Gandalf had expected many things to come his way when he elected to choose one respectable hobbit to embark on a quest to reclaim the ruins of Erebor from a dragon. What he did not expect was a figure, neither man nor elf, neither dwarf nor hobbit, and unlike anything else he had seen before, diligently looking after the hobbit's household.

The wizard's interest was piqued, and the quest for Erebor would unfold in a manner very, very much unlike anyone would have expected at the outset.

First and foremost, some initial disclaimers/general notice:

1) First thing first: All disclaimers apply. The Hobbit, The Silmarillion and all related work were the property of The Good Professor and presently belongs to The Tolkien Estate. Zero, Megaman, Megaman X and all related characters - may they rest ever in peace - is the legal property of Capcom.

2) This story is my first on AO3, but I should like no leniency because of that. Please, let me know if you see something you don't like! That's how progress is made, after all.

3) I am somewhat unfamiliar with the Hobbit films but for the very first, though I have been,
as of late, inundated by the existing Hobbit fanfic base and therefore certain elements might be influenced by existing fanon (including, of course, ISeeFire's excellent works), which I am hereby disclosing for transparency's sake. (I AM refraining from Fem!Bilbo though, as tempting as the idea is).

4) The story contains obvious spoiler for Megaman Zero 4, even though since the game has been out for so long now and an entire new series (MMZX) had been concocted in the interim, it might not be a spoiler any more. If you are not "in the know", however, do consider this your fair warning.

5) This story has been cross-posted on DeviantArt: http://insanecross.deviantart.com/art/A-Reploid-s-Journey-There-and-Back-Again-C-1-630656800

The premise of the story is a simple question: What if Zero - yes, that jolly red fellow with flowing blond hair with a beam saber who always seems to survive shenanigans that would kill anyone else multiple times over - joins the Quest for Erebor? Shenanigans, that's what-stuff that might befuddle even the likes of Gandalf and Elrond.

With no further ado, do enjoy your stay here - I do hope you'll enjoy reading my work as I have writing it.
Chapter 1

An Unexpected Gardener

Gandalf had been all too used to knowing exactly what to expect from (most of) those he met.

After all, it was in his job description: he was supposed to rally (read: manipulate) the denizens of Middle-earth against the Darkness of Mordor. One cannot play chess without knowing the chess pieces, he’d think, even if he should grow attached to – even love – his comrades too much to even think of the analogy.

Perhaps that was the reason the Shire represented something immensely soothing and uplifting. The folks of Hobbiton were simple, yet excessively unpredictable. And of these delightfully little rotund fellows who loved songs and good food way too much to seem (superficially, at least) of use to the thousand-year war between the Free Peoples and the Enemy, none would hold so much surprise as the Tooks. Bullroarer Took, Gandalf once thought amidst another pipe, might have given Feanaro Finwion a run for his money had he been born a Noldo. And Belladonna Took, well, Iluvatar bless her soul, was much more of an adventurer than many a Man or even Elf (by which he meant them rustic Nandor, obviously)

Oftentimes, as he had learnt, hobbits did need a nudge and/or a shove in the right direction to do what they need to do. That thought permeated his mind that one morning as he drew face-to-face with a certain Bilbo Baggins, son of an old friend of whom he’d grown quite fond.

“I am looking for someone to share in an adventure that I am arranging,” he said, “and it is very difficult to find anyone.”

What he expected was to rouse that part of the respectable Mr. Baggins that craved adventures and heroism and the thrills worthy of epics.

What he got was an interloper.

“Master Baggins. The mission you gave me is accomplished.”

Gandalf’s bushy brows and the shade of his wide-brimmed hat did a pretty good job of hiding his rapidly dilating pupils. That would be unbecoming of the great and mighty and mysterious Mithrandir, no?

“Do excuse me, good sir,” Bilbo said, seemingly losing interest in his proposition as he turned around. Now both the hobbit and the wizard were staring down a certain figure.

A figure, Gandalf thought, and struggled to find a good way to label him.

Now how would Gandalf describe the jolly fellow?

He had long blond hair flowing to his knees that danced around in the cool Shire breeze that would make every Sindarin maiden within a thousand miles turn red with envy, yet he wasn’t an elf because
otherwise Gandalf would have known he existed (Elrond and Artanis being awfully protective of what few Noldor and Sindar remaining in Middle-earth notwithstanding).

He stood far taller than a hobbit proper, yet still at least half a foot shorter than the Dunedain of the North or the Men of Gondor in the South – or even the Horselords of Rohan – so Gandalf crossed ‘man’ out from the list.

And no, he definitely wasn’t even close to anything Dwarven, being much taller than even Thorin Oakenshield and, most importantly, had practically no hair whatsoever on his face except for the aforementioned mass of gold.

In fact, between his large goggly eyes, his steely-cold expression, the sheer prettiness of his countenance and the aforementioned hair, Mithrandir wasn’t sure if he was even, well, a he (which, fortunately, also ruled out any possibility of goblinhood, orchood, or, Iluvatar forbade, Nazgul- hood). Millennia mingling with elves and still he was at a quandary, right here.

