The green book of Tuckburoughs : The two kings
by ChiaraCadrich

Summary

The Old Took has impressed several generations of Hobbits for his wisdom. But do not be fooled. In his youth he was an irresponsible and disrespectful libertine. Thus the grey wizard was mandated to box his ears...
Prolog - The Prince and his princesses

- "Taa, Taratataaaa ! Knight Odrazàr dons his shining armor, carved by elven blacksmiths!" Trumpeted a confident puppy hobbit while wearing a beekeeper leotard.
- "Here, we are ready!
- You must come quickly and deliver us princesses from that horrible castle where there's even nothing to eat!
- Except us!
- Yes, we are terrified by the ugly ogre! You may come! ", tinkled an assembly of hobbit girls, pampered into princesses.

But the hero - an eight years old hobbit with cutely neglected blond curls - did not let the alarming cries disturb his concentration – there was a ritual to be observed, otherwise that was no fair game!
- "Taa, Taratataaaa ! Odrazàr the Powerful puts his magic helmet on, which protects from evil spells!" He bragged with a handleless pot on his head.
- "Well… what about putting your seven-leagues boots on, just to go faster? For we're ready to be rescued!
- Please let him outfit! Otherwise he could not be able to rescue us! You understand nothing about heroes!
- Taa, Taratataaaa! Odrazàr the dreaded Número… knight of Nûmenor mounts his trusty steed!"

The steed gave a disapproving yapping, growled somehow when the little hobbit seized him by the neck, but had to obey Odrazàr the tyrant.
- "Well, is it not time now you just come and open that door? I mean, that drawbridge?
- Patience, you weeping maidens! Your hero is rushing to your rescue! Taa, Taratataaaa! Odrazàr the Beautiful girdles… takes his three stripes shield and brandishes his spear!
- Oh, dear, what a long time he needs to get dressed, that one!
- Must say he is always so smart!
- ... and cute! But step aside, I can see nothing!"

The small Hobbit girls, disguised with princely draperies, jostled at the shed’s window - the dungeon’s stain glass, should we say - where the ogre had locked them, to contemplate their splendid and beloved knight. To be honest, the princesses’ confab had not yet resolved the question of who was actually going to marry handsome Gerry when they are grownups. For now, each Highness projected herself in a sublime union with the dashing heir to the Thain1 of the Shire, without completely realizing that her comrades’ dreams might thwart hers.

Odrazàr, in the person of his young admirer Gerry, launched his mount - that was to say Houn, the big black family dog - against the first obstacle, with a rake pointed forward as his spear.

A scarecrow, dressed with the grandfather’s old chainmail, stretched his threatening arms in the middle of the garden.
- "Taa, Taratataaaa! The assault has begun! The monster’s roaring and slyly hits with claws and fangs! But Odrazàr the Indomitable slish... er… slush? er… hits and thrusts and defeats his ignoble opponent!"

The fight dragged on, under the very eyes of the princesses who were taking the game. The Ogre lost his pumpkin – sorry, his head - which broke out and spread disgusting orange filaments. From time to time, the hero made sure, with the corner of his eye, the effect on his cheering audience. But indeed, the ogre, even headless, continued to fight and defended rather well: during the final close combat, the heavy chainmail had the scarecrow and the boy fall on a heap of smelly manure.
The dandy hero, sheepish and suffocating, argued he had to fetch his squire. So Odrazàr the Stinking flew for a makeover. The gallery wondered:
- "But what is he doing? Why he doesn’t play anymore?
- Pffuu ! He is so muddy, even Houn departs from him!
- Well, I am fed up with that! I am gotta have my tea and biscuits…
-… But? He locked the door for good!"

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When Odrazàr the Gleaming returned, quite refreshed, a princess revolt was brewing at the ogre’s castle. Half a dozen young Hobbit girls, flouted and hungry, were screaming vengeance and bidding for punishment! Even the princesses most in love with beautiful Gerry, had great difficulty to prove him right. Only tiny Priscilla, the daughter of Tobold Hornblower, kept faith in her hero. Obviously, Gerry’s closest relatives were the most virulent, especially his cousins.

But it is in hard times that a real hero acquires his full stature. However booed, Odrazàr the Valiant stepped triumphantly, carrying before him a beautiful plum tart:
- "Hear ye, my Beauties! So I went to fetch the antidote to the poison the ogre had you drink! "

Gerry fetched the dish by the broken window, and the revolted hobbit-girls rushed on the cake. For several minutes no recrimination was heard any more- Grandmother Took’s delicacies were famous!

Gerry wisely waited until the wrath calmed down. After their second piece of tart, even his most furious detractors, acknowledged the hero lacked neither relevance, nor panache.

Gerry knew then it was time to revive the dramatic intensity of his tale. For he had the soul of a jester, and could invent on the spot all kinds of stories, tricks, excuses and evasions with aplomb, an innate sense of wit and a syntax… constantly progressing. As a gallant son of the Thain, he even imagined an episode that would showcase the finesse of “his” princesses:

- "Taa Tarataaaa! Sweet maidens, daughters of kings! You have just escaped the most terrible fate ever! But here's the definite ordeal, which will decide the happiness of your life as a woman-hobbit!"

This reply, punctuated by a gallant fiery gaze, had been repeated many times in the mirror - the reader will note that no language approximation altered the desired effects! The young Hobbit-girls, again taken to the game and simpering, tended their tender little face at the window of the old shed. The charmer fired a disarming smile and recited:
- "The Ogre had stolen the ring the jeweler had shipped… er… shopped… built for my engagement. The ignoble creature has hidden this treasure in this very dungeon! I shall give my heart to the first damsel, who finds this token of my eternal love! »

Obviously, that was ridiculous... Nobody grants, by pure decision, his eternal love and even less blindly! But indeed, there is nothing blinder than young Hobbit girls with a crush, except maybe the jealousy of a crushless cousin.

A dozen nimble and chubby hands began desperately rummaging through the shed. With howls of outrage, shelves were overthrown, boxes opened. Tools fell, grandfather’s trinkets were destroyed and some disputes broke out. Gerry, absolutely delighted by the emotions he aroused, opened the dungeon and separated the opponents, comforting each with a flirtatious smile.

But the competition continued! Priscilla Hornblower, febrile and virulent, found a precious wooden box, much to the disappointment of her rivals. A struggle ensued, the young Hobbit girl managed
to stop by seizing a dibble:
- "I found it, I open it!"

The young Hobbit girls, contrite, formed a circle around the winner who indulged in the solemnity of the moment by opening the casket with a majestic gesture. She threw a languid glance to her promised one, rummaging in the box when she was interrupted by a volley of big flies that escaped from it. She uttered a cry of horror, dropping the precious casket, immediately imitated by her companions - big pink and white worms twisted their rings in a bed of shavings.

Odrâzâr the felon was immediately attacked by the princesses for that most sick joke. For a moment he began to doubt, that his charisma could afford anything, and he despaired getting out of this embarrassing situation. Only his sister, who was not bothered at all by her grandfather’s fishing worms box, found the idea utterly romantic. Seizing the ring amid the swarming mass, she asked innocently:
- "Now I have it! May I marry you?"

So much candor gave a stop to the bickering all of a sudden. With an astonishing timeliness, Gerry set aside a cowlick, took his little sister in his arms and, turning towards the loosers, said with luster:
- "She is the most courageous of you all! She is my sister and a Took! I may not describe my disench… disab… Well all of you terribly disappointed me today!"

Mortified by this moving tirade, the young Hobbit girls suffered the law of the young heartthrob, accusing themselves of cowardice instead of rebelling against his gross lack of consideration, that hid behind a selfish gallantry.

And this was to endure for many years...

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NOTES
1-The Thain is a more or less hereditary dignity. In the Hobbits history, the Thain has always been the leader of one of the most powerful clans. When the Shire was establishment, the leader of the Oldbuck clan was the Thain. Then the clan lost influence to the point of exiling its Elf across the Brandywine River and founding an independent enclave, Buckland, and changing their name into Brandybuck. Since Isengrin the first, the Took hold the title of Thain.
A wizard is to find a young hobbit, in order to teach him several things he ought to know. But the urchin is swift...

Sat in a rocking chair too small for him, on the porch of a respectable-looking smial, the old man was carefully examining the road to Longbottom, which winded her beige loops to the green hills, North of the village. Inserted like two burn-fire gems under bushy eyebrows, the elder’s worried and impatient eyes were gazing as if they could pierce the mist that veiled the distant valleys.

The old man cautiously adjusted his headdress just above his eyebrows, a pointed and broad-brimmed hat, weather-dented and which color varied from bright blue to faded gray. Wrinkles were plying his swarthy face, from the noble brow to the aquiline nose. Slight ridges of joy fleeted on the edge of his eyes and the corner of his mouth:

- « Let us wait… », he whispered satisfied.

Relaxing then, the old man looked absent-mindedly around. Below, in the southern valley, the road ran alongside the more opulent agricultural properties of South Farthing. While this sheltered dale enjoyed a milder climate than anywhere else in the Shire, farmers had built greenhouses which foodstuffs rivaled with the productions of Far South: rare fruits, early or late vegetables were the reputation of this community.

On this may morning, the Shire awoke perky and industrious, such as a well-ordered hive, confident in the benefits of its order. Highlighted by its plump Hobbits bees, free but unconscious of their modest and decent role, the hive lived happy days in the middle of the uncertain intrigues of the wide world. Sheltered but unaware of this security, Hobbits went calmly to their field or shop. The mill was turning counting the sweet hours while cowherds returned to their domestic duties after passing through meadows…

- « … and the goodwives quack drivel. », mumbled the old man while pulling his blue scarf.

Indeed the unceasing babbling of a small but strong and active cook was flowing across the low and round door, choking to the old man who could not pretend ignoring it. The gossip wore a dress, blooming and orange as a pumpkin. The litany of the agricultural and marriage news of South Farthing went on as she loaded a tray of food. For entertainment, the old man fumbled in the pocket of his ample gray mantle, and pulled out a motley box containing small sections of wood, the ends of which were coated with a dark, smelly substance.

Continuous gossip went out on the porch together with her author, a small cook whose smile was framed with cheeks as round as two red apples. Although the cook was hardly less than three feet in height as well as width, she was not particularly small for an adult, nor particularly chubby for a mature Hobbit. The babbles stopped on an anxious note, at the time the old man tweaked a wooden stick on the arm of his rocking chair:

- « You are not going to light fireworks here, are you, Master Gandalf? »
The match was kindled, emitting colored smoke that the nimble hands of the elder escalated in
prancing horses, pairs of swans, eagles in flight, before vanishing in the pungent air of the
morning.

- « Fear not, my good Isadora, and breathe quietly - the cook had held her breath, first for fear,
then for rapture – It is but a game to relax my nerves.

- In any case, as agreed, here are two jars of beer, a bottle of wine, a flask of mead, half a ham, a
loaf of good wheat flour, our sheep's cheese, a pie of goat cheese and squash, my last dried fruits
and some cakes baked this morning. Shall we have the chance to meet you for the great fireworks,
at the next fair of Michel Delving?

- Isadora, I am no entertainer! I shall come if my main activities leave me leisure! »

Gandalf put the food in his bundle, leaving only the pitchers of beer and a biscuit on the table.
Isadora opened big unbelieving eyes, watching all this food disappear in such a small bag.

But she quickly recovered:

- « And what are your main activities?

- You would regret to know!

- And how's your leg? Where are you going like this with my goods? When are you going to leave?

»

The old man massaging his legs over his big black leather boots, launched an incisive look that
convinced Isadora not to keep on this track.

- « And now if you would excuse me, I'll take care of my laundry. You can stay here as long as
you want... By the way who are you waiting for?

- Thank you so much, Isadora... and my compliments for your biscuits that surpass the subtle
sweets of Far Harad. May you always cook them with your inimitable crispy touch! »

Our gossip was already stirred by the tight conversation. She blushed even more, if that was
possible, but for pleasure this time. Never had master Gandalf yet given a "good word" about her
cookies! The neighborhood, and even beyond, was to hear about it... After a delicate and ridiculous
reverence, she returned in her kitchen, well determined to discover why master Gandalf, wizard
well-known in the four Farthings, had stopped by her guesthouse this morning for the obviously
false reason to rest his bruised legs. He was certainly waiting for someone, from her porch
overseing the highway… Which victim was her eldest episodic customer about to recruit for
running adventures? She already held enough gossip to prolong the suspense before an audience of
a dozen blabbermouths for an entire evening, but she would have died of envy to extort information
which would make her the prima of gossips until next summer. Certainly the wizard was not sitting
here to taste and praise her biscuits? Or maybe?

- « By the way, Isadora ?... »

The small motley pumpkin rolled up to her door, full of petulant hope after this unexpected
callback.

- « … What have you just said about young Mister Took ? »

Isadora squinted her usually round eyes with an air of cunning. Gandalf behaved indeed like all
wizards were known to: distracted demeanor, but intense attention to any index that could serve his mysterious activities. He had obviously lost none of the banal news that she had casually stripped earlier.

- « Which one? Because obviously you may not know that, but the cadet branch of the Smallborrough Took allied with the Almonds from Scarry. Which makes that … »

- « I mean The Took[3]’s son, the young mister Gerry! », interrupted Gandalf.

- « Yes, Yes, I’m coming to that, said Isadora, There is he not cute, this young hot fellow... Well I know from my gossip Whitegoose, that he was repeatedly seen, pursued by father Hornblower, out of his plantation Ford’s Comitia, while the beautiful youg lady Priscilla Hornblower stood tearfull at her window. If you want my opinion, she should be wed very soon! »

Isadora interrupted to assess the effects of the earth-shattering revelations she had just distilled would produced on the wizard.

An indifferent, almost unbelieving « Oh yes? », had her fly off the handle :

- « Don’t you dare, Master Gandalf, to question the credibility of my information or the likelihood of my deductions. I know it from respectable source: he conquered as many bridesmaids as feathers are stuck in his hat! I kindly ask you: what do you want from him? », did Isadora yelp, wielding her spatula.

The suddenness and the liveliness of the assault confused the cunning wizard for a time; a glimmer of annoyance passed into his dark eyes and then a quiver of fun. He sat square in the back of the rocking chair that groaned. He scratched a match, had a fumes rooster parade on a slope, had the rooster feed a Tomcat wearing a wizard’s hat, and at last declared:

- « Mother Isadora, I can tell you that the rooster has finished forcing the hens in the area. The Thain has decided to make a worthy heir out of him. We could help the scamp to get useful…»

Isadora knew that she would not learn anything more from him but she had plenty to think about. The enigma of a wizard always has more than one meaning... Gandalf scratched another match and fashioned his smoke with fantasy: a homely home at the bottom of a deep dale, high mountains, a profile of dragon glittering in gold and exploding as fireworks. Isadora frowned, somewhat arranged the brown frizz that framed her jovial face and withdrew in the kitchen for her laundry.

The wizard, trapped in the rocking chair, chuckled: informing neighbours that the Thain was finally taking his son’s education into his own hands, would benefit the Took more than the educated son himself. The Gossip Isadora Plump was the surest way so that this takeover was known and commented by the neighbourhood by tomorrow, and the whole Shire the following week!

All he had to do was to lay hands on the shameful son... who was precisely approaching, perched on a small pony, singing a fairly saucy tune, he no doubt learned from travellers at the sign of the Green Dragon. On a fine unbleached shirt with lace barrister, the young Hobbit wore a blue jacket woven with silver, which gold buttons threw sparkles afar.

On his expertly neglected blond curls, he sported an elegant bottle-green felt hat, in which a string of feathers was plugged. His brown leather pants, with a “Dwarf-fashion” wide cut, left his half legs as bare as his feet, that curled harsh and coarse, despite the young age – twenty-six years old - of the lad.
His pony, richly saddled and furnished with apparently full holsters, strutted around, driven by the furious pace of the song, that its master accompanied with a small improvised bow-violin.

The round and delighted face froze and singing strangled when the young Hobbit saw the wizard sitting on the porch of Mother Plump’s Guest House. Without allowing him any time to recover, Gandalf hailed him courteously:

- « Master Took, may your hair always grow on your chin and on your feet! So join me for some well-earned pint! You are singing like a gai finch! »

The desire for a free beer debated in Gerry’s spirit with the intuition that this affable old man could conceal dubious intents. The Hobbit considered him a suspicious freeloading tramp with a great reputation in pyrotechnics, but also one of the few advisers having access to his father.

But « beer is good when got», as they say in Longbottom, and the scamp soon had attached his pony and joined Gandalf before - rather behind, given the size of the jug! - a rather poorly earned pint.

The Hobbit sat down, rejected his hat back, retained by a tidy silver wires cord, and sipped his pint. Immediately discomfort settled in persistent silence, only punctuated by Isadora’s sounds of laundry. After a good beer shot, Gerry made efforts to break the ice:

- « What a fine weather today! »

Silence stubbornly resumed while the wizard’s matches and passes molded smoke billows into a pretty female face framed by long curly hair. The soft foggy face soon turned into the head of a mule wearing a feathers-ruffled hat. Gandalf considered the Hobbit:

- « Do you mean the weather is fine and that you are comfortable with that? Or maybe that it is well true that the weather is beautiful, unlike what you may have feared? Perhaps do you mean that the weather is definitely warmer than yesterday? Is this a statement reinforced with satisfaction or a disappointment moderated with hope? Do you, from your current agricultural point of view, find advantage with rain or sun? Unless you mind the weather may spoil the crops? Would you fear that the sun may not rise tomorrow? But in fact, why are you talking about the weather that everyone can see? Would you have nothing to say, Master Gerry, you who sang loudly a moment ago? »

The Hobbit was sweating buckets under the inquisitive eye of the wizard. He chose the detached demeanour that usually succeeded him so well with a female audience:

- « I'm talking about the weather, like everyone else, to initiate a conversation with a host who had the courtesy to invite me but not yet to tell me why. Without any claim for wizard’s subtleties, I hope, by trial and error, soon to find a topic and develop it together in a way that would prove pleasant for you and profitable for me. »

The whole lot was given with great ease and ended with a distinguished head nod. Gandalf appreciated the ability of the young Hobbit to hold his rank in oratory jousts. To aggressive inquisition, he opposed disarming candor, to assumptions collection, the humility of a practical approach, and finally to the pressed scorn, a deference mocking wizards, while still adding a slight and exquisitely polite rebuke.

- « You have succeeded, said Gandalf, pleating eyes and smiling inwardly. Let's talk about you! What are your plans? »
Gerry felt his bowels knotting - so the old Fox had something in mind and was playing a game with the Thain. He swallowed a long and dilatory sip of beer which allowed him to mentally review the errands that his father had entrusted to him. He selected one that would justify his presence in the area and declared:

- « I am looking for a beautiful race bull for an exchange of breeding covering next season.

- I was thinking about more... personal projects, although I noticed your interest in covering.

- Family business takes most of my time.

- Don’t mess with me, Gerontius Took!…»

The commanding and annoyed tone of the wizard stunned the young Hobbit with his pint to his lips. He swallowed noisily. The wizard continued:

- «… You are wasting your time in unnecessary, if not immoral occupations… »

- You search for an exchange partner for covering, you sweet scamp, breathed a mischievous voice in the kitchen. Hu, hu, hu, I may propose several solutions…

Gandalf raised a skeptical eyebrow : Mother Plump had come to the rescue of the scamp, with a playful, otherwise prank tone, that she had never let known. Gerry put back his bold front and caught this unexpected help. He drank a strong sip, stood up, apologized to the wizard and went into the kitchen, armed with a pencil and a small leather notebook.

- Come along, and I’ll show you… said the mischievous voice. And also you'll give me your opinion. »

Snatches of hushed conversation then reached his ears for several minutes, pitted with some "and do you love this?" and several "or rather that way? ". Gandalf rose two shocked eyebrows. Finally the conversation fell completely silent. This unseemly delay had irritated the wizard who broke into the kitchen, hit his head several times on beams and furnitures, before getting scold by Isadora who came out of her bedroom.

- Why are you browsing in my kitchen ? By the way, since you are here : what do you think of my new dress ?

Gandalf nearly strangled before Isadora’s extravagant costume. The housewife, strapped in an indigo taffeta dress, could hardly breathe but she blossomed like the green fields in June.

- But where has Gerry gone?, asked the wizard while looking in the bedroom.

- Certainly not in this room, roared the cook; He helped me to choose and adjust my dress, and then he came out in the garden to assess my bull. He will return in a moment. He is a scoundrel, but he has such a good taste! »

Gandalf, feeling guilty about his previous suspicion, realized that he had been fooled. The young Mr. Took had bypassed the smial and straddled his pony. The wizard only had time to reach the porch and grab his staff. The fugitive rushed down the road. Laughing, the Hobbit shouted to the wizard’s attention :

- « Thank you so much indeed for this beer, Master Gandalf ! I'm sorry I have to leave you, but my father’s errands cannot wait... Please do express my regrets to Mother Plump, about the non-covering ! ». 
Worried both by this improper behaviour and his own ingenuity, Gandalf opened his mouth send a peremptory admonition to the brash lad. At this time a cart full of hay came on the road in the opposite direction and hid the fugitive; the peasant driver looked cumbersome and was chewing a wheat straw, as his donkey masticated hay in its jute bag. The fat Hobbit stared down at Gandalf, seeming to blame him for the useless and immature agitation he was indulging in. The wizard, sighing, adopted a more dignified bearing and picked up his bundle. Young Mister Took was far away now. Joining Isadora in the kitchen, Gandalf quite severely scolded her:

- «Frankly, Isadora, such a giddiness surprises me, from a cook as wise as you are! Helping this scoundrel to escape his duties!»

He unleashed a river of Hobbit tears.

- «But I did not know about that… I simply wanted to show him my new dresses and learn from his good taste… And then he lured me with selected compliments it is so easy to believe…»

Bending to embrace the red apples that the peasant cook used as cheeks, Gandalf complimented her for her dress and handed a few coins for payment of her victuals.

- «But these are King Crowns! Isadora exclaimed, soon revived by the kisses,

- Coins always come from a King, Isadora,

- But which King is it?

- Farewell, Isadora! – he said cheerfully

- Where did you find them?

- Goodbye, Isadora! – he said firmly

- And since these coins date back to the king’s time, are they of good valuable alloy?

- To the King, Isadora! – the wizard said exasperated.

But Gandalf stopped after several steps. The gossip had serious doubts. The wizard, with his thin smile, turned back to the Hobbit peasant:

- «When the King’s coins survive him, they remain worthy as long as his people remember that his effigy guarantees the coins silver content.

- Oh! So if these coins are still here, thus the King is still there too, for sure?

- You are right, Isadora, this is exactly the meaning of this currency! The King, whose times are passed, nevertheless left us a part of his kingdom... He's probably still there, in the shadows, ready to come back if we help him at the appropriate time. Make good use of these King’s tokens and think of him from time to time! Goodbye for now!»
Smial: word used in the Shire, meaning a Hobbit-hole, built following their tradition of digging their homes in the soil of a hillside.

[2] Length unit of around thirty centimeters.

[3] In the old scottish or irish families, tradition remains to call this way the chief of the clan.
A wizard tracks a Took on Hornblower's lands

The old wizard, cursing his clumsiness, resumed his walk once more. Getting fooled by this whippersnapper had somewhat irritated him - he was going to change his manners. He strode a few miles southward along the road, under an increasing heat. He was brewing his grievance, punctuating his paces with strokes of his long wizard's staff.

Hobbits smials went gradually fewer and plusher on either sides of the track. Emerald groves and sparkling gardens of multi-coloured flowers gradually gave place to rich soft green crops, that came out of the ground for barely a few inches.

A happy hive of bees followed the wizard as he walked along the ditch, that fragrant shrubs and brooms had invaded. The valley was slowly expanding to join the Baranduin river basin, that was still veiled in its thick morning mist.

Gandalf scanned the road before him, which was running straight towards the river. An unusual sensation, as a gaze in his back, held him still for a moment. A trill hailed him from the dark woods on the left of the road. Attracted by the song of the bird, he paced a few steps among the trees, seeking under the branches. A thrush escaped from beneath a bush, fluttered a few moments around the wizard, then came to land on his shoulder.

- "Hey well, You beautiful, you flew from far away! You look exhausted!"

The bird began to chirp wildly. Gandalf gently had it climb on his forefinger and listened carefully. When the tweets dried up, the wizard issued a curious jerky and extended hissing between his teeth, while the thrush leaned its head on side or the other. The animal resumed its cackle, on a lower tone and a slower pace.

- "Hum, thought Gandalf, the King, like your fellow magpie, takes its flight towards what shines, …"

His face darkened for a moment, revealing many wrinkles of concern.

- "… but all that glitters is not gold…", he added sadly.

Gandalf delicately caressed the bird on the top of the head, and smoothed his feathers to the end of the tail. The small thrush rubbed the two sides of her nozzle on the extended forefinger, giving back his lenient smile to the wizard.

- "You well deserved to rest. As for me, it is necessary now to catch up with time and this young imp. Go find your King!"

The bird plunged to the ground more than it took its flight, hopped to a rock on which it perched. The wizard loosened a large stone near the small throne. Large worms were twisting in the uncovered earthen hole.
-« Have your supper! Goodbye for now! »

Again Gandalf took his bundle and staff. While walking on through the wood towards the east, he reminded his last meeting with Master Elrond:

« All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.
From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
A light from the shadows shall spring;[1]
Renewed the splendor dispersed
Wilderness re-peopled Kingdom. »

« A dream came to me on the wings the night. The heir of the Kings of old, rises to face his destiny. His parents wrote this poem for his line, but I know in my heart that he is not ready yet. »

Master Elrond was not strictly speaking a magician or a wizard, although he was powerful among Elves and Men, but he could read many signs and his premonitions were respected. A hazardous adventure seemed about to start, for a man with an inflexible will. If Elrond foresaw a perilous test, thus was Gandalf to hurry.

Soon his large boots made broad prints in the carpet of mosses and leaves of the previous autumn. As the ground dropped and became wetter, the prints became true holes which a muddy water filled in a few seconds.

The woods cleared and lilies appeared, then snap rings and one-day lilies blazing under the midday sun. The wizard located an elevated road which ran from West to east, climbed there towards his left and strode to the entrance of a beautiful property.

Aligned like a regiment of tortoises with their green fabric back, greenhouses sheltered the plantations of young vegetables and pipeweeds of several varieties. His eyebrows drawn up, the wizard observed the neighbourhood; here was certainly where the small cock was hiding. Further in an orchard, he hailed a small group of young Hobbit-girls who were tending the trees:

- « Here is an admirable bunch of flowers under the spring sun of South Farthing! »

A chorus of cluckings followed the compliment.

- “Have I found the property of the Ford’s Comitia? ”

A melodious ovation of approvals answered the question.

- “Could you please indicate to me the smial of Miss Priscilla Hornblower? »

An aria of small acute and hystericals cries confirmed to Gandalf that the young lad had indeed preceded him within the orchard.

- « The direction, young ladies, if you please? Misses? ».
An anthology of whispers, going up and down like a waltz, covered the wizard’s voice. However the sprightliest of the young Hobbit-girls, a bad smile hung at the corner of her lips - perhaps a rival of Priscilla, most probably the junior girl Whitegoose - ended up pointing out with her fatty finger, a broad paved avenue a little further on the left. Gandalf greeted with his hat and went in this direction, under the dissonant recriminations of the female assembly.

For ages, the Hobbits who lived close to the Brandywine river had inspired from the art of men, the practice to build in height. Influential people had preserved the ancestral habit to build smials, but in a much more luxurious way: the inside of a Hobbits hole was comfortable, warm, aired and dry. Panelled walkways paved and lit, led to many bedrooms and living-rooms and cellars full of food, appliance and furnitures. But the Hornblower had innovated by building, on and under the headland in the center of their estates, a mixed residence, including buried parts and floors above the ground. The building did not obviously match the size or the prestige of the ancestral residences of the old clans such as Tuckborough or Brandyhall, but the Big Folk of Sarn ford reffered to it as the “Hornblower Manor”. The authority of the father Harold Hornblower was recognized from Longbottom to the ford and beyond, among the men exploiting the river fish and the hills of red sandstone.

The father Hornblower had crossed the lines of eccentricity when he installed, up the ridge of his house, a large horn taken from a wild cow of remote Rhûn. The instrument, more than five feet long, was fixed on a large conical pipe which led to the roof. The vicinity had laughed at the Master of the manor who “took airs”. Neither Harold’s generosity nor the professional rigour of his pipeweed selections were to have the scorn cease. The comments would undoubtedly have calmed down more quickly if Harold had not have his sons regularly blow the horn to mark the hours from dawn to twilight!

The Hornblower residence appeared at the end of the alley. The wizard sadly reminded the manors once scattered around the King’s lands, in the Baranduin valley.

The king’s glass-makers from the alley of lanterners –Rath Celerdain- at king’s Norbury –Fornost Erain- had mastered the techniques to build a green-house from flat glass, thus increasing the plantations yield. Yet the help of certain wizard had been necessary...

However this masonry beared neither the pride nor the marks of its former military functions. A low hill spread its soft slopes out, comprising a dozen round doors with spring colours. Thousands of blue flowers framed the opened windows, while a small army of Hobbits extended linens to dry on the lawn. Over the hill, a long and squat beige house with brown half-timberings, resounded with the tinkling of kitchens and various workshops. On the second floor, a bunch of high windows aligned under a large thatch revealed the pageantry hall, where the Big Folk could have stood at ease. The hill could easily shelter about sixty people, without counting the neighbouring buildings and holes.

Gandalf reached an oaken porch where two characters were gesturing around four foaming hounds. The dogs, out of breath, sneezed, yawned and howled in a pitiful way. The most vigorous Hobbit gave them to drink and flattered them, explaining that the animals had been victims of too vile a foe for them. The opulent and stale character seemed to arch backwards to retain his enormous paunch. With his right hand, between the index and the major finger, he held a bar made of brown leaves rolled on themselves, and from time to time he chewed it with an important and opposed look. The wizard addressed him respectfully:

- « Master Hornblower, I see that your pack is in poor shape. May I assist you?
- Good morning, grey Foreigner. I do not appreciate the presence of intruders on my property. But
since you came up here, now go useful! »

Both by reputation and personally, old father Hornblower indeed knew Gandalf, that these peremptorily tone and selective memory irritated further more:

- « I will soon tell you why I followed this road, which was built long before you Hobbits settled the area and does by no means belong to you, answered Gandalf controlling his anger. By the way, you and I met at Michel Delving’s fair, a few years ago. You certainly do remember that you were then quite polite and benevolent towards honest old men. Concerning your pets, let us see what we can do… »

Gandalf knelt and cherished the head of a large foaming hound. The wizard opened the mouth of the dog, smelled and examined its truffle.

- « These dogs have sniffed a prickly powder spice, probably caraway. Here is what we should do… »

The dog handler guided Gandalf up to the manor’s kitchen. Together they prepared a thick mixture which they gave for the dogs to ingest, by force for some. Gandalf joined Harold Hornblower then, letting the animals rest under the guard of the pack master, after the terrible heavy sneezes the wizard’s potion had caused. The dog handler saw the two old people discussing with animation. Leaving the hounds which had fallen asleep, he finally heard Master Hornblower conclude, shaking Gandalf’s hand:

- «… I wish you find him before me: he already robbed me of some pipeweed bundles, if not worse! Several jewels of great value disappeared these last days… You can go and see my daughter, but I doubt she would help you! Please come back when you feel like it, you will always be welcome, Master Gandalf. »

The wizard stepped around the hill, strode the small way up to the thatched cottage and saw a young Hobbit-girl at her round window. She was completing an elaborate hairstyle, inserting small brilliant pearls in her brown finely plaited hairs. Several minutes passed before Priscilla pretended to realize Gandalf stood in front of her window.

- « You should not rove in a private property!, she said with a stiff smile. My father could release the dogs after you. »

Gandalf, showing roughcast eyebrows on a severe face, approached the window above the lawned slope, put his bundle and rested with his two hands on his staff:

- « You should not so inadvertently deny your father’s hospitality! As for these brave dogs Chewer, Grumbler, Devourer and Howler, we are in excellent terms. I came here on behalf of the Shire’s Thain, who charged me with guiding his useless son in the way of uprightness. The young rascal preceded me here - without any doubt to meet you – and hopes to escape his duties. Could you please ask him to join me immediately? »

The beautiful Hobbit-girl looked at the wizard behind her long lashes, and launched a well-prepared sentence she thought was irresistible:

- « Formerly, your sprite tricks impressed me very much, … when I was a child. But for now, Master Gandalf, I inform you that my Promised will not be taken away from me…

- Formerly you had the courtesy to greet your father’s hosts. The future Thain needs to see the world, thus I take him along to teach him to become who he should be: a gentle-Hobbit, in the full
and noble sense of the term. Such are the wishes of his father, who happens to be head of his clan and first Hobbit of the Shire.

- I’ve already undertaken to put him in the right way! »

Gandalf considered her with pity. He could not bring himself to reveal to her the many feathers the young ladykiller collected on his hat:

- « You will reach your majority of thirty-three years old in several years only. Up to then, your father will not let you lead Gerry in the right way of marriage as long as he won’t show more seriousness and respect for his future charge. »

This obviousness was welcomed with a black look, that Gandalf disregarded:

- « As for you, please stop polishing the anatomical details of your pleasant person, and try to show yourself useful to your people. Stride across the Shire, learn how to know the hearts, courage and the weaknesses, practise arts or trade, help the needy ones… Make useful work of your life, for the time you are assigned! »

The Hobbit-girl slowly started to cry, feeling her own resolution blunting in front of the scarecrows of parenthood and thainhood.

- « I will not let you take my Gerry along as you did with all these lads!

- You don’t know what you are talking about! Indeed I took some young Hobbits along for their own good and I brought back ripe Hobbits, the Shire remembers with pride! … most of the time…»

After a pause, Gandalf lent his handkerchief to the girl who refused it; he added gently, though feeling guilty and without illusions about Gerry’s sincerity:

- « If you still love each other when he comes back, you will find the strength to convince your father to settle down with Gerry’s. »

The prospect of her beloved’s departure completely closed the Hobbit-girl: her mind, her face, her window and finally her curtains.

- « Go away ! I won’t speak with you any more! »

But Gandalf had caught a rebellious glimpse of hope in the wet eyes of the girl, just before the cascade of closings. He understood at once that Priscilla would seek to inform Gerry of the wizard’s dangerous intentions. Sighing and moaning, as for lumbar pains - or more probably because of real pains - Gandalf once again took his bundle on his back, and seemed to leave. Actually he posted himself discreetly on a hillock within a furlong[2], North of the “Manor”. He settled comfortably on his observation post amidst the trees and restored himself while blessing Mother Plump’s delicacies, without forgetting to scan the neighborhood.

His waiting, though long, was successful: in the middle of the afternoon - the large horn had just blown the fourth hour, which is first snack time - the pretty damsel Priscilla, whose conspirator look and overflowing food basket were cloaked under her charming blue hood, silently flew from the manor by a side door.

Since the remote times of their first wanderings, Hobbits have developed an innate sense of discretion and furtivity. For their Big Folk neighbors, this art of stealth could not be explained only by Hobbits small size; a rumour of magic veiled this nearly-miraculous skill.
As for now, Priscilla had many turns and precautionous detours to escape her family’s monitoring; but Gandalf, who laughed at such tricks, had set his ambush.

The young Hobbit-girl stepped very close to him, and even turned next to him, to check that she was not followed, but the grey-clad wizard lowered his hat, clung still to a trunk and was not noticed under the leaves. Then he followed the enamoured girl who soon led him, without even knowing, to the “hut of the Elves”, a platform built upon a beech for forest game spotting. Gandalf lurked in the scrubs while the Hobbit-girl climbed on a rope ladder that was dropped when she called. He failed to be trampled by Gerry’s pony, that was fastened there for hiding, and that nibbled the leaves around. The wizard paid close attention and managed to catch small parts of the couple’s conversation.

Priscilla, worried and voluble, told Gerry about Gandalf’s pursuit and his paternal mandate. She advised to him, quite wisely, to disappear for a time and move away, far from Tuckborough and Ford’s Comitia. She brought to him a basketful of food and first quality pipeweed. Like a knight of the old times, he was solemnly given the damsel’s handkerchief and a token of love: a strange golden trifle, that looked like both a ring and small scissors. Moved as for an engagement, she entrusted her treasures to him while whispering tender words, with a romantic smile on her lips, so that Gandalf had no knowledge of it.

This gold jewel was not an ordinary ring. Two curved blades were hidden in the thickness of the noble metal; they left their housing to cut what laid inside the ring, when the two small clear gems on the top were pinched. This was the Hornblower’s leaves-cutter, a luxury tool meant for cutting properly the rolls of pipeweed leaves, that the chief of the household jealously kept for himself.

The pipeweed leaves-cutter is a typical object of South Farthing. Of course it is usually less luxurious and of more a conventional shape. It is not known who introduced the pipeweed in this area of the world. But the time the practice of smoking pipeweed spread in the Shire has been recorded. It is Tobold Hornblower, the grandfather of Harold, who invented this art, nearly two hundred years ago in the South Farthing. The most beautiful pipeweed plantations obviously grow here, from Longbottom to the banks of river Brandywine. If Harold’s recent work allowed a rigorous selection of the seedlings and a considerable increase in the leaves quality, the methods for cutting, drying and conservation were developed by Tobold himself.

The famous ancestor also inaugurated the sumptuous tradition of the leaves-rolls, that his sibblings still jealously maintain nowadays. This is a secret technique for rolling several leaves - of exceptional quality and subtly matched varieties - on themselves. The leaves-roll obtained with that precise overlapping made it possible to smoke the pipeweed... without pipe, but with an incomparable refinement. Still it was necessary to cut the end of the roll with understanding, and to have the leaves-cutter adapted, because an incorrect cut ruined the pulling of the invaluable object. The rollers constituted, at the time of Gerry, an amazing luxury for master Hornblower’s personal reserve. He used to offer some, although seldom, to a narrow selection of close friends and business connections.

So you see how Master Hornblower golden leaves-cutter, the treasure of his house and token of the genius of his dynasty, was indeed a gift of a high symbolic sense! The leaves-cutter of the grandfather founder could not leave the Hornblower family. Entrusted to Gerry, the jewel could not miss reinstating the aforementioned family. In Priscilla’ mind, it should come back the matrimonial way…

For the time being, Gerry did not understand the chivalrous allegory, but he quickly and carelessly put the leaves-cutter, object of a priceless value, in his pipeweed purse, right in the bracket of his waistcoat, under his left armpit. Nonetheless, from the bottom of his heart, the childish pride of
success balanced with a pinching of guilt. Cunningly, he agreed with Priscilla’s advice, shamelessly swearing to be discrete and to behave… without engaging further. After a short snack - for a Hobbit - with her beloved, Priscilla came back to the Hornblower Manor before the fifth hour horning, promising with a saucy smile to come back after supper, provided with a suitable blanket. 

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[2] The « furlong » is a length measure unit of a little more than 200 meters.
Once the young Hobbit-girl had left, Gandalf waited a few minutes for her to reach her home, then he rose quietly and detached the pony that he loaded with his bundle. The wizard whispered a few things to the ear of the animal, went to the foot of the beech and called the rascal:

- « Come down, Master Gerry, it is time to go… »

Terror seized the Hobbit lad, who had neither seen nor heard the wizard arrive and could not escape. First of all Gandalf required Gerry to write a full and fair letter for Miss Priscilla. The missive was to explain his absence from the Shire for a few months, and begged her not to blame him for his unexpected departure. To achieve that, Gandalf had to specify that the father Hornblower was determined to impose marriage to Gerry if « interesting circumstances »[1] forced him to. If Gerry was not to go down the tree, he would be delivered to the old Harold and his dogs. The “circumstances”, although dubious, or because of their uncertainty, prejudiced Gerry’s case, so that the Hobbit wrote the letter, signed and gave it to the wizard who checked the coarsest mistakes with grumbles. After which Gandalf ordered the Hobbit to go down, threatening to seek him byforce. The wizard’s impatience flashed when the detached rope ladder fell entirely to the ground. Then the old man showed a surprising agility by climbing the trunk of the beech in a few moments, which destroyed the young Hobbit’s fighting spirit. Gerry was not let the opportunity to touch the ground: he felt the weight of the wizard’s staff tracing on his head signs of application and obedience that terrified him.

All his limbs shaking, he let be installed on his own mount, looked at Gandalf transferring the food from Priscilla’s basket to the pony’s holsters. Gerry saw the wizard lead them to Sarn ford, without even being able to move or emit a sound. They had not stridden more than a mile when they heard the call of the marshes, horned at the manor, and then repeated from time to time by the Hobbits who left their home. Formerly horned when it was feared that somebody might have got lost in the misty marshes, this tune was now blown as soon as a Hobbit needed urgent and pressing assistance from his neighbors. Gandalf had no doubt father Hornblower had surprised his daughter. Dissatisfied by her answers, he would have launched his dogs and his people after the ladylover.

- « He had promised to let me do it my way, grumbled Gandalf between his teeth. What midge has bitten him? »

Gerry wondered whether the beating had a vague relationship with the gift taken from Priscilla, the large gold ring which he now held in his inside pocket. But he had no time to look further into his assumptions nor to formulate his deductions. With a sharp order to the pony, Gandalf had it galloping and ran by its sides. But their race was vain. The dogs found them in an alley between two lines of greenhouses. Gandalf slowed down his pace and unsheathed his sword. Gerry then realized that the wizard carried a long weapon that sparkled in the half-light. Determined to try something, the Hobbit took a caraway mill from his pocket, ready to re-do this morning’s trick. The wizard realized that and shouted:

- « Let this apart, stupid Took, the dogs are aware of it now! Watch our back! »
Controlling the terrorized pony, Gandalf stood in front of the four hounds while raising his staff that blazed with a sharp light:

- « Down ! » he said with of a strong voice but curiously veiled, as if sounding through the mists of unmemorable times.

The four mastiffs were immobilized in a plaintive yap and laid down, aligned like for the parade, at wizard’s feet.

- « Now, Grumbler, go and carry this to your mistress. Go, to Priscilla! »

The wizard fixed Gerry’s letter into the studded collar of the dog, which left running towards the manor. Once the leader of the pack was drawn aside, sending the others towards a lure was a breeze. Gandalf looked them to the bottom of their eyes, then after a short order, released each of them:

- « Chewer, to the hut, run after the boar! »

- « Devourer, to the canister, on the deer! »

- « Howler, to the warrens, taïaut! »

The three hounds obeyed. They disappeared howling, gathering towards themselves the neighbors torches and dogs, who had dangerously approached. Gandalf seized the lead of the pony and carried out his guest out of the property of Ford’s Comitia. Taking by-paths, they soaked in the maze of the muddy grounds, seeking to reach the river. They walked on for hours, directed first by the wizard’s memory, and then by the gleam of the slowly revealed stars.

Quickly any rumour of pursuit had completely vanished behind them. They were now walking through a sea of rushes under a new moon, sometimes dropping on a gloomy mud pond. On several occasions Gerry protested and advised for a track rather than another “to avoid moving sands”. His right intuition astonished Gandalf, who attributed it to years of stealthy approaches and escapes. They ended up reaching the river, soaking to the – Hobbit’s - knees and followed the bank downstream. The progression was painful and dangerous; the moon, that lighted their steps from time to time, crossed the sky slowly. The ground became gradually firmer under their feet, and then they reached the bank and followed it towards south-west.

With the first lights of dawn, they had reached Sarn ford. On the opposite bank, two large raised stones pointed towards the last stars, as a warning to the traveller who would risk his steps beyond the limits of the Shire. A breeze from the South uplifted the edges of Gandalf’s hat. He scanned and sniffed around, and then blew a small whistle. No answer came except some croakings, so he blew again, in vain. The Hobbit was aware of the wizard’s irritation but he did not figure out his distress.

- « The ford is not guarded any more, said Gandalf to himself. Something unusual has happened… »

Despite his doubts, the wizard strode with resolution, raising his staff and leading a pony loaded with his pupil. Once again he was on the road with a reluctant beginner...

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NOTES

[1] The expression « the circumstances » means, in the Hobbit gossip talk, that avoid using crude
terms, the uncertain and transitional state of a Hobbit-Woman that precedes a happy event for several months – these are then « conducive circumstances ». When a false alarm resolves in disappointment or relief, then they are « unrealistic circumstances ». Cases of miscarriage, rare among Hobbits, bear the terrible name of « ill fated circumstances ».
The road goes ever on - Lectures

Chapter Summary

The wizard lectures the hobbit with terribly boring recommendations.

They crossed the ford and the high raised stones threshold, while the exhausted Hobbit piteously drooped his shoulders on the pony’s back. Far downstream on the left bank, sparkled the lights of a fishermen Big Folk village: several huts of reeds around a stone smoking-room. Gandalf led them towards a large extent of cattails, a mile upstream. There, he finally authorized a short pause. Gerry devoured like a famished and shaken Hobbit, whose habits were entirely called into question.

- « Where do you want to take me along? », he asked with his heart at the edge of despair.

- For the moment, I have simply taken you out of the Shire, where your excesses got you some enmities. Keep high spirits! Your fellow Hobbits show several shortcomings, but everlasting hate is not one of them. As for your female conquests, those who are able to forget you will do so, and the others will marry. Do you realize how uncomfortable a situation you were likely to put these young Hobbit-girls in?

Gerry, who did not at all regard the situations he shared with the Hobbit-girls as uncomfortable, innerly smiled, in spite of his tiredness. Facing such an urchin’s frivolous attitude, Gandalf insisted:

- « Is there one of them with whom you would like to take vows? »

The pretty Hobbitboy, dulled and upset, turning and turning over his feathered hat between his hands, answered:

- « I never thought about it… I am not ready to engage.

- However you may have engaged several of these Hobbit-girls! Can you imagine unexpected and numerous offsprings gathering from the four Farthings on your return?

- It is not true, Gandalf. This rumour is grossly exaggerated. You see, most of the feathers on my hat are still white, only several passed to black… »

The wizard immediately assessed the disrespectful answer of the cynical Hobbit-boy, contrary maybe with our dear reader.[1]

- « You are but a hanging rogue! I take you along with me for a voyage that should prove advantageous for you in more than one way!

- But I never left the Shire…

- It is precisely the reason why I ride with you for a while. Gerry, you know the Shire extremely well, its inhabitants, male and female… But the son of the Thain must know the outside world by himself. What do you know about your borders, for example?

- We have a rather numerous body of volunteers to beat the bounds of the country. When a brigand causes disturbance, we take him back to the borders. I’m also aware that some of us live amidst
Big Folk in Breeland, according to a special arrangement. But I never went there.

- Thus you have no knowledge about people who live around you or a little beyond…

- Gandalf, I have neither desire nor need to know the wider world and its hazards. I live in a time of a peaceful Shire.

- Do you think indeed? Your ancestor Bandobras Took, the “Roaring Bull”, has stopped an invasion of orcs at the Green Fields Battle, hardly a hundred years ago. He decapitated Golfimbul, goblin chief of Mount Gram. Please note that Bandobras was one of my most assiduous pupils! The orc-head flew some hundred steps before falling into a rabbit burrow. It was claimed, two generations ago, that this was the origin of the golf play.

- So my people is able to assume our own defense. I am glad about it, because I see no need to go looking for trouble outside.

- Knowledge of your immediate surrounding is vital for the Thain-to be! Soon you will have to anticipate and solve these issues. Be certain of this: if this battle was a victory, it is also thanks to the assistance of your guardians. Your happy Shire benefits from the protection of allies whose existence you are unaware of! That is the lore you should know and bear, after your father! »

What the Hobbit hitherto perceived as a severe but temporary measure of paternal retaliation, ultimately promised to be a ruthless regimentation to adulthood... He changed strategy, ready to concede just enough to keep most of his tranquility.

- « I am not made for Thanery and its responsibilities nor willing to burden myself with duties.

- One does not burden oneself with duty. Duty is the right that others have on us. But your euphemism shows some insight. As you seem to be unaware that you could not take a step into the world without finding a duty to perform, I'm taking you for a few steps around for some time! »

The relentless logic of the approach reduced Gerry to his usual expedient, candid and disarming good will:

- « Gandalf, I need your help! »

The fair tone, pathetic and moving, did not trick the wizard at all. But he took the Hobbit at his word:

- I am here for that, my boy, at least at the beginning. Do I have your word that you will endeavour to behave?

- I promise to you I'll make efforts, but I doubt I can meet your expectations.

- I will be satisfied with that for the moment, said Gandalf with a smile and posing his hand on the young Hobbit’s shoulder. He resumed:

- Cheer up! You will also discover some wonders. Voyages are not only perturbing and dangerous, they are also enthralling and instructive. Why should you doubt your talent to taste the enchantment of the road that goes ever on? …

- And is there anything to eat in the wilderness? »

Gandalf had a knowing laugh:
- « Hobbits may not abandon their good sense. Lands around the Shire are not as wild as you seem to imagine. Far in the East or North, beyond the mountains, lay truly inhospitable regions. But even in these wilderlands, you will be surprised by the resources they can offer to the learned traveller. For example, marshes cattails that surround us… »

Gerry threw a circular glance. A multitude of long pale green stems were balancing under the weight of their oblong, dark and felted cocoons, which looked like the distaff of a Hobbit spinning wheel.

- « You say these reeds are edible?

- They are more than edible, and these are not reeds, that by the way are very useful too.

- Which part does one eat?

- The inhabitants of Dunland have an old saying : “Tell me which dish you want to eat, I will tell you how to cook it with cattails”. To begin with, when the young shoot reaches two palms, it is the “asdriggs asparagus”, with a savour unlike anything else, boiled and served with salt, pepper and butter. The inhabitants of Breeland name them the “distaff”. They fill in whole cart-loads with cattails in the Midgewater marshes.

- Shall we taste some ?

- Considering the pace you are exhausting our supplies, it will be soon necessary… But it is not the only recipe! You’d rather listen. In the month of cerveth, the crushed rootlets could give you a flour, to prepare breads and biscuits, or even a very tasty paste much like mashed tatters. The base of the root, sliced but crude, has a sweetened savour, that reminds me of large nuts of Far Harad. You may also eat the young heads as a pulp, which tastes like artichoke hearts.

- When I hear you, the wilderness seems like a true food plate!

- That is not false, although one must deserve it. How do you believe your ancestors managed to survive, before migrating towards the Shire? But this plant will also provide you with its stems, to braid hats or baskets. Once matured, it may be frayed into a first choice insulator, for mattresses and pillows. It becomes like mosses, that store heat just like goose down… »

Gerry raised his face towards the wizard in front of him. Where in Middle-Earth had he learned all that? And for what reason was the wise so eager to transmit this lore to him? For the first time, the Hobbit began to foresee that the peregrinations and the intrigues of the old wizard had no another goal but to serve and educate. Paradoxically, his resentment was reinforced: the heinous kidnapping he was victim of, was justified by a purpose, high and imperious. Gerry could not accept it yet. The wizard continued:

- « No, Gerontius Took, you are neither without resources nor without friends, even amidst the wilderness dangers. But you must learn to know them, and should also harden yourself somewhat, so that you too, may become a valuable ally. »

While the Hobbit’s tired face was hardening, Gandalf felt the need to express his satisfaction:

- « Speaking of that, you reacted the right way to the danger yesterday, despite my applications and warnings! I congratulate you. Someone will come out of you! But you will have to be provided with more an efficient weapon than that mill! Though it is of a great effectiveness as long as the game is not launched… But for the moment enjoy this moment: we leave the Shire and the troubles that you sowed there. May this trip teach you wisdom and grant you strength to confront
them on your return! »

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NOTES

[1] As for him, the wizard instantly understood that the white feathers meant the Hobbit-girls who had not yet opened their keep to the young conqueror, as opposed to the black feathers who already surrendered to his male appetites.


Chapter Summary

Gandalf tricks Gerry into a Dunadan place of worship.

Gandalf had them take the road again. Gerry protested hopelessly: he had been awake for a score of hours.

- « We should still add a few miles between the Hornblowers estate and you by the end of this morning, said the wizard. I take you along to the former coaching inn of Thalion. That will be a pleasant transition for you. »

The ground rose slowly, while a pale and timid purple sun rose in front of them, left of the road. Light clouds promised a beautiful day but the air was still cold. Gandalf let Gerry walk, as much as to prevent the pony from getting tired, as to warm the Hobbit. Large meadows spread out their wild grasses and spring flowers. They crossed some gurgling brooks and several red rock bars, around ten feet height, which had forced the builders of old to dig the rock and embank to smooth the roadway. These works, though more inclined that the remainder of the road, were paved with regular flagstones and honoured the King’s masons art of old. It is at least what Gerry imagined, since Hobbits attributed to the King, the main part of the infrastructures they found while settling in the country. They inherited their techniques of timber and stone construction from the Dûnedain but they did little more, most of the time, than to maintain the invaluable inheritance.

The King had authorized the Hobbits to found the Shire, many centuries ago, but Gerry’s time Hobbits had completely forgotten the context of this decision: the critical military situation of the kingdom, a lasting lack of demographic vitality, as well as the internal dissensions that this decision had induced. The kingdom had disappeared at the same time as their northern foe which caused its fall, but the Shire, district of well ordered businesses, had survived it. It had managed to thrive while the surrounding cantons of the Big Folk had slowly declined. The expression “until the return of the king”, that pointed out the antique vassal and dependent position of the Shire, now meant “forever”. No one could foresee his return, but the figure of the King still embodied order, law and civilization. Each bridge, each legal document, any coaching inn set up to accomodate Dwarves, Big Folk and their mounts at the crossing of main roads, each old wash-house or collective furnace, the metal weights and poles bearing the seven stars, all these everyday details pointed out the immanente presence of this guarding figure, at least as much as the ruins of the old war towers.

After several miles, as Gerry was painfully hobbling, Gandalf hoisted him again on the pony’s back. The road now curved amidst small red sandstone solid masses, which casted blue shades across the roadway. The small brown sparrows that wandered above the fields fled with furious cheepings when they approached. The temperature slowly rose in spite of a gentle breeze on their back, which pushed thin shoddy clouds towards the east. The dreams of grandeur of the former Kings had deserted the thoughts of the Hobbit, who tried to learn more.

- « Gandalf, I would like to know where you are taking me along. I consider this departure… rushed and unwise. In the wilderness, we may need… equipment, food, pipeweeds…

The wizard’s eyebrows suddenly curled with irritation:
- Gerry, my young Hobbit, you will learn that the deeds of a wizard are considered from every angle. Their relevance is ever stronger when the average Hobbit is incapable of seizing the wisdom and reasons behind them. We are fully provided with the necessary food. Actually, if not for the dead load of a lazy and whining Hobbit, we would have already arrived to our next stage. Rush is only due to your ridiculous hope and attempt to escape me and your obligations. Please keep in mind that Chewer, Grumbler, Devourer and Howler would swallow you whole with caraway, if they surprised you grinding around the Hornblower Manor.

The Hobbit had sheepishly to admit that. He tried to come back in the wizard’s good graces:

- «I noted that you would provide for eating and drinking. I simply meant that I had no time to think about the equipment, such as for example a shovel, a rope, a lighter, curtains or a rain-proof cover.»

Gandalf inwardly admitted the reasons of the perceptive Hobbit, who at once noticed that. Gerry maliciously dared to press his advantage:

- «But I suppose that you will also provide for it, when time comes. Please simply tell me where we are heading for, after Thalion. I may not be carried like a package. That would not be… educational!»

Then as a teaching reprisal, Gandalf gave him several chapters of the old history: how the great King had three sons who could not get along and had split up their heritage in three rival kingdoms that competed for control over the large fortress East of Bree. He also told how Rhudaur, the weakest of the three kingdoms, quickly fell under the domination of the Witch-king of Angmar, then how the second kingdom Cardolan - where they stood right now - was devoured too. The wizard somewhat raised Gerry’s attention when Hobbits made their entry into this tale, crossing the Misty Mountains to flee a dark terror: they came by small groups, over several decades, and ended up being so numerous that the King of the last kingdom, Arthedain, had the idea to allot to them the Shire as vassals. But in spite of the wisdom and the exploits of the Kings, the last kingdom was also destroyed by its northern deadly foe.

These epic events somehow hustled in the young Hobbit’s brain, who, like the majority of his fellow Hobbits, had never considered the study of old times but under the genealogical angle. The three hours lesson ended when a red cliff of thirty feet height showed up alongside the road, after a blown sandstone stacking. The sun, though high in the sky, could not heat them. For fifteen minutes, they followed on their left the base of the cliff, which curve revealed the road gradually. On their right, dull falls followed one another, without any vegetation except close-cropped grass and some large thistles. The cliff top appeared to them as an irregular red gray alignment of teeth which sharply drew on the sky’s cobalt blue. As birds had ceased their chipping, a shade fell on the heart of the Hobbit, whose face became pale and attentive to any warning. Gandalf realized that and told him:

- «This defile is one of the places where the troops of Cardolan opposed a hopeless resistance to the hordes of the Witch-king. Here are the tombs of the fallen warriors!»

On the right of the road, the ruins of a house of the Big Folk, built with red material from the cliff, showed signs of a very old abandonment: blackened stones had overlapped with dust and wild grasses had grown there. Gandalf stopped the pony close to the ruins.

- «Here were formerly an inn and a coach station. There in front of us is the only way to the guard tower, that stood above on the cliff and was entirely destroyed. The whole neighborhood appears desert but you should know, young Took, that Men often come here to guard the area. The rangers are the secret Masters of these inhospitable lands. See!»
The wizard showed, apart from the ruined walls, in the middle of what could have been the stables yard, four oblong and polished stones of the same size, aligned on the ground between grasses, and planted in parallel with alternating colors: red, white, red, white.

- « Rangers stride across the country to monitor, guard and to drive the dark things out. They left these signs.

- Do you know how to read them?

- Of course. But rangers teach these signs only to their sure friends. Do not expect me to reveal their meaning to you: you have to prove reliable first.

- Who are the rangers?

- Thus you know nothing about the Dûnedain who ensure the safety of your borders? What do you believe would have occurred to the Shire, during all its years of peaceful idleness, if not for the help of guards to take care, uproot the growing evil, set off the alarm and assist you in the fight at critical times?

- I believed that peace and wealth were the rule for our neighbors… Why do these rangers care for the country?

- Beyond the years of obliterating and anonymous labour, their sense of honor guides them. They feel indebted towards the populations of the old kingdom. Because dark things such as orcs, trolls or ghosts do not know peace and would spread around the Shire to finally destroy it. »

Gerry disfigured Gandalf as if the darkest verses of old legends had embodied in the meadows by this beautiful spring day.

- « But why do they feel indebted to us?

- They descend from the Dûnedain lords and warriors who defended the kingdom in days of old. When the last King disappeared, the few survivors went into hiding, finding a refuge in hidden villages and perpetuating the tradition of guards, generation after generation. »

The young Hobbit felt small and useless. He explored around with apparent detachment, which could not mislead the wizard. Back near the road, he froze in front of a broad opening dug in the cliff wall, which top had dropped to a dozen feet. The entry, framed by two pillars that were carved in the shape of mailchained guards, was surmounted by grass strewn with small white flowers. The opening evoked bitterness and nostalgia. The Hobbit, attracted in spite of him, advanced on the porch and observed inside for a long moment to accustom his eyes to the shadow. Before Gandalf could restrain him, he engaged in the tunnel. Two tombstones alignments bordered the tunnel, that led to a big room, in the center of which a black catafalque supported three stone coffins. Some wells of light gave to the room the look of a large castle of men. The young Hobbit’s imagination flew away - he was galloping besides the knights of old. His head was spinning now. The noble defenders swore protection and courage before battle. Just like their descendants today, they defended for honor and right. The Hobbit’s feeling of uselessness was now turned into some guilt without remedy.

He believed he saw, like in a dream, the last recumbent stone image of the corridor straighten up and reach an imploring hand to him, as if claiming for… He had a quick back move, clutching the golden leaves-cutter in the pocket of his waistcoat with his right hand. He fell backwards and his head hit the opposite tomb stone. His mind struggled for a short time with this knight who accused him of aloofness and theft of the leaves-cutter: “I did not steal it! It was a gift! »
The Hobbit awoke suddenly, rubbed his eyes and noted that he had dreamed on the ground. Gandalf was leaning on him, considering him with concern. A warm orange light irradiated from the wizard’s staff, repelling the ghostly shades around. The Hobbit raised slowly:

- « I had a strange dream…, he said, while making sure the leaves-cutter was at its right place. What happened to me?

- You’ve had a short stunning. Let us go out of here… »

The wizard stood up, turned to the catafalque and sent a short, serious and ceremonious greeting « Nai Eru lye manata[1] ». At once the Hobbit felt light-hearted. He nodded towards the room and turned over from there by the corridor, followed by the heavy steps of Gandalf’s boots and the rattling of his stick on the flagstones. When they were under sunrays, the wizard conceded a sip of hydromel to him and says sharply:

-« Let us leave this place. The signs invite not to delay! »

They immediately took the road again, both disturbed.

- « You spoke while you were stunned… », ventured Gandalf.

The Hobbit seized the side glance of the wizard but avoided it carefully, looking straight in front of him:

- « I do not remember! », lied the Hobbit.

- « This hall was called "Rond Quensanwë", the arch of awareness, continued Gandalf with a thoughtful look. At the time of King Orodreth, it is the place where young Dùnedain of Cardolan withdrew for a night vigil before receiving their weapons and swearing their oath before their King for the laws of the kingdom.

- Do you mean to make a knight out of me?

- This place was famous to reveal the vocations, whether they were warlike, artistic or academic. You did speak about knighthood in the first place… The knights of the King represented him in times of war or peace. They had great privileges but their first duties were uprightness and respect of the laws. Do you dream about knighthood? Or maybe about the cardinal virtues of the knighthood? »

The wizard knowingly led the conversation towards the theme of responsibility for the free creatures, just to see where that would lead them.

- « I do not know exactly », slowly said Gerry, seeming to gather his thoughts uneasily.

From the everchanging maze of his guilty thoughts and memories of shamefull acts, emerged the Hornblower gold leaves-cutter, with a sharp and glowing outline. The Hobbit realized now what this gift deeply implied young Priscilla - the golden ring bore the pride of her entire family line. He assumed without any embarrassment the one-way affection so many young Hobbit-girls gave him, but betraying carelessly Priscilla’s naive trust had been a first, which he could not stand now. This miserable usurpation he authorized by cowardice and comlacency would weigh on him from now on. Unless he would give the ring back to the Hornblower family…

- « I can see now more clearly… that I should not have accepted a gift, however freely granted! », he stated uneasily.
Gandalf was happy it had been so easy for him to bring the Hobbit about topics like his conquests without feelings. Furthermore, Gerry seemed to face his responsibility and to regret his behavior towards young Hobbit-girls! But the wizard deluded himself. He could not realize that one small gold ring worried the Hobbit much more than any of his easy conquests.

.oOo.

[1] May the great creator bless you!
The road goes ever on - Smokescreens

Chapter Summary

Gerry grins and bears a journey with the grey wizard. This might even have turned into a pleasant conversation about the art of smoking pipe-weed, if not for a strange rider on the road...

They silently walked on while a sparse cloudy vault scrolled above them. The road continued straightly on a large grassy and windy shelf. It dropped then rose from one hillock to another, limiting their visibility in a rather random way. Some raptors were hunting voles above the meadows. From time to time, they approached a stone hut, often collapsed, but always neighboring some old field enclosed by low gray stone walls. Several pines thickets with pale green cleared up bunches, broke the monotony of the meadows, that had returned to wilderness. They had just reached the top of a hillock when the wind carried to them the noise of a fierce gallop. Gerry, whose senses seemed to be naturally sharpened in the hostile environment that was “outside the Shire borders”, specified that it was certainly about a single large horse mounted by a Big Folk. His worn face betrayed an anxiety that he could hardly explain:

- « Who can that be?, he asked to be reassured.

- Rangers rather move by foot. Meeting a solitary rider in these desolated areas has become rare. For the time being I prefer caution and stealth. My errand suffers no delay. Follow me! »

Firmly but without precipitating, Gandalf led the Hobbit and the pony under the branches of a pine thicket, leaving no trace on the needles carpet. A few moments later, a black foaming thoroughbred burst on the road at full gallop. To the Hobbit’s great displeasure, the rider slowed his pace down about at the place where they had left the road. Leaned on his mount, he seemed to inspect the ground with attention. But he did not stop. The tall Man, dressed with brown leather and a dark green hooded cloak, spurred his mount with his black boots and resumed the gallop. Gandalf observed him to the following hill, approximately distant of two furlongs. The Hobbit believed, before the rider disappeared behind the knoll, he saw a couple of crows circling above him. Gerry asked again to be reassured:

- « That was certainly nothing, wasn’t, Gandalf? »

Then he realized with dismay that the wizard had made his sword ready, out of the sheath. The answer of the Wise brought him no comfort either:

- « Do not be childish! This man seems to be looking for somebody or something. I hope that it is not you! »

Gerry’s throat tightened: he was probably himself this hunter’s target!

The travellers returned cautiously on the road, gazing and listening. They guided the pony so that it walked on the grass, to avoid letting prints in the mud of the road, as well as the noise of horseshoes on the paving stone. The Hobbit, letting his fear guide his assumptions, imagined that father Hornblower had engaged and sent this armiger to find him and recover his treasure. During several miles, he scanned the neighbourhood without any respite. They finally left the relatively
wooded area where they had been hiding, to reach a naked and less hilly space. The increased visibility reassured the Hobbit: no rider could have dissimulated his mount as far as the eye could see.

The travellers courageously resumed their trip. As the Hobbit’s hunger grew, practical thoughts came back to him. He undertook to complete the wizard’s knowledge about the food practices in the Shire. Thus Gandalf was described the seven daily meals Hobbits granted themselves: an early breakfast at dawn when “jumping from bed”, a second breakfast at full light, lunch just before sun’s zenith, dinner at the beginning of afternoon, tea-time with sun’s decline and supper after night fell. Such habits may seem adapted to the long summer days of labour in the fields, but Hobbits of all professions devoted themselves to it in any season. Still they added, when temperatures or workload justified it, or simply when an opportunity arose, an unspecified number of small snacks!

The wizard, who knew the halflings for quite a long time, was all the same surprised by Hobbit wit for varying food and preparations, conferring on each meal, a special flavor and an individual style, thus renewing the interest of all of them. The Hobbit maliciously added:

- « As far as I am concerned, I consider such a refinement in culinary manners as a feature of civilization! Do you think that the debt of my people towards the King is somewhat reduced? »

Gandalf nodded with satisfaction and a smile. This young Hobbit had wits as quick as his tongue.

- « The Shire has no debt! Let us rather say that some goodwill towards the free people would be appreciated as a token of gratitude, even when it is expressed in a culinary way. But do not try to deceive me while pretending to be yourself! You and me know that, although you drowned your speech in a flood of details, you refered to Hobbit cooking, in hope of getting closer to our next meal. »

Gandalf finally relented on a stop when the sun seemed at its zenith: they halted in a small wind-sheltered pleasant combe. A clear rivulet fed a pond, shaded by small elms and some birches. They let the pony freely wander and fed with restraint - from the Hobbit’s point of view. While Gerry afforded a restoring nap, Gandalf leaned against a large gray rock and observed the road. When their mount had rested, the wizard awoke the Hobbit who, wishing for a clearer mind, drew from a holster a small clay pipe with a rather long stem. He stuffed it ceremoniously, under the amused gaze of the wizard.

- « What a weird instrument, he said, I really have to catch a glimpse! You Hobbits share quite an intriguing habit…

- This is just a pipe from South Farthing! Please do not imagine some ancient wizardry…

- I noticed that these “pipes” - since it is how your people name this invention- are generally built on the model of yours. I had already seen a couple of them before. But could you tell me, I beg you, the origin of this tradition? »

The Hobbit answered eagerly :

- « To start with, Master Gandalf, I shall need your professional competence, he emphatically announced. Please may you proceed to the ignition? »

The wizard, lowered to the rank of a valet appointed with the candles, reluctantly lit the small hearth, and observed with amazement the Hobbit who drew the first puffs while comfortably sat with his back against the rock. He told the story of pipeweed to a very attentive old man, its
discovery by Tobold, Harold’s forefather, the years of research and work about the seedlings and
the art of drying and smoking, while throwing clouds the limpid breeze immediately carried away.
Gandalf questioned:

- « I have observed the leaves on the slopes of Longbottom. I found nothing special about them. What is there so noticeable?

- Now comes a beginner’s question! First of all, it is important not to consider pipeweed as hay, or
dried and prepared cut grass; it is a matter that has character and is befriended with flexibilities and
sciences; by “befriending” I mean “experiencing some very special pleasure”. The place where it is
held, the packing which contains it, the weather, the moment of the day, let alone the season, your
state of mind, everything counts.

- « I begin to understand that your people raised this occupation to the rank of art. What I still do
not get, is the interest you find in the act itself…

- That is the essence of its charm, Gandalf. My pipe sends me tastes full of images Hobbits best
like: a well cultivated land, nicely cut hedges and ditches, a graciously arranged garden. It relieves
me from small immediate worries. It tells me about eternity according to Hobbits.

- This art seems to help sustain one’s pleasant thoughts…

- But that is not all! As soon as you are outside in autumn, well, the tastes seize the pipe: taste of
the pastures alleys and the forest paths, taste of the dead leaves humus that heats our woods large
roots; the perfume of the naked sparkling branches, that sing alone, without birds nor leaves, the
lament of the naked branches in the winter wind. Other splendid tastes come around the pipe, cross
pipe-weed, mix with smoke, and melt on the tongue.

- Thus you smoke while having a walk?

- Often! While traversing the moors, one suckles one’s pipe with small blows, without touching it.
It is not removed any more from the mouth’s corner, it does not weigh any more between the
teeth… But we also smoke after a good meal, at evening fire-side. As far as I’m concerned, the
evening pipe tastes like the roast chestnuts from my childhood, smells like the ethereal savour of
the tales of old, feels like the excitation of an adventurous fantasy in the comfort of my home!

- As a matter of fact, you indulge in a ritual, which finds its roots in a long intimacy with land work
and wellbeing. Especially wellbeing, as far as you are concerned! »

Gerry did not notice the sarcastic remark and continued:

- « My family is proud of having reached the top of that art: smoke rings.

- Here we are! What is that exactly?

- The most common way is, after having filled up one’s mouth with smoke, but without inhaling it,
to wide open one’s jaws. One closes the mouth quickly and slightly, while keeping the round shape
on one’s lips. But you must realise that I may not reveal all my secrets to you. The most skillfull
smokers are very valuable among clubs that compete against each other.

- How do you assess smoker’s skills?

- The effects are with the appreciation of any smoker: to blow chains of quick rounds, or to control
their size and speed, to have them overlap…
- Do you think I may try and blow several smoke rings?

- Don’t even think of it! A pipe is a very personal instrument. I shall choose an appropriate pipe for you wizard as soon as we have the opportunity: long stem and big hearth. I shall also provide you with a choice of pipeweed. And I shall be your smoke ring mentor! »

The Hobbit added maliciously, watching sideways for the wizard’s reaction:

- « You will have to devote steadily, this art is not within everyone’s reach!

- Did I give you the impression of a fickle or careless wizard, Master Smoker? »

They went back on the highway before the end of the pipe. Gerry asked Gandalf the reason for this haste. The wizard, whose hat’s edges were now floating in the wind, answered in a thoughtful way, as in a dream:

-« I must participate in an expedition that should soon be organised. You will come with me. This will be very good for you, and perhaps for your companions… if you can survive it unscathed! »

Gerry did not insist, guessing that his companion’s mood did not lean toward Hobbit insolences. He wondered still if "unscathed" was meant literally or figuratively.

The meadows around them appeared under a less pleasant light: gray clouds had almost entirely covered the sky, and the bees which, a few moments ago, filled up the air with their lively quivering, had sheltered. Striding, Gandalf led Gerry to the end of a large grassy plate.

Near the road, at the very place where it plunged in an immense valley, stood a solitary tree. Hoary and twisted, it seemed folded up on itself, like an old Hobbit, overwhelmed by tests and rheumatisms. Its broad roots sprang far from the trunk, overflowing on the road whose paving stones had burst. Some russet leaves dwelled since last autumn on the two remaining wretched knotty branches. A couple of crows flew past them, then plunged towards the road to the foot of the tree. They landed there, dancing a curious saraband among the worn paving stones. While approaching, the wizard understood the animals had been attracted by a heap of colored stones. With a strong voice, he drove out the crows, which fled eastward with an outraged croak.

Gerry and Gandalf halted under the branches of the oak and leaned to inspect the stones. Man-made, the heap had been dispersed.

- "Was that a hidden message from the rangers? », asked Gerry.

- "That was indeed. I am sure that was a warning but it is all that I can read now. I do not like that. We shall behave more cautiously from now.», Gandalf murmured while scanning the East to see the crows. The road softly inclined and continued straight to the foggy bottom of the valley ahead. Large slate-gray clouds slipped by now above their heads. The stone walls around them howled at the rhythm of the most violent gusts of wind.

- "Here is the Gwathlo basin, the Shadowy River of Hobbits. This land was once covered with a thick forest, dense and wild. But the Men of the sea took more and more from its woods, the building materials of their immense fleets. There remain only some scattered masses on the plain, that today’s men especially use for hunting.

- The remaining trees now seem no more than stumps!” Gerry pointed out as he was leaning against the old oak.
The wizard, who was scanning afar, came back abruptly to close reality:

- « Life sometimes hides dormant where it seems to have given up, Gerry. Let us leave this place! »

Then they went precipitately down the road, pursued by threatening clouds. The two travellers could run only a little more than one mile before having to find a shelter in a half-collapsed sheep-fold. A thin but penetrating slanting rain soaked them to the bones until Gandalf raised the roof of broken down boards by supporting it with a wormeaten beam. They did their best with the hut’s primitive comfort: they afforded a sip of hydromel each, and Gandalf managed to cook a hot meal, drawing from his concealed reserves.

This evening the odd fumaroles Gandalf got from his matches competed with the Hobbit’s smoke rings: cats jumped above full moons, ballerinas danced on horses running through circles, suns blazed on glorious cities...

.oOo.
At the sign of the drunken goose - The usher

Chapter Summary

Gerry confronts Big Folk and foreign lands for the very first time

The following day, it was raining cats and dogs but the wind had fallen. Long and sticky liquid cords fell down on the country, limiting the visibility to a few steps. The Hobbit felt very miserable and “out of place” in a sense, as if he was inappropriate but in the four farthings. The rain in the Shire had always seemed to him at its right place at the right moment. But this downpour hampering their trip crystallized the wilderness adversity and the elements hostility. He put on a brave showing and strode the ten miles to the next stage, without almost complaining.

As they advanced, the liquid pearls curtain revealed signs of Human activity: bleats of ewes seeking their lambs under the beating rain, growing cereal furrows, a lit farm, a barn sheltering some fatty pigs and an etic horse. The exhausted pony, whose left hind leg slightly limped, was thus somehow perked up. Crossing a liquid and opaque curtain, the road ended abruptly at a coarse palisade, which door hung on the side.

The travellers went forth and crossed a vast streaming paved place, to reach a stone gate at the side of an immense building, that had seen better days. It seemed the rebuilt remainders of a large castle of men, with square corner-towers, once powerful and proud, but which now hardly exceeded second floor. The masonry mixed stones and bricks, and the crenels ended in pitched roofs. A green sign hung above the entry arch, bearing a white poultry that showed obvious unbalance. Two crows had perched on the sign and observed them, one with great interest, the other with mischievousness. They nimbly flew away when the Hobbit seized a stone.

Gandalf struck the door’s studded oak with his staff, while his hat and shoulders dripped with water.

- « Here we are at the inn of the Drunken Goose, in the village of Thalion, formerly fair town and summer residence of kings… sighed the wizard, It is time to show Hobbits good education, Master Took! »

After minutes of obstinating quietness, only beaten by the regular flow from the blocked tiles gutter, the wizard repeated his call, having the black steel hinges groan. A wavering flame revealed the disrepair, by lighting the top of the door, corroded by bad weather, the bottom eroded by mosses and many other interstices, while heavy steps resounded under the entry vault.


- « Travellers seeking shelter for an evening not meant to let a Hobbit outside! », answered Gerry on a clear and childish tone.

An inquisitory but frightened eye scanned from a broad hole in the door.

-« Can't you cater for two honest, inoffensive and refrigerated travellers? », said Gandalf, openly resting on his staff. He massaged his flank while having coins tinkle in the leather purse hanging at his belt.
They heard unlocking bolts noises, then a tired “ho-ho” when the gatekeeper withdrew the beam that barred the door. They finally entered the shelter and snorted. Beyond the entry vault, they stood shortly under the rain again before reaching the stables. The gatekeeper was in fact an old stable boy, dressed with light trousers too large for him and a worn green blouse. While the travellers passed in front of him, he scraped his cranium under his dark hood, with an air of disbelief - his jaw hanging three inches long. Gerry realized then, how strange they certainly seemed: the appearance of the wizard was very different from that of the other men, let alone his garb. As for Gerry, he may have been regarded as a child, at worst as a goblin. Relieved by reaching a shelter, he now felt the need to be even smaller than he was.

The stable old man took care of the pony and carried them out in a large room, undoubtedly a former guards room, just on the left when entering the castle yard. Weapons racks had been converted into mangers. In a corner a huge sow wallowed, surrounded by a dozen fighting piglets. Two thin cows, dowagers of the domain, were idly chewing their straw, beside two donkeys and an enormous draught horse. The stable man accommodated Gerry’s pony in a broad stall, near two beautiful dark coat horses, which equipment had been cleaned and hung at wooden shelves. Gerry asked for an oat portion in addition to the usual fodder and liberally bribed the old man, who thanked him with an emphatic but sincere “Let me thank thou for a thousand times, my small lord”.

Gandalf had insisted on being given a locking room.

- « As usual, Master Usher. You certainly remember my previous visit? ”, said Gandalf, aging his voice and softening his glance as much as he could. The old stable man straightened with an offended look :

- « We remembered thou perfectly coming sometime. Thou mustered many a footpad and twice a cut-throat who attacked thour door until annihilating it to the ground. Under a-like conditions, our key thus serves for nothing… just lose a good door…

- This time we came without any pursuer. You know that at my age, one needs a little privacy… »

Thus the travellers were led above the entry vault, by a wooden staircase built in the angle of the main building. Gerry was probably one of the rare Hobbits who had already slept in height: seducers were to adapt to all kinds of circumstance, such as “elven platforms”. He objected only rhetorically. The room, walled with naked, clean though a little wet masonry, was sparingly furnished: four beds, two armchairs, a large studded wood coffer. The slightly grumbling servant lit both candlestick and brazier, then cast with a quavering voice a tirade long memorized and resumed with some approximations:

- «The company seated in the grand hall of the hosts of our Sign of the Drunken Goose would certainly ravish to hearing news from so distinguished travellers! »

The old man withdrew with dignity, as would have, at the time of the castle’s splendor, the eminent royal usher, whom he might have been an offspring. Gerry whispered, enthusiastic but discrete:

- « This majordomo seems to come straight from the memories of a royal court! Did one speak this way at that time?

- Master Gigolet’s syntax is somehow exotic, but his expressions remind me of a time when the lackeys fought to come here along with their lords, so famous were the food and the rejoicings!

- But he seems so… outmoded! Does he not feel out of his time or useless?
- You would prove quite cruel and vain to blame him for that! But do not rely on his looks! Master Gigolet has a talent which you do not foresee. A dead tree still makes a good frame.\[1\] His memory reaches beyond the beginning of his own life! It is the function of old people, to provide the frame of the young lives which build around them. »

Gandalf reminded of a remote time:

- « You will certainly note that here in Thalion still survives for a time the memory of more splendid periods. We are lucky: tomorrow is the day of the large market of the season. You will admire the place in its full glare. Several merchants from Tharbad still gather convoys and come here for the fair. Will you benefit from this opportunity to do errands for us in the city?

- According to my father, I was not born for trade…

- But what were you born for?, interrupted Gandalf sarcastically. That would be kind to help me with that request. I need to glance ahead the wilderness. Moreover, I think of motivating you by recalling that we shall need quality equipment in the deserted regions. Here is a liability letter issued by your father for that purpose.

- That is settled, then. You can count on me. », answered Gerry, while he took the letter Gandalf handed to him, pretending resignation and concealing his thoughts of fleeing back to the Shire.

As soon as they finished grooming, Gerry went down to the yard while Gandalf locked the heavy door. The staircase emerged at the base of the main building, the upper floors of which had been destroyed above the second. The Hobbit was reading his liability letter when he got at the bottom of the stairs and stopped: a perch\[2\] in front of him, a big man was taking fresh air, sheltered from rain by the sloped ceiling’s edge. Leant against the wall, the man with an aquiline profile and a moustache observed the half-light on the other side of the yard and seemed to wait for something, with his arms crossed. His wet boots shone under the dark cape he was cloaked in.

Suddenly the man, surprised by the Hobbit’s presence, turned his unpleasant and smirky face towards him. He seemed irritated as if he had been interrupted in the middle of a crime, and emitted a short and acute whistle, which aroused Gerry’s suspicion. He put the letter hastily in his inside pocket. This man gave him the impression of a ruffian in search for petty thieving. The man quickly uncrossed his arms and drew aside his rider’s coat, as if ready to unsheath a weapon. He was fatty but strongly built. His jaded glance betrayed an absence of scruples and an unshakeable determination. At least this was the way the Hobbit read his features. Such a fellow would stop at nothing in order to complete a mission conferred by an angry father or a cheated owner. In addition to his shady behavior and his aggressive attitude, Gerry suspected this trooper came from the lord of the manor in the South farthing, and he could not help staring worried and inquisitive looks.

The man on the other hand was furious at having been caught by a child. He did not know about Hobbits and his mission was quite different. Then the wizard appeared, carrying a lantern at the end of his staff. Gerry relaxed and the man mastered himself. Gandalf walked ahead of Gerry who followed him with relief. In the wizard’s back, the ruffian threw a threatening gaze to the Hobbit, as a criminal would try to impress a child and force him to conceal what he knows.

Gerry, who had only suspicion and impressions, had nothing to say, but the attitude of the man frightened him and he quickened his pace behind the wizard.

The travellers entered the main building, after a flight of worn pink marble steps. The immaculate black wood of the antique double door was speckled with a circle of thin silver stars. The suspicious Hobbit kept an eye on the ruffian. Whereas the heavy door was slowly closing back, he foresaw a second man, also cloaked in dark, running to the ruffian’s side from the yard’s depths.
His suspicions were confirmed, but he had no opportunity to talk to Gandalf.

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NOTES

[1] « L’arbre mort fait encore une bonne charpente. » Paul Claudel

[2] Imperial unit length of 6 feet.
At the sign of the drunken goose - Singing at the inn

Chapter Summary

Gerry fancies hobbit's gall at the inn of Thalion.

The immense room extended under four arched vaults, which all rested on the same central pink sandstone pillar. Massive and furnished candelabra lighted the center of the room. The candles released a tallow flaring smell and a black smoke which added to the thick volutes escaping from the enormous chimney, which poor draught clouded the room. Large logs finished consuming there, where a sheep oozed and crackled on a big pin.

A kitchen boy with a round and jovial figure turned the pin. His hair which seemed of chestnut wool was covered with a cook’s cap. Seeing the travellers at the entry, he entrusted the pin to the care of a big and half-bald man, with a scarry face and a sagacious glance. His worn white shirt, surprisingly cut, betrayed an adventurer who had stridden many dangerous paths. The assistant-cook wiped his bloody hands with a big rag, slipped it into his immense leather apron that shone with fat, and seized the pin. The kitchen boy, however rather plump, made a few hopping steps while readjusting his yellow jacket under his white apron. His red and attentive face adorned with a broad smile, as he inclined to greet the new-comers:

- « Good evening to you both, dear guests! What a pleasure to accomodate such distinguished visitors! Hobbegar Grubb, owner, at your service! Welcome at the Drunken Goose. Master Gandalf, what can I do for your convenience? You would certainly wish for rooms, but you are already installed in your favorite attic, I guess? And then anything for supper? This way please…»

Gerry’s surprise was even with his rapture: the landlord was a Hobbit. Rather tall for one of the little folk, he enjoyed a cook’s plumpness and showed a jovial good-natured cordiality. The young Took immediately felt home. The uneasiness he had experienced before entering disappeared immediately. The Hobbit, “of a mature stature” like is said near Frogmorton, led them to a table in the center of the room, in plain sight for anyone. He wiped it clean and laid out a high stool for Gerry and an armchair for Gandalf.

There were gathered two dozen people, mainly men. Peasants and poor twisted wretches were talking placidly with craftsmen, recognizable by the tools hanging at their belt. Most wore farmers or labourers clothings, adapted to work of this time of the year: trousers under a gown, sometimes wooden clogs, a thick decorated tunic, the hood of which was taken back for now. A bunch of townsmen wore dresses, sober by the colors but elaborate by the cut, faded but neat. Most stood heating in front of the hearth, conversing and clutching their beer pitchers. Worthy and cordial, all obviously lived in the village or its immediate surroundings and could not help staring at the Hobbit duet. Gandalf however did not lose his composure:

- « Would you please fetch lamb, cheese, a loaf, and… do you still have this wonder you served the last time I came, master Hobegar?

- Do you mean my wife and cooker’s great speciality, her famous cabbage soup? This is your lucky day, Master Gandalf! »

The wizard rocked in his armchair and took his hat off.
- « Here you will feel just like in your old family smial, Gerry. Oh, Master Hobegar, please do not forget a beer pitcher for my young friend and a little wine for me! »

The landlord inclined and went in the kitchen where he seemed to parley lengthily, then went back to his business behind his counter, laid on three beer barrels.

A little further away, three Dwarves ate silently - which is without pronouncing any word, but the utensils, their chewing and their swallowing, without forgetting their belches of satisfaction, made as much noise as a forging mill in full activity! Their richly coloured clothings, the redbrown leather of their belts and boots, the gloss of the weapons pointing out large bags resting at their side, contrasted with the modesty of the inn. On the other side, face-to-face at an isolated table, the two men from the entry, cloaked and equipped in an almost similar way of soiled dark green tunics, soberly ate the dishes which seemed to await them when they returned to sit at their table. They argued with each other with a low voice, the biggest sending from time to time a glance that seemed like a warning to Gerry. The slob came to understand that our Hobbit, who was no longer a child, could well be more than he had thought, as he was protected by a wizard... At last a wretch, sat at a poorly lit table at the bottom of the room, swallowed great gulps of soup while soaking his bread.

But the crowdly and cordial environment dissipated the Hobbit’s fears and diverted him from the unsavoury man. When the owner brought to the travellers a board covered with juicy lamb slices, Gerry rose and indulged with the rite of Hobbits formal presentations. Under the amused looks of Gandalf, the two Hobbits, upright face to face, exchanged the customary civilities and courtesies with many bows:

- « Hobbegar Grubb, from the good town of Thalion, I am here to serve you!

- Gerontius Took, from Tuckburoughs, at your service!

- I took the liberty to heat some flageolets to complement your lamb: my wife cooked them this midday.

- Thanks a thousand times for this, to your wife and yourself. May I ask you whether you are related to the Grubb from Grubburrow? We are second cousins by my mother’s third sister, who married Guilhob Grubb, one of the great-grandsons of the famous OldGrubb. It is him who changed his name when he arrived in West Farthing.

- See how funny this is! My mother was always uncertain about her grandfather’s origin! Because he never left any written act bearing his name’s spelling. But I must tell you first that I bear my mother’s name because my father had to dissimulate his. Here how it happened, etc. »

Gerry served himself flageolets, ate and re-served himself liberally from the tureen and the board of sliced leg, while continuing the conversation. Gandalf had to impose himself to collect his part, but did not manage to meddle in the verbal exchange. The locals made circle around the travellers table; even the Dwarves stopped to observe this peculiar genealogical chat. The two foreigners remained in private conversation, while shaking their darkskin faces and smoothing their brown moustache. The two Hobbits talking slowly slipped toward the actions of South Farthing, without them showing the least sign of disinterest or tiredness. When the landlord showed curious about Gerry’s presence away from the Shire, Gandalf interposed:

-« I usually answer those who ask for the reason why of my tos and fros: That I well know what I flee, but not what I seek.[11] »

The Hobbit understood that he had better avoid too precise a reason, and mumbled a vague
matrimonial disagreement.

The big cook with a leather apron brought the remainder of the supper. A chorus of praises welcomed the cabbage soup, which had a great success. The cooker, Mrs Grubb, a solid but still fresh Hobbit-Woman, was eager to meet the travellers and particularly the young Mr. Took. She made an appearance for the second soup recall, then slipped away to clean up her kitchen. One of the locals, a solid and pale arched herdsman, asked for news from Bree and the north. Gandalf, first satisfying his curiosity, afterwards led the conversation to the local news.

The Dwarves, once stuffed, were enlisted to tell the assembly about news from Dunland. The Hillmen were somewhat agitated, denouncing former trade agreements with the Dwarves. The fact is these two people had always been at daggers drawn about the usufruct of various mines. Old resentments sometimes reappeared suddenly. In any case such was not the disagreement which opposed them now, since the people of Dùrin[2] forged their weapons, almost only from the ore extracted by the hillmen. It was quite rare now that subtle craft would be required from them, such as repairing some old jewel. Thus the Dwarves concern concentrated now on the opportunity of other outlets for trade of tools and weapons along the greenway. But these business attempts had not revealed very profitable until now. The Dwarves also reported dark events from beyond the Misty Mountains, the wilderness where dragons committed bloody atrocities. The assembly did not openly laugh at such twaddles, but all the same listened to these accounts with some discreet smiles, under the sharp-edged and sagacious glance of the wizard.

The travellers enjoyed their evening at the sign of the Drunken Goose, in spite of Gerry’s anguishes, he had driven back for now. A dyer from the area, who “had his letters” and kept the memory of small local legends, told a tale of a remote time. It was about an old dowager, great-aunt of the King of Cardolan of that time, who had found no husband worthy of her and dwelt in Thalion castle, seldom visited by her nephew’s court. On a winter’s evening, during which loneliness had ached more than usually, a landless knight happened to ride this way and ask for hospitality. These were happier times: the rider, who held high his gray hair and hunting spear, was welcomed with great fanfare. His company was so pleasant to the dowager at supper-time, that before the end of the evening, the rarest bottles had been emptied. The knight pitched on his chair while trying to preserve his noble capacity, while the sweating dowager got rid of her veils to reveal a neck she believed charming but that was way too long and slender. After the meal, the poor old lady, whose faded charms had hardly touched the gentleman’s heart, showed at her balcony, in hopes of a romantic night serenade. But the knight whirred in his room, while the dowager took cold and was to confine to bed. The following day the surroundings were taunting the unfortunate drunken goose exposed on her balcony by a winter evening. The popular belief in Thalion assures this is the origin of the name of the first inn, that later opened on town square. Obviously this name was used again when the aforementioned inn was transferred into the deserted and ruined castle, years later.

The quaint tale and the colourful art of the storyteller delighted the visitors. The assembly rustled with news and gossip, to which Gerry gave only half his attention, contrary to Gandalf who did not lose a bit of it. Mrs. Grubb joined the company at the end of the service. She found young Mr. Took neat and proper, as she had expected, and asked, to please him and her guests, if he would sing some new tune from Tuckborough. The young Hobbit, whom his third beer had completely freed from his prejudices against this remote, obscure and outdated village, sang a joke of his own on a well-known tune:

*It was raining and winding*
On the trail to the village
Kitty was trotting
While weeping he said:

Refrain: « Would you give, Oh please
Give me a bowl of milk creaming
To dip my little muzzle in
A big bowl of milk steaming »

Goupil the elder fox
Wandering around asked
“What about a duck steak?
I have got one in that box! »

<Refrain>

Little Kitty, small pretty cat
Good milk I have not
But follow me so that
I show where you can find a pot

<Refrain>

Sly Goupil in the wood
Lets kitten alone for good
Near a homely cot
Meowed the poor little cat

<Refrain>
Good old Father Appelstraw

When petty Kitty saw

Said: « how dare you bad! »

But finally kept petty lad.

The assistance applauded, and particularly Mrs. Grubb, whose mother’s instincts had been awoken by Gerry’s cat-like mimicry! Gandalf could not prevent the Hobbit cock from bragging and actuaing the fool. After several ditties in the same vein which made him thirsty, Gerry, encouraged with success, was prancing on a table, a pint of beer in his hand. He was singing drinking tunes, the refrains of which the assembly core sang along. The Dwarves, overheated by drink and taken away by the merry atmosphere, supported each other not to roll to the ground and beat the rhythm - more or less - with their boots. The two foreigners themselves, a pint in hand, had mixed with the company, their face jeering, their glances alert and their moustache full of foam.

But Gerry’s euphoria kept him beyond any threat. The Hobbit achieved ovation after success. He engaged in a rather saucy lovesong that he mimed with an accomplished talent. At the moment Beauty was indulging in a romantic kiss with the Hero, Gerry, leaning to her imaginary lips and handicapped by his plenty of beer, rocked and winded up flat on his bottom on the floor. The assistance burst in a unanimous laughter. Gandalf gazed at him with exasperation, while Mrs Grubb motherly and compassionately winked at him.

The Hobbit, confusingly feeling guilt, tried to collect his thoughts and his scattered belongings, when he realized the liability letter and the leaves-cutter ring had slipped out of his bracket when he fell. Nervously, he surreptitiously searched under the satin of his waistcoat to position it back but he perceived an intense inquisition in the foreigner’s dark glance, just opposite him. The slob’s crimson face betrayed renewed attention: obviously, this young lad held important documents and valuable items...

Meanwhile Gerry took this interest for an irrefutable proof that this man pursued him by the order of master Hornblower, about this ill-gotten leaves-cutter ring. Feeling caught, his mind, numbed by beer, was subjugated by the threatening presence of the large man. His heavy head, cluttered with all his little untrue oaths, his coward’s abandonments, his guilty escapes and other petty larcenies, he reddened in front of all the company, but he felt alone under the accusing stranger’s gaze. The tall man, with brown hair pulled back into a ponytail, played with the guard of a short sword hanging at his black leather belt. During several seconds Gerry underwent the influence of this relentless glance, without being able to move.

Feeling a numbed mouth and an awkward hand, the Hobbit arranged the letter and the ring in the silk bracket of his waistcoat. He could at last shake and get up, but his gait was unsteady. The foreigner stepped back, his traits bearing a hardly contained concupiscence. Gandalf well realized that the Hobbit was subjugated, but he blamed this stupefied air on beer. He considered better to claim for the Hobbit’s tiredness. He dragged away a piteous, thoughtless and ravaged Gerry. He cordially saluted the company, which greeted them back with ironic smiles, and followed the owner, who preceded them to second floor with a lantern.
Michel de Montaigne

Dùrin is the father of the house of the Longbeards and the elder of the seven Dwarven tribe fathers.
At the sign of the drunken goose - hangover

Chapter Summary

Gerry wonders who might be sleeping next to him

The cock had sung for a few hours when Gerry raised a heavy eyelid. The hunger alone had drawn him from the brewery limbo. As a veteran of mornings after reunions and rejoicings, he prudently probed the other side of the bed, without finding there the usual soft compromising presence. He was astonished by that. The distant and strange ceiling drew his attention: large oaken beams covered with a network of planks which themselves supported tiles. This incongruity completed to awake him - a Big Folk roof! -, then memory flooded back to him. Feeling a thick and awkward tongue, he washed a bit in the room’s basin. His spirit somehow cleared, he realized that Gandalf was nowhere to be seen any more. For a moment, a frivolous hope of escape rose above the certainty of unpleasant complications, before being firmly driven out and surviving in his subconscious. On the pedestal table the Hobbit found a letter on behalf of the wizard, written in his firm but elegant hand:

« My dear Gerry,
You already have the bill that your father had entrusted to me. That will enable you to acquire what appears to be missing for our tour. Choose - for two please - covers, fabrics and small items of linen, just as shovels, cords, lighter, lamps, etc. Could you also provide for food for eight days - waybread, salted meat and dry fruits?
I shall join you in the evening after an errand that cannot wait. By then I entreat you not to give to anyone the opportunity to harm you. Moreover I beg you to accept as your own brother and sister, the Hobbit couple who accommodated us and who always treat me with great kindness.
Gandalf
P.S. – You may trust the old Finran, the farrier and blacksmith; The other tradesmen are not known to me.
P.P.S – The reputation of your family will give you credit but will cause covetousness. You show cautious!
P.P.S.S – Big Folk, unlike Hobbits of the Shire, show very variable mood and morality. You hold quiet and do not draw the attention! Remember that it is not enough to have wits. It is still necessary to have enough, in order to avoid having too much.
G.»

The Hobbit did not appreciate the tone of the letter: this paternalist condescension seemed to him to exceed the role of adviser he had begun to accept from the wizard. Eager to take advantage of Gandalf’s reckless absence, he joined the courtyard of the inn. But the wooden steps descent reminded him of the unpleasant encounter the day before and at the same time gave him back a little common sense. Perhaps the wizard submitted him to a test, to evaluate his docility? He should play this tight and not flee headlong...

Any threat from dark strangers had for the time vanished under the pale sun that greeted him on the steps. Then he discovered what the previous day’s beating rain had hidden from him: indeed the inn was built in the enclosure of an old Big Folk castle, it filled a whole wing of which, in addition to the ground floor and the only remaining second floor of the keep. The wing facing the door of
the large hall had partly collapsed: a breach in the enclosure had been filled with awkwardness to protect the yard. The art of old had unfortunately been lost... Immediately on the right of the breach a farrier held his shop, announced by the merry tinklings of a forging mill. Opposite the entry vault, a baker was finishing laying out her husband’s morning batch, and scolded some kids. One of them fled with some brioches stolen from the stall, by a small postern next to the shop. Finally on the last wing, in the extension from the keep, the old apartments of the manor lords, transformed into warehouses, sheltered the bales of hay, the salting barrels and the seeds stores of the small community.

At the center of the yard, that measured about half an acre, Mrs Grubb was crunching on the crank of a well. As she indulged him with a smirk but a lenient glance, Gerry gallantly took her place for this heavy labour. He filled the bucket with clean water and brought it in the kitchen. As a reward for his gentleHobbit elegance he was entitled with a copious lunch.

As he expressed his astonishment to find Hobbits apart from the Shire, the cooker, while preparing his omelette, told him the vexations her husband had experienced, how he was driven out of his place, without the support of his family who recognized him as a robber. That was old history, now Hobbegar was respected, but he had had to work a dozen years to refund for the litigation, and never again he would agree to return in the Shire.

As far as Mrs Grubb was concerned, she had experienced rejection and loneliness. After her parents’ death in a smial collapse in Scarry, she was left all alone, too old to be placed with her remote poor family, and not yet “in her majority”. She worked at the inn of the crossbows bridge, and met a young Hobbit. He said he came from Bree-land, but was only a wanderer from outside the borders. Forced to leave Buckland with her very young son, she tried to find her seducer in Bree, but he was known there only for his larcenies. She ended up at Thalion, where the master farrier and once landlord, Finran, took her in. Thanks to him she met Hobbegar who married her and the couple dealt with the inn of Thalion.

Never had Gerry been confronted with the injustices of the Hobbit society that usually maintained strong family bonds. The Shire quite simply expelled the undesirable elements. He promised himself to be concerned by the unfortunate in the Shire, when he would be Thain, but he immediately had to face the obvious: he could right now achieve what lay within his immediate capacity, and stop compromising these young Hobbit-girls who were nothing to him. He sincerely felt sorry for Evarista Grubb, who did not hide that she had married by convenience.

Somewhat disturbed by this straightforward and intimate revelation, Gerry behaved as a gentle-Hobbit and enquired of her children, particularly of the son she had brought with her. The small Hobbit had been taken on as a cooper’s apprentice near Brandy-Hall, but still no child had blessed the union of Evarista and Hobbegar. Deeply moved, Gerry wished her luck and gave her support, asserting awkwardly that “Life sometimes hides dormant where it seems to have given up”, and changed subject abruptly.

Mrs Grub, tearful but grateful for the traveller’s attention, told him about the counters, where to change his liability letter: in addition to Hobbegar her husband, only an itinerant usurer, who was precisely downtown today, was able to provide him with “coins of the king”. Gerry proved tactful not to consult the usurer. He yielded his letter to Master Grub, who granted to him the exceptional rate of on per twenty of interest. It is true that already at that time, an acknowledgement of debt from the Thain of the Shire was indisputable. Gerry, as a prudent trader, borrowed an old jacket from Mr. Grubb and passed it over his silk waistcoat.
Gerry wakes up alone and gets an opportunity to run away.

Thus dressed like a simple business-Hobbit, but with a tidy sum in his pocket, Gerry crossed the castle’s yard up to Master Finran’s workshop. The lively melody of the hammer on the anvil slowed down then stopped when the Hobbit came into the shop. Although daylight flooded by the carriage door and some arrow slits, it took a few moments for Gerry to get accustomed to the thin gleam projected by the red-glowing embers of the blacksmith. Coal and burned ground smells tickled the Hobbit’s nose whereas overheated puffs swept his face.

Finran, sweating in this choking heat, bellowed and buried metal parts in the hearth and then turned to Gerry while readjusting his leather apron. The big man advanced with a smile, which on his half-paralysed and scarred face, drew a rather threatening grin. Sweat streamed in rivulets from his bald head. He fetched a rag and mopped as he shook the Hobbit’s hand. Gerry called upon all his strength of character to remember that this man had Gandalf’s trust, and not to flee this former warrior, covered with obvious ancient battle-scars.

- « Good Morning, Master Holbytla », said the man with a peculiar accent, while knotting his long ash-blond hair at the back of his head. « Do you worry for your poney? »

Gerry realized that his companion was there, blocked with an uplifted forefoot. He marvelled at Gandalf’s ingenuity in spite of a genuine irritation: the wizard had found a way to immobilize him in Thalion while he was away... The farrier resumed his work by flattering the animal’s neck:

- « He’s a good chap, sweet and obeying. Furthermore I took some precautions and used adapted argument! », he said laughing.

Some carrot tops scattered on the ground in front of the pony testified the farrier’s trick.

- « You know that you do not have anything to fear, here, my Gilles… », whispered the Hobbit by cherishing the nose of the animal.

The pony put its muzzle in the Hobbit’s neck, obviously anxious about the treatment he was to undergo.

- « How is Gilles? »

- He has no wounded limb, good gracious! One of his hooves was damaged by running on paving stones. No defect of balance either, although he very slightly paddles out.

- What do you mean?

- The horse paddles out when its foreleg describes a circle towards outside, particularly at trot: it puts forth its leg towards the side, by a rotational movement of the knee or fetlock.

- Is it serious?
- Not for him. It used to be very rare and regarded as a defect because it was often associated with the knock knees, but it became rather common now among the horses of Eriador. But your Gilles does not have knock knees, and he is in perfect health. We only will give him two new pairs of shoes.

- How much will cost me this fancy gift?

- Nothing at all! I am in debt with Master Gandalf!

- Do you know each other well?

- We used to hunt trolls together a long time ago. I owe him my life… several lives! »

The reference to trolls was not to the liking of the Hobbit - too much alike these terrifying family tales that from time to time cost a femur or even the cranium to some ancestor - thus he kept the conversation on the topic of the wizard.

- « Tell me everything about Gandalf! »

For a moment the giant blacksmith considered the Hobbit with a doubtful and resentful grin:

- « Are you ready for such revelations, I wonder. Master Holbytla, I suggest you should ask him yourself what you wish to know. What I can say to you, is that he never forgets his friends… nor his enemies by the way. », he added with a rather sinister smile.

