senses have never failed me before, child. Even now, I can sense that you are older than you appear."

Her stomach clenched nervously as a horrid thought intruded. Was something happening to her as she wandered between . . . ? No, that was stupid. "What d'you mean?"
"I mean," said Gandalf, patting his robe pocket, "that you seem to be of three hundred years to me."

"I'm not," said Harry, bemused. "But . . . could the fact that my people can easily live up to three hundred years if they have enough magic have something to do with it?"

Gandalf frowned, and shook his head, "No, no, that should not matter. Nor should it matter how much magic you have. I sense specifically, in you, that you are three hundred winters. It is as if you have lived long years."

"Well if I have I don't remember," Harry joked.

Gandalf eventually extracted a pipe from out of his left boot, and stuck it into his mouth. He sighed. "Another thing to think about, then. Only you and hobbits can cause me so many problems."

They looked at each other, then laughed. "I have to agree with you there." said Harry. "I'm not one for staying in the background, as much as I try."

"Well that's enough of that," Gandalf said, flapping the hand that didn't hold a pipe. "Tomorrow morning we set out for Isengard, and you shall come with us. I should very much like to see Saruman's face when he sees you and knows you were the one who destroyed most of his uruk."

"You don't think he might try to kill me?"

"Oh, yes," said Gandalf, sounding as if Harry had asked him whether they were having roast for dinner. "You have destroyed his hoard, and you have also wounded his pride. But," he patted Harry's hand, "you need not fret overmuch. I will be there, of course, and the others. And do not forget, Harry, that he will also be very terrified of your power. He fears it for he does not understand it."

Harry had never thought of herself as powerful — lucky maybe, with the Devil’s own luck — but never powerful.

He smiled kindly. "Now, let us leave all this sad business of Saruman until such times comes when we must retrieve it again. Tell me of this book."
Harry blinked for a moment, wondering what on earth . . . then she remembered. Reaching into her shoulder bag, she extracted the thin animagus book and handed it to Gandalf.

The wizard stared for a moment at the moving figure on the front, but made no comment. He opened it, and flipped. "Most unusual," he hummed. He placed it back in Harry's hand. "I cannot understand a word. You shall have to read it to me."

Harry grinned. "That’s alright." She flipped to the first page. "The first step a wizard must adhere to when attempting the animagus transformation is the unwavering focus upon the task, otherwise . . ."

Half an hour later almost all of the tables, barrels, and benches were packed away — except theirs — and Harry had finished reading the first two chapters to Gandalf. She closed the book, and looked at her companion. The white wizard sat, hands on knees, staring thoughtfully at nothing. "So basically, I have to find my inner animal before attempting to bring it out."

"That is the simple part," Gandalf agreed.

"Yes, but I don’t think I’ll be able to do it now." Harry placed the book back into her bag. "I've always been bad at keeping my mind from wandering. I’ve been told that I tend to think entirely to much on unimportant things."

"Have you ever thought of not thinking at all?"

Harry frowned. What Gandalf had just said sounded a lot like Occlumency. "Yes, I have." The old wizard raised his brows. "That is, I’ve tried," Harry amended, looking up at the withered face before her. "It didn't work. I'm not . . . skilled enough."

"Hmm," Gandalf said. "Not skilled enough, you say?"

Harry nodded, twining her fingers together. "I'm not very good at some things; some wizardry things that is. Especially Transfiguration, which is where we transform things into other things. But I'm told my father was very good at that." she looked at her feet. "I'm not that great at Charms, either, not like Hermione. But what I'm absolutely horrible at is Occlumency." Seeing Gandalf's inquiring look, she explained, "That's a form of magic to stop people from reading your thoughts."
"Ah," Gandalf said, nodding slowly. "But I have not ask whether you have ever tried to stop people from reading your thoughts, I asked if you have tried not thinking."

"Well I tried clearing my mind a few times — but that's not the same, is it?"

"No. It is not."

"Then no, I haven't tried not thinking."

Gandalf stood up. "Try it."


The wizard nodded.

"In front of all these distractions?" She gestured to the commotion of people behind Gandalf.

Gandalf didn't bother sparing a glance. "The more there is to distract you, the better it will be for you in the end."

Harry raked her hair, sighed, and stood up. "It's not possible. No one can not think."

"What nonsense, Miss Potter, I do it all the time," Gandalf grumbled as patted his pocket.

Harry reached behind him, lifted the pipe Gandalf had placed on the bench earlier, then handed it to him.

"Ah, thank you."

"What do you mean you do it all the time?" Harry asked, following Gandalf, who had begun to walk away. "D'you mean whenever you want?"
"Certainly. When I wish to not think, then I do not think."

"But —"

"What is your first step?" Gandalf interjected. They had just stopped by the entrance door. "What must you do as your first step to becoming an animal?"

"Concentrate," Harry answered promptly.

"Exactly," said Gandalf. "And what must you do in order to cease thinking?"

"Erm, concentrate?"

Gandalf smiled and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Get to work."

"I'm sure none of the wizards in my world ever had to do this," Harry said. "I'm not sure they even know how to not think. I don't understand how anyone could just not."

"Ah, but you said it yourself. Those wizards who have attempted this transformation were very good at trans-figuring things already. You are not. Therefore, it stands to reason that it will be more difficult for you, and that you should learn as many new — skills, shall we say — in order to help yourself. Promise me something, Harry: That you shall always try. All the time, no matter what is happening around you."

Harry stared into the wizard's crinkled blue eyes and thought. She knew if she answered in the positive she would be setting herself an impossible task. No, not impossible. Merely improbable, according to Gandalf. At that thought, she reluctantly gave in. "All right, sir. I promise."

He left her now with a smile of encouragement and a clap to the shoulder, and strolled off down the corridor.

Harry stood, thinking — no, don't think! Her fists clenched so hard the knuckles became white. But
how could she not? Every conscious movement she made was a product of thinking. Wasn’t that how it worked? But Gandalf could do it. He said does it all the time. If Gandalf does it, she should have been able to do it too . . . Harry blinked. But how does he do it?

"What do you do, Gandalf?" Harry called after the man.

A few people turned in response to her shout but Harry didn't notice, too busy watching the white figure at the end of the corridor.

Gandalf stopped, looked back, and smiled. "Why, I sleep, of course."

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