Now Gandalf noticed that he was dressed in a thick gardener’s cloak and had a pair of large gardener’s scissors in his hands. Wherever Bilbo fished the fellow from, he had made sure to keep him as inconspicuous as an androgynous... person of uncertain race could be in the middle of conservative Hobbiton.

“What are my next directive?” the figure asked, and his voice was deep and commanding – again, almost on Thorin level. Poor Master Baggins, obviously flustered, kept alternating his eyes between the figure and Gandalf for a good long moment.

“Err... well, Noughton, it's your free time! Do whatever you like – so long as you keep your Big People body indoors until-” Bilbo squinted around the surrounding, obviously scanning for Sackville-Bagginses and other busybodies.

He let out a long sigh of relief. “Well, until second breakfast. Actually, why not go prepare our second breakfast right about now?”

“Mission accepted, Master Baggins,” said the figure, and then he was gone – vanished behind the round hobbit-door with such an amazing speed and efficiency Gandalf found himself tracing the fellow’s movement until not a vestige of him was left.

“Now was that an extraordinarily tall hobbit I saw,” Gandalf said, genuinely befuddled, “or is he a curiosity from somewhere beyond the Shire?”

“Oh, no, my dear sir!” Bilbo said, still impeccably courteous in demeanor with the exception of a pair of eyes leveled at Gandalf as though the wizard had been a threat to his very existence. “Noughton here is a... is a...” Bilbo snapped his finger. “A gardener! Yes, yes, a very exotic gardener I've found to care for my, uh, pipeweed crops! Garden here, garden there, can't find enough good gardeners as is!”

“His language is a bit queer,” Gandalf pointed out. “No one in or outside of the Shire, may I mention, speaks the way he does.”

“You don't say, good sir!” Bilbo said in an obviously feigned astonishment. “Why, I am sure there are stranger and less reputable sorts out there – like elves! Especially elves!”

“I would know an elf when I see one, my dear sir,” said the wizard. “And I would know because I am Gandalf and Gandalf means me, and I do know your name, Mr. Bilbo Baggins.”

And then off went Bilbo, eyes rolling and nearly dropping his pipe in an oh-so-ungentlemanly
manner, began a tirade colored with all sorts of astonishments as he recounted the various things Gandalf had been known to do.

“I beg your pardon,” he concluded, “but I had no idea you were still in business.”

“And I had no idea that poor Belladonna's son now hosts a genuinely curious sort in his homestead,” said the wizard. “You surprised me, Mr. Bilbo Baggins.”

“I beg your pardon, but I can hardly see how having a gardener in my employ would be surprising!”

Now Gandalf trained his eyes on poor old Bilbo, for the first time in so many years asking a question he had not intended to when he planned his unexpected visit. It wasn't conducive of his original goal, nor was it, well, respectful of the hobbit's late mother, but Gandalf's Maia-sense was tingling. Something was up – something that might change the entirety of his plans for Thorin Oakenshield's company. Permanently.

“You've asked for my pardon twice now, my dear Baggins,” he said. “Which I shall give you. In fact, why don't we begin by talking a bit further about this new gardener of yours?”

Gandalf fancied a guess: that Bilbo would be glad that the wizard had turn his attention from him to his gardener. Which, if he was right about Bilbo Baggin's nature, was going to work out.

Fortunately and predictably, Gandalf was right.

“Well, I suppose I have nothing to hide but my soft heart and a penchant for hospitality,” said Bilbo, laying down his pipe and straightened his collar. “Now, you should be aware I am a firm believer in sacred hospitality and charity and helping the needy...”

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“Believe in me, Ciel!”

Zero had been created as an engine of hatred.

Yet during those two minutes, there was no hatred in him.

There was only faith and love and whatever needed to be done in their name.

Weil was beneath his hatred then – a pathetic creature to be put down, and that was the end of that. Methodic. Mechanical. Just another day's work. That the day's work would end in his demise, well, that was part of the package.

Funny, how the bastard screamed bloody murder. I don't care, thought Zero. To give him a piece of his precious mind was giving him too much.

In the end he could not discern the explosion of Ragnarok's core from that of the rest of the colony. Images flashed before his eyes as fire and smoke engulfed him.

Dr. Wily.

The Sigma Virus.

Sigma. X. Axl.


His sensory systems were overloading. His saber fell on the collapsing floor.

His systems shut down the pain receiver as a self-preservation measure. He knew it was useless.

Good riddance too. More energy diverted to the things that actually mattered.

Time condensed. He had so little time left. So little energy.

Iris.

His fingers were rent from his hand.

Fingers that had, for once, tasted the feeling of knowing what to fight for.

Ciel.

He felt every inch of his body torn into shreds.

The body that had brought the peace like it was (not) meant to.

None of that mattered any more.

He wouldn't live to savor that feeling.

He wouldn't exist to see that peace.

Was it regret he was feeling? His last regret?

“I... am... sorry. Live well... everyone...”

And then, everything went white.

***

“Good morning!”

A rather jolly voice made itself heard to Zero's mechanical ears.

Wait a second.

Hadn't his head been reduced to the consistency of space dust?

Zero batted his eyelids. So he still had eyelids?