The farrier took his clippers back, took a horseshoe from the furnace and resumed his merry din while struggling on the horn of his anvil. After a few minutes, sweating again, he put the red horseshoe onto fire and the Hobbit asked him whether he could show him some tools and weapons that would fit his size. They found a shovel and a small wood axe, that a Hobbit could use. Finran promised to sharpen them but advised him, for the weapon he sought, to contact the Dwarves who rested at the inn.

-« I have no steel of superior quality to forge good weapons. I can make a temporary repair, but my hearth is not hot enough for a proper war smithwork. »

The Hobbit assisted the blacksmith while he shoed the sheepish and nervous pony. Then he left the craftsman to pay a “courtesy visit” to the neighbouring bakery. He quickly realized that his exploits of the previous night were known throughout town: in spite of his camouflaged getup, he was immediately recognized and welcomed with curiosity and eagerness: "Ah, here you are! What can I do for your service, young Mr Took? ». He ordered six waybreads, in addition to several salted tortas and some delicacies and paid the whole at once. The breads, which were to be baked twice, would only be ready the next morning at dawn.

.oOo.

Gerry, warned by this first try, mustered his courage and left the castle enclosure. You can imagine his surprise in front of the pitiful spectacle of this old royal summer residence: beyond the few true houses which bordered the paved square in front of the castle gate, hardly thirty thatched cottages were pressing inside a stone and wood palisade. Beyond, some huts sheltered refugees and several herds. Thus the coaching town of Thalion that Gandalf had praised, city of fair for a score of miles around, had become this small borough which fought for its survival…

Gerry ventured on the plaza and was at once surrounded by squawking children. Among them he recognized the hirsute mug of the pilferer, the bakers bane, and he brought simultaneously his hands to the Hornblower father’s treasure and his purse, to protect them from any accidental
alleviation. The young imp casted an interested glance over him but seemed to think otherwise and moved away. The Hobbit managed to disperse the rascals by distributing sugar refineries acquired to bakery, and started to stroll on the plaza, crowded with carts, tents and barges.

His senses were overwhelmed by a profusion of colors, fragrances, cries praising various products, cooking fumes which hustled on the town square. Craftsmen had assembled their foldable workbenches on the bare paving stones and carried out minor repairs the inhabitants could not deal with. From hamlets nearby, several farmers had come to sell their products, often making original and tasty dishes out of them. Needless to say, our Hobbit honored many of these culinary initiatives, without discrimination, since the aromas excited his curiosity.

The house-fronts of the town-square flaunted their out of date splendour. Worked beams were regularly maintained with natural varnishes, and colors refreshed with local dyes. The front of the tailor’s place exposed some bright attires but his workshop did not sell anything but utility clothes; to survive, the great-grandfather of the current owning tailor also had to become a weaver, but he jealously preserved the know-how of his predecessors. The drugs shop formerly sold subtle compositions from extreme-Harad. Now the herbalist survived by distilling himself remedies and perfumes, with local products. Times were hard but the craftsmen of Thalion preserved, like a talisman ennobling their days, the memory of past glories and the lore of their ancestors.

Gerry experienced the whole range of the Big Folk reactions about the contrast between his adult capacities and his child size: jaded disbelief, renewed surprise, diligent distrust, respectful distance, patronizing mockery… For a few minutes, he made quite an impression among housewives who came to the market, then from time to time groups of children led by an adult came and contemplated “the other halfling”.

« Although Thalion is only two or three days march from Sarn ford, the immense majority of its inhabitants never leave their village », thought Gerry.

The insulation of the communities made them ignorant and vulnerable. Neglecting their immediate neighbors, their customs and habits, their aspirations and their fears, they would end up forgetting that they shared a need for safety and alliance, for exchanging goods and know-how.

After a few minutes he could move around the stalls without being stared at too openly. He explored tents and carts, being on several occasions nearly trampled by panicked animals or indifferent herdsmen. Gerry began touring the cattle merchants. His mount being locked, he needed another to return to the Shire. But he realized that the only available horses were for work in the fields or carrying -too big and too slow for him.

Although the townsquare was less wealthy than Bywater’s marketplace, for example, he noticed that some of the articles had not reached the Shire yet: unknown aromatics and exotic spices shared the stalls with local condiments. Paradoxically, the Hobbits irrepressible taste for “nice fine dishes” did not stress any kind of culinary curiosity, even if chance and need had sometimes supported gastronomical adoptions. About this particular topic, Gerry certainly proved an exception.

Luxury fabrics also seemed more varied than in the Shire. During the feastdays in Hobbiton, young Hobbit ladies wore discreet embroidered bonnets and traditional cross-stitched, brightly white aprons on their sharp colored dresses. On the other hand, in Thalion, young women, and even their elder, competed with wit and imagination to emphasize expensive but small pieces of fabrics with moire colours or rich textures, which came from afar. The Big Folk could not allow the true luxury any more, but they managed to keep bits from it and did not give it up completely.

Gerry sized up the rise and the decline of the Dûnedain civilization through the habits of their
descendants in Eriador: the immemorial notion of the good, the beautiful and the true survived at any cost, sometimes born again from its ashes. Only the most prestigious and richest families of the Shire - and particularly the Took - afforded a certain clothing extravagance, like Gerry’s satin waistcoats. But the Big Folk of Thalion had preserved a true passion for jewels: Women wore them, Men admired them, this revived the memory of the kingdom of old.

At the ground floor of one of the town square houses, he found Thalion’s weaver. There, after choosing a travel overcoat, that the master dressmaker fitted from a Dwarf cape, he bought covers and good quality wax-cloths. He supplemented his purchases with linen for an adult man and a ten years old child, which would certainly suit him, and had the whole delivered for him at the inn.

Gerry spent hours on town square, observing the Big Folk and inhaling the market’s fragrances. There he crossed Evarista who had come to buy venison, and gave him a discreet smile, wise but knowing. He bumped on a ropemaker who carded vegetable fibres and bought to him a rope coil of fifty yards. As the weather became gloomy, he resumed his search a little more thoroughly. After crossing the town square three times in a different width, Gerry realized that the person he sought was not there. He asked for the hawker and was directed towards a lane downtown.

He stopped by a thatched cottage, next to a small orchard, to buy dried fruits. The ridge of the thatched roof was planted with resplendent irises, their rhizomes consolidating the whole of the roof. The low flint walls supported frameworks of beams with half-lap or bevels joints and filled with flexible branches. These beams seemed healthy and adjusted with art, but the scaled cob of straw and clay, threatened to fall on the ground. The building, narrow and long because of its strongly inclined thatched roof, obliged Gerry to cross the rooms of the residence to reach the storeroom. Large wooden trays, empty for now, were garaged in a corner to leave some place for the jute bags filled with apples, cornouilles, pears and quinces. A little further, bags of sweet chestnuts, carobs, nuts, medlars, hazelnuts, acorns and beechnuts were piled up to man’s height. On a corner, a wooden box sheltered the dried raspberry, sorb and elderberries reserves. Gerry selected six pounds of berries and fruits, he also had brought to the inn.
The market of Thalion - many street encounters

Chapter Summary

Ruffians get interested in Gerry, who must take care of himself.

In spite of Thalion’s small size he had difficulties in finding the hawker but bumped on him by pure chance. The merchant had pulled his hand-carriage in a small alley, sheltered by two thick hedges from the rising wind. The Hobbit recognized both ruffians who were at the inn the day before, who were speaking with the hawker. He could not repress the need to dodge and hide under the hazeltrees hedge, not daring to move any more. Gerry still surprised himself to seize father Hornblower’s ring under his waistcoat. What did impel him to remind of his culpability and his faults, when he crossed that man? And which strange fascination did lead him, like a criminal, to spy on strangers? He saw them side-way, on both sides of the merchant who seemed extremely embarrassed. Both carried a black travel-cape and riding boots. The tallest, thin and athletic, carried out the conversation, sometimes shaking his head in an aggressive way, sometimes by taking the poor merchant by the shoulder with a false friendly air. The most massive, who had caught the Hobbit off guard hiding his ashamed treasure, crossed his arms with an impatient air and played with his dagger under the nose of the street pedlar. Snatches of conversation reached Gerry: the two brigands were exerting various pressures until having their prey bend, in an insidious way, by veiling threats and tinkling his purse. The lure of gain adding to the fear for reprisals, the merchant yielded:

-« All right, I shall tell you if I see some! Rangers, a Halfling or horses! »

The big brigand, smoothing his moustache with satisfaction, gave a last “embrace” to the merchant who, livid with fear, hardly stood upright.

They moved away in the direction of Gerry, who hid further under the branches, charged with pale green flower-buds. He saw the two brigands pass, observing the riding boots, the dark breeches, the overloaded cross-belts and the rigid leather suit. The Hobbit, who once again had silently clutched his treasure, cautiously waited a few moments then left his hiding-place and comforted the street pedlar. Then he recognized the guest at the inn, eating alone the day before at the end of the dining room.

-« Hello master merchant… Are you well?

- No, no, I feel a little dizzy.

- May I help you?

- I assure you, little Sir, that I already feel better.

- As you like. May I ask you whether you sell lamps and flint lighters? »

The hawker had no lamp but Gerry did not have to negotiate the flints, so shaken was the small man. He slipped them into his purse and harangued in a convinced way:

-« Good people should always help each other. That would avoid them being abused separately by
a bunch of cowards. »

To his great surprise, the merchant answered him with a resigned look over his shoulder:

- « You had better watch your back, little Sir. »

Gerry only had time to turn over and catch a glimpse of a short hirsute shape running away through the garden on other side of the hedge. He did not stoop to pursue a child, even as large as him. The street pedlar continued:

- « As for me, I have no friend. Anyone thinks I steal as a living. My business is so hard…

- You will always be able to count on my assistance, as humble as it is, as well as my friend Gandalf’s, I promise you that.

- You small Folk attend curious people. But start by learning how to defend yourself! », the hawker said doubtfully.

With that, the merchant mucked around at the bottom of a small coffin in his hand-carrier. After some swearwords of impatience, he lifted a strange thin flexible leather strap, approximately two feet long. The end was tailored as a loop, and a bulge was set in the middle of the stringcourse. Like any young imp of the Shire, Gerry had already used slings, usually for hunting catbob or fox. He acknowledged that this hunting weapon was an excellent choice for him: light, easy to dissimulate and seldom short of projectiles. He proposed to pay but the merchant was walking away already. Gerry thanked him cordially and took the way to the inn. The sky had become threatening and passer-bys hastened to join their homes. The air became heavy and the Hobbit shivered. Soon alleys were empty. Gerry was going back to the town square, when he saw, after turning in a hedged street, the largest ruffian emerge in front of him. He was surveying the street in company of the young hirsute boy who had followed the Hobbit and was now pointing at Gerry with vehemence.

The man, whose severe face showed a small grin of satisfaction when he saw our Hobbit, held on a leash an immense mastiff, which mightily pulled forward while dribbling to launch the kill. Gerry turned pale and felt his legs shaking under him, regretting the mother Plump caraway mill. He plunged the hand under his waistcoat, clutched his treasure and disappeared! At least this is how the brigand perceived the scene, unlike his mastiff which did not let itself be lured. The black dog rushed and thundered frantically; however the man, undecided, stopped for several seconds. He had received secret instructions for such strange cases, but his main task was usually to gather information and intimidate the populations. The slob hesitated as for the means to be used.

These few seconds saved the Hobbit. He had quite simply, of course, ducked and hidden in the alleys of the vegetable garden next to the street, with all the art nature had alloted him and all the motivation circumstances pressed him on. Like a fox, he crawled discreetly towards a hen house, entered there, came out of it and climbed on its roof. From there he jumped into the thatched cottage by a window which he closed behind him. Very happy with his performance, He pushed a long sigh of relief. The thatched cottage kitchen he stood in appealed to his Hobbit’s instinct: at this place, tasty cakes were cooked, everything proved it, the aroma, the flour spread on the ground tiles, the few biscuits left to cool on the metal plate! A biscuit in hand, he was about to seek for an exit on the other end of the house, when he bumped on the belly of an enormous grandmother of the Big Folk who fairly looked like a Dwarf. The rugged-looking matron asked him, with a rolling pin in the hand:

- « What are-you doing here, you little imp? »
No more way to escape! A fluffy moustache spread out on the ungrateful face of the old lady, whose thick spectacles emphasized the severe aspect even more. When the small grandmother wrinkled the eyebrows, her glasses fell and balanced at the end of a small chain attached to her check apron. Trusting his instinct, Gerry found no other resource than imitating a weak and high-pitched child voice - remainder, it was not necessary to counterfeit his much:

- « There is a naughty, nasty man outside who’s stealing your hens! When I saw him, he wanted to do bad things to me! »

The energetic country-woman, who each summer loaded her cart with hay and pulled it with the strength of her arms, felt her motherly heart melt with a protective love for the poor little darling. Is not the true talent of heroes to be loved by women?[1] Gerry’s last conquest put her rolling pin in the pocket of her apron, she seized a kitchen knife long as a Hobbit’s arm and slipped it in her belt. After a short barking “Stay quietly here! You will have cake!”, the grandmother went out on her porch and grabbed her hay fork. Gerry remained hidden behind the door of the thatched cottage, enjoying the remainder of the stolen biscuit: one does not disobey that sort of woman. A few seconds later, the din of hard-pressed hens was followed by the howl of a wounded dog, then by a threatening man’s voice, that lost his haughtiness when the country-woman began mustering the vicinity with many insults and calls for help.

Then Gerry left his shelter, just in time to surprise the second brigand – the big ruffian who had seen through him – who was sneaking in the grandmother’s back, with his dagger in hand. The Hobbit shouted without thinking; with a hiss the dagger planted itself in the door, a few inches on the left of his face. A wild grin distorted the red and curiously swollen face of his attacker. The brigand leapt and unsheathed his rapier, while Gerry seized the dagger. The Hobbit flew by the street in direction of the town square, the two brigands trailing closely behind.

The drum-roll of the rain, which started to fall, covered his calls for assistance. A smell of burned ground, mixed with metallic savour filled the air. His advance melted in the straight lines and increased with each subterfuge opportunity. The Hobbit wasted time to try and catch stones in the hope of shooting them with his sling, but he was in dire straits. The darkness that started to fall gave him back some small hope. He ran and zig-zagged but realized that the brigands had a second dog, quick and silent, set on him. Gerry had no more a hiding-place in the street, enclosed by house walls or thick garden hedges. Hard-pressed, he ran randomly, a mastiff pursuing him; he emerged by chance on the town square at the time when a flash streaked the air and illuminated the castle frontage. Gerry fell blind on the wet paving stones, resigned to his deadly lot.

But death had already struck. The mastiff laid, half-calcinined and smoking, still traversed with spasms. Gerry crawled back horrified. Gandalf stood close to him, haloed with a narrow break in the black clouds. The end of his staff and his pupils shone with a bluish light that the Hobbit had never seen in his gaze. The wizard put the hand on his shoulder and said:

- « May I not leave you for several hours without you mustering all the dogs around? »

Gandalf had a severe face and a mocking tone, but he saw that his pupil was shaken:

- « All goes well now! Tell me what happened.

- You saved me! You could have come sooner!

- A wizard always arrives at the right time, he is neither late nor in advance. As for you to save, that will happen more than once, it is obvious. I thought my counsels and a secured town would be
enough, but you have the talent to attract troubles… But as for now, luck was rather on your side, and I like that! Let us return to our shelter. »

Never an inn’s room was sweeter for a Hobbit than the covered parapet of the Drunken Goose this evening. The two travellers had ordered a restoring meal in their room. A hot water basin erased the marks, if not the memory, of the tribulations of the day. On his return in the room, Gerry had the excellent surprise to find his belongings cleaned and folded, in addition to some old shirts and breeches of replacement:

- « Adorable Evarista… », he muttered for himself.

He bravely withstood Gandalf’s suspicious glance. Whereas storm thundered outside, the Hobbit rushed on the meal that Hobegar brought them, then he told his day in detail. Gandalf listened to him with interest, up to the part when the two brigands were involved; from now on he focused all his attention. Gerry did not extend on his “disappearance”, regarding it as an innate aptitude of all his kin. But this particular detail interested the wizard very much. He even stopped the history to go and say a word to the landlord about his indelicate hosts; when he returned he announced joyfully:

- « I could not learn anything more about your attackers, who have slipped by, obviously! Yesterday evening already Finran’s workshop had been searched. Before fleeing today, they tried to steal your pony, but one was harmed with a red-heated horseshoe on the face, and the other by a kick of your Gilles…».

The wizard’s laughter released Gerry from a great weight. The Hobbit finished his story by describing his feeling of terror and impotence with relief and recognition. Gandalf, without showing anything, was very satisfied with Gerry’s courage and presence of mind, although he had already experienced the formidable instinct of Hobbits self-preservation, for several generations. Gerry showed him his catch triumphantly: the brigand’s dagger. The weapon measured slightly less than a foot length, which could be used as a sort of Hobbit-sword. Its steel blade, sharp on both bevelled sides, threw gilded reflections in the light of the lamp. Its leather handle ended with a bronze wild boar head, while the guard adopted the shape of two stag antlers, one turned towards the hand and covering it as a protection, the other turned towards the blade. Gandalf lengthily examined the dagger then returned it to his companion while saying gently:

-« This is obviously a hunt dagger. I see no malefic inscriptions, I believe you can learn how to use this weapon without any daunting danger for yourself. It’s been a long time that I haven’t seen a similar one. I wonder how it arrived up to here. In any case you have fought tooth and nail, I congratulate you. But I believe that we should soon find a mentor who would teach you how to handle it. »

A few days earlier, such an assertion would have appeared ridiculous to the young Hobbit, whose only weapons had always been his charming smile and his still slim waist… But the world proving larger and more dangerous than he had imagined, he wished not to be found as short of self-defense skills as he had been this afternoon.

- « Why not Finran, I believe that he has many skills. He was amazing with Gilles today, not to mention the hot horseshoe blow… »

Gandalf sensed Gerry’s resentment towards an old authoritarian wizard. Nevertheless the fortuitous but hard lesson of the day bore the fruits of reason for the Hobbit: with such miscreants at his heels, it was unsafe for a Halfling to venture alone along roads, at least before learning to defend himself, if that was possible against such formidable opponents.
- « Finran would certainly be competent and up to it, but I believe healthier for you and me to
disappear for some times. I am in a hurry, and I do not like the look of these two brigands. They
left the inn a little before the arrival of the storm, after their theft attempt. If Finran had not been
there, the algarade would have gone wrong for my Hobbit friends. About that, I see that you
sympathized with Hobegar and Evarista?

- You are telling guesses to get to the truth, Mister Wizard, said Gerry smiling. Please note that I
can behave on the occasion. I like less than half of those you think of, half less than you fear! »

The wizard, laughing, looked at the Hobbit :

- « You managed very well, after all. We shall make someone out of you! ... But tell me, maybe it
is time for you to carry out a small demonstration of smoke rings? See what Hobegar found for me!
He yielded a weedpipe to me which he thought was too large for him! »

Gandalf produced a superb and long wooden weedpipe from his sleeve. This old “furnace”, solid
and worthy by its antiquity, had a metal head and a hearth of a dark wood. Many wrinkles had
disappeared from his face. The prospect of a new experiment seemed to renovate the old wizard.
His malicious eyes sparkled with such a communicative simple joy, that the laughing Hobbit took
his small clay pipe and his best pipeweed.

After a small but solemn introduction about the choice of pipeweed, the Hobbit filled his pipe and
observed the wizard doing alike. Gerry stopped him, filled the wizard’s furnace correctly and
returned his pipe to him. He took a small piece of wood in the stove and then slowly carried out
lighting by commenting on each of his gestures. The wizard imitated him in all respect. Gerry did
not expect that the wizard would cough for his first puff, however that is what happened.

- « For today, we will limit ourselves to learning how to tolerate the pipeweed smoke. The
appreciation of savours, and let alone the smoke rings and other fumes figures, will be the subject
of the following lessons. », Gerry clarified.

On his advice, Gandalf got over it and tried again more slowly, with less smoke. After some tries,
the wizard slackened a little and took his “first steps”.

- « My dear Hobbit, I am all at the same time allured by this pipeweed flavours, and disappointed
by the prickly taste on my tongue. It got me good feelings during the very first puffs, then quickly
the smoke’s aggressiveness took over.

- Gandalf, I find you to be somehow hasty. Usually beginners can feel the flavours only with their
fifth or even tenth pipe. You should be grateful to have been able to collect the soft fragrances of
this “Old Tobbie”.

- Really? Thus I shall compel myself to the training you will prescribe for me.

- That you should do! You will develop much more complex and interesting olfactive feelings
when you understand that pipeweed must be earned. It is necessary to tune the exact degree of
drying, the association with the proper pipe, the adequate filling… »

The lesson continued late in the evening. Gandalf showed completely disconcerting aptitudes in
this art, as besides in all he applied for, but Gerry endeavoured to maintain his pupil in a studious
perseverance, suggesting there was still a long way ahead. When the wizard had found the quiet
rhythm which was appropriate to him, the Hobbit probed his state of mind:

-« And now would you tell me, if you wish, what are your thoughts at the moment…
- See how strange, certain memories return, which I had not cherished any more for ages. It’s how it went: the fragrances of eternal flowers wrapped the most perceptive among us and conferred to them a kind of insight…»

The Hobbit did not understand Gandalf’s memories, but he guessed they were remote and very personnel, though in relation with the pipeweed’s virtues. He did not insist and let the wizard sail along his reminiscences. After a long pause, he ventured towards other grounds:

- « I wonder what these ruffians were doing around here! »

The wizard’s sharp glance at once stared at the Hobbit through pipeweed fumes.

- « Would you believe I happen to ask the same question precisely? They were sober and quiet within the inn, but they revealed their perverse and dangerous nature when they knew they were discovered. I think these are kind of spies. But for spying on what? To which aim? And who would benefit from it? »

A few minutes later, the wizard internally formulated his first assumptions:

- « The dagger that Gerry pilfered from them is neither Dwarf work nor Elven art. Men soaked this blade, but not the Dûnedain. I do not believe the Dunlendings forged it… Some of the elite troops of the witch-king, a long time ago, had rather similar weapons. But these troops came from very dispersed and remote regions. Nowadays there is nothing more than shades, orcs and dragons in the north… I heard these men speak with a remote intonation. Probably these ruffians come from Rhovanion wilderness. But if I am right, for which dark goals? They are in the service of a hidden power, that at least seems clear. What do they seek here? »

The deductions he carried on did not please the wizard. The Hobbit stopped his thinking:

-« Maybe they are rangers?

- What makes you utter similar nonsense? Did I not explain to you who the rangers are? », Gandalf roared.

The Hobbit packed himself in his armchair and continued with a small voice:

-« Indeed, you told about the descendants of the Dûnedain. They were a large people. I imagine that you do not know them all personally? I thought maybe of rangers who would have turned bad. In any case I found them determined like men who knew what they wanted. They are equipped and dressed in a similar way, to prowl the wilderness. They might as well have been two brothers. »

The value of Gerry’s arguments shook the wizard:

- « Undoubtedly there is truth in what you say. Indeed, they are wilderness men, accustomed to prowl in organized band. But they are by no means rangers of Arnor! »

A new pause left the travellers time to puff away alleviating smokes. Hobbit curiosity eventually overrode pipeweed:

- « What so urgent an errand did you carry out today?

- Of my comings and goings I will not account for to you. Be only aware that they were necessary. But I did not find those who I sought. That troubles me, over and above what you told me. I believe I shall think a while about all that, with the assistance of your pipeweed. I must make my mind about our route and I am still undecided. You should sleep, as far as you may. Today you father
would be proud of you! »

.oOo.

NOTES

[1] Jean Van Hamme

%MCEPASTEBIN%
The market of Thalion - Departure

Chapter Summary

Gandalf and Gerry spend a last night at the drunken goose, before adventuring in the wilderness.

The Hobbit, dead beat indeed, laid down. Late in the night, between two dreams, he had the vision of the wizard, puffing slowly on his long pipe, re-sifting events and discoveries of the day. Actually, Gandalf evaluated their chances to pass through the meshes of a net which he felt was tightening around them. His errand had led him quite far to the North by the Greenway then in the North Downs. There he had sought friends, whom he had not found. Instead of news and assistance, he had discovered a camp, hastily deserted a few days before. Gandalf was anxious, but had decided, as often, to carry his concern alone.

For his part, Gerry sank in an agitated dream: black riders tracked him in the wilderness to steal his treasure from him. He tried to join the Shire to return to the nest egg and to put an end to the curse that weighed on him since this terrible misunderstanding. But in the familiar wooded pastureland of the East Farming, he was still pursued by a horse. That was Gilles, mounted by Priscilla, who pressed him to marry her while imposing the treasure on him by force. Confronted to Gerry’s obstinate refusal to marry the undertaking Hobbit-girl, she launched her mastiffs on him in order to lighten his anatomy with various parts: the fleshiest for Chewer, the tastiest for Grumbler, the most appetizing ones for Devourer or the most used for Howler.

The Hobbit awoke in a jolt. A fine rain beat against the wood shutters, the wizard still held his pipe in hand and seemed dormant in the armchair. A thin gleam filtered in the room, the gray day rising behind thick clouds. The wizard opened an eye, rectified himself in his armchair, opened the second eye, rose and declared:

- « Gerry, it is time to go. »

They silently gathered their belongings. Gerry, gloomy, expected a quick departure without even a snack in the cold and wet dawn. They furtively went down the wooden staircase and emerged in the yard, entirely bathed with fog. To Gerry’s pleasant surprise, Gandalf entered the large room and closed the door behind them. It was empty, cold and dark, thus the wizard crossed it with a fast stride with the Hobbit on his heels.

He entered the lit kitchen, where Evarista, Hobegar and Finran awaited them, sat around enticing pastries, bowls of hot milk, honey pots and various jams. A young gilded fire whirred in the chimney. The perfume of brioches just out of the furnace had the Hobbit somewhat dizzy. The chorus of the three friends greeted the travellers, and invited them at the table. They congratulated Gerry for his exploit on the previous day, serving him again and again with everything, nurturing and parenting him like a lost and found son.

During a few minutes, that Gerry would remember with nostalgia for many days, he experienced the cordial friendship of simple people, with selfless devotion and a faithful word. Of course, such bonds existed in the Shire, but those had been forged spontaneously, out of the family and in the face of adversity. He thought back at the lonely hawker and recommended he should be cared about. He keenly felt what “sure allies” meant in the mouth of the wizard. Soon Gandalf discussed
his route with Finran, who seemed to have carried out a short inspection around Thalion this morning. Master Hobegar went out to prepare and load the pony with the travellers belongings, the waybread and the deliveries received the day before. Evarista distilled a selection of good advice to the young Hobbit, who could not answer because he was swallowing candy reserves.

Then came the moment of departure. Gandalf liberally cleared their account and left some messages to be discreetly delivered. Master Finran offered Gerry a small brown cross-belt provided with a leather scabbard braided for his dagger. This attention heartened the Hobbit very much but it also faced him with his new responsibilities. From now on not only did he know the dangers of the world, but he also was to assume his share of it. To put on a bold front, he girded the belt, attached his sling and sheathed his dagger. He sighed deeply, driving out an increasing longing to warmly greet the company. He kissed Evarista Grubb who repressed her tears, and the travellers went discreetly away by the postern.
The dark riders - Stealthy shortcuts

Chapter Summary

Gandalf and Gerry leave the main road to avoid notice...

Gandalf was leading the group. His vigilant eye staring under his dew-beading hat, he was walking through the fields with an elastic stride. Gerry shivered, tightened his shoulders while trying to convince himself that all this was not a nightmare. Even the sheep did not go out by a similar time! Once passed the first mile, the wizard decided to entrust the Hobbit with his mount; he had better keep his mind busy to take care of more unhappy than him. As a matter of fact, Gilles had obviously, no more than his master, the hobbit of getting out at dawn. The fog dispersed its ghostly volutes as the travelers passed by. The Hobbit was wading in a thick and spongy grass. A deep silence surrounded them, as if the countryside around heeded the least sign they would leave in their path. From time to time, Gandalf whistled a short and repetitive air. A penetrating drizzle slowly and relentlessly invaded their clothing; at the end of the day it would leave them soaked, in spite of the wizard’s mantel and the Hobbit’s waxed cape. The air, saturated with moisture, did not propagate any more the fragrances of the fruit trees in flower in the orchards they crossed.

Gandalf guided them with a sure sense of directions: they had left Thalion towards the North-West, from the castle ditches, which gave access to the fields, without crossing the city itself. After a large turn to avoid any meeting, they joined the Greenway, a broad paved road leading northbound to Bree, more than eighty miles away. This road had been named this way, many centuries ago, because it was bordered with trees carefully tended for, for the travellers summer comfort. Moreover, in foggy weather, this double line of trees reduced the risks the merchants were to be mislaid and abducted by the barrow-wights, far in the north.

Gandalf and Gerry followed this road, anxiously listening to choked rumours of the countryside and scanning endlessly the opaque silver curtain which fled in front of them. They were walking for two hours when their pace, that followed the sounds of Gilles’s horseshoes, slowed down without them consulting each other, until they completely stopped. The wizard had taken his hat off and bent his ear, with a discrete smile. Gerry, also on guard, glanced at him interrogatively. But he was the first to perceive distinctly and recognize the cawings which approached. Gandalf, who did not smile any more, put his hat back on and immediately have them leave the road and most furtively get away from it by a furlong. The pony harnessing had been ably loaded, and nothing tinkled in the satchels and bundles fastened on its back. They let the cawings pass; these also seemed to go up the greenway, at low altitude. Then they came back on the road because their progression was definitely easier there.

-« The road is searched… I feared that since my disappointment yesterday.», the wizard muttered.
At first the Hobbit could not believe in crows espying the road. Remembering at the couple which had preceded them up the sign of the inn, he faced the obvious and was fully aware that a will was at work to find them. The wizard resumed with a low voice, near the Hobbit’s ear:

- « We shall change route: at the first bridge we find, we shall follow the watercourse downstream towards south-east. Watch out, I would like to make this detour and to disappear in this fog which protects us for the moment. »

They walked on furtively on close-cropped grass at the edge of the road, often stopping to listen ahead. Then in a low voice the wizard played his short, sharp and nerve-wrecking air again, listened a while and set out again. Half an hour afterwards, they found what they sought: a ravine emerged out of the fog, on both sides below the road. A bridge spread its three arches through a river which dark waters were invaded with buttercups. Two half-collapsed parapets bordered the work, firmly built but badly maintained. From place to place a pale green film masked the depth, that the Hobbit evaluated at a little more than four feet of calm water above a muddy bottom. The negligible current left any latitude for tadpoles to stroll between the algae, while dragonflies streaked with blue the round and brilliant leaves of water lilies. A mild scent of decomposing leaves went up to their nostrils. The small river softly curved at the bottom of a ten feet depression, a hundred-feet broad. The wizard moved back on the road, made a rather broad turning and joined the right bank downstream. Then, making sure that fog masked the bridge to him, he entrusted the pony to the Hobbit and came back on his own steps, giving his best to erase their prints. Once back on the bridge, he scanned northward as he could pierce the silver drizzle to the end of the road.

-« The game is on… », he muttered.

With his staff, Gandalf furtively traced a sign in the middle of the bridge. Choosing five small stones of different colors, he composed at the foot of the parapet a message that only rangers would be able to read. Then raising his two arms to the sky, he sang a small enticing tune he repeated three times, his voice lowering to the whisper of a light wind on a cobweb:

*Faithful friend returns always,
Token revealed to his kin’s man.
Foreigner goes his own ways,
To average man are secrets ban.*

After a last glance to the North, the wizard broke the long stem of a thick plant with broad dark green leaves. At the break beaded a white liquid, the wizard smeared his boots with, even under the soles. Then he cautiously joined the Hobbit and imposed the same treatment to him, as well as to the pony. The light having slowly increased, the fog, though thinner, radiated with an unreal silver all around them. For some miles they followed the combe that widened and received tribute from some brooks. Then Gandalf had them walk at the bottom of the ravine, where they found a pebbled alley. They followed it alongside the river’s right bank. Sometimes some narrow paths, cut by the sheep, went down to the bank.

Gandalf carefully avoided leaving prints and regularly renewed the olfactive camouflage of the small group. From time to time, he listened then threw his short and repetitive whistled tune. Along the way, the ravine still widened and the riverbed became more rocky and enlarged by many
brooks. Drizzle ceased and fog was slowly dispelled. After a three hours walk only interrupted by a short pause, a sharp chirping was heard. The wizard stopped at once and launched a tweet, tightening his staff in the air. Soon a small thrush sat there, chirping furiously. The wizard answered her on the same tone, to the Hobbit’s amazement. Once the small animal wooed, Gandalf listened attentively. After he chirped too for a few moments, the wizard sent it back. The thrush flew away without additional comment, disappearing in the vapors which were vanishing little by little.

- « Was it not afraid? », asked Gerry,

- « It is a « she ». I explained to her that you are a friend. »

The Hobbit was shocked by the off-hand way the wizard used not to answer his questions. He suddenly launched all the interrogations which tapped him:

- « But I mean: how is she not afraid of you? And it looks like she understands you! How can one speak to a bird? And it looks like she can speak! What did she say? And what did you say youself? And moreover why do we take this way? Where do you take me along? What do you fear? »

The wizard haughtily gazed at the Hobbit:

- «How would I know, better than you, why brigands tackle a lost Hobbit out of the Shire? What should I know that you hide from me? »

The Hobbit shranked and discreetly checked that his treasure was well secured under his armpit. In front of his dumbness, the wizard changed subject:

- « In addition, why would you have birds speak? They communicate in their bird’s ways. But do not be abused: all birds do not show the same gumption. Sparrows, for example, are like Hobbits: always nibbling. Crows pay allegiance to the most generous carrions supplier. Magpies feel like Dwarves, driven by gold. Thrushes are right and very faithful. Eagles are lords, alike the deep Dùnedain. You should know all that; a little observation is enough to teach you. »

The Hobbit held quiet, well decided to think twice before questioning the wizard again. Silently, they walked on and on along the bank, entering the waterstream whenever possible. The fog had now cleared up, it hardly remained but in the bottom of the depression the travellers followed towards East and South. They distinguished the sun intermittently, and Gandalf realized that midday was close. They halted at the confluence with an important river, which went down from North. The pony was aloud to stroll and graze around a long leach, while the travellers restored with a torta and cold meat. The Hobbit, anxious, did not take any pleasure with this fast meal without fire. At the end of the torta, a pale sun had woken up the insects of the meadows around. The river, from now on quite broad, rolled its clear waters on a stoned bed. The Hobbit foresaw there some trouts and crayfishes. He bathed his feet in the limpid stream, while the wizard took the pony along the bank of the affluent, to leave some misleading prints there. Then he went down again the bed of the tributary river, and the Hobbit followed him downstreams towards south-east.

- « Do you fear they may find us that far from the road? 

- I feel a hostile will after us. Let us not delay. »

The travellers resumed their progression. Soon the Hobbit was perched on the pony and their pace increased. Several small affluents further, they took a new pause at some distance from the river whereas the sun was quickly going down the western horizon. The Hobbit askef for a fire which was refused to him with little tact:
- « Did you take the necessary wood bundles, chef-cook? »

As a matter of fact, no tree was found to brighten the meadow nore to provide enough fuel for a small warm picnic. The short pause and the cold meal did not fill Gerry’s need for restoration.

-« But you are a wizard! You can light a fire!

- I need fuel, like anybody, you scatterbrained Took! »

The Hobbit started to taste the bitterness of physical as well as moral discomfort: he felt tired, dirty, anxious, in hiding, guilty and in addition he had no perspective that these increasing inconveniences would cease. That should last for many days. For the time being any revolt seemed useless, he bided his time and finished chewing a dried pear. Gerry froze suddenly. Far on the opposite bank, high on the slope, advanced a rider, wrapped in a dark hooded coat. He turned his head towards Gandalf who beckoned to him not to make a noise. The man must have ridden alongside the opposite bank and was going up the slope now. He whistled, and the travellers detected a large dog which was sniffing close to the bank. The animal ran to its master and both disappeared towards north.

The runaways resumed furtively their progression until twilight. They finally stopped and ate frugally. The Hobbit sank in an anxious sleep. Then he truly regretted a good fire: the temperature had dropped so much that they had to wrap in covers in addition to the oiled cloths. The night was short but the wizard slept lightly. The moon seldom showed its growing arc, until the gray dawn rang the hour of a new gloomy departure, without rejoicing of any kind. After a quick toilet and a small collation - to Gerry’s mind - the travellers followed anxious Gandalf. Fortunately for the Hobbit - and unfortunately from the point of view of the wizard - the sun was rather quickly evaporating the morning fogs. Without being able to dry his soaked clothing, the Hobbit could slip on a dry shirt and breeches, which somewhat restored his fighting spirit. They had been walking for two hours alongside the river, now rather broad and fast, when they found a pebbles ford. They lost half an hour to ensure Gerry and the pony’s passage with a rope, but Gandalf insisted because it was “the last place to make it before other difficulties would arise”. He carefully avoided to specify these difficulties in spite of the Hobbit’s curiosity.

On the left bank, they found a portage way, which supported their progression. The river now ran at the bottom of a vast basin, which became gradually populated with trees in bloom. Gandalf skipped the mid-morning pause to join a forest’s edge. They left the bank and went up the slope on their left to reach the limit of the basin, to the edge of a beautiful elms and oaks forest. Then Gandalf scanned lengthily towards the north-west. He anxiously looked for a flight of crows which cruised from East to West. Suddenly the two black birds were attacked by a raptor plunging from the heights. Although smaller, it forced them to land before rising in concentric circles.
Considering the signs as good predicts, Gandalf accepted a pause under the shelter of the forest.

-« My dear Hobbit, I believe that our chasers follow other paths than the river! », he said with an air of satisfaction while crunching a biscuit.
Gandalf and Gerry must flee into a cave before their pursuers.

The wizard even afforded a small restoring nap between the roots of a centenary elm. The Hobbit found himself with nothing to do, though he wanted to prove useful. He collected some round stones and trained a little with his sling. Then he piled up some branches and bound them in a bundle, remembering the wizard’s previous critical remark. Then he checked the equipment: he rolled the rope carefully, arranged the tools in the satchels so that they do not wound the pony nor make any noise. When he found two lamps in the satchels, he realized that their equipment had been carefully supplemented before their departure. He tested it thoroughly: the lighter worked well, he even succeeded in lighting a small fire with fallen leaves he took in a fairly dry shelter between old knotty roots. The acrid and thick yellow smoke awoke the wizard, who leapt on his feet and quickly extinguished the fire:

- « Absurd Took!, he roared, You just sent a signal that everyone can see from eight leagues around! »

His first fury passed, the wizard ordered Gerry to load the pony while he pondered a moment. He placed the sorry and crimson Hobbit on his mount and returned to the river bank, accelerating their pace. Obviously Gerry’s blunder had changed Gandalf’s plans. After about an hour, the Hobbit perceived the rumor of a discrete pursuit and warned the wizard about it.

- « Watch around, especially behind. Let me know as soon as you see something. We're almost there... », whispered Gandalf who accelerated even more.

Finally they reached a large hollow, the river rushed into. A narrow passage to the left allowed a man to sneak by the same route. You could still see the old river bed, partially collapsed and covered with trees: there were many thousands of years, that water had left it for a line of greater slope, below the surface. It took all the wizard’s willpower and Gerry’s affection to have poor Gilles move ahead. But they were interrupted by their pursuer’s arrival in the small clearing that preceded the hollow. A rider dressed in dark leather and olive green canvas held on leash an almost entirely black wolfhound, who drew silently towards the fugitives. The rider dropped the flange and the mastiff rushed screaming. Seized with terror, the pony plunged forward, knocking Gerry who fell into the water. The wizard’s sword made a quick reel, splitting in two the mouth of the monster, that fell into the roaring river. Facing this unexpected resistance, the black rider stopped his horse and began an emergency retreat. Having reached a respectable distance, he blew a large horn and armed himself with his bow.

However Gerry could hang on to the pony’s leach. The Hobbit’s weight in the stream had forced the poor thing to stop a few dozen feet from the tunnel’s entrance. Agile as a goat, Gandalf joined the unfortunate and pulled him from the water. When he had made sure the Hobbit was fine, he retraced his steps and sneaked a peak outside. A fairly well shot arrow planted in his blue hat. The wizard pulled back but he had seen enough. The archer was lying in ambush, it was not possible to reach him without risking life. Obviously his horn call would gather his fellows, who would not be
far away. But Gandalf knew this place for he had been there once. He took a deep breath, imperiously said a word of command while raising his staff and struck the narrow stone passage before him. A lightning flashed the air and the cornice exploded over six feet. No chaser could now enter after them any more without risking an almost certain fall into the water and being swept away by the current. They would have to spend several hours securing each other with ropes. The wizard knelt beside the Hobbit and gave him a shot of cordial. He vigorously rubbed him, put him back on his feet and led him a little further along the ledge. A slightly wider platform allowed the Hobbit and pony to recover. They shared a loaf of bread, the Hobbit seasoned his share with various picklings. Gerry put dry clothes on. Both greedies being busy for a while, Gandalf came back to the cave entrance.

The Hobbit heard him mumble some ban curse or slow litany of secrecy. The voice of the wizard chanted softly then grew stronger at times, in a language which, though Gerry did not understand it, evoked in his mind marble columns, brazen grids, silver ramparts, walls of solid rock strengthened by Elven craftsmen beyond Human memory. Before his very eyes, the seven hidden doors of Gondolin rose one by one into the secret tunnel carved by a river, the living had forgotten. The temptation of a hidden life, the hope for an unspoiled existence, were taking shape in a timeless glamor, carried by the works, the pains and the faith of the high Elves of old. The song dragged then slowly died.

A long moment passed and then Gandalf reappeared near the Hobbit, his back more arched than usual. He made some light out of his staff. His worn face smiled with such weariness that the alarmed Hobbit felt the urge to take care of the old wizard. He could not imagine another way than offering him food, panacea of the Shire for the sadesses of Hobbitlings or the hassles of their elders. The old man sat down beside the young Hobbit with gratitude and rested a while. The rumor of increasingly numerous troops crowding at the entrance of the tube reached them a stifled way, but neither were disturbed for a while. Then the Hobbit still worried about it. The wizard claimed that they would be safe for a long time:

- « I would even suggest that you should show up a little, to convince them to persevere at that end! », he whispered.

The mischievous spirit of the young Took revived his creative verve. He stationed himself at the edge of the pulverized road, cleared his throat and began to sing a little improvisation on a lively and popular Shire tune:

« Do you see this footpath narrow?

Alone may pass petty Dwarrow.

Can you scent my Halfling odour?

No dread to be devoured!

Haven’t you seen me haste?

That didn’t suit thour taste!

My poney neighs with his tail stiff,

Your mastiff whines and sniffs!

My pretty pathway underground

Rolls roots and stones around.
A volley of arrows fell into the water. The beginning of the song had intrigued Gandalf. The mocking tone had seemed particularly appropriate to him. The allusion to a dark path to nothingness had stealthily reminded him memories of old and evil roads, dark and straight, bordered with sharp towers and plunging to the furnaces of the enemy of the world. The boldness of the Hobbit’s unconscious assumptions about their pursuers’ obedience struck him, and a dark foreboding clutched his old heart. When the young Took spoke of his treasure, he knew that the Hobbit had a secret related to them being hunted by dark powers. But which ones? He silenced Gerry with a hand on his shoulder:

- « It is time to go. They seem convinced enough…

- You have behaved as giddily as a young rabbit out of his burrow in the spring! Let this be a lesson! But I guess I should have given you instructions for caution. Forget it! A wizard is never short of arguments, you should know that! »

Gandalf, now resolved but bent, led the Hobbit and entrusted the pony to him. He rekindled the light of his staff and took the lead. The road sloped downward, slightly overhanging the underground river. The track had certainly been carved by Human hand, but to what end and at what time? The ceiling gradually lowered, forcing Gandalf to bend. Mosses that lined the walls at the entrance of the cave had now disappeared, giving way to a slimy, wet film. After an hour of cautious progress, the path emerged into a large room, whose walls sparkled depending on the orientation of the wizard’s staff. The narrow platform overlooked river falls about twenty feet. The travelers slowly walked down the winding path in the fog caused by the fall; it took them another hour to force the pony to take a short flight of stairs. Gilles was put to the test when they had to wade in the water, fifty feet on a slippery stone, before following a dry corridor along the stream that took up again speed. They reached a second room, the wizard brightened. White stone columns rose to the ceiling, like a forest of lances darted in a volley. Others fell from the ceiling; the largest, about twenty-five feet long, crossed the room throughout. Down-to-earth thoughts had come to the Hobbit, who was dragging his wet and tired feet:

- « Gandalf, is there an exit out of these galleries?

- There will be an exit, even if I am to open it by tapping your head against the wall! », he replied with bristling eyebrows. He went on more smoothly:

- « Do you think I would have willingly ventured us into a dead-end? »

The Hobbit had only to show up a quiet confidence. Some thicker, shiny columns projected ghostly shadows on blurred walls. A discreet musty whiff surrounded him, but they saw no trace of spores on the walls. Travelers crossed the stone forest as its natural dripping fountains sang. When the Hobbit stumbled, the wizard realized it was high time for them to sleep. They settled on a dry surface and restored by the flickering light of Gandalf’s staff. Gilles was treated to bread and fruits. They finally afforded a small pipe they slowly filled. The wizard was progressing rapidly in this venerable art:
- « This practice is as enjoyable to me as my little colored matches, said Gandalf. But I feel it also helps my concentration… »

They blew a few smoke rings as if they were on a comfortable smial porch in the Shire, forgetting for a moment their concerns, before slipping into a deep sleep.

Some six hours later, Gandalf had them back on their way. They walked so long from room to room that Gerry would have lost track of time if his Hobbit stomach had not given hints. Finally they reached a new room and left for a moment the edge of the underground river, to the great displeasure of Gilles. Then they followed the right bank. Shortly before the end of the hall, Gandalf stopped the pony and advanced to observe a strange phenomenon. The river, before disappearing into a tunnel, ran along the steep wall on the left and produced a great surf, on the surface of which an animal was floating. This turbulence occurred immediately after a secondary stream evacuating some of the water flow to the left, at the foot of the first stone columns. Gandalf watched the animal for a while before admitting that it was the mastiff he had slain at the entrance. The wizard decided to take advantage of this chance. He endowed the rope with a climbing hook and turned back to cross the stone arch. Gerry, ending up in darkness, approached the pony. On the left bank, Gandalf joined the secondary flow and strove to catch the dog’s corpse with his makeshift harpoon. After several attempts, he succeeded, and led the animal to the left flow, the diameter of which exceeded four feet. Then he returned alongside Gerry who asked for an explanation.

- « If I remember accurately, we shall be led to the right bank of the right arm of the river, Gandalf said thoughtfully. I do not know where exactly the left flow you saw emerges, but it will most likely happen North of where we will go out ourselves. With any luck, our chasers will expect us to go out at the same place and will establish their guard there. At worst we could reduce the number of attackers. »

After a snack they resumed their long and haunting journey through shadows and drippings. A few hours later, entering a large room, they noticed the floor was littered with feces. The wizard, illuminating the vault, recognized a large colony of bats.

- « We are approaching the exit, he said in a perky tone. Judging from the colony that is becoming restless, the day will soon fall. Let us find a clean place, eat and rest until these little beasts go out a-hunting. »

They followed Gandalf’s plan to the letter and ventured out after two hours. The river finally borrowed a portion of fully immersed tunnel, but they found in the last room, thanks to both the wizard’s memory and the bats coming out, a long steep slope that the brave pony took only a few moments to climb, so much he longed for the outside air. After Gandalf had probed and encouraged him, the Hobbit ventured out first, made a short tour of exploration and came back to the wizard. He too sniffed and lengthily looked from a little eminence, before concluding that there was no immediate danger, and that they were exactly where he had imagined they would. The pony hungrily pounced on fresh grass. The earth was soft, there was no way to erase its tracks apart from erasing each shoeprint by hand. Then the wizard sprinkled a powder all around the exit, with a smile to Gerry:

- « Dear Bane of the mastiffs, here is your own trick imitated and perfected by a wizard!
- What is that?
- A much improved version of your caraway. Hopefully we shall not have to judge its effectiveness! »
The perked pony was charged with Gerry and the small group went well. They immediately returned to the river, which bed, now wide and calm, allowed them to advance without leaving any trace. The wizard had lifted his long gray mantel. His big black boots had vigorously cleft water for almost two hours when the Hobbit, dry on his pony, began to nod. The pony snorted increasingly often. The wizard made a last effort to reach a shingle bank he used as a ford. He still went along the left bank to find a workable climb. The fugitives disappeared into a grove of beech trees on the left bank. They crouched in the leaves and the exhausted Hobbit slept like a baby.

The wizard was tired but his troubles left him little respite. His intermittent sleep was cluttered with puzzles. What were those black riders doing in Eriador? Why did they hunt the Hobbit down? Because he had taken him under his protection? Because he had a treasure? And what was this treasure? Was the Hobbit tracked down as the heir of the Thain, on whom pressure was to be exerted? How could he throw their chasers off? Was he to provoke a confrontation to force them to flee? He could not be certain the Hobbit would be safe if he could not put him away first. The wizard completely awoke with the thought of this responsibility. Or was that his sixth sense?

He had decided to light his pipe in order to clear his mind, when he heard people on the opposite bank. He scanned darkness and numbered two horsemen flanked by at least one dog. The animal was breathing with great difficulty, as if its mouth and its lungs were irritated enough to cause pain with each breath. It whined and barked from time to time. Gandalf remained motionless for several minutes - fortunately Gilles did the same - after which he decided that any immediate danger was over.

The wizard reloaded the pony while a half full moon, red and fuzzy, began to descend into a blurred sky. Lifting the asleep Hobbit, he gently harnessed him on the pony’s back and started again. He left the bank and headed due North as the sky on his right began to clear. After about a mile, he reached a drier and harder soil, on a small ridge of dark, flat and brittle stones. He sniffed around a long time and followed the ridge to the east.

A pink dawn succeeded the gray one, igniting grass spikes around him. An hour later, the wizard noticed a spruce wood on his left and sook shelter there. A few miles away, the Hobbit awoke as Gandalf was unloading the pony in a grassy clearing. Both were able to refresh in a little spring. The Hobbit ate like four while the wizard fell in a deep and restful sleep. This time he had left strict instructions, with eyebrows frowns and staff pounding: Gerry was to let him sleep for an hour, no more, and to do nothing that could betray their presence. The Hobbit faithfully performed his mission: he stood guard, listening to the slightest sounds of the forest around. He estimated that his vigil had come to an end, which evoked the idea of a second breakfast; so he sat on the fallen and rotten tree trunk Gilles was attached to.

He was rummaging in a satchel for a covert snack when he froze: at the edge of the clearing, about at stone throwing range, he had just seen a pair of yellow eyes staring at him from under a pine branch. His own sweat froze his spine for a moment but he managed to keep his Hobbit natural poise. The yellow eyes blinked from time to time. Gerry had therefore not been dreaming. He carelessly set on the pony, without losing sight of the yellow eyes. He stealthily armed himself with a sling and picked up a rather angular stone, then woke Gandalf, quietly whispering:

- « We have company. A dog or a wolf hides over there. It believes going unnoticed! »

The wizard was immediately alert. He got up, groaning in pain because of his back, looking at another direction as if there was nothing amiss.

-« I cannot see it but I feel its predator glance… he blew between his teeth. Why not practice your new toy? »
The sling issued two short and powerful whistles as the Hobbit managed his reels; the yellow eyes immediately disappeared with a hasty trampling: doubtless the animal turned to flee. Perhaps was it impeded in its flight? The stone flew. A cry of injured dog rose before a sound of galloping lame was fading under the trees. Gandalf rushed under the foliage, sword in hand, with a speed of captain of the guards, while the Hobbit was reloading the pony. The wizard came back with a concerned face:

- « That was for sure a black wolf or dog… You have harmed it, there is a little blood. Let us leave at once. »

However he took time to spread some of his assassin’s powder.
The dark riders - The cardolanian keep

Chapter Summary

Gandalf and Merry make their last stand.

The travelers crossed through the wood, following the slopes of ravines that gave towards East, and up the ridges to the North-East when usable ways arose. The short breaks, the endless walking, the meager meals completely exhausted the Hobbit, although he usually rode his pony. For now they were no more concerned to conceal their passage, cutting through short valleys as quick as possible, under a thinly veiled sun. Towards the end of the day, the wizard found what he wanted: a ridge of black rocks, they skirted the foot of which by veering slightly to the South. The edge of dark and layered stone rose and fell erratically between twenty and forty feet high.

After a league, they discovered a breach in the cliff and hurried up there. A path, carpeted with dead leaves, climbed right through the rift, on about an acre, but the pony was able to follow it. The slope was so steep that the Hobbit doubted it could go down this way. Gerry, bringing up the rear, saw at the top of the climb, two stone columns keeping the end of the path out of the rift. A fathom high and shaped like hawks perched on a hand, the statues darted their aquiline gaze to the slope as two idols of the ancient world to oversee the path. After a steep climb, Gandalf stopped under the hieratic figures that towered menacingly. He said in a solemn voice:

« Orodreth na Aran Cardolanië »[1]

The silence of the forest below seemed thicker, as if the trees themselves held their rustling to hear what would happen. Gerry had the unpleasant feeling that some red lights, hidden inside the stone orbits, followed him insistently. The statues answered in unison from a world beyond:

- « Lost na edrëa! »[2].

Then the small group climbed the last few feet, in a supreme effort to force their heavy limbs to obey. The wizard spread his toxic substance at the foot of the statues. The setting sun revealed several towers of Men guarding the cliff. At Northwest, away atop the bow of the gray jagged ridge, stood a tall building. Closer, two furlongs to the Southeast, a ruined fort rested on the edge of the cliff. Gandalf sniffed from the top of his lungs, in the light westerly winds sweeping the crest. A raptor flew in large concentric circles on the sunset.

« Manwë’s[3] winds bear rumors of renewed hatred. Our pursuers gained on us all day. It's time to entrench ourselves and reveal Gandalf the gray without his old coat... ”, thought the wizard with a sigh of resignation. To the Hobbit whose looks interrogated him, he said:

- « He we are for the night. You will be able to rest. »

Within minutes they reached the fort. The light was rapidly declining. Three towers surrounding the keep had resisted the ravages of time, but the walls and the door had long since gone. Gandalf chose the seemingly most robust tower, standing proudly at the edge of the cliff. The first floor seemed solid, still surrounded by high walls on three-quarters of its perimeter, facing the outside of the enclosure. But the stairs up had collapsed. Gandalf had yet the Hobbit climb on that floor with
all the supplies, helping him to scale the wall. He advised him to keep the packages ready for a
hasty departure.

Then the wizard lighted a fire in the middle of the fort, sheltered by the half-collapsed walls of
some old reserve or captain’s lodge. He prepared a hot meal he shared with the young Hobbit,
lying in ambush on the roof, while the pony was grazing weeds in the old yard. Finally he led the
animal to the old stables, bringing him armfuls of plucked herbs. Meanwhile, the Hobbit was ready
to curl up for the night. Clearing a drain, he discovered many oblong gray stones that had been
sling bullets. As he asked the wizard whether he planned to sleep, Gandalf consented only to tell
him he would do well to barricade and sleep while keeping his weapon within reach.

—« In case of trouble, you do not show. Stay hidden and confine to defend yourself if necessary. I'll
be down there watching. »

Gerry was too tired to argue with such a determined wizard. So he gathered stones behind the
remains of a niche. Having discovered a rusty and barbed iron grid that would cover a water
evacuation, he stuck it in the narrow opening of the collapsed staircase. Then he laid down,
keeping his belt on. However, the wizard continued his preparations: he firmly barricaded the
entrance to Gilles stall, who found himself completely surrounded by a six feet high wall. Gandalf
positioned old planks, balancing on the columns and walls in front of the stall. He spoke a few
words of protection and preserving to calm the nervous pony. Finally the wizard bent on the fire
and concocted a long secret brewing. Satisfied with his preparation, he fueled the fire and came out
of its sphere of light. Then Gandalf crept stealthily back to the gap they had climbed to the cliff
top, and there schemed some wizard business. After a short scouting around the old fort, he
wrapped in his big coat and returned to lean against a wall of the collapsed tower, the furthest from
the campfire, between two thick bushes. The stars were twinkling intermittently, and soon a clear
almond moon rose and flooded the vicinity of the former stronghold with an unreal glow. The
wizard seemed to recommend vigilance to his staff and slipped into the deep shade of the bushes.

The Hobbit rested the sleep of the fugitives - light, anxious, attentive. He dreamed confusedly that
a collar tightened around his neck, or a bony hand slipped into his jacket to steal his treasure, when
a voice, soft and sweet as a spring breeze, sad as a farewell, rose into the night air. He awoke. The
moon was crossing the sky, faithful guardian of his sleep. A short and harmonious tune sounded as
a warning and vanished quickly:

—“Rhynwaith taurhoth nuithir lendiali”[4]

Immediately after sounded a dog’s cry of pain, followed by furious barking, harshly repressed by a
whip. The wizard jumped to his feet, throwing his coat and hat on the bush in the shadow of the
wall next to him. With a wave of his staff, he appeased the campfire. He looked around and slipped
into the shadows away from the fort. Rumors of riders dismounting and weapons tingling out of
the scabbard alerted the Hobbit at the top of his tower. Gerry carefully pulled away his blanket and
hid behind a niche above the courtyard of the fort, his armed slingshot in hand. With trembling
legs, he was looking about the wizard, when he noticed several shadows approaching the keep.
Tall men, covered with black coats and dark hoods and armed with long glittering swords,
progressed steadily towards the ruined tower opposite Gerry’s refuge. He wanted to scream and tell
the wizard but the words remained glued to the back of his throat, tight with fear. The swift and
concentric progression of attackers to the collapsed tower ended in violent swearing. A sword fell
on the ground, a cry of surprise and pain arose: "A viper." A man staggered aside, the other four
moving to surround the fire.

A huge black dog, that Gerry had not previously spotted, prowled growling around the stall.
Gandalf’s words came to his mind: "Stick to defend yourself!" But the thought of poor Gilles,
surrounded and unable to defend, woke his young courage. He planted himself on his short legs and raised his slingshot. But at that moment a man stormed to the side of the dog and began to demolish the barricade Gandalf had raised. Suddenly a heavy plank fell on his head, unbalanced by the precipitation of the man who fell to the ground, unconscious and his skull bleeding. The dog took advantage of the break-up and climbed the stony scree. The pony’s neighing broke the Hobbit’s heart, but he found the strength of character to overcome his fear and apply his address to a single goal. The sling whistled three times and the mastiff collapsed with a groan of pain, a trail of blood on its face.

But this masterstroke revealed the Hobbit to his enemies. After a swearword of hatred, one of the men ordered the others, in a horrible language, to seize the Hobbit... or worse. The other three men ran towards the tower, protecting their face with a small targe or the back of their leather glove. One of them received a stone in the knee, gasped and continued stumping. He tried to climb the collapsed wall right of the Hobbit, but could not succeed. Another began climbing the left wall, but was slowed down by his own weight that broke or unsealed the stones he leant on, as he progressed. The third entered the ground floor. Realizing the lack of stairs, he piled some rubble and grabbed the grid, trying to hoist himself. The hard-pressed Hobbit did not know on which front he was to face first. The threat of hands rising from the dark hole was the most impressive. The assailant growled in a low and dull voice using an approximative common language:

-« Give it to me, dirty little scum, or you'll be sorry! » The foreign accent also revealed a hateful lust. Gerry recognized the grinning face of the man from the inn at Thalion. But the mouth and chin were now deeply burned, crimson and covered with blisters. The swollen left eye oozed bloody humours streaming down the amputated mustache.

Disgusted both by the hideous appearance and by the hold of this individual upon him, the Hobbit ensured his treasure in his vest and drew his dagger. His fighting spirit revived, he gave a blow on the gloved hands that were already dislodging the grid. The Hobbit’s blade nicked the dark leather and severed several tendons.

-« You will not get it! Choke in your own hatred! », he shouted as a cry of victory.

The man collapsed in an inhuman cry. Some curses casted in a remote and guttural language reached him from the ground floor of the tower. Despite the hatred and animality it carried, the language seemed strangely close to him, although he did not comprehend it. Then a long silence followed, as if the evil of the attackers assembled for the final and irresistible assault. The captain, who had remained behind, grabbed his bow and walked toward the tower too. The Hobbit, glancing over the niche, shivered when he met the man’s implacable gaze.

The captain was loading his bow near the fire, when the hearth blazed and one of the glowing logs collapsed, sending sparks into greased shards prepared nearby. Burning oil sprayed all around. The cape of the captain flared violently. While he attempted to extinguish the fire, all heard a yelp, the neighing of terrified horses followed by a cavalcade of mounts galloping. Moments later, Gandalf burst, riding a big dark and foaming steed, with reins and staff in one hand and sword in the other. The attackers did not need their captain’s order to retreat. Gerry sent a rain of projectiles. Gandalf pursued the robbers, distributing sword strokes with generosity, but hampered by his mount’s ardor.

He returned after a few minutes and ordered the Hobbit to pass any luggage. Then he brought him down from the platform and sent him to comfort the pony. The wizard reached into his bag to take a few bark chips he reduced to dust over the fire, uttering a vow of secrecy and concealment. He put on his coat and hat, not without checking inside with caution. The travelers were ready to go in minutes. They walked away as the dying fire gave off more and more of a thick smoke that
enveloped them. Both mounted companions hurried forward in the smell of pine smoke and continued their gallop for an hour, until the gray dawn lit all around them. Gandalf, his eyebrows still bristled, wore an alert eagle profile. The heat of battle still smoldered in his glowing eyes. He authorized the group a brief pause during which he showed his sharp ways.

- « You disobeying Took! I told you to stay idle and hidden…

- But my poney was in danger…

- So you did well and you acquitted yourself with honors. In fact, I did not take time for your injuries…

- I am safe, and Gilles either, I think. What did you do as they arrived? I thought you were hidden in the other tower.

- Oh! I dodged and let them focus on my stash. We needed one more mount, and furthermore to deprive them of their own. Once that was done, I came back to lend you a hand. Now, they probably still run after their horses. Judging by the nature of this one, they were treated in such a way that they will not be caught easily. Besides, I have sabotaged their saddles!

- Did they not try to stop you?

- Yes, of course. I’m an old wizard, but I still know how to handle my sword, master questioner! I had to kill a black wolf, and there was only one guard. He won’t be able to use his weapon for a few weeks. But you as well behaved beautifully. You killed one of these dark creatures and hurt your assailant. You are a worthy descendant of the Bullroarer! "

Gerry would correct this genealogical approximation but a glance from the wizard had him change his mind:

- « Now we must hurry … »

Travelers progressed rapidly along the ridge that, after two hours ride, eventually flattened out and then vanished into short, more and more grassy hills. The trees became scarce and the prairie stretched its plains of flowers under a bright sunshine. They slowed the pace when they reached a small hollow, sheltered from view. The spring life burst around them as the sun rose. Riders and mounts quenched their thirst by a lovely little stream. An incredible variety of herbs, grasses and succulents abounded on its banks.

- « If rangers were here, they would teach you the virtues of these plants. I think we are not far from the river. Formerly there were certainly farms and mansions of the Dûnedain, at the time of the kingdom of Cardolan. This could explain all these medicinal plants that are rarely found in such variety and quantity. I would not be surprised to find the remains of a fortified villa nearby. For their forlorn last stand in this area, they recruited mercenaries who protected the border against incursions of wolves and robbers from Rhudaur. That is when they built the towers we saw and the keep you held against the enemy! »

The weary Hobbit found no solace in the anachronistic brotherhood of arms the wizard’s memories evoked. The resources he had recently mustered in himself had destroyed the mirage of a pleasant and rewarding life without an effort of any kind. It seemed that after such an ordeal, he could never feel at peace and indulge in the sweetness of life. Gandalf seriously looked at him; he seemed preoccupied:

-« It was high time that you looked after yourself, that's for sure. And you show quite a satisfactory
ability to overcome hardships, although you may be too rash. But obviously you carry a burden, a responsibility that I had no idea of. Maybe should you open yourself to me about that?

- I do not know what you mean.

- Indeed? I will ask our chasers the next time we cross their path... Maybe will they?

- You removed me from my home! You have forced me to leave my family. We have never seen such Big Folk in the Shire! I bet those ruffians have tried to get me at Thalion, and from there on, in the sole aim of harming you! Who knows which enemies you have made, by dint of wizards schemes in distant lands? Why did you need to attract them to me? »

The same hypothesis had indeed come to the mind of Gandalf, who envisioned it with some despair. His vehemence was but the echo of this fear and his bad conscience:

« I create enemies for myself while defending people like yours. »

A long stormy moment passed under the bright sun. The mist quickly retreated from the bottom of the valley. The wizard relented and sighed:

-« I will lead you to our destination despite this mystery, or even more because of it... We should go and enjoy the coverage mist offers us. On the open ground we have to walk on, it would be much wiser.

- Do you really think they did not give up? If I counted right, these ruffians have one man killed, one bitten by a viper, one heavily injured and one with a slight injury, not to mention their sordid critters, two died and the other poisoned.

- Their hatred is relentless all the more. They follow us, I can feel it. »

They resumed their ride, pushing their horses and giving them the minimum breaks.

.oOo.

NOTES

[1] « Orodreth is the King of Cardolan ». He was the last sovereign of this kingdom at the time of its splendor.

[2] The path is clear !

[3] Manwë is the King of the Powers of the world, and tutelary force of the air and skys.

[4] « A dog pack and the forest rangers interrupt your journey. »
Chapter Summary

Gerry's first scouting goes wrong...

Their swift ride did not, however, meet Gandalf’s expectations. From the beginning of the afternoon, he frequently turned back, scanning the North and West insistently. Around them the beautiful spring day bloomed, insects buzzing and the temperature climbed. A fresh westerly breeze raised small clouds of pollen. The Hobbit was asleep on his trotting pony, at a time when, in the summer, he would have laid under a walnut’s shade for a dissolute siesta. Gandalf, worried and sometimes struggling to control his stallion, perceived a relentless effort behind them, and wished at all cost reach the swans marshes, where throwing off their chasers would be a cinch. The day passed in a frantic ride. The wizard, very nervy, shortened the late afternoon break. They rode for an hour, when they arrived within sight of the large river. The grassy valleys spread their gentle slopes off to wide fields of reeds and cattails, enlivened by a few willows. Clouds of wading birds flew above the marshes in front of them and the river downstream, away on their right. Travelers looked to the east, under the shade of the last scattered trees of the prairie. Their escape was two hours ride ahead. They went bravely on this last leg.

But after an hour and a half of a cautious walking, the Hobbit saw several dark spots along the river bank and upstream, between them and the marsh. The magnifying wind was now carrying ash-gray clouds and had the vegetation ripple –but not these singular points. He told Gandalf who understood where his long-during and oppressing sense of insecurity came from. Other bandits were waiting in front of them, arranged as a net, ready to close in on their prey. The wizard gathered a few armfuls of dry branches, tied them and distributed the load on the horses they dismounted. They engaged in a tiny depression that seemed to lead to the North of the swamps.

-« Why choose this path, Gandalf? Would it not be better for you to press on straight, slaying riders in front of you with your lightnings?

- You do not fear our foes enough, young Took! Once discovered and without the element of surprise, we are more vulnerable than you think. By showing us too soon, we expose ourselves to the risk they get together and we would be doomed. I also feel the chasing behind us accelerates. We have to hide our approach and hit by surprise a weak point of this curtain of sentries. Our best option is to hide as long as possible up to the ford I know. After crossing, we'll be fine provided they are not immediately on our heels... Now hush! Our hope is in hiding and not in combat to the death. »

The travelers, making vows not to have been already spotted, progressed for an hour without seeing another soul. A small thrush came then fluttering around Gandalf, but her visit did not brighten the wizard’s face. Exasperated, he sent her back. A few miles away, the small depression had melted into the plain. Gandalf sent the Hobbit scout ahead and they advanced more slowly. They reached the end of the ground of grasses and wildflowers. The wizard concocted a secret mixture he sprinkled on the fagots, the horses were loaded with. The anxious Hobbit then secretly returned to do his report: a horseman kept quite a loose guard ahead. An idea was born in the mind of Gandalf:

- « Here, Gerry. This is a balm of sleep, a Queen of the Elves gave me to fight my insomnia. Do
you feel capable of spraying this thug with it? »

This mission raised minimal enthusiasm for the Hobbit but the perspective of losing their chasers for good decided him. He made a wide turn, progressing stealthily and without leaving any trace, as only Hobbits can do. The guard, sat on his saddle laid beneath a willow, had left his mount unattended, grazing a bit further near the river. From time to time he watched to the north-west, without much conviction. The Hobbit behaved with great skill despite his fear. He walked a few yards up in the back of the watchman and was about to throw the small bag of elvish pollen in the branches above him, when he sensed the presence of a dark dog. The monster was quietly progressing through the grass to position in his own back. He only had time to arm his throw. The bag of pollen reached the mouth of the monster in full leap and Gerry rolled in the grass to avoid it. When he stood up, trying to arm his sling with a stone out of his pocket, he saw the animal lying on its side, his head nodding up. He himself did not feel very brave. The Hobbit saw the monster lay his head and fall asleep, but not the man who grabbed him by the collar when he lost consciousness himself.

He was revived by violent blows. His bruised wrists were bound behind his back and the contents of his pockets spread between the roots of the willow, piled on a soiled cloth: his coins, some jewelry and cameos -pledges of love-, two stones, his sling and his knife. His purse lying gaping on the floor and his vest was open. The ventral inner pocket was torn, but the pipeweed gusset under his armpit had miraculously gone unnoticed. The treasure of Father Hornblower had escaped the search of the villain, who certainly knew nothing about pipe-weed...

-« Now here is the ratling from the cantons! You tell me where it is, at once! »

Gerry’s spirits came back to him gradually. How long could he stand facing the villain? What would happen to him when he would have given the treasure?

- « I do not know what you mean! »

A volley of blows greeted this courageous response. Gerry screamed. The man drew a rapier.

-« Next time I will make you squeal with this! Where is it? »

The Hobbit felt the ring of an old halfling would not satisfy such a scoundrel.

-« I don’t have it! groaned Gerry

- Indeed? I thought so. The boss is after the old wandering man. You are no longer of any use to me! Thank you for your little trinkets. »

The ruffian raised his weapon when Gandalf’s sword cleft through his head up and down. The mass of the robber collapsed heavily on the side. His face drawn with anxiety, the wizard rushed to the Hobbit. -« You have nothing?

- I am crippled with bruises and pain, but I think I’ve nothing broken. »

The Hobbit was entitled to a dual sip of mead. Gandalf girded his belt, arranged his purse and gave him back his belongings. He fetched their mounts and Gerry sat on the pony.

-« You are made of a stronger dough than it seems at first sight... So it seem I do have it, whatever it may be? », threw the wizard, but the badly hit Hobbit gave him a look which asked for mercy:

-« He was about to kill me, I just tried to save time. For once you were late... »
The wizard did not comment and stopped torturing the poor young Hobbit. He sabotaged the saddle of the dead rider, took Gilles and his stalion’s reins then went eastward. The travelers had barely covered a league when a long horn call was blown behind them. The skittish black steed reared, dominating Gandalf who dodged the horseshoe blows with great skill and even more luck. The wizard overpowered the stalion with difficulty and mounted it once more, applying all his will to thwart the secret orders that the faithful animal had obviously received and understood. The wise launched the last ride to the river. They heard the chase converge towards them at high speed, but Gandalf’s memories did not fail him. They found their way without hesitation among flooded fields and muddy swamps.

After another league, Gandalf found a rangers trail and emptied his supply of powder on the ground. Flocks of birds took their flight in their path, giving a mark for their pursuers. Then they launched their mounts to the last gallop for getting to the river bank. A small grassy surface stretched almost dry and firm between two thin willows. On the contrary, the bank around had a muddy and indistinct appearance. This place looked like a pier, although Gerry could see no ferry. Before them, a large body of water, driven by a slow but powerful stream, ended in a degraded marsh plants. Gandalf sang a short elven song, raising his arms toward the East:

- « Edro Annon Gelydh »

Three large black swans arose from clouds carried by the West wind, landed gracefully together at the surface of the river, and swim calmly toward them.

Gandalf unloaded their mounts of the wood bundles, he scattered quickly around the pier, attacked by swarms of marshes insects. He set them on fire with his staff, ordering a long and contagious combustion. The fire definitely began to take and extended when a new horn call sounded, much closer than the last. Other blows echoed in many places from their shore. The black horse, stolen to the ruffians, suddenly unleashed and fled to its master. The ropes that had attached the bundles on top of this horse were not completely loose. In its flight, the dark horse pulled a burning fagot. The wizard sat Gerry back on Gilles, grabbed the reins and said contentedly:

- « That will keep them busy! To the river! Let us follow the swans! »

The majestic birds bowed their slender neck before Gandalf, who gravely greeted them back, imitated by speechless Gerry. Then the wizard followed the swans in each of their aquatic ramblings. Fifteen minutes later, they had crossed the hundred fathoms of loamy stream and reached the swamp on the South bank, but Gandalf was soaked to the waist and completely muddy. Still clinging to the pony's mane, Gerry heard behind him a sinister crackling, while the surface of the dark waters around was covered with small fugitive tongues of yellow lights. Turning back, he saw that the willows lining the pier blazed with a yellow and green eerie fire. Two figures could be distinguished struggling in the flames, several others in the background trying to master terrified mounts. This furnace could be seen from quite a distance, especially as darkness began to grow. Other Men had tried to bypass the flames and were pitifully stuck to the waist. Two of them had managed to emerge and even reach the bed of the stream. The most slender had paid with his life the absurd attempt to defeat the current of Eriador’s most powerful river. The second had also lost ground and struggled to regain the North bank. The Hobbit warned the wizard who appeared troubled:

- « I never imagined they would brave the fire of Anor ... What force drives them so? What a pity for these centuries-old trees ... But let us not be discouraged and take advantage of the diversion… »

But his concerned tone showed a nagging doubt. It subsided when the rain suddenly fell from the
grey clouds, while the black swans drew them further in the heart of the marshes. How many times had he been forced to kill in defense of his young protégé or himself? Could that have been avoided?

.oOo.

[1] Let the Noldor gate open!
The company escapes the dark riders in the swan's marshes.

The North shore vanished behind the curtains of marsh plants. Dusk casted its last orange rays when the old willows finished burning at the pier. The swans swam steadily over several miles, followed obediently by a thoughtful wizard and a yawning Hobbit, jolting among the packages loaded on the pony. The three dark figures, driven by an ancestral memory, found their way between impassable depths, muddy sands, extensive reed and cattail marshes, interspersed with a few layers of naphtha. The Hobbit did not feel above a package itself, both physical and mental fatigue accumulated in recent days isolated him from the outside world. Fatigue had anesthetized any pain: he was neither cold, nor - almost - hungry, and perceived the lapping of his companions very remotely.

They walked into the plant and water maze until they could hardly distinguish the black swans who continued their journey, imperturbable. Hungry insects harassed travelers and the pony. The small group had progressed for two hours in the general direction of the northeast when the three swans stopped. Hesitant, confused, craning their necks and snapping their beak, the birds returned a few feet back as three undecided or drunk elders on their way home. Gandalf approached, intrigued. The water depth was knee-high. The pony shivered, half awoke the dazed Hobbit and moved nearer the wizard. The black swans behaviour extending, he became worried. The dark water seemed oily around his boots. A sudden whiff of spoiled meat and naphtha grabbed them by the throat. The wizard would venture to do some light when Elbereth came to his aid by revealing for a moment the almost complete disk of the waxing moon. The small channel through which they had progressed was lined either side by a wall of dense reeds. Before them a large pond stretched its calm and foul waters. Gandalf pretended to move eastward across the pond. The three swans came immediately and cut him off, extending their great wings and standing in the manner of a goose seeking to protect its goslings. He retreated to the South edge of the channel, lined with reeds. The swans came by, peacefully this time. He repeated the command:

-« Edro Annon Gelydh ».

The swans lowered their necks with respect and sadness. Then along with each other, they graciously took flight on the marsh arm by which they had driven the travelers. Gandalf said aloud:

-«I wonder what could have possibly inhibited them this way. Yet we are at the end of the marsh, their mission was almost accomplished. The memory of the Elves of old does not protect us any more... We are heading for dark times. I will have to revive the memory of bright and beautiful things. »

He shook the Hobbit a little and realized his near-comatose state. After a few rather terse words of encouragement, he explained that the marshes end was near. All they had to do was going around the pool before them to reach a drier ground and find a place to spend the night. The wizard grabbed the pony’s rein with his left hand, raised his staff in the right and commanded:
The end of his staff slowly radiated a soft, warm glow. With the golden rays mingled moonlight nets and flicker of distant stars. Gandalf raised his staff that shone increasingly and led the pony. Quickly the water depth decreased. The wizard pushed the reeds aside with his staff and progressed slowly as they skirted the pond. They had covered about halfway when a marsh arm appeared before them. The pony stopped dead, covered with sweat, rolling frightened eyes and every limb trembling. Gandalf had, to compel Gilles to move forward, to seize the reins near the jaw and guide it while humming small elvish lullabies. The pony consented to follow. Gandalf engaged in the channel and was surprised by the significant depth - after a few steps, he had water at mid-thigh. His lifted staff projected on the viscous surface, the silhouette of the Hobbit perched on a pony. They reached the bottom of the water arm, Gandalf struggling with the mud up to his waist. The pony was again overwhelmed by scare, this time by large algae among which he walked. Gandalf sang again a soothing elvish tune. The group began to move towards the opposite bank, when Gerry mumbled between his teeth:

« Something is breathing in the pond… »

Indeed some bubbling appeared where the water arm joined the pond. An unbearable stench assailed them. They stopped, overwhelmed with horror. The pony was shaking like a leaf again, paralyzed and unable to respond to the strong pull of Gandalf. Suddenly an arm rushed out of the stinking effervescence and fell on Gerry’s head. It was not a human or even troll arm. It was a living vine, strong as a centenarian root but as agile as a snake. It grabbed the Hobbit by the neck and pulled him into the water with an irresistible force. The pony rushed forward, terrified. Gandalf, not seeking to restrain the animal, took his staff in his left hand, drew his sword and rushed to rescue the Hobbit, who struggled like a rabbit just caught by a weasel. He was about to strike down the vine but changed his mind since the melee was so confused.

Gandalf dropped his staff that illuminated the water below and reached into the bubbling. He managed to grab a Hobbit’s foot and pulled it out of the water. Gerry’s reversed and convulsed face was desperately trying to inspire. Gandalf could finally blow the monster, side-cutting with his blade. The vine, half cut, stiffened while releasing the Hobbit. Putrid and luminescent flesh fell out of the cut. The bubbling, retreating, became greenish and glowing. The injured vine disappeared there but suffocating fumes forced Gandalf to flee quickly. He picked up his staff and climbed the bank, with a panting Hobbit under his arm. A glance back showed him that the monster had retreated to the middle of the pond. Gandalf gasping followed the trail the poor Gilles had left. As announced by the wizard, they quickly reached a drier ground.

- « You have nothing broken, have you? », asked Gandalf.

- « My neck burns terribly. But I can already breathe better… »

The Hobbit’s glottis and jugular were torn and covered with disgusting pimples. Gandalf could do nothing about it right now except rid the wounds of the viscous and pungent substance that covered them.
- « You have not lost anything? », inquired the wizard sheathing his sword and cleaning his staff.

-« I do not think so», said Gerry, dabbling under his armpit. The gesture was not lost for Gandalf, who had asked the question on purpose. He added:

- « Yes, I see you still have your purse. »

The prostrate Hobbit, lying on his back, far from these subtleties, only applied to breathe. Gandalf undressed him, wrung his clothes and put them back on him. He resisted the temptation to explore the purse pocket where Gerry kept his pipeweed. He added slyly, "Your pipeweed should be all wet," but the halfling did not react.

Gandalf cast a look of pity on the Hobbit, both for his wounds and the weight of his assumed burden. The wizard picked the little body up in his arms and set off again, muttering: « Hopefully we'll never see such a horror! » Indeed many years would pass before he would meet it again.

.oOo.

[1] Elbereth is Manwë’s spouse, Queen of the stars and tutelar power of the Elves.

[2] Let shine the lightest of lights!
Gandalf progressed a few minutes, following the pony’s trail without difficulty. Nevertheless after an hour of walking, the path left the muddy and reedy soil to get lost among shorter grasses and bushes. However, the loose ground kept a readable track of the pony’s passage. Obviously the mount was still scared when it had been there: the horseshoe prints showed a frenzied gallop amid the bushes. Gandalf was concerned about the Hobbit, whose fever seemed to increase. Despite Gerry’s need for rest and care, the wizard went on, hoping to find the pony. The terrain became more rugged as the moon reappeared from time to time. The fresh wind would have started to dry them if both had not been covered with a layer of sticky and stinking mud. When at last mosquitoes became scarcer, the wizard gave up finding the fugitive animal, although he had retracted their provisions, their equipment and spare clothes. He found a sheltered hollow and gently placed the Hobbit in a sandy trough. The wizard gathered dead branches and some fragrant twigs and lit a fire with his staff. He let the Hobbit rest by the fire to warm up.

Gandalf had kept his pipe and pipeweed on him in his waterproof purse. Thoughtfully he filled his pipe and sat down not far from the hearth. He was to share several serious issues with the rangers when he would manage to find them, starting with the horror of the marsh that had just attacked Gerry. The old wizard remembered a creature encountered in the first age of the world. That memory came from a hidden part of himself, deeply repressed in the unconscious depths of his current form. A nymph, powerful mother of life and death of the Beleriand marshes, had once caught him in her nets of poison and seduction. The spirit of the primordial waters had felt, for the first time, a strange affinity with the form Gandalf assumed then.

He taught the fierce mermaid the gray Elves language, to capture the essence of things and beings and to turn it into words. Dazzled by this rise out of her world of silt, currents and eels, the wyvern was persuaded to release him. Usually she would devour her lovers after the act of life. Gandalf, who had another name then, meant to bring the spirit of the old world to the wisdom of the immortal lands. But the seduction of boundless free spaces overcame the sterile and confined abode, bathed in the golden light of the Immortals. He did not know what happened to her. Back to wilderness, had she created some monstrous offspring across the Blue Mountains?

His mind came back in our age of the world:

- « Is this horror of the marshes an offspring of wyverns? Which dark force has nourished and brought her so far? Why did she attack the Hobbit? Would not this rather be the monster inhabiting Hobbit legends, the Fastitocalon, from the valleys of the Anduin river? Or is the Hobbit’s burden, the cause of this attack? He does not seem the target only to black rangers, but also to this horror from the shadows. What evil burden may he bear? »

The next day the halfling felt nauseous but he could breathe without difficulty. Curiously he felt no malnourished Hobbit hunger. Gandalf, relieved, shared with him some cordial and a wafer of waybread. He found clean water and washed the Hobbit’s neck wounds, which had swollen but seemed less purulent than the day before. Then Gerry and Gandalf resumed their search for the
pony. Unfortunately the trail was hard to follow on this ground that increasingly looked like the moors of North Farthing of the Shire. They lost it a few times and found it by retracing their steps, noting that the pony had gradually turned south. Then the hills became less and less wild, sometimes even with a lawn decorated with juniper and holly. Gandalf explained that the region, once known as Eregion, was also known as Hollin, due to the large number of these trees that grew there. The High Elves had lived there for a blessed time.

But the track eventually dried up. After several failures, it had become all too clear that they had lost track of the animal. Gerry tried a few whistles, without success. Then they saw a dense grove of trees on top of a large hill. Holly seemed planted in a circle, spreading their dark, glossy foliage to form almost perfect balls. Attracted by the symmetry of the place, the Hobbit led Gandalf and climbed the hill. Once at the top, they noticed that the air, which moments earlier was carrying some hints of marsh smells, now seemed to them softer, with a healthy and relaxing flavor. The sky, that all morning long, was covered with an opaque and threatening roof, now dissolved it to filter the pale rays of a distant sun, as shining in the early ages of the world. Gerry’s view from there was like the gaze of a gyrfalcon ascending the heavens when the sky was new. Gandalf watched the Hobbit with amusement and curiosity.

- « We are on Amon Wenrin, the Hill of remembering. Elves who inhabited this land long ago, had planted these evergreens to revive the memory of their happy days. They say that things look like in your early youth, with the candor and innocence of an awakening mind. I wish I could go there whenever worries and chains of life prevent me from fairly appreciating hassle or grace.
- I wonder how far reaches your own memory back ?
- I remember many things from the Elder Times. But I had to forget a lot to relearn the laws of this world, so not to transgress any.

- Do you always speak with riddles?
- Some puzzles, tamed and embellished by their inevitable, slow and patient work of appropriation, are sometimes better than bare and hard truth. But as for yourself, have you told me everything I need to know to guide you on the adventurous road of courage?

- These last days, you have taught me the beginnings of humility. I'm a Hobbit, with simple and mundane ambitions. All I am looking for is happiness.

- There is neither happiness without freedom, nor freedom without courage.[1]
- It is perhaps brave of me to keep my secrets.

- It is true that sooner or later the price of secrecy as well as confession must be paid. You're probably right. Steadfastness requires courage, whether it proceeds from blindness or intransigence. But consider that in both cases, you might not be alone to bear the consequences. »

From that moment, the wizard ceased his attempts to circumvent the Hobbit about his burden. He continued:

- « But you have not answered my question. What are you feeling right now?
- Well, I feel better, my injury does not hurt any more. But I am ravenous! »

Gandalf loughed :

- « This is proof that your young Hobbit functions are stimulated by the place. But I was not
talking about immediate sensations. What comes to your mind when you let it float in your past? 

Gerry took a deep breath and sat down on the grass, letting his gaze glide to the green hills, South of the promontory. Their slopes led to a river, barely discernible in the distance, but Gerry’s thought blithely crossed the distance, fishing in a like river from his buried memory, an episode from his childhood. He saw himself lying in the shade of an alder, his feet in basil plants. The heat of a summer afternoon and a long run after a dirty trick, had led him to the banks of a tributary of Baranduin. A thick green roof retained a nice freshness to the valley where he had fallen asleep.

Through his half-closed eyes, he saw a little girl cross the river with graceful petty leaps, like a spring dragonfly gliding above a pure stream. She raised her diaphanous dress, held at shoulders by thin silver chains, exposing her small barely wet feet. Her handsome face, framed by long silver hair, already mingled the seriousness of Elven folk with childhood glee. Her wise and worried brow bent over Gerry’s. With her index, she stroked the lips of the small Hobbit, who muttered a fairy rhyme of the Shire. She rose quickly, her enchanting smile splashing the whole valley with droplets of joy. The little Elf recrossed the river with her swift elegant jumps. On the opposite bank, a majestic Elven lady, Gerry could distinguish only when she moved, welcomed her child who softly told her, hardly containing her excitement:

« Perianeg gar senneg, Emel ! »[2]

The grim woman smiled to her daughter, looked up at the Hobbit and extended her hand to him protectively. Gerry closed his eyes and buried the memory of what seemed a dream, deep into his heart.

- « Come back, Master Took! Do not fall asleep in the maze of your memories... You are not as ignorant as you imagined! »

The deep voice of the wizard hauled Gerry back to the surface of present time after the Hobbit had caught his memory in the depths of his unconscious mind.

- « I saw Elves!

- Say rather that Elves have seen you! They travel through the woods of the Shire in fine weather. It's not that they are particularly interested in your little person, as they move away from Middle-Earth and its sorrows. But they have many ways of knowledge that you do not suspect. Birds report to them the deeds of the mortals. And trees hear many news along, yet they remember mainly what concerns them. Winds themselves can tell stories... But the young Took’s mischiefs are somewhat monitored, as you can imagine. So you knew deep inside yourself that you sometimes share your lands with other folk, older than yours, in the heart of your beloved Shire?

- My people have long wandered in the past. Our stories depict the memory of a hard world, full of mysteries. Nowadays Elves, creatures of the woods and dark things dwell far away. We came to doubt their reality, if ever we did not invent them completely. But we still sing about the hills goblins and the wood Elves: it is always good policy to have the spirits believe they are feared,[3] even if we only count on ourselves to mind our business.

- When you come back, you will be fully informed as to the Elves, and perhaps, I fear, about some less respectable creatures that roam mountains and wilderness. But I see it is dangerous for a mortal to delve into the depth and intense reality of elvish memories. Come now. This place reminded me of a few side roads of this beautiful country. I think we have a chance to find your good Gilles. He probably went, like any good horse, to the former stables of the queen. »

They went down the hill to the Southeast. Along the slope, the sky turned gray, but the Hobbit’s
heart would now be more attentive to the wonderful stories that awoke a distant echo. His shooting pains in the neck and stomach cramps gradually resumed. Gandalf occupied his mind by telling him the exploits of Elves of old, while walking along the ruins.

Turning a holly tree, they emerged into the remains of a large building. The crumbled blue marble walls formed acute angles that were piled overlooking a stream, swift and deep. An impeller flow and remnants of small stone channels showed that it was an old workshop.

- « My dear Hobbit, your furry feet trample one of the high places of the arts in Middle Earth. Between these walls, the high-elven blacksmiths forged some of their finest works.

- What did they forge?

- All kinds of beautiful objects: ornaments, weapons, tools, construction parts... The science and art they displayed bore to the highest, the techniques to tame metal and stone. Sharpness, lightness, elasticity, strength and many other qualities of nearby ores, were discovered, explored and mastered, right here!

- Did Elven craftsmen surpass the works of the Dwarven smiths?

- In this blessed period, before the war came and the doors of Moria were shut, the Noldor and the people of Dùrin supplemented each other wonderfully and shared their secrets. But these Elves possessed, above all, the gift of imbedding the subtlety of their thought and depth of their lore, into the works of their hands.

- Do you mean they forged learned objects?

- Don’t be ridiculous! Let's just say they imbued their most beautiful works, with much of their will, their passion and also their need to transmit and share. Creativity and desire to discover was an integral part of the life force of the High Elves. An Elven ring, for example, perfected the skills of his guardian and increased his power to bear beauty to the world. This kind of ring was a gift from its creator, who conceded a part of his understanding of the world to share it. Thus such a ring comforted its bearer in his ability to protect, teach, reinforce. That's why they were called rings of power. Of course, its power grew in accord with the guardian’s skills, and the risks, in proportion with its use.

- Why that?

- Any power is a responsibility that bears both opportunity and risk. It seems to me that the greatest of these is the temptation to impose one’s will by force, even for the sake of good. »

Among all the wonderful works of the Elven blacksmiths he could illustrate, the wizard had chosen the rings of power. The coincidence struck Gerry. Did he read in the Hobbit’s mind on Amon Wenrin? More likely, Gandalf had guessed the nature of his treasure, and had brought him here on purpose, to teach him the perils and the responsibility it entailed. He watched the wizard stealthily, but could read no trace of deception in his remarks or his attitude.

Father Hornblower’s ring was probably an artifact of knowledge and power. Gerry had noticed that the quality of his own smoke rings had greatly increased in recent times. Now that he thought about it, he also found out that the instruction recently given in the art of smoking the pipe-weed, had proved fast and wonderfully adapted to his pupil, besides the fun he had experienced from that. Unusual thoughts that his conversations with old Gandalf had caused, also proved that a mutation was at work. A broader view had begun to shape in his awakening mind. And most of all, the risks he had recently endured proved that many kinds of power tended to his ring... This item may
indeed be a ring of power! Gerry checked it was safe at the bottom of his snuffbag.

The travelers had followed a small paved road with multicolored stones that wound South between ruins overgrown with clematis and some great hollies. After a dreamy silence, Gerry decided to keep his thoughts to himself and changed the subject:

- « Do you think we could find some of these objects, buried here in the ruins?

- Do not think you would come across a magic ring under your feet. This won’t happen.[4] Very few were forged. But you could indeed, armed with luck and persistence, uncover forgotten warehouse and find a good blade or some good quality tool. The country was hard-won by the black enemy. Fighting mowed the flower of Noldo people and their wonders are everywhere. This is what sometimes brings in the tribes of Dunland, despite their hatred and fear of the Elves.

- What would they be afraid of? You said to me that these lands are deserted, didn’t you?

- This is right, but a land long remembers the Noldor who dwelt on its slopes, worked its soil and fashioned its landscape with love and cunning. So do not be surprised, after dark, to see pale echoes of their former presence.

- Ghosts?

- Stop your nonsense! Simple reminiscences evoked by stones and trees to venerate the memory of the people who beautified this country long ago. They have nothing to do with the dark deceptions…»

Gerry silenced his ambitions to investigate about ghosts. Gandalf had got into a story of Eregion while the small paved road passed under ivy-covered arches. Gerry first saw the Elven survivors gather after the wars of the first age. Gil-galad founded his Elven kingdom in Lindon while proud Celebrimbor led the tribe of Fëanor in Hollin. In this land, neighbor and friend of the mighty Dwarven kingdom of Khazâd-dum, blossomed the confederation of the Elven blacksmiths. Then came Lord Annatar, great among the powerful, who taught the smiths. Their thirst for knowledge was great; their will to unravel the mysteries and tame the world of minerals led them to open their minds. Then they were caught in the traitor’s nets and deceived. With the knowledge he had stolen from them, Annatar forged in secret the ring of power to rule them all, and turned into his true nature: Sauron the Dark Lord. With his instrument of domination, he invaded the lands of the West. Hollin was devastated and the halls of the blacksmiths destroyed. The Dwarves of Khazâd-dum closed their gate and brought no help. Thus was revived enmity between Elves and Dwarves once again. Elves resisted with all their might, but they would have been defeated without the alliance with the Men of Westernesse who deployed their power from the heaven of Tharbad. Sauron was humbled and taken captive in Numenor.

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[1] Pericles

[2] The baby Hobbit is having a nap, Mummy!


[4] Now our dear reader might better understand Gandalf’s disbelief when another Hobbit would claim, a century later, a ring had popped out of the dark under the Misty Mountains. And yet…
Chapter Summary

Gerry and Gandalf awaken greed and discord among the ruins of Eregion.

Gerry had stopped pretending he listened, since he understood that these events preceded by many centuries the history of the kingdoms of the Dúnedain. Venturing into the maze of lawns and groves, Gandalf found the remains of an old garden. Two lanes crossed under a double arch of thin stone lace, colonized by beautiful roses. Cultivated squares had become dense tangles of plants of all kinds, but the wizard had no difficulty in locating and digging up some vegetables, they shared and ate raw. Gandalf sacrificed his handkerchief to make a plaster of medicinal leaves and treat the Hobbit’s neck.

After an hour’s rest, they resumed their southbound journey, until Gerry gave a warning: a band of many Men was discussing not far below. The wizard and the Hobbit concealed themselves in the bushes and watched large troops camping in a valley.

The men were working around a bonfire, the youngest fashioning a meal for the whole clan. Well built, growing dark braids and mustache, most wore trousers cut from the same red and beige plaid fabric. The elders, who wore a same woven plaid at their shoulder, argued bitterly, sat on broken columns of white marble. Their athletic appearance and weaponry revealed a lifestyle of hunters.

A middle-aged fellow, of medium height but with wide shoulders and a leader bearing, grabbed a hose and ceremoniously poured an amber liquid in a bronze cup. He said a few ritual words, approached the hearth and shed a few drops. Then he did the same, sprinkling the myrtle bushes nearby. Finally he drank from the cup and passed it around. The older warriors took turns drinking, some jostling to have a sip before their rivals.

No mount was visible, except Gerry’s pony, hindered, apart near a stream. Bill bucked and fought vigorously. A young man tried to subdue the brave pony, and was mocked by a wide circle of elders, who nevertheless remained at safe distance. Obviously the pony had not yet been discharged of its burden, for its resistance was fierce. The equestrian culture of these tartan-wearing mountaineers seemed almost nil.

- « They are part of a clan from Dunland, near the southern roots of the Misty Mountains, blew Gandalf. I know their leader, the old Sarlaigh: proud and greedy, with little courage but some caution. We have a chance to get your mount back at night. But let us somewhat get closer at first. »

The wizard stared long and made sure that no clansman was on duty nearby. With so many warriors around, the chief probably did not consider it necessary to establish a guard. Gandalf and the Hobbit walked stealthily among junipers and small oaks, to the edge of the stream, less than half a furlong away from the pony. Suddenly, urgent calls were heard among the warriors gathered near the fire. Gerry and Gandalf recognized the steps of prancing horses. Riders had arrived among the clansmen. Furious barkings were heard, and then threatening yells. Some swords were drawn from scabbards. Clansmen left the vicinity of the creek to gather around the hearth, unsheathing their weapons too. But soon the voice of the leader dominated the yells that grew louder and threatened to escalate into battle. The screams subsided but the tension remained palpable between
the two groups. The travelers could not see the newcomers, but they did not need to consult each other to acknowledge they should fear the worst: their pursuers had caught them up.

Dunlendings reputation was not that of highly reliable allies, but their numbers made them dangerous. The situation of our travelers, although they had not yet been spotted, was desperate. Gandalf did not hesitate long. He felt they could not escape without at least one mount. Going for broke, he ordered the Hobbit to recover the pony, and approached the melee to hear the argument, hiding in the bushes.

*The dark rangers’ leader:* -« Room! Give room! Let your chief step forward! »

Menacing dogs or wolves growls supported these attempts at intimidation.

*The dunlending chief:* -« Who comes to my camp with weapons in hand?

*Clamor of many wrathful dunlending voices:* - Respect for King Sarlaigh! »

At these words of defiance, the last warriors who were still busy, gathered around the hearth to support their kin. Spears were already brandished, and shields at shoulder.

A loud and strong voice answered, calm but carrying a dark threat:

*The dark rangers’ leader:* - « Who is feasting and lounging, while the Master ordered the hunt?

*Some dunlending voice objecting:* - Foreigners must claim their name first!

*Some taunting dunlending voice:* - Dismount, slave of your master, for you to meet our King! ».

The anonymous dunlending had heavily emphasized the insult "slave" and the rejection of the "master", whoever he was. The ranger with loud voice had to regain the initiative, neither losing face, nor defying the dunlendings.

*The dark rangers leader:* - « I stay on my horse because it is just an extension of my power, as well as I am an extension of the Master’s. I am the Master's Voice. Hail to the chief Sarlaigh! I request him to honor our agreement.

*The dunlending chief:* - My clan has fulfilled our part of the agreement!

*The dark rangers’ leader:* - Where are the prisoners?

*The dunlending chief:* - We captured their baggage!

*Some anonymous dark ranger, with taunting tone:* Collecting luggage is women's chore! »

The captain turned furious to his minions. A disapproving murmur ran through the clan. But the dunlending chief continued:

*The dunlending chief:* - « My clan has no interest in capturing these useless vagrants. Only their property is helpful to us.

*Some anonymous dunlending voice, in a loathed tone:* - We do not devour our enemies. We are not allies to these cursed wolves. »

The Master’s Voice gave a masterful effort to control himself:

-« These prisoners have a great value! The Master offers a silver talent[1] for their capture, dead or
alive, on condition they be delivered without being stripped in any way! »

Such an amount lit lust in the heart of the dunlending chief, but his cowardice made him suspicious:

The dunalending chief: -« Are they powerful ghosts, for such a high corpse price?

Some of the dark rangers, anonymous and taunting : Only our children are afraid of ghosts! »

The Master’s Voice, exasperated by his sidekick’s mocking initiatives, drew his sword while turning his mount in anger. A concert of exasperated disapprovals ran through the audience. The dark ranger’s leader, unable to identify his detractor among his own troops, who watched each other with amazement, faced Sarlaigh again:

The dark leader: - The child has a value and must be delivered alive. The Gray Wanderer is dangerous and should be killed. This is undoubtedly a powerful ghost, so I’ll look into him personally. Just surround him and let us deal with him! »

The underlying disdain about the clan war abilities triggered an outcry:

- « We are the warriors of clan Ardelaigh! We do not fear anyone or anything in our hills! We do not share the reward!, shouted some strong-arms alongside their chief.

The dark leader: - The life price is fully vested to the clan if you find the fugitives!

Some anonymous and alarmed dunlending voice: Wolves surround us! »

Indeed, the beasts had hidden under shadows and had adopted the natural arc hunting disposition of the pack around the tribe. Some spears flew and several wolves were engaged. The dunlending poisoned blades would leave no chance for these monsters, if they were just ordinary wolves ...

The black rangers could not let their trackers being mauled without reacting. Then everything went on very quickly. Age-old fears took precedence over diplomacy, insults rang out from both sides when the first wounded collapsed under swords blows:

-« Slaves! Wolfheads! Step back to the abyss of death !

- Unleash our trackers, you band of degenerates! Down the disposessed!

- Down the landless! You will not be lords on our lands! »

Soon the melee was general. The dark rangers had to regroup to face very excited clansmen. Several men were killed or seriously injured on both sides. Blood bringing vengeance, no one had the power, nor soon the will, to stop the killing. The outnumbered rangers were forced to retreat, leaving more than half of them and the whole pack of their wolves, dead or heavily wounded. But the clan paid the highest price. Immediately after the hasty retreat of the dark marauders, the clansmen finished off the wounded and stripped them. Then an argument broke out between chief Sarlaigh, who was wounded and weakened, and his nephew, a well-built guy whose followers had stayed away from the fights. Obviously the missed opportunity of an alliance had displeased the challenger.

For long minutes, Gandalf had listened, mingling very rarely in the conversation, with small witful touches, and a counterfeit ventriloquist voice. Well pleased with such a turn of events, the wizard withdrew and joined the Hobbit.
For his part, Gerry had sneaked with the discretion of a hunting ferret. While clamor rose and shrank before the bellowing authoritarian voice, he joined the stream and ran to the pony. Gilles’ dunlending tormentor had joined his comrades near the fireplace, and the way was clear. The poney, immediately and easily detached, let his beloved master lead him. After a few steps downstream, at the muddy edge of the brook, the Hobbit had merged deeper into the stream and walked back upstream. Thus, he hoped pursuers would try first to track him southward. Gandalf, returning on the sly, followed him in the stream, laughing about their enemies’ discord.

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The flight was swift and driven by a lively hope. Gandalf allowed a few short breaks to feed the small group. They lacked some provisions that the pony had probably dropped in its frantic race. But the wizard insisted on continuing their flight until nightfall. Then they settled in the ruins of an old house. They had water and the opportunity to make a fire that could not be seen from away. They had the joy of a full toilet and Gandalf replaced Gerry’s bandages. The pony even awarded an independent catering with great armfuls of grasses. The two companions indulged in a real treat. The Hobbit enjoyed the wizard’s gastronomic efforts and served himself three times.

They settled comfortably and filled their pipes. Gandalf tasted the simple and relaxing quietness of this evening ceremony; Gerry lived it as a luxury after the privations and injuries he had suffered. Again he had to acknowledge the great diligence and talent of his pupil, who was soon to produce smoke rings with as much mastery as him. He thought again about the power of his ring and ventured to explore, along with the wizard, new heights in the art of smoking. Later in the evening, they happily challenged each other with strings of circles, rings that shaped in chains, and many other similar difficulties. After a final walkdown, Gandalf went to bed. Both slept the sleep of the righteous.

The next day, the two companions resumed their journey in gentle weather, heading North and blurring their trail as much as possible. No rumor of pursuit was heard. They pushed on to a valley Gandalf knew and took shelter like the previous night, between the slaughtered walls of an old house.