He moved his fingers. So he still had fingers on him?

His sensory systems were rebooting. Whatever happened to being blown to smithereens, you guys?

Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Am I allowed to stay dead anymore?

No, he wasn't, as Zero apparently found out by opening his eyes. The legendary red reploid, unsurprisingly, was alive, and part of him felt this wasn't the first time such a miracle had happened.

Zero did a very, very quick full system scan. All systems green. Yes, even the memory blocks-
On a second scan, maybe not. There were large chunks missing from his memory, but not the normal kind of post-explosion-and-dismemberment memory corruption. No, he scanned his drives over and over again. Something – someone – had forcibly erased portions of his memories, and disturbingly specific ones at that.

He could recall his final moments on Ragnarok fine enough, sure, as could he remember his name, his directive and all his combat specs. The memory he had recovered throughout his time with the Resistance Army was similarly left mostly intact, too.

Yet he could not recall any name other than his own... and that of Weil.

At all.

The blue guy, the purple guy, the purple girl, the pink girl, the orange girl and a plethora of other people he had met throughout his lifetime were meshed into one tiny memory block like a gestalt mass of generic data. It was no longer possible to attribute specific events in his past life with specific, non-Zero persons any more.

In other words, the memory of everyone he knew had gone the way of the dodo. Everyone except himself... and Weil.

Yes, that Weil. Why Zero remembered him specifically and nobody else seemed to be the fate's last cruel trick on the poor reploid.

No. No. No. No. This isn't right.

An also very specific bodily power shortage kept him out of commission at that exact point. Fortunate for whoever happened to wake him up, too; because Zero was freaking out. The last time he truly did so, a certain Maverick Hunter captain got thrashed and untold hundreds slaughtered.

“Good morning!” the voice called again, this time a little louder and even more upbeat. “So you are awake!”

Oh, how he so wished he weren't. But since he was well and truly awake (and by extension, alive), Zero thought he might as well have a look around.

The first thing his eyes met was this fellow the size of, well, a child – and he'd seen enough children (name notwithstanding) to make that comparison. A few logical facts proved he was anything but a human child, however.

He was a little round and had a face too chiseled.

He was touting around a pipe as long as Zero's saber handle.

He had a rather thick mat of brown hair on his feet – yes, around the place Zero liked to wear armored (preferably red) boots, thank you very much.

And most importantly, the place Zero was finding himself in happened to be built according to the rotund fellow's proportions. Low ceiling, round (round! At least Weil had the sense to build a sick, well, whatever he built, actually) doors, and table and chair that seemed more fit for the children of the Resistance Army rather than adults. Or reploids built according to adult specs.

“Where... am I?” Zero felt this wasn't the first time he found himself asking that question.

Immediately his host stumbled a step back.
“Oh my, oh my!” muttered the little round man. “You are, well, you're a sir, my good sir!”

Zero's eyes twitched. “A sir?”

Zero performed a quick memory scan. Yes, now that he had a few seconds, he knew exactly what the fellow was on about. This would make it, well, not the first time someone mistook him for a girl to his face, and Dr. Light knew how many more times behind his back.

“I suppose you can say that,” Zero said, pushing himself up. His head was dangerously close to the ceiling as he did so.

“Oh, but where are my manners?” the little man said, approaching him with an outstretched palm. There was a genuinely friendly smile about his face, of the kind Zero had forgotten – except for a select few whose name he couldn’t remember for the life of him.

“Bilbo Baggins of Bag End, at your service!”

Memory scan. Memory scan. Memory scan. There was a vague feeling at the back of Zero's mind that he would have to get used to the routine, because he'd need to do it really often from now on.

Unsurprisingly, there were no records of either a Bilbo, or a Baggins, or a place (at least Zero reckoned it was the name of a place, from the lingual syntax) called Bag End anywhere in his many, many, many exabytes of memory.

“I see,” was the most neutral and therefore harmless answer Zero could come up with.

Then he noticed Bilbo was kind of eying him with this kind of curiosity that suggested that maybe, maybe, he should give his name at least out of courtesy.

“My name...” Zero hesitated a bit. A nagging sorrow was churning up within him as he spoke. “My name... is Zero.”

“Zero?” Bilbo parroted, putting his fingertip to his temple as he sank himself into a few seconds' worth of brain-racking. “Oh, you mean the number nought! Do excuse me, the terminology is quite a bit foreign here in the Shire.”


“Well, it seems like you are a foreigner here in these parts all right,” said Bilbo, and he displayed no suspicion or wariness at all.

“I suppose you can say that,” said Zero.

Then for the moment his internal computer short-circuited – or something along those lines happened, judging from the next words to string Zero's synthetic vocal cords. “Why am I alive?”

Certainly, this time around he hadn't been hiding himself while he was repairing himself. Still, his host looked terrified.

“Good grief!” cried Bilbo. “Please, my good sir, I had thought you were a man in need of help, for I found you down the Brandywine unconscious. But if you were trying to take your own life, well, may I suggest a completely different kind of help than I am able to provide?”

Part of Zero felt like silently chuckling. It wasn't entirely wrong to describe whatever happened to him as a suicide attempt. Sure, he'd brought down the most evil bastard in the 23rd century AD with
him and saved millions and gave everyone a chance for peace at bleeding last, but he did do so at a complete disregard for his own personal safety.

That, however, wouldn't fly in the face of casual conversation. “No,” Zero said. “I meant... I happened to be caught in a,” he analyzed the little man's speech pattern before continuing, “most terrible accident off the road. I had believed I would die for sure.”

“An accident, you said? Oh my!” said the little man, and he looked dreadfully concerned. “Would you be so kind as to let me know what happened?”

“I was... on this... cart,” said Zero. “And then the... floor just collapsed from under me.” Not one of his best lies, if he ever did lie at all.

“That's terrible!” said Bilbo. “Well, uh... I beg your pardon, mister. I should have got a doctor to look at you, but, ah, I must have been so muddled then, pardon me, that I forgot to do so! I'll go have a doctor visit at once!”

Well, that worked out all right, thought Zero.

“No, thanks, that's fine,” said Zero. “I don't think anything of mine broke.”

More like, a lot of things broke, but if doctors could fix them a lot of his personal drama would have been solved from day one. Newsflash: the former couldn't and didn't, therefore the latter weren't. But as a proof of his apparent good health (and to shoo the doctor away), Zero stood up and started moving his body.

Yes, nothing seemed to have been broken. And Bilbo Baggins sighed in relief. “And that would be very, very good and very lucky of you! Last year there was this incident in Bree, see, where an entire cart of Big People tumbled over a stone the size of a small child! And, oh, it was terrible!”

No result for “Bree”. Why did he even bother at this point?

“Bree?” Zero asked.

“Oh of course, not to say I was there or see the incident in person, my good sir!” Bilbo said, adamant and somewhat cross. “I am sure you do not mean to insinuate, but Bilbo Baggins of Bag End – that's me – is a proper hobbit among proper hobbits! Which is to say, I do not under any circumstances go on such a silly thing as an adventure! Makes one late for dinner, I say!”

Which was both long-winded and offering basically no information Zero could use except for the knowledge that the little man obviously called himself a hobbit and that he disliked adventuring. Which was to say, not useful at all.

“I don't suppose,” Zero asked, training his words a little more carefully, “that you know something about a place called Area Zero? Or, if it still stands, Neo Arcadia?”

“No, sir, no adventuring here, sir!” Bilbo answered indignantly. “This here is the Shire, and you might have more luck asking about the other places from other Big Folks!”

Searching “Big Folks”. Actually, Zero cancelled the search before it could finish.

For a while Zero stayed silent. He should, logically speaking, be quite shocked. For all he knew, he could have failed terribly. Maybe Ragnarok had, indeed, fell on Earth just as Weil designed it to. Maybe everyone he'd known and loved and forgotten had died horribly because of his failure. Maybe he was now beholding a future hundreds of years in the future where all reploids had been
“retired” and all humans have been mutated – due to food and energy shortage and radiation – into round midgets with hair on their feet and a stereotypical British gentlemen accent and demeanor.

But he wasn't, strangely enough, sad or distraught.

Perhaps he'd seen too much already, that even another two-hundred-year timeskip during which everything had fallen apart wouldn't surprise or frighten him any more.

“It's peaceful here, isn't it?” Zero asked. Yes, that was the next most important thing on his agenda right now. Peace. Everyone he’d known had sacrificed so much for it; as long as it was there, he would be able to rest his sore body for once in the knowledge that his friends' faith in him was not failed.

“Of course it is! This is the Shire, my good sir, and that means comfort! There is food, there is music, there is the finest pipeweed on this green earth, and there's no Big Folk making a ruckus and scaring all the birds away!” Then he looked at Zero and back at the wall, then back at Zero again. “Oh, I didn't mean to insult you, sir!”

“I see, Mr. Baggins,” Zero said. Another question began to rouse within him. “May I ask, why did you save me?”

“Isn't it the right thing to do, good sir?” Bilbo said. “Well, at first I was afraid because you are a Big Folk and all. But then I thought, here there was me, with a big house and ample strength and plenty of food to go around, and there you were obviously hurt and frightened and in need of help. Only heartless monsters like Orcs and Goblins; or the Sackville-Bagginses wouldn't lend you a hand!”

As he listened to Bilbo's explanation, a new emotion, so to speak, swelled within Zero. Gratitude.

“That would mean I owe you my life, sir,” he said, still mimicking the very polite speech pattern of the little man. “I will repay this debt somehow.”

And he meant it.

He would repay his debt, rediscover his memory AND reunite with his old friends, even if that was the last thing he'd do before his body broke down for good.

But now, repaying Bilbo Baggin's debt was the priority (not helped by the fact that he didn't know any better clue to hold on to).

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“And he has been your servant ever since then,” concluded the wizard.

“Aye,” said Bilbo, and he looked and sounded quite proud. “One of the best butler you can find, too! Remembers all the little things, works so fast as you can't believe, and especially discreet and careful when he needs to be. Perhaps there is hope with the Big People yet.”

Then, as if realizing he had just said something he shouldn't, Bilbo began to again scan the horizon. No busybodies, no Sackville-Bagginses. And that was good.