In the early morning, the holly woods around their ruined refuge rustled with the sweet noise of birds. A ray of bright light struck the stone wall above Gandalf. He awoke with a start, driven by a bad feeling. After an effort, he identified what had drawn him out of limbo: the chirping had stopped. The wizard blamed his late awakening: the Hobbit had already got up, and was probably raiding their dearly saved reserves. Intrigued, Gandalf called his companion. After a few seconds, a small voice, unusually hesitant, replied from beyond the building:

-« I am right here, Gandalf! »

The wizard, now worried, grabbed his staff and his sword and strode out into the light. He discovered with horror the Hobbit at the mercy of his enemies. Gerry, torso naked, was kneeling in front of a stone basin, his hands tied behind his back. A tall man pulled his head back and held a knife against his throat.

Three archers arranged in semi-circle bandaged their weapons in the direction of the wizard.

The ”Master’s Voice” of the dark rangers leader sounded, calm and confident, not far behind the archers:

« You had me hurry, Grey Wanderer! »

The wizard made a quick overview. To his right and left, many clansmen were standing guard,
ready to pounce on him. The nephew of Chief Ardelaigh threatened him with his hunting spear, flanked by his two elite warriors. Gandalf was surrounded. Any attempt, perilous even for him, would certainly result in a horrific death for the young Hobbit. He reminded the letter of the Thain, urging him to take care of his son and bring him back safe...

- « Drop your sword! Otherwise your pupil will promptly visit the halls of Mandos! ... If you still believe in this nonsense! »

Gandalf felt the head of a spear in his back. There was obviously no way to surrender. Who knows which crimes would these robbers commit once the wizard was disarmed? He slowly walked across the lawn, with a furious look. They ordered him again to get rid of his weapons. Then Gandalf leaned on his staff with an air of miserable defeat, and threw his sword to the ground. The weapon joined Gerry’s neatly folded clothes at the feet of Master’s Voice, who said triumphantly:

- « That was very clever, old Gray Beard, to pit us against each other. But you poked your nose too far this time, Master Ferret. »

A man dressed in dark leather and green clothes stepped forward to hinder the wizard with silver chains.

-« Here's a souvenir of fallen Eregion… »

Gandalf would have to play all out, risking the life of his protege and relying on luck. But our wizard did not have the opportunity to deploy his genius and the chief of the dark rangers did not finish his sentence. A lightning ripped the air as he was projected a pole[2] away. The man holding Gerry under the threat of his blade slowly fell down the side, his head completely charred. Men jumped from who knows where, dressed in a blue and green tartan. The archers let loose a volley at them and retreated hastily. The attackers, numerous and led with talent, quickly made a clean sweep.

Then a man strode forward, dressed in a rich pristine white robe. His tall stature and his bearing revealed a great lord. His deep eyes showed foresight, his gray hair lore, his noble brow determination, and his salt and pepper beard, a wisdom of many ages. With a gesture of great authority with his white staff, he sent the warriors who flanked him, to the pursuit of the fugitives. He approached Gandalf and extended his hand toward the gray wizard. Gandalf knew him, knelt to the ground and bowed respectfully:

- « Sarouman…

- Rise, my friend. », said the newcomer after a few moments, with a serious and reassuring voice. With an elegant and gracious gesture, he got Gandalf up. The latter rushed to the Hobbit who laid unconscious nearby. He revived him and made sure he was not suffering from any injuries. But Gandalf’s lack of deference antagonized the great Saruman, who yet had just masterfully overcome especially difficult circumstances:

- « Your compassion honors our order, Mithrandir, but don’t you have anything more useful to do than nursing a disobedient little boy? Are you sure to choose your priorities with sufficient discernment? ».

The voice was that of a prominent strategist trying to elevate the debate to a Board of young promising but turbulent captains.

The Hobbit, shaken by a nervous shivering, stood huddled on the grass, unable to move or cover up. Gandalf, upset by the state of his companion, sought his belongings, rose and dressed the
halfling, wasted by travel in wilderness. Gerry, like a sick child, did not resist. Saruman approached, vaguely impatient:

-« Your companion needs the sleep of oblivion. Let me handle this! ». The tone of the healer in the fullness of his art; left no alternative. Gandalf parted with gratitude and hope.

- « Look into my eyes, my young friend. Fear dissolves into sleep! », the white wizard enunciated with a bass voice, gently authoritative and reassuring. Then he ran his hand through the brown curls of the Hobbit who relaxed, laid down and fell immediately asleep.

- « He will keep no memory of this episode. You'll have to tell him when and if you feel it necessary, but I advise you to be wary. »

Gandalf bore the Hobbit in the building and covered him with a blanket. Disturbed and worried, he joined Saruman to take advice on the latest events. The two wizards went away to converse.

- «I would like to reveal some disturbing events ... » the gray wizard began softly.

- «When Gandalf appears, the storm is not far! You stand often at the heart of the tempest. I am listening to you, my friend. » The smooth voice of a general addressed with confidence to a long trusted aide-de-camp.

- « Eriador is no longer guarded. The rangers of Arnor evacuated the lands, South of the Great East Road. I was unable to meet any of them, from Sarn ford up to Thalion and the South Downs. After that my messages went unanswered.

- The absence and silence are a concern, I agree. But I have long forbidden myself to rely on a single ally. There is nothing to expect from the scattered remnants of the Dúnedain of Arnor, I'm afraid. Their lineage failed a long time ago...

- However, they are reliable, and that is much nowadays.

- They will not serve the enemy of their own accord, I grant you this. But of what use is a force that vanishes when entrusted with a mission? Have you any news?

- Their messages on the roads are cleared. I am waiting for news from the North that are slow to come... I fear winged spies assist their enemies, and that our movements are better known than we thought.

- My dear Gandalf, your route is written in letters of fire. For those who can see signs, you left a blazing trail, perfectly obvious from your halt in Thalion. So how wonder your movements are known? » The mocking tone was blended by no hint of kindness. Gandalf passed on:

- « I may explain their absence, only because of a major offensive. Men, numerous, well-equipped, provided with gold, do spy in Thalion. They terrorize the weak and buy the others, I bet. My friends assured me that those I met had been through Tharbad. But beyond Gwathlo, there is no force able to maintain such troops. Where do they come from?

- I spotted this group for several months. They obviously come from the east, where they are trained physically and morally. Their allegiance seems flawless... Their captain, in particular, who calls himself "The Master's voice" is particularly stubborn. I suspect some black magic.

- We have been pursued on many miles. The captain promised a silver talent for our capture.

- A silver talent! The reputation you boast of cannot serve our cause, Gandalf. » The voice had lost
its smooth tone, animated only by annoyance and a touch of jealousy.

- « They were to execute us. Their violence is blatantly obvious. »

- « I do not think your young friend has any interest, either for you or for your attackers. You are always at the heart of the storm because you provoke it. » The harsh voice was that of an angry father but righteous, sorry to have to rule.

- « I would like to find out where they come from.

- I know where they come from, Saruman interrupted. And I shall take care to avert this threat, as you certainly have noticed. When I am done with them, their corporation will have been expelled from Eriador. You do not seem to understand that a power is about to rise, Mithrandir. » The tone of Grand Commander of the army admitted no reply. «A power struggle has just begun; we have to keep control of the western regions at all costs, otherwise we shall fall. This war is now my business. »

The white wizard led Gandalf to the ruins, leaving his conclusions pending for a moment. Then he turned to his subordinate and he meant sternly:

- « The wake of your vivid demonstrations is followed as a trail of fire in the night. You wrote "Here Gandalf plays his flamboyant magic" in flashes, discernible from whole Eriador. Your vow of humility vanishes in the pipe-weed smoke... Or is it desire and need to shine? I would strongly advise you to moderate your enthusiasm and to apply your skills to steadfastness and efficiency. Otherwise your charge would be removed... »

Before the pale face and tight lips of the gray wizard, Saruman took a more conciliatory tone, as with a student who needed being reprimanded, but very much liked:

- « Believe me, I regret it. You attract too much attention to yourself. I urge you, in the future, to show more circumspection. Promise me not to deploy the fullness of your power only when necessary, without witnesses. But everyone should be expected to act according to his abilities... This fight is mine now. Help your Dûnedain friends to recover their strength, if they can. Against dark rangers, I shall unleash the vengeful fury of the Dunlendings. It was time to break the web before the spider completes the weaving. »

The clan that had pledged allegiance to Saruman had proved extremely efficient. Within seconds, the Ardelaigh clansmen had been controlled and constrained. Only the "Master’s Voice" and one of his associates had managed to escape with their horses. The captured men were now held kneeling and bound to each other in front of a lying marble column. Their weary and resigned heads hanged on their chest. They seemed they had no illusions about the mercy of their captors. With a triumphant grin, the leader of the gang in blue and green tartan stepped under the cheers of his warriors. Suddenly brandishing his great battle axe, he beheaded the few survivors one by one, without further ado.

Gandalf rushed but was retained:

- « No, Mithrandir. This folk makes war his own way. What right do you have to judge them, you who have not been driven out of your ancestral lands? Besides, you are indebted to them by the law of blood: without them where would you be at that moment to cry your young friend? For this is a war without mercy, whose stake is the balance of power in the North and freedom of every people to shape its own destiny. Indeed I tell you: I may not, no more than you, leave a witness behind us... »
Gandalf bowed, sick at heart. His superior had called him to order in many respects.

The bodies were entitled to burial in the way of Dunland, but without the honors deserved to ancestors. The corpses were piled in a rocky fault. The collapsed entrance will keep the secret of these dead for eternity, unless vengeance spreads its ugly tragedy to future generations.

Once alone, Gandalf sent a final thought to these uprooted men. Their leader had admitted a dangerous and unholy alliance, but bitterness had driven them and they did not deserve such a dishonorable death.

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NOTES

[1] A talent is a unit of weigh, volume and money. As a volume, it is a cubic foot.

The Dunadan - the beast behind us.

Chapter Summary

The wizard, full of doubts, is leading Gerry to Imladris, while the wilderness around falls into a disturbing silence.

When the Hobbit awoke, Gandalf gathered his belongings and had them leave without a word. The Hobbit could not remember the morning events. Gandalf told him plainly that a fight had taken place, and they would not have to worry about their pursuers. They went off a few miles North and reached shelter for nightfall. The valley was bathed by a small spring that welled up in the grass before slipping between flat rollers. The mixed vegetation reminded the travelers they were now approaching the first lower slopes of the northern mountains.

The evening was gloomy for both companions. The Hobbit vaguely felt a lack, as if a part of himself had been retracted. This moral amputation gave him an uneasy feeling of an irreparable theft, of a secret he owned but which remained inaccessible, by the sake of a superior will, occult and all-powerful. He searched tirelessly in the fragments of memories that Gandalf’s delaying explanations did not support. For the first time he doubted the wizard, whose evasive answers aroused his suspicion. Gerry checked his treasure had not been stolen, and he blushed with shame in the twilight of the evening.

Gandalf for his part meditated the speech of the white wizard, shaken by his rebukes and mortified by the sanction. According to Saruman, a power was rising in the East, the head of their order was to fight in Eriador in person. Gandalf could neither detect these newcomers on time, nor count on his friends who had failed him. The two companions took refuge in the comfort of pipe-weed, and yet failed to share a moment of peace.

The following days were not merrier. The Hobbit, thanks to the constitution of his resilient little folk, was slowly recovering from his "memory hole" and applied to cheer old Gandalf, who seemed more absorbed than ever. Prolonged silences and incomprehensible grumbles that escaped the lips of the wizard, overcame the benevolent patience of Gerry, who finally gave up and became interested in landscape. They traveled by day, extending each stage, under often overcast and sometimes rainy skies. The gently undulating hills of Eregion faded. Travelers headed north. They crossed several spurs launched from the high peaks of the Misty Mountains to their right, before descending into the valley of the Greyflood. Then they inflected their route to Northeast along the river, at a good distance from the left bank. At times its thin gray ribbon was near enough for them to notice the silver and shimmering reflection of intermittent may sunshine.

-« Is it the River Greyflood I see there? 

- This is the River Loudwater, the Bruinen of the Elves. It descends from the Misty Mountains in the North before passing through inaccessible defiles. It joins the Greyflood a few miles Southwest of here. If we may, we shall cross it as soon as possible. »

One afternoon, after a break near a stream, he noticed a romp in the woods on their right. He watched carefully, but noted nothing special. No doubt they had disturbed a deer or stag. Yet the event raised his attention, although Gandalf showed no alarm.
At the evening camp, Gerry insisted on having a hot meal and light. Facing the ill will of the wizard to set fire to the branches he had collected, the Hobbit used the lighter. He asked again Gandalf about the purpose of their trip, in order to lead him to reject any doubt and look to the future. A well-stuffed pipe gave some kick back to the wizard who was previously lost in his thoughts. Gandalf brightened somewhat to outline his vision of the situation in the North, although he often added remarks showing that he hesitated now about his priorities.

Gerry learned that various goblin tribes shared the North, from the two ends of the Western Misty Mountains up to the Grey Mountains, constantly at war against each other. These unstable clans competed for supremacy up to the Misty Mountains passes, East of Rivendell. The low military power of the Dùnedain did not allow them to eradicate this vile brood. They could merely contain them away from inhabited lands and possibly from roads. The control exercised by Dùnedain and Elves had no other purpose than to prevent the emergence of a leader, able to connive the clans up by force. The strikes they had to arrange then, needed their much scattered troops to be gathered. Such operations required careful planning and flawless action, otherwise failure would leave Eriador exposed for many years. Thus the risks of these military expeditions were carefully weighed. Gandalf continued:

- « We can not afford all the achievements that our heart desires. Secrecy is our best asset. An ally, a Dùnadan friend of mine, is tempted by a brilliant action that I consider reckless. Although my own actions may have, themselves, be considered reckless recently! 

- « Why do you consider it reckless? », Gerry revived to deflect Gandalf from his sterile criticism.

- « My heart and my wisdom agree on this point, at least so did they when I felt I had enough wisdom. The purpose of the trip is far from our bases. We have strange and contradictory information on recent events affecting this part of the world.

- Where is this mysterious remote location?

- You will know more when we are safe in the beautiful valley of Rivendell. The exact location of this place is uncertain and distant. It will be dangerous to reach.

- So why go there?

- This is the main danger of too uncertain a goal, which shimmers off with misleading lights. This place could contain a hoard. This is what attracts my friends, who are in great need for gold.

- And what about yourself? Does the hoard draw you to this place?

- Your family is wealthy, dear Gerry. But, as they say in Bywater, "If hard work renders anyone richer, donkeys would have golden horseshoes!" So you may not realise that some wish to acquire wealth through a brilliant and courageous feat, rather than a long toiling life in the fields? But treasures usually go along with great dangers. The whole point I see in this matter, is the opportunity to destroy these perils. That is why I intend to join the expedition and advise its leader, assuming I know how to assert my views. However, once my objective is achieved, I do not see the need to let my share of the hoard to others. You neither, I guess?

- Am I entitled to a share? »

The mindless answer of the Hobbit - which as a matter of fact turned out to be a question - showed that his adventurous side was now offset by his need for comfort and certainty. He had tacitly agreed to participate in a distant and perilous expedition, attracted by the lure of adventure. The wizard immediately tested how deep the Hobbit’s fearlessness had taken over:
- « Certainly, since you will also share dangers.

- You avoid designating it clearly, and I suppose, on purpose. With all respect, I am not sure the challenge is worth the reward. What would exactly be my role? You may have noticed that I am not built like a great warrior. »

As a matter of fact, the homebody side of the Hobbit remained awake. Gandalf temporized:

- « You are careful and I like that. But we are still sure of nothing about these dangers, or even about the treasure, I’m afraid. Your talents will probably help us discreetly explore the place. »

The Hobbit indulged in various objections. Eluding protests from Gerry, the wizard changed the subject:

- « By the way I must absolutely find the captain of the Rangers of Arnor. He must have his guards close ranks in the South.

- You told me that our pursuers would leave us alone, because the head of your order had destroyed them. But have you heard why they were chasing us? Could some others come after us? »

The Hobbit had come to believe that his magic ring was the primary cause for the pursuit. Gandalf did not answer immediately, as if exploring the consequences of his answer:

- « Saruman thinks he discovered everything: it seems I have crystallized the attention of our aggressors on me. It is better that he should be in charge of dismantling the threat, while I mind some other business. »

Gerry was tempted to disabuse the wizard and tell him he knew the cause of their worries. But his ring, it seemed, had strengthened his vow to return the treasure to its owner, to repair his fault by himself. The wizard seemed reassured to focus on another matter. Thus the Hobbit, for friendship toward the old wizard but also by cowardly selfishness, did not bring the conversation back on their pursuers.

So they laid for the night, but the Hobbit slept badly. Nightmares of furtive eyes surrounding the camp did not leave him. A frightened pony neighing pulled him out of his dream. Gandalf jumped up and grabbed a torch which shone like a thousand lights in his outstretched hand. Shadows retreated to the darkness of the woods, repelling nightly rumors afar. Gerry calmed the pony. He gathered a large pile of deadwood and fueled the fire. Gandalf, who seemed to experiment the same nightmares, did the same and established two more hearths to put the pony in the center of a well-lit area. Curling up in his blanket, Gerry sat next to Gilles and decided to stay up all night. Yet at dawn Gandalf woke him up, whereas the Hobbit did not remember when he had fallen asleep.

-« Come, Gerry, I found some footprints here! », said the wizard in a breath.

Indeed, a huge canine had obviously roamed around the camp during the night and had come near to flare. They left, troubled that their pursuers might not have gone... Or was it an isolated predator? Travelers changed their route to get nearer the river, hoping to find an open field that would allow them to see pursuers from further away. All day they forced the pace through elms and pines, without need to push the pony, which gave the best of himself. Then a slope of alders and oaks finished in a long flat and sparse space. Sometimes the Hobbit noticed hurried footsteps on the leaves of the undergrowth, away back or on his right.

At lunch break, the pony showed again signs of nervousness. Yet the surrounding woods, very
sparse and quiet, seemed devoid of any animal life. Gandalf sniffed the air while Gerry cared about
the mount:

- « This silence worries me. The woods in these regions should sound the song of many birds. They
are also home to small rodents that came out of their winter sleep, we should have seen. A threat
hangs over this land, unless we ourselves are the cause of this unusual peace? »

The wizard lit a fire by precaution, and piled a great bundle of wood in anticipation of future needs.
He would load their poney with it, but for now he doubled its attachments. All senses in alert, they
waited an hour so that the pony rests and grazes the sparse grass. Finally they harnessed and strode
a laborious and worried path.

Walking for more than an hour, between the ferns and behind the pony Gandalf was pulling, the
Hobbit had the unpleasant sensation of a gaze in his back. An annoying chill ran down his spine,
but he mastered the urge to turn around and draw his dagger. Several times this horrifying feeling
resumed. He still resisted, continuing his walk. Intermittently, his neck tingled insistently.

Suddenly he could stand it no more. Before he had time to think, he was acting against common
sense. Gerry pulled out his treasure and pressed it in his right hand. He focused his attention on the
powers that he attributed to his "Ring of Power", hardening his will while a vital desire grew, to
return and stop the feeling of a predator darting his fragile neck. The pony, a few yards in front of
him, disappeared for a moment behind the low branches of a chestnut tree. Gerry had managed to
gather as much courage and conviction, as only his magic ring could grant him. After a deep
breath, he put his treasure off, ready to overcome his fear.

Following in the footsteps of the mount, the Hobbit suddenly veered behind the chestnut and
slipped silently up, climbing it as keen as a hunting ferret. Gradually, strong branches sprang
vigorously from the trunk to the canopy. When he reached more than a pole height in the tree, he
wedged his back against the rough trunk and leaned with both feet on flexible and strong branches.
Calming his breath, he noticed the horrible feeling of stealthy examination had disappeared. Then,
his feelings moving from visceral relief to lucid alarm, he realized his audacity: Gandalf was
walking away with the pony and all their provisions, while Gerontius Took, armed with his sling
and his beautiful dagger, quietly waiting for the passage of... what exactly? At least it would not
take long to find out what was approaching. For his ring had given him this certitude: he knew a
creature was following him!

After a few seconds that seemed like an eternity, he heard a stealthy progression: an animal
alternated advances and sniffles, near the chestnut. Gerry breathed slowly and deeply to calm his
fear. The animal was now at the foot of the tree. The halfling clearly perceived his stuttering
breathing and some undecided grunts. The beast walked around the tree and leaned a paw full of
long claws, covered with brown hairs and notched with a long gash!
Gerry screamed in terror. A few feet below him, a creature half-man, half wolf, raised his glazing eyes of blood-thirsty beast at him. An ancient hatred shone in the depths of the orbs. The monster growling hoarse and unintelligible words, grabbed a low branch and hoisted there awkwardly. The huge hairy body grabbed the next branch but his back legs did not allow it to rest effectively on the branches; he missed and fell at the foot of the tree, ranting and drooling with his long carnivorous mouth. This time the Hobbit’s survival instinct took over: he brandished his sling with courage but the shot was lost when the reeling leather strap hit branches.

The monster fell to the ground and raised his limb - half paw, half arm - towards the Hobbit, uttering a curse, in a language speakable by no mortal. Gerry felt directly hit by a flood of eternal hatred, as stung by the keen and implacable eyes of a mortal enemy he could never escape.

But Gandalf arrived at a run, singing an old song of strength and light. Gerry’s heartblow passed quickly. The monster retreated, not without sending a final grunt up the chestnut. He received a small stone at the base of the ear and barked one last yell before dodging and running away on all fours in the undergrowth.

Gandalf, with bristly eyebrows and his staff forward, rushed as a hurricane under Gerry’s sheltering tree. His wrath, which had subsided when he made sure the Hobbit was safe, once again erupted with the detailed narrative of events. He demanded a detailed description of the monster. But the Hobbit was not listening much, obsessed as he was by his ring of power and measuring how difficult it was to master it. He held forth about his control over his own fear:

- «I could dominate my emotions when it followed me, but I could not help but cry when I saw its hideous face!»
- «This is not a contest of individual courage! », Gandalf growled.

While pulling the pony, he roundly admonished his protégé for the risk he had incurred, and wondered what had made him so rash or altruist. Guessing no answer, he concluded:

- «At least now we know who we are dealing with!»
- «Who? You mean "What? "! I guess this pleasant gentleman is not the kind you would invite for tea?»
- «You have the right to laugh, because you have come out of this encounter alive! Gaur[1] ! A terror escaped from the deep forests of the dark years.»
- «Gandalf, you still speak in riddles! But I'm not sure any more I want the answer to that one!»
- «From your description, I am inclined to believe that this is a werewolf, a creature of the ancient world, hatched and multiplied to torment Elves and Men in former times. It was indeed a person, whose horribly mutilated mind has let itself be dominated by its most visceral fears, its most basic
needs and irrepressible hatred.

- It has hairy feet, like me... »

The wizard did not point out the Hobbit’s humorous ramblings, that were supposed to be facetious and casual, but betrayed a dull terror. Gandalf continued:

- « I am puzzled. Yet its presence gives reason to Saruman. Not only seems our group to attract an ancient evil, but this evil has traveled extensively to reach these forests.

- So this monster is not home? So much the better! Maybe it will get tired if it has nowhere to feed or rest!

- I would not count too much on it. But now we have an advantage, thanks to you, we better identify the dangers that pursue us, so I will prepare myself accordingly. Keep high spirit, my dear Hobbit, the tables of Elrond are getting close. »

Respecting the meditation of the wizard who already customized a defense for the next night, the Hobbit began to speculate on the "tables of Elrond." The plural, to begin, seemed enticing. His Hobbit psychology first had some difficulty in imagining them otherwise than in terms of size, number, opulence or nutritional value of their food. This greatly increased his motivation. Then the possibility crept into his mind, that these beings, who bred beauty and grace since ancient times, had been able to develop culinary arts, that were unreachable by mortals. For a long moment this very hope surpassed all his fears. Gandalf did not know how far his encouragements had achieved their goal: the adventure could be worth the risk, after all...

The two travelers had resumed their swift and worried progress. They forced the pace and strode for hours, only interrupting for short snacks. They joined the river over a cliff while the day was quickly declining. The strong and turbulent flow, lit by a sun that set in the axis of the river, threw golden and silver reflections. A mist rose from the abyss in an uproar, that mosses and ferns lining the cliffwalls partly silenced. After getting his bearings, the wizard took them upstream in a race along the riverbank. A league further they overhung an impressive precipice, down which the river was boiling. Twilight assembled its pastel glows to the west. Gandalf announced smiling:

- « The Elves call this place Cabed Athrad[2]. This is the perfect place to hold pursuers at bay. »

The raging river had cut an island with steep banks. The island, winding for half a furlong, was accessible from the left bank by a narrow stretch of rock that spanned a chasm approximately two fathoms wide. Some pines and bushes had overrun a ruin, maybe a relay or forest cover, in the center of the island. They had great difficulty having the pony across the stone arch.

- « Once a wooden bridge widened this passage, which was guarded all year, Gandalf said bitterly. Where are the Dûnedain? »

The case went to the Hobbit who tempted poor Gilles with a carrot gleaned from the Elven garden, somewhat dried but that certainly seemed for the pony like a delectable candy in the wilderness. Then the mount safely reached the island, without losing any of its package. Relieved of his load, he was sheltered in the middle of collapsed walls covered with briers, tied up and covered for the night. Gerry stuck some branches of green leaves in the brambles to his attention.

The wizard quickly lit a fire just before the rocky arm. The two companions busied themselves to prepare defenses. The atmosphere of the camp tonight was firm and battling. Gandalf had regained his authority and the Hobbit showed attentive, motivated and applied. Should this be seen as an effect of the change his ring began to work on him? Whatever it was, he immerged in the
preparations very seriously.

He was in charge of collecting all pine cones he could find. He also heaped suitable stones for his sling. He even ventured on the right bank. On this side the precipice was also important, but much larger and with no natural passage. A solid bridge of logs, built by the labor of men, spanned a broad and voluntary arch above the tumultuous and deadly waters. The pillars of a former stone bridge could still be distinguished underneath. On either sides of the wooden bridge’s northern edge, stood two stone statues, a fathom high. Harsh weather had stripped etched details, but Gerry distinguished a resemblance with the stone guardians he had crossed a few days earlier, near the keep North of Cardolan or at the entrance of the vault of consciousness.

Large oak trees leaned over the North bank, like elderly men looking, over the water, for the bright memories of their youth. Approaching the hieratic monoliths, which shape evoked a helmeted guard, the Hobbit cleared his throat and enunciated emphatically, as he heard Gandalf do it a few days ago:

- « I do not recall the king’s name, but I am a Hobbit of good will and friend of the free peoples. Please give way to the heir to the Thain of the Shire, who received patent from the King a long time ago. »

Thereupon he advanced timidly, watching the statues which cast neither a lightning flash nor a sensational fanfare, nor even any tremor. The little Hobbit felt very lonely but he braved the threshold of the bridge and the darkness of the North bank. It seemed that the clouds parted for a moment, revealing the stars, as to open the way for a friendly thought, launched in the night just in case. Equipped with a burlap sack, he gathered armfuls of firewood and pine cones. He also discovered a recently fallen tree, probably hit by lightning. The Hobbit picked some sections of fresh wood along with thick fragrant resin. At the camp, Gandalf congratulated him for his initiative and bustled while Gerry returned to pile some wood.

A distant roar was heard. It mingled a marauding wolf cry with an appeal to slaughter. Gerry hurried back near the wizard. A howl rang twice in the South bank’s shadows while the moon rose to illuminate the clouds with an uncertain and threatening halo. The roar of the waves itself seemed to have stopped, for the time of these screams of another age of the world.

After a moment of stupor, Gandalf ordered additional timber reserves were accumulated. The two companions labored over a long time, watching the left bank permanently. Finally they considered themselves ready. Nothing moved on the South bank or made any sound, as far as the constant stream made them audible. The Hobbit’s confidence rose with the flames the wizard revived, thanks to the wood he had brought. Gandalf ordered Gerry to take care of the pony and strengthen its ties, then he fashioned a hot meal that would support the fragile morale of his companion. He checked the accommodation of the pony and whispered in his ear a few verses of comfort and courage. Returning to sit by the fire, he said sipping his brew:

-« We are safe, now, I think. If it dares showing the tip of its nasty nose here, we have enough to receive it. »

The Hobbit savored this moment of comfortable security, warming his limbs by eating his soup. But a low growl was heard near the other side of the stone arch. Gandalf stood up, brandishing his staff, now as bright as a moonbeam. Gerry cocked his sling but he still could not see the monster, hidden in the shadows of the South bank.

The wizard raised his strong voice, directing his light to the opposite bank.
- « Go back to the darkness of your acursed forest! »

The growl grew louder in words of defiance, articulated in a language forgotten by mortals. But Gandalf knew that language. It wore the black mark of an enemy of the world. A huge dark figure stepped forward, picked up on itself, all muscles rolling under the thick silver-gray hide. Gerry, finally perceiving it, found it much bigger than his pursuer this afternoon. He immediately imagined that the werewolf had gone for his dad, as in the tales of his childhood. Inextinguishable hatred could be read in the split pupil. The shape straightened. It was the same animal as before: the companions could discern an open wound, bright with fresh blood at the base of the left ear. But it seemed more imposing, as if the accumulated hatred or the night had fortified it. Gandalf drew his sword, that cast a bright white glow, warning of the weapon’s cold bite.

-« You will not pass! The Anor fire is to scorch your hair and whiskers before consuming your hatred in purifying embers! »

The mention of mustaches startled the Hobbit. This grimacing face reminded him of another, almost as menacing though wildless... An even more powerful roar greeted the wizard’s speech. The forest around them trembled. The monster made low to the ground, ready to pounce. With a gesture, Gandalf sharpened the fire which flames lit up the surrounding trees. His staff blazed a white flash. A cry of pain rose when the wizard darted the light ray on the monster’s hideous face. The animal turned away groaning and returned to deep woods, far from the bank.

The two companions carefully peered the South bank for a while. A pitiful howl, hateful but annoyed, reached them from a hill before them. Gandalf said, with a smirk:

- « I think it understood! You may sleep, I’ll watch for now. »

.oOo.

NOTES

[1] A were-wolf!

The Dunadan - The Werewolf

Chapter Summary

The travellers are hard pressed by a pack of wolves and some vicious beast.

The Hobbit paid a short visit to the pony, he found nervous and sweaty under its blanket. He fueled the fire again. Then he laid near the hearth and managed to fall asleep. After two hours of restless sleep, another howl echoed through the night. The monster must be a few furlongs South of the island, on the low hill that Gerry distinguished now in the moonlight. The Hobbit scanned the tense face of the wizard and asked with hope:

- « Is it a farewell cry?
- I am wondering. This howling is full of hatred and helplessness, but also a hint of hope I cannot explain...»

The long growl was no sooner finished that another roar replied, far to the southeast, from the foothills of the Misty Mountains, that was immediately repeated by a lupine chorus of a dozen voices. This time the morale of the camp came sharply down. Gerry recognized here the scenario of his old tales, where the whole family of the monster come and run to the kill. Gandalf immediately occupied the Hobbit, requiring him to coat the pine cones with a resinous mixture he had concocted. At regular intervals, the chorus sung a response to the repeated calls of the werewolf, coming closer. Gandalf looked for a small promontory and found the corner of the collapsed house the pony was stalled in. He strengthened it with fallen stone blocks; this would provide Gerry with a shooting platform that would keep him out of reach of their enemies for a while. He hoisted the Hobbit with a large supply of pine cones and all the stones Gerry had gathered. The besieged were now as ready as they would ever be.

Finally a concert of victorious howling sounded on the hill in front of the island, while a gibbous moon came down on a hazy horizon. The combined pack would certainly attack before dawn. Indeed, after a few furtive rustlings, a wave of screams suddenly covered the South bank. A huge gray wolves band crept inch by inch to the brightness limit of the fire. The werewolf stepped into their ranks, channeling their pack instinct. Gandalf regretted not having lit other fires along the bank of the island, as many wolves already leaped across the chasm, upstream and downstream of the stone arch. He cast a word of fire and seizing a few pine nuts, he threw several incandescent of them around the Hobbit and the pony’s refuge. Each projectile radiated a blue flame even the more vivid as they were close to each other. The Hobbit imitated him, gradually filling a barrier of bright blue fires around his refuge. The pony tossed increasingly in the restricted space surrounded by flames, but it was well constrained.

Soon a large pack of wolves, that had jumped across the precipice and had gathered in the northern part of the island, walked stealthily toward Gerry’s platform. The Hobbit saw a dozen pairs of predator’s eyes reflect blue and yellow glows. He warned Gandalf who was holding in check half a dozen of the biggest wolves in front of the stone arch. Gerry’s pack, wavering before the flaming pines that crackled in front of them, began to grow bolder. So Gerry aimed at the biggest on both sides of the collapsed house. Thus he managed to contain the pack. When a large black male pretended to pass between two weakening flames, he was fortunate enough to reach his spine. The
pinecone remained glued to the pelt that burst in fire. The leader ran off, not without dispersing a few minor wolves, that leaped over the crevice. The trail of flames and screams could be followed from afar.

But soon Gandalf met his match. Despite the fire that blazed at the threshold of the stone arch, attacks from all sides had forced him to fight with his sword. He had a hard struggle precipitating several predators in the chasm. Others lay charred in front of the ark. Yet the wizard had to retreat. He was fighting now between the declining hearth and the ruin where the Hobbit stood. Gerry reached again the chest of a huge wolf. The animal immediately flamed, jumping like a raging mad dog. It fell into the fire he largely dispersed, then swung into the stream. Gandalf and Gerry threw their latest pinecones, wreaking havoc in the ranks of the animals. The wizard, out of breath, was driven back up to the entrance of the collapsed building. The Hobbit was helping his best, shooting now with his sling the howling mouths and demonic red eyes. Gandalf found himself at bay, pushed even further into the room. He fought for a moment near the pony. Gilles, terrified, unintentionally saved him from the fangs of a small wolf, unleashing a kick that left the carnivorous inert. A large white male tried to shake Gerry promontory; the Hobbit now had to face it with his dagger, and could no more lend a hand to the wizard.

Then strode the werewolf. Its presence clouded the dying hearth. He straightened at the building’s entrance, pushing two wolves that were about to pounce on Gandalf. For now Gerry repelled with his dagger, attacks from young wolves leaping up to his promontory. With a loud growl of rage, the werewolf arched its legs before pouncing. A small shaggy wolf managed to seize the sword-arm of the wizard. A lightning laid it dead, along with its neighbor that was about to leap at the wise’s throat. But the exhausted wizard had fallen, leaning a shoulder against the wall.

Fortunately the attention of the monster was diverted for a moment by a mysterious aerial enemy. With his staff, Gandalf, sweating and panting, slew a confused wolf and managed to come to his feet. Grimacing in pain, he mowed another that had seized one of the pony’s hock. Then he turned to the monster, gathering his forces. The werewolf seemed to hunt an unwelcome bird that assailed him from all sides. Catching his breath, Gandalf was about to hit the monster in the back, when two enormous gray wolves jumped over the collapsed wall, next to the entrance. They positioned themselves in front of Gandalf and began a concerted highly effective attack, driving the wizard back to the pony.

Suddenly the werewolf, who was angrily biting the wind, gave a fierce cry that sounded more of a gurgling than a howling. It swerved and fell to the low wall of the entrance. Lying on the back, shaking with convulsions, it awkwardly tried to remove an arrow, deeply stuck in his throat.

The fighters immediately sensed a relaxation in the assault’s intensity. Gerry was able to resume his sling and went on a rampage around the collapsed building. The twin wolves that coordinated their attack so skillfully retreated in good order outside the building. One of them was hit by an arrow; the other ran away yelping. But the monster was able to get up. Gandalf struck a blow on its shoulder with his broadsword, the tip of which broke off in a blue flash. A section remained stuck in the corrupted flesh but the werewolf, in a last effort, knocked the wizard down and fled. Gandalf, stunned but unharmed, stayed still several seconds to catch his breath. Finally, relying on his staff, he left the building, his hand firmly gripped on his chipped sword.

Two dozens wolves lied dead in the building and all around. The wizard slowly walked around the island, finishing off the wounded predators. He revived the fire and lit two more. Finally Gandalf helped the Hobbit to get off his shooting post. Gerry was shaking with uncontrollable nervous shivering. The wizard, full of caring, sat him in blankets by the fire, with a sip of cordial.

.oOo.
Dawn was just beginning to rise when a man calmly crossed the bridge of logs, a bow in hand. The wizard did not seem surprised at all. The man approached the hearth, sat down without further ado alongside the amazed Hobbit and said, smiling at Gandalf:

- « Now this place will be called Cabet Ngaurhoth[1] ! »

The two companions greeted the newcomer with simplicity, sharing their food with him. Obviously he was the archer whose intervention had saved them from disaster.

- « It has been a long time for you to come! » muttered the wizard.

- « You are very welcome! » whispered the man smiling, as if he had just received warm thanks.

Gerry understood that the wizard and the newcomer had known each other for long, and that their bickering was only the result of a long work together. A small thrush came to rest on the shoulder of the archer who welcomed her with pleasure:

- «Ah, here is my beauty! » he said, laughing. He took the bird on his finger and placed her on a rock beside him. «Here, this is for you! » he added, fingering a few crumbs of dried meat to her attention. «You saved the old Gandalf, today, you deserve some respect, if not warm thanks ... »

The wizard said gruffly:

- «Indeed your help is utterly welcome today. Let us thank you both! But this charming little thrush has accomplished the most dangerous feat!

- It is true. She is precious to me in many ways. But I've never seen you in such a hard time.

- I was recently asked to act more cautiously, thus I restrained somehow in the use of my art.

- Could it be that you accept being lectured? »

The sarcasm bristled the eyebrow of the wizard who replied with a bitter tone:

- «I always bow to an argument which outweights mine.

- A horror of the elder days would perfectly justify you fully deploy your skills. Say rather that this opponent was particularly devious and cunning to dominate powerful allies. By the way that seems to me very disturbing. What a pity that I had no projectile forged by Master Elrond or his kin! The monster would be destroyed by now...

- It will take time to recover.

- And I bet the bands he had mustered will not follow it any more… »

The man stood up and stared at the South bank at length, his right hand as a visor. The Hobbit watched from below the archer who scrutinized the eastern hills with a look of falcon. Tall and powerfully built, he wore a blackened chainmail under a dark green surcoat. His brown leather hood covered some black curls on his high forehead. A winning smile could light his proud bearing, although awareness of a forever lost golden age blunted the rigor of his long face with melancholy. Crow’s feet wrinkles cheered his gray temples, but strength and endurance radiated in all his limbs.

- « The wolves are gone, never to return... But this monster from a lost age of the world, is licking its wounds and brooding revenge…», he said slowly.
His dreamy eyes belied a voluntary jaw. He disbanded his bow and put it in a beautiful quiver covered with green and brown brodered leaves. The clouds vanished for a moment, revealing the moon as a crown to the Dûnadan’s brow. The Hobbit exclaimed:

-« You are the King of the forests! »

The tall man turned back and smiled:

- « I yearn for more! But this is a generously granted title, Master Took, son of the Shire Thain! I deem it mine till better fortune! »

The Hobbit stood up and bowed, the South Farthing clumsy way.

- « So you know me?

- The King of the Forests knows all his subjects when they stride the groves of immemorial Arnor! »

Gandalf raised a wry eyebrow and interrupted the exchange:

- « Gerry, let me present you Arathorn, warlord of the Dûnedain of Arnor. »

Moved by respect and gratitude, the Hobbit knelt down and said:

- « My people are careless and prosaic. Out of respect for your long labors, whether through work or courage, if I may serve you, I will. But truth is I am not good for anything... »

Astonishment gave way to compassion in the eyes of the Dûnadan. Then his face hardened, like a strategist who recognizes and seizes an opportunity:

- «Today I saw as much worth as I would like to instill in many young people. You'll stay with me, if you want to become... the prince of the Shire forests! »

Gandalf, who had hitherto attended the scene with a disapproving reserve, grumbled:

- «Do not dream of making a hero out of him! He is getting to behave as a decent Hobbit.

- Yet it is easier to be a hero than a decent man. We can be heroes once by chance; a decent man we have to be forever. [21] »

Gerry nodded, bowing. Growing in wisdom and prowess with such a mentor seemed to him the most enviable destinies. Furthermore, getting rid of the niggling guardianship of Gandalf would be a good trick to the wizard. Perhaps did the ranger understand that. Sitting back with a smile, Arathorn adjusted a heavy brown leather belt, on which hung a long sword and an Elven dagger in golden brown silk sheaths. The Hobbit soon fell into a dreamless sleep, reassured by the comforting presence of this unvarnished hero.

Gandalf stuffed and lit his pipe, keeping silent and focusing on his thoughts for a long time. Then he spoke again amidst smoke rings, while Gerry was peacefully snoring:

-« I have obligations to this young Hobbit, not to mention his father, who entrusted him to me. He carries a burden with him, although I don’t know what it might be. I do not think wise to add to his difficulties by giving him unreachable dreams.

- Goodwill must be cultivated, you know that, Gandalf. I have duties as well, towards this people and this land, and I have to rely on worth, where I can find it. »
The Dûnadan had spoken firmly. Probably Gandalf and Arathorn continued a debate they had begun a long time ago.

- « The night was rough for all of us. Let us leave that for the days to come. Thank you for having rushed to my call. You came just in time! »

.oOo.

NOTES

[1] The leap of the werewolves

[2] Luigi Pirandello
Chapter Summary

The Wizard and the Dunadan seem to part in many ways.

The companions rested for a few hours. Dawn tinged the still snow-covered peaks with orange and fuchsia color, which veered to a warm yellow. A concert of chirping gradually rose around them while the sun was pointing over the Misty Mountains in a bright sky.

Arathorn watched over the Hobbit and the wizard, inspecting thoroughly the South bank to the tops of the surrounding hills.

He finished his guard walk with the certainty that the werewolf was seriously injured. Abundant traces of black blood defiled the woods for a long distance.

Gandalf was refreshing when the ranger came back to the camp. They quickly talked about the way forward, while exploring the North bank, and discussing the safest way to escape.

- «I see now that I should have crossed the bridge and burned it to make us safe and prevent any pursuit.» Gandalf said.

- «My men have rebuilt it to allow the passage of our arms, when a strong party is needed beyond En Egladil[1].

- It is a brave move, but in my opinion, premature. You need to have it guarded it permanently, otherwise it is a threat against the security of the eastern route.

- Usually it is tightly monitored. Our guards would have eradicated a small party of orcs here. A bigger group would have been detected, tracked, spotted and eliminated further in the hills. But we suffered several attacks at all surveillance points on the Greyflood, from Tharbad to here. This has forced us to focus our device.

- Thus is the reason for the absence of your warbands in the South Downs!

- These enemies are not greedy short-sighted orcs, but well-armed and well-trained humans, who bred large black wolves. We had to gather as much force we could muster, around Weathertop, where they pursued us and fell into our trap. Now we are hounding the survivors from the South Downs, up to Thalion and on the Great East Road.

- Make sure that none of them find refuge in Tyrn Gorthad, even if it is dangerous to approach these parts.

- As a matter of fact I suspect an alliance with the forces of darkness. These men are well versed in the dark arts. Several escaped a quite inexplicable way. I was not surprised, when I arrived here to help you, to find a monster of the elder days. Do you think there is some collusion between our enemies and your attackers?

- I am rather sure about it. I would say they are looking for the same person. I do not know yet if it is me or the young Hobbit...
- Are you kidding?

- I have not joked since we left Thalion, more than a week ago! I inform you that Saruman, the head of my order, with his dunlendings allies, has launched an offensive against the intruders and those Dunland tribes that helped them. He defeated several groups. Can you guess where they come from?

- Your revelations are troubling. I'm sure these men do not come from Eriador. They do not know enough of its ways. From their talking, I would say they are from eastern Rhovanion. We should fear collusion with the necromancer.

- I assume that Saruman came to this conclusion. He’s caring about this threat now. They shall not cross the southern passes of the Misty Mountains or the gap of Rohan without him being notified and acting promptly. He has already had many more troops eliminated in the south.

- In this case it's all for the better! His reputation is that of a powerful wizard and an ally who keeps his word, even if we have no connection with him.

The trust and praise of Arathorn somewhat hurted the feelings of the gray wizard, who nodded nonetheless. He continued:

- « You are now free to lead the expedition you intended.

- Imagine what could be accomplished after such a success!

- Promise me you will submit your plans to the concil...

- The decisions about my people will not depend on the interests of others, be they our surest allies!

- Master Elrond is not only your oldest and most loyal supporter! More importantly he is by birth the head of your house, the brother of your distant ancestor. This should at least arouse your sense of loyalty! Check with your friends, hear their opinions, then make your decisions and assume them. »

This argument had driven them angry. They parted, fulminating. Around noon Gandalf awoke the Hobbit and got ready for the final stage of their journey: to reach Rivendell. Arathorn meanwhile had planned to join his men to reorganize oversight and plan his expedition. After some erratic leagues under the direction of the ranger, anxious to cover their tracks, they parted. Gerry begged, tears in his eyes:

- «I thought you were coming with us. I wish to learn the arts of wilderness!

- We shall meet at Rivendell in a few days, young squire. Then my path will probably climb the high pass, East of the Last Homely Home. Then may follow me, whoever loves me! »

Gandalf frowned and made no comment. The Dûnadan was the master of his decisions.

They were now at the rocky top of a naked hill. Behind them rose the mist in the valley of the Bruinen. Below them a grassy slope led to a forest of beech and oak. Arathorn described to them the way forward. Then they left, the wizard, the Hobbit and the pony engaged in the dreary slope.

Was it raw luck or some grace written in the stars? A furlong further, Gandalf noticed strange footprints in the soft ground amid tall grass. He whistled vigorously, much to the surprise of the Hobbit. Moments later, Arathorn appeared on their left, his companions hearing no approach, like a fields pixie appearing suddenly amidst poppies and grasses:
- « Still needing help?  

- It may well be... answered Gandalf grimly. I shall trust someone skilled in the wilderness art since I am fortunate enough to count a ranger among my allies. What do you think of these tracks? »

The Dûnadan leaned to the moss and carefully examined large areas of ground for several minutes. Rising, he said:

- « Small orcs, a dozen, bare feet and lightly armed. These are probably goblins of Mount Nassglan[2], Tribe Nashlârs, not far from here. They are swift and sharp like snakes. Their shafts are often poisoned... They would move in fast bands and roam the hills North of here for plundering our sheep. Some pastors have returned to the area with our help; certainly that's what attracts them. These tracks lead north, probably to the hills. They passed here two days ago.

- We have to run to their rescue! », Gerry yelled without thinking. He vaguely hoped to show his value, as a young squire before an accomplished knight.

Arathorn and Gandalf exchanged a discreet smile.

-« Do not worry, master Hobbit! We removed the cattle when the attacks began. Lambs and shepherds are safe far to the north-west. », the Dûnadan answered.

He raised his hand and threw a short cackle. The small thrush landed on his fist. After a quick confab, she flew off Northward. Arathorn continued:

- « They will not get far. Before nightfall they will be intercepted. But I'd better go with you, for your safety. »

Gandalf was much amused, without letting anything transpire except a gleam in his eye, by the pretext the Dûnadan adopted in extremis to change his mind without losing face. He liked him more for that. As for Gerry, he was overjoyed.

.oOo.

NOTES

[1] En Egladil : The Angle. Strip of land situated between the rivers Greyflood (Mitheithel) and Bruinen.

[2] White Head (as in arrow-head)
The hobbit and the Dunadan make a deal about pipeweed before descending into the mists of the hidden valley.

From the chapter "The riven valley - Down into the mists":

The Hobbit's joy was short-lived. One does not travel with a ranger at war as one frolics in the Shire. The steps were long and winding, and the meals, cold and fast. The squire-ranger's learning appeared confined to collecting timber, gathering wild berries, burrowing roots and especially neverending walking and night vigils. The evening pipe was hardly authorized; furthermore Gandalf's full authority was necessary to have it admitted. Arathorn addressed him mockingly:

-« Will you explain this new fad to me? For many years the residents of small Breeland have been cultivating and consuming pipeweed. They were recently imitated in southern Shire. And then Gandalf the Grey himself adopts this curious rite. I did not know wizards may indulge in these petty quirks. This herb has no known property besides its distillate that our ancestors from Westerndisse used against pain and apathy. Do you suffer from chronic pain or creeping apathy? »

The coal of Gandalf’s eyes were brought to incandescence under his bristling eyebrows. The wizard was about to reply when Gerry interposed hastily:

-« It's Tobold Hornblower who invented pipe-weed in the Shire long ago! »

A smile on his face, the Dùnadan answered to him with a learned air:

-«Pipe-weed in the Shire is very recent. I am a lot older than I look, don’t you know? It's in Bree indeed that once leaves used to be dried and burned in pipes. The habbit was known there a few centuries ago, at the arrival of refugees tribes from Dunland. Old Tobold imported these methods and has certainly taken advantage of distinct varieties of plants, suited to the South farthing climate. Our guards posted at Sarn ford sometimes deal with the master of manor Hornblower, which is the most famous terroir. But the weed itself was brought in the second age by Numenoreans settlers, the ancestors of my people. »

The Thain's heir felt upset that the Shire was contested this art's genuine authorship. Alerted by the Hobbit's scowl, the ranger continued:

-« But South Farthing has given its pedigree to drying and smoking, and made pipe-weed crop a true industry. My dear Hobbit, this is an expertise and a wealth that could help revitalize trade in Eriador! »

The Hobbit had never considered his green Shire as an economic high place, able to export rare and elaborate products. He reached into his memory, which usually dealt with dishes and desserts or female faces and baits, to find a precedent when the Shire would have shone by the industrial inventiveness or the commercial trick of its people. He only found the semi-legendary tales of its origin, embellished, sweetened and polished by centuries of peace and growing isolation. He expressed his instinctive disapproval about a development that would put his people in contact
with the unknown:

- « My people fosters a long tradition of modest prosperity: we produce what we need. Any surplus is dried, salted or smoked, if possible, or we resign ourselves to eat it anyway. Progress developed by industrious Dwarves, deep Elves or inventive Men does not much affect us. »

Gandalf, who was drawing on his pipe, while listening the exchange with amusement, came against all odds to Arathorn’s support:

- « The highest task of tradition is to return to progress the politeness it deserves and allow progress to emerge from tradition as tradition arose out of progress. [1] »

This interfering amazed the Hobbit and irritated the Dûnadan, because Gerry was now fully occupied to unravel the clever linen[2].

- « A tradition is nothing more than a successful progress.[3] », summarized the Dûnadan to cut short. He continued with conviction:

  « Your people have remarkably accommodated the traditions of Arnor. The inhospitable and wet holes of your years of wandering benefited the construction techniques of men, whether they were inherited from Elves or discovered by themselves. Your customs merged with our laws that, better than a pastoral tradition, govern land tenure, its work and its defense. And your people have contributed to the permanence of the kingdom, in such a way that they survived it. »

Arathorn made a pause to prepare for what he had to say:

- « Now you have lived for yourself a part of the long soil of the Dûnedain in the service of the Shire peace. We ask nothing in return: the Shire is free and carefree! We would not admit it to be otherwise. But if you think for one moment that our pain might have won your sympathy, you must consider this opportunity for both you and us. Your people master the techniques of pipe-weed. Expanding this production and trade it with your neighbors can help us rebuild a strong and prosperous Arnor! Think of the glory to bring to your neighbors, a wealth that helps them recover!

- But nobody else than us smokes pipe-weed! », said the small Hobbit incredulously.

This protest of common sense, that Gandalf had been resisting the urge to oppose to the Dûnadan for several minutes, knocked the latter from enthusiastic plans to harsh realities.

- « Yet, a wizard still indulges in it! », he muttered with hope.

Then he added more formally:

- « Master Hobbit, let us make a pact: you teach me the art of pipe-weed, in return I shall instruct you in the ways of the rangers!

- Our deal is concluded! », the Hobbit said, suppressing a yawn.

.oOo.

The next day the small group continued its way at dawn. They joined the Great East Road in a fragrant pine forest. Gandalf drove the pony that was dragging its iron shoes with an air of weary resignation. The Hobbit trotted around the Dûnadan who paced the long and steady rangers’ stride. A grassy slope led to the ford of the river Bruinen. Gerry enjoyed the contact with fresh water but Arathorn hoisted him on the pony, as the swollen waters of late snowmelt did not allow him to cross safely.
They climbed a steep slope among tall larches that led on a grassy plateau, dotted with clusters of huge blocks of gray stone. Through some pine groves, they traveled a few miles in a brisk and fees westerly wind that washed the sky’s white clouds. A little after lunch break, they left the road to the North, in a gray-green conifers wood. Darkness under the trees forced them to slow the pace on the carpet of needles that choked the sounds. Lower branches hindered their march and lacerated their flanks. Curiously, they always found it easier to move to their right, or even back on their steps. But Gandalf maintained their direction. Then the ground became very uneven, littered with sharp rocks. The pony refused to advance, not to mention Gerry. Arathorn sang a little Elven tune at the ears of the mount, which resumed its walk reluctantly. They had to mobilize all their strength of character to get through the rock. Gandalf pushed some aggressive snakes away with his staff.

The air progressively filled with vapors that rose straight to the head with heavy scents of resin and honey. Travelers hardly resisted this haze of sleep; it took all of Gandalf’s energy and the long experience of Arathorn to stay awake and guide the pony and the Hobbit in the right way. Deaf cracklings and fugitive rustlings were pushing from the gnarled trees. A huge stretch of dry branch fell with a crash in front of them. They had to fight against a growing tangle of roots and branches, feeling the menacing sounds of the angry forest welling up around them. Deliberately ignoring the threats and silencing their fear, they came abruptly to the edge of a precipice, masked by a fragrant mist that emanated from it. Gerry would have fallen into the abyss if Arathorn had not retained him. Slender archer silhouettes emerged from fog around them, waving their arms for a moment before vanishing under the larches foliage.

The travelers followed the ridge to their left. Some welcoming whispers, mingled with friendly jibes, punctuated their slow and cautious advance. Then they found the entrance to the secret hidden valley: the ridge softened and at times curls unveiled a little bridle path leading down into the mists, surrounded by fir trees. The confused echo of a mighty river, flowing below in a swift stream, rose to them, sifting through the dense but blazing fog. They went down the long and winding narrow path. Suddenly the mist cleared away in their descent on the trail. After a turn, a wide valley was revealed, framed by a glittering rainbow.

Under a precipice of a few yards, a steep pines incline softened into an oaks and beeches down, and ended with gently sloping closed fields and orchards. The valley of the split combe was fueled to the East by a powerful waterfall, the foot of which was covered by fine mist. The singing river crossed the broad valley, and escaped to the West by a narrow defile. The air warmed as they ran down the trail, revealing scents of saps and pollens.

The valley seemed much larger when the Hobbit walked out of the wooded slope: groves with many shades of green mingled with small cultures that gleamed in the serene air. A herd of horses grazed in the distance near the western defile in the shadows projected by the setting sun. Gerry realized that an insullied sky prevailed over the valley. To the East, on the upper slopes near the falls, small white goats were frolicking and tinkled their bells in a joyful song of welcome.

The spring mildness touched the travelers with its fragrances of blooming orchards. The enchanting sounds of renewal lightened their tired limbs and transported them in a time of innocence and peace when the world was young. Gerry would forever remember his winding descent into the magic and secret splendor of the terraces, shimmering out of the times of the mortals.

At the bottom of the valley, a narrow stone bridge without parapet allowed them to reach the opposite bank, dotted with graceful homes. Laughter, songs and words of welcome greeted the travelers as they advanced one by one on the bridge. Most gently mocked and took pity on Gandalf’s new protege. The river flowed over a bed of multicolored stones, that sometimes shimmered like gems under the strong current.
A large Elven castle raised its pinnacles near the waterfall. They climbed the last slope with glee and reached the steps of the last homely home, West of the ancient world. The gate opened silently, and a gathering of the beautiful folk came forward to greet them.

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Elven girls, wearing crowns of wild flowers, sang in the Sindarin tongue that has the power to shape the winged words. Their balad told the wanderings of Mithrandir[4] and the tireless mentoring of young mortals, both Periannath and Aratani[5]. A tall Elf with long blond hair advanced, surrounded by some members of the house of Elrond, with his open palms forward.

-« Namariê[6]! », he said, raising his hand near his face.

He welcomed Gandalf in Sindarin with friendly consideration, then Arathorn with formal respect, finally he bowed to the level of the Hobbit with a smile by adopting Westron:

- « Welcome to the house of Elrond, master Took! I am Erestor, chamberlain and advisor to the Lord of Rivendell. Here you will find rest for body and mind. »

Gerry rarely gawked. Yet the beauty of the land and people had for a moment deprived him of the ability to express his feelings, however skilled he was at it. The prosaic mindset of Hobbits had him ask thoughtlessly, forgetting all forms of politeness:

- « How do you know my name? 

- The wandering companies of our brothers continually gather news from all the lands of Eriador. We have come across you more than once in the groves and forests of Woody End, far away in the Shire. Although you rarely saw us, I guess. But do not be surprised if Master Elrond knows everything about those who enter his domain, be they guided by allies and Elf-friends like the powerful lords who led you here. »

Gerry had the mixed feeling that anything he might have done in recent days was known to his host. His reason told him that this impression was probably exaggerated, but he vaguely guessed that small vicissitudes of the outside world were seen from here with quite a relative importance. When he realized his host was desoriented, he bowed low:

- « I beg your forgiveness for my Hobbit boldness, which is due only to my dazzle. Halflings’ greetings essentially involve declining our names and kinship. You seemed to know mine, so I did not know what to add! A thousand thanks for your warm welcome and your offer of rest. »

The tall Elf laughed:

- « Our own greetings for friends or strangers no longer remember halflings, I am afraid! But Periannath are courteous people. How eloquent you would be when you have indulged in rest... »

He added in a facetious tone:

- « ...or the tables of this house! »

This time Gerry no longer doubted, this Elf knew a lot about his actions - and probably too long, he would have to hold his tongue. Erestor led them inside.

-oOo-

NOTES
Jean d’Ormesson

Verse, epigram, witticism.

Maurice Druon

The Grey Wanderer, Gandalf

Both halflings (Hobbits) and humans of high lineage (probably the Dûnedain)

Contraction of sindarin A na marië, « Take care of yourself », greeting for both meeting and separation.
Chapter Summary

The hobbit explores Elven customs and lore in the blessed valley.

.oOo.

The Hobbit was quickly supported by a petty and smiling Elf, who led him by many patios and halls with aerial decorations. His small room opened on the North slope of the valley, directly on a veranda bordering a garden.

- « Mithrandir says this place is suitable for Periannath. » said the elf, whose beautiful face, young and joyful, prompted to confidence. Gerry thanked for this delicate attention and immediately inquired about the young Elf and the habits of the house, including meal times.

- « My name is Rúmil, the Elf replied with laughing eyes. I am responsible for guiding you, serving you and answering any question, which as I see are many. Master Erestor thought the company of a young Elf would be less confusing for you.

- How old are you, Rúmil?

- My mother counted two and twenty cycles of the sun since my arrival in Middle-Earth.

- I am your eldest of three springs. Do you usually receive Hobbits?

- Yes, Mithrandir often brings Hobbit companions.

- Oh! Who did you receive, if I may ask? May be I know them?

- The last time was a few years before I came into this world.

- It is therefore not so often...

- You periannath have your own assessment of time. The house of Elrond hosts for centuries all free people united against evils inherited from Melkor the Black Enemy of the world. But it seems these days that we may rely only on Elves.

- How could our appreciation of time be different, since we have almost the same age? As for your perception about other free people, I must confess I shared it until I was compelled to leave my dear country. I mean, I thought only Hobbits were sensible people, gathered as a community to live free off evil. »

Rúmil realized that he was probably more likely to learn from his host, than his carefree sprite apparence inspired at first sight. Before the beautiful and perplexed Elven face, Gerry burst out laughing and asked Rúmil, much to the confusion of the young Elf, to sit down with him in the chairs on the veranda:

- « This conversation takes an unexpected turn. Since I am your elder, I beg you, in consideration of my old age, please to adopt a posture that helps discussion and reflection. »
Gerry went out and filled his pipe, settling in one of the armchairs. The Elf sat on the seat in front of him but did not dare to relax. Leaning forward as a servant or an attentive teacher, he watched with interest and curiosity the Hobbit’s doings. Blowing his first puff, Gerry sat back comfortably in the cushions and announced:

- « Here is what we Hobbits are used to do when a quiet moment allows us to rise above immediate needs. What are the young Elves' occupations, when they have time for themselves?

- Past their younger years, Elves end up feeling the need to dive into the trend of the world. According to individuals, this need to answer the call of their heart and find their place manifests itself differently. Some feel the urge to explore the vast lands. Others feel called by the memory of a relative, even if he or she has come to Mandos’ halls of waiting. Not all are called to the same age, of course. In fact I will speak mainly by hearsay because young Elves are hardly many. The enlightened Elves suffer in Middle-earth and long for joining the immortal lands. Hence Elven offsprings are rare in this world they will flee shortly. Here in Rivendell, only Idril, my promised, is as young as I am.

- You do have a promised?

-Idril and Rúmil have plighted their troth, five cycles of the sun ago. It seems our hastiness is very exceptional. Perhaps it is a sign of the precarious fate of the Elves in Middle-earth... We will unite when both have been called and have found their ways.

- And how long is this going to be? », asked the Hobbit, curious to assess elvish abstinence. The Elf replied casually:

- « Time does not matter. A union with confidence, free of doubts about the Call, is essential for us. »

Such an answer could not satisfy the Hobbit. He asked further, frantically:

- « But how do you know Idril is for you? How did you choose her? How do you know that you will not meet someone who suits you better later? Could that be that her "call" proves stronger than your love in the end? Was she called? And do you know what is your call, Rúmil? »

The burst of questions stunned the young Elf and put him on hold. This voracious need to understand immediately, all big and small issues, without order or judgment, as if he was running out of time, was certainly the mark of a mortal. Measuring how his answers might disturb the Hobbit, Rúmil leaned back in the chair to think and replied calmly:

- « Idril and I have no doubt about our union. This became obvious to us since we were young, gradually and jointly. We do not know if any might turn away, but I do not fear this eventuality, as it seems astranged to us. Yet Elven lore teaches us that such misfortunes occured sometimes. This was the case for Gwindor and Finduilas and in the elder days. »

Gerry pledging him to continue, Rúmil told the story of Finduilas, daughter of Orodreth, King of Nargothrond.

– « Beautiful and wise, she had long promised to Gwindor, a straight and powerful Elf who fought the dark enemy alongside his King. They loved each other and they finally united. At this time the security of the elvish kingdoms lay in secrecy and concealment: Elven bands protected vast forests, where their citadels were hidden. It happened that Gwindor was captured by the orcs and held captive in the jails of the North. Broken in torment and mutilated by abuse, he finally managed to escape. Returning to the forests of his King, he rescued, on his way, a Human named Túrin, who
had committed serious crimes by the curse of the enemy. Recovering part of his desire to live, he became the mentor of the Human and took him along, against the Elven law.

On his return to the secret kingdom of Nargothrond, Gwindor was celebrated as a lord of the Elves. Túrin became part of the community, achieving great prowess against the orcs. Gwindor meanwhile was bitterly dragging his infirmity despite Finduilas' care. But the Elf she loved was deeply hurt in his body and soul. Then Túrin raised so high in the esteem of the King, that he supplanted Gwindor in his privy council, adding to his resentment. Yet Gwindor and Túrin remained friends until Finduilas, against her will, felt her love turn away from Gwindor and stand to Túrin. This is a black mischief of the enemy, than to have perverted so deep a love. Thereafter all perished in the wars against the enemy, but that is another story. »

- I hope all your stories are not so sad! For my part, I have not felt such a deep love...

- Perhaps it is the strange fate of mortals to choose freely, with the share of luck imposed by chance encounters?

- Maybe... although I wonder if we really have a whole choice. In any event, families are frequently mingled in uniting young people in the Shire!

Before Rúmil’s consternation, the Hobbit changed the subject:

- « But you haven’t told me what are your "Calls ", although I'm not quite sure what it means.

- Each of us feels but a single "Call", as far as I know, except maybe princes of the Noldor back in the vanished years. It is an irrepresible attraction, a certainty that is revealed then develops, or rather a discovery of what suits you. Idril thinks she had no appeal yet, though she is particularly skilful for woven works. For my part, I know for the last few revolutions, that I must collect the memory of my people.

- So you read the lore books?

- That's right, but even more I shall meditate under the direction of Master Elrond to remind myself of the memories of the people of the Sindar, especially of my ancestors. »

The selfless and eternal depth of these immortals left the Hobbit somewhat perplexed. He preferred to change the subject again:

- « You said that sometimes Mithrandir leads some Hobbits to Rivendell? But what do they come here for exactly? When and why do they ever leave? Do they change here somehow?

- Some encounters change us forever. Mithrandir has a way of awakening the will, altruism and resistance to evil. He especially has Hobbits in affection, but it is said here that he constantly wanders into the wide world to stimulate and sustain the good will of any kind. His proteges quickly learn to stand on their own, to burn their own flame. After all, they are mortals. Either way it is dangerous to meddle in the affairs of wizards.

- How far perilous?

- Aside from the dangers of the world, I guess the main danger in accompanying Mithrandir is to confront one’s own limitations. In essence, we can’t prepare to this. »

Gerry frankly disliked the prospect of a confrontation with his own limitations. He was nearly persuaded he had already reached them during this adventurous journey. The feeling of a gap in his memory rekindled with a renewed meaning: what he had forgotten must have been one of his
limits. Rúmil realized a hassle upset his host. To change his mind, he proposed to visit the kitchens, remembering what Erestor had taught him about the preferences of Hobbits. Indeed, the memory hole disappeared from the scope of Gerry’s immediate concerns, supplanted by feelings of a stomach’s emptiness.

.oOo.

The Elf and the Hobbit walked from patios to halls, two young people discussing the meaning of life, discovering little by little that they were very unlikely to understand each other, under the compassionate gaze of marble statues. The duo crossed many Elves, surprised by this young, eclectic and cheerful company and amused by the offbeat seriousness of the talking among the oratories and majestic colonnades of Rivendell. In a hallway lined with rooms, two merry brown cat-eyed lads pushed trolleys loaded with food in front of them, racing with each other; wholly dressed in green, they teased Gerry and Rúmil who could not divert any part of the appetizing loading.

Under a dark blue dome shimmering with thousands of gems, a serious Elven lady tried to put some order in a dance rehearsal. When the half-dozen dancers saw the Hobbit, the company dislocated its fragile formation and rushed around the "cute little pixie." The excitement was at its height when they noticed the dense hair on top of the Hobbit’s feet. Gerry refused the urgent proposals to play a faun in a tableau that the group was preparing. Rúmil kindly and firmly scattered his friends, with a little help from his bride Idril, the youngest dancer.

Finally, the two lads reached the kitchen. Gerry could never have imagined such a grandiose spectacle. Rows of gleaming brass reflected the flames of multicolored lamps hanging from arches covered with silver mirrors. Glassware aligned in transparent cupboards shone as bright knight chainmail. A battalion of cooks watched for hearths of various colors, under the watchful eye of the master chef, who set the pace of a song, shared by all the Elves of the room. The huge kitchen was buzzing with agitation, but an invisible order paced the applied and inspired contribution of each protagonist. At times, the kitchen master, approaching a bowl, grabbed a utensil or ingredient and sang a variant or counter-melody, which had its own unicity but melted into the overall tune.

-« Tomorrow we shall celebrate Nost-na-Lothion[1], the beginning of the elvish year, Rúmil said with relish. There will be singing, dancing and a feast for the whole household. We shall have special guests. Master Erestor said a group of Dwarves of Dùrin will join us, can you imagine? And that’s why Medianendil, Master of Elrond’s kitchens, sings the rite of spring. The dishes promise a special flavor! »

The Hobbit had nothing against singing while working, but strengthening a dish with a musical recipe somehow defied his culinary sense. Rúmil took him by the hand and walked timidly to the kitchen’s Master, who seemed so busy. Medianendil saw them from the corner of his eye. He immediately went on the verse which orders the spring pests and rodents to let alone the young roots and blooming buds. The young but subtle Rúmil carefully turned around, but a head waiter intercepted to take him to a reserve, where they were granted some food to sustain decently and without disturbing the preparation for the feast. A dolly was barely enough to contain rolls, cakes, honey, jams, dried meat, milk and fruit juices. The two thieves considered their fate as acceptable and retreated while the going was good, Rúmil only catching a large basket.

The companions walked down the hill, chatting like old comrades, and spent a pleasant moment talking about their customs and their hopes. They went in search of a "quiet" place, which is, in the mind of a Hobbit, a cozy bench, suitable for eating and drinking without being interrupted. But the valley offered the splendid panorama of a promising spring. At the end of a neatly paved trail, they found a small kiosk, which roof evoked the sails of an Elven ship. But when they approached, they
discovered that the "quiet" place was already busy and very animated.

Gandalf and Arathorn, face to face, opposed there vigorously again on the serious subject of Arnor’s renewal. A beautiful and gracious woman, with long hair, black as raven-wing, sat a little apart, a little boy on her lap. Both played with the old thrush, but the lady followed, with attention and some anxiety, the debate between the two men, sometimes intervening to moderate both. Rúmil and Gerry slowed down. Apparently the curiosity of young Elves equals the inquisitiveness of Hobbits. They both crouched at the foot of the slope, under the booth, and listened.

Arathorn continued the statement of his views:

- «... Only a strong state can fight against dark forces and secure its borders. Besides an unchallenged leader and a core of dedicated fighters, a strong kingdom foremost requires resources and exchanges with neighboring allies.

- My dear Arathorn, Eriador is strongly depopulated since the defeat of Argonui. The victory achieved with the aid of Gondor and Lindon Elves is far and these two allies themselves are now in serious trouble.

- They would be safer if Arnor could revive and fill with an industrious people, the wilderness that was formerly cultivated. You know, we have developed a network of farms and herdsman in the old Western Arthedain around our secret refuges and along the Great East Road. We are on the right path, we started to restore small clusters of industries that complete them: tanneries, meat drying, mills, forges, breweries, hop farms...

- The Dúnedain are too few to support so many activities. Orcs from the North and the Misty Mountains would come upon you before people have time to grow and strengthen.

- Men cannot grow without resources, Gandalf!

- I fear it is too early, Arathorn. My heart tells me so.

- Mine orders me not to wait. How long will my people still have to remain anonymous, hidden as vagrants, homeless and deprived of their lifestyle? Our time has come, Gandalf! Consider that, since the war of Dwarves and orcs, goblin threat has been significantly reduced. Once the first cities have been revived, we will be able, with the help of our hidden villages already installed, in addition to the Shire and Bree, to rapidly reduce our dependence on imported goods such as clothing, weapons and tools. Then will come industries on a larger scale. For example we will plant trees in the middle of the Gwathlo valley for future naval industry in Minhiriath.

- You are dreaming about amber and ivory of the great bay of Forochel! I hope you do not think to restore the whaling fleet of Tharbad?

- And why not?

- The North is in the grip of an evil that is beyond your understanding, Arathorn. And its influence reaches into the heart of Eriador some winters. You must first secure the inner territory, such as the haunted downs of Tyrn Gorthad, and then your borders.

- You underestimate the capabilities of my people, Gandalf. Some activities persist as before: wax and honey in Eldanar, wool in the South downs of Cardolan, furs in Numeriador, Hops in Bree and the Shire ...

- This is probably true, but you should acknowledge that these activities need your protection more than your lore.
- But we did not lose the expertise of our forefathers, we have patiently kept it all these years of hiding in our secret havens on Lhûn and in Sirannar. Elixirs of Fornost Erain, dyes of Minas Tarma, heavy waters from Amon Emerie, musicians and instruments of Bar Eketa, Twilight Hills essential oils, medicinal herbs from Lake Nenuial: all these riches are sleeping quietly, preserved by skilled and tireless hands and minds.

- Arathorn, I have not forgotten what was Arthedain in the time of its resistance: ironwork and satins of Thalion, tapestries made in the cantons of Feotar, Gwathlo Valley cereals were admirable. Certainly, a kingdom without enemies could expand and reopen the tin and copper mines of Rhudaur, the iron mines in the Blue Mountains, the marble quarries in Emyn Sûl, and even exploitation of aromatic woods of Ettenmoors or peat of Oiolad desolation. I know you dream to plant vines in Eregion and I recently learned that you are considering to extend the cultivation of pipe-weed to make trade with people who ignore the pipe! You hear that, engineering, knowledge and inventiveness of the Dûnedain is in my mind. But you do not take enough into account the fear that paralyzes men of Eregion. Your projects require considerable hand work. But all your might in alert barely manages to repel raids of orcs. Threats will increase tenfold when your jewels, these rich preys, begin to make themselves known. Against the power of dragons and the fear they inspire, garrisons are of no avail. Time is not yet ripe to restore Arthedain. We must first eradicate the North of its ills.

- You advise caution, Gandalf. I hear you. But indecision or fear of hear-say dragons should not paralyze us. We have achieved the first step of my plan: implant a few farms and herds and secure the main road to the East. My ambition is to extend this network to Rhovanion then to Gondor. The news you bring from Saruman and the battle we won make me think that we are right.

- Some evil is setting in Rhovanion, and has tried to reach us, indeed. But do not despise the Great Worms! It seems to me unwise to risk your precious resources while it is not time yet. Your refuges remain vulnerable; I guess that's the reason for your worthy wife and your grand-son being safe here?

- That's right. But my oldest son Arvedui led our troops to Tharbad to hunt these dark marauders. He will join me here after the victory.

- Take care that whole Dunland might set ablaze. I recently attended the summary execution of one tribe by another. There is no hope in a fight to the death like this. It was horrible, Arathorn. I urge you to more measured actions.

- You sorely lack a vision of the future, Gandalf.

- You are dramatically short of realism, Arathorn. My vision, unlike yours, is based on observations and not dreams. But perhaps you will hear reason, if not from me, at least at the council that Master Elrond should not fail to summon shortly.

- What about?

- About some expedition in the north!

- This project is an initiative of the Dûnedain! It has no place in a council! I disapprove that you mentioned it!

- I have not spoken of it! But facts and new players have emerged. You should consider this as a sign and meditate at length! »

Thereupon Gandalf, irritated, got up, greeted the couple, stroked the head of the little boy and
strode to the house of Elrond, muttering under his breath and brooding his resentment. Rúmil, squatting with Gerry at the foot of the hill where the booth stood, turned an amused face towards the Hobbit. Sneaking up on the Great and catching them in the act of quarelling was somehow exciting!

His smile faded into an alarmed expression. The Halfling, white as a sheet and eyes bloodshot, was leaning against the slope and panted heavily, his hand on his chest. The story of Gandalf had remembered him the atrocious killing of Men by Men he had witnessed, this wanton killing his ring had caused. That was certainly what had been hidden from him, for his own good. His intimate limitation was revealed; exceeding it had overwhelmed him with horror. A mixture of disgust and guilt got him nauseous. He glimpsed the werewolf’s gaze of hatred commanding his dark side to rise. Half-conscious, his mind merged all the violence he had suffered in recent days. Gerry had the feeling that his ring of power was at the heart of this surge, he feared to drag behind him as a curse invading his body. The hideous grinning face filled his mind, it came up to devouring him...

Rúmil shook him gently, forced him to get up and slowly led him on the paved path. Halfway to the western pastures, under the soft spring sunshine, they sat on a bench placed in front of a pool of clear water. The Hobbit sank his teeth into a loaf and his morbid cast of mind fainted. The Hobbit insatiable appetite for earthly dishes and the "strange ways of Elves" astonished Rúmil.

« The flame of mortals is intense but fleeting. Their fate is to be accomplished in a short time. » the Elf thought.

Once sated, Gerry laid in the grass "for a moment". Noting that this moment seemed to last for an indefinite time, Rúmil sat cross-legged in front of the pool and dived slowly into deep Elven meditation.

.oOo.

NOTES

The riven valley - Intrusion in the dale

Chapter Summary

The hobbit has brought his own evil in the elven dale of Imladris...

.oOo.

When he came out of it, night was about to fall. The Hobbit was still lying, but his eyes wide open evoked a terror despite the reflection of the clear and star-lit sky. The Hobbit uttered a hoarse cry:

- «He's trying to get in, it is getting closer! »

Trembling, the halfling struggled violently before falling inert, but with all his limbs stiff. Rúmil called for help. Arathorn ran and took the Hobbit in his arms. Joining his wife while returning to the manor, he showed her the small lifeless body.

- « What is wrong with the boy, Aremel[1]? Please can you cure him? », little Arafin asked.

Facing the anxious insistence of his grand-son, Arathorn laid the Hobbit in the grass. His wife's name was Luinloth[2] and she belonged to the lineage of the healers of Fornost Erain. She quickly examined the Hobbit, whose gray complexion was slowly turning blue. Her face with delicate and regular features creased with contained anxiety. She made an emergency resuscitation by rapidly pushing on the chest of the halfling, who began to breathe whistling. She took a dried leaf in a discreet pouch at her belt and crushed it by vigorously rubbing her palms. Then she opened her hands and blew the cuttings on to the Hobbit’s face. Finally she gently rubbed with her thumbs the brow, the eyelids, the temples and the nose of the Hobbit. The small body gradually resumed easier breathing.

-« Fortunately, my grand-son asked for help immediately, said Luinloth. The Halfling is now breathing normally. But he is possessed by an atrocious dream beyond my powers of healing, and that will overcome his resistance if the eldest of our house does not take care of him. »

Arathorn resumed carrying his little groom in his arms and ran towards the manor. A few minutes later, Gerry was in bed, surrounded by Rúmil, Gandalf and Arathorn, whose faces were ominous.

An Elf Lord entered the small room, rejecting his rich skirts of dark blue velvet and satin. His face allied the meditative grace of the Elves, the enduring will of Men and the wisdom of magicians. Approaching the bed, he bent over the Hobbit, his head crowned with dark hair like the shadows of a moonless night and surrounded by a white band. Starlight shone in his silver gray eyes, revealing memories of all his people, either happy or sad, bearing hope and regret. The face of Elrond was ageless, neither old nor young, noble and beautiful as the first King of Men before the marring of the world.[3] The King, crowned with many summers, showed the maturity of his thought and the vigor of his warrior arms. His brow reflected the fullness of Elven lore but his discreet smile betrayed the disillusioned weariness of many struggling years. The Lord of Rivendell, Elrond Peredhel[4], famous for his wisdom and foresight, extended his healing hand to Gerry’s brow.

The Hobbit was naked and paralyzed in a beam, darted by a black almond-shape pupil, with a yellow iris, streaked with fire. He felt his last resistance yielding to the imperious and wild
impulses of that gaze. He was to wear a wolf skin and run to his fellow in the moonlight. The beam vanished like smoke in the wind as Elrond interposed raising his fist. The beast let go, unable now to find the Hobbit. Gerry, finally released, curled in on himself. A warm, reassuring voice called him:

-« Come back, Gerontius, your enemy is gone. Come back to light! »

Gerry opened bulging eyes for an instant. Elrond's hand on his forehead calmed and reassured him. He finally fell asleep, breathing with a peaceful pace. Elrond sighed:

-« This young Hobbit just escaped a plight. I am surprised by the inner strength he opposed to the animal spirit that had subjugated him. He will rest until tomorrow. There is nothing to fear now. I closed the door. But I feel Gerontius still bears a heavy hidden weight, like a responsibility that overwhelms him, a mistake which oppresses his mind or a risk that instills doubt. Rúmil will watch for him and warn me if anything abnormal occurs. »

Elrond gave detailed instructions to Rúmil, who was to regularly clean the air in the room with the vapors of a decoction. All retired for the night.

.oOo.

When Gerry awoke, Gandalf and Arathorn were smoking together, sitting in chairs on the porch. They had sent Rúmil back for a rest after his all-night watch. The Hobbit opened one eye, then two, and saw the two men approaching his bedside. Their faces reflected both the joy to see him back to health and the fear that he may keep some injury at heart. Gerry was moved with their obvious concern. Arathorn smiled like a spoiled child:

- « See what the wood-turner has made for me this morning! He chose a strong briar root. »

He brandished a beige wooden pipe that smoked heavily. The Hobbit exclaimed:

- « But your pipe is about to flare up. Please give me that, with my weedbag. »

The Hobbit’s belongings had been withdrawn. They were stacked on a safe, cleaned, artfully mended and folded. Besides, on a silver platter, the contents of his pockets had been gathered. Gerry searched his weedbag suspiciously but he found what he had feared to lose. He pulled a small instrument he used to empty the pipe on the platter, much to the dismay of the Dùnadan. Gandalf badly hid his laughter. Gerry gave him a reproachful look. He dutifully scratched the bottom of the fireplace, then stuffed the pipe with a new pipeweed, light and cheap, and lit it with the help of the wizard.

-« Arathorn, you should have expected me for your first lesson. A wooden pipe is to be prepared with method. You will need several sessions to repair these uncontrolled burns. »

Arathorn was happy to suffer the outraged remonstrances of the little Hobbit, rather than having to share the blame of a wizard, anxious about the fate of their ward. Gerry had the ranger take a few puffs. The Dùnadan acknowledged that the smoke finally got an acceptable flavor.

For a long time, the three friends talked in thicker and thicker smoke, in a very relaxed atmosphere. Rúmil returned, bearing a tray filled with food. He had not gone to rest, but had gathered some "restore-Hobbit." He opened the windows disapprovingly, dispersed the smoke and claimed his protégé needed rest. Gerry let him do it in memory of the time of his childhood, when his nurse protected him with by medical half-truths, from the wrath of a too demanding father.

In early afternoon master Elrond came to visit Gerry, who had recovered after some more nap:
- « Welcome to Rivendell, Gerontius son of Fortimbras Took. I see that your friends were able to have you smile. But we should still pay attention to your full recovery. »

Rúmil left the room, leaving the Hobbit alone with the Lord of Rivendell.

- « What can I do for you? »

Gerry embarked on a path that surprised and alerted the Elf lord:

- « Master, what do you know about the origin of my people?

- Hiding in the swamps and hills, yours have long lived in the upper valley of the Anduin, the great river that runs from North to South on the eastern slopes of the Misty Mountains. Loeg Ninglorion[5], this is the most distant origin I have knowledge of. You should consult Perfendur, the master of Imladris libraries, who will help you gather what regards the history of your kin.

- I must admit I'm not very good at reading.

- This is an unfortunate gap for a gentle-Hobbit, heir to the Thain of the Shire!

- Tell me more, please!

Elrond sat in a wicker chair at the head of the Hobbit’s bed. Although he now spoke Westron and not Sindarin, his warm, expressive voice had the power to awaken visions of past things:

- « The Hobbits lived in marshes along the Anduin. They wove few relationships with Men and usually fled before them. A fear and a growing danger, emanating from the Black Forest, on the East bank of the great river, gradually drove them from their shelters. They crossed the Misty Mountains in small groups or even entire clans, many centuries ago. Many fell during this journey. They spread in Eriador and multiplied again. Some settled in the Angle between the rivers Mitheithel and Bruinen. Others crossed Eregion, where they skirted the tribes of Dunland. A small group was able to establish in the heart of the Misty Mountains. Another founded Hobbits villages in Breeland. But most eventually settled on the southern lands of the kingdom of Arthedain, the last state of the Dúnedain. They were exposed to the resentment of the great nobles who protected their feudal rights. So the King of Fornost Erain, who needed farmers, granted the Hobbits the large tract of land that you know. Most Hobbits dwelling in Eriador gathered there. After the last northern war, the Dûnadan kingdom went into hiding, but the Shire survived. It has now expanded to the East, when the Oldbuck annexed Buckland, and to the South to include much of the western bank of the brandywine, but its northern and western borders are virtually unchanged since its creation.

- So my ancestors went through Eregion, the ancient kingdom of the Elves?

- Some of them, yes. But Let us talk about you now. How do you feel?

- Free of all control and rested. »

To the Master Healer, the Hobbit’s tone seemed too cheerful to be honest. Elrond continued:

- « Really? You have suffered the onslaught of a terror from the elder days, a werewolf drinker of souls and blood of the living. You've been saved just in time. But your escape was so narrow, that I have to make sure you are aware of certain risks you may now be exposed to. »

The tall Elf paused long to watch the Hobbit, who looked deeply interested:
- « I think you are sensitive to the plight of your fellow beings and prone to pity. These qualities certainly support your strength and your love of life and helped you renounce the call of savagery, destruction and darkness. But I have read in you, something like a question or a burden. »

Another pause ensued, during which the Hobbit affected to wait and see, with this faked poor innocent air that won the affection of all the gossips of the Shire. It goes without saying that the comedy did not abuse Elrond:

- « In my experience, sharing your doubts and fears with someone else, who would not be involved, can help you to overcome or circumvent these difficulties. »

Again a silence fell, embarrassing for Gerry, but eloquent for Elrond.

- « I am not trying to steal your secrets, Gerontius Took. I advise you about this burden weighing on you: it makes you more vulnerable to lurking evil. Your guilt will designate you among others as an obvious victim, easier to pervert. By exceeding your doubts, you would strengthen yourself in two ways.

Master Elrond, I do not think I have the right to get rid of any dangerous burden, that I alone am responsible for, by passing it to someone else.

- I understand. But perhaps this burden would be lighter if it were shared by friends, ready to support you knowingly. And maybe would you rate it less dangerous for yourself and for others, if you agreed to submit it to the wise. Do not feel restrained by shame, because it is not appropriate between friends, especially to address the lies of our dark enemies. »

Gerry thought silently, enticed to open up to Elrond and Gandalf. He would have to confess the theft of a ring of power, his attempt to use it, his early success, and its great attraction of the servants of darkness. About that Elrond was wrong, he thought: it was not himself but his ring that attracted them. Gandalf had warned him about the danger of the rings of power, but he felt unable to abandon his. He knew in his heart that he was lying to himself, but he kept silent, pretending he would return the ring to its rightful owner when he could. Elrond felt his hesitation and glanced the stiffening in the expression of the Hobbit’s face, and knew that he had failed to help him.

-« Nobody would think about forcing you in any way. But may I offer you an advice?

- Please, master! »

The obsequious tone of the Hobbit strengthened the resolve of Elrond, who told him bluntly:

-« I believe you are in danger, young Hobbit. Loyalty to your friends seems to me second - or even a pretense - to personal intrigues. I recommend you should put your own house in order. If you fail to, you will fall with no hope to recover. You will need to endure a trial that teaches you the true value of loyalty. If you want to talk to me, I am ready to help you. »

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NOTES

[1] Ar-Emel : Grand-Mother

[2] Sindarin for blue flower

[3] Probably the face of Elrond allows to imagine his brother’s, Elros, who chose mortality and became King of Númenor. This happened many centuries before the downfall of Númenor and its
submersion.


Chapter Summary

Gerry indulges with a luxurious Elven dinner.

That noon, the house of Elrond echoed with calls and unusual preparations. In addition to the premises of the spring fair, a group of Dwarves was expected in the afternoon. Glorfindel, an Elf lord from Gondolin the lost city, was sent to meet and guide them. He led them by winding and hidden paths into the secret valley of Rivendell. They would never be able to find the same path to come back here. But the Dwarves went well aware of that treatment they considered discriminatory and offensive. Harassed and irascible, Thráín their lord showed himself haughty and brittle upon his arrival. The warmth and charm of the master of Imladris probably avoided an unfortunate skirmish.

Since the Dwarves had confirmed the reason for their presence with rather claimant a tone, Elrond convened a high council for the next day, as Gandalf had expected. Thereafter Erestor had deployed all his diplomacy and all the resources the guest house of Rivendell could deploy. The bad mood of the troops having barely softened, grumpy Dwarves joined the large banquet hall in the evening.

Meanwhile Arathorn’s closest rangers had prepared to override or anticipate the conclusions of the council. The Lord of the Dûnedain did not accept that their right to follow their own path would be restrained. Rangers spent a few hours searching and copying maps from the vast library of Rivendell, under Perfendur’s disapproving monitoring.

Arathorn sent his four best men as fast scouts, the team whom he usually entrusted the care of his family. Their mission was to find the mysterious destination and propose a route as secure and discreet as possible for a large group, with horses and equipment. They went immediately to the North, one to the West and the other to the East side of the Misty Mountains. Since his family’s shelter was no longer guarded, Arathorn had called his wife Luinloth and his grandson Arafín, who was still in infancy, to dwell in Rivendell under the protection of Master Elrond.

The lady of the Dûnedain was careful not to show it, but she was troubled. She had dreamed several times during the trip, that a danger was lurking on her husband’s road to the revival of Arnor. The meeting with Gerry had reminded her of some details of her dream:

« Renewed the splendor dispersed
Wilderness re-peopled kingdom.
On the long road winding back,
Of cardinal virtues, courage and sacrifice,
A faithful shire-squire to restore sovereign
Honor in the house of Valandil. »
Luinloth feared the sacrifice evoked in her prophetic dreams would prove too big for her, however the presence of a halfling squire, brought her hope. So she insisted on her husband to recruit the little Hobbit for his expedition. She would not admit that, but she also hoped that the Hobbit’s presence would induce Gandalf’s going, whose judgment and strength would be invaluable for safe-guarding her husband.

Reassured by the concessions she had obtained from Arathorn, the lady of the Dûnedain confided his grand-son Arafín to a small, lively and smiling Elven Woman, and attended to her toilet for the spring festival.

Luinloth and Arathorn stepped into the large banquet hall arm in arm. The lady wore a high elaborate headdress and a silver tiara extolling her royal port. A dark gray mesh belt emphasized her slender and high waist on her silver chiffon dress. She smiled around to the upturned faces, as in the days of celebration in the northern kingdom. The lady had an evening of entertainment but the mind of her husband was already elsewhere, alongside his scouts or his aides who prepared the expedition. Dressed in a crimson velvet tunic and black breeches, his mind seemed already arguing at the council to come.

Gandalf was wearing his usual gray robe, but rid of the journey’s tears and stains, thanks to the skilled hands of Elven seamstresses. The wizard was talking with Elrond, Glorfindel and Erestor. The graceful chandeliers diffused a soft light that clung to the gold and silver hair of most Elves, but the faces of the great lords gleamed almost by themselves.

Rúmil had brought Gerry earlier in the room; the Hobbit had admired its diaphanous drapes, soft lighting and lavish feast tables. The young Elf was busy now for the festivities that would follow the meal. The Hobbit felt a little lonely and rather incongruous, even if the high and elegant silhouettes and beautiful and solemn faces of the Elves fascinated him. At the entrance of the Dûnedan couple, many Elves bowed. Gerry also went to the lady and lord, in search of a smile or a company. He left the tight groups that were gossiping between the tables and found himself alone, right before the couple who was moving to the master table at the center of the room. His eyes met the lady’s gaze, bright and deep; he thought for a moment that the high Queen of the Elves was invited to the party. He was speechless as they came up to him, smiling. Both leaned, extending their hands to greet him. Seized by a sudden need for expressing his gratitude, Gerry kissed their hands and knelt on the ground. Raising his head, he said to the lady:

"You saved me yesterday, like your husband rescued me a few days ago. I offer my service to both, if the recognition, loyalty and meager talents of a small Hobbit can be useful to your lordships."

Elven attendies had silently circled around this unexpected scene between mortals. The couple looked each other for a moment - the man hesitantly, the woman with a pleading air. Arathorn, his face serious now, sternly said to the Hobbit:

"This is not about a walk, Gerontius Took. You will need to harden to the existence of rangers, disciplined, dangerous and frugal.

- To this I am resolved! », said the Hobbit who hesitated about which requirement would prove more restrictive for him: anonymity or frugality?"

Then the lady bowed to meet it. She planted her hypnotic gaze in Gerry’s and said:

"We shall foster you to instruct you and serve us. You will be the squire of my husband. Repeat his words after him!"
Arathorn looked for Gandalf’s approval and obtained a resigned nod. Then the Dùnadan lord spoke sternly:

- "I pledge allegiance to the lord and the lady of the Dùnedain of Arnor. I promise to serve by life or death, in time of peace or war, until my lord absolves me as his liege.", which the trembling Hobbit repeated. Then the lady continued:

- "We hear you and shall certainly employ you according to your skills and reward you up to your services."

Then the lady added in a more confidential and motherly tone:

- "I commend you now to the ward of one another for your deeds in the north."

This token of fidelity had restored the Dùnadan’s smile. Gandalf admired the political skill of the lady who came to say without being challenged, that her husband intended to conduct his own plans to fruition. Master Elrond watched the scene without showing any emotion, trying to assess the sincerity of the Hobbit.

Arathorn smiled to Gerry:

- "My first order is for you to enjoy the festivities. Burnish your manners and try to win the heart of our hosts and their guests!"

Gerry bowed. Erestor took the Hobbit by the hand to lead him to his place. Thràin and his entourage was to arrive at the entrance to the room in an instant, and the butler insisted that the reception Elrond wished, had the entire room as witness, without further disturbance or Hobbit joke. Gandalf and the Dùnadan couple sat at the high table.

Then a clear voice announced the arrival of the Dwarves, who advanced to the threshold in a compact mass, and halted, hands on their belts. Most had withdrawn their chainmail and wore only a leather hauberk or a brightly colored tunic. Though all their weapons were hanging at the racks of their rooms, the group nevertheless gave the impression to prepare for a fierce battle. Shaggy beards and wigs, brown, red, blond or white, once freed from the weight of heavy helmets, were domesticated by matting and ointments with amazing visual effects. A great Dwarf, looking fierce under his brown braids, kept his arms folded, taller by a half-head than his two neighbors with white beards.

Elrond, Erestor and Glorfindel advanced to meet the Dwarves. They bowed and held out their palms to their hosts, greeting them with kind words:

- "Welcome to this haven of all free people, noble heirs of the house of Dùrin. Let your beard grow ever longer!

- Let your treasure room fill with wealth out of your labor!" Thràin said half under his breath.

- "Be this day twice blessed as spring heyday and especially the first ever visit of the people of the Longbeards in Imladris."

The three Dwarves, characters of high rank, followed the master of the house up to the high table.

Then the Elves came to invite Thràin’s followers to join the guests who assembled around the other tables. All, however, were standing in front of their chair. Then Elven dancers entered the room, hopping merrily and laden with garlands of flowers. They offered one to each guest. The Dwarves, imitating Elves near them, put the flowered necklace around their necks or on their
heads, which accentuated the comic effect of some hair. The master of the house and the guests at all tables, congratulated by wishing a year of sweetness and discovery. The Dwarves and the Hobbit were explained the meaning of the rite of renewal.

Everyone then sat down in his place, while the girls returned with baskets of colored eggs. Their size ranged from thrush egg to pumpkin, the majority around the size of a beautiful apple. Painted with art and attention to detail, they displayed a wide variety despite an outstanding style unity. Some were pale, veined, reminding of marble. Other shone with thousand tiny lights. Sometimes a simple and delicate design showed a plant or animal. Several flared with rare but oddly hypnotic chromatic alliances. Some eggs gave the impression of a dark glass, crossed with flashes or fleeting flames. All evolved, changed their dress over time, at very slow pace.

The guests obviously chose at random, except the promised who got similar eggs in pairs. The Dwarves, very surprised and circumspect, each chose an egg with sober colors and graceful geometric patterns. One could see the skill of Master Elrond or a mysterious predestination; actually all the Dwarves imitated the choice of their captain, who, as an advised leader, opted for a medium sized egg, with classical and reassuring ornaments.

Elrond stood and spoke again:

- "Dear guests! This probably deserves an explanation. On the threshold of the new Elven year, the people of the Great Journey have always fostered this ritual since our immemorial awakening at lake Cuiviénén. Formerly it was performed by the lady of Rivendell, with sensitivity and love. But marred Celebrian joined the immortal lands and I continue this tradition in her memory, waiting to see her again in another age of the world. The eggs that you have chosen are a promise of renewal and grace offered through the intercession of Valier. Some are alive, and they will hatch in their time. All will help you, but sometimes you would not be aware of it. All will fit your needs and your personality, often unexpectedly. The promise of some will remain uncertain for many years. Even I can not tell you for sure what would come out even if I had the right to. It has been observed that the longer the egg’s hatch, the more useful the egg’s content. But these eggs should especially remember us that each of us has a part to play in achieving the song of creation, keeping hope and patience, but without delaying what needs to be tried."

The Dwarves showed a frightened and skeptical face: what should be thought about these Elven gifts, obviously magic, that had certainly to know you in order to help you? After his confrontation with Master Elrond, Gerry also harbored doubts about the innocence and true altruism of his gift. But the shocked and awed Dwarven faces, not to mention their exotic hairdressing and their flowering beards, painted a wonderful picture that overcame his reluctance and uplifted the Hobbit.

Gerry entered into conversation with his neighbor, a short but wide Dwarf whose size promised an outstanding eater. His frightened eyes, surmounted by one single blond and profuse eyebrow, could not detach from his egg, but quite quickly they took a confident and grateful expression, after a few glasses of mead, flavored with raspberry juice. The formal greetings taught Gerry that Barin was a grand-cousin of Thráin, who himself was a direct descendant of the eldest of the seven fathers of the Dwarves. Since this prestigious lineage suggested great wealth, the Hobbit politely asked the cheerful fat Dwarf about the kingdoms of his people. Gerry expected enthusiastic musings depicting the rich mines of the Blue Mountains.

It did not happen. Barin described a pretty miserable existence of hawker, manufacturer, weaponsmith and toolmaker in Eriador. The troupe of Dwarves, which was not strictly speaking "followers" of the King, but his relatives, had only recently returned to a barely decent level of prosperity.
Barin politely asked the Hobbit in return. Gerry was smart enough to admit only what might seem familiar and comforting to the ears of the good Dwarf:

- "My family lives in the Shire, where I attend to my father’s business, along with mine. Sometimes I meet foreigners –and even Dwarves - at the inn of crossbow bridge or the Green Dragon at Bywater. More recently, I have met other Dwarves in Thalion, who were in business with Dunland.

- How exciting! exclaimed Barin, whose ambitions often stopped at the inn’s threshold.

- The Shire may seem far removed from the big news of the wider world...

- But your fellows are reliable people, and that is much nowadays!

- I’ll concede that. But can you tell me more about your work?", clumsily tried the Hobbit.

The Dwarf did not understand that Gerry was trying to have him talk about his own work. Barin had never done anything really remarkable, except at table, thus he extended spontaneously the question to the deeds of the House of Dùrin and applied himself to describe the past splendor of the kingdom under the Mountain.

- "Can you imagine a lonely and gigantic mountain, traversed by miles of tunnels, provided with many cellars, abundantly supplied with victuals and equipment of all kinds… Weapons and tools supplying all the lands around... Allies in all the surrounding countries… Chests filled with gold and gems, veins rich in iron ore, silver and gold! Hundreds of Dwarves working hard! Trinkets beautifully wrought, of unsurpassed beauty! And the halls of our fathers, immense, lit by eternal magic lamps...

But echoes of this splendor reached the ears of the dragon Smaug, cursed be his name! In his den of the Gray Mountains, the winged worm heard the wonders of Thrór and his people were boasted all over the North. One evening he flew to the Lonely Mountain and entered by surprise, killing many Dwarves and looting our underground kingdom..."

Gerry served to drink and eat again to the poor weeping Dwarf, sincerely sorry for the pain he caused him. No doubt his Hobbit instinct naturally accorded with this homebody and gourmand-Dwarf and even more surely, Erestor had them eat together knowingly. Barin went painfully:

- "Most Dwarf survivors fled to the Iron Mountains, while the King Thrór and his son Thràin escaped narrowly, all scorched. With a few parents and faithful servants they could muster, they wandered to the South and West, and eventually reached Dunland where they settled for a time, reopening old abandoned mines."

The Dwarf sighed and continued:

- "But our troubles were just beginning. King Thrór was desperate because of the precarious situation of the group. He behaved like he sensed death and seemed resigned. Wishing ardently to admire the kingdom of his forefathers, Khazad-dum, Thrór went northward with a single companion, Nàr. The western gate was closed, so they crossed the Redhorn pass and found the eastern gate of Moria open. There, Nàr was to witness the death of Thrór."

A new bout of sobs interrupted the big Dwarf.

- "I am really sorry to inflict such a distress to you...

- Do not, Barin said. The misfortunes of the house of Dùrin are unknown. But you do not realize how Nàr was downcast: the orc Azog disfigured Thrór and scattered his body to the crows. My
uncle Nàr nearly killed himself in shame. But resentment was stronger. He managed to reach Thràín and told him the odious end of his father."

A fire was smoldering in the pupils of the Dwarf. He raised his glass, emptied it and went on:

- "Warned by Nàr, Thráín called the seven houses of the Dwarves to the vengeance of their elder branch, the Longbeards. Thus we exterminated orcs and goblins from the Misty Mountains to the Gray Mountains!"

- "Wonderful! ", interrupted Gerry.

- "I see you do not know this story, which is nevertheless a feat of arms!", protested Barin.

- "I am pleased and honored to inform myself with a witness and participant," politely evaded the Hobbit.

- "But we suffered heavy losses. At the battle of Azalnubizar, Thráín avenged the death of Thrór, killing Azog but we could not take Moria... the Dwarven armies dispersed. Later Thráín was able to reopen a small coal mine in the southern Blue Mountains, and establish trade with human communities of the rivers Lhûn and Baranduin, as well as in the Shire... As you can see, we are far from the kingdom under the Mountain"

Gerry let the fire go out in the eyes of his neighbor, who smiled when he heard the Hobbit was so concerned:

- "Perhaps will you have another opportunity?"

- May that be true! A token recently told us, that a stronghold of our people has been found! And we'll get there soon! It may not be very far from here in the north!

- How exciting this is!

- Is it not? But the problem is that we do not know exactly where. But I should not bother you with our old Dwarven stories... "

The big Dwarf had suddenly realized that he was probably talking too much. But the meal was over. Master Elrond, who had placed Gandalf to his right and Thràín to his left, stood with his hosts of the high table and walked to an adjoining room.

.oOo.
Suddenly a booming noise startled everyone. Barin had had a last glass of mead before leaving the table. The alcohol vapors accumulated throughout the meal had made him less agile than he expected. Without meaning to, he pushed his egg while placing the empty bottle. The egg rolled slowly to the edge of the table, swinging. When Barin noticed that, he only had time to throw wildly his hand in the void to stop the fall. He missed the egg, giving it an extra boost that sent it crashing just a few steps from Elrond.

The room stood frozen with anxiety. The insult was big. Thráin reddened with shame, Barin became purple with confusion, a shade reminding of the raspberry ingested. Elrond knelt smiling to the egg:

- « It is a tradition among us to have the "hat of impatience" worn by the one of our young Elves, who first breaks his spring egg out of curiosity! But you will be excused because this subtlety had not been revealed to you. Let's see what fate reserved you... Do not worry, dear guest, you have not broken any innocent life! »

In the fragmentsof the egg, Elrond picked up two small items he gave to Barin, who had approached, trembling. The Dwarves surrounded Elrond and Thráin, while Barin was playing the mechanism of the trinkets. He soon held three folding pieces of cutlery – knife, fork and spoon of a magnificent silver and pearl work. Barin apologized and thanked profusely. Elrond asked him knowingly:

- « Will this travel cutlery, thwarted in its growth, now suffice your appetite, Master Dwarf? »

A Dwarf bearing white beard and hair said aloud what the other Dwarves thought to themselves:

- « Barin’s cutlery is never big or solid enough for him. This gift was perfect, and maybe still is – this cutlery may remind him of more temperance and moderation... »

The younger Dwarves, that the mere thought of Barin being restricted on food and drink, could hardly retain their laughter. Soon all the Dwarves guffawed loudly, accompanied by Thráin and Barin who laughed nervously under the benevolent gaze of Elrond.