“And I am happy for you, my good sir,” said Gandalf. “I do hope this man isn't as queer as he
“Well... there's one thing, but I fixed it. He insisted on calling himself Zero, which is no proper language for a Baggins to use, of course, and that would draw raised eyebrows,” Bilbo said. “So, as he is my butler now and it is in my rights to do so, I decided to name him Noughton, and that is the end of that! Fits a butler too, if you asked me.”

Now and again Gandalf tugged at his great mass of beard and thought long and hard.

Mithrandir had never heard the name “Zero” before in his lifetime – his really long lifetime. Nothing in Quenya. Nothing in Sindarin. Nothing in Westron. Nothing in bloody Khudzul. As for the Black Speech or other strange dialects spoken by the Enemy, he was less confident, but then their tongues were far more nasal and harsh to the ears, which those simple two syllables weren't. But then, what did he know? The Enemy took many forms. Just ask Ar-Pharazon for his experience with bad old Sauron (at the end of time, of course, when Iluvatar would un-stuck that fellow).

*Note to self*, he thought, *'Bring the matter forth at the Council of Elrond.'*

That being said, the wizard was now quite clear there was no reason not to involve the hobbit in the Quest for Erebor he was cooking up. After all, he wanted Bilbo to be in it... and he certainly wanted this 'Zero' to be part of it too, if only so he could monitor this new piece on the chessboard. Something about one stone and two birds.

He harrumphed loudly. "In any case, my dear Baggins, as I said, I am looking for someone to share in an adventure...”

***
Zero's first impression of the wizard named Gandalf was about as good as his thoughts on mysterious, thick-bearded, bushy-browed old men with lofty claims and an agenda to hide. Which was to say, not good at all. Given his previous line of work and his experience with men of that ilk, his intuition had rarely been wrong.

From the way Bilbo Baggins shook his head as the old man left, he, too, wasn't extremely comfortable about the idea.

“And you are inviting him to tea,” Zero said.

His master threw his hands into the sky. “Best not to think too much about it.”

“You're the host,” Zero said. “You could have said no.”

“But, but, but, my dear Noughton, that's not the way of the prim and proper hobbits. You have a visitor, you invite him to tea. Or luncheon. Or dinner. Or supper. Simple as one plus one equals two-”

“It is not because he claims to know your mother, is it?” Zero pressed the question. “For all we know he could be lying.”

Bilbo's fingertip touched his chin. For a while he seemed to be thinking very long and hard. As long and hard as a hobbit was able to, in any case.

“I don't think so,” he finally said. Then he forced a smile.

“If something is false, you cannot just believe it true and it will be so,” Zero said. He still couldn't pinpoint the name, but he could remember rather well that everyone he'd known and loved had 'extreme naivete' in their profile.

“Well, I'll give him a chance all right,” said Bilbo. “Because I'm a Baggins of Bag End!”

And that seemed to be the end of that.

***

Came the next day, and everything seemed to go on normally.

Tea in the afternoon. If Zero could forget the 'for a wizard' part, that meant peace, and that alone was good. Indeed, nothing hadn't been ever since the hobbit took him in and gave him a job that didn't involve slashing the hell out of Mavericks (he could remember the terminology, being so integral to his past life as it was). With the exception of still not knowing what had happened to the world, his friends or himself, of course, but that was another story for another day.
Zero tried to put a nagging feeling behind him as he went about preparing tea. Nothing too special but for the amount of food involved: hobbits, as he had found out, had a habit of eating about as much as their own weight and liked to think others do too. Because of that Zero been thankful for his creator of all people for having installed an organic-food-processor unit for him. All that food (read: energy) did a fine job of keeping him recharged.

Unfortunately, that much food and energy could barely keep his weapon systems working. He'd found out after awakening that his prized beam saber was as unscathed as he was, but a fizzling beam the size of a plastic ruler in the old world was all he could squeeze out of it unless he could find an alternative energy source elsewhere. Solar power, plutonium and/or uranium to recharge his internal nuclear reactor, even diesel or gasoline if there were any. Anything more advanced than the hobbit definition of “cakes, sausages, hams, bread and ale”.

In any case, he'd laid three pairs of plates and knives and forks on the large table in the living room and a larger plate piled with a dozen seed cakes. A kettle was boiling on the fireplace, and cups and saucers were on the ready, and everything was laid out with pixel-perfect orientation and symmetry. Let nobody say, Zero thought, that a reploid created for destruction could not put his skills to peaceful ends. Even Bilbo was amazed and amused.

“Now that's some fine work,” he said. “You seem to be looking forward to this meeting more than I do!”

Zero gave neither a nod nor a shake. In truth, at a certain corner of his mind he concurred. As much as Bilbo hated adventuring with a passion, Zero had enough wits about him to realize if he were to find a way home, he couldn't and shouldn't spend the rest of his days being Bilbo Baggins' butler.

Could this Gandalf be the answer he was looking for?

Then, with all the ceremony befitting a hobbit of great wealth, taste and prestige, the doorbell rang.