The incident was over. The Elves also relaxed and all the guests went into the hall of fire. Gerry, walking next to Arathorn, said to him discretely:

- « The reception has come rather close to a disaster...

- Young Hobbit, may you learn that stones do not build the house, but guests do. You would be well advised to get inspired by that. »

A dance entertained the guests. Soon the Dwarves were divided into small pensive groups, seated
on cushions, lulled by the Elven charms of dances and songs. Rúmil sang a lay of Beleriand to the
delight of his bride, and the two conversed for a long time. Gerry found himself next to his lady.
Seeing his vacant air, she questioned:

- « My squire, you ought to behave a more cordial and joyful way at the threshold of the new Elven
year. What is your concern?

- The egg that I got intrigues me greatly. Do you think Master Elrond has a special thought for all
of us?

- I am not sure and that is the charm of this gifts Do not let curiosity or impatience spoil its worth.
Trust him. Some years ago, Gandalf and my husband received the same egg. I was consumed with
spite for several weeks. But in the middle of summer, two pretty little twin thrushes came to light.
Arahorn and Gandalf raised them; they are very clever and able to speak in their own way. They
are now the best messengers their masters can find. So I forgave his joke to master Elrond, since
these thrushes protect my husband from some of the many looming dangers and give me news of
him. »

Luinloth was still speaking to the Hobbit about the elvish customs of this beautiful house, when
Gandalf, smoking his pipe, came to take him away, along with Thràin. The great Dwarf leader was
keenly interested in the smokes exploits, so Gerry and Gandalf made a brilliant demonstration for
him, mixing geometric and animal figures. The Dwarf was much amused by these little tricks and
the curious harmony between a wily old wizard and an innocent little Hobbit.

Thràin spoke a little about his travels and his whereabouts through the Shire, asking Gerry how the
custom of smoking had come to halflings. The Hobbit told the story of old Tobold Hornblower in
melancholic terms that stirred up the great Dwarf. Gerry admitted that so many beautiful and
wonderful things, even here in Rivendell, could not overshadow the sweet feeling of "home."

-« Like a mother, a native land cannot be replaced![1], said Thráin in a dreaming mood.

- I left the Shire several weeks ago, and I still miss its inhabitants, along with their small hopes,
little problems and petty foibles. Now the least anecdote, even the most derisory, makes them more
endearing to my heart. »

Then the Hobbit told one of his memories, all full of innocence and humor of the Shire:

- « The mayor of the Shire, Gilles Proudfoot, inaugurated a new smial to serve as town hall at
Michel Delving He had pressed the construction to allow the inauguration, the very day of the
great fair at mid-year. The weather was hot, and he ate and drank so much that after his speech, he
fell asleep under the cool arch. His legendary snoring drove away his hilarious fellows one by one.
And misfortune would have it, that the vault, too quickly consolidated, collapsed on him. He got
off without a scratch, barely awake. Now it is told throughout the Shire that his snoring had the
room collapse!

- I was there when that happened, Gandalf intervened laughing. We have laughed only after
clearing him out of the rubble, as bleached as his baker father used to be! He blinked owl eyes and
immediately got angry against the rascal band who had botched the job. »

The companions talked late into the night, sharing anecdotes. Gerry realized that Gandalf deeply
loved the Shire and its inhabitants, speaking as a father, kind to all and stern with each. The wizard
reminded that Hobbits had not always known this carefree serenity.

- « It's probably from past troubled times that this little people retain a surprising endurance.
- I still have to prove my endurance, Gerry said doubtfully. I can not imagine the hardships suffered by the house of Dùrin... Barin told me your terrible ordeal. I admire your tenacity, he added to the address of Thràin who replied:

- At the end of the war against goblins, we were not able to push our advantage and continue the legacy of our fathers. Yet the need for vengeance has rooted in us. We gave it to our sons, as a curse, the only honor and the only wealth they have left.

- Do your sons come along with you?

- My son Thorin remained in the Blue Mountains, much against his will. But he must foster an offspring before rising for a quest. Maybe I should have given the attributes of our lineage to him...

At these words the eyes of Gandalf lit up. Thus the great Dwarf had a premonition that transmission of the treasures of his house would soon be necessary ... He said nothing but long pondered this omen.

_oOo._

Long after dawn, a bright sunshine pointed above the eastern falls of the Elven valley. The Dwarves were snoring in the wing of the building that was assigned to them. The concert of humming bass interspersed with sharper ringing modulated on all rhythms, reached the hallway, having the little eagle-eyed rascals rock with laughter.

Gerry was not snoring, but he would certainly have extended his morning in bed without the arrival of Rúmil, smart and playful. He opened the doors in a bang:

-« The Lord Dûnadan, your master now, has asked me to shake you, Master Dormouse! Your place is by his side and not into the fluff. You are to accompany him to the council. But first he wants to give you your first lesson!

- Without eating? Without taking time for a morning wash?

- Without eating, definitely! Without taking time, definitely! But without washing, certainly not!, » Rúmil exclaimed laughing.

Our Hobbit went topless on the veranda, splashed water from the basin and rubbed his head and face thoroughly. He donned quickly, girded his belt with his dagger and ran behind the young Elf to join the Dûnedain who had already gathered.

A large oval terrace paved with white marble shone in the sun, surrounded by bleachers skillfully carved into the rock, and overgrown with roots of tall pines. A building of porphyry, rather low, which housed a multitude of training weapons and stage sets, formed the foundation of the terrace. Pink colonnades prolonged natural basalt columns that lined up near the falls. Below, gardens terraces and orchards slopes ranged down to the river that roared its morning song.

Lady Luinloth casually played with her grand-son, sitting in the bleachers. Some young men were given a lesson in archery under the supervision of a tall Elf Gerry had met the night before. His silver hair was held back by an elaborate and graceful metal headdress. He handled the bow with a precision and speed that seemed supernatural.

A little apart, Arathorn was training with a vigorous Elven swordsman with black hair. Gerry for a moment thought he recognized Master Elrond, in a younger form. But his features were harder and his gaze stauncher.
The Hobbit was late. He was received rudely and began by performing two dozen bleachers, up and down at a run. Then his duties were listed to him, under the amused and compassionate look of the young archers, who remembered their beginnings. There was talk about punctuality, discipline, self-transcendence, deprivation, in short, the opposite of the philosophy and habits of a gentle-Hobbit pampered by life.

After that, his abilities were carefully explored, by the expert gaze of Arathorn. The captain of the rangers decided to let him handle his slingshot, an art in which Gerry had developed a respectable skill. Anyway the great bows of Elves and Men were not adapted to his morphology. But the most pressing issue was to teach the Hobbit the basics of fencing, so he could survive in melee. Ironically his primary asset was his small size, which brought the attackers to underestimate the danger of a sharp attack after an unexpected parade.

Under the keen eye of the raven-haired elf, Gerry bravely sustained the repeated assaults of Arathorn, who reproduced endlessly the same basic movements, until the Hobbit could not lift his arms any more.

-« You may run, bath and restore, Gerry! », Arathorn said finally while smiling at his wife.

Gerry was moving with tired steps towards the home of Elrond, when a melodious but authoritarian voice called him out from the breaches:

- « Gerontius Took! We are not finished for today!... This afternoon you will study with me! I think we can dispense with etiquette lessons, but your reading is poor, I was told! But for now, obey your master and do not be late at the council. »

Gerry would never kneel lightly any more. He complied in a half sleep and went to the boardroom, in front of which he waited for his lord.

.oOo.

NOTES

[1] Albert Memmi
The council of the exiled kings - Many revelations
Chapter Summary

Arathorn and Thràin oppose at a Council.

Gandalf and Arathorn arrived together, already quite annoyed:

- These topics are not yet within his reach! Why exactly do you want to drag him into this risky adventure?, asked the wizard.

- I intend to draw upon him when I am there!

- You’d rather say your wife has asked you to!

- And so what? Is that not because of Elrond’s demand that you wish not to take your eyes off him?

- Enough! This argument is sterile. If you uphold your decision, I will go with you and the Hobbit, whether you like it or not!

The Hobbit that was all about, judged frankly incorrect to speak of him in his presence, as of a negligible amount. Arathorn waved him, entering the hall. Gerry followed him and spent the whole council standing a few steps behind the seat of Arathorn.

Some Elves, with a serious and thoughtful face, were already present. Lady Luinloth sat alongside Arathorn, her face careful and stern. Thràin came on, dressed in his coat of mail, armed for war and flanked by his two uncles, burly balding Dwarves bearing a long and proud white beard.

The council hall was actually a platform overlooking the river. Graceful stone arches joined in the center, bearing vines that, jumping from one arch to another, built a roof of green and red leaves. The air was still and only the chirping of a nightingale disturbed the quiet echo of the waterfall.

All stood up or joined their places when Elrond appeared. He begged them to sit down and spoke:

« You came by your own ways, by chance, it seems, and you are gathered at my table without having planned to submit your thoughts to a council. Let all of you be thanked for consenting to it, because allies must pay the mutual respect of consultation, to decide what to do, for fear of being beaten separately. »

Elrond paused after this introduction, to emphasize the vital importance of a combined action. Having obtained this approval in principle, but without illusions about the challenges ahead, he continued:

« So you are sitting along each other because an ancient Dwarven Mine resurfaced from our memories off centuries of mist... Thràin, lord of the House of Longbeards, the heir of Dùrin the eldest of the seven Dwarves fathers, could you tell us what led you among us? »

The great Dwarf raised, resting his hands on the heads of the two war axes fastened at his belt.

« For decades, the house of Dùrin has been brooding its resentment. We started the war of the
Dwarves and orcs to avenge my father Thrór. The bitter victory deprived us of the friendship of the other clans, who lost the flower of their war strength without compensation. Our existence is that of outcasts, satisfying with the place that is merely left to us as unwanted guests. My relatives live in a small coal mine in the Blue Mountains, as vassals of the Wide-Torsos clan.

That's enough. We want to recover our properties, our kingdom, our dignity. We want more than anything to conquer a rallying point for the Dwarves of Dùrin, grow and reclaim Erebor. This is the desire that has grown in our hearts all these years of expedients. We were waiting for a sign. And here it is!

Når, my uncle who stands next to me, paid a pilgrimage visit this winter to the kingdom of his late wife in the North of the Blue Mountains. Warm and sacred sources of Nogrod revealed him the awakening of the Life Stone in Barum-Nahal!

The great Dwarf watched the effect of his revelation on the audience. Nobody seemed to understand his excitement or even recognize the name.

Lady Luinloth asked, in a collected tone:

- « This omen seems capital boding for your lineage, but it is mute for who knows less. Can you please, noble Thràin, explain who or what is Barum-Nahal?

- It is the name of the major mines near Mount Gundabad where our ancestor trod the stone for the first time. It is the primary name that we do not teach. We reveal it to you here and now, so that you realize the importance of this site for the Dwarven kind. At Barum-Nahal, Dùrin coined gold for the first time. At Barum-Nahal stone came alive for Dùrin to shape his wife. This place is the well-spring of our family. »

A heavy silence fell over the meeting. Never did any in the assembly receive so precious and so moving a Dwarf confession. Master Elrond said, the spokesman for all:

- « We fully measure, dear Thràin, the critical importance of Barum-Nahal for the Dwarven kind. Thank you for your trust. »

But Arathorn would not let the board be moved. He asked slyly:

- « What are your plans, noble Thràin? Will you invest Barum-Nahal and rally there the people of Dùrin? »

Luinloth put her hand on her husband’s forearm. The great Dwarf clenched his teeth to answer while both his parents approached for support:

- « Today Barum-Nahal has become a legend. The revered site stands at some distance from Gundabad, its location is approximate at best, at worst a hazardous guess. The place is certainly infested with goblins for long. It was recaptured in second age by our cousins the Stiffbeards, for a brief period. But our rivalry did not allow to keep it. Tradition warns that a great worm inhabits it for ages. The people of Dùrin has not sought for it for generations. We do not know how to get there, although Dwarven lore suggests that it is South of Gundabad, on the eastern slopes of the Misty Mountains. However we do have one certainty: the Stone of Barum-Nahal can give life again! »

After another pause, Thráin confessed:

- « We came to see Elrond half-Elf for advice to find Barum-Nahal. We will fight it back or die trying! »
- Baruk! exclaimed both old Dwarves in chorus with a fierce accent in their voice.

- And we shall give you the help and advice you need. », concluded Elrond soothingly.

Arathorn was seized by a cold sweat, but he controlled himself. How could his parent, brother of his forefather, stand up for his opponents in a race to recover sovereignty? Elrond in his wisdom, had anticipated this feeling and cast an intense glance at the ranger. He went back to the beginning of the tale of years:

- « A long time ago, a little less than a thousand years, the tribes of riders southeast of Rhovanion were allied to Gondor. They were defeated by a powerful confederation of peoples from the East. Survivors fled and founded a small kingdom in the upper valley of the Anduin, between the mountains and the northern reaches of Greenwood-the-Great. Frumgar the Beautiful managed to unite the Êothéod and strengthen their defenses, pushing back the orcs of Gundabad.

His son Fram managed to defeat the mighty lady-dragon Scatha, that nested in the caves of the former Ettenbaras volcano, located in the heart of the Misty Mountains. The legend of Fram’s wealth spread through the North, as well as rumors of strange abominations from the dragon’s nest. The Dwarves of the Stiffbeards nation, who were in possession of the mine for a time in the second age, claimed for Fram’s treasure. He answered to them by sending one of Scatha’s teeth. « So, did his messenger say, the Dwarves’ claim was served, though undue, because no Dwarf would ever own such a rare treasure. » The anger of the Stiffbeards was beyond imagination.

The curse of Scatha’s wealth had begun, even though these treasures have perhaps never existed! The mortified Dwarves tried to reinvest the Ettenbaras mine. So did the Êothéod. Parties sent by either kings, disappeared into the mines or even before reaching them. The two factions, Dwarves and Êothéod, ready to fight, accusing each other, were finally more concerned to counter the movements of their opponent, gradually losing sight of the volcano. An argument about a fortress commanding the path to the mines went wrong and Fram was killed in suspicious circumstances.

During several years, several expeditions were organised by Êothéod and groups of Dwarves, without success. Few survivors, whose health seemed deeply altered, spoke of unrelenting guards, sharp tongues of fire and betrayals among their expeditions. Tombs lined the valley leading to the volcano and mine, it is said. They have a reputation for being haunted.

Over time, the primary reason for the fighting and the reality of the treasure faded before the renewed need for revenge. Six hundred years after the killings, the Êothéod left the valley of the Anduin. The location of Scatha’s den became obscure, even for us who sit in this fortress since the second age of the world... Since then, large eruptions have been occurring repeatedly in these parts. Nobody went to claim the hypothetical treasure for ages. »

Thràin, who had sat down to listen to Elrond, interrupted angrily:

- « Why have you told this story? Could it be that...

- We believe here at Rivendell, that the Ettenbaras volcano is none other than the sacred site of Barum-Nahal. Of course the mine entry is impossible to pinpoint because many secondary chimneys were reported. Lava - the tongues of fire of the legend - probably buried any wealth that could be there. But if you are confident in your Dwarven hearts that the Stone of Barum-Nahal is back to life, you must make sure. Maybe Aule lets there, for the last time, rebound the life of the old volcano that was thought as too old.[1]»

Arathorn and Luinloth had heard enough. The revelations of Elrond convinced them that only death would prevent the Dwarves from trying to regain their sacred site. They quickly convened
together. Luinloth decided her husband: descendant of Kings, he lordly dismissed any hint of competition and opted for a proposing an alliance. Gandalf was watching, waiting for the ranger to display a position for all to see. The Dûnadan stood up majestically:

- « Now I must share with you the news that our people have brought from wilderness. Three moons ago, the Dûnedain in charge of overseeing the mountain range that borders the southern boundary of the lost kingdom of Angmar, surprised a strange ride: a squad of orcs hanging around a heavily loaded cart, regardless of daylight. It seems they tried to rally Mount Gram, which is yet occupied sporadically by goblin tribes at war with each other. We have intercepted and destroyed them. But our men discovered many strange things. »

The Dûnadan paused to enjoy the effect of suspense on his audience. Gandalf alone let perceive a slight annoyance.

- « First of all, the cart was a chariot with arms, as Dwarves use in their mines, but an old kind, entirely of iron. Its cargo was gems and gold coins. My rangers brought a few. Here they are... »

Arathorn passed a purse containing a few gold coins, with disparate sizes, thickness and gold content. Elrond and the Dwarves agreed that some came from a Dwarf mine of the Stiffbeards because they wore their effigy, a three-pointed beard topped by a helmet. Some were stamped with Dûrin’s hammer hitting an anvil, under a star. Other pieces came from various but ancient origins, such as Gondor during kinstrife. Finally the oldest coins bore a patina and a symbol that had the Dwarves thrill.

Luinloth, as a shrewd diplomat, offered one to each of the Dwarves.

- « And above all, a strange and disgusting being was hindered in the cart, half-orc, half-man. He was dying and his tales those of a madman. He spoke of terror from the tombs, of fire tongues pursuing him and... of a pulsating life source. »

At these words the Dwarves advanced, trembling with indignation: orcs contemplating the sacred stone of Barum-Nahal! Arathorn continued:

- « Yet in his delirium, some corroborating evidences suggest that this being fled westward for several days with his companions, before falling into an enemy clan’s ambush. We believe we have destroyed their assailant gang.

- What makes you think that this horror of yours came from Barum-Nahal? », Interrupted Thráin in an offended tone.

- « I can only say that the cart came from a Dwarf mine; it was carrying a Dwarf treasure and the ramblings of that half-orc, half-man being remind of your own tales. Moreover the premonition your parent Nàr came shortly before we captured the cart. I think, noble Thrain, these facts should give you, if not hope, at least doubt! »

The great Dwarf replied, trembling with indignation:

- « We do not accept these signs may have been sent to you, and not to the heir of Dûrin! Where is the Dwarf treasure you say you have captured, of which you returned only a ridiculous sample! »

Arathorn raged, abandoning any politeness:

- « Try to maintain some kind of consistency in your speech, Lord Thrain. Criticism is a tax that envy collects on worth! [2] You cannot both call into question the good faith with which we report our findings, and suggest that we stole your treasure. Our rangers followed down the trail of this
heavy cart. It came from the Misty Mountains. My men went their separate ways at the foot of the mountains. One came back here to bring this purse and the strange news I told you. The other followed the trail in the mountains. But before my men split, they buried the captured treasure. You will admit that they could not safely carry it! I shall not tolerate any more that doubt should be cast on my word! You have been warned. »

.oOo.

[1] Jacques Brel

[2] « La critique est un impôt que l'envie perçoit sur le mérite. » Duc de Lévis
The council of the exiled kings - Alliance in Rivendell

Chapter Summary

Despite Gandalf’s reluctance, Arathorn and Thráin negotiate an agreement.

Then the lady spoke with a soft but firm voice:

- « I ask each of you to return to his senses. Here are two Kings in exile! Two forces of nature struggling to restore the dignity of their lineage and the greatness of their people! Will they make a covenant, or will they rise up against one another for reasons of personal pride? »

Gandalf narrowed his eyes and hid his smile, pretending to smooth his mustache. Arathorn sat. Thráin bowed respectfully to the lady and sat back, saying:

-« The treasure the Dúnedain conquered, was hard-won from the enemy and is rightfully theirs. We will hold these coins in memory of the wisdom of the lady. Only time will tell if they come from Barum-Nahal indeed. »

Arathorn slowly spoke:

-« Noble Thráin, I wish our alliance. You have the undoubted right to seek to conquer this place. Only you have the power to bring your people there to make it a stronghold. I also aim to rebuild my kingdom. We started there for years to revitalize some areas, to secure our roads. To go further I need allies and neighbors. A road between Eriador and Rhovanion, held by reliable allies, would be a blessing. Comings and goings between the Blue Mountains and the Misty Mountains, a secure trade route to Rhovanion would be, for Arthedain, the triggering of a recovery. A flourishing trade route through the Misty Mountains, protected and justly taxed by a free kingdom, would be a guarantee of prosperity for your people, Dùrin. An alliance between the powerful kingdom of Arnor and Barum-Nahal would guarantee future. That’s what I want to succeed with you, King Thráin. I offer our help and our swords to recover your property and build a lasting alliance. »

Thràin had regained all his wits and distinguished perfectly, behind the noble speech, where his own interest stood:

- « Why could not the people of Dùrin recover its property by itself, alone? »

Arathorn turned a moment to Luinloth and smiled: the real negotiations were just beginning.

- « The Dûnedain have a thorough knowledge of the mountains that border former Rhudaur. Our Men are watching for the Ettenmoors permanently. We know the habits and forces of the orcs clans. We consolidated the cards we had or we found here in Rivendell, and the valuable information gleaned by our hunters. I sent two scouting teams. We located the Ettencaras or Barum-Nahal if you prefer. We are exploring, this very moment, the approaches from West and East. But most of all, it is clear that we must act quickly, because we are not the only ones who know that there is a treasure. I must say that for three days, we have had no news from the ranger who was sent on the trail of the cart in the mountains. »

The tall Dwarf long pondered this argument.
- « And what part of the treasure of Barum-Nahal will you claim for, once our victory is achieved? 
»

- « For the price of this alliance, the Dúnedain ask one quarter of the treasure we will find together. 
»

Thràin had made his decision, but he still negotiated:

- « And who will provide material and equipment for this expedition?

- My rangers are hard at work for several days to collect mounts, food and equipment. »

Elrond intervened:

- « This question seems secondary to me. My house will supply for your trip, if you maintain this project. »

Gandalf stood up and raised his strong bass voice:

- « If you maintain this project! What a beautiful tale will be sung in Eriador’s cottages and the Blue Mountains halls in a few years! Two Kings rebuild the heart of their kingdoms! A dozen Dwarves and half a dozen men respond to mysterious signs and recover, unopposed, a fabulous wealth! Barely should they take into account the dangers of the journey, the arid and inhospitable mountain slopes, swarming orcs tribes in these regions, haunted surroundings of the valley and unpredictable eruptions of a volcano. »

The good-natured tone had gradually veered to a fiery harangue:

- « But in these calculations other creatures are involved, proud and independent, unpredictable as April showers but more mobile than a volcano! Thràin, you stubbornly omit this threat as if you had not suffered its calamity! Yes, I’m talking about dragons, which are neither blind nor deaf. Because it would be wrong to imagine that reviving the rumor of such a treasure would not arouse the lust of your new neighbors. We know of at least two major worms - Corlagon and Scorba - that nest in the mountains encircling old Angmar.

Do you shudder at this name of Angmar, Arathorn? As I have repeatedly explained, we must eradicate this threat. Only the security of your borders will enable a new Arthedain growth. Tell me how you could escape an invasion comparable to that of the year nineteen seventy four of this age, except by secrecy? If you raise the kingdom again and ensure prosperity, dragons will rise up and destroy you!

And you, Thràin, does not your Dwarven heart shudder at the idea that a Human defeated the great Scatha alone? Let away this mine rumor for now. You would not enjoy it. Rather war against Scorba as he is not on guard! We must eradicate the dragons! »

- « Baruk ! », exclaimed the chorus of three Dwarves, standing up and brandishing their war-axes.

Arathorn, feeling his influence weakened among the audience, advocated a phased approach:

- « We are not yet strong enough to wage war against major worms. Let us lead a preliminary, safer and more lucrative expedition. Let us take a stronghold, from which the successful attack will be launched. Let us prepare this revenge by putting the odds on our side. »

The shortcomings of this reasonable argument did not escape Thràin. Arathorn associated himself too much with the Dwarven revenge. Once the treasure recovered, he had obviously no intention to
accompany an expedition to destroy the Mountains Misty dragons. But the lure of gold and renewed prestige proved the strongest. Thráin cherished the dream to fortify Barum-Nahal against major worms, after conquering it...

The Dwarf leader stood up. His majestic face remained closed but he pronounced emphatically:

- « I Thráin, son of Thrór, accept the proposal of Arathorn Dûnadan. Let us join our forces to find and invest Barum-Nahal. A quarter of the revenue of this expedition will return to the Dûnedain. We will therefore be allies and conclude an advantageous trade agreement. »

As Elrond did not clearly opposed the agreement, Gandalf sat down and finished ulcerated:

- « I think I'll join this madness. Nothing is worse than a dreamy idealist, but two. It takes a sharp mind in this expedition. »

Arathorn and Thráin solemnly shook hands, surrounded by their family as witnesses. Elrond raised his hand and said:

- « I may not disagree with an alliance between two free peoples. But I am warning you up twice! Against your divergence first, because the goal you are pursuing is distant; you may need to make major concessions to one another in this business. Against the signs of your destiny, then, because my heart tells me that the road to renewal of your lineages will be long. »

Arathorn could not hear that speech. He replied:

- « Each of us has a part to play in achieving the song of creation, keeping hope and patience, but without delaying what needs to be tried! »

Elrond sighed:

- « The fate of mortals is veiled in uncertainty. May your will and courage lead to the success you are yearning for! Finally I urge you both not to risk everything in this adventure: your two heirs Argonui and Thorin should be kept safe. That is my judgment and obligation for both, if you care for my blessing. My heart is troubled since once again, the councils of the great and the wise ignore the oldest creatures in these mountains. Well ... maybe will they bring you some unexpected help. »

The council was ended, the audience dispersed. Thoughtful, the wizard mumbled into his white beard as he left the boardroom. Elrond joined him, taking him by the arm:

- « Let us back up what we cannot prevent, Gandalf! These two characters, though noble they may be, lose easily their temper. They will need your wisdom and your ability to gather, before the end of this hazardous tale. You should advise on the spot about what you will deem appropriate...

- If only they had listened to me now! »

The Hobbit was walking not far from Gandalf:

- « What do you think of all this, my dear Gerry? »

The Hobbit felt torn between loyalty to the ideals of his lord and the deep aspirations of his own people:

- « The affairs of dragons are a bit above my opinion. But I respect the need for a home, a quiet smial, the satisfaction of a well cultivated land, inherited from my ancestors. My people did not
understand what others have done for their safety and well-being. I want to stand among the brave
who strengthen a home for those who protect mine. I will help Arathorn rebuild his kingdom and
Thràin to find a home, if they think the services of a Hobbit can be useful, which I doubt somehow.

»

Gandalf watched Elrond knowingly, as to conclude a debate they started long ago. Elrond, smiling,
told the Hobbit:

-« So you Hobbit-liege will accompany Arathorn in his expedition! Enjoy his lessons during the
journey. »

.oOo.

The following days left a vague memory to the Hobbit. In Rivendell, time passed on without
smothering the mortals’ flame, nor wearying the immortals existence. Gerry could only remember
small talk with Elves of the hidden valley, or his hours of dreamy contemplation. Of course he
fulfilled his service and pursued his education, supervised by his lady and his Lord. He practiced
his fencing and his reading without much zeal, as Dwarves and Dûnedain were actively preparing.

News came from the parties sent to either side of the Misty Mountains. The eastern team quite
easily tracked a long, winding valley leading to the large volcano Ettencaras. The western team met
with an unusual activity of the orc clans of northern Rhudaur. On the advice of Elladan, Arathorn
decided to take the Anduin valley path to reach Ettencaras. Elrond backed the advice of his son: he
worked with the rangers to dispose a curtain of spotters, in order to rescue the expedition from the
West side if needed. The chosen route crossed the Misty Mountains and the Anduin, after which
the company would follow the edge of Greenwood the Great northbound, in greatest secrecy.
Finally they would re-cross the Anduin to cruise along the river Eithelang[1], that met the

In addition to his daily lessons, Gerry attended a council of the Dûnedain. There he learned that the
expedition was leaving the next day. Only Arathorn, three rangers and Gerry would embark on the
expedition while the others would strengthen the fight against the orcs by the western slopes of the
Misty Mountains. This secret strategy would allow the company to get to the mines through the
valley of the Anduin, with a reasonable chance of confidentiality, and that military pressure was
maintained by the West, promoting the return.

Realizing suddenly that his lord left Rivendell the next day, Gerry finally busied for some
preparation on his own account. He asked for his pony, he found cavorting with thoroughbreds in
the western prairie of the valley. Giles was perked up, but Gerry had to struggle to take him to the
stable, because his mount was much more interested in some mare. The hobbit got busy all day in a
waking dream, as if his mind was contemplating his body achieving all these preparations without
the help of his will.

.oOo.

[1] The river Langwell, contraction of “langflood welling”

At dawn a small company had gathered on the steps of the great house of Elrond. Ponies shivered in the cool early morning air. The whole household had assembled to wish good luck to the travelers.

The twelve Dwarves had donned their traveling clothes - solid canvas tunic, studded leather broigne, lamellar armor or flashy chainmail. They rode big and strong mountain ponies with long hair, in the middle of a large number of leather and canvas secured packets. Their recently cleaned and sharpened weapons shone with conquering lights. Two additional animals bore the equipment that was mainly to be used once arrived at the mine. The four Dûnedain and Gerry stood aloof in a well-ordered company, dressed in dark green canvas and brown leather. They did not intend to mount but each had harnessed a lightly loaded mule.

Thráin realized that the mules would certainly serve on the way back. Since the Dûnedain knew, better than anyone, the needs of the ways the group would take, he did not comment. Gandalf had prepared likewise, going on foot, his small backpack slung over his shoulder, a sword at his side and his stout staff in hand. But he also led a mule, loaded with mysterious packages and boxes bearing the rune "G". Gerry followed Arathorn with his little pony Gilles, who was trying to hide his nose in the neck of its master.

The group of Elven girls sang a slow farewell, sad but not hopeless. Rúmil joked with Gerry to uplift his rather low morale. The heart of the little Hobbit clung to the thought of leaving a place of peace and harmony, to embark on an adventure that he did not completely feel like his own. His promise pegged in mind, he gritted his teeth and stepped for the sake of the lady, the honor of the Shire and perhaps also to preserve the esteem of himself.

Lady Luinloth gave him a book with a smile:

« Perhaps will you read a little, thinking of me in the evening at the camp? »

The Hobbit bowed without promising. The lady turned to her husband. She bestowed to him a branch of an Elven tree. Legend had it that this gift should retain its freshness and protect its wearer as long as he remained faithful to his vows. The Dûnadan kissed his wife and his grand-son, laid the twig in his quiver and reviewed his companions.

Elrond had a comforting word for everyone. Gerry did not hear what the half-Elf told Thráin and Arathorn, but his face was as serious as Gandalf’s. The wizard kept in mind the prophecy of Elrond, that Luinloth had also partly dreamed:

« All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.
From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
A light from the shadows shall spring;
Renewed the splendor dispersed
Wilderness re-peopled kingdom.
On the long road winding back,
Of cardinal virtues, courage and sacrifice,
A faithful shire-squire to restore sovereign
Honor in the house of Valandil. »

These verses invited to hope but his heart was troubled by one detail: why did the omen mention an equerry? In fairy tales, the squire was appointed to report the death of his lord. In the old days, Ohtar reported the disaster of the Gladden Fields. Closer to them, Nàr had reported the tale of Thrór’s heinous death. Gandalf chased his doubts away and focused his will.

Then the master of Rivendell leaned towards Gerry, smiled benevolently and whispered:

- « You will find more than half of yourself in this adventure, if you do not abandon the essential part. »

The stunned Hobbit could not unravel the skein of this Linnod[2], but he would have many days thinking about it.

Elrond finally turned to the company:

-« You leave this house with hope in your heart, to see your dearest wish flourish and bear fruits for the future. May you watch over your companions before you cherish your own dreams! Leave with the blessing of Elves, Dwarves and Men. »

.oOo.

The company finally shook in songs of farewell and good luck. First Thràin led his eleven companions, along with Gandalf. Gerry and Arathorn followed them. The three Dûnedain closed the line with their long, slow ranger’s stride. They crossed the narrow bridge over the Bruinen and began the climb to the plateau. Gerry looked back with a heavy heart, while the column disappeared into a mist as they came out of the thickets. He ceased to float in time to re-enter the bitter realities of the outside world. The ponies began to grumble: the slope of the steeper trail, the colder weather, rumors of the wilderness, all combined to hinder their progress in the slope. Gandalf flattered his mule that was willing to comply, but most Dwarves, cursing and grumbling, had to dismount under the mocking eyes of the rangers.

Once on the highlands, they were greeted by a chorus of songs from birds and Elves, who held forth in the dense undergrowth. Elladan, Elrond’s son, had wanted to explore and secure a wide perimeter around the valley to facilitate the departure of their guests. Dûnedain smiled to the petty
quips that rang out and waved back, but the Dwarves’ already stern faces showed they felt slightly offended. They walked extensively through the woods to the South-east, before emerging unexpectedly on a highway that undulated toward East and the mountain range.

The weather was clear and the temperature was slowly rising. The Dwarves sang a marching song and eventually returned to their stools, still singing. Dúnedain traveled in silence, quick and furtive shadows when they could, barely noticed by the animals themselves. They felt uncomfortable, dragging on the road with this noisy band. But Arathorn let the troops bawl the first day. At the camp in the evening, when the guard turns were distributed, he summoned a short council to set the record straight. Helped by Gandalf, he received command of principle for the trip to the mines, recommending silence and listening.

They toiled for long days, climbing a steeper and steeper slope. Dwarves and Dùnedain, who spoke little to each other, did not speak at all from one group to another. Each drew on his memories or his hopes to mobilize his courage and will. Arathorn thought wistfully of the sweetness of the hidden valley and the loved ones who safely waited there. Barin was remembering the excellent food and relived his visits to the master kitchens of Rivendell. Some crafty Dwarves, Nàr and Már in particular, dreamed about the prowess they could achieve in the forge. They had shared some best practices with Elven smiths who had followed Elrond after Ost-in-Edhil’s looting. The Hobbit, looking at blur gray mists of the western horizon, imagined his parents and friends in the fields or over a pint at the inn after their daily toil. He surprised himself with such thoughts, but he also noticed a strange and nagging feeling of lack: a Hobbit-girl was waiting for him, but her enigmatic smile did not reveal any intimate face. The most severe shortage was certainly not the absence of any Hobbit-girl, but the lack of familiar features.

The little Hobbit shuddered. Since breakfast time in the morning he could not get warm, the air became cool at this altitude. The road climbed steadily, walkers guided ponies and mules that had now adopted an acceptable cruising pace. The road, which had thinned, sometimes left some doubts at crossings. These mountains were spanned by many trails, but most led to dangerous dead-ends. The Hobbit wondered aloud who could have traced them. Gandalf looked askance at him:

-« You do not want to know! »

The rangers now formed the vanguard and the rearguard of the column, avoiding the tricks of the trail, clearing the passage and assisting latecomers. Thràin took umbrage at this takeover. Late on the afternoon, he recognized a shelter built by Dwarves, a little away from the trail, and he commanded they spend the night there, but Arathorn opposed it, arguing that the speed was their best strategy. Most of the passes were held by evil things. But Gandalf, who himself retained an excellent memory of these trails, had asked Thràin to trust Arathorn, whose knowledge of goblins and mountains was second to none. Nonetheless, the Dûnadan leader showed gradually more worried as they climbed. Hours earlier, a small thrush had landed on his shoulder and had steeped in a frantic chatter that had darkened the mood of her master. Arathorn explained that he was certain of the road, yet he expected to encounter signs left by his scouts. He sent Hirgon[3], forward, his most skillful tracker. The tall silent man returned the next morning, as the company resumed its climbing, bringing some bad news.

-« The pass is three hours walk ahead of us. When I reached it last night, I found it held by the enemy. It is impossible for our column to pass there unnoticed. So I have slain two goblin guards then I hurled their bodies into the ravine. They will not be found. In the morning, at daylight, I found the entrance to a cave nearby. It is well camouflaged but the goblin leader had remained there out of laziness and cowardice. I caught him and I caused a landslide that will block them for some time. Anyway I doubt they go out by day. We should hasten and enjoy the respite. »
Gerry marvelled at the efficiency of the warring Dúnedain. Arathorn congratulated Hirgon and ran forward with Gilhael. After an hour of strenuous climb, they came upon a small mound, obviously left by rangers. These signs, left by the team that passed there three weeks before, said they had noticed nothing unusual. The two men forced the pace and reached the pass. Large patches of snow lingered on the slopes facing North. A cold wind was blowing between rocks, whispering dark warnings with a monotonous and gloomy tune. While Arathorn stood guard before Hirgon’s barrage of stones and rocks, Gilhael explored the eastern slope. The ranger noticed the trail of an orc party, down then back up the trail. Arathorn concluded that his men had been spotted and chased. Yet news had been received, indicating that the group was unharmed, several days after the pass. Goblins had therefore probably meant to track them and find their route rather than exterminate them. Or they had been misled by more skillful scouts…

When the column reached the pass, Thráin ordered the cave exit to be completely blocked. Gerry was amazed by the work force of a dozen Dwarves, started in their pride, and who also meant to display their superiority in war. The gigantic work was done in record time. To this Dwarven feat, Gandalf quietly added some injunction of closing, while the company was quickly restoring. The group left about noon and ran down the slope with great rapidity. Arathorn left Gilhael as rearguard to cover their exposed descent to the edge of the pines.

Luck was with the company. The weather changed quickly, and the rain began to fall. Arathorn blessed it because their tracks would be erased. As the sky was darkening, rain was soon followed by lightning which struck randomly the mountain peaks around them. Stones sometimes ran down the slope in front of or behind the company or even between the ponies. But a rock hit Frerin’s mount, that fell and hurt his left rear leg. As the animal was limping and bleeding, Arathorn did his best to heal the mount and the company found refuge on the first roughly flat land they found in the forest.

Then it was realized that Frerin’s Elven egg, carried by the poor animal, had been broken in the fall, with a few other small items. The young Dwarf carefully unpacked the remains of his egg. He found a bottle of ovoid form, tinned, of impact-resistant metal. Frerin opened the bottle, reluctantly sniffed the fumes and grimaced. Barin volunteered to taste the Elven mixture but Arathorn firmly dissuaded him. Turning to Gandalf with an interrogative and dubious frown, Frerin asked of what use could be this drink, with such a strong smell. Gandalf lifted it to his nostrils; it smelled like a concentrate pot-au-feu of laurel and cloves. The wizard handed the bottle to Ingold who sniffed the potion and said:

-« I think it is an Elvish balm to treat muscle injuries, sprains or joint diseases. It certainly works by contact, as a poultice if possible; do not spread it on a wound or ingest it, except as a powerful emetic. »

Arathorn added with a grateful thought for Master Elrond:

- « Maybe this gift comes in time to help you care for your pony, Frerin? »

Ingold helped Frerin to apply some of the precious balm, massaging the pony’s limb.

The next morning the ranger and the Dwarf, who began to sympathize, were examining the animal with satisfaction when Gilhael joined them under a steady rain. The tracker announced that he had noticed nothing special at the pass, except thuds under the rock since a late hour of the night. No doubt this mishap would teach goblins to excavate more than one output to their galleries. At the first light of dawn, Gilhael had slipped away as ordered, while goblins seemed to have made no notable progress. The company had nothing to fear provided they walk a good step. As the injured mount seemed restored, the troops took the trail, eager to leave this awful place. But Arathorn felt
it was better, both for the group cohesion, and for their subsequent chances, to conserve their energy. The troops calmly strode their next step under a penetrating and constant rain. Ingold and Arathorn took turns at the rear of the column for erasing their tracks, while Gilhael and Hirgon advanced forward as scouts.

But they were not disturbed, thanks to the combined skill of their leaders. The company followed the road, large again and clearly defined under the trees, heading southeast. Arathorn, a thrush on his shoulder, sometimes sent her scout the ground nearby. Thràin grumbled, considering it a waste of time to join the great forest, far beyond the Anduin River. Arathorn addressed him quite firmly:

"Our battleforce and equipment do not allow us to walk on the mountainside. Cutting blindly northbound would compel us to permanent, long detours, dangerous for our mounts. We're moving quickly on this road without the risk of hurting our pack animals. Also our route, up to the edge of the forest, does not discriminate us from ordinary travelers. Then we'll head north, through a sheltered land, very easy to cross, where we can hunt and feed our mounts without any difficulty. Thoughtless precipitation would lead us to disaster, noble Thràin."

Gandalf used his credit on a more conciliatory tone before Thràin could pronounce unpleasant protests:

"My dear Thràin, I implore you to give, as I do, credit to the skills of the Dûnedain. Their caution is the surest guarantee of success."

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[2] Device, maxim, dictum or puzzle
[3] This name means « Lordly Stone » or « Lord of Rock » in sindarin. It may be supposed that his noble lineage backs the King by family tradition.
The company is heading north under the eaves of Mirkwood, when they find they are being chased.

.oOo.

Two days later, at the end of the afternoon, they reached lands with a rich soil, where groves of elms and beeches grew near prairies that bloomed with thousands of colors under clouds of bees. At nightfall, they saw the ford of Anduin. The wide river carried beige waters, swollen by the melted snows far North in the Gray Mountains. Small wooden forts were built on both banks. They protected the lashing of the big ropes stretched across the river for safe passage. These redoubts allowed to hold the ford against attackers. Silhouettes of archers fluttered on the wooden ramparts when the company approached.

Gandalf, Thràin and Arathorn advanced and parleyed a moment with the guards. Big brown Men and a few Women held them out with their longbows. They wore skin clothes embroidered with colorful designs. Eventually they were allowed to pass. The rangers’ clothing awoke a few remarks from the alarmed guards, but their leader had them keep quiet and reassured. The company passed the ford and climbed the East bank under the supervision of the guards.

That evening the Dwarves and the Dùnedain could light some fires near the eastern fort. They ate something warmer and much tastier than the previous days. Their morale was greatly improved, even if Thràin and Nàr were offended by the heavy toll imposed by the foresters. The company had received strict instructions regarding the information to be given: they were traders traveling to Esgaroth-upon-the-long-lake, for business. The Dwarves were able to deal some exchanges, yielding weapons against beautiful furs. They built up a small makeshift forge and repaired some axes. Obviously these weapons were used for goblins and wargs necks, they were no mere hatchets.

The following day, the company took ostensibly the East Road, early in the morning. The ford’s guards watched them go, sternly farewelling the travelers. After about a mile, they left the road to the North in the middle of a dry stretch, where a small thrush hopped with a cheeky air. The Dùnedain meticulously erased their marks along an entire furlong. Dwarves dismounted their ponies, that got tired more quickly on this soft ground. Arathorn veered slightly to their right, climbing the slope to less waterlogged soils.

The Dwarves reckoned the balance of their spendings and earnings at the ford foresters’ station, concluding as good traders, that they had done well. Gerry, who for a moment had been dreaming of the feasts of the Great Smials at mid-year, asked who had paid for him.

Hirgon laughingly replied that the guards had hesitated to charge Gerry as a child, but they had remembered the legends of their ancestors where small "hole-bytlans" with hairy feet, inhabited the banks of the river.

-« Legend has emerged in full daylight for our guests. In their eyes we are untouchable thanks to you, Gerry! Arathorn said.
- It's a chance, said Gerry, my purse is at its lowest!

- You will be entitled a share of the treasure. Meanwhile the Dúnedain cover your share of the costs of the expedition.

- I do not see what I could do when we arrive. Before discovering that Rhovanion foresters saw me as a living legend, I had the uncomfortable feeling of being a useless package.

- Be assured, Master Gerry, we still need a burglar when it comes to exploring a little-known mine », assured the Dwarf Barin.

Thràin disliked the way the conversation was led. He interfered haughtily:

- « It is obvious that the emoluments for Master Gerry, whose doubts I praise, will be deducted from the Dúnedain share, as well as Master Gandalf’s share. »

Arathorn obviously could not ignore this unmistakable provocation.

- « Although the presence of this worthy wizard honors and comforts us, the Dúnedain in no way required his participation. If his eminent skills have not yet earned your appreciation, it goes without saying that the Dúnedain would provide for Gandalf’s reward. But I prefer to believe, King Thràin, your memory is more uncertain than your word. Maybe we should write down the agreement sworn in Rivendell, lest the circumstances lead us to interpret it too freely? »

Appalled, although he was the author of the first verbal aggression, Thràin now sported a purple complexion. Gandalf raised his voice:

- « Do not worry, Thràin, if you still have doubts about me, I shall take whatever share you would see fit, one or the other. But perhaps these material issues will be facilitated when some of us are dead and the survivors saved one another’s life several times! »

This outburst calmed the heat of rhetoric, if not the resentment. Gandalf casually changed the subject, talking with the Hobbit of the origin of his ancestors along the Anduin.

Then the company adopted a rapid pace, rarely stopping, walking long and silently, passing from a thicket to another. Rangers often went forward, leaving their pack animals in the care of Gerry or their companions.

The next evening, Arathorn made an effort to break the ice and somehow bond the company. At Rivendell, he had managed to gather a good amount of pipe-weed, thanks to master-herbalists of Rivendell who grew and prepared all kinds of leaves for their ointments. He had dried and cut, for his personal use and to offer when Gandalf and Gerry would have depleted their reserves. He had also had built several wooden pipes, which he had carried away.

During the spring festival, Arathorn had noticed the interest of Thràin for games of smoke. At the camp in the evening, he approached the Dwarf King, and courteously, offered him a pipe and proposed he joined the lesson led by Gerry. The maneuver, although political, was nonetheless appreciated by the Dwarves, especially Nàr and Már, counselors and parents of Thràin. Eventually the whole company came up around the fire, to review the progress of smokers under the supervision of the Hobbit.

Dwarves and Dúnedain relaxed around colored smoke rings, late in the evening. Arathorn liberally distributed his additional pipes – to Már, Nàr and Ingold. Subsequently several Dwarves harnessed to build a pipe with a nestable hearth for themselves. The spirits were appeased and it would have been a perfect evening if the memory of an ancient evil had not come to trouble it.
After a particularly successful figure, only Gandalf managed to surpass, Gerry was seized by a seemingly innocuous coughing, which had the audience laugh. Yet a burden remained on his heart, a taste of burnt oil that clung to his stomach and lungs. Gerry stopped smoking, to the astonishment of Gandalf. When the Hobbit became pale, Arathorn sent him to bed with warm clothing. The whole camp went to bed.

But it was only later that night, when Gerry expressed the feeling of a painful lump of burnt blood obstructing his chest, that Gandalf, who was watching over him, was seized by doubt. The wizard asked Arathorn to check and double the guard that night. The ranger knew Gandalf was afraid when he saw him put the pack animals in the center of the three fires of the company. In the middle of the night the Hobbit complained of hallucinations: a grinning mask with bloody fangs had returned in his nightmares to torment him. Gandalf, feeling helpless, saw him sink into a disturbing trance.

It was at this moment that Hirgon raised the alarm: dark shapes approached stealthily. Immediately the camp was got up in uproar. Thráin and Arathorn divided the company to protect the fires and mounts. Howls of wolves broke out all around the companions. Gerry opened bulging eyes, his body paralyzed. Gandalf securely tied the Hobbit to the shelter of a large stump and stood up. With a wave of his hand, the firelights became brighter, revealing many pairs of malicious eyes. But the company was far from succumbing to panic. The Dwarves in combat formation had a fierce glint in their eyes, the heavy-handed Dùnedain kept calm in battle, and Gandalf had never been defeated yet.

Then Fràr, a nephew of Màr, and the Dùnedain shot a few arrows sparingly, whenever they could hit for sure. Several pairs of eyes drooped in a rattle. Howls decreased, some turning into little plaintive cries.

Then an icy breath spread throughout the company. Something terrible was approaching. A different scream sounded suddenly, which raised the hair on the back of all living soul. Gandalf and Arathorn had ever heard it on the other side of the mountains. A werewolf advanced, gigantic, followed by a pack of huge black wolves.

Suddenly they charged. Thráin ordered the Dwarves to hold their positions. A volley of arrows whistled, mowing three wolves. An arrow struck the monster on the chest, which took it off like an annoying thorn. Thráin and Arathorn joined the rank of Dwarves who faced the onslaught. There were Màr, Fràr and Norin. The shock sent the latest and the two captains to the ground, but the werewolf was wounded in the head. The simultaneous attack on all sides that followed this frontal attack completely broke the defensive formation of the company. Gandalf struck, cutting and thrusting at arm’s reach, protecting the Hobbit and the mounts. But Dwarves and Dùnedain held on. The storm abated, except the monster that struck with its dangerous claws, staying mostly out of reach.

Then a roar sounded in the woods. Most wolves disbanded immediately, while the werewolf, alone against the company, hesitated and then retreated. Arathorn fetched his bow and specially forged arrows, and set off in pursuit. Thráin shouted him to come back, ordering the defense reformation of the company. But the Dùnadan chief meant to put an end to this threat. He darted into darkness and immediately regretted not to bear any torch. He had already moved some poles further when he was assaulted by several huge black wolves. The first fell, the eye pierced by an arrow. The ranger unsheathed his sword, driven back to a tree by four big males.

Things would have gone wrong for him without the help of a huge bear, which emerged from a thicket. With a swipe, he broke a wolf’s hindquarters and snapped another by the spine, breaking the neck off. Arathorn took advantage of the surprise to plunge his weapon into the jaws of the
closest beast. The last wolf fled in a yelp. Arathorn stood on hold for a moment, facing the bear that turned and ran away, to the place where the screams and the sounds of a furious close-combat came from.

Arathorn could hardly distinguish what was going on in the thicket. Finally he discerned two major bears struggling with the werewolf. A stricken bear was about to receive the final blow when the second grabbed the monster’s shoulder. The werewolf got rid of it with a swipe. Then luck smiled at the Dûnadan: Gandalf was approaching with his light, which revealed the monster’s chest for a moment. The ranger bent his bow and launched the fatal shaft. Forged by Elrond and his Noldor kin, the mithril[1] arrow bore the secular hatred of Elves for evil and darkness. It reached the monster in the heart. It collapsed gurgling unspeakable curses, before dying in a rattle. Gandalf and Arathorn cautiously approached the thicket. The bears had flown, leaving the hideous corpse, still trembling with hate. Arathorn severed the head while Gandalf made sure the body returned to nothingness.

The return to the camp was triumphant: the wounds of the company were minor, except for Bafur who suffered a nasty bite on his left arm. The fighters joyfully patted themselves on the back, while their captains rejoiced together at the victory. Arathorn showed the head of the werewolf to the company. Now it had the appearance of an awful mixture of Human and dog. Gerry was horrified by that. Arathorn burnt the head, which released a horrible stench. Ingold was called to provide his knowledge and skills, with the support of Gandalf and Norin. Dwarves repaired the disorder caused by the attack. A new guard was established, and the camp tried to finish its night. But little Gerry sank into a coma of growing concern, as he had done at Rivendell. After two hours of wakefulness, Gandalf, Arathorn and Ingold confessed their impotence.

In desperation, Arathorn opened his bag and pulled out a package. He gently opened his Elven egg of the spring fair. Confident in the premonitory power of Elrond, he expected a lot. But what he found did not disappoint him - a ball of compressed leaves, fresh and wrinkled as if they emerged from the bud. He recalled the actions of his wife and reproduced her deeds, thinking of her grace and presence. Was it the loving thought of the lady or the thaumaturgic power of the King’s descent, or the vanishing of the werewolf’s charred remains? Still, the Hobbit began to breathe normally. Retrieving the complexion of a living being, Gerry opened one eye and said:

-« I would fancy some snacks… »

He was liberally granted a nocturnal meal and Gandalf finally found sleep.

.oOo.

NOTES

[1] Mithril, dearest metal to the Elves, also known as « True silver », glitters like silver and is as light as aluminium.
Chapter Summary

The company is greeted by a woodsmen tribe of Mirkwood. Their princess is strong and pretty much undertaking...

.oOo.

At dawn the next day, Krorin raised the alarm again. A man and a woman, both tall and large, peacefully presented themselves at the camp. Their appearance seemed strange to the Dúnedain and Dwarves, but Gandalf thought he knew who they were. The couple was dressed in rather crude laced hides of deerskin leather. The hairy, muscular man far exceeded Arathorn, resting his club on his shoulder. His face, eaten by a very thick black beard, expressed an innate respect for the living, mixed with some mistrust for Humans, alone capable of lying. He made a sign of peace with his right hand, like foresters.

The woman reached the size of the tallest of the Dúnedain. Though her face was smooth, her powerful limbs, covered with dense body hair, wielded an ax that the Hobbit could not have even raised. Gerry woke up because the discreet hubbub of an awakening camp had abruptly turned into the respectful silence that greeted the arrival of their visitors. The woman also bowed, smiled and addressed Arathorn in Westron, with a pronounced northern accent that rolled the "r" as a cub would growl:

- « My clan calls me Bera. Bearn is my brother, the dominant male of our clan. We welcome you now that the furious dancing bear ornament has subsided. May the rays of your hives be overfilled with honey. »

The woman had placed particular emphasis on the word "brother." Gandalf stepped forward to give the appropriate response:

- « Let your storage abound for your winter slumbers! »

Bera and Bearn bowed to Gandalf. The couple seemed sensitive to the power of the old and dominant. Thus the two giants reiterated their greeting before Thráin who strutted, his great ax at shoulder. The woman, who seemed the most playful, spoke again in the name of the man:

- « Let the father of the Naugrim clan be thanked. Bearn, lord of this land, recognizes mighty warriors in you and accepts you into his clan. »

The smiles of the young woman clearly reflected a hope. As she was the sole speaker, most of the time while watching Arathorn, the Dúnedain wondered about what being "accepted into the clan" could exactly mean. Gandalf evaded the question, since Bera’s interest for Arathorn seemed very insistent to him:

- « Our clan solicits Bearn’s permission to pass through his land. We are, as you saw, enemies of the wargs. We have business in the North and our quest suffers no delay. »

Bera’s disappointed face was painful to see, despite the magnetic presence and huge strength of the
giant woman. As she put her hands in her lap and bent her face ruefully, Bearn advanced, fire in his eyes and his club on his shoulder, looking very upset:

- « Our clans were married in battle today. Bearn rescued your clan and your clan male saved Bera. A debt of honor binds us for now on. We guide you on our lands and sagas will be told together! »

Gandalf, who knew the Bearnings’ tongue, however, nonetheless was not able to decipher whether the phrase “saga told together” meant "a tale told to each other" or "mingle our stories." He did not have time to think about it. Gerry, who had not seen the fight of the night and had heard it told, ignored the guessings[2] of the company. He asked innocently:

- « Where are the bears? »

Dwalor suggested he should leave leading discussions to Gandalf, in so anxious a tone, that the Hobbit abandoned for the moment the idea to understand what was going on. Clearly the master of the lands did not appreciate much contradiction. Insofar as the mansions of Bearn were located further North and closer to their trail, Arathorn and Thráin saw no objection to share some epic tales in the house of Bearn.

Still the ranger meant to scout around to find out where the wolves had fled. As the company gathered their belongings and loaded the wounded on his pony, he ordered his trackers do a quick inspection of the neighborhood, on a mile radius. They returned hurriedly after a few minutes. All brought the same news: the travelers were surrounded by brown bears.

Bera, noting Arathorn’s agitation and annoyance, stepped forth and gently took him by the arm.

- « The dominant male should not worry about his clan. Our bear-brothers protect them from wargs and evil. They gathered to chief Bearn’s call.

- Where are the wargs? »

Bera stared at Arathorn, speechless because the Dûnedain needed to be taught facts that even the children of her clan already knew:

- « The wargs fled to the cursed mountain. You killed the Vargúlf[3]. It is a great deed. You saved Bera from the horrible wolves’ death. But there are many, and more will come. But today victory’s sun is shining! »

Then Bearn gave the signal of departure. On the track, the ponies showed signs of nervousness, but the Bearning woman managed to calm them down by stroking or by looking into their eyes. Leading the company, Bearn strode, while Gandalf trotted along. To sustain the pace, Thráin had perched on his pony. The mounted Dwarves followed as a compact block around Bera, as a litter of cubs surrounding their mother.

The Dûnedain held up the rearguard, marveling at the alliance of strength, instinctive gifts of the woman, but worried that this power may unleash all at once. Arathorn, well aware of the disquiet of his men - and his Hobbit- felt he could not fend off the advances of the Bearning woman without risking triggering a dangerous disillusion. He found her candor pretty much disarming and could not ignore the danger of turning against him so valuable allies. But his lady filled all his thoughts.

Obviously Bera thought Gerry was the young son of Arathorn, or at least some sort of godson. The Hobbit displayed the pleasant characteristic of abundant fleece on top of his feet, perhaps she felt on familiar ground. The woman, who had young and naive but heavy and energetic features,
constantly sought to keep Arathorn’s company, and hear tell about himself. Thus the Dwarves, especially Thràin, would have considered the situation as particularly funny, without the awareness that their guests could at any time get back to their terrifying bear form.

The company journeyed long under verdant woodlands, from a treed slope to another. At Bearn’s passage, trees and plants seemed to greet the master, their offspring who had become man, by the grace of sylvan Maiar[4], to rule over the people of the undergrowth. Humus smoked clouded flavors of gingerbread. The sun filtered through the dark green canopy and gilded the morning mist that wrapped her son in a soft scarf of light. They arrived in a space surrounded by large oak trees which branches, located high on the trunk, intersected regularly. In the center, could be seen a small portion of a clear bright sky. A sunbeam penetrated the opening obliquely, illuminating the clearing peopled by a dozen giant stumps. Small white bellflowers lighted the short green grass with silver sparkles. Bearn sat cross-legged on a stump, inviting travelers to rest a while. Gandalf sat on another stump, but he was the only one. Their footsteps on the grass and leaf litter sounded curiously under the protective vault, as in the great hall of an ancient castle. The master ruled in his kingdom, but he had a sacred duty to perform. Bearn put his elbows on his knees and closed his eyes. After a few minutes of deep meditation, a large bee came to rest on his fist. Then slowly it was joined by dozens of thousands. Dwarves and Dùnedain stepped back as soon as politeness allowed.

Bera, spanning the ferns with the grace of a lynx, led Arathorn apart, although he did not wish to leave the group. Her shy smile expressed the excitement of spring and the strength of immemorial seasons but also revealed the uncertain hope of a vulnerable and inexperienced young woman. Two small red squirrels came to play at her feet, as she was weaving a wreath of flowers. She donned Arathorn who grimly guessed the hope of the girl. He took the crown on his head and respectfully put it on the girl’s brow, whose smile disappeared. The sparkling white bellflowers fleetingly gave her the profile of a queen, in the prime of her youth but sad and resigned.

The arms of the giant sitting on the stump now resembled overloaded branches with moving clusters of live fruits. When sunlight hit him finally, Bearn stood up, stretching his arms out. The swarm slowly took flight - bees left his arm to reach the other. After long minutes all passed into a deep meditation, each fist bore half of the swarm. Bearn then raised one arm. Immediately the half swarm left the giant’s arm, and floated to Bera, who was left alone with her crown, close to tears. The bees lingered over her for a moment, then vanished into the forest, while Bearn was dismissing the bees his fist had called.

Huge Bearn, his forehead bearing pain but with a determined look, joined his sister and had a long conversation with her. Long the debate swung under the worried gaze of the company. Sister and brother concluded their talks, one in unshed tears, the other in contained fury, agreeing that laws of hospitality would be respected.

.oOo.

NOTES


[2] Guessings we hope our reader has resolved!


Chapter Summary

Telling stories around the clan hearth of the Bearnings, may lead further than you think.

.oOo.

Then all continued their journey, following the couple, with a heavy heart and alert senses. Several hours were spent under the trees before they reached a new clearing, two furlongs large. It housed many huts arranged around an imposing wooden building. When the company arrived, all the people came together to make a spontaneous guard of honor. Bearn and Bera led them to the common hall.

The log building was erect on a stone platform of three poles wide and long. Huge trunks, uplift at the center, formed the mats of a solid double slope frame. The adjusted logs were pierced with rare small windows, that people blocked with curtains in the cold season. When they entered the low door, they realized that the upper floor, served by a fair opening just above, was used as a barn and reserve.

The company was directed to the large central fireplace, where they could unroll their blankets. Comfort was rudimentary but the place was safe and warm. Hams were hanging from the beams above the huge central fireplace, where they ended being smoked. Animal skins were drying after undergoing various treatments. The group settled and got busy like voyagers in a friendly camp - laundry, sewing, repairs, care for the wounded... Gerry took his little sewing kit and showed great skill in mending clothes, like the fashionable Hobbit he remained inside. He even devoted some time to reading and writing, aided by Gandalf, who was amused but very firm on hesitations.

Mounts were parked with the village livestock, while the wizard unloaded and hid his precious and mysterious cases. Afterwards Arathorn, Gandalf and Gerry had a walk in the streets. They noticed a flurry of activity around Bearn, who paced the village and spoke to everyone. With the approach of evening, the small town had received a few dozen warriors with a fierce look, from neighboring villages. All had been conferred for an evening of revelry. The town of Bearn catered for a foreign company, high-ranking warriors who certainly would tell or sing their deeds. The companions went into the house, feeling that some special event was being prepared.

At nightfall a strange character, his limbs as gnarled as an old root, and his eyes as bright as a leprechaun, stood at the entrance to the town hall. He progressed slowly with the aid of crutches, but anyone could guess, by the way he used them, that they might as well serve as bludgeons. Handicapped by a hunting accident in his youth, the man had narrowly escaped and turned to lore. Protected by the powers of the forest and by men, he was the storyteller and the shaman of the clan. He was believed to be seen sometimes in the company of sylvan nymphs. For a sure thing he talked to spirits. The shaggy and ageless man cast his sharp eye on the audience. He walked with his rolling gait, right on Gandalf, who was smoking in a corner. Both bowed silently but respectfully. Since the old wizard did clearly not intend to interfere, the storyteller joined the central hearth. The audience formed a circle and hushed.

The shaman sprinkled powder on the fire, which freed a heady scent of humus and resin. Colored
smokes spread around. Then his melodic and captivating voice rose in the language of the Bearnings. With consummate skills of rhetoric, he told and mimed the fight of the previous night, having his audience panting till the theatrical denouement. Gandalf, whispering to Arathorn and Thráin, reported briefly the eloquent words of the storyteller.

Bearn stood up and paid a heartfelt tribute to the courage of Arathorn’s clan. Thráin grimaced but managed to put on a good showing. Honor required Arathorn to pronounce some words of modesty, then to thank Bearn and Bera for their courageous fight and hospitality. Gandalf translated brilliantly and allowed an addition of his own: he quoted King Thráin and his mighty warriors. But the great Dwarf realized this, which added to his resentment towards Arathorn.

Then the shaman, satisfied with the courtesies exchanged, regained control of his audience by telling a long story, punctuated with expressions of emotion from the Bearnings. Here it is, as Gandalf told us later, with the details he could remember.

-« In times immemorial assembled the clan of our ancestors. Our most distant tales sing how our fathers’ fathers lived at the bottom of the northern forests. They indulged in hunting and gathering, and in that time Men and Women roamed the woods alike. The lord taught the ways of the forest to the youth of the tribe. One morning he took them to a ritual hunting that would make them adult members. His daughter Barwen and her twin Baran participated. They had forged unbreakable bonds and had sworn loyalty for as long as they live in the service of their people. Their innate understanding allowed them a unique coordination, as for hunting or mind games.

During the tests it happened both twins were lost. They wandered at length in the primordial forest, finding barely enough to sustain themselves. Attacked by giant spiders, they were hunted down and captured. They were going to be devoured when a huge bear rescued them. This bear had been the favorite of Ardau, the Great Spirit of all the bears in Middle-earth, who had bestowed him with the gift of speech, and had named Arduin. The Great Bear picked them, fed them and lent them shelter during winter. In the early days of spring, Arduin, captivated by the beauty of the girl, turned within a few days into a human being, full of majesty. He opened the soul of his young proteges to study and taught them the Ogham writing and signs language. He disclosed to them that in the West resided the High Elves, holders of science and lore provided by the Mighty Ones. Baran, seduced by the prospect of raising his people to the lights and the worth of the Elves of the West, designed to join to place his people under their prestigious protection. Barwen meanwhile, marveled at the powerful symbiosis between wilderness and the children of men.

So the twins departed from each other without hope of return. In autumn Barwen carried within her, the heir of Arduin. The people of the twins eventually found them, sorely affected by the previous winter; the twins’ father himself had departed. Arduin greeted their people and taught them the forestry arts, animal husbandry, cultivation of bees and berries.

Then came the painful separation of the twins: Baran followed his resolution and Barwen chose to remain with her beloved and their child. So the rise of Baran’s tribe cost an irreparable loss to the young lord. Swallowing his resentment and grief, he vowed to lead his people in Beleriand to the Elves of light, saying the fate of Human beings may not follow the savagery of predators, but by studying the lore taught by the firstborns.

Barwen remained in Rhovanion with her husband and her son Eochaíd, who was bestowed great gifts: beauty, vivacity and strength. The few faithful tribesmen who remained with Barwen, mingled with the forest population. Over time, Arduin could not keep his Human form permanently: irresistibly attracted to the deep forests and high mountains, he eventually left the community that had begun to form around him. Shortly after the final departure of Arduin, Barwen gave birth to a baby girl, Ardia. Tearful Barwen vowed not to join with any living being. But still
evil was to come.

The weakened community was attacked by a band of Orcs of the Misty Mountains, which took Barwen and her baby. Eochaid, who had the power to turn into a giant bear, was seized with an indescribable fury: he pursued the kidnappers to their cave, wiped out the orc tribe and destroyed their lair; but he could only save the little Ardia.

His little sister, disturbed by the early departure of his father and traumatized by her kidnapping, remained silent and sad. Growing up, she isolated herself increasingly and Eochaid alone, who adored her, managed to cheer her up. Over time, it became clear that no one would want to unite with Ardia. Eochaid instituted the tradition that the firstborn of the line, would not have any wife as long as his sisters is not married. After several years of celibacy for both, Eochaid and Ardia were forced to have each other as spouse, finding no other way to remain faithful to their vows.

Their descendants, who all had the power to turn into bears, maintained the tradition for their sister to marry first. Most of the time they only delayed their union, patiently rejecting girls’ attention. But it did not happen any more that the male of our people should marry his sister. Yet today the sister of our lord Bearn has still not found a consort. Will it be that Bearn and Bera, who have not yet found any mate, should follow the tradition of our people? »

It goes without saying that at the time, no member of the company, except Gandalf, did understand the scope of this tale. But the assembly began to chant the "cubs rhyme", the song that Barwen used to sedate her little Eochaid, when the absence of his father weighed him.

Gandalf stood up and whispered to Arathorn, «An evening like this is an opportunity to report tales of yesteryear. Here is just one that will raise the judgment of our guests. »

Then the wizard spoke in the language of the Bearnings:

- « People of Bearn! I will tell you what happened to your ancestor who went to the western expanses. The people who followed Baran, facing many dangers, crossed the Misty Mountains, further the Blue Mountains and came into Beleriand after many years. Balan, the son of Baran moved his people into a place of Ossiriand woods, the year three hundred and ten of the first age. The Elf lord Finrod Felagund saw them and watched them for a whole day.

At night, he crept into the camp and, accompanying himself on his harp, he sang a song that seduced men, women and children. In the morning, the Elf lord had understood the principles of the language of this people. He had a long conversation with Balan and they became friends.

Following Finrod’s advice, Balan led his people through the plains of eastern Estolad in Beleriand. Balan entered the service of Finrod, he was then known as Beör, which meaning both "bear" and "warrior" in your language, and "vassal" in Finrod’s tongue.

Entrusting the lordship of his people to his eldest son, he went to Nargothrond where he remained until the end of his life, contributing to wars against the orcs. At his death, the Elves were surprised and sad, facing the weakness of Humans and the fate that has them leave this world. »

The shaman concluded Gandalf’s tale this way:

-« This is how the lineage of the Kings of the West is akin to the lords of the Bearnings. May these two lines meet again one day! »

Bera raised her weeping eyes, that glistened yet with a vaguely renewed hope. The wizard bit his lips. He had sought to educate the clan but his foresight had turned against him. He warned
Arathorn that it had inadvertently come again on his marriage with the princess of the clan. The Dûnadan therefore advanced to the center of the hall and, with the help of Gandalf, told the assembly:

«My clan lives beyond the mountains. Many summers ago, I met my beloved. She gave me a son, who is now old enough to fight our enemies and is the pride of his father. Himself has a son, raised by his grandmother over the mountains, because his mother died in childbirth. I hope to overcome our trials to join them and give them what my people have not been able to restore since many generations: peace.»

This statement, full of sobriety, went straight to the heart of the Bearnings. It emphasized fidelity in love and the pursuit of a peace ideal through military virtues. Yet the tribe was feeling accountable. A life debt was to be paid. It was all the more, to this distant relative whose code of honor was so close to theirs.

The shaman raised his melodious voice again, his words spread up like a muffled chant of encouragement, then the proud accents blossomed into a war song, finally to explode as a hymn to the glory and courage of the Bearnings. Over singing, some warriors had advanced, in a trance, bearers of the resistance and the honor of a whole people. Last advanced Bearn, possessed by the adventurous fury of his ancestors. The singing stopped.

As in a dream, Bera saw four Bearning warriors and their leader gather and extend their arms over the shoulders of their neighbors. They took up the chorus, singing the final passage, as an oath to excel and risk everything for each other in the event to come. All were village leaders, among the most respected and most powerful warlords of the people of the bear. Their company would befall entire hordes of enemies to protect Arathorn, thought Bera. She walked towards them with a determined air:

«No!»

The common house held its breath. Bearn sobered instantly, looking incredulously and painfully at his sister.

«I refuse anyone being committed to my place for the price of my blood. I have a debt to pay and a man to find. Our villages will not remain defenseless. I shall go forth alone. I said.»

Bearn's face softened. Her sister was grabbing control over her destiny.

Arathorn was about to set this proposition aside, but Gandalf’s imperious look dissuaded this offensive, dangerous and unnecessary approach. The Dûnadan stepped forward and bowed ceremoniously at Bera, soon imitated by Thràin.

The festivities lasted late in the evening. Mead flowed so freely, that many Dwarves did not retain a very precise memory of the night. The next day was devoted to new exchanges, care of the wounded and preparations for Bera.

The powerful girl had hardened her heart and seemed reassured. She often visited the forests men and sometimes held the fords with them against orcs incursions. She had learned Westron and was often more sociable than the Bearning chiefs. But she had never left her village for more than a week, so the prospect of a long journey, alone with strangers, so noble and brave, seemed the adventure of her life. The company greeted her as warmly as could Men and Dwarves at war. Bera immediately turned her disappointed need for affection back on little Gerry, who soon became her confidant. They left the village the next morning, in the twilight of a distant dawn.
While Bera was guiding the group along with Ingold, Arathorn lingered in the rear. Thráin slowed his pony to wait for him. The Dwarf mocked Arathorn as an old comrade:

- « I am surprised that a warlord like you had to resolve to accept a woman in his ranks! Would you have discovered your weakness? »

Arathorn was very upset about this situation, he had not wished for. The Dwarf’s playful tone seemed to him awkward and inappropriate. He replied tartly:

-« Do you realize that this woman could certainly tear your head apart in one fell swoop? She is an excellent recruit, noble and reliable. Her sacrifice for blood debt is worthy of the greatest. She simply considers having no choice. I suppose you understand the unbearable weight of a blood debt, since you have kindled a war for this reason. »

Thráin, whose only intention was to establish a certain complicity in a conversation between boys, scowled and made no further attempt to do so...

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NOTES

The company, now accompanied by a noble woman of Bearn's folk, strides north on the eaves of Mirkwood.

The tall woman and the Hobbit were walking together, finding solace in the presence of each other, in an unexpected exchange. The little Hobbit reminded Bera that the world offered reasons to forget her regrets and to deeply dedicate herself, like a child to be protected by love and self-sacrifice. Bera showed every moment a surprising contrast: disarming naivety in her outdated conception of love, and unrelenting harshness in her duties as chief’s sister. For Gerry, the first half personified all the young Hobbit girls whose flimsy romance had to be protected by honesty and loyalty. The second half summarized the laws of survival in a world marred by the black enemy. The ambivalence of her character fascinated Gerry, who transposed it into his world of the Shire, to the delight of Bera:

« My dear Bera, you are positively the first woman I ever met, who gets involved in adventures!

- Do you mean that you are surprised, and that since most women do not, you thought that none may? »

The Hobbit shuddered. He had introduced as neutral and pleasant as possible a subject, just to spend some time, but existential considerations had immediately risen. But the Bearning continued:

« Our people traditionally reserves the tasks of war to men, but the age-old custom of my line inspires my own conduct. Yet, raising litters of young cubs often resembles heroism, let alone delivering them! »

This remark amused Gerry but reminded him of the silent abnegation of his own mother and the stoic pragmatism of his grandmother, the two of them being authors of almost three dozen lives and proving tireless guardians of the family concord. Bera continued:

« Do you not meet such exceptions in your woods, women who leave their village?

- As far as a Hobbit can remember, there was indeed a famous chief-mother, once head of clan Chubb. It is said that her clan was the last to join the Shire. Maybe she was a romantic and fragile Hobbit before becoming the fearless and unyielding matriarch. She had given birth to six children; probably this amazing fertility had contributed to her transformation... »

Bera began to consider Gerry with different eyes. His children of men features concealed skills for reflection and sharp observation. Bera’s protective arm resembled too much a pervasive mother bear paw, but she finally managed to respect the halfling as an adult, or at least a young adult looking for his way.

Gerry told her about his small country, on the middle of Eriador beyond the mountains. She discovered a world of order, sociability and conventions, which had exceeded the critical threats such as famine or survival, or rather delighted in this illusion.
The term "walk" for example, was not of the same significance for the Hobbit and the woman. Bera meant a slow, silent and watchful scouting and hazards spotting through distant forests, which could result in unpleasant encounters. Gerry meant a quiet hike punctuated by views of a well-ordered, recreative countryside, and especially pic-nics, highlighted with flirtation under the shades of walnut trees.

The Bywater shops depiction puzzled the Bearning. The possibility that such places were not looted by goblins could not be conceived. She fancied the idea to go there along with the Hobbit, if he consented, but without actually projecting the day when she could realize this fantasy.

While chatting, Bera guided the company towards North, sniffing and peering regularly. Then she resumed her soft and tireless stride. Thràin had to remind her several times that the ponies needed rest, while the rangers followed without complaint nor comment. The company therefore traveled a great distance, without meeting a soul, since the rangers maintained as usual their scouts screen during their progression. A massive and stealthy shape was sometimes glimpsed at, lurking at the edges of the dark wood, usually to the East and to the right of the company. The little Hobbit also spoke about seeing a large bear slipping into the foliage one furlong on their right; he warned Bera who said, sighing wistfully:

« My brother remains with us as long as we stride within the territory of our people. I think he cannot help himself. Do not pay attention!

- He's worried about you ... Why did he not accompany us to the end of our journey?

- The dominant male of our tribe must protect the villages. He is a descendant of our ancestor, he commands the undergrowth. I would not allow that our people should suffer because of me, by depriving us of our leader. He will be leaving us soon...

- But your shaman seemed quite sure that the fate of your leaders was to go along with us...

- That old crafty fool would have tried anything to marry the dominant male’s sister, especially if this male leader would be lost in a remote area... He tried to get into the same saga, all the outstanding and great males of our people, which was not safe.

- But is he not your shaman, the intercessor with the forces of your universe?

- Yes, this is true. He is also the narrator, memory and imagination of our people. He was a good man, but he became a figure of authority. His gifts have a counterpart: his lameness hurted him in many ways... In his dreams, he often takes his secret wishes for signs of fate... »

The confidence surprised Gerry in many ways: he could neither suspect a prominent figure might try to manipulate the omens of his people, nor that the innocent Bera had realized it.

- "Did he ask for your hand?

- My hand?

- Did he ask you to become his wife?

- What a lovely expression! He asked a few years ago when I left childhood. I refused then. Now I would probably think twice...

- But you were certainly courted by other suitors?

- Think again, little Hobbit. All other clansmen felt too intimidated by the sister of the dominant
male... But tell me: are all Hobbits as greedy as you are? I mean both about food and the intimate stories of their companions? »

Gerry blushed. He confessed to being too curious and stammered some lovely excuse, with his half-fake air of old ladies’ seducer. Of course, the tall Bera, who was already devoted to his manners, forgave him willingly.

After a few days walking, they no longer saw any signs of bears. The vegetation around them became denser and trees entangled with each other. Bera gave even more attention to the scents of the trail. At first her nosing had aroused incredulous condescension, then some doubt mingled with fear, but the infallibility of her predictions soon earned her the respect and confidence of all. Sweet hazel smells blended with fragrances of bark fungi growing on old rotten oak stems. Some strongest aromas, for example of a passing boar, sometimes distracted Bera who was going away for long huntings. Arathorn reprimanded her somehow, arguing that the expedition could not afford such long digressions. Bera, as upset as a squire at fault, said in retaliation that Arathorn would not enjoy the boar she carried on her shoulders, after it had been roasted. But she did not allow herself any more, to get overwhelmed by her hunting instinct.

One morning the Bearning said she had never reached this far, and the birds of this country had an unusual song. The trail seemed more and more difficult to them; the Dwarves were most often dismounted. The company therefore decided to go down the slope to the west, in order to journey closer to the great river and find greener trails through the woods. Hirgon, who had stayed behind, raised the alarm one afternoon. The Dúnedain scout had detected an animal following them. Arathorn ordered the company to stop and gather in battle formation. But no challenge was addressed to them.

Quickly Bera, the Dúnedain and Gerry had ventured, scouting backwards. But they could not track the pursued down, who had deftly avoided their approach. The animal left few traces, and it was difficult to read them in the wake of their company. Bera and Arathorn ventured further. It seemed to them that a large gray shape escaped stealthily when they approached. After vainly losing a few arrows, they rejoined their companions. Arathorn showed great displeasure about the chaos he had seen after Hirgon’s alert and insisted on repeating the operation of collecting animals, bonding them and placing them in the center of a defensive position. It goes without saying that the Dwarves’ mood, and particularly Thráin’s, worsened immediately. Arathorn haughtily replied that he had been entrusted with the safety of the company, and that in the wilderness, cohesion and obedience conditioned survival.

All concluded that was a false alarm, no sign of party or pack having been raised by the Dúnedain or Bera. Yet Gandalf and Arathorn, who had strayed for a moment, heard with concern the chattering report of their two young thrushes. The same evening they reached the edge of a large forest, overlooking a gentle, grassy slope leading to the great river Anduin, a mile below. Mosses and lichens invaded trees and stones. Some late thorny trees still let loose clusters of their yellow pollen.

They camped near the bank, on a rocky area with low vegetation cover behind a mound that looked like a stony ridge of fish. The smooth sounds of the mighty moving river completely surrounded them. Clouds of small parasites befell travelers and animals. The company quickly had to light hearths to get rid of them. Gandalf, looking around them with a mixture of surprise and suspicion, insisted that the company fires would carefully be arranged on a thick bed of stones, to fight the ground’s humidity. Bera gazed at the stars for hours, while Gerry practiced reading for her, at the firelight.

-« It is perhaps time for Bera to follow the path of Baran, embrace the lore of the West, and learn
to read. », she softly said to herself.

Arathorn was smoking with a few Dwarves, hoping to repel mosquitoes. He heard Bera but could not unleash his empathy. He refused to personify the cultural emancipation of the girl. In addition, he felt this fondness, he certainly did not seek for, somehow cumbersome, though he welcomed the enrollment of such a powerful warrior. So he tended to treat her as a soldier, without special care. As he felt concerned about Bera’s last remark, he wished to dispel any hope of hers, without discourtesy:

- « Our wizard will probably prove to be a more patient mentor than I. It is now too dark for that. You should ask him tomorrow. »

The Hobbit finally fell asleep, the tales he just read still in his ears, drifting on the ship of dreams. Elven princesses took his lady's face. A curious little character appeared there sometimes, vague but powerful ancestor of Hobbitkind in the chronicles of ancient days. The cool and quiet night of moonless Norui[1] was well underway, when Forin woke Gerry up for his shift. The small cantankerous figure protested in the dream of the Hobbit, who reluctantly returned to reality.

Gerry, his mind still foggy, walked around the camp in silence, chasing mosquitoes and trying to collect the night sounds of the forest through the cacophonous sleepers’s snoring and the dull roar of the river. He climbed atop the hillock overlooking the camp. Its huge smooth stones were roughly arranged in the manner of an old scale armor. From the river nearby, ghostly vapors emanated and immersed Gerry back in fairy Beleriand. There, a girdle of mysterious forces protected the rivers surrounding the grey Elves kingdom. The Hobbit sat on the edge of a huge stump, with a rotten and hollow heart. Some warm, very comforting and sweet smell of cedar rose from the cavity. Facing the forest, his back leaning against the stump, Gerry carefully peered towards the forest for the safety of his companions.

.oOo.

[1] Month of June
Gerry sinks into an age-old dream.

But Gerry's mind was still inhabited by the shadows that roamed the tales of old. He stood guard, like the Sindar long ago preventing access to the kingdom of Thingol and Melian. The voice of his lord and lady dictated him not to doze, to focus on every little rustle coming from the forest, every movement of branch, each variation in the intensity of the shadows under the trees. He maintained his lookout for a long time, bearing on his frail Hobbit shoulders, the sleep of all his companions. This tension, he imposed on himself, slowly brought him to tap into his deep forces. He appealed to his treasure, closing his eyes to focus his sharpest senses at this hour of the night. He grabbed his ring and sank quickly in a curious awoken sleep, deprived of images of the forest, but aware of its sounds, its smells and its vibrations with a sharpness he had not experienced before. He swung back, and fell in the heart of the stump. It was hollow and bottomless. Gerry had the sensation of falling endlessly, still aware of the living and careful forest around him.

An acute skull pain had him straighten. He was seated on the stump, trying to guard his companions. His prosaic side noticed that he no longer suffered from mosquitoes that yet fluttered around him. Thanks to the ring, he thought, he had split, remaining at his post but responding to the call of the voices of the mound. Because he also sat in a strange place: a dark room covered with huge scales of slate, resounding with viscous sounds of the mighty river all around it. The top of the vault was pierced by a flint-colored day, through the hollow of a stump which roots ran along the arches of the room.

A curious little character was facing him and awkwardly scrutinized him, looking quite uncomfortable. The face of the gnome recalled the Hobbit some of his recent dreams. His broad and kind face seemed it had been furrowed for years by the pangs of doubt and loneliness. His hand clung nervously to his own red cap with long legs coming down to his belly. The gnome eagerly awaited to hear words, but dreaded he would had to respond. The Hobbit bowed respectfully and emphatically, as he would have started a speech from the rostrum at the Fair of Michel Delving, before a somewhat deaf elders audience:

- « Well, foreigners must claim their names in the first place... In any case this is the use in the West... And if I may, I shall submit to this use! ».

After a short throat clearing:

- « Gerontius Took, from Tuckborough, at your service and at your family’s! »

The light but polite tone, with a cheerful pace but respectful of syntax, managed to please the gnome, who replied with pleasure, surprised at his own ease, as if he found without difficulty the arcane of long forgotten an exercise:

- « Eriol, from... the sailing hill, first offspring of... the great iris swamp, to oblige you in words and deeds! »

Without stopping at the gnome’s vocabulary approximations, Gerry was fascinated by his
inimitable accent and archaic turns of phrase that conjured in him the echo of an ancient kinship. The gnome and Hobbit competed with bows and curtsies.

Gerry suddenly remembered that Master Elrond had taught him about the Hobbits and the iris fields.

- « Master Eriol, can I ask you the name of where we are?

- Pike and algae! Now that is a hasty issue to describe a vessel that lives and transforms since the Great River travels the world! I live here on the hill, it is my home and my nest, I am his friend and he sails with me. No one gets here without my consent or his. Usually no one walks the iris carapace of Eriol’s hill.

- But my company and I do stand on it, don’t we for good?

- Swirls and eddies! The hill should not be trampled with impunity... Travelers sleep, lulled by the waves and mist of the river. But we had to meet – my faith! - cross each other, creature from the West. Eriol knows you through many spring, though your hills now sail far beyond the Great River.

- To be honest, our hills do not sail much any more now. My people founded a pretty colony that thrives in peace, far West of the mountains. And where does your family live? »

A fleeting expression of regret passed over the face of the gnome, who smoothed his short brown beard, as curly as the hair under his cap.

- Tadpoles and alvins! Eriol the lone has no more family! His daughters are gone and established their own homes when his beloved Loegwen[1] returned to Mother River.

The wrinkled face of the gnome now bore an immemorial mourning. He continued slowly:

- « Eriol has known the small children with hairy feet who lived in the iris swamps, so many springs ago. Such beautiful and large families! And always his granddaughters blossomed among them. A beautiful little people, always so gay but stealthy and forgetful about their roots... The friendly and shy Swamp People, respectful of old uses. Of course there were some thieves and worse. I remember this despicable brat... But he’s gone, never to return. The small nation has long hidden in the arms of the iris marshes. Then evil awakened in the forest.

- What did you do then?

- What does the river do when awful darkness perverts her waters? She tirelessly washes the dirt of the black enemy.

- So you pushed evil away?

- Always evil continues in one form or another. Small people fled, the daughters of my daughters have launched their boat on other rivers. And since that time Eriol is standing alone against the pernicious shadows of the great black forest, when they stride forward like today!

- Do you mean that they are approaching at this very moment?

- Can you not hear them? Hunters from Amon Lanc! Shrouded with a mephitic fog from Mirkwood, flying on the wings of hatred and guided by the packs of the underworld, they are running for the kill.
- But my sleeping companions, are not in danger, are they?

- Wyvern and aspic! Who is safe in this world? Sleep will leave them if you choose to overcome it for them. I shall grant you this right. But Eriol expects much from you...

Seing Gerry’s doubtful and anxious look, the gnome urged:

-« Eriol can no longer be alone. You are a son of the marsh dwellers. You are the novelty Eriol has been hoping since their departure! You cannot leave! »

The Hobbit understood very well the plight of the gnome, deprived of company for so long. Although he assumed they must be some kind of distant relatives, Gerry could not have admitted Eriol was a direct ancestor, if the ring had not played a role in the encounter. Had this venerable item belonged to Eriol? Sincerely sorry for the gnome and despite his own angst, he tried to entertain him the best he could, by telling him habits and minor events of the Shire. The escapades of young Hobbits particularly seemed to please him. Gerry told him that the ancestral habit of living in a cave had perpetuated, but the gnome was overwhelmed to learn that many Hobbits were living apart the edge of a river. The island-cave of the Hobbits did not float any more. Few now were the Hobbits to venture on a boat, except in the eastern farthing.

But Gerry felt the approach of the pack. Silently in the woods, it assailed now the Hobbit with interior screams of hatred and desire to snatch his treasure. A horribly familiar growl was heard in the distance. Gerry’s blood skipped a beat. Eriol looked at him sadly, as if he guessed the weight of his burden:

- « It is haunting you... »

Gerry did not know if Eriol told him about his ring or the werewolf that obsessed him. But the gnome continued:

- « The Draugmori[2] are approaching. »

Gerry needed no translation! The craggy gnome’s face expressed horror and fear, while his stumpy body, dressed in old flannel with undecided colors, shuddered with disgust. Considering the Hobbit’s distress, Eriol raised his hand with an imperious confidence that denied any fear. Gerry’s senses extended their scope to reach what was approaching - a pack of unspeakable creatures dispatched to destroy them! The Hobbit quickly shouted:

-« Master, I fear for my friends. I feel the approach of our pursuers. We need to escape. »

The old gnome peered and sighed. The Hobbit's friendship for his companions persuaded him that Gerry could not be held against his feelings. Moved by a sudden inspiration, Gerry reached into his wallet, pulled out a carefully silk-wrapped parcel and handed it to Eriol, saying:

-« Here is for you the gift of a relative, an egg of the new Elven year! I do not know what it is, but an Elf Lord assured me that it would come to open when its owner needs it most. I hope it will bring you hope for the duration of its maturation, and joy at the time of hatching! »

This unexpected gift moved the old gnome to tears:

- « Eriol knew, deep inside, that his people would not return. But now he is happy to see a young and generous branch sprouting from his tree, confident that it will keep growing. Take good care of yourself! Now join your companions. »

Then the gnome stroked the wall of the room. Immediately the ground jolted heavily, like the hull
of a ship scraping the bedrock. Liquid noises surrounded the Hobbit. He emerged from the stump that was gently swaying. In the gray dawn he saw some huge dark creatures rushing into the river bed to reach the island that was retreating. Eriol’s ship, now several fathoms away from the bank, swerved, raising a wave of green water which submerged the dark creatures. When they reappeared on the surface, they struggled in long sticky overwhelming algae. They did not survive the second wave. The pack broke over the bank, helpless and angry.

The island was still getting away from the eastern shore. It seemed to Gerry it was moving to the rhythm of a slow and powerful breaststroke. The Anduin flowed majestically, flooded with the colors of dawn with rose fingers in her cloudy crib[3], when the island came to dock with the West bank, North of the Gladden Fields.

Gerry completely came to his senses, lying by the stump. He hurriedly put his ring in his pocket, ran and shook his companions, urging them to stand up. Pulling Gandalf to the top of the hillock, the Hobbit showed the stump, insisting: "right there!" After the wizard had cast an incredulous look inside the stump, Gerry checked himself: it was hollow indeed, but only a yard deep. The bottom, lined with dry leaves, had obviously been an excellent mattress for a Hobbit! Gandalf leaned to Gerry and asked him, with a fatherly hand on his shoulder:

- « So, you have dreamed too! Dreaming alone is only a dream while dreaming in unison is already a reality! [4] It turns out I too thought of strange creatures... Maybe we will have the opportunity, when this is over, to compare what we have learned from this dream? »

As for Gerry, he knew that his ring had saved them by soliciting his distant ancestor.

The awakening company was disoriented. For the most gullible, Anduin seemed to have reversed its course. But the captains immediately realized they had indeed crossed the river during the night. The opposite bank was swarming with enemies, who gesticulated and hurled curses to their address. Only Gerry could distinguish that they were fighting swarms of mosquitoes. Gandalf, Arathorn and Thràin gathered their people and departed quickly, heading due West out of sight of their opponents. Gerry shed a tear, throwing a last look at the mound. His heart ached as if he was leaving the Shire. Then only, from afar, he noticed that the island looked like the back of a turtle. Hobbit grandmothers’ tales, populated with bogeymen from the woods and crossed by the Fastitocalon, flocked to his memory. Then the island covered with small blue stars, which twinkled under the rising sun. The iris of Loeg Ninglorion opened together, as if an old ancestor smiled at him beyond a dream.

.oOo.

NOTES

[1] The Woman of the swamps
[2] Black wolves
[3] Homer
[4] Elder Camara
The Great River - Scouting the northern valley.

Chapter Summary

Arathorn, remembering an prophecy of old, leads the company up the Eitheland valley.

The companions puzzled and suspected that high magic had saved them from an imminent disaster. Gandalf vigorously denied being the author of this mystery, recalling that Gerry alone had witnessed the phenomenon and was not surprised at their inexplicable rescue. The reputation of Master Took was highly affected by this episode: his great skill to dodge suddenly, his ability to hear a rustling better than a ranger, or the prodigies out of his pipe, were seen in a different light. More than anything, the collusion with Gandalf about this mysterious nocturnal dream, suggested there was more about him than appeared at first sight. But were they to be surprised by the companion of a wizard?

The rangers behaved with a discreet restraint and the Dwarves showed a cordial deference, in the few days it took the company to reach the valley of Eitheland, heading North. Arathorn was struggling to deal with Gerry as an Esquire, teaching him how to handle weapons, but employing him a bit more according to his abilities. So the Hobbit often accompanied one of the Dúnedain for scouting. The Dùnadan captain behaved the same way as for Bera, who proved as competent as the most hardened of his men.

When breaks or evening rests left him some leisure time, Gerry used to take out his sewing kit from his pocket and kept his mind and hands busy, mending his belongings. For, as you probably know now, our Hobbit was a careful lad who hated wearing any outfit to his disadvantage. Despite these crafts he kept wondering about his treasure. In the light of the firecamp, while Gandalf taught Bera to read in the Hobbit storybook, the latter considered the progress he thought he had made in the control of his magic ring. Thanks to him, the company had escaped a deadly peril. But he could not claim for it. The desire for power was slowly growing up, deep inside his heart: for the sake of his friends, he was to silently rely on his talent. Of course Gandalf and Elrond had both warned him about the dangers. Confidence in his own abilities and the lure of power still seemed driven by his generous heart. Yet a remnant of guilt persisted in undermining the arguments of his reason, when they seemed unassailable. But Gerry was to return the ring to its rightful owner. Any danger of corruption would be eliminated, he thought. But would he have the strength to part with it when time comes? The Hobbit was reassured by the thought that he had abandoned his magic egg without any regret. He wished he would feel the same detachment at the time of making a complete redemption!

Over these longest days of the year, the company progressed rapidly without making any encounter during its journey in the western valley of the Anduin. Summer burst into gold, dripping from the pristine celestial lights, down to the revived slopes of the Misty Mountains. Every morning fog, respite of the old oak trees, slowly withdrew, while Bera greeted the arrival of the star of day. Blessing the hour, she silently gazed dawn spreading over Middle-earth, in a caressing and fruitful embrace. The sylvan saps spread their vigor in crimson fruits. Then mordant rays overwhelmed men, Dwarves and mounts after the northern night’s coolness. The company resumed its journey in the summer heat, seeking asylum and picking fruits under the heavy foliage. Every night the Bearming princess greeted the star that declined, thanking for its cup of life, overflowing through
woods and plains.

At solstice, she really pressed to organize a party in honor of summer. Gandalf kindly supported her. Having maintained the fire all night, they began to wake the whole company one hour before sunrise. All washed and donned a light-colored clothing. Bera performed a ritual dance of her people around the fire. Then at her request, Gilhael carved on a log, a figure of the sun such as the Dunlendings used to sketch. They solemnly burned the log, while making wishes for the world cycles always to bring their share of light. The Dúnedain associated with the ceremony by telling the story of the chariot of the sun. Thràin, who could not be outdone, sang the song of the lights of Khazad-Dum, backed by a Dwarven choir.

Meanwhile, Gerry said nothing: he felt very small and insignificant, the customs of his people seemed vain and empty, copied without understanding from more learned folks. His friends seemed animated by visions and perspectives, that aimed much further than his. The Dúnedain, skilled by necessity in the ways of nature, made it a point of honor to also develop lore bequeathed by their sophisticated civilization. Some carved, others practiced music, studied Elven literature, arts or science. As for the Dwarves, they grew deep in their heart the passion of gold and jewels, these toys they had been working to create beauty, using their techniques secretly refined and passed from one generation to the next. Even the Bearnings felt a rich communion not only with their forests and their inhabitants, but with the entire universe.

- « I had never celebrated the sun. In the Shire, we hardly celebrate fairs and anniversaries... » he said ruefully to himself.

- « Nonsense ! said Gandalf, who had been watching him for some time. Why do you think your main fairs are held when they are? Any farmer in the Shire knows exactly what products are popular in every festival. Spring fairs allow them to exchange breeding animals, summer is time for canning. Autumn Fair mark the end of the harvest, while winter emphasizes the eve’s manual work. As for him, the gardener of your father has not forgotten, what he owes to the sun! Only young idlers like yourself do not remember they knew this some day... »

As Gerry seemed dejected, Gandalf continued to comfort him:

-« You have learned a lot in recent days. Do not grieve if all your kind and absurd Hobbits seem to lack depth or memory. Maybe you were just not able to give them such a credit. Enjoy your adventure and encounters, either beneficial or disturbing. When you come back, your peers will seem commendable. So what they bring to the world will seem clearer to you, and you will cherish them all the more. »

.oOo.

The company reached the valley of the river Eitheland a few days later. A strong stream was singing in a meandering but fast rocky bed. Fir trees with soft green ends covered the rugged valleys. Purified on the snows of the peaks, a new breeze was blowing, carying smells of resin and flint. The little river kept them in check for long miles to the North-West, before revealing a crossable ford. After two exhausting days walking among the rubble, companions toiled a few hours to have the mounts cross on a slippery and dangerous bed, once being discharged.

Ingold was crossing with the last mule when the animal was seized by a sudden panic in midstream. It reared up, unbalancing the Dùnadan who fell into the water and was hurt. Barin and Krorin rushed to his aid. The Dùnadan’s arm was bleeding and he could not resist the current. Skilful Krorin managed to throw a rope that certainly saved the unfortunate from drowning. As for Barin, he tried to control the mule that also seriously injured itself. The Dwarf in turn fell into the water, shouting:
Worthy Barin had not released the mule’s lunge, for the simple reason he had solidly though unintentionally tangled in it. The mule, harmed at its right rear limb, seemed to calm down and proceeded reaching the bank with difficulty. But it dragged the poor Dwarf who waded convulsively and then floated unconscious. On the bank, his companions rushed to his aid, finding Barin’s skin had turned bluish. It took several minutes to revive the Dwarf. Yet they would probably have failed if Ingold himself, dripping and grimacing in pain, had not directed the operation.

To the chagrin of Thràin, Arathorn ordered a halt of several days to allow both the injured and the animal to recover, and the troops to rest. A lively discussion ensued, during which the leader of the Dúnedain enforced his authority, rather than displayed his persuasion. In reality, he had sent his scouts forward, since the ground had turned rough, mainly seeking signs of the squad that had theoretically come this way before them. But the Dûnadan did not explain his decision, and Gandalf regretted that.

The company moved into a hidden valley and built some defense. Some young pine trees were felled and assembled to keep their mounts safe from wolves and the Dwarves safe from the night wind. Seeking fodder, the Dwarves shot a few pheasants in the tall grass of a plateau a mile further north.

While the Dwarves were fortifying the camp, the Dûnedain, Gerry and Bera went into a long-range scouting. As the North side of the valley of Eitheland revealed more feasible, they went off in the morning to the plateau, that streamed with the colors of summer under a burning sun. Lush meadows rippled over a large area, bounded on the North by a gray line, uncertain and distant, and on the West by the majestic Misty Mountains. Journeying on foot, they followed the edge of the plateau for several miles. As the day progressed, the grassy undulations gradually transformed into hills. Farther West, the edge of the plateau turned steeper, overhanging the river from place to place. Then the companions had to find their way through the first shoulder of the great mountain range.

It was an opportunity for Arathorn to toughen Gerry. The group disbanded, taking the Hobbit as a center, whose progression was the slowest. Arathorn assigned him the goal to head West, trying to avoid being detected by his companions. After only two miles, Hirgon and Gilhael had already lost sight of him, and tried to follow his elusive tracks. Then only, Arathorn realized the natural abilities of his scout. He lavished some advice to him and changed the exercise. They walked a furlong away and each progressed in the scree, shrubs and conifers, communicating with each other by imitating the cries of small animals. The Hobbit showed encouraging provisions. During their tiring march, they met several traces of game that the Dûnedain had Gerry read. Here too, the Shire truancy had stired, it seems, the Hobbit’s naturalism skills, if not academic, at least practical.

Their search lasted the rest of the day. The company finally found the remains of an ancient road, which got lost on the hillside to reappear on the occasion of a bridge or causeway. The Dûnedain strove to find traces, old or new, anxious to get news of their comrades, who had scouted the area before them a few weeks ago. But before they found some, darkness overtook them in the middle of a long row of rocks at the bottom of which flowed a rivulet. Probably at times of meltdown, the flow had completely smashed and washed the road away.

At night, the company took refuge atop a gentle slope. A roughly flat area overlooked a bend in the valley, making it possible to survey two segments of about half a mile each. Behind them, a cliff of unknown height towered as a dark and indistinct mass. Scree adjoined their refuge, remains of a collapsed cliff, deeply cut like a chisel of the world’s smith. The companions hesitated to climb it,
but it seemed unstable and dangerous, besides the fact that the top could not be seen.

After a cold and meager meal, the small group spent a short night, interspersed with the cries of nocturnal hunters. The Hobbit suffered more than usual from his guard shift, in this desert of stones and thorns. Tall shadows of mist seemed to bend to him to whisper their woes. Several times he jumped in the dark when fingers of cold fog stroked his ankles or his neck.

Arathorn too dreamed of ghostly figures. Broad shoulders, wearing an antique gown, arose in his sleep, overshadowing the thin, fine and colorful figure of his beloved wife. The majestic profile raised his deep voice:

« Over the land there lies a long shadow,
Westward reaching wings of darkness.
The Tower trembles; to the tomb of Kings
Doom approaches. The Dead awaken;
For the hour is come for the oathbreakers:
At the Stone of Erech they shall stand again
And hear there a horn in the hills ringing.
Whose shall the horn be? Who shall call them
From the grey twilight, the forgotten people?
The heir of him to whom the oath they swore.
To the North shall he come, need shall drive him:
He shall pass the Door to the Paths of the Dead. »[II]

He had heard this poem before, it seemed to him. In the morning, Arathorn discovered he had slept - albeit with one eye - near a small mound of stones. He examined it carefully and exclaimed:

- « Elbereth sent us news from our brothers during the night! Baranor and Eradan have stayed here! The message is dated two weeks ago and speaks of danger... a mortal danger! »

A shadow fell on the company. Moved by the memories of his prophetic dream, Arathorn felt the hour of his destiny was coming. He ordered:

-« Let us prepare to go! I have reasons to believe that the danger comes from the dead, not that we will face a mortal danger. »

Gerry, although his Hobbit heart was tight, remarked:

-« At least the message mentioned no dragon! Are we properly insured that Scatha is dead? »

Arathorn sternly set him straight:

-« What good is it to convene you to councils if you do not listen? Scatha the great is dead, but
obviously the rumor of her cursed gold is enough to frighten the timid. »

The Hobbit gritted his teeth, not daring to express his concerns about these dead that might prove dangerous. Bera, to ward off the fatal allusion, began her salvation to the sun, although it was not yet visible.

The small group progressed a few miles at the bottom of the ravine, which edges were becoming higher and cashed. After a sudden slope up between the steep walls around them, they emerged at the entrance of a wide valley.

Arathorn contemplating the jagged landscape said slowly:

--« We have found the road to Barum-Nahal! The destiny of the North is at hand... »

.oOo.

NOTES

[1] The Lord of the Rings, Malbeth’s prophecy. J.R.R. Tolkien. Several passages are re-interpreted by Arathorn. But is it knowingly or not?
The path of the dead - The prophecy

Chapter Summary

The fellowship follows the steps suggested in the prophecy of Malbeth.

{oOo.}

The companions, at the top of a steep pile of slid rocks, contemplated a broad valley. Gushing from a gaping opening, halfway up a cliff at the opposite valley's end, a river dropped in a basin, projecting sprays of mist. Then it slowly flowed in its muddy bed, through the whole valley up to the foot of the scree where the Dûnedain stood. A whole piece of rocky wall had collapsed, blocking the end of the defile that the company had followed to come. This landslide had created a small lake, which was now evacuated by a cleft in the cliff, that overlooked another valley to the South. Many human lives had probably passed since this event. Vegetation had invaded the slid rocks, from which oozed several brooks, too small to fill the old river bed. Thorny bushes and short torn trees spread their intrusive roots between the moss-covered limestone blocks.

-« Now here is the reason why the defile we walked in, has dried up! » Hirgon noted.