***

What would a respectful hobbit do should a dwarf arrive at his doorsteps, hang his hood on his peg, and stepped into his house like he was meant to?

Invite him in for tea, that's what! He did exactly that, though he did end up a little flustered, surprised and a little cross at a “Dwalin at your service” coming out of nowhere.

Bilbo's new butler's reaction was far more worrisome at that point.

“You are not Gandalf,” said Noughton, hands crossed before his chest. His voice were chillier than the worst winter Bilbo could recall in his lifetime.

“Oh, worry not,” said the dwarf as if it was a matter of course. “Wizards.

Then the dwarf's eyes reached the point of origin of that voice, and his jaws sagged. There was that murderous look on Noughton's face, good gracious, that made Bilbo think his butler would tear the dwarf apart with his bare hands. Murder in his own home was never, ever tolerable, period!

“That's fine, Noughton,” said the hobbit with due haste lest his butler start to act on his impulse. Then he turned back to the dwarf. “It is just fortunate that I'm about to have tea; pray come and have some!”

And the dwarf complied, eyes kept stealing glances at the butler. Noughton was giving him a continuous glance as he walked into the living room, sat down and lifted a cake to his mouth. Bilbo
didn't know what bothered him more – that a dwarf was there eating his food hardly invited, or that
his butler was about an inch from striking said dwarf down where he stood.

Then again the doorbell rang, and Bilbo held his breath.

A “Balin at your service” was nothing like he expected or wished to hear.

Neither was another “You are not Gandalf,” even colder than the first one if that was at all possible.

Then Noughton turned around and back into the living room, and Bilbo held his breath. Was he going to murder someone?

The he heard a dwarf yelping and the sound of a very heavy object crunching against the ground. His heart skipped a bit as both hobbit and dwarf ran into the room.

They ran into the living room just as Noughton laid another chair down around the table along with another set of plates and cutlery. Now there were space for four, and chair and table and cutlery were all set around with an uncanny symmetry.

“Balin, good brother!” said the dwarf at the table, his face paling as he tried to stand up. “He lifted me! Me and the chair.” If not for the look on his face and the sound Bilbo had just heard, he would think the dwarf was making stuff up.

“You are breaking the symmetry, mister dwarf.” said Noughton, his voice now without emotions. “Will there be any more visitors?” he asked.

The two dwarves stared at Noughton as though he were the biggest, baddest Big Folk in a thousand miles holding a terrible weapon at their throat. They began to count off their fingers. “Kili, Fili,” said Balin, more than a little trembling. “Dori, Nori, Ori, Oin, Gloin, Bifur, Bofur, Bombur... and-”

“Eleven,” said Noughton, his eyes sweeping around the table. “What say you, Master Baggins? This is not what you bargained for.”

“Uh...” Bilbo stared at the room, racking his brain. “I think I would appreciate an explanation or two, good sir dwarves,” he said, trying his best to grab ahold of his manner. “Why, pray tell, are thirteen fine gentle-dwarves doing in Hobbiton?”

Then again the doorbell rang, and Bilbo looked nervously at the door's general direction. “More of your companions, no doubt?”

“A-aye,” said Dwalin, eyes still leveled at Noughton.

“What say you, Master Baggins?” Noughton repeated, Bilbo had to say something. Something positive. Something constructive. Something now.

Again the doorbell rang, with a hastier tempo. Inside, Noughton was tapping his feet

“S-sure,” he said. “We can certainly entertain some more guests. Aft-after all we've got lots of food to spare-”

“Mission accepted,” said Noughton, disappearing into the next room. He came back seven seconds later, two small tables for four (hobbits, of course) balanced around his shoulders while his hands juggled a set of four chairs. How he did so with the relatively low ceiling would forever be a mystery to Bilbo Baggins.
With a precise shoulder hurl, the first table flew over the dwarves, landing exactly next to the table on which they sat. The other table followed suit on the opposite side. Then came the chairs; one, two, three, four, each falling into their disturbingly symmetric place on the ground.

Bilbo would stay to watch, but then he had to tend to the doors. It was quite unbecoming of a proper hobbit to leave a guest hanging at the door for too long. To the door he stumbled, and threw it open before another bell could be rung.

Before him stood two dwarves who, frankly speaking, didn't look very much like any dwarf he'd heard of. One boasted brown hair and was little tall and lanky, the other had a mass of blond hair and just a little less so in height; both boasting way too little beard for a dwarf. The one was touting a large bag clattering with Illuvatar knew how many sharp iron implement; the other held the most unlikely weapon for any dwarf – namely a bow and a quiver of arrow.

“Fili,” said the brown-haired dwarf.

“And Kili,” said the blond.

“At your service!” They gave a synchronous bow.

“Bilbo Baggins at your service,” said Bilbo with a shudder. Not because they were entering his house as though it were his own, but because he'd just heard the iron-soled footsteps belonging to you-know-who.

Before he could utter a warning, he saw a bright red flash dashing behind him.

Then up went the two dwarves, Aule preserved them, lifted into the air by the collar of their huntsman-style clothing.

“Kili and Fili accounted for,” said Noughton, and off he went into the kitchen, each hand holding a shrieking and kicking young dwarf.