The company followed the northern edge of the lake, where traces were spotted and interpreted as those of Baranor or Eradan. Walking upstream, along the bank, they found a small camp hidden under a grove, near a welling. A pile of dry wood was found near the remains of a fire. The air was silent. Only the lake’s calm waters sounded with a placid lapping. The fir trees did not rustle under the caress of the wind, no bird greeted the day. The whole valley seemed to hush the furtive sounds that betray life and the passing of time. The Dûnedain felt oppressed but failed to discern the source of their discomfort. Bera looked up to view the valley. The lake meandered feebly between crumbling heather-pink tinted slopes and overcome by insurmountable a-peaks. Suddenly the waterfall shone with a blazing orange, intercepted by nascent solar rays, darted horizontally. The sun cast a long shadow towards the western part of the valley. Arathorn, with a proud glint in his eye, declaimed:

- « Over the land there lies a long shadow,  
Westward reaching wings of darkness. »

Bera contemplated the Lord of the Dûnedain in the splendor of his glorious dream. What could he not accomplish for the survival and revival of his people? She wished to tie herself to his steps and share his destiny! She followed the line of his aquiline gaze and was stunned. Far beyond the western cliff, just above the fall of the river, stood a mountain that dominated the neighborhood. Its clear and high conical shape faded and trembled in the limpid sky, as due to intense heat. The companions believed they perceived stealthy glows in the distance, while a tiny rumble spread a veiled threat.

Arathorn continued, staring into the distance :

- « The Tower trembles; to the tomb of Kings  
Doom approaches. »
The Hobbit’s sharp eyes spotted the reliefs of a roadway, worn and collapsed. Using extra caution, the company reached and followed it, along the lake on its northern bank, to a large cobbled square, surrounded by tombstones. The troops tried to decipher the few surviving inscriptions. Runes of Daeron, too dirty and erased by weather, only indicated them these were probably Dwarven tombs, which was corroborated by the size of the stones. At the center of the esplanade, overgrown with brambles and grass, stood a solitary pillar, a huge anthracite and oblong stone, solemn warning to intruders. Gerry shuddered, while Bera commented her own impressions:

« My people has raised our tutelary tree in our clearing of the Dead. In times of war, we usually suspend there goblins heads and wargs skins. Viewing our tree is ominous for our mortal enemies... This solitary finger reminds me of our tree because it chills my blood. It shows a way but my heart whispers it is not for the living... »

Indeed, the monolith was lit with golden yellow and its shadow now stretched up to a path of flat stones, leading to a gaping hole at the base of the cliff.

At these words Arathorn opened the bag he had slung and pulled out a small silver horn. Full of a restrained hope, he exclaimed emphatically:

- « Here is the solitary stone, Erech Sarn! For Malbeth the seer-master once predicted what happens to us today:

The Dead awaken;

For the hour is come for the oathbreakers:

At the Stone of Erech they shall stand again

And hear there a horn in the hills ringing.

Whose shall the horn be? Who shall call them

From the grey twilight, the forgotten people?

The heir of him to whom the oath they swore.

To the North shall he come, need shall drive him:

He shall pass the Door to the Paths of the Dead. »

Arathorn raised the horn to his lips and sounded three powerful calls. Silence around them thickened even more.

-« Dûnedain and feal servants, to me! I lead you to our destiny. »

Bera watched in horror as the Dûnedain leapt alongside their lord and prepared to proceed to the path of the dead. She warned them:

-« Death marks the whole valley. Resentment and murder are imbued on the graves along the path. Death still is written beyond the porch! I feel it in the air and in the water! »

Sure of his fate, the Dûnadan answered with impatience:

-« Stop sniffing misfortune like an animal and cut back your tears for fear! May you honor your oath! Today fate gives us the chance my people has been waiting for generations. We shall take it with or without your help! »
The young woman, swallowing indeed her tears of disappointment, seemed to grow as her eyes flashed. Her black hair, disheveled and bloated by anger, flashed in red in the sun and seemed for a moment like the mane of a mountain bear. The little Hobbit, that neither the majesty nor the tension of the moment deprived of his good senses, muttered:

- « Who are these dead perjurers, Dwarves or Men? And whom for is their allegiance, I wonder, after all these years ... We had better wait for Gandalf and Thràin... »

No other comment could harden more the heart of the already determined Dûnedan, whose imperious look brooked no reply.

The Dûnedain marched behind their lord, their face taut with angst but their hands clutching their weapons. Bera reluctantly prepared, for the honor of the Bearnings.

- « Let me at least prepare for darkness! », she hissed.

Out of her iron and wood pack, she took the burning coal she always kept with her. It came from the hearth of Bearn’s home, that had never dwindled since their mother had lit it up, even before she was born. After lighting a torch, she covered her head with a deerskin cape. To face death, two skins were better than one... Grabbing her ax, she gave one last prayer to the sun and followed the men.

But Gerry stayed behind, petrified at the base of the monolith, unable to lift the yoke of horror his lord’s dubious certainties had inspired him. Without knowing the prophecy of Malbeth, his Hobbit common sense had detected that Arathorn’s hope dismissed rather obscure and worrisome details.

He saw his companions running away, climbing the paved road to the open mouth, which gave off waves of dumb terror. By the time they reached the doorway and were about to disappear inside, Gerry felt some guilt he had seldom experienced before.

An arch of carved stone overlooked the dark entrance. Pale red vapors escaped from it, as if the soul of the occupants fled at the approach of intruders. A bearded face with worn geometric shapes held the tympanum and let its blank and blur stare below. Arathorn, Hirgon, Gilhael and Bera, weapon in hand, engaged in the dark cave. The Hobbit shuddered: once his companions had gone beyond the porch, no sound could reach him, neither jangling mails nor heavy boots clash on the cold pavement.

After climbing some stairs, the companions marched in the dark, Arathorn leading the way. Hirgon lit his torch with Bera’s. No one dared to talk, but it seemed that no sound could come out of their tight throat. The paved road was rising slowly, sometimes revealing on one side or the other, an alcove harboring a headstone or a granite coffin. After a bend to the left, they ran into a cold, smooth wall, so dark it seemed to absorb the light out of their torches.

Arathorn once again grabbed his horn and gave a clear call, which rang in the tunnel as a creed of life facing void. But Arathorn’s authority seemed to achieve wonders in the tunnel: the wall dissolved within moments, torchlights piercing the darkness of a large room, now revealed. The companions climbed a flight of stairs and found a catafalque, which bore a gray stone stele or altar. The carved walls reminded the decor of the porch, broken lines forming animal murals or regular patterns. Two openings in the wall to the right of the entrance seemed to lead further into the heart of the mountain. Two axes carved crisscrossed above the left porch, seemed to forbid passage. On the right porch was carved a triangular mountain, its top covered with a white metal inlay.

-« Here is the passage of Barum-Nahal, eternally snow-covered crater», Arathorn said.
But on the central altar, a recumbent of flesh laid motionless. The Dûnedain, trembling, examined the body and recognized Eradan, the sure-handed ranger, persistent strider and stubborn soul. The naked body had no obvious fatal injuries, despite numerous lacerations and bruises. His face, however, frozen in a hideous grin, told of the pain and horror that had preceded death. The men were shaken by this terrible discovery. Bera, tearful, covered the body with her buckskin. Arathorn hummed the song of the dead, prayer of the Dûnedain to the One, for the deceased to find their way to the halls of Mandos, intended for mortal souls. The melody, sang along by his two comrades, yet seemed confined to the room, unable to defeat the overwhelming accursed darkness that surrounded them.

Then the companions heard a tiny complaint, along with a gentle stream of cold air coming from the porch leading to the Mountain. The torches flickered for a moment. The companions crossed the porch with the axes since the complaint, that sounded human, seemed to come from there. Driven by hope and tapped by fear, they rushed and found their companion Baranor, lying naked on a low, flat stone, chained like a convict or sacrificed. Gullies cut into the edge of the stone revealed the odious destination of the altar. Pale as a ghost and his eyes bulging, the poor bloodless wretch raved:

« Let come the reign of the Valar! You're finally here! The King of the Dead denies us passage, Hîrmâin! [1] He tormented me, but I looked elsewhere! They took Eradan too... To defeat them, only light and heat are worthy. Run away! »

Baranor’s leathery face ceased then to animate. The emaciated body fell limply on the sacrificial altar. Arathorn knelt beside the wretched man, breaking with his sword the silver chains that impeded him. Bera bent to give him water, but then everything happened very quickly. The chill wind intensified, producing an increasingly acute hiss. Scraps of gray mist brushed and enveloped them as wet algae in an icy wind, freezing them with amazement. Before the companions realized, a stone door had swung to block their retreat.

It screeched into its slot with the sound of a tomb lid. Then intense cold crept into the room. The dying man was agitated, screaming and struggling before dropping inert. Despite his companions’ eagerness, they could not revive him. Baranor had just died.

No torch could be rekindled. The Bearning’s glowing coal seemed stilled by a strange cold. After several unsuccessful attempts to push the heavy stone door, the companions must acknowledge the obvious - they were trapped in the heart of the mountain. As despair began to seize them, they hummed again the Song of the Dead, but the words were ringing in their ears as their own dirge. Soon they realized with horror that they had trouble controlling their numb limbs. Hope died in their hearts. That’s when they realized the Hobbit was no longer among them. Hope was reborn from the ashes, but what could a frightened little Hobbit do?

.oOo.

The path of the dead - Terror in the tunnel

Chapter Summary

The hobbit proves helpful for the company.

.oOo.

At the foot of the monolith, Gerry was gathering his will, bit by bit. Slowly spurred by guilt, the generous courage of his small breed began to wake up. For all the quiet mornings in the heart of the Shire, for all the pints of beer, well earned after the day of august work of some elder in North Farthing, he would follow his lord. But he still had to overcome the uncontrollable shaking of his legs. Mustering all his being, he found himself once again focusing his will in the form of a circular golden mental image. Again this magical item timely came to his aid to surpass himself.

Gerry overcame the resistance of his limbs and forced his feet forward. He walked with difficulty to the threshold of the underworld. Fear held him there, sweaty and panting, for a time that seemed like an eternity. A strange torpor froze his joints every time he stepped into the shadow of the threatening porch. The long and hoarse complaint of an oliphant rose from the bottom of the tunnel and slowly dwindled as the rattle of a dying man. Gerry's hair stood on his head but he seemed to feel his ring jump into its leather slot. Finally shaking himself, he took his treasure out and rose it up. The golden circle and the two stones sparkled in the sun, throwing insolent amber rays that pierced the impenetrable darkness of the underground.

The Hobbit advanced cautiously, waving his torch of hope and scanning the darkness. Each step in the tunnel brought him new sensations: cold sweats, dizziness, choking, claustrophobia... Soon eyes lit up sporadically around him, some bad and inquisitors as a Michel Delving’s gossip, others off and desperate like a statue of the king. Gerry persevered, step by step, by diverting his attention from these insidious threats, half guessing, half hoping, that they were only illusions induced by his own fears. Undecided whispers ran around him, hissing and casting the curses of generations of Men and Dwarves. Further, long misty hands tried to grab him in their icy embrace.

A long time after entering the tunnel, Gerry reached the turning point. Then he realized that the ambient light had fallen to the point that he could hardly distinguish his limbs. Only the two small stones of his ring still shone, as if they had stored the sun's rays to return them now to the heart of the cliff. Just after the turn, Gerry stopped suddenly, impeded by an oldest, a more hardened and more compelling will than his. An invisible wall, dense with hatred and desire for some blood of the living, forbade him to pass. The Hobbit lost his composure for a moment when he thought his ring could falter. Whispers, glances and furtive rustling resumed. But the small stones shone with an equal brilliance, with no sign of abating. Again Gerry concentrated, focusing his will on his comrades and the need to join them. He passed the wall of adversity, which closed back behind him with a short noise of suction.

Then he heard his comrades. They seemed far away from him, as at the bottom of a large wood, lined with moss. But Gerry perceived anguish and despair in their supplications. They were calling him indeed! In this half-dream, he was aware that things were going badly for his comrades. A slow and sad song was heard, the litany of the Dúnedain for the dead. But a small treacherous tune, as sour as the threat of a coward and as insidious as a contagious disease, added in counterpoint,
perverting the noble aria to Mandos with its dissonances. The unsightly air gradually gained power and assurance, chanting forcefully the hateful vanity of its rehearsals. A creature, withered by bitterness and eager to destroy these lives, meant for running freely under the sun, stood there, chanting its litany of killing. Formless and intangible, it floated into the room beyond the stairs, listening to the quick decline of its victims.

The Hobbit’s fellows, whose strengths weakened, took turns in singing to resist the spell. With tears in the eye, Gerry recognized the high and guttural voice of Bera, who was humming with her peers without understanding the words.

- « They will not die! », the son of the Took cried within himself. «Well... at least I will not abandon those who helped me! », tinged the young adventurer, who remained somehow lucid.

Gerry went up the steps on the sly. Brandishing his ring in his left hand, he pulled his little dagger and exclaimed:

«By Imladris, leave them alone! »

This was the only elvish word that came to his lips. He vaguely knew the evocative power of Elven words, but our Hobbit had just learnt to read the languages of the West. He did not know the words of power for extolling courage, hope or light in elvish, or at least they did not impose on him in that extremity. Thus his injunction, though brave and unexpected, proved not as devastating as the supposed magic he impugned to his ring.

The creature immediately interrupted its insidious spell, turned in great anger, and rushed upon the hapless Hobbit, hissing like an angry cat. Terrified, Gerry fell backward, swinging his arms. Dagger and ring flew away much against his will, and fell behind him, on the steep steps of the marble staircase. Gerry hit the ground hard with his head.

The Hobbit’s awareness wavered for a moment, just firm enough to formulate «My turnips are fried!» We must admit that the situation was not brilliant and that the adventure, so praised by Gandalf, seemed to be over. Yet there was one thing that painfully surprised the creature of shadow and smoke, apart from the unexpected presence of this measly mortal. The little light, double, thin but stubborn, violated his omnipotence. The dweller of the cairn heard its clear metallic tinkling on marble and saw the little dual and piercing light bounce on the steps. With fury, its mass, darker than void itself, rushed to kill these flames, destroy and suck their insolent vitality. Then he would take his time to look after his guests, starting with this ridiculous mortal who had defied him. The Hobbit on the ground, guessing more than seeing the creature rushing on him, moved to protect with his legs and hands. The creature rushed with a bang over him and stumbled on the Hobbit! No doubt his voracious fury and destructive desire had given to him, for a short moment, a plot of materiality.

That is at least the hypothesis Gandalf imagined when he knew the whole story. For everything ended very quickly for our petty adventurer. The wight stumbled and crashed down the steps, preceded by the maddening jingle of the double glow on the marble. Trying to grasp it, the wight, carried away by his momentum, strode one step too many and passed the wall of ban he had erected himself. He stood for a second illuminated by natural light - a faint and very distant light, but it was a reflection of the sun on water. Nothing is more harmful to a wight, except the spells of a competent wizard, again according to Gandalf.

Gerry threw a glance over the stairs. The dark wall blocking the hallway was gone. The barrow-wight was writhing on the gray stone like a balloon deflating violently. Wriggling on the ground as an eel out of the waters, the wight began to hiss like the old kettle of aunt Cedrina. Blinking, the Hobbit contemplated this unusual spectacle, while the creature was shrinking rapidly and howled
its impotent rage. When it reached the size of a worm, the barrows-wight exploded in a deafening "boom". Then silence fell in the hallway.

Our Hobbit, who had sheltered from the explosion, cast a wary glance over the stairs. A gray light shone at the end of the hallway and the staircase. No movement was audible or visible, everything appeared calm and healthy. The air seemed rid of an oppressive presence. Gerry tried to get up, but failed. He was breathing with difficulty, feeling dizzy after the violent shock to his head. His temples throbbed wildly. Groaning in pain caused by his multiple bruises, the Hobbit cautiously descended the stairs on his haunches, sitting on each step. At halfway, he paused and retrieved his dagger, which seemed warm and gooey. After cleaning it with his handkerchief, he ended his cautious descent. His ring was lying in the raking light, its two stones sparkling bravely in the dust. He crawled up to it, nervously put it in his pocket and sat in the corner, relieved but surprised to get away with it. Then stress and effort took their toll - he fainted.

When he awoke, Gerry saw that his head had profusely bled. But he felt better, though terribly hungry, and he could get up. The corridor now glowed with a faint orange light. A little shaky, he went up the stairs in search of his friends. In the room, the Hobbit looked with horror the morbid staging that the wight had probably orchestrated. He felt the need for giving light, illuminating dark corners to push back the horrors that arose again in his shaken imagination. He feverishly sought a torch to light but found none.

In desperation, Gerry climbed a sculpted wall, to reach a flare that seemed still to bear a firebrand. Horror! What had looked like a torch, which proved rusty iron, yielded to the Hobbit’s pull and broke. Gerry once again fell backwards and lay on the ground, lifeless. Meanwhile, a horrible noise was heard, as the dull roar of a forced tomb. The whole room shook. Slowly, like ghosts gray with dust, four staggering figures emerged from the next room, now open. Coughing, spitting and dispersing a dark mist that coated them like a shroud, they caught their breath before noticing our unconscious Hobbit. Finally the familiar faces of Bera and Arathorn leaned together on the small body.

Carefully, they seized and carried him out in the open, like two nurturing parents, arms entwined around their child and matted hair over the small battered body. Their eyes met as they left the tunnel and Bera blushed at her thoughts. But Arathorn behaved like a soldier, ordering that care should be given to the injured. Hirgon bandaged the Hobbit’s head, fed him and have him lay down. Meanwhile Gilhael and Arathorn returned in the tunnel to lock the stone door mechanism and arrange several torches.

They also took away the bodies of their fallen comrades and carried them laboriously at the entrance of the valley, near the spot where they had set up their camp. After an hour of rest and plenty of sweets, Gerry was alert enough to get up.

Arathorn chaired a farewell ceremony for their fallen brothers in arms. Two large twin tombs were dug, deep down to the bedrock. The bottom and walls were carefully lined with flat stones and the bodies disposed to their final rest. Gilhael was the foster brother of Eradan. All shared his pain but he was the most affected. With despite, the young Dùnadan broke the egg offered to him by Master Elrond. He found three beautiful moonstone pendants and decided to give one to each of the deceased, as parting gifts and pledges of protection on their journey to the halls of Mandos. Then Arathorn improvised a dirge:

\[ «\textit{We bring noble heroes} \\
\textit{To their final resting places.} \\
\textit{Under the wings of hopeful heavens} \]
They came North before their lord.

Never will again gaze at Nenuial splendor

And sparkling shelters glow in Evendim.

Let glory, ransom of their Worth,

Forever protect their noble bones

In the valley of the lone Stone.

May they join our fathers

In the shade of Lorien’s[2] gardens. »

Gilhael adorned each body with a jewel he found in the egg, and girded with the last. Bera had asked about the families of the deceased, and put to work to carve small wooden dolls that would represent them, and she placed in the graves. The companions formed a circle around the twin graves. The Dúnedain sang one last time the song for the dead. Gerry tried to follow the lyrics but burst into tears, soon discreetly accompanied by Bera. A small dome of flat stones was erected over the bodies to protect them, and each grave was filled with rock and covered with grass.

About to leave, Arathorn turned and, raising both hands above the graves, said in a low voice, trembling with suppressed emotion:

- « By the wrath of Tulkas, I vow to avenge your loss! You will be honored in the North as the regenerators of the kingdom of the Dúnedain. Keep now this valley until the return of the king! »

Then a deep silence settled in the little wood, as if wind and water themselves had been the moved and dumb witnesses of a powerful wonderworker’s oath. After which the fellowship withdrew, because it is not right to stay close to sacred places at a time when shadows lengthen. Arathorn’s company found refuge where they had spent the previous night.

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NOTES

[1] Typical expression of Tuckburrough, which means « It’s over for me! ».

[2] Here Lorien is for Irmo, the Vala master of dreams, desire and peace, the brother of Mandos, and of course not the forest of lady Galadriel.
In the early morning lights, the companions departed under a lowering sky, with serious looks and drawn faces. Only Arathorn’s gaze blazed with the light of an ardent dream of success and revenge. They walked in silence up to the end of the long valley, rid of its former watercourses. They reached the exit when the cloud vault dispersed. The sun tinged their weary faces with gold. Realising that Bera had been carrying the bandaged and nauseous Hobbit for several hours, Arathorn ordered a break and gathered the companions. Rejecting his coat back and putting his fists on his baldric, he harangued the company:

« I want to tell you all how proud I am of your stubbornness, your loyalty and your courage. Our fellow fighter Bera showed innate qualities of a great warrior. Her deeds honor her people and her oath. »

Bera gave him a look of gratitude mixed with disappointment. « So that is all he likes in me indeed! », she thought with a sigh. But the Dûnadan continued:

» But we all owe the pleasure to see the light in the morning to our protege Gerontius Took. So let he be warmly thanked here, although we expect nothing less from the son of The Shire’s Thain. Gerry, consider now that your probation time is completed. You are squire to the lord of the Dûnedain, by genuine right! »

A chorus of approvals and cheers greeted this statement, even if the voice betrayed weariness. Gerry blushed like the young Hobbit girls whom he formerly granted their first kiss. He considered it necessary to clarify a few things about his bravery, in the Hobbits’ unconcerned and modest way:

» My family is forever at your service, at your lady’s, and at your heir’s! But I’m afraid I do not deserve your praise... If you want to know, I do not really feel heroic. If not by chance... and a third power, I could never get into that damn tunnel!

» And yet you have accomplished this feat! It is true that the protection of as noble a lady as Luinloth gives wings to her suitor... I'm particularly pleased to have yielded to her request. You alone destroyed the wight of the tunnel and found the mechanism unlocking the stone door. Without you, we would have probably succumbed to its terrible enchantment! »

Arathorn obviously misunderstood the nature of the third power Gerry had confessed. But it was better this way, the Hobbit thought while crossing the ambiguous gaze of Bera. The Bearning seemed to envy the warm attention he enjoyed from Arathorn. Yet she reported on the Hobbit, all the love the Dûnadan refused from her, as would an abandoned mother on her child.

» You overcame your fear and saved your comrades and your Lord. You are now one of us. », Arathorn announced with authority.
The companions had a meal in a more cheerful mood than they would have thought on the morning. Bera admired the core strength of Arathorn and the talent of this great captain to attract the loyalty of his retainers and revive their courage. Despite the smile she addressed to the Hobbit, her sad face expressed a melancholic resignation. When Gerry tried to comfort her, she replied:

«The brightest lights project the longest shadows, master Hobbit. I was dazzled by the light of an extraordinary man, but whether I like it or not, I'm not part of his destiny, which seems to be emerging despite the shadows where I stand.»

While he was sorry for the great warrior woman, he could not get used to arouse only a maternal affection from a female being this age:

«All the same, I am sorry to see you so helpless.

- Read in yourself, Squire, and tell me if you would prefer your lord would betray his lady?»

Gerry could propose no remedy for the woman’s bitterness:

- «How cruel it is to see what we hate, while leaving what we love!»
- «I do not dislike him, but I shall leave the company as soon as my wish is fulfilled.»

The companions continued their journey by cutting shorter and could join the camp before nightfall, after a tiring walk.

Gandalf greeted them with joy but soon noticed their somber looks. The wizard hastened to Gerry, whose exploits Bera told him while changing the bandages. But the Dwarves, especially the white beards bearers, who had spent the last few days to lead the hard work of their young comrades, immediately asked for news. Thràin believed his royal curiosity had the right to be fulfilled. The great Dwarf was eager to know more, but he knew he had to veil his greed. Thus he composed a wily demeanor while approaching:

«Good evening, master Arathorn,» he said, hiding his impatience.

The term «master» sounded respectful, but the name Arathorn bears in itself the majesty of the chief of the Dúnedain, and even the mark of royalty[2]. Adding a term, that in other circumstances could emphasize the status of a craftsman or even a free man on his own land, antagonized the Dúnedan leader, despite his respect for artisans and Men in general. So he snapped like a rough-hewn sergeant barks his report at an ungrateful captain:

«We found the way to Barum-Nahal. To reach it, we ought to head West for about eleven leagues, aiming for a valley we spotted a mile and a half North of the straight western direction. After that, following this valley for four miles is easy, before reaching the entrance to a tunnel. We have reasons to believe this was once the underground Fram’s people used.»

Thràin, though startled by the weird tone of Arathorn, did not hide his joy:

«Gems and gold veins! Great news, master Arathorn! Your rangers have no equal! But why show so sad a face? Do not tarnish the joy of such a discovery!

- Because we have buried two brave fighters, brothers who gave their lives for our cause! Baranor’s agony and the horrible grin of Eradan’s corpse are still in our minds.»

Thràin frowned and bowed:
- « Forgive my reckless words. I was concerned about our quest, and I did not pay enough attention to your grief. »

The Dwarf retreated awkwardly, sincerely sorry for his blunder but perplexed about the ability of their alliance to overcome the challenges ahead. The argument had not escaped Gandalf, who walked away with a sigh, taking a long drag on his pipe.

During the absence of the scouts, the Dwarves had been busy - three shelters of logs and a dirt reinforced fence now surrounded a wide space, easily defensible by cross-shoots. The mounts were protected and reserves were safe. Tall stacks of split wood were stored aside a wooden barrel, full of fragrant resin. The wizard joined a small group in one of the shelters, from which sounded the joyous cries of an animated conversation. Barin and Frerin had come to cheer the Hobbit and the Bearming.

Gandalf listened carefully the interspersed and contradictory stories of Gerry and Bera. He pretended not to be surprised by Gerry’s bravery and cunning, yet in his heart he was astonished. A single Hobbit, armed only with his small dagger, escaping a barrow-wight unscathed, that was already very surprising. But he managing to foil its evil spells and reducing it to eternal silence was worthy of his extended professional attention. Several startling scenes of his journey with the Hobbit came to his mind; This Hobbit had more than his own little people resistance...

Gerry caught the discerning eye of Gandalf who now haloed smokes at each camp. The Hobbit was more circumspect and his story, until now very colorful and illustrated in detail, became more sober. But soon Thráin came to remind his troops about showing some reserve and respect for their Dúnedain comrades’ mourning. The re-combined company did not spend an evening of rejoicing reunion. Rangers mourned their dead while the Dwarves pondered their hopes of gold and gems. Gandalf, who seemed quite absent-minded in recent days, seemed worried about the stormy relationship between Thràin and Arathorn. He isolated himself throughout the evening behind his smoke rings, brooding obscure projects.

Two days later, Ingold's balm and rest had done wonders again. The wounded could walk alone. Ingold could carefully use his arm and Gerry did not suffer any more from his head. After a moonless night, Arathorn ordered the company to resume its journey at dawn. A beautiful weather allowed them to reach the end of the defile, about an hour after sunset. The tale of the scouts had been quite impressive. Thus there was not much debate: the company chose to camp near the graves of the Dúnedain, rather than near the tunnel.

The companions stood guard in turn, as they were used to. But this time they appointed two watchers. Gerry, who was exempt because of his head injury, did not fall asleep immediately. The shadows of the night reminisced about the voices of the tunnel under the mountain. Our Hobbit, whose prestige had gradually increased during the company’s long trek, had been called "Mr. Took" by most Dwarves.

This consideration mark, inaugurated by Dwalor, surprised the Hobbit very much. In the Shire, this denomination was strictly for his father or his uncles. Thus, accessing this distinguishing mark of majority, prior to the appropriate time, seemed strange to him, as if it was referring to the part of himself, buried and difficult to control, who could benefit from his treasury. Our Hobbit realized indeed that he had saved his comrades from a horrible fate, but he hardly assumed the role of hero which already induced, on the part of his companions, manifestations of enhanced consideration and a higher level of expectation. But it seemed scarcely assured he could replicate such a feat. Fatalist, he counted on chance, playing with the idea that inspiration would come to him through his ring, should the need arise.
Though protective Bera slept close to him that night, he could not help some nightmares. His nocturnal fabrications all turned around controlling wights by the sheer force of his will, magnified by his magic ring. This recurring theme clearly reflected a persistent fear, which the lurking wizard realized.

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At a time when dawn usually colors Middle Earth, Arathorn woke his companions. Under a leaden sky that gripped their hearts, they took a snack, lashed their packages, girded their weapons and loaded their pack animals. A gray day was coming, but they engaged in an even darker journey. Two small thrushes flew over the company, throwing farewell squeaks, and left when they entered the hall.

The first test came soon: the horses refused to enter the tunnel. It took all the experience of the Dúnedain, the tenacity of the Dwarves and the love of Bera to get them there, in addition to the indispensable help of the wizard.

The atmosphere of the tunnel seemed to have completely changed since the passage of the scouts. Gerry, his comrades had naturally pushed forward, felt this with great acuity. The hostile and perverse will, the perpetual and morbid harassment he experienced during his last visit, had given place to a diffuse and concerned vigilance. The company passed the first rooms they knew. Then the passage became broader and steadier. Fortunately the flights of steps were rare, although the tunnel resolutely ascended westward, allowing them to maintain a respectable pace despite their horses. They progressed in a lineup until the company entered a large room.

A towering ceiling of glittering stone was supported by four huge pillars of light marble. An admiring murmur ran through the group of Dwarves. In the heart of the stone, the torches lit large and fugitive geometric figures that fascinated them. The Dúnedain and Bera observed a respectful silence. A skylight illuminated the space between the columns, littered by some undifferent forms. The marble shone like the barrel of large trees in winter, under a starry sky. Approaching, Gerry identified the forms with horror - these were corpses, covered with clothes and war gear. Most, mummified by the dry air of the room, were almost skeletons. There were Men and Dwarves, but our Hobbit also noted that the most recent corpses seemed those of goblins.

Arathorn and Thráin came. One looked like the owner, returning after a long trip, and unhappy with the keeping of the domain. The other scrutinized darkness, fearing at any time a bandits or orcs ambush. Their companions gathered behind them, leading the fearful horses. However, Dwarves, men, woman, wizard and Hobbit were guided by the same instinct, since they all stopped at the edge of the wide beam of light, which was made visible because of the dust lifted by the company. The bodies, all of which were lying in the light, had sent them a silent warning. The group cautiously circled around the lit center of the room. Apart from the passage they had come by, many tunnels left the hall.

A debate arose to determine the next route. Gandalf suggested that indications should be looked for near the openings. The Dwarves scattered in disorder to explore the room and inspect these openings, unable to obey the instructions of prudence from Thráin. The companions did not notice any particular index, except over the opening diametrically opposite to their entrance. Everyone got there at once, the Hobbit at the forefront. The lintel and the pillars were engraved with interlocking linear patterns running around the door. At the top inlay stones drew a triangle pointing up and radiating in all directions with straight or wavy lines. Thráin exclaimed:

- « This is the immemorial sign of our fathers! We have entered into the original fiefdom of my people. Now I take command of the company! »
Gandalf fully expected some tirade like this. So he had carefully prepared his argument:

- « My dear Thràin. Obviously, this path has been carved out by your ancestors. But paradoxically, it is also certainly the beginning of Fram’s road. According to Master Elrond, it was the stake of bitter fights. I am afraid that we should expect difficulties of all kinds: dead ends, traps, defenses run by evil creatures... So may I suggest you to stay this change of command and work closely to achieve your destination? Three will not be too many - Yourself, Arathorn and Mr. Took - to unravel the wiles of the road to Barum-Nahal. »

Arathorn had patiently listened to Gandalf’s exhortation. He spoke so as to be heard by all, happy to display his high-mindedness and independence from the wizard:

- « The first part of our quest ends at the edge of your fiefdom, O Thràin. The Dùnedain have met their share of the market, although it has cost them two lives. It seems to me wise to hand over command to you, lord of the Dwarves, masters at fighting and carving under the mountain. However I am warning you: my heart whispers that our trials in these tunnels are not to their end. »

Sweeping the fears of Arathorn with a gesture, Thràin bridled and ordered the company to prepare for departure. He surrounded himself in the vanguard with crestfallen Gerry and mumbling Gandalf, while Nàr and Mår brought up the rear. The Dùnedain at the center of the line, cared for the horses.

Gerry got ready and walked cautiously to the gaping door, beyond which he could see nothing. Gandalf lit the end of his staff, with a word of command:

« Naro[31] ! »

The company progressed slowly, at the pace of the most restive mounts, along the low and narrow tunnel that rose steadily. Bera considered heading to the northwest, but the acuteness of her senses lost its fullness after these long underground detours. At times, secondary passages left to one side or the other, but none were a dilemma for Thràin and Gerry. After several hours, the companions took a meal in the dark. They progressed again for about an hour, Dwarves hobbling on their short legs, and Humans leaning regularly to avoid the uneven ceiling, when they reached a small circular room. Four tunnels left from there, more or less to the north, the West and two intermediate directions. Thràin ordered the company to stop. The room was carved out of the rock, quite coarsely. The amenities of an adjoining cell gave the impression that this was once a major crossroads, guarded by sentries.

Gandalf sniffed the air of the four tunnels. A stream of warm air seemed to rise steeply to them in the left-most corridor, and then rush into the nearby tunnel, rising before them. From the rightmost gallery, that went somewhat down, emanated a musty smell. The other central corridor strongly descended but some remains of a lifting device revealed that it was certainly the beginning of a mining tunnel, probably a vein of iron. In the absence of signs near the openings, the Dwarve engaged in an anxious conclave, sharing their interpretations of legends about Barum-Nahal.

After several minutes of this learned but sterile conference, Gandalf simply suggested to send a few scouts in the four tunnels. Gerry had no choice but to honor his reputation, as the young Dwarves disputed the right to volunteer with him for this discreet exploratory visit. Thus there were three excited Dwarves - Dwalor, Forin and Grar - and one resigned Hobbit who received instruction to investigate, as discreetly as possible, the corridors on one furlong, and to return at the slightest danger, avoiding if possible to be followed by said danger. The four scouts engaged simultaneously, each in his corridor.

Gerry befell the median tunnel, that rose with a gentle slope. He tiptoed like a fox, as lightweight
and stealthy as a young marauding Hobbit may move, when the aroma of a pie cooling on the window tickled his nostrils. After creeping for a chain[4] he saw that his companions, who were waiting in the small room behind him, emitted all kinds of untimely noises and unseemly comments, which sounds spread up the corridor. Gerry made a note to remind them to behave more stealthily. Continuing his cautious sneak, he met neither obstacle nor remarkable sign, until he thought he perceived a faint glimmer, far away in the heart of the darkness in front of him.

Was he to, as instructed, turn back and inform the company about this discovery? But what could he possibly tell? An early dedication was born in the Hobbit’s heart, inside the ordered company of the Dûnedain. The fear of disappointing his friends or suffering their derogatory jokes certainly influenced him, but his prevailing feeling at that moment was simple curiosity. He advanced step by step with extra precaution, slowly discovering the nuances of the light source he approached. Intermittent rays draw moire greenish patterns on the carved rock. Gerry realized that his skin took iridescent colors that contrasted with the light jade of his clothes. He flattened against the least exposed wall and resumed his creeping, his heart pounding. Within a few yards of the end of the tunnel, he stopped to listen. Confused and distant echoes of shuffling reached him, interspersed with grinding chains. An uncertain moan ended in blows out of the tunnel.

Confident in the growing power of his ring, Gerry grasped it with his left hand and reached the end of the corridor, that opened on a broad crenelated platform. Stairs went down to the left, defended by a wall, to a gate under the platform, that led to an immense room. Venturing to the balustrade, Gerry threw a quick glance and discovered a huge natural hall, with a diameter about a third of a furlong. The ceiling was irregular, bristling with stalactites and supported by some natural pillars. The ground was leveled, except in the center of the room, where stalagmites surrounded a natural basin of glooming green water. At the other end of the hall, another platform defended access to a gate just below.

Wonder was taking precedence over apprehension, when Gerry saw a form that had his blond and usually curly hair, raise on his back. A grotesque and obscene figure, sitting on a boulder near the pool, chanted what seemed a lullaby, with unexpected accents, sometimes rising in high tones of hysterical wailing, sometimes descending down to the octaves of a military march. The creature swung his huge head in rhythm with bulging lidless eyes, wrinkling the greenish and pustules-covered skin of his neck. His emaciated body, wearing a war cloth from another time, beat time with his clicking foot.

Terrible tales came back to the Hobbit’s memory, reported by residents of Brandyhall after traveling to Breeland. The terrible ghouls of the Downs took possession of the bodies of ancient Kings under their cairns, crouched all day long in their dens and crept out at dusk to assault the lost travelers, devour them or worse...

Gerry was appalled and hid behind a crenel. It took several minutes for him to take over and force himself to look around. He saw only one other way out of the hall: at the foot of the northern postern. But he did not exclude that there might be a concealed way. The Hobbit also noticed that the creature was perched on a large and heavy stone, which appeared to be a tomb, not far from the central basin illuminating the entire cave. Having dutifully noted these details, he turned back on the sly.

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NOTES

[1] Sacha Guitry

[2] The prefix « Ar- », which means « Great » in adunaic, the tongue of the Dûnedain, begins the
names of all the chiefs of the Dûnedain of Arnor, since the last King Arvedui. This habit states the continuity and the primacy of the line of Isildur as well as the ambition of these chiefs, to re-found the kingdom of Arnor.


The path of the dead - Fram

Chapter Summary

The company awakens the memories of long forgotten hatreds.

But the hobbit froze before leaving the platform. The singing had stopped abruptly and the creature had talked to him.

- « Does a honest host leave without saluting? »

Terror seized our Hobbit anew. But the vaguely female voice addressed him in the tone of reproach of a harsh mistress, scorned in her house. Gerry replied without thinking:

- « I apologize. I must have got lost! »

That was ridiculous. Nobody lived nearby and could inadvertently venture into the lair of a ghoul. Yet the creature did not note the unlikeliness and continued:

- « Who are you? A Dwarf burrowing for gold, thief and coward? A lord of men, dragons bane? You have the soul of one and the appearance of the other! Appoint your allegiance, you who hide a secret! »

The Hobbit grimaced, feeling exposed to the fiery eyes of the creature which nevertheless could not see him where he was. The discomfort of a clawed hand rummaging through his thoughts intensified. But he felt that he could not escape without bloody reprisals and resolved to save time. He faced the voice, his back to the wall, and said, moving slowly to approach the tunnel:

-« I am the seductor from the green hills beyond the mountains, to serve you!
- Come here, if you want to serve me! But can you seduce me? »

Gerry could not see the creature any more, but the sound of its voice indicated that it had reached the foot of the South postern, just below him. Sweating with fear, our Hobbit retreated just in time. The ghoul now stood on the platform and darted at him with yellow and bloodshot eyes:

-« But that's our little snoop! You happen to possess a shiny treasure? But do you really know how to use it? »

Gerry gasped. News roamed these halls faster than the whine of a dying! This creature seemed too knowledgeable to be honest. Strangely his ring had, by himself, escaped from his fist; he now held it between his thumb and forefinger. Moved by a sudden inspiration, Gerry raised his ring to challenge the ghoul.

By pure and incredible luck, the small stones captured the green light that rayed between two crenels. The ring now shone with a double opaline flame. The blinded creature was held by doubt and stepped back. The hall resounded with its dismayed and malicious whistle:

-« This is a beautiful ring! Wait a minute, I'll get my sisters ... we'll have a beautiful wedding! »
As the reader certainly knows, marriage did not have our Hobbit’s favor. How embarrassed he was at the prospect of a multiple marriage! In other circumstances, such a proposal would have earned him a few seconds of naughty thinking. But in this case, the malicious smile of the creature inspired him the greatest modesty. Nonetheless reckoning the number of sisters, he took advantage of the creature’s hesitation and ran away into the tunnel.

Gerry made such a racket throughout the corridor, that he found all of his companions in battle formation when he arrived, sweating and puffing, at the intersection. A few minutes and Gandalf’s severe injunction were necessary to obtain a clear explanation from him. Then Thràin and the wizard concerted seriously as to the exact nature of this creature. According to the Dwarf, it could not be entirely evil, since it had proposed marriage to Gerry and sang lullabies.

The Hobbit exclaimed:

- « But it is a barrow-wight, a terrible bloodsucker! »

Then Arathorn came out of his shell and declared:

-« Time has come for the heir of the Kings! We shall venture in the path of the dead as announced by the prophecy for ages! »

With that, he raised his silver horn and gave a ringing challenge, which resonated endlessly in the tunnels.

Gandalf was stunned, not by the cacophony, but by the terrible presumption of Arathorn. Before he could intervene, the Dúnedain had rushed into the corridor with their battle cry of « Elendil! ».

The wizard had to use all his influence over Thràin, who was embittered, to lead the Dwarves to the rescue of the reckless men. Gerry, whose value in close combat was not very popular, and the big Dwarf Barin were left behind to look after the mounts. All other companions engaged in the tunnel, following Gandalf’s illuminated staff.

In the great hall, the creature had mustered its sisters. Half a dozen ghouls, most broken down and more frightening than the first one, had massed around the tomb. The Dúnedain descended the stairs, ready to fight.

Arathorn, majestic and confident, began to negotiate and get the pass, claiming a few centuries old oath that these dead’s ancestors would have lent to his forefather. The ghouls, as might be expected from unlearned creatures, claimed they knew nothing about this episode of the past, and savagely attacked the Dúnedain.

Despite the blind ferocity of the assault, the rangers of Arnor proved a match for the vile creatures, but these seemed to ignore weariness. Arathorn, overwhelmed by doubt, desperately sought what he could do to rectify the situation, when Gandalf, Bera and the Dwarves burst on the platform. The Beaming, continuing her momentum, jumped off the platform and landed with the flexibility of a fawn behind a huge gray-green ghoul wielding a scimitar. The young woman, animated by a murderous rage, tore the head of the creature with one powerful blow. The ugly head went rolling to the basin, while the repulsive corpse wandered at random, with its emaciated arms dangling.

Soon the Dwarves arrived at the foot of the stairs, backing the Dúnedain and encircling the creatures while shouting « Khazad aï mênou ! »[1]. The monsters seemed about to yield when Gandalf, who had remained on the steps to prepare an injunction, stood crying:

-« Dead animated with non-life! Return to the void prepared for you! »
The latest ghouls fell lifeless. Suddenly a deafening flash stifled the green glow of the basin, but Gandalf immediately brought enough light to illuminate his companions. There was silence in the room while Gandalf’s smoke dissipated. Then, slowly, a sepulchral screech shook the tomb in the center of the room. A tall skeleton sat up there and turned to the companions the emaciated orbits of its fiery gaze. Grabbing a powerful sword into the tomb, the creature came out and faced the stunned companions. It wore a golden crown on his head, with an ax stuck in it. Its rich mantle revealed the wealth and power of this ancient King of men. In a voice full of authority, he shouted to Arathorn’s attention:

- « You fool! Only one of you two will be king! You cannot trust a Dwarf! »

Behind him shapes were gathering, blurred shadows out of the gate facing them. Gandalf seemed to mark a stop, surprised that his cast would not have annihilated all the creatures. On the contrary, it even seemed that his intervention had helped to call for more... Bera was the first to recover - her huge muscular and now hairy body was getting ready to pounce on the next attackers. But Arathorn had recalled his war captain glance. He shouted while springing:

- « Bera, to me, on the King of the dead! »

Both fell like a thunderbolt on the giant who fought back hard. Gandalf’s light failed them when the wizard concentrated his efforts to delay the newcomers. But the strength of the Bearning, extolled by the token of trust her love had just granted her, forced for a moment the King against a natural pillar. Arathorn's sword flashed while hurling on the neck of his opponent, severing his head and shoulder. The inert King collapsed.

Arathorn, Thráin and Bera advanced then, followed by their companions, to face the horde that hesitated. The Dùnadan chief had regained his self-confidence. He rang again the horn and ordered the dead to retire in peace, brandishing his sword, still animated with the fire of death. Slowly the hideous troops disbanded and the companions were not worried, the shapes vanishing into the shadows of the cave or burying their repugnant limbs in the rubble from which they had emerged. Surrounded by the Dwarves, Bera looked the lord Arathorn in all his glory, shrouded by the grace of victory. Lost in his dream of renewal, he repeated the venomous prophecy –Only one will be king! - and gave her no look.

Past the joy of victory, Màr and Nàr gathered the Dwarves, who turned away from Arathorn. Thráin secretly blamed the Dùnadan for his naive belief that had nearly destroyed the group. His delusions about a King, predestined by a so-called old omen, had clouded his judgment on the battlefield and made him flout the authority of the designated captain. Furthermore, the pernicious prediction had not escaped him. He restrained for the time his anger and grievances, held by a soothing gesture of Gandalf.

Gerry and the Dwarves finally reached the gate. They were helped having the mounts go down the steps. Then the companions gathered around the tomb of stone, beneath which lay the remains of the giant. Gandalf approached, examining the corpse, the features of whom seemed to have regained peace. His cracked skull bore traces of blond hair beneath his crown. As a necklace, the King of the dead wore huge sharp teeth, grouped in pairs - one of the biggest missing. The wizard told, with a bass voice:

-« These are the remains of Fram, dragon slayer and bane of the orcs of Gundabad. »

Sheltered behind the legs of Bera, Gerry asked innocently:

-« What is stuck in his head? »
Màr spoke, trembling with emotion, stating what all the Dwarves had in mind:

-« This man is dead, struck by a very ancient Dwarven ax, only a Dwarven King could wield. »

Arathorn noted grimly:

-« So it is true that Fram and the Dwarves of the Stiffbeards clan savagely killed each other... »

Nàr, clenching his fists, protested:

-« If this man is dead at the hands of a Dwarf, certainly he deserved it! »

- So you absolve his killer without knowing the circumstances of his death? You know only too well what may be the iniquity of a Dwarf, subject to the test of gold he cannot appropriate! Fram refused to bow to the dictates of the Stiffbeards, they got rid of him, that is all! »

The weapons had not yet returned to the sheathes and were to serve again. Gandalf intervened, with a fierce look and ruffled eyebrows:

-« The ax, preserved in the skull of these remains, proves nothing except that the death was staged. It is Dwarven craft. How could possibly a Dwarf hit a tall man on the top of his head? Face these obvious facts: no one will ever know what happened when the Stiffbeards and Fram’s company attempted to appropriate the treasure without agreeing. One thing is certain: they were unable to unite against their common enemies, which led to their downfall. May this lesson inspire all of us. »

Thràin and Arathorn had been close to rush against each other. As always, the political intuition of the Dùnadan showed swifter than Thràin’s. He declared:

-« The prophecy of the Dùnedain was accomplished today! I humbly ask you to forgive my urge. I dedicate myself, as well as my suite, to serve your cause. May we all recover Barum-Nahal for the people of Dùrin! »

Thráin knew very well that this elegant discourse, all drenched with modesty and noble contrition, served only one truth: Arathorn considered himself the only one, who had revealed his royal stature today! Under the watchful and severe eye of Gandalf, he mumbled a vague assent, and ordered his Dwarves to bury the corpses. Fram’s body was placed in his grave, the ax removed from the skull and the cover replaced. After this disgusting toil, Gandalf suggested a lunch break, both to calm the spirits and restore them somewhat.

Gerry’s heart was heavy when they departed. Frightened glancing reflections of the great hall, he asked the wizard:

-« Do not all these unfortunate, possessed by the dragon’s curse, deserve better than these dark holes?

- Probably, but we must not linger here. The feat Arathorn thinks he achieved, seems not sustainable to me. »

Seing the piteous face of the Hobbit, Gandalf added:

-« My dear Hobbit, the real tomb of the dead, is the heart of the living! We remember their prowess and their falls, their worth and their weaknesses. Those we love still live for us. If we are faithful to them, they can still advise us. As for those that we have not known, their glory still enlightens us for centuries to come. The deceased, if we venerate his memory, is more valuable
and more powerful than the living. [3]

- But what shall we do when we realize that what we believed in was marred by wrongdoings, heavy to carry, like in a legend embellished by time? »

The wizard wondered if Gerry spoke about the legend of Fram or some idolatry he would feel for his lord.

-« Even when our heroes legends flaw, it is in the memory that things take their proper place. [4]»

Bera was looking for a cure for her growing sense of loneliness. She followed their footsteps, lining in the caravan that forced the mounts up the stairs of the northern postern.

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NOTES

[2] Jean Cocteau
At the end of Fram’s road, the company finds worrying traces.

The company silenced its doubts and contradictions by focusing on action. Gandalf urged them to leave the unhealthy gut. They walked for long hours, pursued by rumors of their own fears that seemed to revive the ravenous hatred of the Dead. Every moment Gerry believed he perceived the stealthy sound of feeble limbs on the stone behind them. Her hair ruffling, Bera walked at the rear guard, her ax in hand. Finally a stream of fresh air told them that the exit was near. They came out in the open, under a starry sky, washed by a cold breeze blowing from the north. The Dúnedain appraised they had moved some eight miles to the north-west, as the crow flies.

Thráin ordered a campsite should be found. Arathorn sent his men to search the area, but they returned without having located any suitable site nearby. Furthermore they had found indications that goblins had passed nearby. Gerry pointed out that the armory located near the exit of the tunnel was probably the safest place. Therefore the company installed there for the night, not allowing any fire. The mounts were aligned in the tunnel and guards were maintained at both extremities. The night passed slowly, the whole company trying to sleep in vain. The alleged proximity of Barum-Nahal made the Dwarves febrile and restless. The Dúnedain slept with one eye open, because of the goblins traces, while Bera was burning with impatience to decimate them. Only our Hobbit seemed to have reasonable anxiety and melancholy feelings. Meanwhile Gandalf was brooding distant and inaccessible plans, and was becoming increasingly moody as the relationship between Arathorn and Thráin was deteriorating.

Dawn came suddenly, cold and sharp. Nár and Hirgon braved together the bite of the gray hour, wrapped in their blankets and searching the darkness around. Frerin had watched the ponies at the bottom of the tunnel; he had escaped the icy wind but not the pestilential rumors of the Dead. The guards shook themselves and beheld the Misty Mountains.

A high plateau displayed its chaotic mounds all around. From the outside, the exit of their tunnel could not be discerned from the few graves lined at hillside. The rugged moorland burst into purple as heathers opened in the morning sun. Some spots of ferns dotted with touches of soft green, the gray pink sandstone beaten by the weather. The shades projected by huge blocks of gneiss striated of anthracite, remained worrisome, but the mounts were particularly grateful to leave the depths.

Arathorn asked Thráin for permission to send his scouts ahead of them. The goal was certainly not orientation, since a large conical mountain blocked up the horizon to the west. The Dwarves made their devotions discovering Barum-Nahal, while the Dúnedain, Bera and Gerry were exploring the area. After two hours of searching, Arathorn had enough information to build a map of the area. He presented his findings to Thráin under the dark look of Gandalf, whom this goodwill made suspicious.

As the wizard insisted, Arathorn explained the discovery of Bera: the eastern edge of the plateau they had reached, had suffered major fractures. One of them, especially deep, provided access to the valley leading to Fram’s road. Still a path had to be cleared and the scree was to be
consolidated to allow passage for the Dwarves, then expanded and strengthened for the mounts. By means of this huge work, this discovery opened to the Dwarves the prospect of an easier communication line with the Iron Mountains, avoiding the haunted underground. These revelations were received with joy, despite Arathorn’s repeated exhortations of caution.

After much discussion and arbitration of Gandalf, the company decided to join a series of tiny lakes which line ran from East to West, South of the exit of the path of the dead. They slowly hobbled in deep coombes, often marshy, sometimes losing track of the river to find it a few miles ahead, in the form of a long pristine lake. Heather then gave way to large bogs, where the Dúnedain could shoot some rabbits.

The companions stopped for a hopeful lunch. The mountain approached, perfect cone streaked with black and gray cast. Its snowy summit was lost in a persistent fog that a wind from the North dishevelled without dispersing. While the Dwarves reveled in roasted snow hare, contemplating Barum-Nahal, some allowed themselves to discuss how they would benefit from the victory and would enjoy their share of the treasure. Gandalf appreciated the attempt to cheer up the atmosphere, but that was rather rough, and even little Gerry noticed the subterfuge. But Màr had questioned each of them.

Barin surprised no one by announcing he would run the inn under the mountain. He detailed the delicacies he would indulge distant visitors with, inspired by elven and Bearning dishes.

- ... And you will call your inn: ‘The Elven Cutlery’!, Launched Bafur. The company benevolently laughed. Riding the wave of good humor, the old Màr encouraged everyone to express, in order to mobilize his people for the incoming goal:

-Well, what would I do at Barum-Nahal? I think I will finally complete my project of triple blast furnace. The temperature will be perfect to revive the steel that sings of our fathers. And you, Norin?

- I hope to find the secret ointment of Dûrin, in the heart of Barum-Nahal.

- What about you, Forin?

- My workshop will smith golden tiaras and silver ewers, which will be the pride of our kingdom!

- And Bafur?

- I shall crimp gemstones, animated with a living glitter, in my cousins’ jewel artwork!

- …and what will our skilled Fràr indulge in?

The archer’s cheeks reddened with a carmine almost as sharp as his cap. Pushed by his brother, he replied:

-It seems our duty to populate our colony with young Dwarven girls. We believe Mîm could be decided to join us...

- You're so good at devoting yourself to the common cause!, cried Frerin. You have in no way indicated that you asked her for wife!

- To be precise, she agreed to marry both of us, Grâr and I, provided we become rich!

Bold and loud laughter of the Dwarven companions rang out in front of the puzzled and confused Dûnedain. This time the company was brimming with a joy it had not experienced for a long time.
It should be noted here that few Dwarves ever took the marriage vows. More than half of them are content with a life of travel or work. Forge or chisel gratify Dwarves with joys of creativity and success, better than would passion of love. Dwarven women never show in public, so the absurd legend that Dwarves are spontaneously born among the rose-gems, is still widely believed. But truth is that Dwarves live most of their passion in the creation and control of what rock offers them. Dwarven women, so few, are sometimes to marry several Dwarves. However this practice is rather more tolerated than encouraged. Often derided with sympathy, it was never allowed in the direct royal line. This practice does not cause any estate difficulty, especially when spouses are brothers, which was the case of Gràr and Fràr.

-And you, Mr. Took, are you getting married?, Màr bounced, hoping to include step by step the Dúnedain in the conversation.

Our Hobbit protested, arguing that picking among so many delightful Hobbit-girls left him undecided. In addition, his gallantry formally forbade him to do so many unhappy girls. Dwarves recognized the bluster and laughed harder. Some were surprised that beauty could be a criterion for choosing a bride - health, lineage honorability and fortune seemed to them much more serious and defensible motives. But Gerry glimpsed the wrinkled brow of the wizard behind a pipeweed cloud. So he tried to change the subject. To remain on the topic of marriage and involve the audience, he told the story of Miss Primrose, the younger daughter of a worthy family from the Marish.

-The petulant young Hobbit girl was courted by the two prominent bachelors in the East Farthing – and even in the whole young Shire, since one of the two candidates was none other than the heir of the Oldbuck clan. It turns out the two contenders had a rather pleasant face, they were over-confident about it and hated each other heartily. Miss Primrose, who much enjoyed this outbid of gallantry, gifts, surprises and poems, had them dally until her majority.

Meanwhile the opponents indulged in all kinds of covert businesses, alternating small commercial sham, intimidation and smear campaigns. Each family of the Shire had come to side with his "champion." By dint of hate and fighting on all possible grounds, the two lovers finally lost sight of their goal. Their life had turned into a battle for supremacy, for the sake of which they committed all kinds of meannesses.

Miss Primrose, feeling abandoned and finally wishing to marry neither one nor the other, finally gave her hand to a third one, who is none other than Gerontius Took’s forefather. This decision was certainly the cause of the departure of the Oldbucks for Buckland, abandoning the prestigious function of Thain, to the benefit of my own family.

A respectful silence greeted the end of the tale. The story had first entertained the Dwarves and the Dúnedain. But the end seemed prescient to them. Only young Bera and old Gandalf smiled discreetly. The wisest in the audience, or at least those whose wisdom exceeded their pride, bowed their heads, stirring resolutions of reason. Màr tried to resume his tour of wishes, but the atmosphere was gone. The wizard, squinting with laughter, assessed the effects of the Hobbit’s parable, on the two people it had not explicitely named. Arathorn and Thráin finished their meal, each apart. Then Gandalf’s eyes became vague. The short story had induced an idea, strange but tenacious, the wizard decided to examine carefully and methodically. He entrenched himself behind a thick cloud of smoke and began to weigh his discovery with an absorbed air.

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When the meal was completed, the company resumed its arduous journey among the bogs. After two other miles, Gandalf, Arathorn and Thráin made a detour to explore where Ingold had found the goblins traces.
They approached the coomb cautiously. It seemed that a squad of Gundabad orcs had been ambushed by a rival gang. Arathorn prevented his companions to disturb the signs, and ventured into the ravine, looking to the ground. The defenders had been cut to pieces. Most showed signs of burns, and some bodies had been cut in pieces and scattered. The Dûnadan was surprised that no trace of escape from the coomb was visible. Noting the remains of dead bodies all belonged to the same tribe, he hypothesized that the shooters had decimated by throwing flaming projectiles on troops that were too heavily armed to maneuver at the bottom of the ravine. Unconvinced by his own theory, he hailed his companions:

- This killing is three days old at most. No goblin came back here later. These bodies belong to a band, which den is several nights away, North of here. There are no casualties among the attackers, which I find very disturbing. If an orc chief was cunning enough to beat his rivals and become a warlord, and proved able to coordinate such effective attacks, the free peoples of Rhudaur and the northern valley of the Anduin would soon fall to him! Furthermore powerful fire weapons were used, and perhaps spells of the enemy! You can get off! He said to Gandalf and Thráin.

When they were close, he continued:

- What do you think about these injuries, Gandalf? Could these be war fires of Angmar? Or a wild animal? Or...

- I've never seen anything like this since the elder days, the wizard whispered, sincerely worried. But it does not seem plausible to me to imagine a dragon, if that is what you have in mind.

- So how do you explain these steps? Asked Arathorn.

A footprint could be seen under a burnt body. The body was moved. There was a clear but only partial print of a big paw, with three crooked fingers, about two palms large. Arathorn carefully explored the area, but the ground was too dry and the track too old. Thus he discovered only several traces, he could still follow on less than a mile, after which they were lost in rubbles of gneiss towards the mountain.

Gandalf, puzzled, dismissed the hypothesis of a Great Eagle: the animal would not have attacked its prey at the bottom of such a deep ravine, surrounded by trees, and would not have moved on land over such a long distance. The only animal that could fit this footprint did not live in the north.

Suddenly a quick cackling was heard behind a thicket along with a soft wrinkling. Arathorn drew his longsword in pure reflex while Thráin adopted a defense position and Gandalf raised his staff.

Two small thrushes hobbled under a bush of broom, swinging their tail. Thráin exclaimed with hope:

-Once there used to be ancient species of intelligent and faithful birds around the Lonely Mountain. Perhaps the line of Dùrin will have the chance to meet representatives of these noble races?

But the thrushes took flight to perch, one on Gandalf’s shoulder, the other on Arathorn’s raised fist. The great Dwarf had believed for a moment these birds were an encouraging sign, some unexpected omen; he scowled when Arathorn flattered the small bird which had approached from time to time throughout their journey. A little apart, Gandalf was vigorously cackling with his bird, perched now on the end of his staff. The trio, shaken by their discovery, joined the company that struggled to a hillside of heather. A tacit agreement bound them immediately: the doubts that arose during their exploration should not weaken their companions’ kick.

The thrushes had already gone for discrete scouting. The companions and their pack animals
progressed to the mountain, close enough now to distinguish the irregularities of the gray cone. The lower part flared like a duchess gray dress, spreading on the grass of her park. The plateau became more rugged, close to the mountain, and slowly rose up to its lower slopes. Soon Arathorn’s bird twirled again around the Dùnadan, who charged Hirgon with a fast race. When the ranger came back a few hours later, he proposed to alter their track to a route that seemed to lead to the mountain.

Thràin and Gandalf hesitated a moment in the waning evening. Their progress was slow but quiet so far. Arathorn cast a wry look at the Dwarves, muddy and tired, struggling to run their mules in a spongy field:

-I think we had better find a shelter for the night. Our strength declines with the day. You will take a more informed decision in the light of the morning.

Gandalf endorsed that opinion. The Dwarf even took it upon himself to nod, brooding his resentment towards the Dùnadan, who had not given up command indeed.

The troops settled at the bottom of a ravine, sheltered from the North wind. They allowed two small fires for the night, that promised winter temperatures. The Dwarves took fur coats out of their packages and set oilcloth tents in a few moments. The Hobbit admired this organization and this energy against the elements. Dùnedain showed equally competent, but their lore was more about hiding and melting in the elements.

- Dwarves take a stand, Dùnedain bypass!, said Gerry, wrapped in blankets from Rivendell.

He was slow to regain his senses when Gilhael and Krorin came and awoke him for his shift.

When he fell asleep, the moon showed a thin nascent crescent, barely discernable. Now the coomb was covered by darkness that only the flickering red ashes could pierce. During the night, a cloud ceiling, low and dense, seemed to have formed. The Hobbit revived the fires and posted himself as usual, on a small hillock sheltered by a bush. The storm broke an hour before dawn, triggering cataracts that swept down the bottom of the ravine. The troops had no choice but to gather their belongings and hobble in the direction suggested by the rangers. After two hours of an exhausting battle against the storm, they finally reached a paved, rutted, slippery and unstable place, but that seemed to them infinitely more sustainable than the slimy bogs they had just left. Dawn was certainly drilled behind the curtain of rain, since they saw each other. However the company had to stand there for two hours longer, until Hirgon and Ingold found Barin and Norin, who had gotten lost in the dark storm.

It was decided to move forward no matter what, since the troops’ morale was dropping alarmingly while standing in heavy rain. Gandalf took his famous remedy and distributed the cordial of Imladris. The Hobbit, perched on a pony and invigorated by the precious drink, nibbled a little something, more for to the feeling of a solid food than for its effects on his fighting ability. A pony was suffering from posterior limb; its charge was divided between Dwarves and ponies. Despite Frerin and Ingold’s care, it was progressing much too slowly. The pair remained at rearguard along with Bera, while the main body walked ahead faster, without discerning any sign of progression around them. The paved road sometimes disappeared, but the road still facilitated the passage. Twice they had to descend to the bottom of a flooded ravine because the old stone bridge had been destroyed, but overall, they advanced, without realizing it, at a much higher speed than in the moors.

Some encouraging clearings petered out during the day, the rain taking over again. When brightness declined again, the group saw on its left, a bank of heather come out of the fog, strewn with stones either raised or fallen. Their Dwarf warrior form sported helmet and coat, ax in hand.
Their beards were cut in three braided strands, that silently dripped on heather. Suddenly the slope faded into a wide and dark opening. Without even consulting, the companions rushed into the providential shelter. Gandalf made a little light. A pack of wolves had once made its den out of the great room. Nothing was left now but a few calcined pelts. Nàr said it was an outpost, a sentry guarding the access road. The "gate" - the dimensions of which still were around three or four poles, was searched, but the Dwarves discovered only some alcoves and looted reserves. Thráin meant to restore some luster to the guardhouse, and ordered to clean it thoroughly. At the entrance, a small broken gargoyle poured rainwater into a cracked pool. After carefully cleaning the premises thanks to a fire concocted by Gandalf, the excited Dwarves were quick to brush, scrape, scrub, scour, sweep and wash every inch of the floor and walls, repairing, straightening and re-caulking here and there as they could.

Finally rain stopped during the night. Shortly before dawn, the troops’ sleep was disturbed by howls of wolves, which came from the Southeast. They saw Frerin and Ingold coming, pulling a pony that rolled its eyes in terror. Furtive shadows slipped away when torches showed out of the guardhouse. Ingold explained that they had long walked as slowly as required by the state of the pony, he had provided with a splint. The rain had stopped for about an hour, when a hungry pack of wolves had given chase. Luckily, Bera had been able to light torches with her burning coal, which had certainly saved them from a horrible death. In the gaze of the Bearning, still smoldered the heat of battle and her hatred for wolf hordes. They nursed the wounds of their brave rearguard and waited for the morning.

.oOo.
Gold and flames - Reunion

Chapter Summary

The dwarves contemplate the mountain.

..oOo..

Dawn exceeded all their expectations. Dark clouds broke up just as the sun rose on the eastern horizon. The mountain appeared to them in its virginal splendor, its streaks of black and gray rocks shining beneath the slanting rays. Heathland sub-slopes ablazed with changing malachite, quartz and amethyst lights. The huge conical mass sparkled like a giant jewel washed by the rain. The top disposed an instant of its misty panache, revealing its delicate white petal of arum inclined towards the South. The central hollow glowed with a soft flickering light reminding celestite. It seemed to the Dwarves that the cottony cradle of their whole race was revealed to them in the original splendor of the morning of the world. But soon a clear plume covered the top of the mountain, and spread on its sides, that sported powerful shoulders, streaked with milky marble and dark obsidian. A spur leant against the middle of the cone and ran down to the limit of the fir trees, then split up into a large chevron, in the lap of which bloomed a pleasant valley. A large stag crossed the road swelling out its chest, before its court of does and fearful fawns. The animal paused in the middle of the track, put his proud look on the company, and jumped in the wake of his kin.

A swift river rustled between fir trees and heather, spreading in their hearts the joy of its singing, and sowing in the looks the delight of its diamond sparkling. The warbling of a multicolored fauna filled the musky air with the promises of summer. The Dwarves remained a long time frozen in ecstasy, some kneeling, all speechless. Even big Barin stopped eating while mist slowly rose from thickets bathed in warm rays.

Thrân was the last to exit the guardroom. He stopped, shivering. As he set foot on the edge of the valley, she appeared, his mountain, dream of the Dwarves of any lineage, with her slides and her terraces, her sources under the mulberry trees, her bogs dress, her heather necklace and tulle shoulders, wrapped in blue fumaroles, as a mother festively dressed, sitting at the edge of the sky waiting for her son. [1] He felt the big hammer of Dûrin pass through his heart! He had no legs anymore, but of smoke, and that could not withstand the sheer weight of his rustling head. He had to rely on a leaning effigy. This mount had given birth to his forefathers. Fragments of memories abounded in flash "not too old,... the road is eaten by moors, the forests have grown... is the door still wide open?...". He slowly slid down to the soft grass, no longer in control of his limbs: the sheer force of his life hastened to his head and leant at the windows of his eyes, gazing at his mountain. The immeasurable mass, transfigured in the shaking air of the morning, overwhelmed him with tender reproaches:

-Here you are, Lad, she said, you come so late!

Pain, as vast as the sky, cracked Thrân’s chest, anguish closed his throat. A tear weighing at the corner of his eye rolled, hard as a rock. It left a deep furrow on his cheek and came, bitter, melt in the crease of his lips. Another tear fell, then another, a whole source was carrying diamonds and little by little, this fluid stroke melt the salt of pain.
-Is it really you?, asked the mountain. I have watched this dark road for long, and I have been listening to the horn of the Dead. You come so late!

Thráin overlooked the years of wandering and shame, the servitude in foreign lands, the bitterness of exile. The company, touched by grace, looked at the mountain that reached out her brazen arms to her re-born children.

- You come so late! But is it still time for you?

The mountain was looking at the Dwarves with a nostalgic and incredulous smile, as a grandmother contemplates her descendants, steeped in her past history and dubious about the pages to be written.

- Your sons are back and will revive your blooming lap, Thràin greeted, his face radiant and his heart washed.

Gandalf’s thoughts traveled in happier times, while the subdued Dûnedain silently respected the emotion of their comrades. Noticing the bliss of young Bera, our Hobbit conceived a strange thought. Any fate could befall him, now that he had contemplated the mother of mountains and shared the fleeting feeling of rebirth. It seemed to him that the Dwarves’ reward entirely held in this moment. But soon his instinct for cozy comfort resurfaced. He expected the Dwarves to rush after that moment of reverence; thus he gathered his belongings and found with a frown that his food reserves would not last long.

Nàr, the dean of the dwarves, went gasping to the luggage and pulled out, with his old shaky hands, a small package wrapped in tissue paper. He awkwardly untied the string and, straightened up wobbling, hobbled to Thràin. The Dwarf lord ceremoniously received the fabric and displayed it: a golden crown topped with silver stars overlooked a hammer striking an anvil on a black field.

Gandalf chose a hunting spear and fixed the standard. Màr took it, held it up, and shouted a warrior march, which the Dwarves, suddenly galvanized, chanted while getting ready. They armed themselves for war and loaded the packets on their backs. Lined by two, they already marched the cobblestone road in quick time, in an exhilarating atmosphere of reconquest. The Dûnedain barely had time to place the mounts on line and send Bera as a scout. Gandalf followed, half amused, half concerned about so sudden and deep a Dwarven faith. But he was careful not to cool their ardor: difficulties would arise soon enough ...

The troops advanced rapidly in bright sunshine, swallowing greedily the few miles to the first steep slopes. Half awake and anxious, the little Hobbit trotted behind, experiencing difficulty staying in the wake of the rush. The Dwarves kicked their heels with enthusiasm, noting here and there some remains of ancestral constructions. Small buildings marked out the heath, bathed in light and morning mists. Insect hummings rose from the woods where echoed the calls of a cuckoo. Gradually, the valley was closing between the two gnarled arms of the eastern spur, while the slope got steeper under the tenuous firs.

Silence suddenly set at the end of the last wood. The Dwarves, sweating under their helmets, stopped to contemplate the final climb. Their deep and heavy breathing produced puffs of steam in the still fresh air. Gandalf pleaded caution, whereupon Thràin ordered a halt. The valley, very deep at the upstream end, poured the powerful flow of the river that was crossed by a series of bridges. The paved road, built with the art of the fathers of the Dwarves, jumped from one side of the fork to the other on seven arches, guarded by defenses anchored into the rock, more and more impressive.

Thráin decided that the Dûnedain, skilled in forest-lore, would keep the horses hidden in the
woods, while the Dwarven squad invests the forts. Arathorn gritted his teeth, not to say aloud a disparaging remark about dismissing the best fighters. But Gandalf saw to it that no incident could compromise this critical hour. The captain of the Dûnedain therefore calmed down, while a small thrush jumped on his shoulder.

Bera had to give up following the North Ridge, that became too sharp. She went down to the first defense keep, using her hands, and climbed its wall. This was a castelet controlling the exit of the first bridge and the entrance to the second. Her exploration revealed that it was deserted except for a dead orc, that scorched off a stench in the yard. She joined her companions by the first bridge and informed them of her findings. Dwarves peered the keeps, the bridges and finally the crests, very high and prominent on both sides of the valley. The road approaching the mountain seemed deserted. Some crows hovered nonchalantly in the air flowing up the mountainside.

Small Gerry tried to be forgotten, hidden on top of a young fir tree and busy scrutinizing the South ridge. Màr came on behalf of Thràin and begged him in style to assist the Dwarves in their approach. Arathorn interjected:

- The Dûnedain stand ready for their allies and comrades. Gerry will scout ahead as you ask.

Even if it meant to temporarily play the second role, Arathorn was not to abandon credit.

.oOo.

Gandalf had a twinge of heart. Therefore his protege would go to war, sent by two bold captains who failed to agree. Gerry took shelter behind a relaxed composure. Tiny details in the attitude of his companions, especially the vertical wrinkles that had just emphasized on the wizard’s brow, warned him that "the joke had gone long enough," as the shiriffe stated in the Shire to the urchin surprised with his plunder in hand. He took the time to check his weapons, then to pocket a few stones suitable for his sling, then to gather some supplies, then to adjust his belt, then to find his handkerchief, and then to put on his blue coat. Finally, having no more preparation that may delay the inevitable, he heaved a deep sigh and walked on the bridge, alone but bearing the blessings of the Dwarves, the Dûnedain, an old wizard and a young woman.

Our Hobbit felt pretty small on the imposing road. He walked with dignity on the first bridge, knowing that Bera had already been there and expecting the queasy stench that assailed him when he entered the courtyard of the gatehouse. Gagging, he ran along the second bridge to escape it. The second keep seemed empty. Gerry went to the wall and looked around cautiously and methodically. He did not realize it, but a small thrush had followed him and passed ahead of him, watching with her shrewd eye, the slightest movement in the narrow valley.

Gerry took a considerable time exploring every keep, in every corner. Although he did not discover anything truly remarkable, he accumulated the evidences of a diffuse presence: the site was occupied in the recent past, but suddenly deserted a few days ago. Loneliness grew as he walked away from his companions, always climbing higher and nearer the base of the rocky chevron. As he stealthily passed the fifth bridge, our Hobbit saw the Great Portal.

Curiously, he had no other horizon than the need to reach it. It reminded him of the entrance of his grand-father’s storeroom at Tookburroughs. It was a smial where the old Hobbit took refuge among memories accumulated during his escapades as a youth. The fertile imagination of the younger generation peopled that smial with mathoms, randomly collected when the grandfather committed jokes and petty plunders throughout the Shire in his youth. In the collective unconscious of his offsprings, the storeroom of the old Hobbit was home to some treasures with obscure origins if not positively ill-gotten, to glorious trophies gleaned during memorable meetings, in addition to relics earned during travels outside the borders, in the company of a wizard.
Actually the grandfather had collected, in the nest of his first love, items that reminded him of his late wife, to evoke her memory at peace. Admittedly his best bottles, that were stored there, greatly helped the old Hobbit to support his memory. So the legend of a place full of eclectic treasures was vastly overrated, though lately, his light kleptomania had tended to clutter his smial with small unnecessary but precious and pleasant items. His brownish round door was dotted, in Gerry’s memory, with various lucky charms pinned on the old wood. When an urchin dared to hang the bell, a Dwarf carillon rang with a perky look that evoked some distant and exotic destination. Thus this little music echoed in his head, when Gerry beheld the eastern gate of Barum-Nahal.

He shortened the exploration of the fifth gatehouse, then of the sixth, the last and most powerful. The ultimate bridge spanned the river that flowed down a narrow gorge, and led from the South fork to the North ridge. He stepped on a marble platform without making any noise. This esplanade preceded a solemn arch, carved with seven layers of discrete and harmonious geometric patterns. The spur of the mountain separated into two powerful branches, exactly above the door, thus surmounted by an impressive facade of a hundred feet high.

It seemed to the Hobbit he touched the very roots of the world. The steep wall threw creepers of stone from the top two edges, bestowing the cliff the appearance of a rough trunk. These interlaces appeared to reflect the turbulent history of the stone in its youth. The proud and bloody history of the Dwarf folk gazed Gerry from the top of this portal.

- Never mannish castle nor Hobbit manor had so solemn a portal, thought Gerry. Its view would discourage the enemies of the King under the Mountain in the old days!

But Gerry was not an enemy and did not lose courage. He beheld at length the porch of the King. After he somehow lost track of time, a small thrush landed near him, issuing hysterical tweets. The Hobbit recovered and reached for the bird that escaped and landed on the tower to the nearest gatehouse. He cast his inquisitive look around, without discovering any danger nor any enemy trace. The morning was almost over and the air, that stood still between the two stone arms, had warmed up. The small thrush watched, constantly changing her orientation as a weathervane in a storm.

Gerry went to the porch and entered the arch, which proved to be much larger than he had imagined. The smooth arch, twenty feet high, beautifully engineered, showed plumes of carved stone that captured light as knitted lace on Hobbit windows. Almost every thirty feet, two panels of shiny metal adorned the walls of the corridor, face to face. The panels assured a nice lighting of the avenue, by simple reflection. Gerry had the feeling of walking in the lap of mother earth and thus, in quite an irrational way, he felt no fear, but extreme exaltation. In front of the twelfth set of panels, he stopped. The majestic avenue, forty feet wide, was being prolonged further, equal to itself into complete darkness.

The Hobbit tried to calm the beating of his heart, and get in harmony with the deep silence under the mountain. He focused extensively, as he had become accustomed, with the help of his little gold ring. Once again, the precious jewel came to his aid. Gerry held it before him, facing a metal panel. The small stones were reflected as in a slightly frosted mirror. The Hobbit realized that stones and reflections were animated at a regular interval, with a small blip, at the rate of blood circulation. Although his heart beat wildly, he had not imagined being in such a state of excitement. And suddenly he realized - the muffled beats he heard and the pulsation he felt did not follow the same rhythm. He bolted like a rabbit to warn his companions. He did not see the pair of predator eyes blinking behind him.
NOTES

Chapter Summary

The exploration begins.

.oOo.

Gerry met his friends ambushed in the fourth keep. He almost managed to finish as a pincushion, since his frantic race differed from his previous stealthy and competent scouting. The archers had formed a squad to shoot volleys like the Elves of old. Arathorn had suspended shooting at the last second, with an imperious gesture, a small thrush on his shoulder.

The Hobbit described in a few words what he had discovered. Comments and speculations blossomed. The pessimists interpreted orc drums were beating the muster of underground hordes. The extravagants feared it was a dragon slumbering in the Great Hall. The pragmatics stipulated that the volcano was announcing a rash. But the mystics prevailed, and it was admitted, against all reason and despite Gandalf’s admonitions, that the heart of the mountain had begun to beat for the return of her sons. The Dúnedain remained safely off the debate. They formed the rear guard of course, with baggage and horses, while the Dwarves rushed, fevered and impatient, hardly maintaining battle formation, toward the porch.

The persistent lack of opponents did not let Thráin’s circumspection doze, however. Once on the marble porch, he put some order in his troops. Before the lined company, he gave a fine "speech for the occasion", holding forth the sacred duty of the Dwarves, the exorbitant privilege to have regained the gate, shining tomorrows of fame and wealth, as long as secular qualities of Dúrin’s people were tested in accordance with tradition. A short passage alluded to noble Dúnedain and Bearning allies. Overall it did not come to basic tactical considerations, nor even to organization to ensure the company’s survival, but to allegiance and commitment. The group of Dwarves, uniting in ecstatic satisfaction, was forging the legitimacy of the future King under the Mountain.

Then, driven by his self-sacrifice instinct, Nàr, the dean of the Dwarves, ceremoniously broke his Elven egg on the porch. He probably considered this an act of atonement or gratitude, because he expected to receive no other blessing than the feeling of fullness and excitement they were granted here. With some disbelief, he rose, from the pile of shell, a small silver lantern, enclosed on three sides. When he opened the window of the fourth side, a soft moonlight fell out. But the lantern contained nothing else but a bright and clear opal stone, shaped like a large drop encased in a silver flower. Gandalf approached; after all magic items were his domain.

After careful consideration, he informed Nàr with an incredulous pout, that it was indeed a moon lantern, a toy the Dwarves of Nogrod once forged for the Elf King of Doriath. Its heart was made of ithildín[1] and restored the light of the moon. It was said that its carrier, the bailiff of the king, could see beyond appearances and thwart obfuscation for the sake of his sovereign.

This royal gift could not be more appropriate on such an occasion. After a respectful thought to master Elrond, Thráín ceremoniously invested his uncle to the bailiff function. Tearfully, Nàr remembered his despair and rage when he had attended the ignominious murder of Thrór in front of another Dwarven portal, very long ago. The bliss and the solemnity of the moment brought him an unexpected compensation. Younger Dwarves Norin, Frorin and Krorin, improvised a royal
march on their instruments. The old Dwarf stepped forward, holding high the open lantern before him, at the head of the Dwarven troop. When Nàr crossed the threshold, the semicircular tympanum appeared to gain clarity, as if a new lighting revived its engravings.

The usher continued. The lantern revealed ornamentation of great delicacy that ran along the avenue. When he got to the first metal panels, it produced an unexpected event: the panels glazed suddenly with a white, slightly bluish light, which seemed to answer the call of the lantern moon. After a moment of intense light, both frames ceased to shine. When the sensation of glare left the Dwarves, they realized that the frames seemed to have disconnected from the wall. Pushing the panels, they discovered new passages.

The company was enthusiastic about this Dwarven art prodigy. Thráin quickly visited the revealed rooms and immediately decided to install their base refuge there, without waiting for further exploration. He entrusted the Dúnedain the task of organizing the camp and continued exploration alongside Nàr. Arathorn was happy to control the front door, but he was eager to assess both dangers and treasures concealed in Barum-Nahal. Thus he discreetly ordered the Hobbit to slip into the group of Dwarves.

The discovered rooms allowed an effective defense of the entrance: the guards who stood there once had observation and shooting posts overlooking the esplanade. Invisible arrow slits, hidden in the ridges of the rock, commanded the entrance of the fortress. Besides bedding and standard amenities, which at present were rotting on the floor, the rooms guards enjoyed piped water, fire pits, coolers and latrines. Only a few tools and some metal weapons had survived, but it seemed that no evil had reached these places. Dwarven art had preserved them from any defilement. The Dúnedain established the camp in the northern room, using the South room as a stable. They unloaded the mounts and distributed fodder; they arranged the equipment at best, leaving the tool boxes and Gandalf’s mysterious cases with the horses. Then they went foraging with one mule, leaving Bera as a guard.

The dúnedain had returned for two hours when the Dwarves, Gandalf and Gerry emerged from the bowels of the mountain. Arathorn’s lieges had provided the group with plenty of fodder and game, and had racked a deer. Thus the guard room almost looked like a welcoming and illuminated inn, perfumed with aromas of rotisserie. The Dwarves, delighted with their expedition and exhausted, felt a deep gratitude. Even Gandalf gave a word of satisfaction. Thràin, who had not given a thought to these stewardship contingencies, inwardly recognized their need and accused himself of lightness. As a sudden result, he resented Arathorn for taking an initiative so obviously useful and publicly ignored by him. Nobody knew, but his grudge grew.

That night, Gandalf described what the Dwarves had explored.

- The avenue extends from the entry on a great distance below the spur, leading to the heart of the mountain. From time to time, a well brings a little light, but progress has only been possible thanks to the moon lantern of master Elrond. Thanks to this treasure, a few side rooms were revealed to us. These were mostly guard posts or stores.

Norin clarified that one of them harbored a large amount of tin and lead. So the mountain showed prolix in useful metals.

-What shall we not find when we have cleared access to the goldsmith workshops!

Gandalf resumed after a few conciliatory puffs from his pipe:
After a half mile or so, our company has reached a vault of considerable size, probably the ceremonial room of the Dwarf King. Three steel candelabra, which would allow to light hundreds of candles, hang from the ceiling. Powerful chains still allow them to be lowered from a height of forty feet. The ceiling is lower on the perimeter of this room, which is decorated with many alcoves.

One of them is a small kitchen, thoughtlessly interrupted Barin. But barely enough to keep food and drinks at proper temperature, mind you! A small spiral staircase leads to a more serious kitchen. And what a room! You cannot imagine the size of the hearths, the number of marble sinks, and the quality of the water flow!

The big Dwarf, driven by enthusiasm, would not have stopped if Thrán had not requested him to postpone his detailed description of the royal kitchens.

Gandalf, always liberal with a pipe in his mouth, said after two smoke rings:

- As a matter of fact, the throne room seems quite central. The main avenue crosses it through and continues further West, but we do not have continued our investigations very far in that direction, which seems to lead to western mines. Although many routes are now blocked around the throne room, we managed to locate some of the main districts. First, as Barin said, the royal apartments lie North-west, with obviously, chambers and service rooms located just above the apartments. Opposite, on the other side of the avenue, to the South, we found ceremonial rooms and smaller apartments, on several levels. But I doubt this is the entire residential area.

Dwalor in turn succumbed to the temptation to brag about their findings:

- One of the rooms was beautiful, because the lantern revealed it intact to us, soiled neither by time nor by orcs, cursed be their clawed hands! Furnitures of precious wood, rich tapestries of ancient silk and linen of great finesse! Look what I brought…

When Thrán had intervened again, Gandalf took his time to blow some smoke rings that assembled into a beautiful sparkling crown, which came floating over the head of the great Dwarf, under the impassive gaze of Arathorn. When Thrán reached a tentative hand to seize it, the crown of smoke broke up. Gandalf replied again:

- Finally we have clearly located armories, workshops and forges, to the Southeast. They span on several levels and are powered by a complex network of canals that divert some of the water from the underground river, before to dispose it there again. This district was looted and modified by the new occupants. You'll have to come and look around there, Arathorn.

- Dwarves do not need help to recognize vicious orcs doings!, exclaimed Thrán. This repugnant brood diverted the Stiffbeard’s installations to their ignoble purposes. Goblins do not make beautiful things, but for killing and cruelty, they show cleverness and imagination. In a foundry, we found a dead orc tortured and filled with molten metal!

The company shivered. Arathorn took advantage of the pause to ask:

- Have you noticed any recent signs of goblins or other creatures?

His inquisitor look went from Thrán to Gandalf and clearly referred to their discovery on the heathland plateau, a few miles before the entrance of the mine. The great Dwarf spoke:

- The place seemed deserted. At one point, Frår believed he saw a movement in a secondary gallery, but research has given nothing. Admittedly, many galleries are damaged or even impassable.
Tomorrow, Nàr will draw an accurate map of our findings and arrange a systematic exploration plan. Thus we shall be able to secure our possessions by blocking passages or keep guards at strategic locations.

Arathorn showed a skeptical face. The size of the company did not allow to control such a great fortress if the enemy stood in great number. Though he was eager to ask the second question, the Dùnadan refrained for fear of showing precipitate.

Little Gerry, who began to collect roleplays and antagonisms as much as characters, forestalled him knowingly:

-And we did not find any treasure, but Gandalf says the lower levels, where it is possible that the Stiffbeards stored some of which, all seem inaccessible, and it is a tremendous work to clear a path.

Unlike the Dùnedain, the Dwarves experienced no disappointment at having yet found no treasure. It seemed that such a huge task as was required of them, was considered an essential and necessary phase, an initiatory or redeeming rite, that would increase in their own eyes the legitimacy of recovering the site and its treasures.

Dwarves at work showed an inflexible determination. The absence of armed opposition had surprised the youngest, but the wisest Dwarves, who also happened to be the oldest, were confused, wondering by what miracle a site in the Misty Mountains had escaped the goblin spawn, capable of spreading like woodlice and could not have been driven from the North despite the exploits of the seven Dwarven houses. Thus Nàr and Màr sustained Thràin when he distributed the roles that night and organized the exploration teams, bringing the Dwarves to more realistic and immediate objectives. Arathorn, adhering fully, thought wise not to interfere, especially as the interests of the dúnedain required he retained some of his autonomy of action.

Thus, the next day, Hirgon and his lord went on an expedition around the mountain to find a path to the western side of the Misty Mountains. The next day they multiplied expeditions to both West and East and even managed to find an old way leading to Fram’s road. So they paved ways around with their signs while hunting and foraging for the company. The dúnedain shortened and roughly cleared the Eastward route, but they failed to discover a truly feasible way beyond a string of sharp peaks that blocked the western horizon at three leagues from the volcano.

The Dwarves meanwhile franticly explored the mountain, unearthing some forgotten rooms filled with wonders in ruins and extending Nàr’s map of several levels in a few days. The first real works were to block some passages beyond which they felt momentarily useless to venture. Thus, they concentrated their efforts on the districts adjacent to the throne room and secured all the accesses leading to it. Thráin himself conducted the masons who built a wall and a door blocking the avenue beyond the throne room. The door, reinforced with steel specially forged for the occasion, was crafted with all the art Màr was able of, instilling the vow it would have had the vault collapse if it happened the door was forced.

Gandalf had ventured alone to the western mines. He came back dirty and tired, and disappointed with the results: he had found no exit, but miles of galleries for coal and iron mining. He entrusted his notes to Nàr but not very heartily. He had encountered no alive goblin, but he had to repel large disgusting worms. He conversed with Thráín about dead orcs, almost entirely burnt, that he had also found, and he insisted that the dangerous and collapsed passages leading to the depths of the northern district, should be sealed as long as a guard could not be established there. The great Dwarf consented, impressed by the anguish he perceived behind the insistent demands of the wizard.

As these works had progressed well throughout the day, Thráín left Frerin and Dwalor in front of
the final pass to be closed as the company took some rest in its quarters. All were snoring for a few hours, when they were awakened by a commotion coming from the stables.

The Dwarves and Dûnedain rushed and found a ripped and burned pony, in the middle of its terrorized congeners. Under the critical eye of Arathorn, whose men had assured the guard outside, Thráin declared a hunt for the predator. They found traces of a dark fluid that led them to the north, at the bottom of a gallery that had obviously been neglected. It plunged into the depths and then separated into three smaller tunnels, one of which was half-collapsed. Thráin dared not continue; but he had that gallery walled that very night, the Dwarves pulling from the walls, the raw material for their work.

The next day, the great Dwarf convened a counsel; He revealed that some subterranean monster, that had probably already ventured outside the mine, had attacked a horse. He sternly rebuked the explorers and made them promise more rigor. The next day, the map had enriched with three side passages that had been overlooked, and the corresponding galleries, with three additional walls.

Finally the Dwarves assessed their new quarters to be secure enough. The Dûnedain persevered in their research westward, without much success, but regularly catered food for all the company with goodwill. The rangers had discovered, in the valley overgrown with forest and crossed by the river, several remains of subsistence agriculture: a chestnut grove, several fruit trees and some vegetable varieties that had returned to the wild, the cabbage being the most common.

Thráin planned for the next day, a breakthrough to the north, beyond the passage Gandalf and Màr had identified as the most likely to lead to the gold mines. The active phase of exploration approached, the most exciting and the common goal of the allies. Therefore Thráin invited the Dûnedain to join the Dwarves for this first expedition.

This was the moment Gandalf chose to declare that he had an errand to run.

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[1] Metal forged with a part of mithril. This name means « Silence of moon ». It possesses strange properties, related to the moon.
Gold and flames - Scouting

Chapter Summary

The wizard leaves the company, while Gerry must sneak in the dark.

.oOo.

The great Dwarf felt betrayed at the moment he most needed his allies. But the wizard was not to be influenced, despite Thráin pleas.

- Do you imagine that a wizard has nothing else to do but watch the back of a clique of dreamers? Important matters demand my attention!

- But will you come back?

- The recovery of a fortress is a thing too serious to be left to warriors! [1] I do not think wise to let you on your own for too long...

- But we are far from everything. It will take forever for you to come and go, wherever you mean to!

- If this is a roundabout way of asking me where I am to go to, you will get nothing for your trouble! A wizard is never short of resources, especially when you least expect it! Do not try to unravel the wizard’s mysteries, dear Thráin!

The next morning Gandalf left them on the porch, sending ahead a little twittering thrush, apparently happy that the wizard should resume his travels.

- May you get along before, during and after the troubles, without provoking them yourself! And make sure not to damage Mr. Took!, He shouted at the two captains.

Maybe the shrewd Wise had guessed that the Hobbit, beloved and respected by all, may play despite himself, a conciliator role in this perilous enterprise. Gandalf walked away with his regular stride, jingling his staff on the pavement of the bridge. Gerry waved while his Hobbit heart ached and the wizard disappeared without looking back.

Arathorn took advantage of the company gathered in full force, to step in with one of his manipulative ploys. He appeared before Thráin, flanked by Bera and Gerry, proposing their help for the expedition. He argued that the three Dúnedain were needed, according to him, for hunting and guarding the entrance. Thráin wondered for a moment if he was proposed the most dispensable Dúndan resources, but he remembered the warring fury of the Bearning, the flawless fencing of the ranger and the strange burglar talents of "Mr. Took." He could not decently refuse an offer both thoughtful and generous.

Thus the companions armed themselves for underground war. Bows were put away in favor of heavy axes and “shields of nine skins” of Dúrin's Folk. Torches, a few picks, stone scissors and mortar powder completed their gear, in addition to food and water for a day of walking.

Gerry received his share of tackles, but Arathorn left him only his food to bring:
The company began to move, greeted by the Dúnedain with serious faces. They walked in silence to the door that Thráin had erected. "In silence" simply means they uttered not a word, but a dozen ironclad Dwarves cannot help producing various rattling, squeaking, rubbing, and other grinding with every step. Thráin ceremoniously took a large carved and shiny key. He slipped it into the lock and strained for a while. The lock suddenly gave way when Nàr added his powerful grip with Thorin’s. To open the oaken door covered with steel, the Dwarves had to give a thrust, only could a Dùrin squad welded by blood ties. Suddenly a loud crash was heard, and a mass of seven Dwarves were left indiscriminately piled a few feet beyond the swinging door.

Some laughter rang out, but choked when the torches revealed burn marks. On several places, rock had melted to large viscous lava slides. The layer of hammered steel that covered the North side of the door was streaked with smoky puffs that had sealed the door to its wrought steel frame. The united strength of many Dwarves had been necessary to have it yield. The Dwarves silently gazed the damages, their surprise giving way to anxiety. Thráin launched defiantly, trying to show optimistic:

- Whatever this creature may be, it cannot unlock our doors!

However the great Dwarf ordered to strengthen it. The South face of the wall was lined with thick stone and a fast cooling system, the secret of which Norin held. This took a few hours during which Bera, Gerry and Arathorn, helped by the idle Dwarves, explored a bit ahead. The gallery seemed to have collapsed at the point where it crossed a larger cavity. Whole sections of the collapsed ceiling blocked the passage with a dangerous maze. When Grår saw the ceiling, he had himself hoisted there by Bera to examine at length the breaking edges of the rock. When Thráin returned, his mind relieved they had enhanced and secured the door, Grår revealed his strange discovery:

-The ceiling of this room was deliberately destroyed by mine fires. I must say they were not placed appropriately. It seems shoddy work to me... Orc work, if I am to guess.

The revelation weighed on the company. Therefore even goblins feared what the depths of Barum-Nahal concealed. Thráin’s heart was heavy, but he did not show it:

-Someone, probably goblins, felt the need to isolate what is hiding inside those tunnels. That is a good sign! The mountain spirit must have driven our enemies out!

Thráin’s enthusiasm and faith had more effect on his companions than his arguments’ insight and likelyhood. The Dwarves took a psychological refuge into work, clearing a passage and consolidating the height of the room. The hours passed, laborious, while Bera, Arathorn and Gerry stood guard to protect the Dwarves who took turns. Màr had the idea to install a kind of harrow, a trap that would befall a heavy panel to block the passage by simply pushing a wedge. Thráin nodded gravely. Finally, the passage was secured. The Dwarves were boiling to move forward. Arathorn had anticipated this feeling, asked Gerry to suggest the expedition should be postponed until the next morning, since it was so late.

Thráin could only be convinced in condition Gerry would accept a small scouting ahead. Arathorn, caught in his own trap, could not refuse and proposed Gerry to accompany him. But the Halfling was upset at having been manipulated. Since he was unwilling to share the company of one of the Big Folk, heavy and noisy, in circumstances when finesse and discretion were required, he declined the offer bluntly.

Therefore our Hobbit found himself once again forced to the hard and lonely job of hero. He drew a little courage in the comforting presence of his ring and in the hope that this time would redeem all
the others. He went ahead with the weasel’s felted step, without light and bare hands to feel the obstacles before him. After a few steps, he took out his ring and found that the small stones radiated a dim light.

Gerry walked constantly down for a time he was unable to evaluate, but his companions, well after the whole episode was over, said he came back after two hours. This long delay suggests how irritated could Thráin and Arathorn be, arguing over what to do to rescue the Hobbit. At the time he noticed no crossing. In fact he saw on his return that he had missed two, and his chance made him choose his way unerringly.

Here is what happened. When he saw an orange glow obviously emanating from a fairly large room, he knew immediately that he was nearing his goal. He moved forward, as fluid and flowing as a stream of air, to have a look.

The cave was strewn with gold coins, silver cups and all sorts of valuable equipment and apparently formidable weapons. Bars heaps and a few chests full of precious stones laid on the side. One could guess several corridors accessing the place, but they seemed cluttered by rockfalls. At the back of the room, a crack let drip a kind of orange magma, which had formed by filling up a small pool of viscous liquid with opaline reflections. One large egg, about the size of a Hobbit, dipped in the pond that emanated hot vapors. Its upper part was shredded, and some sort of croaking could be heard out of it. Suddenly a form that Gerry had taken for a gold heap stained by magma, came out of the pond. The creature looked like a huge volatile, but without feathers and scaly. The hind legs, long and muscular, supported a lithe body ending in the likeness of a giant lizard tail. The front legs, atrophied and ridiculous, could not obscure the enormous mouth filled with sharp fangs. The animal, about the size of a Dwarf, walked on its hind legs with an unsteady balance, out of the phosphorescent mud. When the creature leaned on the egg to monitor the fuss, the Hobbit slipped away without even trying to steal the slightest coin.

He did very well. He had not walked six poles, when he heard a growl behind him. The animal followed him, either by hearing or smell. Gerry accelerated as much as his short legs could, but still in complete silence. His ring now cast an orange radiance, sufficient to light his high speed run. He chose in a flash one of the two passages that were available in front of him. For a time he thought his pursuer had abandoned. But soon he heard two raucous croaking answering each other a few perches behind him. When he heard a third, he knew that the kill was launched. He accelerated to the maximum, abandoning any attempt to go unnoticed, almost exactly at the moment when he saw the flickering light of torches. He shouted, leaping:

– Help, they are running after me!

He heard behind him a confused stampede that was gaining on him. But the Hobbit’s luck did not abandon him – one of the predators tripped at the last turn and its fall impeded its congeners. Thus the little Hobbit escaped a shower of flames that would have instantly turned him into a roasted rabbit. He fell at the feet of Arathorn who had advanced to the end of the hall. The Dúnadan grabbed him by the neck and threw him over a block of granite, safe from the attackers. The ranger, also targeted by an acid shot on fire, was forced to dodge in extremis, and took cover behind a boulder. Predators came, sure of their victory.

But Thráin had not remained idle. Possessed by the authority of the King under the Mountain, he brandished his mace in his mailed fist that radiated with a burst of sunshine and blood, as if his fingers had been clad with gold and rubies. Inspired by his majesty, the Dwarves had donned their war masks and seized their shields of nine skins. The squad advanced as one Dwarf, screaming:

-Khazad i Dûnadan[2]
The three creatures appeared clearly in the torchlight. They were similar but with some important differences: the head of one was thinner and with two side fans, the other wore a proud crest, which ended with a powerful prickly mass at the end of its tail. They turned toward the squad in close formation, vainly fencing on this shell of steel and leather, driven by a perfect cohesion. At that time Thráin was indeed revealed as the heir of Dùrin, bearer of the treasure of his house.

Bera could therefore bypass the frontal attack; she jumped out of the shadows in the back of a creature, crushing her ax on the spine of the monster, which staggered a few moments. Arathorn also seized the opportunity - his sword, surrounded by a border of red light, burst from its cache and fell on a long neck, stretched to launch its flame. Neck and head fell heavily to the ground, bursting into flames. The speed of the attack surprised the biggest monster, which turned heavily to Bera then Arathorn. It was its loss - the Dwarven scrum fell on him with a single leap and reduced it to pieces, as well as its congener shaken by Bera.

The body Arathorn had decapitated continued to stand, striding randomly to the hallway. The Dwarves caught it and hewn it down, while the cries of victory echoed after the Battle of Barum-Nahal. The cohesion of the Dwarven squad had done wonders under the leadership of the King under the Mountain, bearer of the ring of the house of Dùrin.

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The company, covered in glory, returned to its quarters in quick time. Arathorn, his face closed, carried Gerry stunned in his arms. No serious injuries had been reported, but all suffered burns to their armor joints. The joy at its height, the Dwarves sang drinking songs. Gràr, more playful than others, decided to break his Elven egg to celebrate. He discovered a rounded flask, he suspiciously sniffed before tasting it. His face lit up:

-My friends, we are all entitled to a drop of this most excellent vintage of Dorwinion!

A concert of approval greeted the news. After enjoying his swig, Gràr gave the flask to his brother and then to Thráin, who had it circulate. The Dúnedain who were present tasted it gratefully and sparingly. Bera smelled the drink, found aromas of red fruits, and tasted it shyly. Mr. Took, great connoisseur, made the liquid gurgle and clicked his tongue. Barin was allowed to drink, but last. All were surprised that some wine remained after his long swig. After one more round, the Dúnedain declined and Gerry could not see since he was already snoring, the round bottle was still not empty. No doubt each Dwarf proved more altruistic and parsimonious than he thought about the wisest of his peers. After the next round, it was suspected that the majority of the Dwarves sacrificed for the sake of the others. Yet their meeting in gaiety gradually gained and their faces, especially the solid Dwarven nose, gradually tinged with scarlet. Between vapors, Thráin caught the mocking expression of Arathorn. He interrupted the tour and gave his flask back to Gràr, who was grateful. Needless to say, that night, only the Dúnedain and Bera assured the guard. Moreover, none could have slept in the deafening roar of a Dwarven snorers’ squad.

The next morning, the company was noisily got up by Thráin who intended to leave no doubt about the ability of his people to endure some libations. The same team went back to the North galleries. The door opened easily. The company stepped forward cautiously and invaded the first room without resistance. They immediately noticed that something was wrong. The bodies of the creatures with jets of fire were gone! A few viscous and phosphorescent liquid lingered on the ground where they had been. Only the head Arathorn had put on fire, now burned, had left a lasting mark on the ground. Puzzled, Thráin vowed that the corpses of the monsters that would be slain, would from now on pass through fire.

They resumed their advance. The company explored the two ways of the fork Gerry had reported.
But it turned out that the two tracks came together a little further. Approaching the next room, the company prepared for the final confrontation. The Dwarves, clad in leather and iron, adopted their assault formation. Once on the center of the room, they stood still, having no enemy to fight. Thráin ordered the defense formation. The dwarves were expecting at any moment to be attacked. But Gerry, who had sneaked into their ranks, suggested Thráin to look into the egg. The great Dwarf approached, followed by Arathorn. Soaking in a pool of viscous liquid it contained a half-dozen small creatures, similar to those that had attacked the previous day. Arathorn avoided a blaze from the most aggressive and slaughtered them systematically.

Immediately a creature of great size, almost as high as Arathorn, emerged from a side tunnel and darted an onslaught of fire on him. Bera pushed the Dúnadan behind the squad of dwarves and rolled over him, already tousled and eyes bloodshot. The monster roared, deafening most fighters. Gerry and Arathorn, who wore no helmet, were now laying on the ground, unable to fight. The creature lunged forward to grab Bera, who protected Arathorn’s inert body but the Dwarven squad barred its way. The monster hammered the lined shields, trying to break the formation that reeled under the powerful thrusts. Sometimes a Dwarf fell to the ground, immediately replaced by his comrade from the second row. The creature did not weaken, distributing blows and burns. But Thráin had refined his tactics - the band of Dwarves, while maintaining its cohesion, changed shape and pulled its wings around the creature. Then crossbow bolts flew, disorienting and wounding the monster. Finally all charged together, destroying the legs and neck and obliterating the creature.

This time Krorin had been heavily injured because the creature had crushed him with the full power of its caudal appendage. Arathorn and Bera took care of him, while the dwarves established a defense and obstructed both arteries that opened into the room. Gerry himself got useful by burning the remains of the animals, large and small. He was disgusted with the sticky aspect of these reptiles and found cowardly of him to get rid of the cubs. But their appearance in miniature dragon persuaded him that what he felt like an indignity was a necessity of the ruthless life in the wilderness.

After a long and exhausting work, the company was left fairly unharmed in a safe room full of priceless treasure. A great silence fell over the company; then all were fully aware of the heart of the Mountain, beating distinctly. Orange lava, slimy and translucent, which released acid and stifling fumaroles, seemed animated with soft pulses at the same pace. Bera, who was not the least fascinated by gold, noticed that the orange lava seemed to slightly narrow or contract. The flaw, from which the viscous fluid appeared to have dripped, was now only a thin crack.

Alerted by the Bearning, the companions decided to immediately take a part of the gold. They filled leather bags and made their way back, carrying the injured and the precious metal amid joyful panting. Even poor Krorin tried hard to seem satisfied, though he suffered horribly from his three broken ribs. Finally the crippled troop -indeed all were covered with bruises and burns to varying degrees - reached the door, they bolted behind them. Back in their safe quarters, they hastened to alleviate the pains of the injured and heal their other wounds.

For several days, the Dwarves had recovered gold from the lower room, without encountering any monster. Meanwhile the lava had disappeared, and conjectures about it were rife, especially since the pulsations of the Mountain were now perceived only sporadically. Winds of victory were blowing around the company, to the point that Thráin had his flag hoisted atop the castelet that commanded the last bridge. The Dwarves unearthed a new room overlooking the avenue and were able to repair its secret closure mechanism. Thus was inaugurated the new treasure room of the King. Arathorn lost no opportunity to participate in the carrying chore, as much by taste for the effort as to assess what would be left to his kin.
NOTES

[1] Inspired by Clémenceau: War is too serious a business to be entrusted to soldiers.

[2] The Dwarves with the Dûnadan!
Duel at the top - Naugwar Mithmirion

Chapter Summary

Thràin seizes the symbols of Barum Nahal's sovereignty.

One night, the Dwarves, who had just finished their work, were surprised to find Gandalf, quietly installed in Thràin’s office, absorbed in the maps of Barum-Nahal.

-« Oh, here you are at last! I was wondering how long it would take before you find the first room!

- We found it immediately, but collecting our wealth has mobilized us for several days! But you seem to think that we shall find others?

- I am convinced that vast stores are close at hand!

- This is a very optimistic wizard! We carefully blocked several galleries to keep us safe from monstrous fire hydra!

- This is what our poor Krorin told me in detail. The poor boy is just beginning to be able to sleep despite his bruises and sore ribs.

- For now, I do not consider us to be out of danger. Fire hydrams may have infested the lower depths.

- But I am sure you could easily defeat these hydrams, though I doubt there are some left. Obviously, these creatures chased goblins from the place, but a squad of Dwarves, united, motivated, well-equipped and properly led in combat, has been a challenge over their strength. Now they have lost their nest, I doubt they can come together and attack in full force, mindless and incapable of concerted actions as they seem!

- How can we be sure of their complete eradication?

- I cannot be certain, but I guess there are not many left. Obviously these fire hydrams are related to dragons, even if they share neither their intelligence nor their deadly power. I fear the egg you destroyed is born from a dragon, maybe even Scatha herself. May we never have to explain to the real mother, what happened to her egg, if she is still alive! But at least it seems clear to me that this egg is related to these creatures, very closely related! I wonder if the 'tongues of fire' from the legends of the North could be the monsters you have overcome, and not some lava as we had thought.

- But how can a dragon egg could produce anything else than a dragon and what's more, many of these creatures?

- I am not sure, O Thràin, Gandalf replied thoughtfully, but I fear that evil has perverted the life principle of your original Mountain. »

Thràin was horrified at the idea:

- « Our sacred duty is to eradicate this dreadful brood! »
Dùring the days that followed, the Dwarf leader had the galleries opened and explored one by one. As Gandalf had predicted, they found little evidence of the most terrible hydras. Yet they had to face a few, lonely and disoriented though impressive. But the cohesion of the Dwarven squad overcame them at the price of a few burns and a broken arm. Dwarves persevered several days and discovered some metals stores, including a room full of silver - but no more hydras.

However, the Dwarf leader felt something missing. He paced the galleries of the lower mines, hoping to complete his conquest. He explored the western corridors of his mines and charted them rigorously. This sense of unfinished persisted despite the undeniable success of discovering stores, well stocked with mine equipment and fire machinery in perfect condition. His instincts and his desires, tenfolded by his ring, led him to have a great portion of a large well unblocked. That proved to be the main route of entry to the under-depths. Probably the dragon had used this way before... Several times they found the remains of unclean food left by creatures they dared not represent in imagination. But it all seemed very old. At the intersection of two major roads that sank to the depths, Thràin had the intuition that his tension would be answered. The heart of the mountain beat to the rhythm of his own heart. He sent for his treasures; Màr and Nàr returned, carrying a jumble - the Moon Lantern, the flag of Dùrin's Folk, the eggs of Thráin and Mar, and the ceremonial ax of their leader.

The lantern revealed nothing, to the disappointment of the three Dwarves. Thràin did not hide his disappointment. He sat, grumbling under his breath, weighing his treasures, while his elders persisted in probing the surrounding rock. He had just decided to break his precious egg, offered in Imladris, when both eggs -his and Mar’s - escaped from his hands and began to roll. He stopped the first and blocked it, then set off in pursuit of the second, which took an abnormally high speed in the avenue’s gentle slope. The Dwarf leader strove to grasp it, yet the egg bounced unpredictably on the roughness of the ground and escaped for several perches long. Finally the egg miraculously stopped - it was Thràin’s. He called his uncles who joined him. Then he solemnly broke his egg on the wall. The heart of the mountain had stopped beating. How disappointed Thràin was: the egg was empty! He eagerly examined each piece of the beautiful shell, in vain. Incredulous, the small group finally resolved to go back, hurling muffled imprecations against Elven proverbial rudeness and duplicity, that Khuzdul tongue alone could render.

Then was revealed a wonderfully hidden door, in the wall that Thràin had struck with his egg. The contours shone faintly. Feverished, the three Dwarves gathered to push, but the door did not open. Yet the edges lit and flickered when words were spoken in Khuzdul. Inspired by Dwarven legends passwords, Thràin spoke a few opening commands in Khuzdul. Each time the contours appeared more clearly, as answering their call, but the door remained closed. Powerlessness had fueled his anger. Enraged, he frantically demanded the opening, hitting both fists on the wall, when the most unexpected and yet the simplest injunction - "open up!" triggered the mechanism.

The room contained wealth, only a Dwarven King could hope to see gathered: mithril ingots, fine gems, jewelry worthy of Elvish forges, sparkling blades... In the center of the small room stood a cylindrical trunk of marble, sealed in the floor. Thràin braced himself to lift the lid, soon helped by his uncles. The safe did not flinch. Then the dwarves tried to unscrew the lid in one direction and then the other. The hemispherical cap stood still, showing no lock, but a runic script ran away in a spiral from the center. Then Thràin noticed that the writing contained a riddle in the language that Dwarves do not reveal:

*The true King draws on this wealth to open his safe.*

The three Dwarves strained for several hours. They reviewed the various ways a Dwarf King had at his disposal to secure and open a chest. All forms of locks were discussed, including the secret charms of the house of Dùrin. No word had the cover plate shudder. Then they competed to
imagine which instruments could force it. They physically tried a few, to no avail except broken scissors. Anxious and irritable, Thráin began to wonder whether the lord of the house of the Stiffbeards was more legitimate than him in these mines. In desperation, Màr mustered all means that a burglar could imagine in such cases. Needless to say, it was in vain.

The three Dwarves, tired and deeply upset despite their great discovery, rejoined their companions. They said nothing of their misadventure but everyone noticed their silence and worried faces. After having their meal, as they were convening with whispers in Thràin’s office, they resolved to consult Gandalf. The wizard entered into a dull wrath, announcing that he would rather leave the company immediately if a cover-up like this was to happen again. Therefore Thráin had to endure the reproaches of Arathorn’s looks when he was made aware. Yet the Dúnadan leader had the wisdom to claim that he remained convinced of the Dwarf’s good faith. He drew extra prestige from that, which exasperated Thráin.

Bera felt deeply uncomfortable in such an atmosphere of suspicion and unspoken, and went out to shift Gràr’s guard at the keep. Gerry, sorry for the turn of events, muttered to himself for his part, he did not want any reward and would rely on the generosity of the Dwarves. Arathorn who was smoking sat next to him and Gandalf, dryly remarked that as a squire at his service, he would receive a reward from his lord, if the latter consented.

The remark plunged the wizard in his thoughts, that did not leave him overnight. About the third hour, Gandalf was still tossing and turning on his makeshift bed. Suddenly he straightened up, got up and woke Arathorn and Thráin. He had found the solution to the riddle, he thought. All three went down to the safe room, which Thráin entered alone. As he laid his hands on the lid, the heart of the mountain seemed to stop. Then he uttered the appropriate word in Khuzdul and the cover seemed to detach from the trunk of veined red marble. Then the Dwarf called Gandalf and Arathorn who helped him loosen and gently put it down. Thráin leaned over the edge. His face had regained the enthusiasm and candor of his youth, illuminated by a blue light coming from the bottom of the trunk. He reached in with trembling hands, and pulled a necklace of large size.

Rivers of diamonds, punctuated with a few sapphires and crossed with chips of mithril, swirled into elegant scrollwork and formed several loops. In the center an empty space could accommodate the entire palm of Arathorn. The whole formed an ornament covering shoulders, neck, chest and upper back. The finery might as well be suitable for the thin bare shoulders of an Elven princess as the broad chest of a warrior King. And indeed, the jewel fit perfectly Thráin’s shoulders, enhancing his presence, ennobling his port, expanding his size and gestures to make him the true King under the Mountain.

Arathorn marked his admiration, as Gandalf remained confused for a moment:

- « It cannot be what it seems! The Nauglamir was lost when Elwing hurled from the sea cliffs at the mouths of Sirion! »

The wizard looked closer at the beautiful finery under the suspicious eye of Thràin.

- « I cannot be categorical, but this wonder truly seems very old! What do you think, Thràin? »

Arathorn, having seen the flash of greed in Thràin’s eyes, hastened to put the record straight:

- « Elwing is my far distant ancestor. But my lineage does not claim anything that begat war between Elves and Dwarves. You would be well advised, O Thràin, to do the same! »

- What needs to be claimed an inheritance for the Dwarves, is the heir of Dùrin to decide! », said the Dwarf with a surly air.
The expert look of Thráin left him no doubt:

- « This necklace is virtually weightless on the shoulders, it fits the wearer. This is indeed a work of our fathers, from Nogrod or Belegost. The secrets of this production were lost long ago in the wars with the gray Elves! But mithril is the basis of this work - in no case it may be the Nauglamir, which frame was made of gold! But this is a work of the same hand, the great Telchar himself! »

After a few moments when Gandalf and Arathorn beheld him, imbued with the splendor of King under the Mountain, Thráin added:

- « By the ring of the tribe of Dùrin, last witness of the victorious resistance of the Dwarves, I claim this work as the prerogative of my house and the pledge of my sovereignty over Barum-Nahal. I call it by the secret name I will not say here. You will know it as the Naugwar Mithmirion, the dazzling mithril necklace of the Dwarves! I order you not to reveal this discovery yet! »

The King under the Mountain slipped the jewel beneath his tunic to hide it, and replaced the trunk lid. He distributed some mithril ingots, took some himself and all went up to higher levels.

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[1] Spoiler! Only the eager will read this note! The wise will override and find the answer her- or himselfs. The true King draws on this wealth to open his safe. The answer is: generosity.
**Duel at the top - Bargaining**

Chapter Summary

The fellowship has won the place. Now is time for strengthening the hold and fulfilling the promises...

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So the foolish hope of resuming full ownership of the mines with only twelve companions had accomplished for Thràin. There remained many tunnels to explore, to the West, but the threat of the hydras seemed definitely eradicated. For their part, the Dúnedain considered their goal as achieved, and began to make plans to return. Their guards had scouted westward, and reached a ridge in the Misty Mountains. From this promontory they had established a map of the area, yet they had been unable to descend into the valley beyond. Time to decide, and especially to share the booty, approached.

Therefore, one morning, Arathorn probed Thràin in the presence of Gandalf, wondering what the Dwarf was expecting for, before calling his people to him:

« O Thràin, King under the Mountain. Investing Barum-Nahal was a great feat. The danger of fire hydras seems under control. Now the main threat seems to me to come from the goblins, who will soon get wind of your exploits. The hydras, their scourge, being destroyed, and your reclaiming of your mines will certainly attract them shortly. Barum-Nahal will endure an assault sooner or later and must be strengthened. »

Until then Arathorn had won the approval of the dwarves and their leader. The dwarves’ visceral hatred toward their hereditary enemies, goblins, accorded with the fair speech of the Dúnadan. But he made the mistake of approaching the topic of wealth:

- « I advise to take the conquered gold to show your allies, your cousins, your people, that the fortress is close at hand. I propose to establish a route that would permit to reach your allies and bring them to your aid. »

Maybe Thràin guessed the thought of the Dúnadan - he imagined Arathorn proposed to open a route to the West. It was indeed his fervent wish, but the ranger had accepted in his heart, to extend his help in order to strengthen the Dwarven position by attracting more substantial Dwarven forces to Barum-Nahal. Anyway, the great Dwarf said with some bitterness, suspecting some duplicity:

- « So you want to leave us! Your wise words have no other aim than to win the gold for yourself. The road you are advocating would lead to Bree, I presume!

- My heart remains with my beloved people forever, and my duty is to think about the interests of my folk first! But we have made a covenant and agreement. If you think that the present situation requires that our forces remain at your disposal, we shall stay. But as I said, I do not think we can hold against goblins of the North when they muster again the courage to re-invest the premises. That is why we need to establish ways to allow our allies to join us. We also have to prove our victory in their eyes - gold is the best way!
Thráin long weighed the Dúnedan’s logic. The latter felt obliged to insist:

- « We cannot wait beyond mid-Úrui. We must be on our way at this time to join Eriador or the Iron Mountains. Beyond that, we would risk being caught in terrible mountains storms. The nearer cold weather, more curious goblins will prove and less food or relief shall we find.

- Be honest, Arathorn, if I send you in Eriador with my gold, you will not find the courage to come back!

- If you give me the promised gold, I may raise militias in the South that will allow me to bring here the flower of my rangers!

- After how long? I cannot resolve to untie you by giving you my gold, lest you leave us alone in our plight! »

Arathorn became very ill at this unvarnished distrust.

- « Your distrust makes me doubt to get our share paid, when we come back after your own reinforcements. Remember that we have brought you so far, and you owe us! »

Gerry, who knew now his lord quite well, made then a diversion:

- « Maybe will it appear possible to drink the beer in turn? Part of the promised share should suffice for now. »

Thráin’s dubious silence encouraged the Hobbit in his argument:

- « You should just write the details of your arrangement on a paper, which would enumerate the rights and duties each of you commits to the other. You should also include therein the execution of a fair gold advance that Thráin would make just now before Arathorn comes back with relief or Dùrin’s blood reinforcements arrive! The remainder would be expressly set aside, as a token of full refund when the safety of the Mountain is assured. »

Spontaneously, the Hobbit had thought of notarial deeds that began to spread in the Shire, such as the complex documents Masters Grub, Grub and Grub had written before him for his father. The principle of a written agreement, sealed and witnessed, accentuated the solemn and sacred character of word to be kept. He argued:

- « Thus any dispute would be set aside... The Dúnedain could go and open a road, return with assistance and food, with the confidence to earn their share. In return, Thráin could dispatch an envoy to muster his kin. »

Dwarves found this idea strange, but interesting, and finally put it into practice. It is true that many problems arose, such as the evaluation of the treasure that the Dúnedain had already intercepted, the proportion of gold, silver, precious stones, the assessment of yet-to-be-discovered wealth or the value of artifacts of very high worth. Of course a neutral view on a fair advance was needed, and naturally Gandalf had to deal with it. Màr, Nàr, Ingold, Gerry, Bera and Gandalf were solicited as witnesses. The wizard also received the contract deposit. The agreement stipulated that the Dunedain would still linger two full weeks. Gerry, as a token of gratitude for his skilful mediation, was offered a tiny mobile hearth for goldsmith and jewelry, that the Dwarves converted into a pipe. Thus was created the first Dwarven pipe, offered to their worthy professor in the art of smoking pipeweed.

Therefore the allies kept company with each other for a few days, watching carefully. The Dwarves frantically explored the corridors of the depths while the Dúnedain intensified hunting...
and fishing. Bera and Hirgon taught Barin the smoking of meat and fish, while the rangers were harvesting early fruits of an altitude chestnut grove, tucked away between the two arms of the Mountain.

Meanwhile Gandalf, indifferent to the calculations of all, embarked in a diligent and thorough exploration of the friezes and inscriptions scattered under the mountain. He spent most of his time listening to the rock, browsing the friezes, drawing secret glyphs and planting mysterious markings. Thràin, Màr and Nàr tried repeatedly to discover and understand what the wizard was plotting. The heavy crates marked with the rune "G" had found their use, but their nature still eluded the Dwarves. In desperation they decided to ask Gandalf. But they had spent too much time, spying on him way too awkwardly, or trying to circumvent him on spurious subjects. They were received unkindly, as rude and nosy children. The wizard mounted a wooden scaffolding and lingered long on the ceiling of the throne room, inspecting crevices, sounding the airshafts, deciphering the inscriptions. He consented only to reveal that he was preparing the room for a special day; the center of the city would be ready to receive guests in a royal fashion when the time would come. He hung lights on the ceiling, and hoisted there a few decorations that reminded a few childhood memories to our Hobbit.

One evening, the Dúnedain invited the Dwarves to a meal that was particularly dear to their heart. Each year, the house of Arathorn celebrated the sad anniversary of the fall of Arthedain, the last of the northern kingdoms that fell at the hands of the Witch-King of Angmar. On this occasion, the Dunedain still perpetuated the memory of this glorious era, renewed their vows of guardian of the folks of Eriador, the descendants of the kingdom’s inhabitants. The company gathered on the porch, breaking the first chestnut bread baked under the mountain. Under a dome of stars, twinkling in the cool evening air, the Dúnedain headed west. Their faces, turned to their homeland and beyond, Númenor the Downfallen, were serious with memories and hope. The waning moon rose in the East and began to light up the marble porch with a timeless glow. Then a small gray thrush alighted on the makeshift table. The bird chirped a perky tone that seemed almost playful. Arathorn exclaimed joyfully:

--« This is the hour of meditation when comes to us a messenger sent by my kin! »

And it seemed to all a favorable omen. The ranger informed the company that the positive outcome of their journey was known to Rivendell, and that reinforcements were on their way from the western slopes of the Misty Mountains. The evening promising to be joyous, Gràr generously had his flask of wine circulate. Thràin, particularly pleased with these news, was to say "a few words of circumstance" - and probably reveal the Dwarven necklace - when a second thrush landed on the staff the wizard had stored against crates.

The bird seemed agitated. Gandalf exchanged a few quick chirps with the thrush that seemed out of resources. Moments later, the wizard said, with a severe and anxious face, he had to leave them for a while.

And it seemed a dark omen. Gandalf stood, arrogated some foods he stuffed in his bag, and addressed the company with a briskly air:

- « I'll be back in three days. If I were to fail you, hide in the royal apartments! Do not let yourselves be surprised! »

The wizard took a few steps, then turned back, hesitating. Finally deciding, he greeted the stunned company and walked away for good. If he were to say more, they would be able to quarrel!

.oOo.
NOTES


[2] Expression used in the South Farthing’s buroughs in the Shire. Today would rather be said «split the difference».
Duel at the top - Eve of battle

Chapter Summary

Gandalf has left the company for obscure errands, warning the allies to prepare for battle.

.ooO.

Thráin watched the old man going away on the bridge. When the wizard disappeared, he turned to Nàr:

- « I think I never saw Gandalf that worried. He fears an imminent invasion. We should strengthen the portal against goblins.

- I fear more an underground attack, said the old Dwarf. We have not yet mapped the passages of the lower levels that lead North. We could not defend all the passages. But we should arrange the main avenue to channel our enemies there, and riddle them with arrows!

- Nàr, you are in charge of preparing the inner defenses. Crossbows and the iron bolts we discovered should fit perfectly! And Màr will fortify the entrance! »

The next few days spun as the Dúnedain were absorbed in food chores, trying to ward off the Dwarves for a long siege. No doubt they were pleased with the prospect of returning to their families soon. Yet a part of themselves was reluctant to give up a fight that had not really started. Arathorn harangued his people to remind them that supplies and survival of the new Dwarf kingdom during winter depended on their speed.

Màr, Thráin’s old companion, feeling that a great battle was announced, broke his egg at the gate. Gorgeous assorted tools, cleverly nested, were found in the shell - mallet, trowel and chisel were immediately consecrated and tested.

The work, carried out smoothly by a squad of overexcited Dwarves, progressed almost visibly. A thick wall of stones, assembled with the art of Dùrin, now barred the porch. The parapet was twelve feet high, topped by a watch-turret. Access to the wall could be climbed only through a narrow passage at the top of a ladder of stones protruding from the wall. Battlements, built on each side of the road guard, completed the defensive construction, that a staircase linked to the avenue.

Before Arathorn could object, the beasts of burden were therefore trapped in the mine early the next morning. The Dúnedain could not leave the fortress with the amount of wealth they had expected. Thráín’s smirk let the ranger assume that the Dwarf had combined this misunderstanding. The Dúnadan, considering himself the hostage more than the host of the King under the Mountain, went into a barely contained rage. Yet he was determined to go on the agreed date, especially since he had finally found a pass that would maybe lead to a west-bound road.

For more safety, Gerry informally received the promise a Dwarf would lead them to the western exits of the mountain beyond the ridges the rangers had explored, "if only one could find them...". Tension was palpable that night; trust between the allies had crumbled to the rhythm of blunders, calculations and pettiness of the two captains. The next day stretched into a long waiting for the
Dúnedain, who completed reserves worthy of a besieged fortress. Dwarves deceived their nervousness by refining the defenses. The marble place in front of the porch and the main street were now covered with many firing angles of dozens of crossbows, the metal bolts of which were carefully arranged.

Goblins would need a very large ram to open a passage through the thick stones and rubble wall, but no crew would survive the Dwarven cross shooting. Norin brought a highly appreciated contribution: a pot of pitch, sticky and flammable, was made ready. The guard was established atop the wall, anxious and attentive.

The twilight of the third day flung its lilac glows on top of the Mountain. Gandalf had not returned. Throughout the night, the air warmed in the mines. The lower slopes of the volcano, wet with melted ice, glowed intermittently under the thin moon flying from cloud to cloud. Anyone no longer perceived any beat. The Mountain held its breath.

An hour before dawn, Arathorn climbed down the guard wall and ventured beyond the valley. His small thrush wriggled like a puppy in anticipation of an early morning walk, affectionately rubbing her beak on the leather straps of his quiver. Sending forth the bird through the skies, the ranger explored a wide area while darkness took refuge in the depths of ditches. Suddenly a red dawn revealed the volcano. His immaculate cone sprang like a fire alarm in the night. Then direct light invaded the heather hills and pierced under thorns. But the radiant colors of Barum-Nahal stubbornly refused to hatch. The morning warbling stammered, choking before exploding. The ranger, inspiring at full lung, felt the reluctance of the nature-flowers refused to open, daytime fauna persisted to huddle. A day of the sword was coming.

Arathorn regained the guard wall and climbed the stone ladder. The Dúnedain who were waiting, fully armed, followed him. The Dwarves contemplated his face contorted with determination, and fearing a coup, followed him into the ceremonial room. Thráin had lit, among Gandalf’s lamps, those that were accessible. Arathorn stood before Thráin and asked that would be respected the commitments made in Rivendell and confirmed a few days ago.

- « We have kept our promise and stayed with you to prepare for a siege. But as I predicted, we waited too long to summon for help and provide evidence of our success. The attack of the enemy is imminent. My ranger heart is sure about that. »

The great Dwarf, wearing a golden tiara and perched on the stone throne under the majestic dome, raised his flushed face to the complainant:

- Your vain reproaches are twice unwelcome! For you know nothing about defending a fortress and ignore the power of the King under the Mountain, Bearer of both treasures of his House. »

Our reader will probably be grateful to be enlightened about Thráin’s proud speech. In the old days, seven rings of power were offered to the Lords of the Dwarves. These precious items conferred moral strength, perseverance, and unusual resistance, of both body and mind, and a great ability to rally and dominate his people. Unlike the nine lords of Men, Naugrims were not overwhelmed by the power of the enemy and they did not fall under his rule. Yet their ring increased their pride and lust for wealth. Furious at his failed attempts to bind them, the Dark Lord cursed the Dwarven Houses. All of their rings were taken or destroyed, except the line of Dúrin’s ring. After all these years of wandering and humiliation, one can easily imagine the feeling of revenge and power experienced by Thráin, single Dwarf King holding a ring of power, who bore the Naugwar Mithmirion and ruled as King under the original Mountain of his people. Sure about his rights, his strength and his destiny, he castigated the complainant from his high throne :

- « At last you wait the hour of our need to beg permission to take flight!
- I refuse a hopeless fight to no avail, because the blind general sticks to his throne. I shall get reinforcements, whether you like it or not, to win this war. If you had listened to me, three dozen of my relatives and friends would now stand just a few hours of walk. Instead we need now to guide them to us in emergency, through unfamiliar passes. You are looking for so unattainable a victory, that you will succumb!

- My house and my shield need this victory and will get it since we may not befall otherwise under the dome of Barum-Nahal! Anyone who leaves my covenant on the very day of the trial is a traitor and deserves no reward!

- Thus is revealed the true reason for your dithering. I never thought the House of Dùrin would tarnish its reputation to this point, by the avarice of his heir! I call upon you to honor the written treaty your witnesses signed! Or are you hoping to force me to stay on the grounds that the custodian of the agreement fails us for the moment? »

Now the Dwarf lord had stood up, clutching convulsively the arms of his stone seat:

- « I grant you what was written. So do run to be cut to pieces! These riches will reintegrated my treasure when we slain your winners!

- The masks have fallen: You want our defeat! But the defense established excludes to drive the mounts out through the front door. Yet I intend to go with what was promised, since it gives me the best insurance to mobilize my greatest strength. Have us led to the Western galleries or deliver us a plan! » Arathorn finished drawing his long shining sword.

Thràin revealed his gold ring and seemed to grow, crowned with the power of his ancestors. The Dwarves, warmed up by the fervor of Thràin and the menaces of defection of Arathorn, remained nonetheless sensitive to the ranger’s arguments. The Dûnedain, irritated by the cantankerous tone, the unjust accusations and the questionable tactical judgment of the King under the Mountain, would not abandon their companions on the verge of an orc invasion. Bera, paralyzed, gazed the man of her thoughts striding towards his destiny. All regretted that deadly antagonism, but each would support his lord... Only Gerry kept an ounce of common sense, sorry about the overflowing pride of so great captains. He saw with dismay the rival kings advancing towards each other. He remembered his lady evoking the dangers of pride to the council of Rivendell. Our Hobbit, still young, had previously been lulled by the illusion of strength and responsibility of the adults around him. This lure had collapsed. He had abandoned the hope that his elders would prefer reason to honor. Of course life without proof of a gentle-Hobbit indulged by birth predisposed him to some cowardice. But he felt confusedly an irremediable mess impose relentlessly. With tearful eyes, he staggered between the protagonists, imploring reason and compassion. But Thràin ignored him, brandishing his great battle ax and wielding his shield.

..oOo..
Treason and death are prowling in the Dwarven hall. Arathorn and Thraín prepare for a decisive fight.

A roar froze them all. The throne room suddenly rang with the clamor of a thousand brazen trumpets. The battle cry of a lizard from the former ages of the world, spread in the tunnels like a venom poisons and quickly paralyzes all the limbs of the prey. As the great echo slowly died, hurried footsteps were heard in the avenue. Gandalf, disheveled and his face deeply lined and drawn, burst into the room. Breathless, he considered the scene with a bitter glance:

- « You fools! The great worm is on you! In battle formation! »

The limping wizard urged the Dwarves, with little success. The curse of Dùrin's Folk haunted the minds of each of them. While they had found a major stronghold, the scourge of their kind was catching them up at the moment a meanness was to taint the splendor of their new kingdom. How could anyone see a chance in that...

The worm’s rumor swelled in the avenue. Grunts rang out as many oaths of hatred and promises of death, while claws screeching on the rock squealed in the air. Then in desperation, Gandalf used a word of power - lightning slammed with a jerk and an invigorating thrill shook the company. Arathorn led his Dúnedain and their horses to one of the alcoves that surrounded the room. It gave access to a gallery joining the royal apartments. The Dwarves in full strength gathered around their king, who seemed struck dumb by fate.

But suddenly the stench of the dragon was on them. Fetid exhalation enveloped them, obliterating their breathing and soothing their limbs. Reeks of pestilential marshes, stinking acid sulfur flooded the hall with their viscous and suffocating vapors. Gandalf shook Thràin with his commanding voice:

-« We must confine him to this room until things turn at our advantage! Divide and find shelter in the alcoves to harass him! I'll let you know when all have to retreat to the outer rooms! Go! »

The wizard, staggering, lit a few lamps with a gesture and took post on the outer part of the room, gasping and bent on his staff. The Dwarves finally dragged Thráin and barely had time to arm. Heavy chain mails or plates were completed with shields, helmets and battle-masks. War-axes and maces flashed in the dark, sharp and vivid reflections of the Dwarves resolution.

The dragon stood at the entrance of the room, obliterating any light from the end of the avenue. He spread his huge wings as a challenge. The stench that assailed the company at the beat of the gusting wings, became unbearable. His long and sinuous body, slim but horribly powerful, sparkled on his scales of midnight blue to gray-green. His foul belly gleamed with pestilential humors. Standing on his hind legs, the worm scanned the room. His lizard slit eyes narrowed with malice when he spoke:
« So the rumors that reached the North hold some truth! The Mountain shudders again. But thieves are coupled with liars. I see no King under the Mountain. The least brigand of the hills could afford such a company! It is time for a true sovereign to establish here, provided there is some wealth in this dump. »

Thráin was wearing the Dwarven necklace and brandished his great ax in his fist, bathed with golden light. He stepped forward, leaving a side alcove. The dragon turned to the great Dwarf and brought to him his long tail, bristling with sharp spines. Arathorn was watching the scene with Bera, hidden in an opposite alcove. He had sent his Dúnedain to lead the loaded mounts in a safe place.

Dragons are strange beings. Their strong constitution allows them deprivation, unimaginable for Hobbits or even hardened rangers. This one came out of years of lethargy in his landmark at the northern end of the Misty Mountains. His usual diet consisted in wild sheep or goats, sometimes enhanced by a few goblins when they were to venture too near his lair. With a sharp intellect, he was not above a conversation with his prey when he could obtain information or a pleasant flattery.

His name was Scorba. Like all dragons, full of himself, he aspired to power and supremacy. Despite his dismissive remarks, the worm had rushed after the rumor of wealth. Scorba noted bitterly that he was not rendered the honors due to his rank. It is true he was a young dragon - thin and fast, he easily outdistanced any other worm, but he still lacked the physical power as much as the skin caparisoned of the old hardened dragons. In addition, his den enjoyed only a minor treasure. Thus his reputation did not exceed the narrow circle of goblin tribes around his den, who paid tribute to him in theory, and on which he was feasting on the occasion. Suddenly the dragon noticed a small trembling figure, prostrate in the middle of the large room. His ego was very comfortable about that, and this is why he decided not to immediately eradicate all life around.

« This is perhaps the wisest of the king's guard: he honors my splendor and is already prostrate! »

Gerry had not found the resource to flee; He had collapsed and was shaking like a rabbit under his dwarven coat. He realized he was talked to, but he found himself paralyzed. The powerful voice, vibrating with majesty and pride, invested completely his chest, his ears, his skull, his mind. He played for a moment with the thought of pulling out his ring. But brandishing a golden jewel before a dragon did not seem to him a wondrous discovery. The worm put his neck forth and sniffed the trembling Hobbit. He did not recognize the smell but did not depart from his haughty majesty, though his curiosity was piqued:

- « To reward you, little Being, I shall grant you the title of the first servant of Scorba the magnificent! You will be the first of your kind, I make slaves of! »

Thráin was only waiting for an opportunity like this. Facing this long side of the dragon, he rushed, followed by Frerin and Norin. But Scorba was on his guard - he turned quickly to the attackers and threw on them, with his open mouth, the powerful jet of hot liquid. Dwarves recoiled in shock. A moment later they felt violent itching to all defects of their armors. Frerin retreated, screaming he could not see any more. Norin was lying in a pool of acid, fuming and burning, that his blood began to stain.

But Arathorn in turn rushed silently in the back of Scorba. He narrowly avoided the deadly tail and picked up the trembling package in the middle of the room. A moment later Forin and Mar were in turn repulsed - Scorba proved quick and merciless. Arathorn took cover and put Gerry away, while Bera and the Dwarves took turns trying their luck. The dragon, vivid as lightning, remained at the center of the room where he could move easily, and avoided the periphery of the room, which
ceiling was much lower. The companions, picking up their wounded, sheltered now behind their shields and pillars that surrounded the room to ward off the cruel attacks of acid. But Scorba’s main weapon had devastating effects: he launched his tail, sweeping powerful strokes to the periphery of the room. Thus half of the Dwarves were already out of action, if not worse.

Thráin, desperate, realized that only a simultaneous attack on all fronts, would allow to wound the angry dragon. But he had already lost many fighters, reducing the likelihood of success of such a maneuver. He was about to throw all his forces in the battle, when the entire mountain sounded with a roar of defiance. The low rumble of an old dragon, sure of his strength and domineering, swept the air of the room. A distant crash had the Dwarves understand that their fortification of the entrance was destroyed. The ceiling of the room trembled as heavy steps and hungry growls approached. Scorba curled up at the bottom of the hall, ready to pounce on the new visitor.

Thráin and Arathorn then had the same idea and assailed him by stealth. The flexible dragon swept them with the back of his tail, propelling them into the adjoining room where Gerry was shaking. He was about to join them and kill them when Gandalf intervened, sword and staff forth. Scorba braced himself to project his mortal breath, but a small thrush aggressively whirled around his eyes. The bird saved Gandalf from an acid stream that spread not far, but she was swallowed by agile jaws.

The Dwarves’ company, transfixed for a time, took advantage of the diversion to drag their wounded away. A huge head, hideous, appeared at the entrance of the room. Crimson scales shimmering with gold and precious stones covered with thick jowls. The mouth showed rows of gigantic fangs – the jaw would be able to ingest three Dwarves simultaneously. The cunning eyes, covered by three eyelids, expressed a false sense of languor, but nothing escaped the crippling gaze of the old dragon.

A renewed wave of stench assailed the company: a rancid and bitter bilious stink overcame the Dwarves who were still valid. The head, bristled with fangs though closed, advanced, precursor of a huge reptilian body, armored with scales more powerful than steal. His deliberate slowness evoked the threat of a devastating bite. The two monsters stared at length, the peak of the old giant pulsating to the rhythm of young Scorba’s swinging neck.

Then Gandalf, tearfully, acted promptly. He charged the Barning to evacuate the Dwarves to the central fountain of the royal apartments. Bera, in the form of a Big Bear, obeyed efficiently with great rapidity. The last valid Dwarves helped her there. But they could not find Thráin. The latter was in an adjoining room with Gerry and Arathorn, all inanimate. The wizard revealed himself, stepping between the two dragons in the ceremonial room. Constantly keeping his staff forward, but looking down not to cross the dangerous look of the great saurian, he worshiped Scorba with compunction:

« O infinite power of the Northern Heavens, your slaves have completed the task you entrusted to them. Your layer is covered with gold and precious stones. The walls are hung with silks of former King Thingol. The surrounding tribes sent emissaries to express their submission to the undisputed owner, Scorba the Magnificent. »

Dragons possess a keen intelligence, but also an immoderate pride. The young dragon understood very well the intentions of the wizard, who obviously wanted to provoke a fight between the two dragons. He also knew that his great rival too had perceived these intentions. The two dragons, despite the veil of illusion that pride may impose, did not doubt that the wizard’s foresight made him fully aware of these subtleties. Only the reference to the treasure left both dragons puzzled, torn between greed and mistrust. However, in this game of false dupes, the satisfaction of being presented as the lord of the place, procured Scorba a delicious thrill of pride. The shiver of jealousy
of his congener, yet opponent Corlagon, was also deeply rewarding. Scorba did not take his eyes off the newcomer, whom Gandalf had pointedly ignored. The great dragon, whose role as second in this theater play he despised, raised his powerful and melodious bass voice:

-« The only ruler of the Northern Mountains is Corlagon the Terrible. Do not think, old gray man, that your duplicity may go unpunished for long.

- I defer to the sovereign omnipotence of Scorba the Magnificent! »

Gandalf left no opportunity for any of the two monsters of pride - they were to compete to the death. Only after would the winner deal with the wizard and his gang! Gandalf bowed down, pulled back slightly and let the fight engage. Corlagon first seemed to try and catch the wizard, but at the last moment he turned his momentum to snap Scorba with his powerful jaw. The young and agile dragon was not to be taken so easily and counter-attacked using his great mobility. The great vault, the adjoining rooms and the surrounding galleries were filled with furious cries of the two champions who tried to rip each other apart. An acrid smell of acid and burned blood spread in the corridors.

Gerry recovered first, brought back to consciousness by the violent upheavals and bellowing of Scorba and Corlagon. He pulled Arathorn then Thràín farther in the hall, hoping to elude the fury of the dragons. Indeed, in their fight to death, the two worms had already destroyed the stone furniture and most alcoves surrounding the large vault. The passages to the spacious adjoining rooms now widely gaped, and the duel could at any time be given therein. Gerry pulled the two bodies as best as he could, but he was soon overwhelmed by the horror and stench of the big worms. He tried to crawl to a ventilation opening at the bottom of the room, and vanished amid the rubble.

Gandalf, in turn, checked that the company had completely evacuated the neighbourhood of the hall. He no longer saw Arathorn, Thràín and Gerry where he imagined he would find them, dead or fainted. Assuming that they too had evacuated, he escaped the hall, full of hope. It was time to reveal the power of Gandalf the Grey.

.oOo.
Chapter Summary

Gandalf lits his long prepared firework while a terrible fight occurs in the great hall.

.oOo.

The wizard quickly climbed up the staircase to a reserve located near the ceiling of the great hall. He had appropriated this isolated storage as he was completing his research and concluded the mysterious preparations for the great hall. The walls roared at times while the lizards dueling continued. On the stone tablet were arranged four strands of different colors. His eyes bright with intense determination, Gandalf raised his staff and set fire declaiming:

- « Amlug Ûr-dangen »[1]

Immediately four colored flames, which reminded an open dragon mouth, danced on the wicks they consumed at different speeds.

« May the two Kings reconcile around your bones! », He added before disappearing.

He ran down the stairs and joined Bera in the hallway leading to the old workshops. The great Bear was using every means to prevent the valid Dwarves to run and fight the dragon. She had saved three Dwarves protecting them from huge blocks dropping from the ceiling. Gandalf had to use his voice of command to have them listen to reason. That's when the ground slipped away under their feet, throwing the Dwarves on their wounded comrades - the rock around them rumbled for several seconds, they believed forever. Blinded by dense rock dust, deafened by the roar of the explosion, destabilized by the persisting vibrations, the Dwarves thought their last hour had come. Gandalf himself believed for a moment that his fireworks had sparked an eruption of the old volcano. However, the noise subsided and after a few minutes, the air became again breathable. The valid were working to revive the other when the Dúnedain, pulling their horses, joined them by an avenue leading to the western outposts. They said they had lost two mules and that plans were unusable because entire sections of tunnel had collapsed. Gandalf took the lead, leaving them no time to argue:

-« One way or another, we must reach the entrance, either to exit to or to barricade us. Forward! »

After giving first aid to the injured, they charged them on the remaining mounts and ventured into the cluttered galleries of the old forges.

.oOo.

When the explosion occurred in the ceremonial hall, Thráin and Arathorn were laying unconscious in the middle of a side room, lit by a skylight well. At the great days of Barum-Nahal, memorable banquets had to be given there. Several vents terminated there - the Hobbit had vanished under a pile of rubble, that had fallen from one of them. This dining room was reached by a short passage under an arch of twelve feet high. This side piece is described here as "small" since the top of its vault did not exceed twenty feet. Scorba would have been forced to fold its wings to enter. As for Corlagon, his stature of old stale and bloated dragon would have forced him to some creeping to
spread his enormous paunch by the passage of two yards wide.

The blast of the explosion threw Thráin and Arathorn against the wall facing the opening that leading to the ceremonial hall. Then the collapse unrolled its thunder in spurts. A horrible rattle lasted after the earthquake, in clouds of dust that thickened up, and went off in a dead silence. The Dúnadan and the Dwarf, stired from their torpor, twitched when smoke began to dissipate. But the fire that animated Thráin, bearer of the Naugwar Mithmirion and the ring of Thrór, surpassed Arathorn’s thirst for greatness. The Dwarf sat up, eyes shining, crowned with an invincible faith. He grabbed the shield hanged at his neck by the strap, and ran pick his ax. By the time he turned around, a large head, with silver and blue scales and horns, emerged slowly from the fumaroles of the hallway. The slit eyes of the big worm exhaled a deadly malice. His viscous lips trembled with gall and loath - or what could these spasms be? The visceral hatred of the Dwarf lighted his anger. Thráin seemed to grow as he walked under the hot light beam that diagonally rived the swirls of dust.

-« King under the Mountain!, belched Scorba disdainfully. It takes more than a necklace of Doriath and a ring of power to enthrone a King. I have overcome the old Corlagon! Prostrate before me! 

- You lie, foul worm, brood of the mother of carrion! Others than you have slain him by deception, and you will join him into the void. »

It was time for the killing - the big worm did not answer but his whole body appeared, framed by the collapsed friezes. Thráin noticed that the beast was suffering from a broken wing, dangling miserably from his right flank to the ground. The monster took a few steps in the direction of the Dwarf, assembling his venom to spray and burn his opponent. Then the great Dwarf perceived, when the dragon rippled, that his tail was severed at two-thirds and he lost black blood. The beast had intended to finish quickly but it was sorely weakened. The dusty air of the room was so stenched, that the fighters merely fainted. The dragon darted a malicious look at the Dwarf:

-« May all your friends fail you today and forever! »

Without anybody noticing, a small thrush had introduced by the skylights. She had hopped up to the Dúnadan and climbed on his face, picketing him to get a reaction. Arathorn regained his senses - when he straightened, a shooting pain mowed right through him. Supporting his cracked rib, he crawled into the dragon's back and picked up his sword, which flashed when seized, while the worm expelled his bile. Thráin’s shield worked wonders - a sheaf of acid splashed around him, as if a golden orb protected him in the way of the umbrella of a Hobbit lady. The Dwarf came forward, ready to strike too.

Hardly mastering his pain, Arathorn attended the dragon’s charge who threw all his weight, fangs forward. The shield of Thráin, split asunder and still bearing a tooth of Scorba planted, was ejected several feet away. But the great Dwarf had stood! The dragon backed away, with his back just in front of Arathorn, who still stood unnoticed. Thráin screamed, overproud, to the attention of the Dúnadan who had raised his sword to strike thrusting with both hands:

-« The glory of this victory is mine, the true King under the Mountain! »

The great Dwarf charged the dragon, hampered by the foul and slimy bile poured out on the pavement. But his stroke went astray, and his left arm was suddenly torn by the horrible and skillful mouth. Arathorn, a moment transfixed by Thráin’s injunction, felt in him, meddling with resentment, a strange languor, as if the stench of the dragon, through his throat and lungs, reached his arteries, numbing his members and obscuring his thoughts. He muttered to himself with a sardonic wince:
How far will you bear this solitary glory - to the throne or to the grave?

The fallen Dwarf, wounded and desperate, managed to avoid an attack, then another. Arathorn saw the dragon shook with spasms and knew that the time had come for the monster. Meanwhile Thráin, collecting his remaining strength, stuck his ax into the eye of the monster. This achievement will forever remain one of the high feats revered by the Longbeards. But the great Dwarf was in uneasy a position. In a daydream, as under the influence of a charm, the Dúnadan saw him struggling, trying to capture a short sword at his belt. The small thrush, on the shoulder of Arathorn, bit savagely his ear - he finally came to his senses. In a white flash, he cut the major tendons of the right paw of the monster, which rolled onto the Dwarf. Then, acting quickly and forgetting his pain, the Dúnadan avoided the fatal convulsions and methodically dispatched of the dragon.

Finally, ready to faint, Arathorn cleared the Dwarf as well as he could. It was too late. The Dwarf, broken, laid unconscious. The ranger recovered his breath, overcome by the pain at his sides and along his limbs. Then the dragon spoke for the last time, with the foreknowledge granted by the ultimate breath, but without loosing his malevolence:

-« Traitor to your ally, felon captain and perjury guide. What a fine lineage who claims to rule the North! But soon you will be freed from your burden... since you will lack both courage and tenacity to keep up your vows! »

The offensive insinuation ended in a lewd gurgling. Pale with shame and fear, retching in the stench of the dragon, Arathorn had just slain the monster.

Extruding his steaming sword, he stepped back, contemplating the corpses with a dry and expressionless face. The small thrush escaped his shoulder. She had spotted Gerry and came to provide him with her active attention, but the Dúnadan was trapped in his insidious thoughts. For long minutes, while the thrush managed to pull Gerry from his swoon, Arathorn meditated in the vile fumes.

The great Dwarf had shown true to himself, uncompromising, overly proud and insulting. He had formally terminated their alliance, up to wishing the death of the Dúnedain. One could even say that Thráin considered him a rival, if not an opponent... Like his forefathers, he had succumbed to the immoderation of gold and power, and he had fallen, disavowing his allies. Under these conditions, Arathorn was no longer to feel any obligation toward the house of Dûrin. This fallen lineage had lost its treasures that would stay idle, useless in the dust...

Probably the Dúnadan should have disobeyed Thráin earlier and rescue him despite himself. The dragon’s accusation, obviously slanderous, did not, however, let his conscience in peace. The worm’s sarcasms still rang in his ears. He who patiently prepared the return of the King, whose premonitory dreams had proved in accordance with Malbeth’s ancient prophecy, would now lack courage to seize the opportunity for his people? The dwarven alliance proved pointless, but chance had put in his hands the instruments of renewal. His duty was to seize them. The Dúnadan made his decision: the lies of the big worm would be denounced, he would find the will to take advantage of circumstances and achieve the goal of his life! He approached the Dwarf and he withdrew his two treasures - the ring of Thrór and the Naugwar Mithmirion - hiding them in his bag. Then he pulled away and left the room, wincing in pain.

Our Hobbit, overcome and forgotten, eventually came to Thráin’s side. Grace was leaving the serene face of the great Dwarf. He seemed to have lost all majesty, beyond death, when he was stripped of the treasures of his house. But Gerry was the one who lost the most that day: he witnessed the heinous crime of his captain, but he had not found the strength to protest and now
took refuge in silent tears, contemplating the body of Thràin and the shreds of his ideals.

Horror had just shown its grimacing face to Gerry, hitting him with full force and attempting to scare and stifle his radiant soul. Gasping at the betrayal of Arathorn and his guts knotted by his own cowardice, he arranged the body, washed Thráin’s face as best he could and remained with the great Dwarf until nightfall. Then horror faded slowly, regaining the stinking darkness it came from, taking for ransom, relentlessly, a part of the Hobbit’s youth.

.oOo.

NOTES

[1] Let the dragon be the victim of the fire!
The fall - broken

Chapter Summary

The company, broken and split into hostile factions, is trying to recover.

.oOo.

That is how Màr, Bera and Gandalf found him, exhausted or unconscious, besides the great Dwarf. They woke the Hobbit and forced him to drink a little miruvor and water. Màr crouched beside the body of Thràin, covering his head with his cap and wailing softly under his breath. Gerry immediately burst into tears at the memory of the tragic events. Gandalf, misunderstanding as to the cause of his crying and carrying himself an intolerable sense of guilt, said:

-« I regret I had no time to give my instructions before the dragons arrived. We should all have been out of reach when I launched lightning on their heads. But it seems Thraïn has already got revenge... His sacrifice was not in vain - the world is rid of two evils...»

But Bera bent over the body and exclaimed:

-« Breath has not yet left him! We must be swift. »

She carried the Dwarf in a drier place and stripped him of the remainder of his armor. Màr immediately noticed the absence of the treasures of the line of Dùrin. He quickly rummaged around, but his revived hopes momentarily banished his suspicion in the background of his mind.

Thràin was slowly carried, over the broken pieces of his shield, to the guard rooms of the citadel. The small company crossed the stinking chaos of the large hall, following Màr who was clearing hard to ease the passage of the stretcher. Corlagon laid there, gutted and head exploded under a block of six feet in diameter. All felt better when they were away from the unspeakable sewer.

The guard rooms had undergone little or no damage, despite the destruction of the defense parapet. The Dûnedain had attended to their horses and turned the housing into infirmary. All the Dwarves had paid their courage, when fighting against Scorba, with a small or large wound. Nàr had succumbed quickly, his rib cage smashed. In addition to the critical state of Thràin, Barin, Frerin and Bafur’s survival was doubtful. Bera, Gerry and the Dûnedain were busy around the wounded, their faces worn. Thràin was laid on a makeshift bed and Ingold examined him long. His diagnosis hardly encouraged the Dwarves: the patient had been deprived of his left forearm, he suffered numerous bruises and cuts, several ribs were broken, but the healer’s fears involved possible undetectable internal injuries - the dragon had crushed him with its tremendous weight. A thick, dark blood welled to the corners of his lips. He recommended rest as the only remedy, besides a concoction that purified the air in the room and facilitated breathing for all patients. Gandalf was even asked to put his pipe away while the night watch prolonged.

The wizard was tempted to go stand guard outside to enjoy the relaxing effects of pipe-weed, but he preferred to stay with his comrades to prevent any slippage. The Dwarves showed little gratitude for the Dûnedain’s cares. The eyes of the people of Dùrin carried heavy reproaches against the rangers since they had missed the critical moment facing the dragons. Gerry, who had watched Thràin’s body as a father when he was abandoned by all, was finally adopted as a Dwarf of honor.
He was pressed with questions about Arathorn, but, not wanting to say anything, he displayed no knowledge. In the midst of this tense atmosphere, Arathorn, lonely and last, joined the company. He had a gray complexion, he seemed to bear heavy fighting - only Bera realized that these were internal struggles. His gaze into the distance, he held a withered and broken branch as if it had been his most precious possession. Arathorn let himself be healed and laid down, without uttering a single word.

The company slept badly, healers watching and patients waking up frequently. At dawn Frerin was lost. Later in the day Bafur passed away. Mâr, tearful, organized the erection of the burial site of the three dead, away in a room overlooking the avenue. The Dúnedain thus left alone with half a dozen bedridden dwarves, completely distraught at the prospect of losing their leader. This period of confusion was not an opportunity to strengthen the bonds of community. Arathorn acted remotely, giving orders but forgetting he gave them. Gandalf noticed that the Hobbit absolutely avoided being alone with Arathorn, and conceived a few questions.

The next night, the healers alerted the company because Thràin had awakened. He had talked a little and accepted a few spoons of broth, before falling asleep again. A tenuous hope reappeared among the Dwarves despite their comrades death. All went back to sleep, but Mâr’s mind could find no rest. The next day Thràin spat some blood and complained about many pains. But he was alert enough to hear Mâr’s fears. Against Ingold’s advice, the old Dwarf told Thràin that the Dwarf necklace and the ring were lost.

Thràin’s face contracted, and the great Dwarf pretended to get up. Helped by two young Dwarves, he succeeded and said for everyone to hear:

- "I am the victor of Scorba the dragon! I am the new King under the Mountain Barum-Nahal! By law and the might of our arms, I curse whoever robbed me and my house of our treasures! I deny the robber all enjoyment of the theft!"

Nobody was named in his curse, but his looks denounced Arathorn. The great Dwarf was laid back and vomitted repeatedly, under the anxious eyes of his family. Arathorn livid face showed gray orbits – he had received the furious looks of the dying as a slap, not pretending to answer.

.oOo.

The company had utterly split. The next day, the Dwarves decided, under the leadership of Mâr, to join their cousins in the Iron Mountains. There they would find assistance and resources. Meaning to leave their dubious allies as quickly as possible, old Mâr thought that was the right thing to do, since he could convene with neither Nâr nor Thràin, whose condition was deteriorating. Arathorn, by calculation, let the Dwarves take the lead, to prevent any rumpus about the treasure. Dwarves harnassed their wounded comrades on the ponies, and went off limping, vowing to return in force under the command of a restored Thràin. The parting was short, the rangers showing extreme reserve toward the Dwarves, in solidarity with their leader. Gerry painfully saw the Dwarves go away, these harsh but true companions, the hardships and hopes of whom he had shared for a time.

The Dwarves line had not yet passed the third bridge, when Arathorn gave the order for departure. Gandalf consented, but a brief altercation opposed him to the Dúnadan, about the best route home. They opted, as the ranger insisted on it, for a lost road in the moors, leading to a rocky pass far to the southwest of the mountain. Once the remaining mules had been loaded with a few boxes and the reserves still available, all set off with a heavy heart.

The Dúnadan company, that Bera, Gerry and Gandalf complemented, crossed the bridges and passed the castelets. Gerry had turned and gazed at the majestic entrance of Barum-Nahal, when a small thrush landed on his shoulder, under the astonished gaze of Gandalf. As the bird cackled
madly, the Hobbit felt an inexplicable chill up his spine. Under the puzzled look of Arathorn, the wizard held his index and invited the thrush there. Listening at length, he said suddenly:

-« I do not like it! Treason looming in the shadows! »

Arathorn threw an anxious and guilty look, the wizard caught. Gandalf, who thought rather of an ambush, did not attempt to unravel what remorse weighed on the Dúnadan’s heart, since time was missing. The three mules were entrusted to Gerry and all the others silently rushed under the foliage, spurred by Gandalf who foresaw an irreparable misfortune.

The rangers sneaked the woods, running with light feet on the carpet of pine needles. In action and despite his unbearable ribs pain, Arathorn had found a leader’s soul back. Coming out of a thicket, the rangers suddenly had the enemy in sight.

The Dwarves company was ambushed in a ravine. The terrified ponies had knocked down most of the dwarves who were lying in the mud, motionless or trying desperately to covert. Frár and Grár, sheltered behind a granite block, tried to rally behind the screen of their shields, their companions still valid. Màr covered with his targe, Thráin who was unaware. The Dúnedain saw a group of great warriors equipped with dark leather, coming down the slope, their weapons the ready for the kill. But a gray fur equipped with a huge mouth already stood amidst the Dwarves, spreading death and ripping limbs and necks - a werewolf had found them!

- « Back! » Gandalf yelled, rushing toward the monster. His sword was kindled with a deadly glow while leaving the sheath. The Dúnedain followed with the cry of « Arnor! »

It was more than time for them to come. A dark mist already bathed the ravine bottom like swampy waters flood and infect healthy crops. A morbid torpor had seized the Dwarves, affected by corrupt vapor. Since they stood in daylight, the monster roared and bared fangs but could not face the wrath of the wizard. He flew, leaving the Black Forest scouts struggle with the Dúnedain. The fury of the rangers proved the more relentless - they annihilated the front row and fell like a thunderbolt on the second. Arathorn revealed the power of his avenging arm. Driven by an inner strength tenfold by some unknown stimulus, he sank to his opponents, each of his blows dealing a fatal wound. Besides him, his men repulsed the enemy horde, supported by some valid Dwarves. The Dúnadan fully felt the power of the ring of Thrór, welling in his limbs - all pain faded, his assembled retainers fenced and feinted with coordination and unparalleled accuracy, confident in his command and his worth.

The company succeeded in winning the top of the hill. A cry of distress resounded in their backs - the werewolf, previously thought to be at large, had bypassed the line to hit the Dwarf King. But Màr was watching and fell before Thràin could be hit. Then an onslaugh came upon the monster. A great bear, her mouth foaming, popped on its back and snapped the wolf by the neck. A stream of black blood spurted and the monster dropped its prey. Yet its strength of ten men allowed him to get away, throwing the bear in the thickets. Wolf and Bear froze themselves, face to face.

Arathorn, as the line of his enemies defeated and sparse, took a risk and slew their leader with an artfull thrust, then ordered the survivors, who disbanded, to be pursued. Gandalf then turned his attention to the monster - along with the ranger, he rushed alongside Bera. Then the werewolf yielded. Surrounded on all sides, taking blows on injuries, he had to back further, and fled into the woods, pursued by the bear and the wizard.

Then Arathorn stopped, moved by an inspiration of redemption. He retired from the assault and ran to Thràin’s side. Worth in combat had recalled his sense of honor - he would surrender to Thràin
the treasures of his house.

When he reached the ravine, he had first to pull out of the shadows, the inanimate bodies of Dwarves who bathed in a sordid and repulsive heavy mist. He dragged the bodies on the slope, placing their heads up to release their airways. For some, he had lavish gestures of resuscitation, since the victims appeared to him weak, pasty and lifeless. He did the same with Màr whose body was lying unconscious across Thràin, and with the great Dwarf itself.

The Dwarf leader breathed with difficulty. Arathorn, wincing in pain, knelt beside him and pulled the ring from his own finger. He mobilized all his fortitude to take the palm of Thràin and present the jewel to his ring finger. The stone shone in the sun. Giving up a power that was offered had appeared to him as a betrayal of his people. At present, sacrificing the righteousness of his own house by denying its legacy to an even more ancient lineage, seemed outrageous. More than anything he did not feel able to take forever the weight of such a power. Yet dropping such a potential was now difficult for him...

He renounced the power, slipped the ring on Thràin’s finger and was seized by an intense pain.

.oOo.
The fall - Mournings and confessions

Chapter Summary

The company finally breaks into battle.

As his companions had gone forward, Gerry was on his own, with his little Hobbit arms to hold a succession of three mules attached to one another. He remained silent a few seconds, trying to orient with the sounds around him. Ultimately the Hobbit decided to take the mounts to the edge of the woods in front of him, where he could keep them hidden while observing the area more effectively. Along the way Gerry found torn skin clothes, and guessed that these were rags left by Bera. He picked them up and put them away, among the packets of the first mule, before continuing his way.

At the edge of the woods, our Hobbit securely fastened the mules. He did well, for a few seconds later, a lupine howl startled them and they tried to escape. The war cries of his comrades followed immediately. Gerry took his sling and walked slowly, wanting to help his friends but reluctant to leave the mounts unprotected and unsupervised. Far to his left, bear roars were covering hated yelps. Suddenly he jumped up, shivering because of the surprise: Arathorn’s little thrush had grazed his ear with her wing. The animal fluttered above and in front of him. The Hobbit followed in that direction.

The Hobbit sneaked through the heather, picking up sharp stones along. After turning a block of pink granite, he saw on the next ridge, an archer aiming at a target, down in the ditch. The man dressed in dark green wore a black leather outfit that reminded him of the Thalion bandits. Gerry swung his sling, aimed and shoot the archer in the eye.

But the arrow flew and hit its target. The archer fell dead as Arathorn uttered a sharp cry of pain. Three other archers revealed at the top of the ridge. Arathorn, writhing in pain, grabbed the large shield that was used to carry Thràin’s body, and covered himself. Three arrows planted there, while the nearest archer let his weapon fall and covered his bleeding head with his hands. Arathorn did not attempt to remove the arrow stuck deep into the right side of his back, just below the ribs. Risking a glance over the shield, he saw the two remaining opponents thrown off by the threat of a hidden shooter. Curbing his pain and grabbing his chance, he immediately jumped with the strength he had left. As Gerry shoot at shoulder an archer who tried to aim, Arathorn stroke his comrade before slaying both.

Then came a new wave of attackers - black rangers preceded by a dark cloud. Despite a valiant resistance, the Dûnadan, severely weakened, succumbed to numbers. Wrapped in the disgusting and cruel steam Gerry did his best to shoot the enemies of his lord down, but he was soon reduced to concentrate his forces on his own breath not to collapse.

Finally he came to his senses, the ear pulled by a small thrush. The black rangers were gone. Gerry cautiously approached Arathorn who was lying on the ground. Multiple wounds gaped, out of which his life flowed. Around him laid the bodies of a dozen attackers. The Dûnadan’s quiver was empty in the middle of its scattered contents. The branch, pledge of the lady, laid among the broken arrows and shattered bow. A white bud pointed at the end, pathetic witness of life on the
withered branch. Gerry, wiped in tears, mopped Arathorn’s face and emptied the Dúnadan’s reserve of medicinal leaves on his wounds, clumsily trying to bandage them.

Arathorn opened his eyes, smiled and said in a quiet voice:

-« You will have to undergo the teaching of my lady. My faithful squire should be able to heal his comrades... »

Gerry burst in tears. Arathorn interrupted:

-« I am beyond any possibility of healing, Master Took. Be brave and take as a pledge, the last wishes of your King... »

As Gerry, broken down, could give no answer, Arathorn swallowed hard and continued:

-« In the end my choice was vain or too late. They took Thràin with his ring ... »

Gerry startled. That was the ultimate confirmation these foreigners were seeking for. Without this dwarven power ring, himself would certainly have been discovered and taken away by the terrible werewolves. And that was still possible...

-« ... But they failed to take me this... »

The Dúnadan showed the Dwarves necklace, hidden under his coat.

-«Now, my young friend, hide this jewelry, put it in a safe place. You will give it back to the dwarves, along with the apology of a friend. But remember their alliance... the two kings must not disappear in vain. That is the essential... But Gandalf will help you... »

Gerry complied. As he removed the sumptuous necklace from the ranger’s collar, poise and diction of the latter flew away, as if a veil of eternal grief fell upon the dying.

-«One must want to live and know how to die. But how hard it is to give up the delights of a return of hope and glory to a loving home. I wish you know that joy, Master Hobbit. »

Then he turned to the little thrush who had jumped on his bruised chest:

-« You will help Gerry, and lead him to Imladris. There you must report our tale to the Queen ... »

After a long silence the Dúnadan uttered these last words:

-« Bring to my Lady, along with the testimony of my life’s only love, the confidence that I leave this world with a mind at peace, having worked for the good of my people and repairing my faults. Tell Gandalf that I forgive him of diverting my expedition. He was right and should have been our captain in this adventure. May my fall teach this to my heirs... »

The raspy breath stopped.

.oOo.

The company eventually gathered in the ravine, while the twilight bathed the skies with glows of blood. They had been attacked by scattered groups of black marauders. Gandalf made a great tour to ascertain the fate of each. He brought back Ingold and Fràr, he snatched from the last enemies. The survivors gruesomely accounted of losses in this horrible battle. Gràr, Fràr’s brother, had perished at the hands of a dark ranger’s scimitar. The unfortunate Forin and Krorin, already injured at Barum-Nahal, had died poisoned by a horrible dark cloud. Gandalf suspected black magic,
which he pondered where from it came from. Arathorn and Mûr appeared to have died protecting Thrán’s body, which was not found. The Dûnedain Hirgon and Gilhael were found bristling with poisoned arrows.

Gandalf ventured to make a fire around which the survivors regrouped. Gandalf, Bera, Fràr, Norin, Dwolar and Ingold, avidly listened to the Hobbit, reporting the last moments of Arathorn. At the end of the tale, some flame returned to the Dwarves heart. Norin rose:

« The King of Barum-Nahal was abducted! Our leader Mûr, who acted as his steward, warned us against Arathorn and his greed. He is dead now but we still have not found the treasures that Thrán wore when he got killed by the dragon. If Thrán had disposed of these heirlooms to rally us, a band of brigands could never have overcome our forces. He was horribly betrayed! »

Gandalf sadly listened to the Dwarf listing accusations that the wizard himself had wondered about. Norin was no doubt deluded about the virtues of Thrór’s ring and the Dwarves necklace - but that was obvious that a company, united around their rightful guardian, would have withstood the onslaught. Thus he blamed the robber with the responsibility of their final defeat. The thief could only be Arathorn, in the Dwarf's mind.

-« In all likelihood, Thrán is still alive, said Gandalf. Our attackers would not bother to seize and carry him and in his state, to murder him later. I guess they were looking for the King and the heirlooms of his house and took everything... »

Given the repeated attacks of the Dwarves, poor Gerry temporized, and reminded everyone that he had seen Arathorn defending Thráin and die for him.

- « Your lord was still alive when black rangers seized him, he said. He must be rescued! »

But suspicions towards Arathorn were too entrenched in the Dwarves minds. Fràr recalled the many occasions for the two leaders to oppose and their personal animosity had erupted into the open. Norin pretended to search the body of Arathorn, but Ingold intervened with arms in hand.

Gandalf separated them, sick at heart. The tremendous success of destroying the two Misty Mountains dragons, along with the unexpected offsprings of a dragon egg, faded before so many victims and the disaster of failing the alliance between the Dûnedain and Dûrin’s folk. The wizard felt partly responsible, although he suspected some secret the Hobbit protected. Gerry looked to him for help before the Dwarves, but his attitude reinforced Gandalf’s suspicion who went inquisitor. Thus our Hobbit refrained from confessing Arathorn’s fault and momentarily kept the Dwarven necklace. He esteemed he could not save the alliance of the Dwarves and the Dunedain. But he was reluctant to increase the guilt of his lord, in the eyes of both his critics and his followers.

Yet Gerry had fueled the wizard’s curiosity, who now remembered the guilty look Arathorn had thrown earlier in the day. When a wizard suspects the existence of a secret by convergent clues and he already knows some premise, it is rare he does not reach his goals. But when he feels something of paramount importance, the wizard falls down on his prey with all the resources of intelligence, cunning, persuasion and, if he really has to, bullying. Gandalf drew the Hobbit aside and questioned him once more:

- « My dear Hobbit! You bear too heavy a burden for you! Don’t you want to open up to me about that? »

- And why should I speak of my secrets or my vows? You have no intention to help me. Or at least this is by no means your first goal. You are pursuing your own business, whatever the cost to your
surroundings! Under the guise of relieving me, you try to take advantage of my weakness and your authority to have me confess things I promised to keep secret. But in this case you may not consider the consequences! For once you will have to trust me! »

Gandalf was surprised by this vehement tirade, yet he did not remain speechless long. Our Hobbit, usually so accommodating, had a violent reaction from which the wizard was able to infer a lot, but not everything the Hobbit hoped to hide. Gandalf was aware Arathorn was the author of a felony that tainted Thràin's prestige; he had also understood that the Hobbit knew what was going on but would not betray his lord. Furthermore the wizard sensed that this felony was related to the presence of their attackers. He immediately decided to change his approach:

-« You matured, my dear Gerry! And you are right: I often forget that I am not alone facing difficulties. I shall share my dilemma. So you may judge by yourself what you can tell to help me. Do you agree with that? »

Treated as an adult for the first time, the Hobbit could not refuse and nodded. So the wizard continued:

-« I do not understand what our attackers are looking for, why they pursue us for long miles with troubling eagerness. At first I thought they were trying to reach me. Then I thought it was you. Finally I realize that after joining us, they abducted Thràin, Dùrin’s heir, mobilizing and sacrificing a large force. Maybe if I knew why they have taken him, I could imagine a ploy to save Thràin. What can you tell me? »

Gerry saw no way to inform Gandalf without denouncing his lord. Therefore our Hobbit weighed, in the balance of his young mind, the consequences of breaching his word, against the odds of helping the great Dwarf.

-« First I would like you to promise me not to tell anyone what I am to tell you! 

- I promise! » the wizard replied gravely.

Then Gerry confessed that Arathorn had robbed Thráin after the fight against the dragon, and what happened when he tried to return them. These revelations opened perspectives to the wizard, who realized for the first time that Thráin openly wore one of the old rings of power, one of those who were once given to the Dwarf lords. He remained silent long, his shining eyes betraying the alert wheels of his intense reflection, then he added:

-« Gerry, thank you for your trust. Indeed you have greatly helped me since now I know exactly why Thràin was aimed in person. And this will guide my steps to bail him out, if we may still... »

So a ring of power had reappeared in the north, and a malignant power had discovered this. But the revelations of Gerry did not explain why blacks Rangers were interested in Gerry and himself from Thalion. The wizard would solve this mystery later. For now he had ample material to reflect and decide:

-« So Arathorn was saved in the end. That lifts quite a weight off my heart! Fortunately he did not have time to return the Dwarf necklace to Thráin... So you are the guardian of a very heavy burden, as I had guessed. But you cannot return it without triggering an irremediable enmity between the Dúnedain of Arnor and the Dwarves of Dùrin. Perhaps we may later. But for now I have to direct my steps to great dangers. So I would like you to keep this jewel for me, and give it to Master Elrond. »

Gerry was so relieved that Thràin’s ring had avoided talking about his, he had not even though to
entrust the wizard with the necklace. Yet he felt a dull guilt to keep it, and opened his heart to Gandalf. The old man smiled sadly and said to the Hobbit when they joined their comrades:

- «Tell yourself that you are not responsible for what happens! When the litany of your gnawing thoughts stops, you will realize that no one can relieve you of this chilling judgment you imposed with a little complacency.

- But is it enough to declare oneself not guilty?

- You will make no prodigy, and no one expects you to. Your loved ones, those who matter and rely on you, will see you decide and do what you can with the resources you have. Then you will be responsible. Do you realize that this is ultimately the reason why you were pushed in this journey?

- But what can I do when necessary seems insufficient?

- May you find the serenity to accept the things you cannot change, the courage to change what is within your reach, and the wisdom to know the difference!²

- How can I determine what should be done?

- Everybody has his own method! The wise look far away, the fools even further. But I suggest you rely on your heart. For the reasons we have discussed, tomorrow I will entrust you to Ingold. Sleep peacefully now...»

Gerry fell into a restless sleep and the others wrapped themselves for the night. Gandalf meanwhile watched until dawn, surrounded by puffs of smoke and his mind alert.

The next day at first light, the Dwarves dug a grave for their companions. They announced summarily and with an air of defiance, they went in pursuit of the captors of their leader. Gandalf sighed and spoke:

- «Many evils have stricken us in recent days. There is still a slim hope of saving Thràin, so I shall go with you. I urge Gerry and Ingold to return to Rivendell and inform Elrond of the outcome of our expedition. But you, dear Bera, what will be your choice? »

Bera was plunged into a complete apathy since the departure of Arathorn. Sunrise brought her some peace of mind - she made a solemn vow to provide a burial fit for a King. Thus, after helping Ingold burying his two Dúnedain companions, she objected strongly Arathorn to be laid alongside with them. She long kept her resentment against the Dwarves, because Gerry hid from her, out of pure kindness, the deeds her love was guilty of. So many years later, the Bearnings retained an instinctive mistrust and dull prevention against Dwarves.

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² Serenity prayer. Unknown origin. Maybe St-Thomas of Aquin.
The fall - The eagle pass

Chapter Summary

Bera, Gerry and Ingold leave the group to head westward, in hope to find Arathorn his last resting place.

So the company split by a gray and dreary day, devoid of the joy of success and bereaved with many members. Gandalf led the dwarves to the east.

« Farewell, Master Hobbit, he told Gerry upon departure. Do not let your heart become cold and desperate. Think of your captain when you are quiet, with a good pipe.

Taking the eastern route the Dúnedain had discovered, Gandalf led the Dwarves, hoping to intercept Thràin kidnappers. This journey would take him to the gates of Dol Guldur, but that is another story.

Bera loaded Arathorn’s body on a mule, Gerry and supplies on another, and followed Ingold westward. A light rain hid their tears as they stealthily flew away among the heath where they once hunted with so much hope. The Dúnadan progressed with his long, slow stride, guiding Gerry’s mount who constantly inspected around. Bera followed them without opening her lips, focused on her vow. The storm caught them in the late evening, and they were soaked to establish a tent in the relative shelter of a combe. Bera did not sleep a wink all night, pursued in mind by ghostly enemies who slew Arathorn again and again.

At dawn the companions departed under the same light rain. During the dreary day, drizzle finally stopped and the temperature dropped to the point that the companions had to light a fire to warm people and animals. Peering around, Bera said:

« I do not like it. Rain kept us immune from any pursuit. We have just signaled for miles around.

- We must first survive. We cannot avoid it. » Said Ingold showing the Hobbit, shivering in wet blankets.

The next departure took them to increasingly steep and snowy slopes, along a mountain ridge running from the north. The wind increased slowly and the temperature continued to decrease, while they stepped eastward under heavy clouds anthracite. Bera now scrutinized constantly back. She confided her concern to the ranger who reassured her:

« We are in clear visible sight on these slopes. However we also can spot our enemies from afar. »

The small group persevered in the cold and icy wind blows, climbing the mountainside, mostly to the south. The trail was often covered with ice and snow slides. But the ranger’s lore and the Bearning instinct kept them on the right track. Temperature dropped again and the snow began to fall. Even the mules were to be protected, so Ingold draped them with oilcloth. Darkness had enveloped them for two long hours when they finally reached a roughly flat area. Bera dug a wide trench on the slope, pushing the snow to build protective walls. His mind numbed by the cold,
Gerry imagined a bear in the far North excavating his den to protect her cubs. Ingold roofed the shelter with oilcloth bound by leather straps, and several masts. Finally the three companions and the two horses took shelter in this makeshift tent. Just about time! An extreme wind rose, that smoothed the flat space they had stopped on, and heaped snow on the slopes around them all night.

In the morning, Ingold freed an output out of the tent. Bright sunshine flooded the mountain range around them. The companions came out to stretch their legs, move and enjoy the light. They had the feeling of standing near the top of the world. They had come to a pass over one of the edges of the Misty Mountains. Immediately North and South the sharp ridge continued by climbing from the narrow platform they occupied. Daytime rays revealed a significant layer of snow had covered the slopes, even if snow appeared already to be melting far down the eastern side. They observed northeast the large cone of Barum-Nahal, forever surrounded by vapors. To the East pinnacles succeeded to each other, their alignment preventing them to contemplate the valley of the Anduin, now too far away. By contrast, the Western panorama was luckily particularly clear. Ingold described their landscape, his melancholy tone accented with some notes of hope at the sight of his homeland.

« In the northwest you see unfold the great chain that was once the southern border of the enemy kingdom of Angmar. Its slopes are infested with Orcs and my people continuously monitors them. To the southwest continues the great chain of the Misty Mountains, down to the valleys of former Rhudaur. It is now haunted by trolls that my people and the fair folk of the hidden valley hunt without respite. »

The Dúnadan paused, breathing deeply the fresh and perfumes air, a breeze bore him from the West:

« I think the valleys that lie ahead, drowned with mist, could be the source of the river Hoarwell, that leads to our homes. We finally found the way my Lord Arathorn actively sought. I guess that now, this discovery is not worth much...

- On the contrary!, cried Bera, her face moved and a her heart heavy. I vow to lay my beloved to rest in this ground, sentinel of the free people at the summit of wilderness. Thus he will guard "until the return of the King" the road that his heart had so ardently desired for his people! »

The Dúnadan, torn between respect for the grieving young Woman and his duty toward his lord, convinced himself this was the best way to pay their last respects to the leader of the rangers of Arnor. Gerry suddenly spotted high in the sky, a majestic pair of wings that hung in the clear air. Bera thought this was a good omen. Ingold wondered if the first of the Valar gave his assent through his messenger. Then the Great Eagle suddenly veered toward the Northeast and flew away.

After a short lunch, the companions dismantled the tent and dug the snow down to the bedrock. The following required a tremendous effort, but Dwarf scissors and perseverance of two grieving warriors eventually overcame the toil: a tomb was arranged between two rocks.

Ingold and Gerry made a short toilet to the dead and disposed him the best they could, the feet turned toward Arnor as to ensure him a safe return. The companions gathered a moment around him, evoking moments of greatness or joy they had experienced together, chanting according to their inspiration. Bera put down on his chest, small figurines of straw, hastily crafted, representing the family of the deceased, as well as the image of a bear, she placed next to him, away from the family. Gerry placed small daffodils he had gathered in the valley of the Anduin and that had dried, forgotten in his pocket. Finally the Bearning got up and cut a large lock of her long hair, she threw into the grave. Then the companions piled rocks on their leader. They had reserved a shield with a
pronounced bump, covered with a layer of silver that sparkled under the sun. Bera and Ingold fixed it at the top of the mound of piled rocks. Thus Arathorn’s pass could shine on sunny days, guiding travelers to a successful destination.

As Gerry, exhausted, was feeding the mules that had found nothing under the thick ice, he embraced the sight around them. When he saw a dark spot on the eastern slope of the ridge, far to the North, his heart jumped. When he was convinced that the point was moving at high speed in his direction, he was seized with a horrible feeling. He warned his comrades who, after a moment of disbelief, agreed with him and took counsel quickly. Mules were entrusted to Gerry. The Hobbit approached the western slope and looked into the abyss. Its steepness was growing rapidly, leading to a sunken dizzying precipice. The track led to the south, on his left, then bent a few times on a steep slope before joining a safer zone with the first few acres of grassy vegetation below.

Anger took Bera. Her unlaced leather clothes laid on Arathorn’s tomb. The great Bear turned tirelessly around the grave, her eyes bloodshot and her mouth foaming. Ingold had stepped back, uncertain for now about the mood of their dangerous companion. He armed his bow and placed himself in order to monitor the approach of the North-Eastern Trail. Indeed, a deformed being, with long limbs as a lanky man but powerful paws like a beast, paced the slope, hesitating between standing and crawling.

-«There he is! » Ingold said, shooting his arrow, which ricocheted off the thickly coat, barely causing a gash.

The monster growled viciously and leaped to the assault. Ingold released another arrow - these were Arathorn’s shots with a mithril head - which pierced the monster’s shoulder. Ingold had hoped to draw his sword after releasing his bow, but the werewolf did not give him time. The ranger could only jump aside, in the eastern slope, to avoid the attack. For a moment this reflex disabled the wolf that Bera attacked by surprise - she grabbed the monster by the spine, lifted and hurled it violently, twisting the monstrous body, which crashed a few feet down, barking like a puppy dog. Ingold, sword in hand, attacked the monster in the slope. He imposed a nose injury but was swept away by a violent forelimb stroke. The ranger dropped his sword that ran down the icy slope, and he was so struck, he had to struggle to avoid falling.

Bera burst on the wolf - an indistinct furious mass of fangs and claws tumbled to a terrace of rock on the side of the mountain, leaving a bloody trail in the snow. Grunts continued when Ingold regained consciousness. He came down to the two beasts as quickly as he could. While in mid-term, the grunts ceased and the monster raised its ugly snout to issue an ominous roar of victory.

Bera had been defeated. Ingold was left with a short dagger. From one second to another the werewolf was going to rush on him. But the face of Elrond, kindled with a red flame, imposed itself in the Dúnadan’s mind. Frantically, he looked in his bag. He found an egg, of small size, with moire liquid reflections of red and fire. The monster turned his glassy eyes to him. Ingold repeated the words of the master of Imladris:

- « A Elbereth Elentari », he cried, throwing his egg at the monster.

The projectile got aflame before hitting its target. Bumping on the fur, the egg burst into inflamed and viscous liquids which set fire to the wolf in an instant. But a kind of nucleus, now black, remained from the egg and stuck to the skin of the monster, then burned his bowels by penetrating the flesh. The wolf toppled down the slope, screaming and struggling to get rid of this scourge. Moments later, an explosion shook the mountainside - the werewolf was torn to bloody pieces. An avalanche swept the combatants and covered the mountain with a thick veil of forgetfulness.

After these feats of arms, it was long told that the Pass of the Eagle was guarded by enemies of
darkness, light spectra throwing huge bears in pursuit of the goblins and evil things.

.oOo.

[1] Thoron, the eagle in Sindarin, may be the distinctive root in the name Arathorn, « Great Eagle ». Thus the appearance of an eagle, the messenger of Vala Manwë, lord of the sky and winds, is an important sign and particularly meaningful for a schooled Dûnadan.
Flights and aeries - delving into problems

Chapter Summary

The hobbit falls into giant problems.

Our Hobbit solidly held the two mules. He was not afraid of heights, but the slope at his feet impressed him a bit. His heart was pounding and he felt terribly hot despite the breeze that ruffled his hair. He coyly turned when Bera pretended to undress, then waited while the big bear gathered her forces. Nervous, he made sure that his dagger was within reach of his hand. The mounts flapped increasingly, one of them lost its oilcloth Ingold had folded and added to its load. Gerry picked it up and began to store it securely, having been shown this equipment could save their lives. That was when Ingold’s bow vibrated and the howling of the wounded monster sounded.

These mules were good animals, docile and gentle, who loved their masters, and that the Hobbit had often taken care of. But a hungry and angry werewolf was too great a test for their meager courage. Terrorized, the mules scampered at first rumbling, rushing on the narrow path covered with ice. Gerry had not finished fixing the oilcloth. Entangled in leather straps, he fell down and was dragged on the ice by the mounts galloping with uncertain balance. And what was bound to happen, occured: the mules skidded and were precipitated down the slope, along with Gerry.

Tumbling down the slope, he saw raptors turn in the firmament, with the corner of his eye.

-« Scavengers wasted no time! », He told furtively.

But the thought of repugnant beaks, tearing his dead flesh at the foot of the precipice, was revolting. He focused his will and hoped a moment to get out of this mess. He grabbed his knife and cut the leather that bound him to the canvas and the mule. Then, still rolling down the slope, he tried to slow his descent by planting his dagger in the icy wall, but the quake was so strong that he dropped his weapon. His last hope was approaching at high speed: a snowdrift accumulated in the form of large dune over the precipice, could possibly stop him. With his bleeding hands, he maneuvered to reach it.

The drift was not snow, but sheer ice. A few seconds later, our Hobbit flew in a graceful parabola, propelled through the air like from a springboard, while the mules sank into the abyss.

Gerry closed his eyes and prepared for his last ride. Scenes of his childhood whirled in his mind, quickly chaining vigils, pilferages, banquets and stolen kisses or superimposing striking faces such as Gandalf, his lady, his father the Thain, Arathorn or relatives. Some bitterness dominated his moods when he fainted in shock - no hobit-girl's face had imposed on him. A constellation of lovely and smiling faces had melted into an average Hobbit-girl, bland and without personality.

While Gerry plunged to his death, a huge eagle snatched him with powerful talons. The violent shaking plunged the Hobbit in unconsciousness. The majestic raptor rose in a gust of hissing air and took Gerry up to its aerie.

You must be told that Great Eagles were a powerful and noble race who populated mountainous
areas since the beginning of the world. Soaring high in the skies of the North, they embodied freedom in wilderness and the rise of free peoples. In the old days, they sided with Elves to fight the flying dragons, of which they have always been the most deadly opponents. It is said that the King of the Eagles, great Thorondor, could rise in the sky, sweeping view of whole Middle-earth and monitor the most remote land. Thus the Powerful ignored nothing of the suffering of the Free Peoples.

At the time of this story, the elder branch of the Great Eagles resided in the Misty Mountains. The old Gwaïhir[1], a descendant of Thorondor, reigned over squadrons who fought a hard strife to evil beings. No single goblin or marauding warg could move on the surface, day or night, if weather was fine. For the eagles’ vision, unrivaled, made them relentless hunters. Yet Great Eagles were feared by the inhabitants of the Anduin valleys: Raptors had to live, taking their toll of sheep or goats. Pastors shot their bow when they came too close to their cottages. Independent and proud, Great Eagles repelled by the goblins to the highest peaks and the steepest slopes, showed distant, suspicous and sometimes ruthless, as are all free predators.

It is to say Gerry’s fate was quite unenviable. The Eagle who had captured him had first mistaken him for a goat, as he was tumbling with two quadrupeds along the ice wall. The bird had come because he coveted the mules but their shipment made them inaccessible, though it increased their appeal. Flight-hunting - that is to say, without risk - a fleshy median-sized prey was a bargain not to be missed, which would lift the spirits of the Great Eagle.

Yet, when it landed on its aerie, the Eagle realized that its prey, dressed and equipped with an opposable thumb, was certainly not a goat. In all probability, it could only be a small goblin. But the childish and amiable appearance of his face, the quality of his outfit and especially a strange fur on the top of his feet, restrained the Great Eagle to commit the irretrievable. Since in doubt, it carried Gerry to its pantry - an absolutely unreachable aerie, surrounded by cliffs with a giddy drop on the front and a vertical wall on the back, without need of protection of any other kind. Its appetite was disappointed, hence the Great Eagle unceremoniously deposed Gerry and went hunting for its dinner.

.oOo.

When our Hobbit woke up, he blinked for several minutes without realizing where he was. On the one hand the dazzling sun fully occupied half the space around him, on the other hand a rocky wall reflected the sun, almost as brightly. Luckily Gerry did not try to take a few steps. Finally accustomed to the bright light, he realized with horror his uncomfortable position. Amazed by the spectacular view, he long looked the splendid and lofty peaks around and the dark valleys far down. He was speculating how his fall into the void had sent him on this ledge, when he smelled a diffuse fragrance of rotten flesh. Around him lay the reliefs of ancient meals - dead sheep, marmot furs and numerous bones of small animals. Discovering he was the single alive being in the pantry of a predator was probably our Hobbit’s most horrible moment in our tale.

Gerry literally asked which sauce he was to be eaten with, when the Eagle came back in a flurry of powerful wing beats. The bird landed, folded his wings and dropped a rabbit on the stained ledge. Gerry, pale and trembling, was huddling against the wall. The Eagle was staring at him with its lidless eye, tilting its head as if pondering how it might prepare the Hobbit, who alternately imagined himself on the spit, gamy, boiled or simply swallowed raw. The medley of Hobbit dishes made him nauseous. When he saw himself roasted with an apple in his mouth, he could not help throwing his meager morning snack. The raptor straightened, positively impressed. But Gerry mistook the feelings that moved his guest. He was about to apologize for the inconvenience and announce piteously he meant to clean - with the vague hope that he would be entrusted with many chores, and who knows, a full-time job avoiding him the pot - but that was something else that
came out of his mouth.

- « I am sorry! », He stammered, quite smeared. « Surely I am not very appetizing any more? », He asked, seeking approval.

The Great Eagle, very surprised to hear this little creature speaking intelligibly and politely, and to see it behave with a mother eagle dedication, addressed him in a gravelly, guttural voice:

- « Therefore your people also feeds its youth by regurgitating food? »

What can be more natural than a giant talking bird? After all, Gerry himself had spoken to it... Furthermore, why be surprised that it should speak the common language? Still our Hobbit paid no more attention to this detail, than if Michel Delving’s Mayor had re-taken petit fours. Gerry, transfixed for a time by the intimate maternal interest that appeared in the questions of his host, hesitated to lie. Its sharp eyes seemed to pierce Gerry, as an embodiment of his own conscience. But ruining an opportunity of conciliation would obviously be a mistake. He decided, with his instinct and usual flexibility, for an answer that would satisfy both the assumed expectations of the Eagle and the truth, which Gerry thought it would infallibly detect.

- « We call ourselves Hobbits. Our litters are many, and in fact, we spend most of our time gathering food for our children... and for ourselves!

- In what aerie do you keep your eggs?

- My country is called the Shire, and is many walking days afar, to the sunset.

- Does your female keep your eggs? »

Obviously the Great Eagle was a female. This obsession with eggs watching and youth feeding left no doubt about this in the Hobbit’s mind. But in this case, he came to a correct conclusion with a fallacious reasoning - Great Eagles shared as a couple the onerous task of hatching their eggs and feeding their single youth. This Eagle was indeed a female, she had lost her mate and was very much worried about the maturation of her egg and the growth of the youth to come. But Gerry knew nothing of all this. As you may know, our Hobbit was not inclined to be drawn on the field of children and marital responsibilities. He attempted a delaying note:

- « We usually hatch only one egg at a time. It is quite enough work. Fortunately, when the youth grows, the elder ones can handle the young. »

This revelation seemed to absorb the Eagle for a while. Apparently the horde behavior of mammals could have advantages. But no one could lose a hawk, even in words. She went on:

- « Do you watch for your egg? Or does your female watch for your egg?

- I do not even have a female. So I did not watch for my own egg.

- Did you watch any eggs for your parents? »

Having ruled out the absurd possibility of a marital research, Gerry well imagined that such an insistence could only mean one thing: the Great Eagle was in urgent need for babysitting. Anxious to strengthen his chances of survival, our Hobbit decided to make an opening, even he had to embellish an unfavourable reality:

- « I have long nurtured my younger siblings and taught them some very useful tricks. My parents found me responsible and mature, hence they sent me to explore the world before building my
aerie. I left home and I fly with my own wings, so to speak. But I am willing to lend my assistance in watching your egg, if you wish so! »

The principle of a solo flight before building one’s own aerie rather pleased the Great Eagle. But Gerry’s eagerness seemed somehow hasty if not suspect: a young male, who on one hand spontaneously regurgitated food, but on the other hand, had never raised his own family, may be somehow unreliable. The Eagle decided to test him - without asking his opinion or even warning him, she caught him in her talons and flew into space.

.oOo.

[1] Sindarin : Lord of the winds
Flights and aeries - Life debt

Chapter Summary

Gerry manages to stay alive and sets a deal with his raptor.

.oOo.

The fainted Hobbit returned to his senses in another aerie, apparently much higher but better sheltered. A rim of irregular stones encircled the ledge, doubled with a solid tangle of branches. A strange mosaic of mosses, birds down and tissue gleaned here and there, carpeted the bottom of the nest, showing some signs of wear and poor maintenance. A good-sized egg, a little quirky, milky white speckled with honey, laid there beside an ornate geometric designs cover, probably pilfered from a shepherd of the high valleys of Anduin.

A trickle of water ran along the wall next to the ledge where the nest was built. Gerry drank, but the metallic taste hardly quenched his thirst. To fool his fear and boredom, he busied himself as best he could. After a long time during which our Hobbit had drawn his treasure, his mind focused on his desire to escape, looked with fascination at the beautiful sun glare on his ring’s stones, he found that nothing happened. Neither wings in the back, nor stairs conveniently arisen from the wall, allowed him any hope, Gerry was compelled to admit that his hostess wanted something from him and he had to get to work. For the first time in his short existence, the Thain’s son discovered the intimate nature of work - necessary for life, but indeed not sufficient!

Hobbits, even the most indolent, can be tough workers when need or desire push them. Of course survival was at stake, but Gerry especially felt some need to occupy his mind, not to despair of being subtracted from the world he knew, beginning with true land. For this small cornice was not really land, suspended hundreds of feet in height, and exposed to the winds.

Gerry evacuated droppings, strengthened the structure of the nest, mended the maze covering the bottom and arranged the blanket around the egg a very coquettish way. Meanwhile he discovered a variety of miscellaneous items, brought there by the Eagles throughout their wanderings. Their predilection for small shiny objects such as mirrors and metal instruments, was of great benefit to the handy Hobbit. He cleared a rusty blade, probably a goblin dagger - and sharpened it, probably with some hidden defense motives. Gerry also brought some pebbles that suited his sling, which was still wrapped around his waist.

But hunger was beginning to gnaw. The Eagle had brought in this aerie, the rabbit it had hunted earlier. Gerry was reluctant to eat this rabbit raw, but without equipment he could not ignite the twigs he had set aside. Finally resigning himself, he began to open up the rabbit and ingest as he could. As he was about to bite the liver of the animal, the Eagle returned to the nest. The bird perched on the stone ledge and inspected the place at length, looking inquisitively around, omitting no details. Without saying a word, the great eagle took the air, but returned a few moments later, carrying a wooden box it gently placed it in the hands of the Hobbit.

- "Men burn meat. Here is the red flame. A man left it once to the Eagles of the North."
Gerry, preferring not to know what had happened to that man, opened the small boxwood packet and found a lighter, a flint and tinder. It was quite difficult to decipher the expressions of the Great Eagle, but this gift led to assume that she had appreciated the household zeal of our hero. The Hobbit thanked forcefully with bows and asked if he was allowed to cook his rabbit. The Great Eagle assented and asked in the aftermath, with the tone of a careless gossip who negotiates vegetables in a market:

« What is a man’s life worth of? »

The question got Gerry almost giddy. He had traveled hundreds of miles with wizards and Kings, through incredible dangers, ending far from the world of the living, at the mercy of a cold and calculating predator, who proposed to discourse of existential questions... Expecting the worst, he chose again to bias:

« In reality I am a Hobbit, a halfling who would like try to persuade you about his extreme good will!

- Life of the Little Folk is worth the life of the Eagle!
- I agree... in principle.
- The Eagle has saved the life of the Hobbit. The Hobbit is to save the life of the egg. »

Gerry did not clearly appreciate why the egg could be in danger. He suggested the only support that seemed helpful and within his range:

« I shall hatch your egg, if you agree with that? »

Great Eagles are quite terse. A brief oral agreement is sufficient to seal the strongest contract or the most enduring alliance. Gerry’s intuition provided him, although he knew nothing for sure at that time, with life, food, lodging and protection of the Great Eagle. Of course, it costed him his freedom. But one cannot have everything.

More monotonous days passed, so similar to each other than our Hobbit lost count of them. Gerry sat on the egg as best he could. Every morning the Eagle brought a small prey, asking for news, and moved again. The nights were terribly cold - shivering Gerry passed them to contemplate the moon rise over the cliff and sink beyond the horizon. So he had crafted an extra blanket with the skins he had kept. He spent his days dreaming of the Shire, his adventure and destiny. Our Hobbit had lost track of time, but indeed he was a prisoner for only two weeks when a terrible storm broke out in late afternoon. Rain and wind lashed the nest and fail to sweep the Hobbit. He had to cling to the egg and stood firm to prevent it to be rolled out of the nest. In the morning, Gerry admitted the obvious: the egg was cold and showed no signs of life. When asked how the egg was doing, he replied that the storm had passed without difficulty.

From that moment he regularly probed the egg, in vain. A few more days passed, punctuated by visits of the Eagle and the repetition of the question. One morning the exhausted Hobbit could stand it no more: with a rueful air, that was not quite feined, he confessed to the Great Eagle he believed her egg dead. Gerry thought his last hour had come - without a word, the Eagle seized him and took him off.

.oOo.

The fainted Hobbit returned to his senses in a third aerie, spacious and comfortable, equipped with many pillows and blankets. An egg, quite similar to the previous, laid there prominently - but the
spots were thinner and darker. In addition the aerie stood next to a grassy and gentle slope, surrounded on all sides by cliff, either up or down. The Great Eagle, bent on the hobbit, seemed to be watching his reactions. Gerry asked, trembling:

-« You're not going to eat me, are you? »

The Great Eagle straightened but her scrutinizing eye remained unruffled when she answered:

-« Eagle kill enemies and preys, but do not feed on talking creatures. »

Gerry had already realized that the deep Eagle’s nature excluded lying. Hence he was convinced and a few seconds were enough to regain his composure. The Eagle bowed before him, saying:

-« My name is Celegwelwen[1], daughter of Menelwen[2].

Gerry imitated as best he could the elastic bow of the bird of prey and replied:

-« My father Fortimbras and my mother Hyssop named me Gerontius when I hatched [3]… so to speak! »

The raptor seemed satisfied with Gerry’s franchise. The following days, our Hobbit therefore took care of Celegwelwen’s real egg, carefully grooming the aerie and warming the offspring when the Great Eagle was absent. He could stretch his legs on the grassy slope and even wash with a little snow. The Great Eagle captured for him a living sheep, which gave milk for the Hobbit to drink. The poor animal, as long as its captivity lasted, could feed on the short grass of the adjacent slope. Gerry was struggling to have his hostess speak, but the process took time. Yet from one thing to another, he learned a little about the Great Eagles view of the world and asked about the news that seemed important to them. Thus he learned that the fortress of Dol Guldur spread its evil and that the North rustled with the recent news of two terrible dragons being slain. Gerry refrained from commenting on it. He had indeed understood that changing balances was seen by his wise hostess, like unstable and treacherous swirling winds - source of both opportunities and dangers. The Orc tribes formerly subservient to the great worms, attempted to appropriate supremacy, with the cruelty they were known for.

Finally, the Great Eagle told some incidents of the war against the Giants. Gerry had been thrown in open wizard or fairy tale. He had never really paid credence to these fables but his confrontation with the wonderful diversity of Middle Earth had recently opened his eyes. There was no reason to doubt Giants more than Great Eagles! Hence he eagerly questioned Celegwelwen about the episodes of this war. She answered accurately and without emotion, but Gerry felt that this tragedy touched her closely.

Conversations and living together with his hostess had convinced him with the deep maternal instinct and discrete nobility of the predator bird. The days passed, dull and boring, sometimes terrible and frightening when storms of Urui were unleashed. It happened that the Eagle flew away for a whole day, and taking back a shiny object in memory of her victory - she had hunted and killed a marauding orc. Gerry learned that the orcs under the obedience of the Corgalâsh, who held the supremacy, had lost ground in Gundabad and their neighbors surged to seize power. The Great Eagles, led by Gwaihir, intervened to force them to abandon the open terrain.

But soon the Eagle and the Hobbit parted these warlike considerations. One night Gerry jerked awake, dreaming that the ground shook. All around him, the wind rustled and a slight rumble of thunder was heard over the mountain, as a liquid murmur. The egg had moved - the occupant became restless, the outbreak would not be long. Thus the Great Eagle left hunting more often and for shorter times.
The following day, mixed feelings assaulted the Hobbit. The desire of canceling his debt came first, combined with the desire for freedom. His impatience to put an end to this compromising occupation, gradually veered to curiosity, but did not reach the stage of paternal anxiety. Yet one morning, a strange thought crossed his mind - would the little eaglet look like him? Distraught by the ridiculousness of the situation, he drove this idea away, guided by the instincts of a true Hobbit at breakfast time. But as soon as he managed this, he was horrified: deprived of the delicate variety of Hobbit cuisine, he could only think of a big slobbery omelette! He glanced toward the Eagle, who seemed not to notice the disorder of our hero. Certainly the role of father would never suit him...

However, the next day a new and absurd father reflex came and tortured him: how the eaglet would be named? Of course he asked Celegwelwen, who informed him that Eagles change their names throughout their lives. The thoroneg[4] receives one as it leaves the egg, and then is given as it grows, names that are more consistent with his character, his aspirations, his habits or his status.

Thus a rainy morning, a ball of fluff beige emerged to daylight, blinking behind its glasses of black feathers. Mother Eagle gushed before the prowess of her chick, getting rid of the shell. Gerry, who did not know the proper forms in use among Eagles, congratulated her warmly and wished long life in Middle Earth for the newcomer. Gerry clarified that it seemed highly desirable that the chick should have his meals directly from the beak of his mother, and not from a stranger to his kin - it seemed crucial for him not to disturb the little orphan. Noting that the Great Eagle did not protest, he also stated that it would be better if the chick would not build too many bonds with him, since he would leave one day... This last assertion causing no retaliation, Gerry affected to treat silence as an assent.

The child was a male, who would match the provisional name of Corongwinig[5]. He quickly posed as an accomplished and tenacious rascal, biting everything that came within range, ruining blankets and pillows, and never sleeping at the same time as Gerry. Quickly our Hobbit's hat feathers were reduced to shreds. The eaglet supported maternal sermons, Gerry thought neither frequent enough nor sufficiently strong. Yet Mother Eagle raged from time to time, never molesting the chick, who strengthened day by day. It seemed she was understood at the time, if not obeyed in duration. One morning in the absence of his mother, the bird had been particularly irreverent towards the bottom of Gerry’s panties, our Hobbit had to crack down and smacked on the beak of the aggressor. Therefore, their relations became sounder. The chick even insistently offered his first pen to the Hobbit. Celegwelwen incidentally informed Gerry that a gift would be appreciated in return. Then our hero remembered the predilection of the Great Eagle for metal and shiny objects. Thus he sacrificed two gold buttons of his beautiful waistcoat and solemnly handed them to the chick. Then he tied his beautiful young eagle feather on his hat.

-« You are now ‘Aerie Brothers ’! », Said Celegwelwen, leaning toward the Hobbit, who recognized a hint of pride in his hostess’s rocky crunching.

-«I feel much honored, he replied. What does this imply?

- Aerie brothers take their first flight together.

- Dear hostess, you certainly did noticed that Hobbits sorely lack wings? »

The Great Eagle nodded in sad silence. The Hobbit was angry at himself and asked:

-« May I not do something else for my aerie brother? Is there nothing you dearly need?
- The eagle needs her eagle consort. But it is too late for Landroval. And about that matter, my eaglet’s aerie brother could indeed not assist... »

Gerry insisted on knowing the whole story. It dealt closely with the war against Giants. They were neither completely simple-minded nor plainly mean, but Giants behaved improperly and coarsely. For example, excited by lightning during stormy nights, they were able to throw rocks at the head of each other from one mountain slope to another, for the sake of snorting under the rain in the electrified air! Usually Giants showed distant and independent, causing trouble only when their games got near eagles aeries. Then a skirmish or a sporadic though violent confrontation usually ensued. But such a war had not occurred for ages.

-« So are Giants, vile creatures like trolls or goblins? asked Gerry.

- Not really. Giants are sons of the volcano, children of iron and clay, lively and ignorant of their strength. It is vitality and not malice that usually leads them. And yet they are dangerous. »

This war had started when a young Giant had stolen an egg to an Eagle family. He had found this oval rolled by chance and without breaking down to the foot of a bank overgrown with moss. He had taken it before the Eagle parents could intervene. Then the young and inventive Giant had imagined a ball game with his friends. The Giants pursued each other by rolling the egg on a flat ground. They used the flexible end of an uprooted young fir tree, as a stick, to push this improvised puck in front of them on the soft grass. There did not seem to be any other purpose than to appropriate the egg for as long as possible, but this game apparently gave them intense pleasure. In fact, these were the most complicated game rules any Giant ever invented...

Of course the Eagles, horrified, had tried to get their egg back, but they only achieved disappointments and failures. Now they maintained a vigilant guard over their small valley, but their attempts to fetch the egg had utterly failed, the Giants interposing or throwing firs when they approached, laughing in their unconsciousness. But worse happened: lord Landroval, Celegwelwen’s consort, was captured while trying and never returned to his aerie! Gerry was moved by this sad news.

-« I had not realized the miseries of this war... I understood it as an epic tradition and burlesque tale. I am ashamed of my scantiness... If I could help you... but I do not know Giants, I've never seen. »

Celegwelwen gazed at him long with her harsh still pupils.

- « May Gerontius steal the Eagle’s egg from Giants? »

For a Great Eagle, such a request rather flouted the code of honor and the frank mentality of the species. For them, surprise and deception were admitted in war, only if they let to the enemy, even the vilest, some chance to defend itself. But the eaglet egg had not had the opportunity to protect itself... During those long months spent in Gandalf’s company, our Hobbit had, much against his will and to his sustainable astonishment, grown feelings of responsibility and compassion. Gerry, a scout knighted by the Dúnedain, could do not less. But interfering in a war between Free People was uncomfortable.

So he gave his assent, indicating he would do his best not to hurt anyone, if he was not to be squashed himself, and that he intended the hostilities be be put to an end as soon as Eagles would recover their egg.

- « Promise me you will pursue no vengeance! », He asked.
The Great Eagle nodded and grabbed the Hobbit, who had no time to prepare for the big leap. Once again, he lost consciousness. Hobbits are not made for great heights, or for extreme speed, obviously.

Celegwelwen flew to the Mount of the Giants. It was an extinct volcano, the lower slopes of which, very hard to reach, protected a low-lying conical top. Hot springs allowed the few families of Giants who lived there, to survive all year. The upper slopes, jagged and covered with fir trees, formed like a ship’s hull floating on a lake of clouds. The Great Eagle dropped the Hobbit on a hill, shook him a bit to restore him to his senses, and flew back to the heavens, to observe and intervene, if necessary.

.oOo.

[1] Swift blow of air, Burst in sindarin
[2] Daughter of the air, in sindarin
[4] Eaglet in sindarin
[5] Round Baby, in sindarin, that could be approximated as « ball down »
Flights and aeries - Giant games

Chapter Summary

Gerry finally meets the Giants.

.oOo.

Gerry sneaked to the heathers and stayed there carpeting a long time. Hearing no suspicious noise, he ventured further down towards the center of the old crater. Vegetation, sheltered from the wind, flourished there on a chaotic ground. The day was warm, insects led a rampant sarabande among the flowers, as Gerry flowed among the larches. After a furlong he detected vibrations from the ground. He advanced secretly and found a kind of natural fireplace that emerged from the porous rock. Terrible snoring came from it.