When Bilbo entered the kitchen, the two dwarves had been set firmly in place on the middle table opposite to Dwalin and Balin. Symmetrically so. There was that look on both their faces that made Bilbo unable to guess whether they were angry, surprised, excited, amused, amazed. Or a mix of all of the above. But they were speechless, and that was good enough.

“Do-do forgive my manservant, good dwarf. He tends to act up like that, so, err... Do enjoy the food! I have plenty to go around!”

The four dwarves stared at Bilbo, then turned their attention back to the table. Then, like a dainty elf maiden, the dwarf named Balin began reaching for a delicious-looking round seed cake on the plate in the middle of the table.

Hardly had he plomped the morsel into his mouth when again the doorbell rang.

“Four,” Kili opened his mouth as he eyed his host.

“Five,” said Fili, obviously scanning the room for any sign of the crazy manservant with the slick long blond hair.

“Whoops,” they both said, realizing exactly who had gone to answer the doorbell.

Bilbo gulped loudly.
The next time the blond manservant returned to the room, which was exactly seven second later, two dwarves found themselves dumped unceremoniously into their seats at the leftmost table.

“Oin a-at your service,” said the one.

“Gloin, at y-your service,” said the other.

Before Bilbo could properly apologize, in come another two, deposited into the chairs opposite to Oin and Gloin.

“Nori at your s-s-service,” said the one, a roguish-looking kind with a mischievous glint in his eyes even as he was basically tossed into his seat.

“Dori at your service,” said the other, a mature-looking and far calmer dwarf, although visibly shaken too.

Noughton didn't have to go out for the last one. The poor dwarf, a mite shorter and younger-looking than most, tumbled into the room and scurried towards the last two dwarf like a child looking for shelter. Noughton tapped his finger on the leftmost chair on the rightmost table. The dwarf sheepishly complied.

“That is Nori, Dori, Ori, Oin and Gloin accounted for,” said Noughton as he stood up straight and performed an impeccable butler-like bow. “May I take your orders?”

There may or may not have been a mischievous glint in his eyes, like he was secretly enjoying tossing dwarves around into symmetric seating plans, that Bilbo couldn't tell for sure.

The dwarves began staring at each other. Finally the blond dwarf raised his hands. “Coffee, please?” he asked, puffing his nose.

Then came Kili. “Tea, please?”

Noughton nodded, and then was gone. A red flash into the pantry later, he was walking out with two large jugs in tow and two hobbit-sized teacups. He laid the utensils – still with disturbingly symmetric placement – before the two dwarves and started pouring the drinks from above their head. Not a single drop was spilled.

Emboldened by the knowledge (or supposition, Bilbo thought) that the scary blond butler would do them no harm, the dwarves began placing their order. In short order, more plates and cups were served: tea, coffee, some ale, some beer, a little white wine and a tiny bit of red. Obviously red wine was the only thing truly in short supply in Bilbo's pantry, and he quietly thanked both guests and butlers for leaving his last vintage bottle alone.

“Do sit down, Master Baggins,” said Noughton as his mouth curved into something very vaguely resembling a smile. “The table is far from symmetric.”

Then, of course, the doorbell rang again.

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Part of Zero was feeling a mild amusement as he picked up and set the dwarves on the table. Let it be known he took his work – any work – very seriously, but there was a certain kind of schadenfreude going on as he tossed the dwarves into their seats. He couldn't pinpoint where. Maybe, just maybe, in his last seconds in his past life part of Weil's sadism rubbed off against him.
Perhaps he'd taken the joke too far. Better stop the deal before he did some irreversible damage. Or worse, make himself look more like Weil and/or his creator than he was comfortable with.

Then Bilbo Baggins opened the door, and Zero couldn't help but clumsily hide a chuckle. An avalanche of dwarves poured into the room, all three of them. One, Zero noted, had a rather painful-looking axe lodged in his head.

Luckily for his new master, Bilbo avoided the worst of the avalanche. Now he stood scratching his head, still befuddled at what had exactly transpired in his household.

“That wasn't very elegant,” Zero said, and offered his hands to the crowd at the gate. One, two, three, they took Zero's hands and stood up, dusting their clothing and stating their name. That was Bifur, Bofur (Zero kept a note to himself: the dwarf with an axe in his head) and Bombur. Zero ticked all the name off the list in his memory. That would be all of them except for-

Then, just as Bilbo was leading the crowd into the room, the missing person showed up at the open doorway. Two missing persons, actually.

One was the tall, gaunt and bearded wizard he'd learnt the other day, with a walking stick in one hand and what looked like a scroll of something in the other. Gandalf. About time you showed up.

The other was a dwarf. Not just any dwarf, though: taller than the tallest of the last bunch and clad in a blue coat with fur trimming that revealed a fancy coat of scale mail (At least, Zero hope that was the proper period-appropriate terminology) underneath. His beard was somewhat on the short side, and his eyes were of a rich deep blue shade. He exuded an air of command about him – mesmerizing Bilbo, if his stunned look was of any indication.

Now the dwarf strode into the hall, giving one look at Bilbo and another at Zero, stopping just a little at the latter, and then went deep inside without a single “at your service.”