- « Luckily, Giants are sensible people, he thought, they take a nap in the heat of the day. »

Gerry approached more. Domestic aromas of Giants assailed him then - a sweet barn blandness, spiced with a polecat burrow undertone, but softened with a smell Gerry did not recognize immediately. He stumbled away and hid into the bushes. As quiet as a ferret, he sought the entrance to the cave. He found it, a dozen yards further down. Two Giants were sprawled there, visibly bothered by the heat. They casually discussed the occupations of their lazy days:

-« Wanna play ball – fir!
- Play else!
- Why no play ball - fir?
- Much hot. Ball noise. Ppa sleeps on ball. No play ball - fir! Play else! »

Their common speech proved crude but understandable. The similarity of this domestic scene with those the Shire probably experienced right now, might have had the Hobbit laugh to tears, if he had had a less acute sense of danger.

As tall as a grown-up man but two or three times larger and heavier, the first character, lying on ferns, sported a youthful and upset face. Its completely bald and hairless cheeks stained with orange when it warmed, but its natural color was a washed-out gray-pink. It wore a kind of skin loincloth, tied at the waist with a hemp cord. The second character, who seemed bigger and behaved like the elder, wore gray and tow hair which recurred incessantly over its eyes, of the clearest blue. The young Giant sighed, sniffed and spat out of frustration. The other shook with a laughter, the surprised Hobbit found almost human, though rather coarse. Soon they were sitting side by side on a stretch of fir, and competed for the longest spit. Seing them both with a front view, Gerry realized that it was a girl - Morrg - and her sister - Dyya, almost a baby - and their resemblance was striking. Their childish features and the relative size of their head betrayed children-Giants.

- « What can be the stature of their parents? » Wondered the unfortunate Hobbit.

Since the Giant children continued their contest, he had to dodge a particularly large sputum. This
sudden avoidance seemed to sound the alarm. The noses, scraped and re-scraped, and thus fully operational, sniffed at once the superheated air. Gerry retreated just in time. He rushed into a hollow tree and ran to the other end. He had just gone out and hidden in the ferns, when the trunk he had sheltered in only seconds before, was raised as a straw and inspected from every angle. Gerry did not wait for the end of the review and skillfully evaded towards the slope.

He went to a wide and shallow bowl. The meadow in the middle of the volcanic valley, kept the traces of the Giants’ recent activity. Uprooted fir trees hung out near a giant camp fire. The hearth was dug so deep that our Hobbit could not have got out of it. Grasses were lying over wide areas, probably with firs in epic games. A little away stood a high stone table surrounded by rocks stools. Because of its size, the whole seemed like the tomb of a King of the ancient Men. Gerry also spotted two other trails that rose from the bowl to the opposite slopes. He supposed that other families lived there. He immediately went into research, especially around the pines. After an hour of investigation, he was sweating - too shy a breeze failed to refresh him. Suddenly during a break he realized that the object of his research could not be there: the "ball" the Giant children were longing for, was definitely the egg - it had been confiscated by the father to force children to have a nap and let him sleep!

Gerry returned to the cave he had fled, but taking care to approach downwind. He sneaked surreptitiously behind bushes and ferns, under pines shade. The two children had returned to their benches at the entrance of the cave, and discussed the recent attacks on the part of Great Eagles.

- « Why no play else?
- Stay home sleep safe!
- Big bird no nasty!
- Big bird nasty! Mma sore eye!
- But Ppa strong! Play catch big bird! Play catch?
- No! Stay home sleep safe!
- Big bird good eat? »

The dialogue continued between the two children, forced to stay indoors. Gerry had definitely no chance to enter the cave to retrieve the egg. He hesitated to hide and wait for the giants to get out of the cave. But then the idle children would probably take the egg to play with it... In this case it was better to profit from the nap. So Gerry went up the slope, looking for another opening. Guided by the snoring, he found one, that could lend itself to creeping burglar. But obviously this led right above the sleepers. A little further on, our Hobbit discovered a wide and blackened crack. As he approached, he was sure he had found the exhaust duct of the fireplace. The smell of burns and peat tickled his nostrils. The idea of blindly crawling down in the Giant’s kettle did not appeal much, but the smell of cold soot and no fumaroles reassured him.

After a few seconds of concentration on his beautiful ring, Gerry considered himself ready and put it away. He went down on the sly in the crack, clinging to encumbering roots. Immediately covered with soot, he tied his sling to the strongest root and sank down slowly. Once at the end of the strap, he hesitated to drop, but after a few seconds penduling in the dark, he acknowledged there was nothing else to do, and he fell in the air. Fortunately he was only two feet short and the ash was loose. The cavity was dark compared to the undergrowth, and the Hobbit acclimatized
slowly. He was at the end of a rather crude gut, where fire probably burned in winter. It must have been roughly closed by pushing a huge rock at the bottom, because something screened the rest of the duct, allowing only a thin lightray on both sides. The smell in contrast proved much stronger than outside – for the delicate Hobbit nostrils, a squadron of orcs could not cause worse fragrance.

Gerry crouched a few moments, breathing heavily in the cloud of ash his fall had raised. Suddenly he froze - something was breathing just beside him. He stepped instinctively away from the beast. For he had no doubt the Giants certainly had relegated to the closet, some mastiff in proportion to their size. Our Hobbit, petrified with terror and sweating, expected to be consumed by Houn[1] any time as an aperitif. Yet seconds passed with no bite, then minutes without even a hint of chewing. The difficult whistling subsided as ash fell in stinking air. His eyes adjusted to darkness and slowly distinguished an elongated shape, which seemed to straighten on the front. Gerry approached the opening that provided with light on the ground, not far from him, between the wall and the rock that was pushed there to close the hearth. He scratched dust and expanded the hole, which increased light.

Before him stood a Great Eagle, in the posture Celegwelwen adopted to sit on her egg. Gerry gathered his courage and whispered:

-« My name is Gerontius, aerie brother of Corongwinig, offspring of Celegwelwen and her consort Landroval...»

Gerry saw the eagle's neck straighten up and his eyes sparkle with surprise and pride. The Hobbit flexed the torso as he had seen in the nest and waited for his deferential salute was accepted as an acknowledgment of vassalage link a young eagle sets toward his elder. The Great Eagle returned his salute, deeply intrigued. He did not question this surprising statement. Eagles, who do not lie, also know how to detect it. He raised his voice in a hoarse whistle:

-« My name is Landroval, son of Gwaïrohir[2] and consort of Celegwelwen.

- Great news! Celegwelwen thought you were dead! How happy she will be!

- Giants shot me with a fir. They became ill.

- With due respect, Master Landroval, I think Giants would only defend their children. When you tried to take the Eagles’ egg back, they thought you were threatening their youth...

- Giants have become ill. They captured an eaglet and amuse themselves. Now they have taken over, the aerie brother of my chick.

- I was not caught. I came here incognito as a burglar, to take your offspring back. »

The Great Eagle did not answer - politeness prevented him from showing his doubts about the ability of the Hobbit. What can a small creature without wings? Gerry insisted:

- « I know what you think, Master Landroval. There's none so small but you his aid may need.[3] To begin with, I may get out of here and warn your brothers that you are alive. I can facilitate your escape.

- My honor is broken. What remains of it forbids me to fly away without my brother’s egg.

- Nonsense! Let us start by feeding you a bit, and you will see things more clearly! The only honor that matters is staying alive to wait and take the opportunity to reverse the setback. »

The Hobbit patiently fed the Great Eagle, granting him everything was in his bag - cooked rabbit,
clear water and his last cake crumbs and dried fruit. Snoring and smells continued to filter to the
heath with regularity through the cracks. Eagle and Hobbit argued long. The Hobbit had a pretty
simple plan. But to carry it out, he had to overcome two notorious pitfalls. The first was to
convince Landroval that real honor was to support his wife, and not to remain a withering prisoner.

-« A life is worthless but nothing is worth a life! [4] », He said in a tone of cheeky Hobbit.

But what really moved the Great Eagle was the argument of responsibility towards his offspring:

- « How will you make your son a free and happy being, if you do not wish freedom for yourself?
Your duty is to fight for him as for the egg of your brothers, it is your only honor! »

So the Hobbit’s rustic ethics obtained Landroval’s accession. Gerry described his plan to steal the
egg, which appeared to the Eagle as crystal clear. But it was necessary for Landroval to participate
as a free bird. This is where began the second and real difficulty. Our Hobbit explained this part of
the plan - the Great Eagle, as expected, was horrified. Gerry argued at length and stressed the
innocence and naivety of the Giants, or at least their children:

-« They have not understood that their ball is a living being. It is just a game for them! So they
consider you like heinous aggressors! »

But the Great Eagle could not understand the satisfaction of Giants, big or small, when pushing
before them an oval item. Indeed, the sheer concept of game was alien to him. Gerry was forced to
explain it:

-« Game is all we do, without being obliged to! [5]»

- These Giants do evil without being obliged to... Game is evil! »

Short of arguments, the Hobbit replied:

-« I assure you that the Giant’s children are unaware of the harm they do. I beseech you, on behalf
of my aerie brother that you have not met yet, do as I please. I am out of here and hold my post.
The rest is up to you... »

Gerry moved some rubble, he made a pile with, climbed it up and grabbed the end of his sling.
After a painful effort and a little push from Landroval, he found himself out of the crack. He
unlaced the leather sling and slipped under the low foliage.

Just about time! Snoring had spaced out and had eventually ceased. From the first snippets of adult
conversation, the young Giants rushed inside with hope:

-« Ball-Fir! Ball-Fir! Ppa and GrrPpa play ball-Fir! »

The youthful enthusiasm communicated to the mature generations. Despite the admonitions of the
matriarch, the family reached the central playground and indulged itself with a sort of field hockey,
with pretty rough and unstable rules. Gerry, who was lurking on the edge of the woods, watched
for two long hours. Another family came to attend the games, lending a hand from time to time to
hinder adult players. Finally parents begged for mercy, and all returned to their house.

The family restored with cold dishes, regretting the waste of the family hearth as a prison. Thus,
the Great Eagle, who was accused and looked at, began, against his deepest nature, a conversation
full of duplicity with his captors:

-« The Eagle I am, has behaved nastily. But the Eagle thinks he has had sufficient punishment.
- What Eagle say?

- Eagle was nasty. But Eagle punished enough!

- Eagle stay there. Still punished.

- Eagle was punished unfairly. Eagle wanted only finding eaglet!

- Giants no eaglet! Eagle wicked! »

Dead end was looming... Landroval swallowed his pride and biased, remembering the approach insistently proposed by the Hobbit:

-« Eagle was nasty. Eagle offers to be punished by playing Giant children! »

On the gray and pink face of the upset Giant, amazement gave way to satisfaction. His opponent conceded defeat and agreed to humble. But a background of mistrust kept him:

-« What game? »

Drawing inspiration from the fine sensations of high flight, Landroval embroidered around the game without really describing it:

-« A slide that takes you up to the firmament, a game that makes you King of the mountains, a breath that fills your lungs with strong hope, a game that rises above all others, a raw stream that will swell your heart... and a game Giants may not indulge alone! -Mountain Ride! »

The Little Giants had not followed the scholarly rhetoric of the Great Eagle, but their instincts were not wrong: this game was to be sensational, although their figurative vocabulary would have rather inclined towards the word "Grrr-wow." A big smile and bright eyes had quickly replaced their haggard look. They clung to their father buff tailcoat and rhythmically chanted:

« Mountain Ride! Mountain Ride! Mountain Ride! ...»

Father Giant had already lost the game. Under the mocking gaze of his wife, he pretended not to understand, refused flatly, postponed, claimed his great fatigue, stirred fear for Eagles, considered dangers, pretended he had something more important to do - he had to surrender. The Eagle was removed unceremoniously from its prison and questioned anew. He said as little as possible, but he hinted that he had to go to the edge of the crater at the top of the outer slope of the volcano, and then the game would begin. Gagged with a cloth of dubious cleanliness, Landroval’s legs were shackled with a long rope father Giant clutched.

The heroic line of sportsgiants went to the highest point of the Giants’ mount. GrrPpa, Ppa, Morrg and Dyya were present, their leather boots in hand. Friends and cousins, who roosted on the other side of the crater, were not invited for the first performance, because Ppa and GrrPpa, though curious and excited, still wanted to make sure they would master the technique before bragging publicly. The father volunteered and chose himself - for indisputable security reasons - to the dismay of his daughters but to the evident satisfaction of his stepfather GrrPpa, whose experience and long practice of fun bruising had made careful. The Great Eagle perched on his shoulders, and without releasing the rope, Ppa grabbed his talons. Then Landroval spread his wings in the breeze. Immediately the Giant felt somehow floating. The Great Eagle leaned forward and - hop! - The crew jumped into the slope and off they go under the young Giants’ ovation. Ppa ran down the slope, clinging to his natural brake. It was not an easy task for Landroval to drive his burden and to communicate a feeling of lightness, while preventing braking on snow and avoiding obstacles, both soft snowdrifts and dangerous rocks. Of course, the adult Giant, with his considerable weight,
could not be uplifted in the air. After a minute of descent, the great eagle appropriately accentuated one of Ppa’s mistakes and the crew fell into the snow.

Father Giant, delighted with his achievement, got up beaming. Passed the first scare, this smooth and aerial slide was quite entertaining. The final straw in a shower of snow had been positively delectable. It was not worth a good old rock throwing contest by stormy weather, but this game would occupy the children without risk. Under the cheers of a small but excited and envious crowd, Ppa, the Eagle on his back, went up the hill apace, thereby demonstrating his impeccable physical condition. Back at the top, sweating and hoarse, he had to settle the inevitable disputes and attributed to Morrg the privilege of descending next, at the cost of a crumpled stepfather and a forever grudging baby.

The young Giant’s teeth were chattering with emotion - yet Giants are never cold. She threw herself into the slope with determination and some degree of unconsciousness. Landroval had no difficulty to guide and accompany his new burden, flexible and confident, he could have tried to take off. But the behavior of the family had him think they would prove harmless as long as their toys were kept away. In his wisdom, Landroval renounced revenge. Hence he contented, thanks to the ending fall, to get rid of the cloth which hampered his beak. While Morrg was groaning up the slope, Landroval, with a peck, severed the rope, flew away without a fight and went out of sight of the family, outraged by this obvious lack of courtesy and sportsmanship.

Ppa took several minutes to realize he had been fooled. His stepfather heaped sarcasms on him, while small Dyya burst into tears and threw imprecations at her older sister, who was returning sheepishly. Father Giant was forced to give his little daughter a session of compensation. He laid on his back, feet in the slope, and sat his weeping offshoot astride his stomach. Then he slid down the slope as if he had been a hollowed tree trunk - the so-called "Schlitt" among Giants. So, after a descent that refreshed his back, followed by a grueling ascent, his younger daughter on his shoulders, Ppa resolved to return home. Fearing some confrontation, he was surprised to find a happy wife, who congratulated him for freeing their prisoner:

-« War Nasty. War more nasty Eagle! Hearth ready now! »

Ppa was grateful to his wife, because his stepfather had to stop his malicious chatter, and he enjoyed a hot stew for dinner. Raised by these unexpected laurels, father Giant magnanimously offered the children a game of ball-tree. The last discontent vanished when the father took the egg under his arm and dragged them to the central field.

But Gerry was keeping a close watch. From afar, he had witnessed Landroval’s escape and had taken position for the second part of his plan. Ambushed in the trees, he was waiting for the family to pass, since he had no doubt they would need to take comfort after the loss of their new game. The Hobbit did not have long to wait. The Giant, tall as a ten-years fir tree, led Morrg by the right hand and bore Dyya sitting on his left arm. He hummed curious onomatopoeia on a repetitive cadence. He was singing! The grandfather followed grumbling. Gerry let them pass and went after them, up to the edge of the woods near the field. He undertook a thousand tricks to progress without being seen, and managed to hide in a pile of ferns close to the Giants’ table.

While the players went rowdy, with a lot of shouting and encouragement, our Hobbit constantly scrutinized the sky. Finally, he saw what he was looking for: Landroval had returned, bearer of the gift of peace. The Great Eagle hovered on the ascending current and waited. Gerry, meanwhile, came out of hiding and crept silently to the Giants’ table. He found it hard to climb on the stone bench. Once installed there, he stayed hidden and watched the game. After a few minutes, he got lucky. Players had pushed the egg, to the point diametrically opposite to the table, on open ground. Gerry, his heart pounding, climbed on the table, cleared his throat and shouted like a fair barker:
- « Good morning to you all! By this bright summer sun, welcome to this beautiful clear meadow of our friends the Giants. Come around! I'll tell you the little story of the Giant... Beaupre! »

As you may know now, our Hobbit remains usually undaunted. But in this case, it took him a great fortitude and perseverance to draw the public’s attention on him and keep it there exclusively. You may not imagine the surprise of the Giants family. Never in GrrPpa’s memory, did humans venture here. In so far as this little shouting fellow was human indeed. Ppa could not find the words – that was rather usual – but this time he neither could move. The two children, who had pursued a chimeric pixie the same morning, slowly made some connection. Gerry bravely continued his anecdotes, straight out of his prolific mind:

- «... Since he was a lad, our Giant dreamed of becoming a knight. He learned to ride a horse but he fell awkwardly, and our poor unfortunate was grieved with a weirdly deformed face. Throughout his life, this handicap earned him the antipathy of his neighbors... »

The four Giants, arms dangling, had turned to him and advanced at the slow pace of those who are dreaming awake. Gerry continued his game:

- «... When he grew old enough to be knighted, our hero was stripped of his status as a squire. The poor lad had grown so much that no horse was no longer able to bear such an immense weight. Anyway his long legs were dragging on the ground on either sides of his mount... »

Gerry still hoarsed, gesticulating and sweating as the Giants were approaching, and scanning the sky out of the corner of his eye:

- «... One day our world’s tallest man met the world's biggest man. They fought without mercy, and our tall hero was vanquished. But the strongest man in the world, moved by his kindness and weakness, vowed never to abuse his power against the most humble and swore allegiance to the King... »

At last Gerry spotted Landroval who was dropping down on him from nowhere. He started up again, raising his voice and gesticulating expressively:

- «... In short, he had many misfortunes. He often wrote to his mother, and always ended with ‘It will be better tomorrow.’ Yet our hero died before reaching the age of majority... »

The Giants had given up on firs and egg. Landroval landed silently behind them, laying the egg-shaped stone Celegwelwen had entrusted to him, and removing the real egg in a burst. But the Giants, absorbed by the unusual spectacle continuing under their uncredulous eyes, did not notice him. As danger grew, our hero, who may not stop for a moment his flood of words, indulged in an inappropriate ribaldry:

- «... Poor Giant Beaupre was growing constantly. He reportedly intrigued many ladies, who wondered if his whole anatomy grew in proportion... »

The Great Eagle disappeared from the horizon of the Hobbit, who began to doubt the infallibility of his plan, while the group of Giants approached, as if hypnotized by his performance. Yet he continued:

- «... in the time of the Kings, he joined a troupe of acrobats. But in each castle the poor boy had to hide, reclusive, not to deprive his public in the baronial courts, of the surprise of a real giant coming on stage during the performance. Hiding a gigantic body is no easy task and he lived most
of his life without light or company. No, really, my dear friends, Giant life was not easy for him... »

Gerry launched his latest ideas. The Giants were no further than twenty yards.

-« ... In conclusion - and Gerry yelled, insisting heavily on the word! - I suggest that his remains should be returned to his family, since they were– that is beau dommage[8]! - kept way too long for exhibition. They say he even continued to grow beyond death... »

At this precise moment, Landroval, who had gained momentum outside the field of view of both Gerry and the Giants, appeared just above the ridge of the crater. Approaching against the sun, long and strongly fingered wings cleft the air eagerly. Gerry saw it with the corner of his eye, he played the all out - suddenly interrupting himself, he pointed to where the eggs had been substituted, behind the Giants, and yelled, mimicking consternation with consummate skill:

-« Beware, an Eagle is stealing your ball! »

Giants are a good and naive public. The family turned in one movement, giving Landroval the second he lacked to snap and take Gerry into the distance. Again, the shock made Gerry unconscious, but he was conveyed safely, with the egg stolen on the field. As for the Giants, the abduction of a pixie by their former prisoner left them stunned and puzzled. Did the soot sprite, once his strange ceremony was over, believed that the world had regained its natural order? Did he disappear and take the aquiline danger with him, and thus put an end to the war?

.oOo.

[1] Huan is the name of a noble dog that a hero of the first age took to vanquish the werewolves of the Dark Lord. That was a very popular dog name in the Dunedain kingdoms, and the Hobbits continued this tradition. Hence in the collective imagination of the Shire, a menacing mastiff often bears the name of « Houn », wich is the Kuduk form of the Sindarin Haun. Maybe it is also the origin of the word « Hound »?


[4] André Malraux

[5] Mark Twain

[6] Doubtless this name came to the Hobbit’s mind because of the wonderful blooming meadow at the center of the Giants crater. Most of the anecdotes Gerry invented are inspired by the life of a Canadian who lived in late nineteenth century, and whose name was Edouard Beaupré.

[7] Hobbits reach their majority at thirty-three years old.

Flights and aeries - About hockey

Chapter Summary

Gerry wins his return to home

.oOo.

Ppa rushed to remove his children’s toy from the supposed greed of the eagle. He was very proud to save it, though he barely saw any Eagle. Later he noticed that the ball was much heavier and less elastic than before. In fact, he often broke the flexible end of the fir tree he used to play with. Hence the Giant was forced to sculpt and strengthen sticks to play this family game.

That is how the noble sport of hockey found its origin among Giants. In any case that is the tale today’s men have recalled. Of course, the ball has evolved and adapted to the body size of the players, as well as the sticks. As for Morrg and Dyya’s ball, their mother finally guessed the heavy oval stone brought by the eagle was probably a gift of peace, a guarantee of balance in compensation for a lost treasure. There was no more clash between Eagles and Giants.

It seems Gerry was the only one to be moved by the tender reunion of Celegwelwen and Landroval. Apparently the Great Eagles neither get emotive nor embrace, at least in public. The testimonies of affection, if they exist, are strictly confined to the private sphere. If Celegwelwen showed any signs of satisfaction with the delivery of her consort, our Hobbit was not able to recognize them. The presentation of tiny Corongwinig was slow and formal. Landroval let the ball of feathers nibble his beak and then regurgitated some food for his offspring.

Our Hobbit realized then, that the female Celegwelwen was bigger than her consort, although Landroval seemed more vivid and muscular.

Gerry, exhausted physically and morally, nibbled his last reserves of dwarven biscuits and quickly fell asleep. He was finally able to spend a quiet and restful night's sleep, away on the grassy slope. In the morning, Landroval told him that he had returned the stolen egg to his rightful parents. Eagle squadrons exulted with the end of the war with the Giants and the recovery of the egg, but Gwaihir the King of Eagles was worried – the North quivered with alarming rumors. Thus Landroval was summoned to a council the next day. Meanwhile, the Great Eagle expressed his gratitude to Gerry on behalf of the parents of the saved egg, as well as high consideration from Gwaihir himself. He asked Gerry to name what he considered worth of his own eagle blood.

Outside of his female conquests, our Hobbit was a modest boy. The friendship of the almighty Eagles seemed far above his status. So it did not come to his mind, to ask anything for himself.

-« Master Landroval, as a friend of the Dwarves of Dùrin, I would request your high benevolence, for doing what you can to preserve Barum-Nahal, the volcano of the fathers of the Dwarves.

- We shall watch, as we always did, and teach terror to evil creatures that come near by. But we still have to find the balance in our account! Celegwelwen saved a Hobbit life. The Hobbit saved the life of an egg and an Eagle. The Eagles remain your debtors...

- Oh, not at all, Master Landroval! To pay my debt to Celegwelwen, I agreed to take care of her
chick. That is what I did - although I did not plan it before - helping you to find a way to escape. Now you can fulfill your duties as a father, much better than I ever could! In addition you are responsible for half of the rescue of the egg! So I take it we are even. However, I have one request for the future: if you ever happen to cross a Hobbit, you will recognize it now. Can you help him, in remembrance of Corongwinig’s aerie brother?

- We shall certainly help your kin, however difficult it is for us to discern a Hobbit from a rabbit! But you talk about future. Is there nothing your own heart desires now? »

Gerry did not take up the first touch of eagle humor, Landroval had graced him with:

- « My heart wishes to return to the mainland, near the daisy and fox, in the land of the little folk I am.

- Both of your wishes will come true. »

Thus, one morning at the end of Urui, Celegwelwen carried our Hobbit over the air to the "land of the little person." As usual, the Hobbit could not resist the feeling of falling in dizzying descents and vanished quickly. When he regained his senses, the Great Eagle was watching over him, on top of a grassy hill, at the bottom of a warm and pleasant valley. Fir trees around him were not familiar, but the Hobbit was now at an altitude, suitable for his survival.

- « Are we for good in the Shire?, he asked eagerly.

- Celegwelwen ignores the name of this part of the world. We are pretty familiar with a little person who lives there. Eagles call this place the vanished valley because its people are deeply reckless about the woes of the world around. »

Gerry recognized, in this description which suited the Shire perfectly, the Eagles’ acute sense of observation. He was to ask his hostess to bring him nearer the homes, but he remembered what fate was deserved for Eagles who approached the shepherds herds. Furthermore the size of his friend would certainly scare the neighborhood. He resolved to ask nothing and accomplish the rest of the way on foot.

- « Where does the little person you know live? », He asked for guidance.

The Great Eagle pointed to the South, through the groves. Finally they parted and the little Hobbit wept a while. The majestic Celegwelwen rose swiftly in the firmament.

- 'Let a steady breeze blow under your wings above the storms! », She cried, dropping a beautiful white and black feather.

- « Thank you, said Gerry who had learned the appropriate answer, May you find the conducive ascending winds to your aerie! »

.oOo.
The vanished valley - Hoos in the night

Chapter Summary

Gerry steps at last on the Shire's fair ground -or so he thinks...

.oOo.

Our Hobbit cried a little - for relief to be back home, and for sadness, to see his protectress leaving. Blocking the sun, large fingered wings beat powerfully the air for a few seconds that would remain in his mind. Gerry stared at Celegwelwen rising away and flying eastwards, until she disappeared behind a wood-covered hill.

Regret and hope disputed Gerry’s heart. His comrades’ dreams of glory and peace, even belatedly adopted then sorely disappointed, had pushed him forward. Discoveries, encounters and even suffering had made him grow. A part of himself regretted excitement, chance and hope experienced during the trip, the other aspired to the crackling fire in the familiar hearth and the aroma of sourdough bread out of his mother’s oven in Tuckborrough. But if adventures had to end up by the death of those inspired leaders you had come to love, it was better for you to return home, said our hero. Most of his companions had fallen on the road. Bera and Ingold laid under an avalanche, far to the East in the Misty Mountains, where Arathorn’s remains guarded the eagle’s pass. Even Gandalf had abandoned him, hoping to save Thráin.

Gerry searched his resources - the Eagles had provided him with dried meat and berries. His sling wrapped around his waist, he checked the pockets of his torn and stained clothing. Despite missing buttons on his vest, he kept secure his ring and the Dwarves’ necklace in his inside pocket. He had lost his purse a long time ago. He would probably have to hunt or gather his meal before joining the first cottage. He reached into his bag - he left the pieces of the beautiful pipe the Dwarves had offered him but he fetched the orc’s dagger he had taken in the eagle’s aerie, and put it on his belt.

As heat rose with the sun, he removed his jacket and put his hat on, battered, stained and discolored by the weather. He sighed and was about to set out. But to where? The steep valleys around showed a rich and varied vegetation where hardwoods dominated. The dense undergrowth rustled with birdsongs. Gerry did not know the time, but he presumed, according to temperature, that the sun would indicate the Southeast. Based on his knowledge, accumulated over many escapades in the Shire, our Hobbit considered only two places in his beloved country could match the surrounding topography. Woody End, east of Tuckborrough, showed steep and lush enough valleys, and took strange turns even for the familiar visitor. Similarly the extreme Northwest of North Farthing, could also match, as a pretty wild area next to the moors beyond the Bindbole forest. Judging from the variety of species around him, he leaned more in favor of Woody End. Hence his route should have led him northward, to reach the valley of the Water and its inns, or West through the green hills country. But if he was wrong and he stood in the Hills Estrange, going North or West would take him in desolate countries, full of potholes, which had sinister reputation. And also Celegwelwen had mentioned houses due South. Gerry went therefore in that right direction with a steep step. In the worst case he would come out of Woody End toward Hollow Willows, whence Ford’s Comitia would not be very far away...

Striding on these hills, where many roots and shrubs tangled, was particularly challenging for him.
As he struggled to climb a slope covered with dead wood, low branches and brambles, a feeling of sustained attention on his person insinuated and made him straighten up the spine. He turned, stared and listened several times. A curious thing happened then: when Gerry fixed his attention, the breeze seemed to calm down, the forest seemed to freeze, lay low without producing any sound. On the contrary, when he resumed his march, his temples beating a staccato rhythm, leaves rustling, branches creaking, whispering melodies of insects and birds, resumed carelessly.

The impenetrable forest seemed to densify its twigs throughout his progression. When he reached the hilltop, Gerry paused and took a breath. The downslope in front of him announced difficult too. His instinct as well as Dúnedain lore, led him to lift somehow - he climbed the branches of an oak. At the top of the tree, he had to hold on tight, for the wind proved stronger than expected. Somewhat tossed down the flexible trunk, he realized with horror that high mountains hemmed the valley where these woods grew. Crushed by the weight of this revelation - which ruled he could not be in the Shire - he nearly fell. But survival instinct, pinned to any Hobbit’s body, was now enhanced with skills taught by the best, and a magic ring. Wishing with all his soul to come back home, he hardened his will, made a broad overview to detail the terrain and climbed down the tree.

Back on the ground, he scratched his occiput, under his hat. Where was he? Examining the issue from every possible angle, he supposed he had not left the Misty Mountains.

« What a pity I cannot stand up high fly!, he said. Had I been aware, I could have guided Celegwelwen and I would now indulge a beer in warm Prancing Pony inn at Bree, my feet on a soft cushion and a clay pipe in my mouth. »

He wondered why Celegwelwen had told him that a small person lived nearby. No Hobbit lived, to his knowledge, in the Misty Mountains, at least the address was unknown to the Shire postal service. But the Eagles do not lie, he was sure of it. So our Hobbit decided to head South, hoping to meet someone.

He went down the gently sloping hill, climbing over roots and crawling under brambles. Gradually, mulberry trees gave way to blooming wild roses. Then branches laden with roses wrapped in graceful arches. Old trees finally became less frequent, alternating flowery ceilings and foliage skylights. Gerry hardly wondered this spring anthology in the month of Urui. He ended up not being able to move forward without following the aisles, amazingly well drawn, which widened as he traveled South. Without any clear break marking the boundary, the Hobbit had walked from a wild hawthorn grove to a cleverly designed rose garden. Hedges did not seem to be really cut with instruments, yet bent to the whims of the gardener. Gerry lost no time to pick up here and there, some ripe berries, green edible shoots or young roots. Further away, elegant shrubs and young ash trees lined the walkways, which evoked the elven hedge mazes, Gandalf had spoken of in Eregion. Occasionally meanders wrapped around miniature gardens, where succulents abounded. Gerry had never seen any before and they rivaled with vivid colors and bold shapes. Heady fragrances, constantly renewed, quickly passed in the breeze that animated the branches. His heart delighted but surprised by such luxuriance, our Hobbit found and followed a tamed brook, that gurgled over a bed of neat pebbles.

He had not been able to walk in pure and fresh water for ages. The limpid stream cleared his mind. On second thought, these enchanting places looked more like an elven pleasure park, than a Hobbit vegetable garden! Gerry was reassured, since such an inspired and competent gardener, would certainly not give him an unwelcome reception. He disturbed a small red squirrel, finishing the daily inspection of its acorns and hazelnuts hiding places. The animal appeared angry, climbed down a walnut tree and stood in front of Gerry, looking quite indignant. The Hobbit approached, moving his hand to attract the small animal that tended its sniffing muzzle. Seeming to drape into its proven dignity, the squirrel wrapped its tail around him, sneezed and turned away in disgust, let
out a low whistle of scorn and went trotting down an alley.

Gerry was stunned and brought his sleeve to his nose. His own smell terrified him! What happened to the young dandy, sure of his charm and freshness? No doubt he had sown his vanity to the winds of adventures. But now it mattered to find the right measure of pride. Therefore our stinking Hobbit found downstream, an area paved with large flat stones, at the confluence with another rivulet. Once installed, he realized he was surrounded by soapwort. Remembering fondly Arathorn’s lessons, Gerry went to work - he rubbed rhizomes on the stone and got a rich lather that he used for rubbing himself. He realized that a significant down now covered his chin. As heat was still rising, our Hobbit decided to make a big laundry and washed his clothes. After this burst of safety, our tired Hobbit afforded the luxury of a nap in the shade, while the sun dried his clean clothes.

The Hobbit was off again, not without collecting, at every opportunity, berries and tubers for the event - almost certain – of future less pomp days. The driveway, covered with sand and sometimes shingle, headed now toward the Southwest, bending occasionally westward. He followed it with his furtive Hobbit step.

The driveway led to a large forest, well cleaned and free of lower branches, which promoted proliferation of beautiful ferns of several species, duly confined to their small diamond, bordered by white stones. In the fading light, Gerry recognized species of a variety that usually did not cohabit. No fallen trunk, no pop roots, no potholes impeded his progress. All around, the natural vivacity of trees and plants was under control with kindness. The spirit of order of the gardener was reflected in the docile growth of each species. Gerry noticed a family of mice making their reserves in small piles at the foot of a gnarled oak, among the roots of which they lived. Even small animals seemed to help preserve this domesticated harmony! A volley of acute protests had sanctioned his attempt to capture a bunch of nuts, so he retreated, a little ashamed, and went on his way in growing darkness. In the middle of the night, he finally found shelter under a fir tree, which lower branches formed a tent. He had some difficulties in gathering leaves to make a blanket, they were so few! Finally, he curled as he could and tried to sleep.

The full moon cast caring shadows in the calm and collected undergrowth. But soon a strange noise interrupted the peaceful silence of night. A bird of prey, posted in high branches, punctuated the slow trajectory of the moon. From time to time, a howl sounded, longer or shorter. Gerry was unable to sleep a wink. Exasperated, he finally noticed the bird respected a particular sequence. A "Hoo!", followed fifteen minutes later by two, then another fifteen minutes, by three others. The following hooting was longer. But then the cycle resumed. After the third hour of sleep, our Hobbit completely woke up: the owl was singing time! These impromptu cries mimicked the periodic manifestations of the great clock of Tuckborough... Worn out, our Hobbit rebelled at a late hour of the night:

-« May not an honest Hobbit have a well deserved rest, he cried, It's time to stop! Besides, you are not on time, it will soon be broad daylight! »

Anger and fatigue render irrational and unfair. Not only did Gerry complain to a respectable owl which was merely performing its office, but he made a false allegation: the bird was perfectly on time!

- « Hoo? », Said the old owl, torn between outrage and disbelief. After deep reflection, the venerable provider for the night account flew, ulcerated.

Gerry, that fatigue had made inaccessible to respect for elders, sighed and began his descent to sleep. But moments later, a large bird settled in the branches of the fir tree:

-« Cuckoo? »
And the inexorable counting resumed, much to the dismay of our poor Hobbit, who could testify that the regularity of the "Cuckoos" was worth the precision of the "Hous"... In retrospect, he scolded himself for having chased the night sentry bird, to call the day sentinel. But at the time, he cursed them with equal fervor.

Annoyed and irritable, Gerry got up the next day in a very bad mood. But it must be assumed that this little corner of the world had some unknown secret power, a mysterious propensity to erase sorrows and frustrations, to bring things to a serene and natural order. Our Hobbit joined the stream, took a refreshing swim and did not remember his horrible night. Considering his frayed clothes spread on the rollers, he was seized by an uncontrollable urge to mend his belongings, to bring them in a firm but deft hand to the cozy atmosphere of a neat home, a domesticated garden, a harmonious thought. Reclaiming the appearance of a sophisticated Hobbit, seemed like a normal counterpoint to the unpleasant and chaotic adventures he had experienced recently. So he took advantage of the first sunrays, after a frugal but slowly savored breakfast, for a bit of sewing and embroidery. Deploring the lack of assorted colors threads, he was nevertheless satisfied with his putting, which had lost luster to gain care. His satchel slung over a refreshed jacket, our dapper Hobbit adjusted his eagle feather hat and resumed his journey to the South.

What a pleasant walk in what a strange land! Deep woods succeeded orchards, rose tree glades followed hawthorn labyrinths, and leafy lanes led to colorful gardens. Without forgetting to pick up some snacks, our Hobbit corrected lost antlers, clarified driveways, removed parched bits. This valley was talking to his unconscious as a grand-mother’s retreat to a child's heart. Was that the immemorial past of Hobbits, a golden age, forgotten or to come? He only missed a great river, lined with reeds and iris...

Gerry’s musings floated melancholically on a hull, alongside an old gnarled gnome, when a red flame crossed his field of vision. When he came back to present time, the flame had passed, not without leaving a curious little tune in his ear:

- « Spring blooms wane.
My Beloved of me was never tired.
Summer prolix came.
Her beauty lionized our embrace.
Fall is blowing. My burrow

with a new room is adorned... »

Affecting not to be surprised by anything strange, our Hobbit had no trouble finding the slightest trace which crossed the orchard. He followed the footprints and soon the red flame pranced before him through gardens and forests. At the foot of a hazel trees slope, Gerry sang the chorus in unison and drew his last biscuit to coax the animal, which immediately stopped his singing. When they reached the top, a fox glared on him suspiciously. Standing on its hind legs and leaning against an ash, he wore a green velvet breastplate with the most beautiful effect. A monocle, hung at the second button by a small silver chain, gave him a very distinguished but somewhat haughty look. Gerry stepped forward, holding out his biscuit awkwardly:

-« Mmm, that's good! Want some? »

The fox looked like a Hobbit gourmet would consider a worm in the middle of an apple, and whispered in a bittersweet tone:
- "Do not expect me to swallow any rustic food, stirred by the first bumpkin who passes by! You are not addressing the dumb newcomer!"

.oOo.
Chapter Summary

Gerry finally meets someone refined.

.oOo.

Although Gerry expected some fancy, he remained stunned for a moment. But the conceit of this dandy with a mustache, soon gave him back his eloquence:

-« I beg your pardon! Probably I behaved awkwardly, trying to coax you with a biscuit. Maybe I am the first of my kind who came in this strange valley. But there is certainly no reason to suppose that my hardiness, inherited from my ancestors, deserved me to be called a bumpkin! »

The fox raised a snide eyebrow - so this creature with hairy feet proved able, if not of distinction, at least of a sustained argument...

-« I am afraid that was somehow rash of me to suppose you were a bumpkin...
- No doubt I was absent-minded to try to appease you in such a trivial way...
- Since we lack common acquaintance, shall we make the presentations on our own... »

Noting that the strange creature did not seem to obey its own injunction, Gerry figured he had better take the lead, as a foreigner:

-« Gerontius, son of Fortimbras Took, Thain of the Shire, to serve you! », he bowed low.

The natural and distinguished courtesy of the Hobbit, and even more, the mention of the Thain, the fox did not know but that seemed to be a title for good, finished to cheer him up :

-« Master Corruscin[1], Prince of Foxes and master of the woods beyond! » He whispered with an affable air of confidence, as if this revelation was an exceptional favor.

Gerry did not feel in a position to be choosy. He was lost, felt very much alone and was eager to go home. He had just met a being endowed with intelligence and speech, who seemed local - so he decided to take advantage of this presence without stopping to strange circumstances and the peculiar twist of the interview:

-«Would you mind telling me how to get back to the Shire?
- How would I know better than the Prince of this country?
- But I am lost...
- Let us see... Here it is! Just follow down the path you took to come hitherto! », Yelped the fox brightly.
-«Unfortunately, that is impossible, objected the Hobbit, I came through the air ...
- How regrettable! remarked the fox who revolved around the Hobbit to inspect his back suspiciously. « I am sincerely afraid I am not able to guide you. I have so much to do here that the outside world has not yet had the benefit of my visit... »

Actually the fox suffered from an uncontrollable fear - of large raptors. It happened, as a fox-lad, he narrowly escaped capture by a Great Eagle that had mistaken him with a rabbit. Since he convinced Gerry was not a bird, he noticed the beautiful eagle’s feather stuck in his hat and asked:

- «Have you trained an eagle?

- Absolutely! He dropped me off here as a price for the life of his offspring! »

The fox, reassured and impressed, looked at his watch and continued:

- « But perhaps would you agree to have a cup of tea?

- Certainly, assured the Hobbit who had not indulged with the most civilized ritual Hobbits knew, for several months. And perhaps will you agree to share my biscuit to accompany this tea? »

The fox laughed politely with the Hobbit’s banter but did not answer as to the biscuit:

- This way please... »

The fox took the lead, trotting, swinging his red plume gracefully. Master Corruscin harangued about "His" lands, housing shortage for small game, and damages of last summer’s rains, when the companions arrived in front of wooden steps under the stump of a huge oak tree felled by lightning. A weasel strove there on the small round window. The lady, slender and supple, stopped and issued warning treble trills and a short whistled barking, showing her small fangs. The fox turned up his lips:

- « We beg you, Mustela, please stop fussing and go your own way. My household remains to its first member, here to serve you. "

The lady with nose so sharp and brown and white striped dress, jumped flexibly and returned to the woods, not without casting a long dismissive cry. Corruscin retorted:

- « You had better not rely on that old sly. Raminagrobris[2], although lazy, knows a single law, the rule of the strongest! »

Once lady Mustela was gone, the fox grabbed a twisted key under a large ivy and had Gerry inside. The enormous stump was hollow and arranged with cunning and taste. A Hobbit felt there immediately at ease and safe.

Then only, Gerry suspected what was really going on: he had to be dreaming. He had fainted in Celegwelwen’s talons and was dreaming on their way to the Shire. Corruscin was busy before the fire and soon the kettle whistled, which recalled nothing so much as Mother Plump’s cottage. For sure he was dreaming. There was therefore no need to worry, nothing bad could happen... Hence Gerry casually smiled and asked:

-« How comes lady Weasel does not talk like you and me?

- Come on, do not be ridiculous!, said the fox with a sharp air, while stirring his tea with a silver spoon. Weasels do not speak! »

Our Hobbit swallowed a sweet and fragrant brew, which reminded of the fragrance of fruit trees
laden with spring flowers.

-« But still... »

Gerry did not finish his objection. Obviously, the fox could not stand to be treated as an animal. His dream proved stubborn... He wondered if it would not be better for him to make the necessary efforts to return to the Shire, even in a dream. So he continued:

-« I mean, I would like to meet someone who can show my way home! »

The fox sipped his tea for an moment, then hung his gesture with a meditative air, his little finger in the air:

-« I shall take you to Avacuna. She is the mother of us all, she may help you out. »

Thus our Hobbit was taught the customs of this strange land, chatting about this or that with his host. Indeed he hesitated about what to do, not knowing how deep he lived in a dream or in reality. He spent a very pleasant night in a very cozy sofa. In the morning, he imagined a moment in the room of a young Hobbit girl. When he saw Corruscin’s muzzle and mustache exceed the quilt, the memory flowed back to him. If dream there was, it was not done yet! The dandy master of the house felt great difficulty waking. When Gerry compelled him by the irresistible means of a bacon and mushrooms fricassee in the manner of the Burroughs, the fox unfolded his old boy ritual, arguing that since his tranquility was sentenced at short term, he made a point of honor to enjoy the last pleasures of independence. Gerry could not agree more! Thus, after a very full breakfast, a careful toilet and an endless fitting, master Corruscin opted for a blue coat and went out sniffing the fresh morning air. He armed himself with a cane with silver knob and carefully locked his house, not without a prior inspection turn around.

.oOo.

NOTES


[2] Character from a fable of La Fontaine, in which a weasel and a rabbit come before him to expose a property dispute.
Chapter Summary

Corruscin leads Gerry to a strange healer.

.oOo.

It was not far from noon when Master Fox and his Hobbit friend went out, arm in arm below, to visit an acquaintance. A pale sun struggled to dispel the mists which flooded the valley. Master Corruscin harangued more than usual, boasting Avacuna’s scholarship, wisdom and strength of character. Responding to the innocent questions of the Hobbit, however, the fox let see, along with a deep attachment, some anxiety that Gerry visualized by imagining Avacuna as a matron with huge fist, mocking, motherly and demanding - exactly the kind of person he was strong to coax with a glance and a well tucked compliment.

- « Do you know she taught me my letters, against the advice of my father? How many things mother Avacuna did for me! She is free during this time of year, clarified the fox with a phlegmatic air. Therefore she should be attentive to your requests. »

Gerry rubbed his hands. He was going home.

Master Corruscin took him by dales and roads under congested skies. Summer heat, though held in check by the altitude and clouds, opened flowers and foliage. The companions reached a large river, lined with reeds and willow trees. The river meandered through the bottom of a small depression, descending from the Northeast, where bogs gave life to numerous streams. As Gerry pretended to bathe his feet in there, Corruscin caught him by the elbow:

-« Do not get too close to these old grumpies. They are versatile and often brood a very bad mood! »

The fox drew his companion on a pretty logs bridge, that spanned the river on two graceful arches. They stopped in the middle to watch the stream that widened toward the southwest in a marsh of reeds and cattails. Immediately after the bridge, the friends halted at the foot of a high grassy mound. A gathering of small animals frolicked there. Lady weasel, who seemed to conspire with some stone marten, with a forbidding and guilty air, fled away when the fox appeared. A respectful concert of playful greetings, sometimes gently mocking, rose in the assembly of small woodland hunters. The chorus of rabbits, servile and readily obsequious, was never tired of bows and demonstrations of deference to his majesty of the burrows. Master Corruscin pontificated to the attention of his companion:

-« You see, my dear Gerontius, this valley houses the reign of harmonious civility of speech and right. Outside, well, woe to those plump rodents, fearful and helpless! Their speed rarely saves them from my race... Apart from our dale of order, where everyone knows his place and wisely takes pleasure from it, predation enforces the right of the powerful!

- However, I found that order also reigns beyond. Everyone finds there the place that his qualities spare him. Only the Free People, endowed with thought, are to rise above the fray for survival. To be honest, I may not catch and eat a speaking being, be it a rabbit. I would feel as low as a troll or a
- Both species - loath them! - are endowed with understanding - in very different proportions indeed. Especially as they indulge in baseness and evil! Should I consider them much the same rank as you and me?

- Trolls and goblins are mockeries of the Free People. Their crimes make them hateful and insane to us and denies them the rank of beings of thought. You detain indeed, dear Corruscin, the right and the duty to treat them as enemies. But never did you have, I am sure, the idea of eating them!

- I agree. But back to rabbits, rest assured. Our speech-talented fellow do not venture their long ears beyond the limits of our valley. Their capacity for thought, although often confined to eating, is used at least to this aim! »

Satisfied with this philosophical compromise, the duo engaged in the slope, fraught with oaks and heather. A huge flat stone crowned the summit, supported by five megaliths. Gerry advised that only the Powerful of the Earth, or giants, had been able to assemble the monument to the first age of the world. A shaggy and dense forest of gnarled oaks and low hawthorn covered it. Between the giant pillars of raw rock, thousand years old roots entangled with stone walls assembled with art, interlacing old fabrics, and patterns of wicker. Perennials and exotic flowers proliferated on the walls and ceiling, and reinforced the feeling of a natural cave with multiple ramifications.

In these disparate mosaic’s alcoves, blended the most diverse ornaments, as variegated as would have been, in the mind of a Hobbit, the troubled history of Eriador. Dunland hillmen tartans hung alongside with rare dyes silk sold on the banks of ancient Tharbad, nostalgic heraldry of the Arnor Dúnedain, and some eternal elven tulle. Gerry recognized antiques that reminded him of the mysterious retreat of his grandfather. A boxwood sculpture representing an ibex from the Misty Mountains, polished by the years, seemed to come out of the mists of time beyond memory. A mural reminded him of his worst Hobbit child nightmares. One of the niches seemed to house the death chamber of a warrior of old - the spear and steel sword raised before a reverent but derisory stack of armor, helmet and bronze greaves, bedecked with egrets and faded purple plumes. Further a rock, a strangely colored stone, an unexpected concretion reminded him the objects collected during his childhood wanderings. In the next alcove, a collection of carved ivory spears stood among musical instruments, forgotten by men. Avacuna’s refuge lounged memory of lost tales, abandoned on the moss of years in the fog of memory.

Hazel, elder and blackthorn encircled the top where no one dared to venture, except Corruscin and his host. For the terrible cries that rose from the cave, refrained any curiosity. The screams recalled Gerry of the terror protests of a pig led to the slaughter.

-« I am being slain; that tears me from myself! Who will have pity on a poor badger fur?
- Will you hold your tongue, you ugly wolverine! Is not your lust responsible for your pain?
- Is it my fault, if my partner Grimberthe took refuge under prickly gorse? »

A character leaned solicitously but firmly to the patient, who claimed to suffer martyrdom and complained incessantly. Maintaining the raucous Badger with a strong grip, the woman withdrew one by one, with energy and dexterity, thorns broom planted in the back of the patient. Auburn curls framed an oval face of Elven grace, whose pallor heightened with thousand freckles that sparkled like brown fireflies by a clear summer evening. Her almond feline eyes, deep and hypnotic azure, rested on Gerry, who, frozen by the charm, hardly noticed the long, pointed and mobile ears of the girl. Bold and sophisticated braids domesticated her long rebel mane.
The young woman and the Hobbit contemplated each other, transfixed for a long time. Gerry heard the Dorthonion lynx’s growl when the world was young, singing the freedom of snowy mountainous or lurking in deep forests. The Call of the Wild rose, compelling and vital, but the Hobbit could not guess if the injunction urged him to kill to feed the cubs or unite with the female to produce new ones. Avacuna contemplated the man-child with a predator lust, blended with the instinct of the female in heat. But she did not let the badger. Master Corruscin, who watched carefully, nodded with an air of reserve. He was about to speak when the patient proved vehemently impatient:

-« Will you let a poor badger suffer a hundred deaths before relieving him? »

Avacuna, as whipped by this selfish ingratitude, turned surly to the patient, immobilized by her heavy grip:

-« Have you any idea of the lady badger’s sufferings when she gives birth as the fruit of your attentions? Therefore do suffer for a while, since you did not hesitate to chase after her into a gorse bush! »

The young woman continued her work once again, bringing out at the same time cries of pain and long spines that were the cause of them. When she finished, she put a poultice of leaves coated with a sticky balm, on the back of the animal. Her magnetic eyes fell again on Gerry, who had regained control of his senses and Hobbit rhetoric mastery:

-« Learned a lot who suffered much! [2]

- What do you know about suffering, you plump and young son of man? Humans inflict more often than they undergo the suffering of the world!

- Do not be deceived, O fairy saving the burrows people! A hobbit is standing before you, not a juvenile representative of the Big Folk!

- A holbytla, son of the river! Your kind seems tailored to enjoy earthly pleasures!

- My people have learned the painful way, that work and helping each other wards scarcity off. Grimbert our friend, who seems to suffer martyrdom, will now be wary of thorns!

- But will he acknowledge he pesters his female companion?

- Each day has enough pain and lesson... Maybe it will take him other biting! »

The Hobbit’s moderation favorably surprised Avacuna. The subtle pleasures of high talk had been denied to her for quite a long time - and for ages also had no Hobbit crossed the Misty Mountains. She decided to provoke her interlocutor:

-« Suffering too much makes sour. Suffering not enough, makes silly [3]. What is your suffering?

- Most Hobbits suffer from silliness as well as sour stomach. May you deduce we have suffered too much to overlook pleasures, but not enough to fear a lack for them. »

The girl raised a delighted eyebrow - this young Hobbit brilliantly handled paradoxes! The spark of beastly desire that Gerry glimpsed in that look somewhat tied his stomach. But Avacuna grabbed him by the elbow, smiled kindly and walked away with him, adopting the playful tone of the Hobbit. Master Corruscin adjusted his monocle with a philosopher air and retired with dignity,
knowing when he is redundant.

Avacuna barely exceeded Gerry by the size, but when she scanned the Hobbit, her every move irresistibly evoked the limpid grace and supple force of the marauding feline. She moved silently, permanently perched on the tip of her long barefoot, covered with beige fur. Only her muscular toes, that bore sharp claws, adhered to the soil, without leaving a trace. Her bright linen tunic seemed to reflect lights and colors around, harmonizing with the tawny tones of Avacuna’s hair when she warmed up, or blending with forest shades when she ran nonchalantly. Her alert face betrayed at every moment the predator, particularly when her long dark hair plumed ears quivered, or her short mustache thrilled.

They walked a long time among willows, chatting about this and that. Avacuna’s memories seemed to go very far, she knew many things the Hobbits had forgotten. In some ways, the woman reminded him of Gandalf, his intransigence and his gentleness. But she appeared ignorant and remote about events, as if mortals posturing seemed derisory, next to the high tides of that age. At times, the savage violence of her character flushed in her feline muscles or her fawn look - the Hobbit then redoubled scholarly figures of styles and subtle metaphors, which charmed the civilized part of the girl.

.oOo.


[2] La chanson de Roland

Thus, they two learned to know each other and lived isolated from the world for more than a moon, dreaming at dusk or lazing in furs in the lair of Avacuna. And for the first time in his life, Gerry asked his partner not to cut corners. Indeed his girlfriend’s leering feline glow sometimes bewildered or even scared him. Despite her impulses, assumed by Avacuna, her attitude remained ambiguous. The presence of a Hobbit with a juvenile goodwill, plunged her in her own carefree and hopeful years. Yet this merry company could not completely erase the past misfortunes and dangers that haunt the outside world. Gerry’s bright and sharp mind, exquisite politeness, respectful irony, taste for good things and exotic fashion dress brought her entertainment, she realized now she had sorely missed. This Hobbit appreciated females of his species - Avacuna instinctively felt that, which displeased her not at all - but she also sensed that deep wounds had recently revealed. Finally something essential and deeply new came from this new companion - his unselfishness, his absolute lack of desire for power and supremacy, she had never detected in any of her previous consorts.

They shared the stories of their lives. The Hobbit, for the first time, did not feel the need to tone down this or that dared passage, to disguise this or that treason or enhance this or that twaddle. Avacuna saw him as a reckless and foraging bumblebee, who had barely reached the age of reason at a forced march. On her side, she had difficulty in translating into words, her nebulous memories before she mastered language. It was a happy coincidence that prevented the Hobbit to mistake about the savage side of his companion.

Each of Avacuna’s many trinkets, that tinkled when she did not heed, held a story or a memory. To learn more, Gerry was exclaimed about the extravagant variety of ornaments of the young woman, who rivaled her den’s splendors. Avacuna reluctantly explained the hopes and disappointments she had experienced. Gerry went slowly to realize that his friend had suffered so many trials and had so many enemies, that her confidence in the human race remained permanently shaken. Many times her desire to unite a man of worth had led to uncover herself, to risk in adventure, to force her own nature by leaving her forests. But in Man, it seemed, greatness was associated with ambition. The flames devoured the human at the expense of the natural order. And always excess hastened his demise. On several occasions Avacuna underwent Men’s cruel sting of betrayal, disappointment and shame, ultimately rejected for her appearance and aspirations. She had returned to live quiet days, caring for wildlife, having given up on finding a soul mate but filling her days with her children and the people of the valley who alone, had accepted her for who she was.

-« And you, little holbytla, which battle are you fighting? Which grandiose design fits in your young male’s mind? », Asked Avacuna, guessing the trouble her story had thrown the Hobbit into.

Our Hobbit felt somehow dizzy, listening to the young woman telling her past. He ventured, sounding a little complacent, to claim that hobbits’ customs proved much more civilized than Big Folk or inhabitants of wilderness. The term "civilized" crumpled the girl and she asked in an
« Would you dare to claim that you never committed meanness? »

Gerry feared the penetrating mind and the animal intuition of his companion. He had already noted that half-truths invariably elicited her knee-jerk reaction, as if she feared her credulity would be abused. Was it by cowardice to forestall when his meanness would be discovered despite himself, or rather by an honest spirit in honor of his girlfriend? Our Hobbit never knew exactly but the fact remains that in a low voice he told her of his greatest shame - how he came into possession of a ring of power and how the object had slowly taken, despite himself, a ascendancy over him, causing him to surpass in circumstances when he should have been devoured. Never intimacy of this kind had united him with a Hobbit girl. And he feared his confession might lose his singular companion for him.

Avacuna listened attentively, as one expects the end of a nightmare, dreamed many times. When he finished, he felt relieved - not for long! She was swallowing her tears of anger.

« Therefore Hobbits share mortal Men’s fate. Hopefully you have not exactly stolen this item! But you have deceived the intentions of your young friend by pure selfishness! Hear my words, Gerontius of the Hobbits! Redemption barely remains for now at your fingertips, only since your achievements were made for the benefit of your friends. »

The tearful and confident young girl had turned strikingly into a fury hal-bobcat, half woman, wielding curses. She now dominated him with double her usual size, ready to rip his head with a clawed paw. Gerry, terrorized, defended himself by adding bad faith on awkwardness:

« I had no intention to deceive her! I have only been somehow coward! But that was before this whole trip... I see more clearly now. And I intend to get rid of the ring... unless you want it? Take the ring! And I shall be saved, I can go home and I will marry Priscilla Hornblower to repair my wrongs! And everyone will be happy and I will not have fooled anyone! »

Then for the first time in her long life, Avacuna experienced an unknown feeling, cold and implacable serpent, inflaming the heart with pangs of bitterness, and embracing the spirit with the torments of doubt - jealousy. At the height of rage, she drew herself up to her powerful feline stature and growled angrily:

« Tell me what might prevent me from robbing you of your manhood? »

Gerry, in his haste, was hardly inspired:

« Your conscience? The most basic precepts of civilization?... The sweet moments we just shared?... A pleasant and relaxing occupation... A riddle contest! I know you really like that kind of thing! »

The incongruity of the Hobbit’s proposals had the effect of a cold shower on Avacuna. What she wanted was an honorable and frank companion. Even for such a moment he could not stop pretending. She regained control of her nerves at the thought of a duel. This cockerel was to be disillusioned! She sketched a smirk:

« All right! I take your manhood if I win! What do you want if you win? »

Gerry hesitated. His heart cried out to him "make peace with you!". But peace may not be made with a furious beast, no more than with a scorned woman who swallowed her resentment.

- « Go home! » He said firmly and defiantly.
- « Let it be! » Avacuna launched shortly. After a moment of reflection, she enunciated:

-« Passenger without luggage.

Heir without purse.

His legacy will not bequeath.

Knows how to do,

But may not do so.[1] »

The answer occupied Gerry’s whole mind for a few moments. Even its formulation ached in advance. Sweating profusely, he said shakily:

- « A Hobbit deprived of his faculty for an offspring... like a capon!

- That is right! You are viewing the important issues. Ask your riddle... »

Riddles are a very old game. Tales report that even the vilest creatures hesitate to evade or to cheat. A sentenced person may not be denied the right to try his last chance at riddles. Avacuna had even not considered refusing the offer, that sounded like a challenge. Since some well-turned riddles had toured the Northern lands for ages, many variations could be heard at the taverns all over Eriador. Thus it could be thought an inns connoisseur as keen as Gerry would stand in a privileged position. But imagine yourself struggling with a terrifying opponent and a fatal outcome in case of failure. In addition, when one runs out of the classics, inventing riddles on the spot and within the rules, requires an uncommon presence and agility of mind.

By the way, nothing forbade the players, as Avacuna just had, to remind the horrible issue in the guise of a riddle. But Gerry found this particularly unfair and failed to concentrate to find a worthy riddle. After a long time, he opted for one of the clichés of travelers, most hackneyed in the Shire inns:

- « Ten companions who never stride the roads together? »

Avacuna felt offended by this lack of imagination. She gave the answer with disdain:

- « Toes! » and went on to a childish riddle, very close to the latest, to mark her contempt:

- « Two squads of swashbucklers sorted by size,

Winner and loser in turn,

Vassals of the same headman. »

Gerry threw the response of a triumphant air:

-« Feet! », without understanding Avacuna unconsciously tried to establish communication through the game. It reminded him of a riddle he had forged himself a few years ago at the Scarry inn. He enunciated without delay:

- « Steward opposes any,

Captain shows the way,

Sergeant lies lasciviously,
Loving Corporal clothes his golden armor,

Petty soldier listens silently. »

Gerry remained in spite of himself in the register of limbs. Therefore Avacuna had no trouble giving the answer - the fingers! - Disappointed by the poor difficulty of the game but enjoying the lively style of the last puzzle. Returning to herself, she found an old spicier riddle:

- « Patient sequence,

Winding line unrolled too quickly,

I may not be forced to stop,

But I stop for each of us. »

Gerry remained silent for a long time, mired in speculation around counting along milestoned winding roads. The woman long and patiently patted her fingers on the table.

- « Your time is up! », finally chanted Avacuna smiling with a relentless and bad air.

- «Time, time! » roared Gerry on the verge of apoplexy.

This time Avacuna lost her means. Thoughtlessly giving the answer to her own riddle was a novice mistake! She shook her head, waving her red mane, which inspired to Gerry the matter of his riddle:

- « Flies without wings,

Grows landless,

Worries as wisdom decimate,

Age governs its color.»

The young Woman recovered. Using all her faculties, she found the answer: "Hair!". Then she struck a blow, she thought was hard:

- « Comes friends closer,

Opens onto the unknown,

Yards between the yards,

Ribbon on the dress in the world». 

But Gerry had been traveling on the answer for months. After removing the "journey", he replied "the road!". Naturally enough, the image of the road led home. Then he improvised:

-« Neither empty nor full,

Of air, it is not.

Dark or bright according to ease,

Away from the nest, but cozy by reputation,
The secret and homebody nature of Hobbits accorded well with Avacuna. Reflection had brought the young woman to a less worrisome stature. Hence, when she submitted "Home", our hero gallantly accepted her answer, although it was actually a Hobbit hole. This breach in the spirit of competition troubled Avacuna more than she wanted to admit. Her vindictive ardor blunted; she thought of Men, their strengh, their weaknesses and the ambiguous gift of death. No doubt their scores deserved caring. A refrain of Men from a distant time came then to her mind. She gave the riddle:

- « Intermediate link 

In a chain that multiplies
At each step or dwindles
Without which would be less
As a tree root, proud and vigorous »

Hobbits have a passion for genealogy. This is the main reason that pushes them to acquire some letters. They document the family ties they know, to be permanently able to assess with no mistake, the degree of kinship with people they encounter all week long. Besides, multiple kinship ties often provide material for discussion between two neighbors. Inspired by the Took family tree that fell over dozens of pages in the archives of Tuckborough, Gerry replied quickly:

- « This is an ancestor!»

The face of Avacuna brightened. This old game had calmed her wrath. Riddles were the mark of a civilized being. Maybe this game was born once, invented by the wise heads of two clans to prevent them from tearing each other apart? In riddles, words played with the sense like the mind flattered the senses. Gerry knew that and had gradually understood Avacuna’s envy to renew trust. Remembering a classic riddle, he perfected his statement:

- « Chrysophile inextinguishable 

Selfish arrogance
Bane of the greedy,
Curse of his winner. »

Avacuna savored the balanced rhythm and concise erudition of the riddle. Indeed the first word of the riddle gave the solution immediately. But impenetrability was not essential to a good riddle - it is essential the revealed answer appears obvious the losing candidate. Of course the lexical or rhetorical veil with which the author hides his statement should serve its purpose to win the contest, but in this game winning without panache is worse than succumb without merit. By the way, the issue was hardly fatal in this particular competition, since elegance now prevailed for both competitors. In any case Avacuna seemed quite abandoned to the pleasure of verbal jousting - Gerry for his part spurred his imagination, as much for the declared attraction he felt for his companion, as by the apprehension of a still possible new savagery crisis. Avacuna sang the answer: "The dragon! ", then proceeded to revisit a classic:
- « My many parents are slender than me,
Pettier than my child.

I have a gorge but can only sing,

I flow but do not drown,

I have a bed but never sleep there.»

Gerry recognized the elegant and clever variant of a riddle well known in the Shire. He had the gallantry to present the answer as if it were a question - "the river?" - His companion was not fooled but appreciated the attention. Then Gerry launched a vigorous statement, prepared when Avacuna thought about her previous riddle:

- « More powerful than the dragon,
More vulnerable than the newborn,
The blind man sees me,
The deaf hears me.

Who eats me dies. »

It was a novelty of his own. Avacuna thought, frowned, changed position, motivated herself by a variety of approaches. Curiously, Gerry who held his victory, formulated prayers for the game not to stop immediately. Avacuna would admit that she thought nothing could match, when she realized she had the answer:

- « Nothing! The answer is nothing! »

Gerry clapped his hands, positively thrilled. Avacuna blushed like a young girl receiving her first gallant compliment, but she was not to be intoxicated by success. After an inspired searching, she continued:

- « When you discover me, I disappear.

When you share me, I weaken. »

This time our Hobbit failed miserably. Nothing he knew could approach this paradox. After sweating and a commendable perseverance, he had to admit defeat. Avacuna raised an eyebrow in a lustful smirk:

-« Well? should I give you three chances?

- I would prefer another sign! Your riddle has only two!

- Here it is :

When you discover me, I disappear.

When you share me, I weaken.

I win eternity in the death of my jailer.»
Gerry analyzed the last clue with method, but he could not conclude. Finally, the ideas of death and eternity led to the grave, hence the notion emerged "take his secret to the grave for eternity." The Hobbit gave up a triumphalism he found not appropriate. He gave the answer, "The secret!" and thanked the girl for her courtesy. Avacuna’s charming smile spoke for her, relieved that the Hobbit would meet her expectations on the occasion. Hence Gerry emboldened to keep on playing, an unconventional way:

- « Soft and implacable master,
  Whimsical and lascivious slave
  I brighten dark skies
  I darken judgment.
  Blind who never cheats,
  Instigator of major revolts
  And loose dropouts.
  I burst the sleeping heart
  But calms the wounded mind. »

The young woman was not lulled long by the petty poem before Gerry moved accents betrayed him. Her soul was full of the answer before she should give it. But suddenly she hesitated - love? It is not suitable for mortals to unite with ages-born creatures. Yet her fate was already sealed - she gave the answer in a whisper. But she wanted to fathom the intentions of the gallant. She carefully composed her riddle:

- «It is mine to the exclusion of any others.
  I head forward to meet it every morning without yet knowing it.
  It will catch me and impose itself one evening. »

And the miracle happened. The little Hobbit, beyond ages that separated him from Avacuna, was able to read and understand her fears. He answered, quite moved:

- « Destiny. But for me the only destiny I seek is to live with my family, with the wife who has chosen me. »

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The days that followed were golden. Ending summer threw its last heat and vegetation renewed the annual miracle of its wealth. Gerry learned to know the animals of the valley. Only Master Corruscin showed provisions for rewarding conversation. Although some animals spoke quite properly, the talking invariably revolved around food and cubs. Gerry confessed to Avacuna that, to this regard, the local people hardly differed from those of the Shire. This casual remark, although humorous, deeply struck the young woman, who took a close interest in the home of her companion. Gerry described the peaceful and agreed life of his family, not without enlightening his painting with glazing picturesque portraits. He painted the Shire, leaving a large part to forests and wilderness, and emphasizing the Hobbits’ long intimacy with the land.
Avacuna devoted herself to the simple and busy life of the season. She harvested honey, milked her goats, loved and cared for a whole string of little fur balls. Her favorite, a mischievous goat-kid, capered around her when the young woman ventured on hillsides.

Gerry realized pretty quickly that his companion avoided eating meat. He inquired about it and was very surprised by her answer:

- « I respect Legolothië’s pact since I live in the valley.
- What is Legolothië?
- She is the Mistress of these places.
- Must you obey her?
- No. But I respect her wishes. She founded this place and inspires its rules. Legolothië really helped me once when I was wild. She... moderated my enthusiasms.
- One of the rules is not to eat meat. What are the other rules? », inquired Gerry, who wondered whether himself had regularly transgressed any rule.

Avacuna was surprised with her companion’s formulation:

-« There are no really rules - rather principles of benevolence and motherhood. I do not hunt any animal in the valley because I cannot track down those that I consider my children. I only use the natural resources that are available. The plants are grown, but with moderation, promoting harmony in variety. »

One morning, Gerry took out blankets and stepped out of Avacuna’s cave, feeling under his feet the cracking of the twigs, frozen by the first frost of the season. A thrush emerged from the bushes covering the roof of the house and went down to hop before Gerry.

-« Is that you? How glad I am to see you! » He said happily, reaching out his hand. The bird jumped on his finger and cackled like a little salt mill.

Avacuna, coming out of her cave, surprised the bird’s moving sign. Her kid came up and sniffed the bird curiously.

-« This young thrush was raised by the elves! You are full of surprises, Master Gerontius. »

A moment the bird turned to Avacuna and was silent. Then she started up again in the direction of the young woman who smiled while translating:

-« The small thrush feels very much alone. She has been searching for you for many days. She almost got eaten by a large eagle and went into hiding. She is happy having found you at last. She urges you to follow her. Her master gave her the mission to escort you to Rivendell. She is worried but she does not know why. She urges you to leave this... dangerous place!? »

Avacuna no longer smiled. That small thrush posed as a rival and treated her home as a dangerous place, and she was eager to take her companion back. She dismissed the animal who flew and landed not far in the high branches of a birch tree.

-« Naughty little thrush! I see that you are caught in the councils and plans of the powerful! I wonder if you’ll get out of it... But now I think maybe it is time to go and see... »
As a matter of fact, Avacuna too felt a slight tension, throbbing and growing, that had been veiled by novelty and bliss of the Hobbit's presence. A sense of urgency had gained in recent days, without her being able to determine its origin. A flight of geese descending from the north passed away on their left.

-« Usually geese from the Ettenmoors do not leave so early! Winter looks early and rigorous... », she said thoughtfully.

This unusual event ended to convince her. She had to make an important step, perhaps decisive for her, and she set off within the hour. Along with Gerry and her kid, Avacuna trotted past hill and dale to a mysterious destination.

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[1] Inspired by Sacha Guitry, about literary critics: « They are like eunuchs. They know how we do it, but they cannot do it! »
Mother Graft - Legolothië

Chapter Summary

Avacuna and Gerry seek for Mother-Graft, an elderly person of a peculiar kind.

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After an hour of walking, brightened by singing and merry frolics in streams running down the hills, the two companions reached a large and roughly flat area, majestically landscaped. In the center stood a grove of tall walnuts, arranged in a circle, which seemed to lean toward the center and spread their branches to protect it. Approaching, Gerry realized that these trees were very large, a variety he did not know. Together they formed a thick dome of branches, which center left sunlight filter through the wide grooved sheets.

The kid frolicking in the driveway in front of them, they advanced and admired the beds of delicate plants arranged as a star around the grove, from which emanated a radiant stream to peripheral plots. Its meandering course irrigated the majority of the plots before flowing down the slope they had climbed. Flowerbeds succeeded, alternating colored arrangements of flowering plants, vegetable crops and ornamental plants. A sense of order harmonized these beds without obscuring the essential and fragile beauty of each. In the hot and humid air, these plantations induced a feeling of loving care, as if the coming of a Hobbit, a great admirer of well tended gardens, naturally aroused affability and confidence, despite the scarcity of such events.

Preventing her kid from sowing devastation in the flowerbeds, Avacuna led Gerry at the foot of the grove. Setting aside the curtain of leaves, she invited him to penetrate beneath the shimmering green roof. Sheltered from the open air, a source welled there slowly between gorse, gurgling a song of serenity and renewal. Hundreds of small colorful plants vegetated in a green and gold light that flowed from the quivering canopy, in a soft and cozy atmosphere, a little stuffy.

At the center of the room stood a hunchback shaft, extending two frail but many-fingered branches above the plantations. There lacked the branches that once bore, autumn after autumn, bushels of golden fruits, hatched to disseminate life. Its smooth and worn deep brown bark, showed some bright red burls which almost evoked the body of a tired old Woman. Gerry, amused, noticed that it looked like a nursery guarded by a grandmother asleep in her ward, or a very old nanny, frozen with her fan in hand. Large stone jars filled with strange liqueurs, colored and vaguely bright, spread fragrance of resin and strawberry.

Avacuna advanced to the middle of the green dome, her timid kid at her feet.

-«Legolothië, Eldest! Leave your ancient dreams! Come drink water and suck large bowlfuls of air!»

The tree suddenly shook - the grandmother came out of her slumber. Near the main fork of her branches, two large knots streaked with dark red narrowed suddenly, to reveal huge and attentive brown eyes. The green sparks of her thoughts, dormant at the bottom of a dark brown and smooth pond, seemed to rise to the surface of the present, to the aerial and hectic existence, leaving at the bottom of the marsh, layers of decaying leaves as many centuries of memories. The slow chants of swarming and silty growth rose there to the swift time of the world to blend with frenetic rhythms.
of ephemeral hopes and the jingles of human vanities.

A large and thin red mouth outlined under a callous nodule resembling a nose. A deep yet feminine voice rose, where the torrents of the Blue Mountains happily rolled their pebbles. In her breath sighed the powerful fibers of Arvernien cedars, swinging in the sea breeze. Myriads of heavy ears hissed there beneath the autumnal squall of Thargelion. The memory of the growing world spoke through that voice. Rocky as a winter cough yet soft and moist like a spring rain, she sang the summer fullness and the fever of autumn harvests.

« Harum, barum-ha! Avacuna, follower of Oromë, I thought of ripe wheat in the wind on the prairies of Thargelion. You pulled me out of quite pleasant dreams of growing. My broths and my liquors will soon be ready! But... petty buds! Who is this? »

To the surprise of Gerry, the old tree turned her scorched face toward him, bowing slightly to contemplate him. A grandmother welcoming the first newborn of her daughter, would not have expressed more warmth, love and compassion than the women shaft. Now lowered, her arm showed a fiber stiffness under the gnarled curves of her skin. She seemed an old apple tree about twelve feet high, twisted, dented and scorched by the task in the fields, forever bent toward shoots. Sepia and gray moss grew all around the huge burl that served as her head. A melancholy flame lingered in her eyes, unable to obliterate the love of what is living and will live, but sighing at the irremediable departure of what has ceased to live.

The Hobbit bowed respectfully, striving to turn a compliment of his own.

« Gerontius, from the Took family, genus Hobbit! Let me commend you for the charm of your home!

- Here is a pretty name and a pretty voice! A child of Men, Adannig? It is not! A sprite from the twilight hills? Too much hair on his toes! Indeed here is a Periannig!

- We met a moon ago, Eldest! », said Avacuna, containing her excitement.

- I see he is a young male and you are fond of him, Avacuna! That is why you paid no visit to me for a few days. It is a long time since I kept you in my house when the call of life ran in your veins... »

Gerry asked why his companion had been retained, although she seemed to raise no protest about it and seemed to have consented. The woman-appletree looked at the Hobbit doubtfully and replied:

- « I wonder if a mortal can hear the answer... Well, be aware that this was to protect her from herself, to preserve her freshness, like a young salad, and leave open the doors to her future. »

The Woman-tree peered in the eyes of the Hobbit:

- « You understand, I am sure, the appeal of life, welling in hearts in the spring. Once Avacuna was inhabited by this call, she relayed to all. But she tasted the fruits of speech and thought and hoped, without erasing it, to contain her primordial instinct in order to preserve her destiny. Remember this, if you were to judge her on the precepts of your people. She took a very long way. »

To be perfectly honest, our Hobbit had not understood, at the moment, the very substance of these revelations. However he realized Avacuna would never meet the Hobbit standards. He vaguely got that it would be futile for him to try to understand the whole story of the young woman, too deeply rooted into the origins of the world. In any case, his love for Avacuna had already defeated the objections his Hobbit conservatism had made. Instinctively, Gerry adopted the cherub pouting that
succeeded so well with mature Hobbit-women and answered:

- « Everybody may not be born in the court of the King!

Legolothië laughed - at least this is the interpretation that our Hobbit made about the sounds of waterfalls rattling shingle and ice - and she said:

- «Arumarigperianbrum, He is cute, well aware of his condition and proud of it! »

Gerry blushed immediately.

- «Do not judge him too quickly, Elder!, said Avacuna alarmed. He seems superficial at first, but he is careful and does not seek vain glory.

- Berries and twigs! Do you hear that! For you, people of the great music, the first look, from your heart, is almost always irreversible... But let us not be hasty!... »

Legolothië paused for a while. Avacuna and Gerry respected her silence, since a change had occurred in the face of the Woman-tree, which struck them. The green flames of the eyes seemed at present to be burning with a clear and intense fire, but very deeply, as if her stirred memories had belonged to a very distant past. Her deep voice was reduced to a whisper:

- « A friend of old time had this wise precept. I was nimble and playful at that time, the hastiest of Ent-women[1]. I laughed at such advice. Who knows where are my companions now? You little Folk remind me of the distant time when Ent-women and Ents used to live together. I have not raised any Ent-child since an immeasurable number of years!... Lallon lalla-lallon-mellon-oron-fangorn-legotauron[2]...»

Sap dripped from the eyes of the Ent-woman. Gerry asked naively, to the dismay of Avacuna:

- « What happened to your friends?

- Some have fallen into bad accidents in Middle Earth. Sometimes enemies - burarum - slew them. Others have slowly become treeish, by dint of being absorbed in the memories of the time when the world was young. But for my Ent-women companions, it is quite different. They were, a long time ago, teachers and guides for the men of yore. They created beautiful gardens, far south of here in a loop of the great river. But the war destroyed their works and dispersed them or worse...

- How sad...

- For confidence and independence, I was far away when my people disappeared. I looked long in their footsteps but could not find them. My people and his work seemed to have perished. I wandered for a while to the north under the foliage of Greenwood the Great. The ambition of a place of my own, a valley that I could lead my way took me so far. I lived to beautify this place and make it a safe haven. I sometimes felt the need to see my friends. But where are those who survived? Anyway, I had so much to do here that I never undertook this journey. Now I look forward to them but I cannot leave the work of my hands and all the creatures that matter to me here. Maybe the time to get on the road will come for me? Because I feel in the soil and water that a change is already coming... »

Melancholy passed slowly in the eyes of the Woman-tree. The green flames danced for a moment beneath the surface of her dark eyes:

- « But you, Perian, you are the last of your kind to cross these mountains! All your fellows fled the marshes for quite a while...
- My people did not keep accurate memories of our travels, as they back far away and get lost in our years of wandering before the creation of our country. I come from the Shire, far to the west of the mountains. These are the fathers of the fathers of my ancestors that you saw coming from the east of the Misty Mountains!

- So swiftly the time has passed across the plains of the world...

- Since I started my journey, I came to realize how the world outside of our petty daily universe, seems to move faster than our own affairs. We Hobbits hear only the news we are interested in, or we are capable to understand. For example, until now I hardly listened to the fabrications of our shiriffs from the North Farthing, who reported seeing trees move in the moors near the Twilight Hills. It is true that these appearances often occurred after a prolonged stop at the tavern... But now, unless I am not living a dream, I have to admit the wisdom of their assumptions. After all, the world is large and shelters scores of creatures we know nothing about!

- Without doubt this is particularly true of mortal people, who constantly have to relearn what their elders had acquired, through songs and stories or thanks to the folks of greater longevity.

- Tales lose their reality over time and Elves avoid mortals. I had never heard of your people. Who are you indeed?

- My real name is too long - even for me who am not so hasty - as long as the years of listening to our growing plants. The Elves, who saved the people of the Ents from our mutism - glory and praise to them - call me Tulusdol Legolothië. I guess you would translate this name into "Poplar head crowned with green flowers." But you can call me Legolothië. »

Gerry bowed low while removing his hat, which greatly amused the ent-woman. He kept talking about it, but he found that Legolothië looked more like an old apple tree bent under her burden of fruits, than a slender poplar pointing to heaven. No doubt the labour of the land had taken its share of toil and pain.

-« As for my people, the Ents, or Onodrim in Elvish, are pastors of forests and wardens of the plants. »

Before Gerry's stunned and incredulous air, Avacuna clarified:

-« The Ents are our elders, they were already present at the time of the great darkness and they helped plants to flourish and abound when the sun and moon took flight for the first time. »

Gerry felt slightly dizzy to consider a tree, talking seriously about the dawn of the world. There were limits to what a decent Hobbit could absorb about novelties and wonders! He sat alongside Avacuna and listened absently his companion ask the Elder to tell her story, which began a long time ago. Avacuna’s kid snuggled in her lap, and our Hobbit leaned back against the trunk of a sturdy dwarf-oak. Vapors freed by the fermenting liquors rose to Gerry's head, and soon he could not tell whether he was dreaming or listening.

-« In the beginning of the world, the spirit of creation gathered the thoughts that wandered aimlessly in the dark, and instituted a choir. A chant arose, combining the themes of all these voices. What happened to the harmony and the world is told elsewhere[3]. But it resulted in many minds, exalted or small, wild or gregarious, female or male, who descended to Arda to perform their part of the creation.

That is how a spirit, armed with great courage and inhabited by the fire of discovery, embodied the instinct of hunting and free life in the forests of the North. The spirit fought the evil creatures that
spread in Middle Earth. Its cunning and intelligence made it an outstanding hunter. Now it happened that the spirit saved a petty lost bobcat from the claws of a werewolf. It raised the cub and found therefore it was inhabited by a great maternal instinct. Her gender thus revealed, she traveled Middle Earth, continuing her hunt for evil creatures.

Passing by chance through the valley of Legolothië, she had made a few irregular and then more frequent visits. Driven by a need for companionship, she clung to the ent-wife, who provided for care and attention. She nested in fall, slept a lot in winter and was full of activity in the spring, under the indistinct and multiple form of a predator, fox or lynx. It happened to the spirit of the woods, to unite with predators, in their form. Thus was born, among others, Master Corruscin, the most civilized of Goupils East of the sea. But her empathy was not limited to hunters. Her mountain escapades gradually got close to the sheep, and she always kept a fondness for goats. 

The spirit made the valley her home, ferociously protecting it against all the dark creatures that roamed the mountains. Legolothië named her Avacuna, which means "The one who does not bend, the Inflexible," according to her impetuous temperament.

Since Avacuna showed provisions for speech and sociability, gradually Legolothië held her in spring, for her to restrain and channel her instincts. Under the influence of the Ent-woman, it seems Avacuna progressively abandoned her willingness to take animal forms, retaining more and more the appearance she had today. Her diet also widened out. She sometimes encountered Sindar patrolling north of Rivendell. The elves had the unique power of speech, and bestowed this gift to everyone they met. Avacuna, in her need for sharing with thinking beings, was transformed again through their teaching, and was raised up to them.

As her thinking personality progressively asserted itself, she lost in instinct and ferocity, and gained in depth. Preparedness, prevention and anticipation came more frequently in her strategy of hunting and defense. Pleasure mingled with joy, frustration became regrets. Words begat infinite variations and subtleties, sometimes sowing paradoxes on the winding paths of reasoning and wisdom. Her aggressiveness subsided and channeled but not her fears, which only changed in depth: from transient and violent, they muffled but became steadier.

Her soul looked in the mirror of consciousness. Measuring the extent of her metamorphosis, she feared that her conscience would end up seeing only herself, denying the instinct which gave her birth. Would Anima be silent when Animus should come to look at her? She had never lacked memory, but consciousness gave her memories a new sense. Without feeling regret for her past actions, she cast some forever. The lure of beauty, inventiveness and creativity - the gratuitous act in all its forms - flourished along with a visceral need to transmit what she discovered. Once hatched the bud of enthusiasm, the flower of lucidity bore the thorns of anxiety. Where would her evolution end up, and what was she doomed to? What would her fate be in Middle Earth?

Vainly seeking in her past, the keys to her future, she felt some indefinable soul quality still eluded her. An existential vertigo, quite incommunicable, clasped her - she could only compensate by sharing her knowledge. She taught the language to her dearest children and friends. Some mastered it, and most of them remained in the valley. Satiated by surpassing herself, Avacuna felt with sadness, however, her offspring moved away from her. Speech and its corollary consciousness, this priceless elven gift, proved a heavy burden...

So Avacuna ventured out of the valley, in search of an answer. This is how she met humans. Better than the Elves, they taught her that a part of our qualities are hatched in our relations with our fellows. She was bound with mortal humans, sharing with them the fiery flame to conquer her life. She thought she had found her way, but she was disappointed by the critical need for domination and power that characterized humans. Implacable conquerors tired her need for harmony and
peace. Over time, Avacuna slowly abandoned, without admitting it, hope for inner peace. The harsh mortals, too, had given her a bittersweet fruit: the awareness that her need for serenity would never be appeased.

-« Thus always pushed to new shores

_In eternal night away without return,

_Shall we ever on the ocean of ages

_Anchor one single day? »[5]

Legolothië concluded her narrative with emphasis and smile:

- « Until this day when my little savage-girl is stirred by a young rough Perian! »

Avacuna was grateful Legolothië had painted a picture of her life, she could not have fulfilled herself. Hugging her kid who was trying to get her attention, she ran a worried look to Gerry who struggled to accept this rain of news. The Hobbit shut his mouth –that was open for quite a while - and answered without thinking at the dumb question:

- « You come from far away and you have lived several lives! Yet you have the appearance of a young girl, full of energy and eager to live. Next to you, I am like a spring shoot that a vigorous four poles high pine would protect from the snow. I feel down... »

Avacuna’s fresh hand in his neck’s blonde curls reminded the Hobbit of moments of intimacy and discovery. Then he had not felt dominated by her overwhelming elderness. Instead he had lived their first meeting and their conversations, as a welcomed traveler who held the key of a new continent, unknown by his companion. She added saucily:

-« I have not found you down... » and then grimly: « For my part, I wonder whether we can follow the same path. »

Legolothië had carefully observed the reaction of the Hobbit and was satisfied. She spoke to Avacuna with no regard for Gerry, who felt reduced to the level of a commodity on a stall:

- « Man is an imperfect thing that constantly tends to something better and bigger than himself. [6] You still have to find out whether Hobbits have inherited this tendency. This individual does not seem jaded or without resources. His fellows, who once crossed the Mountains, seemed to maintain a strong and healthy sense of restraint. But he is young and his true personality is not yet mature. I fear he has suffered too many insults lately... but the strength of his folk will provide for his development. »

Then she leaned over a stone jar from which emanated amber highlights and added wryly:

- « Regarding decrease difficulties, here is what should help you match... »

Legolothië handed a bowl of liquor to Gerry, who plunged his nose in it. He had the feeling of a hive, wrung in distilled wildflowers and strawberries, mixed with a rich flavor of almond and adjusted with a sour touch -perhaps grape! The traveling Hobbit is like a soldier in the field - he takes advantage of every opportunity to experiment the wealth of the visited countries, especially its culinary treasures. This thick potion brought him a boost, a feeling of energy and vitality, which was soon to gain his ends, as tingling in the fingers, toes, hairline and some other place our reader
may easily imagine. It goes without saying Gerry sipped his portion with gusto, and to the last drop. When he was restored, he was sent to pick berries and harvest some vegetables, with the stated aim to provide him with "something solid under his tooth" and complete his horticultural knowledge. He walked away, accompanied by the kid who capered around him.

Once alone, Avacuna and Legolothië conversed at length about the intentions of the young woman. But the Ent-woman was concerned by a dull premonition. Avacuna confessed she too had felt a warning against the immediate future. The old Ent-Woman spoke to her gravely:

- « You tried once to unite with mortals who pursued vain or selfish goals. I see you animated with a lively hope of happiness. This young Hobbit has qualities but I feel enemies and trouble are dragged in his wake. An old and lonely Ent-woman may not help you more... »

There was no more talk about this, but Avacuna knew she would soon face with a difficult choice.

.oOo.

NOTES

[1] The verb « Enter » in old french means « to graft ». Hence the personal translation « Graft » for « Ent-Woman », used for the title of this chapter. Is that too bold to imagine that Professor Tolkien might have given this name, Ent, as an etymology, which would be particularly appropriate for Ent-wives, these outstanding gardeners? Definitely. But one can dream a little…

[2] Ent-speech meaning approximately : « Treebeard, sweet shepherd of the trees in the green forest... »


[4] Paul Claudel

[5] Lamartine - Ainsi toujours poussés vers de nouveaux rivages / Dans la nuit éternelle emportés sans retour / Ne pourrons-nous jamais sur l'océan des âges / Jeter l'ancre un seul jour ?

[6] René Descartes
Chapter Summary

Gerry and Avacuna postpone their parting. But evil is looming in the North.

.oOo.

The next day, Legolothië felt worried and torn. Her last potion had turned sour, which made her a bit grumpy and hasty. So she sent her savage-girl and her protégé on an errand among the slopes in search of pasture flowers.

Gerry, fiery and frisky after another swig of the Ents beverage, meant to prove useful. His hair had become long and floated in the breeze, mingled with those of Avacuna while they went away to the northern slopes of the valley, pursued or preceded by the kid that wriggled in heather. The two companions feeling a fickle mood, the trip was long and not very productive. About two o'clock in the afternoon, lying under a hazel, the couple was awakened by a small thrush, that dared not approach Avacuna but maneuvered to alert Gerry. When the woman awoke, the thrush perched on a nearby hazel branch. A ray of sunlight flooded around the bird, revealing an unexpected sight. Avacuna enthusiastically exclaimed:

-« Awake, O lascivious dormouse! Your sweet little thrush has discovered an omen I like! »

Gerry, tired and satisfied with his exploits noon, mumbled something about tea time, before being shaken vigorously. Avacuna showed with emotion a tangle of honeysuckle with a hazel twig. Illuminated white flowers sparkled like jewels in the soft green hazel.

- « Look how beautiful it is! Your blackbird woke us so that we can contemplate this...

- Did you know you cannot separate honeysuckle and hazel without causing death to both? »

The metaphor was too powerful to let the lovers’ souls unmoved. Gerry was inspired and guessed what was expected of him. He composed a Linnod on the spot:

- « Likewise, beloved, are we,
Neither you without me,
Nor me without you.[1] »

These romantic circumstances produced a powerful effect on Avacuna, who let herself be guided the rest of the day without leaving her lovers with her eyes. From time to time she hugged her kid as Hobbit mothers did with their babies, and rocked it a few moments. Gerry advised that the weather was turning cold - threatening clouds rolled their scrolls from the north. The Hobbit, who meant not to return empty-handed, took things in hand and sent his thrush scout ahead. They hurried to their destination further north, and soon found the coveted plant, thanks to the faithful bird’s indications, on top of an exposed hill. They carefully dug up one plant on three, not without carefully following finicky Legolothië’s instructions - they re-filled holes with a mixture of gravel, local land and a few drops of elixir provided for this purpose.
Since a storm threatened to come by, they soon returned home. Along the way they entrusted the precious basket of flowers to the care of Master Corruscin, who honored his reputation of swift runner, by finishing the race for them. The lovebirds sheltered just in time in Avacuna’s house, before the outbreak of the storm and the first autumn rain that, cold and sticky, isolated them for a night. They took snacks and curled under blankets and duvets. The evening was intimate - even the kid was not admitted.

- « I only miss a kettle’s whistle! » blurted Gerry.

His companion had considered the day to be perfect. She was therefore a little disappointed by this yet casual remark. Fortunately she opened to Gerry who explained:

-« In the Shire, the kettle whistling indicates that the work of the day ends. The signal sounds through rain and fog to remind that a drink, tempered with art, is waiting for you to relax and invigorate your limbs as well as your spirits. A moment of relaxation, expected by all, gathers everyone home or at a friend’s. Tea is a tradition of the Shire that the oldest clans have maintained since the time of the King[2]. It is an institution that brings together rich and poor, even if the poorest serve chamomile instead of tea. The hosts wear a more formal clothing after the fields soils outfit. The family table or dining room is dressed for the comfort of all in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. The cups are the pride of the housewife; they are invented a pedigree or a distant genealogical origin. Tea brings friends for an informal chat. This is an opportunity to exchange plesantries and enjoy together after a day of work or trade, or just conclude an enjoyable excursion. And tea is usually accompanied by cookies or a snack.

- Does your people have tea every day?

- Actually my people gather around a table whenever they can, said Gerry with lucidity. For us Hobbits, food rules the purpose and pace of the day... But tea establishes peace. Tea is drunk to forget the noise of the world...[3] »

Contemplating the Hobbit ethics of life, Avacuna, thoughtful, considered with tolerance the findings that civilizations discovered and cultivated in compensation for their wrongdoings. But she could not repel an anxious thought - Gerry lacked his people, and he should eventually make a terrible choice. The Hobbit felt his girlfriend’s trouble and held her tighter against him.

He felt the autumn weather cooling and rain increasing and dreaded to spend a winter away from his family. However, for the first time in his life, a girl had imposed on him, with a natural he had not figured a girl could possess. He accepted this discovery with some gratitude: after all, girls could be pleasantly surprising! This unique opportunity blatantly confirmed every day. He realized that till now, he had neither felt any real regret, nor cherished any authentic dream. The fear of losing a dream held him now, but he still struggled to define this dream. « A man is old, only when his regrets have taken the place of his dreams. [4] » had once said Gandalf, speaking of the Thain, who bred -too - many dreams according to the wizard. Being aware that he stood at the crossroads, made neither the choice easier, nor the arguments clearer.

Both fell asleep in the soft feather quilts, with no illusions about the impending confrontation, but agreeing to postpone it to the next day.

.oOo.

At daybreak, the wind from the North blew his biting gusts. The kid curled up on the bed at the feet of his mistress. Avacuna gave Gerry an elixir crafted by Legolothië. Their mood immediately veered sour when Gerry asked for warm clothes. Avacuna imagined the Hobbit was considering an immediate departure. She complied but walled in a silence that was not like her when the Hobbit, to
take some courage or perhaps by indecision, asked her to have a few steps below thick clouds.

They followed the valley, at the bottom of which gnarled willows swayed their long hair over a dark river. On their way, stems diverged to form a tunnel of green and yellow leaves. Avacuna, noting Gerry’s apprehension, explained that many trees had "awakened" in contact with Legolothië.

-« Large trees are able of thoughts in their slow and silty way, these raise to aerial areas when their sap flows. The cares of the Ent-women have heightened their need for fresh air and sharing. Some have risen to thought - not always for the better, unfortunately! The tree hearts can turn toward harmony with their neighbors. Having extricated their feet from the soil, they usually turn to creatures who speak and move. But some hate those who freely roam the world without burrowing into ground or water. It is not always safe to venture out in the woods without knowing the songs that doze. »

When they had walked for half an hour and reached a hill overlooking the groves of roses, Gerry finally spoke. Indeed he did not know, while starting, what would exactly be his conclusion. Perhaps he hoped, in summarizing his objections aloud, start a debate that would solve them.

Gerry spoke of the great conservatism of Hobbit society, his responsibilities about his family and the Shire and the great distance from this valley. He pointed out painful considerations of age and ended so pompous explaining that he felt no right to require Avacuna’s sacrifice to leave the life she had built. He spoke nobly, with a confident tone, by reasoned arguments. Did he expect tears or a resigned detachment? Anyway his academic speech did not have the expected result.

Avacuna crouched as to pounce on her prey. Her clenched fists let see strong claws that quivered with nervous spasms. Her cats eyes flashed, but she exploded in words:

- « I forbid you to decide in my place what is acceptable or not for me! You consider neither staying here with me, nor inviting me to the Shire that you miss and that you made me dream of - you should have told me to my face. You cast ahead on me and your kin the reason for your choice... But indeed you are rejecting me. I never imagined such cowardice on your part! »

Gerry staggered, found nothing to answer. He loosely expected Avacuna to dismiss the litany of his objections. Now it was too late. Taking the first step and all the following is a long walk alone, that cannot be imposed without consequences. The Hobbit had, in a few seconds, expelled from his life the only female he esteemed.

The return was a disaster. They coldly agreed Gerry would leave the next day, provided with food and directions to the Great East Road. As the Hobbit was hanging back flattering the kid, Avacuna threw him a glance full of sorrow and contempt. That is when she noticed, far north, an opaque cloud, darker than the others, that flew above the peaks and plunged into the valleys. A shiver ran through her, which was not only due to cold.

Gerry, his heart heavy, turned and stared at the dark omen. Suddenly a quadruped appeared on top of the hill. Strong and well built, he saw Avacuna and was in three leaps besides her. The superb mountain goat smoked in the cool morning when it bowed its horns to the young woman. Avacuna stroked his neck and spoke softly. But Gerry was concerned about the cloud, that quickly approached in a heartbreaking and growing rumor, at the limit of human hearing.

Master Corruscin, attracted by the cries, came to him using this language:

-« We were strolling through the thickets beyond the fountain, when those high cries intolerably assaulted our ears... »
Hundreds of squeaks now filled the heavy air. Avacuna, alarmed, shouted at them:

« A swarm of bats is flying down from the north and is spreading terror and desolation in the mountains. They precede an invasion of orcs! »

Gerry wondered if the valley could avoid a disaster. What could attract them here? He remembered the concerns of Eagles and their council of war. He supposed that the events at Mount Barum-Nahal had sparked this surge. Now they ran from the North and all the mines obedient to Gundabad. But why so far South? A former doubt seized the Hobbit: were they after his ring? He felt revolt and guilt set up in him: the valley and its inhabitants were in great danger, probably because of him. Did he have to flee and would that be enough to divert the fury of the goblin hordes? Yet he had been carried by the air, preventing any orc messenger to follow or locate him. No doubt he was not the cause that had bought the orcs so far. He decided that his flight would not save the valley.

His mind clearer now, he strengthened his will and told Avacuna he would join her in defense of her home, although he could not see much how to stop orcish hordes. Gerry bitterly regretted the absence of his companions. What would he not have given to stand alongside his friends, a squad of Dúnedain or Dwarves in arms?


He concerted quickly with Avacuna. She agreed that evacuating the valley was not possible - her heart would not consent to this, no more than Legolothië. Light-footed Corruscin was immediately sent to warn the Ent-woman. The little thrush flew on an imploring word from Gerry, as once during Arathorn’s lifetime. Avacuna warned her offspring who traveled the valley on all sides to warn about the imminent attack. Gerry’s plan was simple - he imagined they could hold, with all the help they could muster, the line of the willows river, that crossed the valley from east to west before turning Southeast along a steep slope. The northern part of the valley would certainly suffer damages, but it would help disperse the orc troops.

Avacuna’s hill stood not far south of the river, near a small bridge of logs, that a beavers’ family had obligingly built. She prepared herself the sabotage of the bridge, which could be triggered by pulling a rope concealed in the grass on the South shore. Animals, big and small, flocked north and crossed the river by this single practicable point, while the ominous cloud approached inexorably. Brandishing spears and blowpipes carefully, Avacuna went out of her cave, wearing a leather and mail armor and decked with paintings, Gerry was intimidated by. She donned our Hobbit in the same way, not without a feeling of pride mingled with apprehension. She also gave him a short sword, light and slender, probably the work of an elven blacksmith in a remote time. Gerry, feeling moved, remembered the last gift a lass had bestowed to him - his ring - and looked at the accumulation of problems that had arisen. He wondered if wearing the colors of two ladies was not presumptuous or ominous. But he drove those thoughts away with the certainty that this gift was offered and accepted for noble reasons, and it would be used wisely. So harnessed with a hauberk and an oversized helmet, Gerry saw the attention of the whole company of small refugees turn to him and found himself in some way established as the general by the collective and gregarious confidence of the rabbits army.

An acute and threatening rumor slowly grew before them. Occasionally a dark shape fluttered above the river, announcing the pestilence cloud that would befall. Gerry was trying to send away the armies of rodents, paralyzed with fear, when Legolothië finally arrived. She was ranting with helplessness but Gerry was able to reason her. They held lengthy council together about what to do. The part of the river that was easiest to cross, flowed in front of them, less than one mile long. Upstream to the northeast, stretched the deep valley which ended in ravines where the slope
increased sharply. Downstream, the river spread out in marshes before joining a fast and dangerous course. Determined, Legolothië went rummaging through Avacuna’s souvenirs, deep in her caves, and pulled out a large leather bag marked with the rune "R", filled with vials of all kinds, she brought to Gerry. Grabbing a small tin canister, she pretended to walk away and then changing her mind, she grabbed a seeds purse. Under a sky that grew dark and threatening, she traveled the South river bank, singing slowly, slowly emptying the purse and pouring from time to time some dark liquid from the tank. Slowly darkness came down while they pestilential miasma of Gundabad’s caves buzzed all around.

Endorsing with candor and unconsciousness the role his lord had been holding so often for him, Gerry entrusted Avacuna with a flank guard role - she gathered her wild cousins from the mountains, the large antlers deers, wild boars and ibexes, and led them to the northeast, by the peat, to bypass the river and be ready to pounce on the rear of the enemy. After a last look, Avacuna went on, pushing her cavalry in front of her.

Gerry posted himself on the top of Avacuna’s hill. While he scrutinized the dark to distinguish movements on the North bank, Legolothië passed back and forth, humming for herself, still spreading and pouring along the river. In the growing darkness, the Hobbit distinguished large dark forms gathering on the south bank, while the water level rose. A large hedge of thorns now doubled the river for a great length, and it thickened quickly. The Ent-woman had deployed her art by spreading her elixirs of growth. Gradually, large disheveled forms emerged near the shore, creaking.

Suddenly the swarm was upon them. The cries that filled all their thoughts drove crazy all the animals around him, brave or coward. Small black and slimy leeches fluttered around, trying to attach to their skin. In their erratic flight, bats with red eyes cast a shadow of fear and disorder. Legolothië joined Gerry and seized a container that looked porous. A thick fluid dripped through many tiny holes in the coarse pottery. Legolothië introduced a solvent by the cover and said a few words. After a moment, a little smoke escaped from the container, leaving a feeling of healthy bitterness to whoever breathed the scent. Immediately the pestilential swarm of bats moved away from the hill. The Ent-woman placed the porous container in a hemp mesh and suspended at top of a soft hazel branch, over the hill. On her orders, a couple of weasels climbed nimbly on the branch and made it to oscillate, which gave a large rotational movement to the container. The surrounding air got rid of bats, the bubble of clean air growing regularly. A large number of animals surrounded Gerry - foxes, badgers, weasels and ferrets stood as one, surrounded by bands of rabbits and voles, that looked terrified but were unable of anything more courageous than being there.

The horde of goblins was approaching. Behind the bats’ screeching cries were perceived their guttural groans and heavy footsteps. Gerry imagined huge orcs with a bloody mouth and clawed hands, brandishing sharp scimitars in a vile den smell. It was not far from the truth about the orcs’ scent. But the tribe that ran to the assault was a small and lively kind - the warriors wore thin spears and light shields. Suspicious, the orcs stopped at the river, which black water bubbled strangely and uninvitingly. They pushed hideous war cries, cursing the indistinct shadows beyond the river. Their swarming mass thronged now before the bridge. They must have reached the river upstream and, put off by the effort necessary to cross it, they had followed downstream to find a pass. Gerry felt a hesitation in the dirty and unkempt ranks of the Goblin soldiery. No leader had been able to impose its strength, to crystallize hatred and push forward the slovenly and howling troops, who contemplated the water with a dubious frown. Indeed the river had risen considerably and its ink surface burst from time to time with a limp, slimy and unattractive "plop".

As Legolothië returned to his side, Gerry found himself thinking:

- « We could use a wizard! They can shed light where all hope seems to faint... »
Thinking about such a help beyond any hope, Gerry saw some well known frowning eyebrows, requiring him to fight with all his intelligence and all his heart. He took out his ring and raised it high. At this time the cloud ceiling torn, throwing a fleeting ray of light brighten the foothill where the Hobbit and the Ent-woman stood. The twin stones shone a thousand lights for a few moments. Did Gandalf watch on them from afar, in his distant journeys? The event, though incidental, fed our Hobbit with unusual temerity. Exalted as would have been an impatient heir to prove himself, he cried:

- « Go back to your smelly caves! The day of the world will not allow you to tarnish its glory! »

What an incisive formula! What a kicked pace! What an authority in the tone of this thin Hobbit voice, barely out of his teens! But what do you think happened? Goblins, put aback for a moment by the river’s putrid appearance, saw a ray of light on a big old stump, under which housed a pretentious little brat, dressed in shiny mail. The puppy was wearing too large weapons and had about too grandiose a speech for someone so small. And now he boasted, brandishing a golden gem! That was too good for him, that dirty little thief!

A large orc with a sly look, gave him a derogatory invective, that had his comrades guffaw. Strengthened by his rhetorical success, the orc took firm steps on the bridge, followed by his comrades who thronged to be the first to take part in the quarry or enjoy the show, hustling and fighting if necessary. While Gerry’s confidence crumbled, the light fainted and darkness fell on the hill. The Hobbit saw with anguish the rabbits’ army flee in all directions. What had he expected? Where were the solid companions present there for a moment, badgers and foxes? Legolothië and he were almost alone in front of a rising tide of cruel and devious creatures. Panicked, Gerry turned and hurried to the hill, the only idea that floated in the storm of his thoughts was to barricade himself in Avacuna’s cave.

.oOo.

[1] Le lai du chèvrefeuille, Marie de France - Ainsi, amie, est-il de nous, /Ni vous sans moi, ni moi sans vous

[2] In reality, this tradition goes back well before the end of the Kings of Arthedain (in TA 1979). Tea was an imported commodity, passing through the great trading center of Tharbad. From the year TA 1409, the kingdom of Cardolan dwindled. The river and road trade fell. Then was tea cultivation was slowly introduced in the greenhouses of the South Farthing to supplement the deficiencies.

[3] Lu Yu, Tea Master under the Tang dynasty (618-907)


Gerry thrives during a terrible battle.

That is when luck chose to remind him of his duties. The Hobbit, weighed down by his cumbersome gear, tripped over a thick rope that was lying in the grass. He fell to the ground. The rope! The bridge! He rose with difficulty under the weight of his armor, grabbed the rope that controlled the trapped bridge and pulled with all his strength. Slowly at first, the overloaded logs uncoupled, then crumbled in seconds, throwing to water terrorized dozens of orcs.

You must know that orcs have a visceral fear and disgust about water. But the river was now at its highest. The elixir that Legolothië had poured in it seemed to have slowed the flow, as if it was encumbered by a thick layer of mud or algae blooming. Goblins squealed as piglets when sliding into the waters that seemed an oily ink. Few reappeared up at the surface, as if the sticky mud or slime algae had retained them at the bottom. Some debated desperately, unable to leave the water and sank inexorably.

Gerry, mortified by his fall but relieved by the unexpected effect, freed from the nodes he had himself tied with, while the goblins stared angrily the failure of their peers. It is not in the nature of this sordid brood to feel compassion for fellow soldiers killed in combat. Generally, the pain or the terror of a comrade, that is to say, a rival, a thief and a threat, pleases them extremely. For example it came to the mind of none, to reach a pole to their fellows who debated before they succumbed. However they consider pleasant to discuss with their gang about the slow torture of prisoners, or the meal they will have out of it. They thought they only had to reach out to capture their prey. At present a considerable obstacle stood before them. That is why the disordered cohort grew to a state of indescribable fury, by an escalation of verbal hatred. They threw many spears and arrows, without much result. Some solid badgers and foxes were unfortunately shoot and succumbed in horrible convulsions, as the throwing weapons of those detestable creatures are usually coated with poison.

After several minutes of fruitless demonstrations of rage, some goblins, smarter than others, parted from the bank and began to cut trees. By their repeated invectives, they convinced others to lend a hand. Goblins do not make beautiful things, but they are cunning and their great number overcomes individual laziness. Soon many trunks were piled up on the bank, and then pushed into the water. From the south bank, Gerry, Legolothië and their helpless friends gazed with distress the logs spilling to complete a sort of floating bridge.

Before it was ready, the Ent-woman approached the edge, singing down a dull air. Gerry had the feeling that the grove of the bank had thickened. Amid brambles that lined the bank, willow branches hanged casually. But Gerry realized that the North bank had no more of them, though they grew on both sides before the goblins arrived.

The orcs went on the attack, jumping on floating logs stacked in the river bed. The task was difficult for them. The unstable trunks turned or moved - they were quickly covered with a greasy water and became slippery. Many orcs were killed by falling into the water. Gerry shot now with
his sling, to the delight of the badgers who screamed "To bath!" whenever an orc fell because of the Hobbit. After several attempts, goblins resolved to consolidate their bridge. They cut more trees, tied them and pushed them over the top, across the first layer. Now they could cross safely - and badgers were to laugh no more!

The hordes of Gundabad launched their assault, determined to exterminate all life on the South bank. Some were cut down in their tracks, but most descended violently on the bank, bellowing and thrusting in the brambles. What a surprise it was for them to find troll-size opponents!

Willows are usually placid trees. They tirelessly suck water from their deep roots, while pitching their head so indolent. But they have a dark heart as long as the torments the goblins once inflicted to them, who cut and leave to rot trees full of life. Then their mumbled anger was unleashed against bipeds, with all the tenacity of roots extending over many years, concentrated in a few seconds of struggle. Willows, that became "entic" besides Legolothiê, proved virulent and ruthless. The first goblin line was dismembered, the second was decapitated, the third crushed under a root, the following equally projected in water, strangled by vines or perforated by direct blows to the abdomen. The carnage lasted as long as the goblin fury proved stronger than their cowardice.

The vexed and sparse orc troop withdrew to the North bank, badly shaken but not yet defeated. Long, champions concocted a response, not without rising in several fatal fights against each other. Finally, several advanced with torches in hand, which dripped viscous flammable liquid. In the background now some high fires threatened to spread. The torches were projected on willows, some of which suffered greatly. One of them flared up in seconds and died screaming in pain. Old trees, with sheer anger, rushed to the attack despite warnings from Legolothiê. From entrenched and victorious defenders, the unfortunate would turn into easy prey on the North shore open area. Goblins re-formed their ranks and refilled their torches for a kind of combat where they knew they held supremacy and awaited the messy onslaught of the "Entic" trees, savoring their victory in advance.

Then Avacuna’s group fell like lightning in the back of the orcs. She patiently waited for the right moment, repenting at times to call the whole troop of her children to their death against a well-armed and cruelly trained horde. However, she lacked some important information. The valley was not attacked by the allied bands of Gundabad reclaiming the northern Misty Mountains. On the opposite, that was of a defeated tribe, driven from the supreme power by the wars triggered after the dragons’ departure, and pushed southward. The people of the valley could not know, but they had before them some disunited fugitives of a troop that lacked a true leader.

Thus Avacuna’s charge was decisive. Large deers cast down Gundabad’s soldiery, that finished gutted by hordes of wild boars. The entire goblins right wing panicked. Pushed by mountain goats, they were thrown into the river and could not escape. Orcs, halved and with no leader, believed they were lost and disbanded. They were crushed between the hammer and the anvil. Avacuna, radiant in the midst of the carnage, reduced methodically pockets of resistance and did pursue the fugitives. Soon Legolothiê who had crossed the river carrying Gerry, laid the Hobbit down. All the inhabitants of the valley were dealing with the invaders at bay. Gerry was found by chance alongside the Huntress as the enemies were eradicated around. Never token of courage was shared with more fervor. Gerry and Avacuna engaged their faith in a look and sealed their fate by returning to combat.

Avacuna rushed to conduct the pursuit, making vows no goblin would ever return to his lair in the North. Gerry returned to the river to attend Legolothiê who fought the last orcs squares. Shaken by the battle and sweating under his helmet, he was walking with a quick step, when he felt violently pushed on his back. He slumped heavily and gasped. Orcs are customary with sneaky ruses. Escaping the enemy wrath by feigning death, they secretly gear a poisoned cutlass while the front
of the fight moves, to arise by surprise on the back of the opponent.

The Hobbit nearly fainted, but his conscience maintained enough to wish he would succumb without suffering too much before the inevitable. But the inevitable would come slowly, after a painful and ultimate ordeal - a clawed hand snatched his sword in an oath of disgust and turned him bluntly.

- « What’s he’s got in its dirty Elvish hands? Where it puts its treasure? »

Gerry startled - ultimately the curse had been tough and had pursued him to a premature end. He felt a strange satisfaction - temptations and deceptions would stop. Repulsive hands fingered him impatiently. Between his half-closed eyelids, Gerry saw a brown skull, emaciated and stitched with pink scars where worms and flies swarmed around, leaning on his face and scrutinizing him carefully. While the insane bloodshot eyes gazed enviously and feverishly, foul nasal slits inspected his hands. With despite, the creature seized the Hobbit’s mailcoat and pulled it with unspeakable brutality, notching his nose and ears. Still holding the Hobbit with the horrible strength of his twisted and hairy arms, the orc inspected the back of the coat with rage. Gerry could not refrain some protective reflexes that did not escape the acute eye of the trained torturer. Abandoning the coat, the orc slammed Gerry on the ground with a knee on his stomach. The poor Hobbit knew his last hour had come. He attempted a diversion:

- « Mind your hands, my treasures are Elvish. You will be burned! »

The hands for a moment ceased their heinous browsing, hesitated then grabbed Gerry by his neck and shook it until the grin of the victim came to resemble the hateful smile of his tormentor.

-« Burned? Elven magic? Bolg take war magic from the elf! »

Hands no longer mucked around – they applied their implacable force to destroy life. Under the disgusting palms suddenly flashed the dwarven necklace. The dazzled orc stopped his grip and seized the jewel, trying to pull it out. Gerry could finally take a deep breath and in his last moment of lucidity, reached into his torn vest to fetch his weedpurse. The orc saw the crimson velvet purse and tried to take it. But Gerry threw it as far as he could. The precious parcel softly flew hardly a pole away, just before crashing with a clear sound Bolg interpreted as the promising jingle of gold. In a flash, Gerry caught in his purulent pupil, the feeling of victory and the desire to get rid of his bulky prey.

But luck had not completely abandoned our hero. Legolothië had launched a cry of victory, reminiscent of the trumpet calls of the kingdoms of yore. Foaming and squatting to clear out faster, Bolg had a moment of hesitation, peering in turns the dwarven necklace, the attracting purse and the bank, to assess the danger. Gerry, who felt in his back the pain of a hard and cutting item, since he was on the ground, contorted to reach it. His hand closed over a long orc cutlass, sharp and hideous. The anxious and furious look of the killer returned to Gerry when the blade thrust under his armpit. Bolg, quick as a snake, suddenly relaxed to avoid the blow, and nearly achieved that. Keeping his momentum, he rolled over himself toward the purse, allegedly full of elven treasures.

Leaving Gerry and his necklace, the orc grabbed the purse, broke the pipe, tore the packet of pipe-weed and took the ring. Triumphantly, he straightened up and looked at his prize of war, taunting Gerry with a sly glance:

-« Gold of elves burns not... You little liar! »

Then Bolg raised his index and put the ring on his finger, forcing it to prevent getting off. He was shaken with a rush of adrenaline and satisfaction he had never known. At that time he seemed
young, not having reached his full stature. Gerry on his side, could not bear to feel cheated, robbed of the precious treasure and the relationship forged with its strange power. Taken by a blind frenzy, the Hobbit rushed to Bolg. Never any rage, neither any conscious exercise of the will, nor any fear was able to mobilize such an implacable determination.

- « Give me my treasure back! My Precious! It is mine! » Screamed the little Hobbit dealing a blow in full swing at the knees of his opponent.

Bolg dodged around the blow with all the art of a goblin of the North. Victim of an excess of confidence and hampered by his injured arm, Bolg nevertheless lost his balance and had to replicate the roll he had achieved a moment ago. But the ring betrayed its new master - when the orc found standing, he lacked both the ring and the finger. Pushing on the ground, Bolg had triggered the stones mechanism and severed his own finger. The orc screamed only when he realized what he had lost. Still Gerry never knew if his rival’s pain was due to the severed finger or the lost ring, since at this moment Legolothië came in great wrath. Without taking time to utter any curse, Bolg fled towards the mountains.

He does not come into this tale any more, but the Elves of Rivendell say he survived and managed to rally an obscure minor tribe, East of Mount Gram. There he brooded his pain and hate, always on the alert and ready to have his irreparable loss paid by anyone who overshadowed him. He came to surpass the strongest warriors and supplanted the king of the tribe. Indeed he was the bastard son of Azog king of Moria’s orcs, infamous for the people of Dùrin. A few years later, Bolg became the undisputed king of Gundabad, lord of the clans of the Misty Mountains and the Gray Mountains. [1]

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Gerry, blinking in the dim light that dissipated, felt Legolothië lifting him gently. From the hill, where they were joined by cohorts of the inhabitants of the valley, he saw a great flood that washed the aftermath of the invasion. Then the waters receded slowly, restoring the devastated valley with a familiar appearance. Woods and plantations in the northern part were almost completely destroyed. Legolothië felt febrile and diminished, as if the loss of so many years of love and effort had halved her person at the same time that the world she had built.

However, the Ent-woman set to work with enthusiasm and imagination. Fortunately the depredations and atrocities of the orcs had not lasted long. The days that followed, feverish and laborious, were golden. Freed of the threat, the valley redoubled with a late flowering before diving into the winter. The people of the valley experienced a period of intense reconstruction.

Poor Corruscin came to live on the hill, for the time to clear and restore his devastated home. When he returned with great ceremony with his vixen - who was, as is said in the Shire, in very advanced and favorable circumstances - he was unpleasantly surprised to find a whole family of weasels, many and squawking. Corruscin could definitely not expropriate under these conditions. So he moved for the winter in Avacuna’s caves.

Gerry felt great difficulties to recover. He was not physically injured, apart from bruised ribs which long remained painful despite the care of the Ent-woman. He even surpassed the shock of war violence. But he had painfully realized, facing the test, that the ring exercised over him an irresistible attraction, which made him a stranger to himself. He began to doubt that the past events may have helped him to grow. In his heart, he had to admit he could not keep the ring, even though he had come to call it "My Precious." His resolution was strengthened to the extent of his doubt about his ability to do without it. He stuck to this set of mind when he proposed Avacuna to come along with him to the Shire. They would try to live there together the promise they had made in the
heart of the event.

Avacuna was delighted and expressed her gratitude to her hero in a very demonstrative way. But filial feelings linked her to the Ent-woman, and she was afraid to leave the valley. However Legolothië felt in the tide of the days that new winds blew around their lives.

- « Bright and wild forces, as Treebeard used to say, will always have the ability to repopulate the chaos. I see my little Avacuna chose to join the order of mortals. Your time has come to complete the metamorphosis that was missing to your nature. May you both make good use of your days to fight the long defeat! Time now is counted for you, my dear... »

Then, blessing her two protégés, she poured for them a great swig of a rich mixture that gave off pine and lavender. Gerry did not remember the exact words of the Ent-woman, but he knew that the valley would remain closed to him, for their own good, as long as he would not be helped by Great Eagles of the north.

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NOTES

[1] Bolg son of Azog appears in the Redbook of the March of the West, where J.R.R. Tolkien tells how he led the Gundabad confederation troops at the battle of the Five Armies.
Gerry and Avacuna take leave and head south. But they are soon aware of something odd...

A frantic flapping of wings woke Gerry. Small nerve legs hopped on his chest. The thrush looked at him with her round and moving eye, leaning angrily her head towards him. He sat up, chasing the small bird that launched a cry of protest before perching on a rock a few feet away. His temples throbbed like in the aftermath of heavy drinking evenings. His scalp shuddered as if battalions of ants were marching in all directions on his skull with a military stubbornness.

Images and thoughts raced through his clouded mind to reconstruct an incomplete frame. He saw a fleeting form of a grandmother with red cheeks, serving a fragrant brew. Snatches of old fables resurfaced, reviving strangely vivid feelings and an inexplicable sensation of personal involvement. A fox with a monocle and dressed in the style of Gerry’s grandfather talked about this and that. A grinning goblin stole his ring - this time the picture was clear and the memory vivid! The Hobbit remembered with disgust having experienced this feeling: suddenly an irreplaceable part of himself was amputated, overwhelmed by a surge of uncontrollable violence that would have led to kill father and mother. Frantically, he searched himself, finding the necklace and the ring in their places under his quite damaged jacket. Feeling dizzy, he made sure that as long as he would wear the ring, this uncontrollable feeling could resurface at any time. His horrible stigma could take control of him again.

Yet a vague feeling floated uppermost in his mind, if not with violence, at least with steadiness and ubiquity. Some lack throbbed in every pore of his skin. The premonition of a smile invaded his every thought with visceral optimism. The omnipresence of a radiant and reassuring face was soothing him. A soft and cool hand stroked his shoulder. Shared intimacy invaded his heart with its unique warmth, spreading there the balm of redemption. The hope of being understood and accepted despite his unbearable stigma comforted his wounded soul. But Gerry struggled to combine recognizable traits from these many diffuse images. As he tried in vain to summon his memories, he had the intuition that only his odious addiction to his treasure barred their access. The fear of hopelessly losing the most essential memories –precisely those that eluded him a moment before - squeezed his throat. He rejected the idea of force and domination while some reminiscences resurfaced. A musky scent of dry leaves, the sound of joyous twin strides in tall grass, the warmth of a shoulder against his, a shared tangy fruit, a brow sprinkled with freckles, tensed by the effort and dropping sweat beads, were some of the disparate clues that came back to him, but so powerful and real in his memory, that what they had in common, their hyphen, materialized at his side.

Sitting cross-legged behind him under a sunburned appletree, Avacuna was looking at him tenderly and pensively. Gerry felt her presence and jumped to his feet, turning around. Seeing her mischievous face, the Hobbit was overwhelmed by waves of affection as the sight of the young woman filled the final details he still lacked. Tears came to his eyes:
-“I thought I had lost you...

- You nearly did... But I am here now. You were talking in your dream...

- What was I saying?

- Things that I liked! », She interrupted with a cheerful smile.

The apple-tree seemed to smile as a gnarled old woman. Avacuna put her blowpipe and rising swiftly, came graciously to the Hobbit. She stood on the tips of her long legs to place a chaste kiss on Gerry’s lips.

-“How tall you have grown! You are now a veteran of the Goblin Wars! My lover will bring us back to his native Shire and make his return within his family as a young giant! But will he protect me from their curiosity and their judgments? »

Gerry thought about the high moral stature of his father and the gossip that would circulate between Longbottom and Tuckborrough. But he was no longer the young, carefree and inconsistent Hobbit who fluttered from jokes to flirts. He thought he was strong enough to impose his choices, at least for decisions that do not involve the community or the clan:

-“You and I will forever stand beyond the judgment of mortals! »

Avacuna was confused by the maturity and courage that were born for her. Deeply moved, she protested weakly:

-“I do not want to uproot my Hobbit! I could not stand to hurt you...

- I alone decide my mortal destiny. If necessary, I would leave the Shire to live permanently in your own way... But take confidence: the worst is never certain[1]. Why not trust in the future? »

Avacuna accepted this optimistic omen. Her kid came begging a caress, startled by the tall pines swaying in the breeze of Narbeleth. The couple dressed more warmly, gathered their belongings and set off, backpack at shoulder. Avacuna turned a few moments to send a silent and moved salute to the red stump under which she had stood, in memory of the long youth that had prepared her maturity. Then they walked off arm in arm below.

The autumn period ignited the vegetation with warm notes, which strengthened as conifers passed slowly and they headed west at the bottom of a steep and winding valley. Avacuna had provided with all the necessary, as a far-sighted hunter and gatherer. They subsisted on berries and roots, until the young woman would accept to shoot a hare:

-“We are far enough, at present. »

Instinctively, Gerry knew he had to respect some uncertainty as to the location of the vanished valley. Companions were progressing for two days when they were suddenly recalled to caution. While approaching a small ford, they spotted a huge footprint of a calloused and bare foot. Size suggested a troll or a tall young giant. They had come into the trollshaws, inhospitable region of Northern Rhudaur infested with the terrible predators. Hence they compelled to silence, gliding stealthily between the golden leaves in the thickets by day and holing for night in an inaccessible hollow. Frequently, Gerry took the kid on his shoulders, where loose soil required they took care not to leave any trace. Vigilant to the slightest noise, they strode three days, increasingly humid. The thrush preceded them as dogs do, flying ahead and back to ensure that the rear guard came smoothly, especially whenever they ventured into terrain by sneaking through the bushes.
Gerry had become a strong young Hobbit, particularly large and hardened to life in the wilderness. It was rare for a Hobbit of his age, to grow still, at least in height. The frugal diet that caution required, lent him a lanky air, but as tanned as a ranger. His beard began to grow thickly, and his limbs appeared tense and tough as a bowstring. He looked nothing like the foppish and indolent lad, lengthening his stride and brandishing the elven knife offered by Avacuna.

Gerry had noticed nothing, but the dwarven necklace bestowed him an aura of modest nobility, an attitude of experience despite his youth, an assured turn that forced confidence. But he never gained the royal countenance or appearance of immanent power that Thràin or Arathorn had won while wearing the necklace. Sensitive to his charm, his companion was nonetheless discreetly attentive that the Hobbit remained faithful to the qualities she had perceived in him. Avacuna for her part looked like a deer hunter, secretly affected by a hesitant grace. Her gaze of an ahunt feline was more and more often transformed into indulgent and knowing looks. Her hair, that once freely floated in the wind, now quietly streamed from her temples to her shoulders, mitigating the startling effect of her lynx ears.

One evening the thrush did not join them. Gerry was worried - besides the fact that the bird proved a valuable ally, and an endearing companion, she reminded him of his allegiance to the Dúnedain and the faithful tenacity of his missing companions. The couple cowered under worn oaks beneath a scree of gray rocks, while the rain was threatening. The next day, soaked and shivering, Avacuna and Gerry had lunch with dry roots and wild onions before resuming their journey. Water dripped from the trees around them under an overloaded sky while they were walking in quiet thickets. At the edge of an open space, both stopped without consulting. They scrutinized, sniffed and listened long, without spotting anything abnormal but could not overcome the sense of danger.

They advanced cautiously, guessing they were vulnerable. A thrush emerged from heaven, chirping furiously, making the kid startle. She flew in tight circles above them, still hyping. Surprised, Gerry dropped the kid that began to bleat. With the sensation to stir all unsavory creatures around, Gerry tried to calm the thrush and get it to land while Avacuna reassured her kid. The behavior of the bird was so amazing, Gerry began to doubt this thrush was his.

Suddenly the companions knew they were circled - a cracking at Gerry’s left hand betrayed a heavy man who was moving towards them, while the bushes in front and right hand rustled as silhouettes were taking place. The couple placed back on back, since the encirclement seemed complete. The huntress and the squire-ranger had been trapped!

The thrush landed on a large stump, looking cheerful and satisfied. Behind her, a leather-gloved hand parted the scarlet foliage to reveal a beautiful smiling face, while the other hand made a sign of peace.

A tall man of elven beauty came out of the thickets. His slim muscular silhouette stepped gracefully, as if floating above the carpet of red leaves. His satin cape shimmered green and brown when he bowed to Avacuna. His smile expressed joy and compassion as he stretched out his arms covered with green arm-greaves. Gerry was struck by the resemblance of the elf with lord Elrond, whose raven hair and gray eyes he shared. Relieved beyond hope, however, he was stung by a pang of jealousy when Avacuna hugged him. This was Elrohir, one of the twin sons of Elrond, unparalleleed forest ranger and bane of the orcs.

«Merry meeting, little mother of the undergrowth!, launched Elrohir

- Blessed be your vigilant watch and the thrushes’ talents!, replied Avacuna. For do I not guess right, thinking that this clever bird has brought you to us?

- Indeed, she has warned us seven days ago and she has been watching over you while you are
roaming in the trollshaws and we hasten in your direction. »

Avacuna happily clapped her hands to the thrush, who bridled and raised her tail.

- We have not met for a long time, little mother of the hunt! But I am pleased to see that you were able to find your way! »

Avacuna blushed a little and sketched a small bow to thank the elf for the compliment. Elrohir turned to the Hobbit:

- « And here is Gerontius Took, gentle-hobbit and heir of the Thanery of the Shire! »

Gerry was used to be called a much simpler way. The burden of Thanery went along his father’s name. Beyond an etiquette he did not heed for very much, he felt that something was wrong:

- « Is my father right? » He asked, alarmed.

Elrohir was embarrassed for a moment, but said quite a serene way:

- « The news our friend Hiravorn brings, report he is healthy... »

Some elves and many rangers went out of the bush and greeted the couple. A tall man, strong as a bull, who stood somehow stiffly, approached Gerry:

- « My name is Hiravorn, head of the Dûnedain of Sarn ford. We gathered at the trollshaws on orders from our captain Argonui, to lend a hand in an operation of great importance. I saw you a few times, Master Gerry, and I acknowledge that travels have changed your appearance. Be assured that your father’s health is not at stake. But he had some issues in maintaining his authority in recent times. »

Gerry was relieved, but he realized that his return would come at a difficult time for his family. The company pressed the couple with questions, but the joy was short-lived since they had to share devastating news. When the Dûnedain learned that their lord would guard the eagle’s pass until the return of the King, the men lamented and meant to send messages.

-« Enough!, Hiravorn intervened. This must be reported first to the lady and to the elder son. It is for you, Gerontius, Esquire of the lady and the last to have spoken to the Lord of the Dûnedain, to go and tell her. But now give me your report, as it should on a campaign return. »

Gerry got interrogated in detail by the Dûnedan chief. He described the approach, the route, the schedule, the decisions he had understood, following discussions he had witnessed. However, he was careful not to expose the growing antagonism that had opposed Arathorn and Thràin. The Hobbit mentioned the departure of Gandalf and the Dwarves to the East, and the remaining Dûnedain Westward. Hiravorn did not show his commiseration for the Hobbit until he had all the elements in mind to make decisions, measuring the disaster of the expedition - the death of the commanders, the loss of the wealth discovered and the invasion of orcs. The great news -the destruction of two fearsome dragons - seemed a far-reaching impact with an exorbitant price. He ordered again Gerry to visit Rivendell and bow before Luinloth. The Hobbit, altered by this passage on the grill, turned to Avacuna and said, a little embarrassed:

-« Hiravorn is right. I have duties to the lady and commitments I must honor. We shall go to Rivendell before joining the Shire.

- If you are not nicer, I shall return to my mother! » Avacuna whispered, looking imploring and anxious. Appalled, she realized now how much her Hobbit was involved with the Great. If he did
not seek honors, honor however was reminded to him!

-« I need to put my past in order before I feel completely free. » He answered with a determined but compassionate air.

Chief Hiravorn was about to remind him dryly that only his lady herself could release him from his oath, and he could not be considered free without her prior consent. But Elrohir motioned to him not to overwhelm the Hobbit. Hence the stout soldier changed his mind and therefore took counsel with the elf for the conduct of military operations. They decided for the moment to send a small team to scout what Gerry called the eagle’s pass, as far as they could. The defensive line would still be held in winter North of Rhudaur, in case the turmoil between Orc tribes should result in other assaults.

Thus Elrohir went with the couple to Rivendell. They followed difficult paths through rocks, boulders and a thorny vegetation, but the Elf led them during long miles at an even pace, while they were enjoying the poetry of a journey in wilderness, as in the early morning of the world. Though the days, that shortened quickly, remained mild under the mist of Rhudaur, the nights became colder. The Elf made no fire, but invariably every night he found so well hidden a shelter, that neither beast nor man could detect it - a huge and cozy hollow stump the first night, and a small cave closed by a curtain of young firs, made safe and temperate houses. Gerry never knew if these retreats were discovered for the occasion, or if they had been patiently prepared by patrols from Rivendell. For the ways of the elf reflected his dual ancestry, combining cautious keenness of rangers and the elven intimacy with forests. His sight bore far as the first-born, towards the western sea, yet his heart was contemplating the uncertain fate of Middle-earth, and his desire to push darkness back was renewed. The children of Elrond Half-elven enjoyed as their father, the grace of the ultimate choice - passionate life of Men or indefinitely meditative existence of Elves.

Then Elrohir drew from his purse some wonderful road breads Gerry adored, their companions listened their guide chant some ancient lai of Beleriand, and fell asleep under his vigilant protection. But one afternoon, the light-stride elf showed concerned and asked his companions to hurry up.

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NOTES

[1] Translation from the spanish "No siempre lo peor es cierto", a comedy written by Pedro Calderón de la Barca
Back in his abodes - the bear

Chapter Summary

Elrohir leads Gerry and Avacuna through the Trollshaws, but he soon realizes they are being followed.

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When questioned, he replied only that he feared to be tracked. So the companions, alert, progressed more quickly. Two or three miles further, in a sparse and rocky slope, Gerry heard a strange noise on his left. He would have ignored it, if he had not thought he saw at the same time, at the extreme limit of his field of vision, a strange shape jump into the bushes. The Hobbit shouted:

- « Oh, there! It made "han"! And then it ducked into the trees when I looked. »

Elrohir and Avacuna ran to his side and watched up the long slope. Concern seemed to have left the Elf who led them forward yet. After a twenty minutes stealthy walk under a rocky bar, he disposed them in ambush in favor of a cut in the cliff. The large cleft provided for height shooting points where Avacuna and Gerry took position halfway up the rock, while Elrohir walked away a few steps and vanished amidst the elms. The watch was long for Gerry, who stood it in the role of hunter, of which he could hardly be assured here. After an hour, Elrohir saw Gerry’s thrush, who peeped furiously while flying in circles under the low sky. The bird had discovered an intruder. The Elf came out of hiding and calmly pointed for his companions to the top of the crag, with his arm silently stretched.

A big brown bear stood on top of the fracture, sitting quietly to observe. When the three friends were relaxed and had laughed at themselves, the bear retreated quietly, following the crest of the ridge to the south. The astonished companions followed the foot of the rocky bar, still watching the summit. After a mile, a new fracture, more important, had turned a large section of the cliff into a giant staircase of rocks. The Elf scouted the rock piles. He quickly called his two companions who joined him.

A little below, a woman, looking haggard and famished, was watching them, sat on a trunk bed, surrounded by the rigors and beauties of wilderness. Her long black hair –turning into white at her temples - hid her nakedness. She smiled weakly at their approach, and shed a few tears when Gerry, closing by, recognized her at last.

- « Bera! I thought I had lost you forever! »

The Hobbit hugged the tall woman, to the unpleasant surprise of Avacuna, who evaluated her rival with the eyes of a huntress. But the bear-woman gestured with a mother’s tenderness:

- « I thought you had left for the great journey, you too. I spotted no fingerprints of yours in the snowy slope, nor did I feel your scent below on the way. I found the remains of the mules and their loads at the bottom of a ravine far below the eagle’s pass, but no trace of your little person. You were gone, like lifted in the air! You can imagine my disappointment in failing the last mission he gave me! I spent a few miserable days to recover from the injuries given by our enemy and the shock of the avalanche. »
Bera told them the death of the faithful Ingold, who had sacrificed himself to save her from the terrible werewolf. Hard hit by a strange illness, she had wandered for many days around the pass, facing a furious fever. Licking her wounds and not daring to move far away from the tomb of Arathorn, the great bear had routed a horde of goblins who had ventured there on a beautiful day. Gerry interrupted the Bearning several times, trying to get details of the battle in which he almost believed he had his part. The Eagles, ultimately, had routed the last orcs and the pass had remained inviolate.

« For now on, orcs will fear the Eagle’s Pass, twice named! », Bera said with a sinister look.

Elrohir came forward and clothed the woman with his elven cloak, she buckled at the waist.

« My father in Rivendell got wind of the Battle of the pass. Now the bear and the eagle will be feared in pair in these mountains. Receive the praise of Men and Elves! » He said, bowing.

Bera finished her story, telling her long wandering along the first steep slopes of the Misty Mountains, heading still South in search of Gerry’s traces. She long pondered the failure of her mission - to protect the Hobbit - weakened by a double grief and an illness that spread to all her limbs. Soon she was no longer able to feed and sustain her human form. Losing hope of finding our hero, Bera took refuge under the skin of a bear, deciding she would die fighting her enemies, rather than return to her village and face disgrace. She was heading back to the Eagle’s pass when she crossed tracks she recognized, along with large lynx footprints. With a renewed hope, she followed them as fast as she could.

Bera’s weary look crossed Avacuna’s gaze, who read the destiny of men: the infinite sorrow of separation beyond the circles of the world and the desperate madness of a lost honor. Full of solicitude for this unfortunate courage, she turned to Gerry with an imploring look - he alone could find the right words. Therefore the Hobbit committed in his modest but confident tone that usually made his success:

« You have vowed to support your beloved to his destiny. This promise is fulfilled, even if it brings you only bitterness. You swore to bring me back safe. This commitment also was met, at the peril of your life. You got the world rid of an evil, and myself of a horrible nightmare. Your word is safe and your honor intact. In truth the dignity of the lady of the Bearnings has raised to the rank of the most renowned heroes! »

A pale smile greeted these words of comfort, since the tall woman had no tears left to weep. But through his grief, the Barning still had regained the esteem of herself. And at this time more than one woman felt a desperate gratitude for Gerry.

Then Elrohir invited them to resume their way and led them, at Bera’s tired pace, a few miles further South. Short hills covered with rocks and heather succeeded as a flock of laying sheep. Far away before them a mist haloed some deep river valley. At the bottom of each coomb, firs and shrubs often managed to remain relatively sheltered from the wind that must relentlessly sweep the bleak landscape. The Elf took them to one of them, a deep and impenetrable maze of thorny branches. At the heart of the grove, he found a small passage leading to a cleverly concealed hut. There, in this camouflaged post of the defenses of Rivendell, they spent the night after a solid meal. None of the hosts noticed, but two Elves took turns continuously to watch, concealed atop a tree, peering at the approaches of the hidden valley. Elrohir charged the thrush to carry a message to Elrond, warning that a noble lady needed his care.

The next day Bera seemed more vigorous but her limbs and her face had taken on a gray color, rather worrying. After a glass of cordial which animated the Barning, they left at dawn, cold and windy, the kid was shivering between Avacuna’s protecting legs. Around noon, when the rain
began to lash, they reached a small rocky promontory they climbed, helping Bera. At the very last moment they saw an Elf dressed in gray who was patiently watching them, sat among the rocks. His outfit had the curious property of blending with the shapes and colors that surrounded him. At a sign of the watchman, they entered a hollow between the rocks and down a long staircase at the bottom of which Erestor greeted them. They had come to the foot of the northern cliff, in the hidden valley of Rivendell. Terraces laden with fruits piled in pastel colors between the dark woods, while Elves hurried to take Bera to the last homely home west of the sea.

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Gerry was soon at the bedside of the tall woman who had fainted. Master Elrond came and leaned on the patient, focusing his attention on the strong and thin face. He labored long at her side, draining toxins that poisoned her veins. But the patient began to shake. Within her took place the primary struggle of the solitary bear facing the wolf pack. Fangs and claws tore her guts and mind before Elrond who felt helpless. When the fight seemed lost, the Elf invited Gerry to take Bera’s hand and spoke to her:

« Daughter of Barwen, come back to the forests of your folk. The cubs of your clan mourn their mother's call with loud cries! Hear the call of the forest life! »

Bera's hand tightened on Gerry’s arm, who felt the waning life force of the bear, throbbing under the veins while the lonely lover sobbed. The Hobbit also discerned the consuming fire of the lycanthrope, the destructive madness of the werewolves of the ancient world. But the exhortation of Elrond had recalled the protective instinct of the mother bear who stood face to the wolves. Her cub or was it Gerry? - called for help beyond the death of his foster father - or was he his godfather and lord? Bera was alone in the clearing of her heart, routing the wolves’ poison. As she breathed calmly now, Master Elrond gave her a liquor and put a poultice himself.

«That will sweat the remaining poison and madness out of her, said the majestic Elf. But what will she awake to, grief or hope? No doubt you can help, Perian, you who traveled with her. And maybe will you tell me more about this extraordinary Woman? »

Gerry told the singular meeting under the trees of the great forest in Rhovanion, the love, disillusioned and too little discouraged, and finally the terrible oath to hopelessly follow a man with inordinate ambitions.

« May be the death of my lord Arathorn was a deliverance to Bera, she has not yet realized.

- She will find shelter and serenity here. Once ready, she will meet as unfortunate as her and that could help her. »

Elrond said no more for the moment. A look at the Hobbit assured that his message was understood. He left the room, inviting the guardian of the house of healing, to ensure that the patient should be kept warm. When Gerry, absorbed in serious thoughts, came out too, a young Elf hopped up to him, clapping his hands.

« Rúmil ! » Exclaimed Gerry, hugging him.

- « Welcome, Master Gerontius! Having heard the news of your return, I took the liberty of preparing a snack worthy of your ogre appetite! » Cried the elf, pulling a cart of groceries.

- Not now, Rúmil! » Said the Hobbit, with a concerned accent in his voice.

The young elf gasped. Seeing his disappointment, the Hobbit reassured him with a pale smile:
-« Keep it all, my dear Rúmil. I must first pay a sad visit out of duty... »

The young Elf led Gerry to his room, where the Hobbit refreshed and put on decent clothes. The elven garments that were lent to him, now fit his robust and tall Hobbit size. Thus adorned, he would have created sensation in Great Smials. Gerry would have gladly traded this livery and his unbearable onus. He confided Avacuna to Idril and Rumil. Then, his throat tight, he went in search of the lady of the Dunedain, directing his steps towards the garden. Approaching the rotunda where the lady and her husband used to enjoy the peace of the valley, he noticed a little boy who was climbing the branches of a low and tortuous tree. The boy was leaping from rope ladders to wood platforms, brandishing a sword and slaying goblins. A thrush was watching the child at the top of the upper branches, punctuating his exploits with twittering praise.

-« Ernil y periannath[1], Aremel ! », shouted Arafin merrily.

Alarmed, the lady ran, holding up the skirts of her night blue gown. Up the grassy slope, she stopped when she saw Gerry, put her hand to her mouth to hide her trembling lips. But her reddened eyes and exhausted face showed that the news she had been provided with, had bereft her of any hope. Crying and producing a cruel effort to pull herself together, Luinloth greeted the Hobbit by courteous words, and begged him to report her certainty about her husband, cruel but true news, that only could give her some comfort.

-« You have guessed, squire of the Dúnedain, the news of the departure of my husband for the halls of Mandos were announced to me, she said, raising a tearful gaze towards the small thrush. But I ask you to tell me everything you have been a direct witness of, even if that is painful for you. »

Gerry bowed, gathering all the courage and the judgment to meet the injunction without worsening the pain of his lady. He first told the growing opposition between the two captains and Arathorn’s talent to stand as a champion of the alliance beyond all dispute, while claiming the rights and concerns of the Dúnedain. The Hobbit painted Bera’s adoration and vow, a chaste and harrowing way. The lady, surprised at the forest-woman’s morals and courage, received like a balm the report of her husband’s loyalty, noting bitterly that he had always been able to ingratiate with warriors and people of honor.

Gerry described in details the deeds of his lord, lessening his own merits and ignoring entire less respectable periods about Arathorn. He mentioned the quarrels which opposed the captains about the recovered treasures in the remote arbitration of Gandalf. The Hobbit was in the middle of the Barum-Nahal mining explorations, when Luinloth began to suspect a bias in her squire’s report, since the wizard was mentioned there sporadically and as minor. But then Gandalf’s hidden thoughts were revealed to her, when Gerry told the arrival of the dragons and the disastrous battle that followed. His voice lowered when he came to the duplicity of Arathorn. His throat knotted. Unable to accuse his lord, he paused before stating the losses, merging the fighting in the mine and the battle against black rangers, later in the valley. But the lady realized a key point was missing in the tale. Pale and tense, she asked in a whisper:

- « A betrayal? »

Gerry looked down, not to behold the pain she would no doubt be inflicted by the revelation of her husband’s treachery:

- « Yes, my lady...

- My husband fell through the treachery of those, whose alliance I vouched for! The worth
recovered in the mine must have turned their heads! » She burst into tears.

Gerry startled. The lady’s love and faith in her husband veiled the unbearable truth, our Hobbit had not the heart to uncover. He got off from his neck, the Naugwar Mithmirion that was hidden under his clothes. With a miserable and worn air, he knelt to present the jewel to his lady:

« This is what I received, as a pledge from the hands of your husband, to pay grievances and soothe the hearts... »

The lady received the wonder with dignity, only muttering with anger and determination:

« So this is the blood-price for my husband! Let this sad trophy become the prerogative of the line of Isildur, until it helps to restore the honor of our house! »

Grief plunged her into endless tears, looking at the incomparable necklace lying in her lap. Gerry, tearful also, took her hand and timidly kissed it, saying:

« Tell me how I can relieve your pain, my lady.

- Can you tell me what were his last thoughts?

- My lord Arathorn asked me to lay at your feet the testimony of the only love of his life. I assure you his mind was in peace when he went away, since he had worked for the good of his people by repairing his faults...

Then the Hobbit took from his purse a little treasure he had cut from the branch Arathorn had born throughout their journey. Trembling, he handed to Luinloth the white button, now wrinkled. The lady remained silent long. Before her, Gerry was tortured by conflicting duties, wondering if his own silence would not ultimately do more harm than good. In doubt, he did like Gandalf had advised him and listened to his heart. He buried the secret of Arathorn. What mattered most to his eyes now was to alleviate the pain of the lady. Luinloth said at last, wiping her tears:

« You have relieved me of uncertainty. Tell me now where my husband lays.

- Arathorn now rests at the Eagle’s Pass, in the Misty Mountains located far north of Rhudaur, watching over the road he had sought to open. Ingold the brave, Bera of the Bearnings and I have buried his remains in this high place, for him ever to contemplate the fief of his lineage.

- You have served well, Gerontius son of Fortimbras. I have no doubt my husband held you in high esteem, since it is you who bring me the item of his last thought and the testimony of his last will. Leave me alone now. I implore you to watch over my grandson in my retirement and to distract him as you can. »

Gerry bowed and did as the lady had requested. He and Avacuna remained in Rivendell for some time, the Hobbit restoring his strength and dividing his time between Bera’s bedside and games with Arafín, most often in the company of Avacuna, who rediscovered the wonder and splendor of Elvish songs. From time to time, he saw from afar, lady Luinloth meditating alone under the dome or near the falls. The Hobbit also witnessed the recovery of Bera, who regained her old strength. She had come close to madness and was back from the veils of the void, bearing the gift of poetry. The words now transcended the feelings that flowed, as powerful as before, but clearer and more subtle. She met Luinloth several times, and they spoke together at length. Bera went strengthened out of these meetings, and the lady of the Dúnedain was probably enlightened with the original life vision of the Bearnings.

Several weeks after the arrival of the travelers, around the end of month Hithui, lady Luinloth
convened Gerry in a hall of the house of Elrond. Her face was now quieter, she turned to him with somewhat artificial spirits:

-« You are now discharged from the double burden of Arathorn’s mission and the sad news of his departure. Tell me now about you, Master Hobbit! What have you found in your travels? »

Luinloth’s smile was somehow strained but her wistful eyes still betrayed a joyful afterthought, almost mocking. Gerry knew it was time to talk about Avacuna and future.

-« My lady, traveling with Gandalf, then being at your service and take part of a campaign with so famous captains, changed the uneducated and conceitful Hobbit I was. Walking through the vast and somewhat mysterious world, I found so many unexpected things, on turns beautiful or ugly, frightening or helpful, it seems to me now a little less mysterious and much larger. To tell you everything, I feel much smaller today than the day I left, although I took a few inches!

- This is a token of wisdom. You seem ready to fulfill the services that my husband and I were expecting from you. »

Gerry waited, choking, the lady should set his next mission. But she laughed at his anguished air:

- « It was never intended to require anything that would exceed your abilities. We meant to submit your loyalty and endurance to the test, what you achieved with courage, quiet dignity and a bit of luck. You are now able to take your place in the plan that we have designed for you: go home, back to your kin. Keep the memory of the King alive among your folk, feed the flame of hope and cooperate with your neighbors and our companies, bring any aid you think fit to your neighbours and the Free People, and get ready, you and your heirs, to have the kingdom reborn when the line of Isildur comes forth.

- I thought you would keep me close to you...

- Beware, Gerontius, I might take you up on this! But Eriador needs leaders like your father or yourself when your time comes, to lead the Shire on the path of honor, prosperity and happiness. Your journey has taught you a taste for these virtues, and may be you know how to recognize and stir them in your own people?

- Indeed. Prosperity is needed by all. Honor and cowardice, happiness and suffering are all the same across Middle-earth, it seems to me, as long as People are free. But there is a feeling that I had not experienced before this trip.

- And what is it? », Asked the lady with a little twinkle in his eye.

Gerry squirmed like a kid caught in the act:

- « I met the right person for me, and I think I might be suitable for her...

- You think so? Did it come to your mind that you should foremost ask about her opinion? »

Gerry took a peony color:

- « Indeed we have engaged our troth and dreamed of some projects.

- Very good! I would love to know these projects, if I may. But above all, would you mind introduce your soul mate to me? »

Gerry did, though afterwards he had the impression that lady Luinloth knew all about his romantic
adventures. But he let go with good grace. Avacuna entered the room, flanked by Rúmil and Idril his bride, who had sympathized with the young woman. Avacuna was wearing a dress of silk taffeta, Idril had crafted for her.

The lady looked at her benevolently but sighed. The graceful arms laden with a wreath of dried flowers were indeed those of a young athletic woman, but when she sat lifting her dress, the huntress let see her long foot that recalled the paw of a lynx. Her cat ears, whatever discrete and blending with her magnificent hair, revealed her ancient origin immediately. The young woman beamed with happiness in this place, she took advantage of every moment. The lady had a long conversation with them, listened to their projects, testing the will and desire of an ardent and prolific mortal life of two young people.

Yet Luinloth realized that the two lovers fled ahead, hoping to stop in the Shire, but without much assurance of achieving this. For her part, the lady had no doubt about the unending difficulties the presence of a fairy would induce in Hobbit society. Her decision settled, the lady had them step forward in front of her and said:

- « The lady of the Dúnedain gives you her blessing. May you prosper in body and mind in harmony with your differences. To help you both, I commit to you, Avacuna, this necklace to wear it forever. »

On a velvet cushion Rúmil handed, the lady took the dwarven necklace and passed it around Avacuna’s neck:

- « I command you to keep it hidden and urge you not to leave it as long as you remain in the Shire. Thus your long journey of fairy forest will not appear stranger, to most of Gerry’s parents, than a Breeland mindset or the habits of vagabond Hobbits of Eregion before the creation of the Shire. For anyone, you will wear a dwarven trinket won by your husband in his long journeys. »

At these words the river of jewels and mithril turned on Avacuna into a humble pendant, while her ears dwindled and blended with the soft locks of her hair, a Hobbit foot -barely hairy- exceeded under her dress, her slick smile shone without feline whiskers on her radiant face, pink with happiness. In the eyes of Gerry, her beloved had not changed, except perhaps a more pronounced curve of the hips, which smoothed her athletic muscles. Yet the gift of the lady gave Avacuna the serenity she had been longing for. Now she would advance in her chosen life, able to pass on the gift of mortal life, practical, rich and quiet as is customary among Hobbits.

Gerry believed he had got rid of his share of guilt, along with the dwarven collar. But now fate threatened that his lady’s high and innocent generosity would force him forever, while beholding his love, to remember his old wrongdoing, committed by love and cowardice.

Our hero, troubled by this poisoned gift, dared yet not refuse. He received a big book about the history of the kingdoms of the north, from the hands of the Queen:

-« So you can hone your letters and study men’s policies, while thinking of your lord and your lady. »

The couple ceremoniously bowed to the lady.

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NOTES

[1] The prince of the Halflings, Grand-Mother!
No doubt Gerry means Arathorn orders him to surrender the jewel to whoever has a right to it, in order to mend his wrongdoings.
Chapter Summary

Gerry and Avacuna plight their troth, after confessing several petty details about a certain ring.

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Master Elrond was somewhat offended at not having been consulted. The union of a Fairy and a Hobbit was naturally the responsibility of an elf whose memory went back to the first age of the world. As loremaster and lord of Rivendell, he should have presided over the blessing.

But mostly, the fate of the Naugwar Mithmirion concerned him dearly. Elrond had no doubt an artifact of this scope had not got into the Hobbit’s possession, solely as a part of negotiations between allies. The disappearance of the two captains, the breaking of the alliance and Gandalf’s swift departure, all these signs urged him to be cautious and wait to learn more. It seemed wise to hide the jewel for a time; yet he was reluctant to hide this treasure here in Rivendell. When he knew that lady Luinloth had given the jewel as a dowry to Avacuna, he had the intuition the Fairy would be the best keeper, until passions were allayed. Then Hobbits, astranged to old grievances between Elves and Dwarves, would be able to surrender the jewel without arousing suspicion. Hence he supported the decision, choosing the lesser evil.

The next day the Master of Rivendell took advantage of the elven celebration of winter to give a party in honor of the couple. The splendours of Imladris kindled for a sort of honeymoon Avacuna and Gerry savored before leaving for the adventure of their lives. Lady Luinloth, though in mourning, attended willingly, especially since her eldest son Argonui and his grandson Arador joined her after repelling an invasion of orcs of Mount Gram.

Bera told the history of her ancestors in a powerful and subtle language, the minstrels of Rivendell translated into a song now known as the Lai of Barwen and Baran. The feast continued late into the night. While Avacuna, radiant with the subtle charms of the Naugwar, danced with the elven chorus girls, Elrond took Gerry to the hall of fire.

- « Gerontius Took, had I not predicted that you would find more than half of yourself in this adventure, in condition you do not abandon the essential part?
- It is true, Master. I truly recovered more than half of myself. In addition to being found by Avacuna, maybe I have discovered myself entirely? Indeed, my life took a simpler and more exciting sense... within my reach, as a matter of fact. But I have long wondered what you called the essential part.
- And what do you think it is? », Elrond asked with great interest.

The Hobbit hesitated a moment, then stepped in, with his playful and friendly tone, hiding his apprehension:

- « It so happens that I have in my possession a very valuable item. And this is a ring of power. Gandalf told me about it, one of those the elven smiths of Eregion cast long ago, you know? Yes, I
guess you know... At first I did not pay attention, but then there were many people who got interested and even pursued me! We were repeatedly attacked! And then I felt guilty since it is an ill-gotten gain, I mean for me. Not that I have stolen it, mind you, but I got it in circumstances that the owner forcefully disagrees. But this item was extremely helpful during our journey, it even saved our comrades and myself from a horrible death on several occasions. I first had trouble using it, but it has somehow revealed itself to me...! I may reach high levels of concentration thanks to it, and achieve things that I would never have believed possible! For example, I met a very old ancestor, near the Gladden Fields... Hence I was attached to it and I wanted its help and power. To depart from it would be difficult... more and more I fear. This is the essential part of myself that I might lose, in my opinion. But an event occurred, that scared me and told me how I became addicted. I have not used it since I've realized. And now I am determined to surrender it to its rightful owner. »

At first Elrond was amused by the Hobbit’s active and naive belief. Rings of power were obviously not found under the hoof of a Shire’s horse! Then his formal disbelief had cracked for the tale of the powers the Hobbit reported. Finally, the accurate description of the evil attractions of a ring of power had positively alarmed him. But the last assertion restored his hope. He decided to proceed with caution, without offending the Hobbit:

-« Did Gandalf advise you about this item?

- I have not spoken to him about the ring, yet he often got close to my secret... and that got me pretty angry!

- Do you have the strength to show this item?

- Yes, it is not as heavy as that, Gerry replied lively! You must be careful not to put your finger inside, however, since the device cuts anything inside! »

Elrond could not hide a frown of incomprehension. Power rings enslaved weak minds, but did not cut fingers. Gerry handed again his ring out of his pocket and placed it in his own open palm. Elrond, who was closely watching the Hobbit, pushed the experience further:

-« May I have a closer look? Would you lend it to me for a moment?

- Take it! Definitely! Such an item should not remain in clumsy or vapid hands like mine. It could do much harm! I will compensate the owner, take it, please!

- I shall just consider this ring. »

Master Elrond placed a cushion on a table and invited the Hobbit to put his ring there. Candle lights grew around with a sign of the Elf. Gerry came and put the object with a trembling hand, which the Master of Rivendell did not fail to observe. Elrond approached his grave and attentive face and thoroughly scrutinized the ring. Then, encouraged by his initial observations, he took it between thumb and forefinger, and raised it in the white light of a large candelabra. The stones sprang into opal light.

-« I commend you to the highest point for having my advice on this subject. I can tell you without fear of contradiction, that this is not a ring of power. In all likelihood, it was once, not one but two rings of the Dúnedain, crafted before the wars of the North, perhaps in Westernesse. Each had a stone and they were twins. Then recently -around the creation of the Shire, I would say - a goldsmith of Eriador, a dwarf most likely, modified and attached the two jewels to make a unique and complex object, which mechanism’s purpose, is indeed to cut what has been inserted inside the rings...»
But the Elf was still puzzled as to the destination of such an artifact. He asked the Hobbit who replied:

« In fact I think it is a kind of knife, master Hornblower used to cut properly the precious pipeweed blends he produces at great expense. But I can assure you it saved me several times! »

Elrond smiled knowingly:

« So master Hornblower certainly had this beautiful item smithed from a treasure of his house. Maybe this double ring once had the talent to help its owner to get the best out of his own abilities. And maybe it is still so today... or maybe you just got lucky. But it is not an elven ring of power, that I may assure you. I guess what Gandalf said to you led you to believe in this item as much as in yourself... You must give it back to its owner, as you are resolved. This will be the last test for you: restore the order of things and reduce the chaos left behind you before you can claim a righteous life. Ultimately, what you had the most to lose, the essential part of yourself, was perhaps the esteem of yourself? »

Gerry looked at Master Elrond who handed his ring with a smile. So all his progress in mastering the ring was fake... He sighed and cast with a gesture the looming lust for power and domination. After all, it was better this way.

The great Elf sat down with the Hobbit and said with a kindly air:

« I trust in your will. And you will be supported unconditionally.

- I am determined, Master Elrond. I'll put some order on my return and introduce Avacuna to my family. But I fear for her about questions and gossip. So far she has experienced only wilderness or the company of a small number of refined people. Small petty inquisitions, harassment or blacklisting may poison our lives. If this was to happen, I'd leave the Shire.

- You are foreseeing with lucidity, Gerry, but I wonder whether you anticipate the possibility of this departure to escape your future responsibilities as the Thain? You can count on the solidarity of your true friends and loved ones, as long as the most blatant of Avacuna’s differences remain hidden, at least initially. Lady Luinloth countered this difficulty in her generous way, although dangerous in my opinion. I must warn you about the Naugwar Mithmirion. It will raise the curiosity and envy of any Dwarf who would happen to recognize it. I also urge you to keep it always such as Avacuna is wearing it now. You've heard enough here of the history of Elves and Dwarves to know that great evils were perpetrated by the greed of such a gem. When it is no longer needed, it should be brought back to Dùrin folk. On this point I must have your solemn promise.

- I give you this promise in my name and Avacuna’s.

- Thank you. But I feel this is not what is bothering you? »

Gerry blushed, stammered somehow and finally confided:

« Actually, Master, I wonder if our union will prove prolific... Shall we have children? »

Elrond summoned his furthest souvenirs and began the tale of Elu Thingol, who united to a sylvan spirit of the first age of the world. He questioned at length the fate of their offspring and concluded that he was very confident about the ability of Gerry’s couple to produce many strong branches. Gerry objected that this was a very old story, which mainly concerned the elves. The master of Rivendell replied:
Avacuna’s nature is neither elvish nor mortal. She has been spending lavishly her innate power to transform the world and herself, following a long way to mature and rise to her current nature. Today she needs a peer who would accept her conception of a life devoted to the transmission of her new-born abilities and quiet happiness. Do you wish to and will you know how to be her mate? That is the only question. Avacuna enjoyed the existence of primordial spirits and was able to rise by her own will and her own vision. Now she no longer has that power to blend into the flow of life in Middle Earth. But rest assured, the length of her life will fit with Hobbit standards. The future of mortals is open to you, as mysterious it may seem to the Elves.

The guests were now coming into the hall of fire. The beautiful folk sang and declaimed poetry, sometimes inviting Bera to join them. Avacuna appeared among elven girls, round and bright as a Hobbit on her wedding day. Gerry wondered, within a blink of an eye, whether she was pregnant, but drove this ridiculous idea out of his mind. At the end of the evening, Gerry, fast asleep, heard Bera reciting Elvish verses, to the wonder of Erestor. As the Elvish words rose with the swirls of fire, he saw Luthien questioning her mortal destiny beyond the circles of the world, and fell asleep on the cushions.

Happy days pass like shooting stars in the summer firmament. Dúnedain dispersed, taking their vigil around Eriador. The winter advanced, Bera decided to cross the Misty Mountains to join her folk. Elladan and Elrohir accompanied her because they wanted to explore the mountains and gather information about the goblins movements and alliances after the fuss Gandalf had triggered in the north. The tall woman, dressed in colorful clothes mixing raw hides and elven silk, clasped over her heart the little hobbit and his wife, and promised them a warm greeting in the villages of the Great Forest, if they happen to wander in the wilderness nearby. No doubt they would be better welcomed than dwarves!

The same day Gerry began their preparations. He had several metal and precious wood pipes commissioned by the artisans of Rivendell, in anticipation of gifts to distribute on his return. He had carved the pipe intended to father Hornblower. Rúmil and Idril brought a gift from Elrond: a beautiful long-haired pony, harnessed and provided with the necessary for both travelers.

Then the Master of Rivendell received Avacuna’s visit. She knew his sons for long, but she never had the opportunity to benefit from his wisdom. As a matter of fact, Elrond had blessed from afar the slow transformation of the willful huntress. The young woman expressed her fears about a world she had only recently addressed in full possession of her means of mind. Elrond calmed her fears and confirmed that her union with a mortal would give her the ability to anchor in this world, to transmit life and act on the present. He added that she would lose her own life force and longevity in Middle Earth.

- « For such is the fate of mortals, whose soul leaves the circles of this world for a destiny that is not revealed to the elves.

- I accept this fate. Now that the world appears more clearly, I see that everything passes in this age.

- It is also the intuition of the elves... »

Two days later the couple went away by a cold and gray morning. Small Arafín came to say goodbye, the little thrush on his shoulder. Lady Luinloth wished them peace, and reminded Gerry with a smile that she could still call him back to her service.

Master Elrond blessed the couple again. He gave Avacuna a small box of hardwood, carved like lace. It contained an even smaller box, a metal one, which contained a glowing coal from Master Elrond’s crucible.
"The hearth of a household, powered by this coal, will never fail to warmth and love, as long as its members remain sincere to each other. And here is another gift for you. Your elvish name is Avacuna, which means "She who does not bend" or "Volunteer". The translation of this name in the culture of the Shire is Adamanta, the Inflexible. It turns out that this name was born by a famous family head, Adamanta Chubb. Her clan was the last to leave the area of En Egladil, downstream of Rivendell, to migrate westward and to the Shire. Thus you will, Adamanta Chubb, in the eyes of your new family, stand for the last Hobbit of the Eastern branch of Chubb clan, to join the fold. This will help you in many ways, provided you keep carefully hidden, the perilous gift of lady Luinloth."

Avacuna bowed, with tears in her eyes. Then, heavy-hearted, the lovers timidly passed on the little stone bridge over the enchanted river, into the gray morning. Choirs accompanied them far up the climb. At the top a few joyful shouts of encouragement put them on the right path. After joining the road, they strode to the West in the cool wind, the kid prancing ahead.

.oOo.

[1] And this promise will be fulfilled. But this is another story, that maybe you will be told some day…
Chapter Summary

The couple heads west to the Shire.

.oOo.

The lovers were quick to find their balance in this romantic journey. That same evening they went down into the valley of the Bruinen and crossed the ford. The next day they progressed among pine groves and thinning hardwood. The warm colors were off and rain, pushed by a west wind, slowed the progression of the pony, that longed for its stable and fields of Rivendell.

Two days later, after the Mitheithel bridge, they approached the last inn, Arathorn had rebuilt and replenished. A thick fire smoke warned from far away, that here a hearth was waiting for the traveler. A fortified farm soon appeared to them as night fell. The visitors knocked on the oaken door, reinforced with steel. A strong man opened the gate after due examination. The place looked more like a besieged castle than a coaching inn, but this was one of the wills of late Arathorn. The yard could receive flocks of sheep from around. Ample reserves stored in fall cluttered the attics.

Once the pony housed, they entered the main building, and were welcomed by Argonui himself. Gerry took care to express deference to the new lord and military chief of the Dúnedain of Arnor. Obviously their journey was watched on, but Gerry also had the feeling that Argonui was trying to demonstrate the reality and the success of Arathorn’s economic actions.

Before going to bed, Gerry confided to Argonui the last words of his father about him, who was deeply moved but also surprised that Gandalf would come along with him in his lord’s last thoughts about the fate of the Dúnedain.

The couple stayed a full day, sheltered at the inn, put off by a cold and pouring rain. The rangers who had not met Gerry, were eager to hear the story of the expedition. Although it was painful for him to behave as a veteran goblin wars, he gave them satisfaction, not without enhancing the role of their former captain. Ultimately, the Dúnedain would keep the memory of a heroic expedition that had conquered all the obstacles, even a couple of dragons, but the two captains had paid the attempt with their lives.

The travelers resumed their journey along the Great East Road. To the north lay the desolation where only a few herds gazed in summer. Southward, thickets sheltered rare hamlets resettled by Arathorn. Locations where Avacuna and Gerry camped were quite popular during the rest of the year, but they did not meet a soul for several days. One afternoon, however, they passed into the mist beneath a Dwarven cart pulled by two donkeys. Gerry wondered if one of them was present at the Drunken Goose Inn, the day he had behaved so weirdly.

The next day they went to the foot of Weathertop, a large promontory north of the road, which still bore the scars of the ancient northern wars. They camped a little further, near the Midgewater Marshes, eating cattails, that Gandalf had praised for their culinary merits, ages ago. Fortunately, during winter, midges let them alone.

Finally they reached Bree hill at night, under a showering rain. Avacuna was very excited, but
Gerry had her pass a pre-inspection before going to the gate. The guard, a lean and rustic lad, saw no danger in this pair of Hobbits, apart from the incongruous mystery why he knew nothing of them and they stood at the East door. But that was quite enough to delay until Gerry gave his identity by raising the tone somewhat. Travelers drove their poney to the village center, where they lodged at the sign of the Prancing Pony.

The owner, a big bald man known by the name of Marlowan Butterbur, received them like royalty. Gerry thought it more prudent to leave the kid with the poney in the stable, which was hardly to the taste of his mistress. Marlowan stood for a moment speechless when Gerry enunciated his name and introduced the "young lady Took" at his side, but as a good inn-keeper he recovered quickly and called his lackeys. They were allotted wealthy bedroom, low and close to the ground. When they were refreshed and fed, an old Hobbit came to clear the table and inquire if everything was to their liking. The couple was invited to visit the common room. Gerry was tired and would gladly have declined, but accepted for the sake of lively and curious Avacuna.

The common hall, warmed by a generous hearth and wealthy paneled walls, gave them a perfect welcome. The master of the house distributed jugs and bottles as rarely for a winter evening. The couple soon realized that unusual events in the Shire had attracted the attention of locals on the prestigious Took name. Hence the inn was full of curious folk who swelled the ranks of the idle regulars. Gerry was therefore forced to tell in detail his travels in the East, to visit men beyond the mountains in the company of a wizard, and how he met and married Miss Adamanta Chubb, here today and for now Mrs. Gerontius Took.

These news turned upside down the general belief about the fate of "Young Mister Gerry". To bring some order to the hubbub, Mrs. Butterbur, a large, forceful and ruddy Woman, who enjoyed a somewhat wittier and more understanding mind than most of her customers, explained the news from the Shire by stripping them of the Bree populace fabrications.

"It was rumored a few months there, towards the end of spring, that the Thain had decided to "put some stones in the pockets of his son"[1], as we say here in Breeland, with all due respect, Mister Gerry. The gossips reported that dozens of fathers - um, I mean fathers of many girls, if you follow me - marched to Tuckborough for mysterious business with you. And what business it was, you know better than us! This is roughly the time an unfortunate fellow was snapped up by quicksand in the south beyond Longbottom on the Brandywine, near Hornblower Mansion. It was believed that was you. But other rumors reported that a wizard, an old man we know here, had boxed your ear and led you who knows where. But we in Bree knew better for sure, since old Bob, here, went to the spring fair in Thalion when troubles started with the black guys. And he discussed with Hobbegar Grubb, the innkeeper there. He said that he saw Mister Gerry with old Gandalf leaving on the sly in the outback with black guys behind on their tracks. Ultimately, in the Shire you were presumed dead since the beginning of winter. It must be said that some people, out there near Brandy Hall or even Long Cleeve, are interested that you remain dead for good. And from what is said here - and I always stand for Bree, if you understand me, with all due respect - there is a wind of change in the Shire, and it is not necessarily for the better... »

The tirade was punctuated all along with cheeky approvals, minor corrections and evocative clarifications. Gerry had seen the ribald look of Avacuna when referring to the dozen girls. But she remained unmoved, absorbed in observing these manners, so amazing for her.

Gerry stood up, cleared his throat and spoke for the whole room to hear:

- « Well, my dear friends, first I would like to say how pleasant it is for my wife and me, to reconnect with civilization, in the good town of Bree! And to celebrate this, let me honor the venerable tradition of the traveler’s round! »
A round of applause greeted this encouraging opening statement.

-« I see here, in Breeland, they will not let themselves be fooled by any gossip, especially if it comes from the Shire! »

Thunderous cheers punctuated the appropriate compliment, and a few laughs appreciated the second degree. When calm returned, Marlowan Butterbur and his wife distributed the promised mugs.

-« I'm sure my return will clear up any misunderstanding about my engagement besides both my father and clan Took, to organize relief to families in need and promote trade with our excellent neighbors. »

The reaction was tepid. Many Hobbit families from Breeland were related to the Brandybucks, East of the Brandywine. The old antagonism between the Oldbuck and the Took was not forgotten. This strong speech, addressed at the adversaries of the Thain, had been understood. By contrast, the board members of Breeland’s council, either Big Folk or Hobbits, applauded the commercial promises, supported by merchants and peddlers.

-« The exceptional - but excellent! - arrangements that Breeland communities have concluded, show you how worthy are peace and order. Just like you, I will not let discord settle in the Shire, especially not in my own family! »

A widespread approval concluded these fairly conservative considerations. After all, stability in the Shire was required for any prosperity in the region. But how far was the time when this rascal "Mister Gerry" pranced on his pony with many feathers in his hat! Now he spoke as a chief, with a mature tone yet no staleness! Finally Gerry meant to give an overview of the news beyond the usual microcosm of the villagers. At the same time he associated himself with the image of a learned Hobbit, in collusion with the hidden powers of the world:

-« Finally, be assured that the dark tales of looters and "black guys" that marred the last few months are now behind us. Rangers have defeated them and we shall be able to resume and expand our business with our neighbors. Sleep in peace! »

Thereupon Avacuna and Gerry returned to their room. They had given Breeland enough to occupy the evenings for several weeks. Avacuna long inquired about the Hobbits social uses. We bet his explanations did not end that night!

Travelers resumed the road early the next morning. They could not know it yet, but it was that very day that Rangers showed they had come back around the country. That increased Gerontius’ prestige very much – he was painted as the companion of wizards and rangers, leaving one morning to eradicate highwaymen and coming back with a beautiful lass on his arm. And his speech was high, honest and prophetic. But for the time Gerry was eager to return home. The prospect of a parade of his former conquest’s fathers before the Thain had rather worried him. Under a leaden sky, the company hurried their pace along a beautiful paved road, lined with old trees, and reached the crossbows bridge in the evening. They stayed at the Inn of the bridge, where they found an unusual excitement.

Clan leaders had animated the scene since old Fortimbras had been shaken by the mysterious disappearance of his son and the defamation orchestrated by a few families. Gerry sensed better now the difficulties his father must have felt. But he was confirmed by the assistance, some bewildered by his presence, the other with a shocking disappointment, that he was presumed dead. A trial was even open at Great Smials to meet many complaints!
The travelers hardly had time to enjoy the scenery of the Shire. A Took from Tookbank who rested at the Bridge Inn that morning, lent them a pony so that they might rally Tuckborough as soon as possible. Yet Avacuna appreciated the gentle hills and the meandering Water, the charming and laborious development of the land, the miniature gardens that reminded her of her hidden valley.

The couple arrived at the gates of Tuckborough in the evening. The villagers gathered in the street as the rumor of a great event spread like rats during harvest. Some cheers from his friends and relatives rang out, but also some pretty nimble jokes on the theme of the eternal seducer. Gerry therefore immediately decided to send a message. He pushed up to the village square, where they dismounted and climbed on the wide edge of the wash. Gerry’s size and incisive tone were appreciated, but it was his clothes, mixing Elvish parts and patched Hobbits belongings, that struck all who knew him as an inveterate dandy.

-« Dear friends, most beloved family, I am very pleased to announce my return among you and to introduce my wife Adamanta to you. »

Avacuna made a very gracious and modest little bow. After a moment of stunned and incredulous silence, Gerry’s older direct cousins launched cheers, dragging the village along with them. It is true that some girls, distant cousins, lost their last illusions, but their tears were taken for demonstrations of joy. Avacuna managed to say a few words in the midst of an excited crowd:

-« My full name is Adamanta Chubb, wife of Gerontius Took. I am deeply moved by the warm welcome you have given to our impromptu visit. And I hope we can repeat here, the celebration and ceremony that were held in the East, in my distant country. »

This enigmatic statement did not clear much the exact family and geographic origin of the bride - yet Hobbits are very fussy about these topics - but it clearly implied there would be a great festive meeting with ample food and drink. This announcement, quite spontaneous, was somehow reckless because Fortimbras was very jealous of his finances, but still rather witty since it immediately evoked the prospect of a restored unit around an event Gerry was responsible for. Avacuna sent her kid among the sheep that were watching the scene too, with less emotion than Hobbits though. Some cousins took care of the pony, and the couple entered the ancestral home by the great gate of the Boroughs.

The Thain was sitting with his wife at the master’s end of the family table, of somehow thirty guests. The newcomers slowly advanced with a timid look while the audience had been silent upon their entering. The two favorite hounds of the householder came growling. Avacuna made a simple little sign with her finger that forced them to sit quietly, allowed only to move their nose or tail. The Thain was furious at such a betrayal on the part of animals he fed with his own hand, and he only was usually able to get close. At a glance, the old but solid Hobbit prohibited any attempt of effusion to diners who would rush to welcome Gerry. Yet Fortimbras trembled with some emotion when his son ascended the table, a ravishing Hobbit-lass on his arm, smiling at his family. Finally, the young giant stood before him. With a slightly quavering voice, the Thain looked at Gerry and said grumpily:

-« What happened to the golden buttons of your jacket?

- They served as ransom to redeem my life, in the wars where you sent me to fight along with our protectors. »

The confrontation was short. In one sentence, Gerry had recalled that his departure was not his decision, he had made up his mind and taken advantage of it, despite the danger that the Thain had not been able to anticipate. To be honest, that was not entirely accurate – the buttons had finished in the nest of an Eaglet, whose politeness would now benefit from the presence of his father. But
the effect was found - a moment the Thain seemed taken aback:

-« So you are well? Where is Gandalf?

- I am all right, yet my clothes have suffered considerably during my adventures. As for Gandalf, he had to rush off to try to save Thràin, the King of Dùrin’s Folk. But I have not come back alone... »

The mature Hobbit-women leaned to see better. To tell the truth the whole table had eyes only for Avacuna, who stood modest, dogs at her feet, just out of the glow of the candlesticks hanging at the ceiling. Now she looked like a young Hobbit-girl, not yet rounded but already solid. At Gerry’s prompt, she stepped into the light.

-« May I present you Adamanta Chubb, my wife! »

A young girl, who had served the family for a few years, fainted down the table. Mother Took stood in tears, but father Took intervened with force:

-« How dare you defy my authority and repeat such feats, though I entrusted you with this wizard?

- With your permission, my father, I must remind you that I did not make any promise on this subject

- you accused me enough not to! I ask you to welcome Adamanta. If I had wrongs towards you in the past, it is obviously out of question my wife should be burdened with them, least by you. Our union was blessed by Master Elrond. The lady of the Dunedain gave us the grace of her consent, in memory of her husband whose squire I became and collected his last words. »

The Thain was abashed by his son’s revelations and his confident tone.

- «What? Has Captain Arathorn fallen?

- It is the truth. But I met his son, a mature man who took command of the rangers. But this is perhaps not a conversation to be held on a night of return, don’t you think? »

The amazed assistance hardly understood the exchange, except that strong arguments were used. Men’s tribes from afar and legends seemed to have conspired to marry Gerry during his mysterious journey. The Thain was shaken for a moment, but quickly recovered his wits, and we must admit that on this occasion he showed a high perspective and a foresight worthy of a great leader:

- « You are right. We shall discuss these serious issues tomorrow, and others that affect you most directly. Your shoulders seem to have broadened somehow... this way and that... », he added with a hint of satisfaction while giving his son a friendly shove.

He got up, stepped toward Avacuna and gently took her hand, leading her to the top of the long table:

- « But for the moment, let us not spoil our joy and let the clan honor the bride! »

And that is how Avacuna - Adamanta Chubb should I say - was greeted with ceremony by the powerful clan Took. The table was not as loud or as large as before, because dissident cousins had deserted it for a time. It was still a good company who took the young couple in a medley of dances and impromptu feast.

But do not imagine they were in for an easy party, for between laughter and affection tokens, they
had to serve again and again the story of a latecomer clan, of which Adamanta was the last girl of marriageable age. Indeed the Thain suspected there was something fishy in all this, and promised to see more clearly when he could have a word with "the gray wizard," but for the moment he savored the unsullied joy of the return of a son he began to believe lost, and the premise of a responsible behavior on his part.

Thus he set the tone and had in his best barrel open. Gerry, who fluttered from one person to another, saw his companion gently caught by the band of young people. Dance especially and rhythmic music, seemed to please Avacuna, who was immediately seduced by Hobbit joy. At times, young children monopolized the kind attention of the newcomer, who seemed to their stunned eyes as a radiant princess wearing her elven dress.

The next morning, Adamanta woke her very official consort at dawn, which was cool but radiant. The young Hobbit-girl wanted to enjoy her first day. For her sake, Gerry made a huge effort to get ready quickly. He did well, for his father came to wake him up by surprise but found him alert and ready, despite obviously too tight clothes. It goes without saying that this pleasant surprise reinforced the new opinion the father had about his son.

After the first breakfast, they had a conversation "between boys", that revealed to Gerry the extent of Fortimbras’s troubles. Our hero listened carefully to the presentation and the action plan concocted by his father, then he spoke with due deference. They agreed that the first step would be to the master of manor Hornblower, with whom it was essential to restore polite, if not cordial relations. Gerry insisted on taking his wife. This was hardly to the taste of Fortimbras, who hoped to regain control over his son, but our Hobbit pleaded that it was essential to erase his image of unrepentant seducer, by introducing Adamanta as widely as possible. Father Took grumbled a bit but sided with this clever opinion.

Here they are off, on foot, along the road to Longbottom, armed with Hobbits walking equipment - cudgel, leather backpack and food basket. They passed many herdsmen enjoying the beautiful day to lead their flocks in the fields. At each interview, the farmers stopped to greet the Thain, talk about the weather or to attempt some negotiation about the rent, or else they questioned Adamanta about her family, without much decency. Hence noon was close when the companions went to the welcoming guest house of Mother Plump.

A delicious smell of rabbit stew with sage preceded the pretty Hobbit smial. Gerry smiled - he was going to give a memorable performance that would serve the interests of his father. The Thain grumbled again, but the guests invited themselves into the cottage of Mother Plump. The landlady was discussing possible outcomes of the trial of the moment with her gossip whitegoose, when she saw the main protagonists enter her shop, along with a young Hobbit who seemed particularly resourceful and ready for anything.

-« Hello, Mother Plump, would you pity a traveler and his children in this cold weather? »

The gossip took advantage of a sudden burst of muteness of mother Whitegoose. She jumped to her feet, adjusted her apron over her green dress and ran to the Thain with apple-red smiling lips:

-« But what a pleasant surprise! Now if you will just come in... Here, here is a piece of clean table for the Took, his son- but is he your son, this tall and great rascal? - And...

- ... His most esteemed stepdaughter! », the Thain ended with a mischievous wink to Avacuna.

Isadora had to try three times to push out her gossip Whitegoose, who found many reasons to help
the owner for the service. Once mistress in her own home, she attacked immediately with a volley of questions, but she was surprised to find quite willing victims, giving details of their journeys and illustrating with anecdotes the obscure points or events beyond the immediate understanding capacity of Mother Plump. Although this conciliatory attitude deprived her of the fighting pleasure, Isadora absorbed all of what was revealed to her.

Distant stories of dragons, struggles between dangerous goblin clans, war against the orcs, trips to the edge of wilderness have a kind of old-fashioned charm. They can even be of some interest to an informed public. But discovering the lost branch of an ancient hobbit clan, that was the kind of news that would fly all around the Shire! While the neighborhood was gathering at the window, Mother Plump was given more unverifiable news that she could ever remember. Doubtful at first, she eventually showed convinced, not by the crowd of picturesque details, but by the knowing glances of the two lovers while they contrived these details. The cunning woman, who knew better, still allowed to observe that an official confirmation and a ceremony conducted in the Shire, would probably smooth some old disorders. The idea was caught on, and the Took came to put it into practice later.

After praising Isadora’s biscuits, who seemed to have enhanced since Gandalf had put a "good word" about it, the companions resumed to the road, lined with people of Longbottom, who wanted to check the news with their own eyes. In the evening, they came to the Ford’s Comitia, while the marshes mist had covered greenhouses with a gray shroud. The gate was open, but four huge dogs came to sniff them, then growled and showed their teeth at Gerry. Avacuna reassured her kid and, with a look, silenced the dogs who obeyed as on parade.

A short and stout Hobbit went forward, his hands clasped behind his back and looking stern. The greetings were as fresh as the moist air of the marshes nearby.

« So you have not fed the swamp worms? You have tamed my dogs, like last time! But I'll be harder to coax! What do you want from me? Steal from me again? »

Frightened by this big voice and gruffy tone, the kid slipped from Avacuna’s arms, and ran on the road, pursued by his mistress.

« I came to apologize and surrender your belonging. I accepted this gift much too lightly and I regret it... », bowed Gerry.

Our Hobbit still advanced, extending his right hand, which glowed with a pale luminescence. As he presented the ring to its rightful owner, Grumpler, the leader of the pack, jumped on him while trying to snap the outstretched hand. No doubt the animal, feeling the wrath of his master, and the fear of Gerry, believed that master Hornblower was assaulted.

Gerry swiftly withdrew his hand. The mastiff closed his frightening teeth on the ring, which disappeared in a horrible swallowing noise! Grumpler was severely lectured. A thief’s hand would not to be missed much, thought Master Hornblower, but a dog - his best warden - which attacks the host without command of his master, must be corrected. Then he turned angry at our trembling Hobbit:

« And now? How do you intend to surrender my leaf-cutter to me?

- I have entrusted it to your best keeper! »

The discussion would have certainly gone wrong if Adamanta had not interfered:

« Come on, Gentlemen! Will you finally behave like courteous people before a bride? »
Without allowing father Hornblower some time to recover his minds, she picked a leaf along the route, flat, thick and somewhat shriveled.

-« Come on, Grumbler, be nice and roll over! Vert well, good dog, eat this, this is for your own good... Eat, Grumbler! »

To the dismay of its master, the mastiff swallowed the whole sheet, wagging its tail at Avacuna. But soon the poor animal was shivering with quite impressive spasms.

-« What did you give him, you miserable?

- A small purgative! Absolutely harmless... »

After a few moments Grumbler had some powerful vomiting, that poured the contents of its stomach on the pavement. Half a dozen small objects shone in the bile. Master Hornblower exclaimed:

-« Here is my leaf-cutter, and more... Priscilla’s earrings, and Mother Hornblower’s rings! So here is the burglar who had retracted all my wealth... »

He retrieved his treasures without a great deal of fuss, thanking Adamanta for her care, that no doubt had cured his pack leader of severe intestinal problems. The poor animal was still shaking after its violent and involuntary effort while Avacuna pampered it.

That evening the Thain, his son and his daughter-in-law were invited at mansion Hornblower. If seniors spoke bitterly of political strategy, young people first did not find much to say to each other. Apart from having been abandoned, Priscilla was outraged to receive her farewell letter from the jaw of a mastiff. She had pondered her rage during the spring and spent her summer to prove herself she was not really fond of the urchin. As it seemed at the end of fall she had finally succeeded, resentment had subsided naturally. The young Hobbit-girl still meant to punish somehow her former suitor and shared some girl’s secrets with neighboring Avacuna, who asked for others. Gerry was finally the subject of their conversation, as the two girls finally got along very well, giggling together between two revelations in a low voice.

But his newly acquired wisdom endured that time of shame, so quickly passed, especially as his beloved sometimes slipped tender glances for him. So he interfered cautiously in the seniors discussions and was consulted, as a traveler, about the rumors relating the villainies perpetrated by black riders, East of the Brandywine. The extent of his knowledge and the sagacity of his views were welcome, so he was asked an account of his adventures. Our Hobbit complied willingly, realizing he would have to put this in writing now that he was capable of, lest his arrangements with truth would suffer from revealing variations.

At the end of the story, father Hornblower looked a little bewildered and seemed to wonder how Gerry could benefit in the end. « What is venturing away from home good for? » Seemed to say his insightful and scowl face, as he pulled on his new pipe of wood and metal. Then only Gerry realized how he missed Gandalf -without doubt he would have been able to make sense out of all this absurd adventure. Our Hobbit remembered the wizard evaluating the expedition with his acerbic look, before involving. Basically this sad escapade had been a dream. He finished thoughtfully:

- «... I followed the dream of two Kings, two visionaries longing for greatness, but mere mortals who tried to impose justice in the chaos of the northern mountains. But these mortals, driven by arrogance and hubris, have brought their own disorder and paid it with their lives. It is very unfair because these shared dreams had improved those who had followed these Kings, and almost all are
dead now, for they had believed in them. I was lucky to get away alive, and yet it took me all
Adamanta’s help, I found by sheer chance. Yet in my own way I too nearly fell into the illusion of
a false grandeur. My own luck seems to me almost stolen... »

His words almost ended in a sigh. But the strong pragmatic courage of his father came to his aid:

- « Do not worry, my son. You should not blame yourself for being luckier than your companions.
Though your wishes may be fulfilled, you now have the opportunity and the duty to pay this debt,
by restoring order in your own home! »

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Epilog

Chapter Summary

The Thain tries to regain control of the clan.

Thus Gerry was told that since last spring, a dozen complaints had been formally registered before the mayor of Michel Delving, who proceeded with calling his father to trial, since the accused, that is to say himself, was failing at that time. The case, concerning the Thain's family, went before the Shire's Council. The Thain was therefore implicated in some cases of "unresolved maternity" as the Registry Board had qualified them.

The Shire's regulations are rooted in the body of laws of the Dûnedain kingdoms, for everything about finance, ownership or crime enforcement. But they also respect the customary habits of the Hobbit clans that wandered before settling on this land. The right of inheritance has been complicated along with the Hobbits' passion for genealogy. The needs of widows or poor families are generally provided with practical and uncodified solutions, in the form of patronage resources, or tribal charges interpreted in a flexible way.

By a strange coincidence, a large number of young Hobbit-girls had declared, almost at the same time, that they happened to be in interesting circumstances, by the works of Gerontius Took. The custom of the Shire in such cases, from two difficulties produced one single solution: an unfortunate girl found a breadwinner and a bachelor found a household. There was no guarantee of happiness for the new family unit, who must catch it on their own! Of course, the exceptional proliferation of these "circumstances" made our case particularly difficult. Every night, taverns rustled with this case from Bywater to Frogmorton and from Long Cleeve to Sarn Ford.

The Thain had initially attempted to address each of these issues, by individual and amicable proceedings. But he finally realized that no girl really intended to marry, neither with his son nor with a lonely old fogey. Each - in fact the father of each - coveted Gerry's succession, especially the potential inheritance from the Took clan's lands. Until further notice, it was enough for the Thain to await the return of his son, and then to marry him with the richest contender, to stop the legal noise.

During the summer, the Thain's allies moved surreptitiously away from him either for commercial transactions or during neighborhood political debates. Soon it appeared to him that the candidate girls belonged specifically to the clans which support he lacked. The suspicion of a conspiracy was confirmed. From time to time, his nephew Bullybras, the head of the Long Cleeve Tooks, managed to win a commercial strife or to convince recalcitrant parties. Longstanding dominance of Fortimbras within his own clan had eroded in favor of the ambitious young Hobbit, who rose now as the savior of the undermined family interests.

But the worst was yet to come. When the autumn came, voices raised to ask where was the main witness, accusing the Thain of saving him from the rigors of Hobbit custom, with the help of a "gray rags beggar". It was only the first step of the legal termination - a few weeks later, Gerry was declared "missing person and property", after rumors had spread, that orcs of the Misty Mountains were roaming in the wilderness. In addition to the concern of his family, this approach triggered -
according to the Registry Board â€“ turning the quality of "unresolved maternity" to "presumptive inheritance."

This meant now the complainants could immediately claim a direct share of the Took's wealth. Yet it was difficult in Gerry's absence, to promote one complainant rather than any other. Therefore taverns in the Water valley were predicting that the Thain's clan would soon be forced to cede a dozen opulent smials to the benefit of these young Hobbit-girls. In addition to the severe blow to the capital of the clan, such a collapse would certainly precipitate the removal of the Thain himself. The "Grubb, Grubb and Grubb" office, which the Thain had enlisted, prepared to argue that the value of a single smial should be shared among the complainants. But the general opinion was that this view had little chance of winning.

Gerry chose this particular moment to return on the arm of his beloved. The fact was immediately exploited by opponents, who denounced the union as a fraud, a distant marriage appearing indeed to be much too convenient. Since Gerry had been declared missing person and property, he had to sue to regain his status as an heir, that his Took cousin coveted, and prove the validity of his union. It is during these memorable debates, won with flying colours by the "Grubb, Grubb and Grubb" office, that their quarrelsome reputation was born, and that Gerry's rights were restored the following spring. The beneficial testimony of a former complainant, master Hornblower, definitelly tipped the balance.

It was discovered, long after the facts, that some of the complainants had not actually known Gerry. In addition, cousin Bullybras was surprised the following summer in a haystack, in the gallant company of one of the complainants, whose circumstances had proved illusory. Even the most candid suspected then some malice and duplicity distilled into the allegations about Gerry, although many young Hobbit-girls still yearned after him with a demonstrative sincerity.

Adamanta, at first fascinated, then somewhat disheartened by these strange customs, showed an unswerving affection for her Hobbit, who seemed deeply in love too. In addition, she was the one by whom the offense ceased, which earned her a huge credit among the Hobbit-women of the Took clan. Avacuna was known under the name of Adamanta, which evokes both the liveliness and firmness of her mind. Her surname Chubb, gift of Master Elrond, proved very convenient since it was reminded that a great-grandmother, who once reigned over her clan at their wandering time, far in the East. She was adopted by the Chubbs, dispersed throughout the Shire, as a distant cousin, for it could not be imagined, there was no relationship with such an active and radiant Hobbit-girl, despite her exotic clothing habits. By the way, Avacuna gradually honored this very common name in the Shire, with a growing roundness of her forms.

At half year during his trials and tribulations, Gerontius, now a balanced and cordial fellow, seconded the mayor of Michel Delving, on behalf of his father the Thain, for the opening of the Shire's annual fair. He gave a speech of firmness and harmony, which passages would still be reminded by many years later. The party was so magnificent and welcomed so many people, that it helped lessen the grievances which persisted between the trials opponents. Adamanta wore an elven dress - sent by friends from far East - but kept her eternal and discreet necklace. It was rumored that she would agree to wear no other jewel, because it was her engagement present. A refined and lavish banquet was given by the young couple under the patronage of the Thain and magnificent fireworks ended the evening.

For Gandalf returned of his long impromptu expedition in Mirkwood. He had come back empty-handed and tired to Rivendell, and journeyed to the Shire for a courtesy and leisure visit. The wizard offered to Gerry, as a wedding gift, a pair of magical diamond buttons, that clasped
themselves, and unclasped only on orders. For Avacuna, Gandalf brought, on behalf of the inhabitants of Rivendell, many souvenirs that the brothers Elladan and Elrohir had gone and fetched in the Northern Misty Mountains, and gifts that two young elves had sewn for the newlyweds.

Gandalf long praised the pipe-weed lore Gerry had once taught him. They sat comfortably to finish the evening, by blowing smoke rings and other shapes, more and more astonishing. The wizard believed that weed-pipe cleared his mind and sharpened his concentration. When Gerry claimed that the pipe revealed therefore a more essential accessory than a wizard staff, Gandalf said with a gleam of amusement and satisfaction in his eyes, that now this practice had proved a bone of contention with the chief of his order, who despised pipe-weed as an unworthy hobby, prone to mist the most discerning mind. But this argument did not seem to grieve the old wizard, who distanced himself from the haughty and austere Saruman.

The companions conversed at length about the fate of the members of the expedition. Fràr, Norin, Dwalor and Gandalf had relentlessly pursued the attackers, first in the Eitheland valley and then Southward along the Anduin. Thus they approached mount Dol Gûldur, former Amon Lanc in Southern Mirkwood.

The gray wizard had penetrated there many years ago[1], in order to discover what dark power held under its mephitic yoke the wooded hills of Greenwood the Great. But that power had withdrawn at his approach, the land entering for a time in a Vigilant Peace. Now the evil power was back, stronger than before. Its enemies called it the Necromancer and his evil creatures were spreading, perverting the undergrowth's life.

Finally the exhausted trackers were ambushed by a company of black rangers from Dol Guldur. Radagast, Gandalf's cousin, had come to their rescue and thus the wizard and Fràr could escape. Enraged and ashamed at heart, the companions were forced to abandon Thrain's rescue. Gandalf brought the last surviving Dwarf to Daîn's mine in the Iron Hills. His reunion with Mîm was a drop of consolation in the ocean of tears shed for Gràr and his comrades. Then the wizard came to seek advice from Elrond, who gave him reassuring and surprising news about the Hobbit.

Hence Gandalf, longing for a true rest, gave an unlooked-for visit to the Tooks and could attend this wonderful celebration. But he brooded to explore again the dark corridors of Dol Gûldur. It was a remark by Gerry, savoring the relief of getting rid of "his precious ring", which convinced the wizard to brave the risks again and try to find Thrain into the jails of the Necromancer, if it was still time, for fear he would succumb to evil seductions.[2]

Sighing at his lost innocence, Gerry reported to Gandalf, Arathorn's last words concerning the wizard, and the two friends finished their pipe in fond memory of their lost companion.

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NOTES

[1] In the year 2063 of the Third Age.

[2] Indeed, Gandalf entered again Dol Gûldur the next year, and discovered the true nature and identity of the Necromancer, who was no else than Sauron. He could, as told in The Hobbit by Pr. Tolkien, find Thrain, whose ring of power had been stolen. The great Dwarf, untamed but broken, handed him Thrain's map and the key of Erebor before succumbing.
Epilog - The End

Chapter Summary

The old Took still watches over his people, beyond death.

.oOo.

Hobbits are made for a certain kind of happiness, calm, generous and teeming with children. The young couple quickly inserted in the Shire's social life, in which Avacuna slipped with delight after the legal tribulations. The couple lived happily for many years and had twelve children. After the birth of the third, Adamanta remarked to Gerry that, after waiving her name, her relief name fell into disuse too, as the "Mommy!" rang relentlessly. The huntress had turned into a passionate gardener, raising her offspring from the tender bud to the vigorous plant, with a constantly renewed wonder.

To break habits and the unavoidable overcrowding of Tuckboroughs, the couple often went, to the chagrin of the Clan Council, romp in the Twilight Hills, North of Lake Nenuial. There they met, they say, elves and even more mysterious creatures. They are the ones who instituted the tradition to go, every year, usually in early summer, to a remote residence, lost in the hills, to put the mind and body "in vacation", in the words of Gandalf. They defied gossips for many years, conforming to essential Hobbit traditions such as tea but also indulging in all sorts of exotic or unusual hobby. For exemple, Adamanta was the first Hobbit of the Shire, to attend inns and drinking a mug of beer to listen to rumors and news from the outside world. She entered the Clan Council very naturaly, while competing in creative crafts such as embroidery.

The need for secrecy did not weigh long for the couple. By the way, Gerry would have been quite unable to find the paths to Legolothië's valley, that haunted his memories in an elusive form. Yet he remembered the strong taste of her beverages, fruity and earthy, to which he largely attributed his amnesia. When he told Gandalf, the wizard was surprised to hear about an Ent-woman in this area, and warned the Hobbit against the strange effects of their drinks. In addition to his proven increased Hobbit size, it was expected they may also confer a form of maturity, and a certain ability to protect and grow:

- « The liquors of ent-women make gardener from each mortal, but in your case of strong and independent spirit, these are hobbits you need to cultivate and their business you need to improve... »

Indeed Gerontius was keen at such a gardening, following some of the dreams of his former mentor Arathorn. Our Hobbit increased the wealth of his clan, by launching the production of high quality pipes, of which he was a famous tester. He also sponsored a contest of smoke rings, which eventually attracted participants from beyond the Shire. The rivalry between Breeland and the Shire was obviously increased, but it grew along with commercial and cultural exchanges. But, curiously enough, never again did Gerry smoke any "rolled sheet" that Master Hornblower lavished!

Of course the country experienced several crises, which saw Hobbits strife along with their Thain. During the Thirsty Summer of one thousand two hundred and seventy-two (Shire Reckoning), the Shire suffered a terrible drought. The level of the Water and the Brandywine was very low, and
only the streams of the green hills country gave drinking water. Gerry organized the flock transhumance to the banks of Lake Nenuial, as well as the bottling of large quantities of water, to supply the Shire areas at highest shortage. It was a joke of folks of Hardbottle, who undertook distributions to appoint these cylinders "brooks vintage". The following autumn saw terrible floods damaging crops, but the wisely accumulated reserves allowed to overcome this difficulty.

Gerontius, who spent his time enforcing the office of Thain and providing care to the Shire, also decided, with the help of his wife, to open a sort of museum. To house the relics that his beloved Avacuna had gathered over the centuries in her mound-house and the elves had provided for her, Gerry had build in Great Smials, on his own money, a large and beautiful cottage. He housed there the treasures from his paternal grandfather's storehouse. Of course he kept the bottles of Old Fence he found hidden there. All the small items and relics from around the Shire that the grandfather had collected were therefore exposed there in his memory. Later, the Mathoms House received donations whenever a Hobbit, inviting many friends for his birthday, received a mass of gifts that overfilled his smial.

Mathom is a Kuduk[1] word, which designated all ornamental, symbolic or prestige item. Some Mathoms had passed so many times from hand to hand, that their original function had been long forgotten. More generally, a mathom could be an item for which Hobbits do not have an immediate use, but they are reluctant to destroy. As such objects tend to clutter their homes, hobbits adhered to the proposal to make them available to all, in a place devoted to the teaching of the younger generations. The museum soon had to be enlarged, to the delight of Avacuna who, during the years of happiness of their union, ran nearby with Gerry, searching for and unearthing evidence of past years.

From time to time Gandalf reappeared suddenly, curious about small and everyday deeds, especially their health and births. The wizard disappeared again for a few weeks or ages, sure that in the beloved Shire, life flew her modest and benevolent way, cultivating the hopes of the future in the irreverent vitality of its new generation. For his intuition whispered that one day would be revealed why the Necromancer's minions had pursued a Hobbit ring bearer all over the wilderness...[2]

Many years later, when they had retired to their North home for summer, Adamanta and Master Gerontius received the old man, who gave them news of Bera. She had regained her forests and was now recognized as a poet and seer, by her own people and their woodmen neighbors. Still not married, she educated the children of her brother, whose son Beorn was particularly difficult. Each year she went on a pilgrimage to the Eagle Pass. They say that a huge bear now guard the pass, and that no evil creature would venture there.

Gerry, feeling the advancing age and contemplating with satisfaction the joyful carelessness of his offspring, began to put on paper some of his memories. His writings were never of great literary quality, but Gerontius was interested in many subjects. Thus he wrote a short manual of elven kitchen, where he called - surprisingly! - two musicians to transcribe the "kitchen songs" heard in Rivendell. Another book, among others, brought together the legends of the folks of Rhovanion, particularly absurd stories of bear kidnapping and marrying women. Many scattered notes have thoughts on the meaning that distant folks give to their existence and many clues as to their practice and daily life. Our Hobbit also analyzed the economic theories discussed previously with his mentor.

When Master Gerontius thought of his lord Arathorn, the dark depth of the forests overwhelmed him with nostalgia. But suddenly the song of a bird, a sun splashed foliage or buds of a spring thicket reminded him that life fights a battle it has never lost since the Valar have sown it in Middle Earth. Then, clutching the hand of his wife, he felt secretly comforted. If the Thain and Adamanta
keep their promises, what Arathorn had tried once will be, sooner or later, a source of new enthusiasm after they have all disappeared. The old couple, tired of strains and happiness, headless of vanities, felt the last test coming, but relentlessly watched for a sign of hope in twilight!

After the departure of Avacuna, Gerry, who was more readily called the Old Took, remained prostrate some time in the seat of honor at the great ceremonial hall of Tuckboroughs. He put his favorite box on his old chair and went to the hills, never to return. Nobody knows where he went, accompanied by the old goat that he had once brought. Yet they say he joined his wife in secret places, and together they celebrate the arrival of the renewed spring among fairies and fireflies. How wonder that a generation later, Avacuna herself was considered a fairy tales of yore?

.oOo.

The will of the Old Took was read on the central place of Tookbanks, since it was awaited by a large crowd. All the servants, gardeners, cooks, received a nest egg or a land to cultivate, which would provide them with an income and a place among the Tooks. But a secret codicil was unveiled in the presence of his only direct descendants. The issue was for them to come into their inheritance only if an old gem that was in the trunk, was handed to the Dwarves of Dürin. The codicil was nearly assessed as void because it stated in unequivocal terms the testimony of a grizzled old beggar who sometimes came in the Shire at that time, and who could not be brought to testify. So the boldest went to adventure, answering to the mysterious call of the Took. But that is another story, which will be told maybe later.

At Tuckboroughs, for several years after the execution of the will, no one dared move or change anything in the apartments of the Thain, who still seemed sitting in his carved seat, examining the heart and mind of the guests gathered there. It was said he still remained among his own people, ensuring harmony between the factions, advising his peers, scolding and pushing the youth forward.

But outside the clan Took, the reputation of eccentricity of Gerontius was firmly established, and it was not denied by the tribulations of his descendants. Three daughters, the famous Belladonna, Donamira and Mirabella, were among the most saucy lasses that the Shire has born. It would now often be said, in other families, that once a Took ancestor probably married a fairy. It will appear absurd in the eyes of reasonable people, but there will always be something not quite Hobbitic and occasionally members of the Took clan would leave and have adventures.[3] If they disappear, the family would not tell a word, like when the remarkable tripled visited the Elves before they leave the Shire, or they were seen in the company of walking trees or they flew on the back of huge raptors.

Thus ends this story, as reported by Belladonna in the Green Book of Tuckborough. After the departure of her mother, she sealed the book that was entrusted in the custody of the curator Mungo Baggins, who preserved it in the reserves of the House of Mathoms.

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NOTES

[1] Hobbitic
Chapter Summary

A letter from Fortimbras to Gandalf, about his terrible son.

Letter of October 23rd, 1247
To the attention of Gandalf the Grey, Wizard
Prancing Pony Inn,
In the care of Marlowan Butterbur,
Bree in Breeland

Tuckborrough, the twentieth and third day of the month of October of the year One Thousand and two hundreds and fourty and seven of the Shire Reckonning.

My dear Gandalf,

We have sufficiently explored the countryside together, in the four farthings of my beloved Shire and outside, for me not to illustrate the signs that oppress my heart about the future of the country. I have a feeling that my little folk may not stand forever outside the events of his time, which seem to announce worse than they were. That is why I thought I would develop further our relationships with the rangers.

Their leader, you had introduced to me, proved far more prolific and visionary than what you had warned me. His knowledge of the outside world and his beliefs have affected me. This people is deep, its roots are older than ours; hence I rule they see farther. We agreed that the links of the Shire with our neighbors should be strengthened and developed. We can do it, neither is our country without assets, nor Hobbits without resources. We need to count on an organized kingdom of men and not, as now, a few hamlets of farmers, whose sense of community stops down the village street.

Therefore I wish to make arrangements to help the rangers reunite what they can from the urban areas to the East and South of the Shire. The main clans will provide for a small part of their income and reserves to pursue several ways. First, we must strengthen the militia under the command of the Thain, under the leadership of the fittest and most influential Hobbits. Then we shall endeavor to promote exchanges with our immediate neighbors, based on our unique know-how. Weights and measures will be harmonized according to the ancient royal measures again. The Dúnedain will bring a good amount of gold to start trade and currency unification. Finally it will take the most prominent families, to agree and promote these changes by reassuring Hobbits by their personal commitment and individual links to be weaved with our neighbors.

I am well aware that these changes will disrupt the peaceful life of our beloved Shire. Our artisans and farmers will get down to business! But I shall see to ensure our independence and prosperity.
In this mixture of fear and excitement, I have worked to win some clan chieftains to this cause. The recent and premature deaths of Adalard Bophin and Ambertin Weasel, my closest partners, have prevented me from completing the first step of creating a common pool of grains. But my perpetual opponent Beroad Brandybuck took this setback to mock my views and stir distrust among the other clan chiefs, about what comes from the outside. This Old Fox knows the rangers as well as I do, but he discredits for the sole purpose of harming me. My excellent relationship with Harold Hornblower suddenly found itself compromised recently, for some unknown reason – he even regularly offered me his rolled leaves! Here is another ally to regain or replace...

So now I have to deal with an opposition led by Beroad at the meeting of the Shire clan chiefs. I was hoping to turn to the younger generation, but this Old Pustular managed to win to his views, my own nephew Bullybras, the grand-son of the Bullroarer, who begins to challenge my authority within the Took clan. I shall not give up the Thain’s office to this puppy, unable to convene a council, though manipulated he might be!

So I meant to keep you informed of my efforts and intentions, even if my views and deeds were temporarily held in check or turned by my peers. But I begin to think I underestimated the visceral need for peace and serenity of my dear Hobbits. Confidence in my authority crumbles for reasons that I have to analyze and for which I would like a sparkle of your lights. I fear indeed I have to put order in my own home.

Yours always faithfully Fortimbras Took, Thain of the Shire

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