“One, two, three, four-” went Gandalf, as he counted the hoods off Bilbo's peg just as Leader Dwarf strode into the dining hall, “-eleven, twelve, thirteen. Quite a merry gathering we have here, don't we?”

“Yes,” said Zero, as he looked Gandalf in the eye. “Isn't it about time you give us an explanation?”

Gandalf leveled his eyes at Zero, and said nothing. Then he gave just a tiny nod, as if saying “I acknowledge your question.” Then he proceeded into the dining room, with Bilbo towing behind and Zero even further behind.

The moment Gandalf's presence was made known, the dining room practically burst. The wizard did so by a simple few words. “What's that? Tea? No thank you! A little red wine, I think, for me,” he said eying Bilbo as if he knew for a fact that Bilbo would provide.

Which, of course, meant Zero would comply, if Bilbo's sheepish eying of the reploid was of any indication. The reploid found himself dashing into the kitchen and out as a torrent of orders broke out behind him for eggs, bacons, sausages, cold chicken, pickles, bread, muffins and cakes. If Zero'd ever wished he still had Soul Body equipped on him, this would be the time.

So busy he was speeding from post to post as if a small army of Pantheons were at his back, Zero failed to notice four dwarves standing outside the kitchen door, looking awfully anxious.

“Uh...” said the first, whom Zero recognized to be the first guest Dwalin. The second dwarf, his brother Balin, was shrugging.
"I'm feeling a little useless here, Fi," said Kili to Fili, indeed the third and fourth dwarf. Fili and Kili didn't have to wait long and neither did Dwalin and Balin, for a tray of food and utensils almost instantly fell into their hands: eggs and bacon, sausages and toast, seed-cakes and country cookies and a large serving of chicken breasts.

"Noughton, Noughton! That's my mother's best china!" cried Bilbo as he ran after the two lanky dwarves. Too late – they'd laid their loot on the table as flawlessly as Bilbo ever could.

The party had well began before the last plate was set. There was something oddly... soothing, Zero thought, about the way they were conducting themselves. Notwithstanding their eating pretty much everything there was in Bilbo's household, their demeanor reminded him of a number of certain children he'd seen scurrying around the Resistance Base and around the Caravan, reploid and human alike, as if not giving a care of the world burning around them.

No, Zero shook his head. The dwarves were resistance children not, and he was going to find a way back, but this wasn't the right opportunity.

He stole a glance at the wizard enjoying a glass of Bilbo's last remaining vintage red wine bottle, appearing like he was part of the merrymaking. *He knows something*, Zero told himself.

If the glance he got back from Gandalf told him something, the wizard knew Zero knew he knew.

***

Thorin Oakenshield was one part amazed, one part amused and one part cross.

He was told to go to that certain house so marked by Gandalf to look for a talented burglar. All he saw was a befuddled halfling and a dwarf-throwing, blurring-fast, deadpan son-of-an-elf.

"An elf he is not," Gandalf had quietly reminded him in between his wine sips, but Thorin wouldn't buy it. Just look at his hair, Thorin thought. Even Thranduil the Oathbreaker didn't have such downright fabulous hair!

On second looks, well, maybe he wasn't an elf judging from the lack of ears long enough to provoke an axe. Still, that didn't quite excuse him for dwarf-tossing.

Then again, he was an important dwarf with an important mission, emphasis on the *mission* part. He'd swore an oath that he'd see Erebor restored or die trying, preferably the former. And to fulfill that, Gandalf said, and he quoted, "You need the burglar and his manservant. The former because of his potential. The latter because he's a wild card."

Neither seemed to be good enough of an excuse, but Thorin knew better that wizards work in mysterious ways.

While his companions scurried off trying to help with the cleaning, Thorin stood back and observed the blond son-of-an-elf. The more he watched, the more convinced he was that there could be no other real explanation. He was dashing around the hall and the house like a blur, gathering up the dishes with pinpoint precision and balancing a load larger than he was on his arms and shoulders with such a kind of intuition he could never have imagined in any other places.

"That's what Bilbo Baggins hates," sang his dwarven companions. "So carefully, carefully with the plates!"

Their voice sounded less like a working song and more like a *cheering* song. They were gathered around, watching the blond fellow do the cleaning all by himself like a whirlwind of red blurs and
plates and dishes and cups and cutlery. Once or twice Nori or Kili and Fili could steal a pile of plates or a few cups or a mound of bowls, but such moments were few and far between. Thorin would hate to sound like a coward, but he'd rather face a legion of goblins from the depth of Misty Mountain all by himself than risking a fight with that monster. For all he knew he'd found his throat slit before he could even utter “Baruk Khazad”.

Thankfully, such a waiting was soon done and done. At a snap of his finger and a short order, the dwarves of his were gathered around him, bringing flutes and fiddles and viols and a golden harp for himself. In the absence of gems, good music was all his kind had, and he'd well enjoy what music they'd make for themselves; lest that day be their last.

That, and he could use some morale boost. A lot of morale boost.

So for a good long while he and his dwarf played, and he looked arrogantly at the wide-eyed Bilbo Baggins within whom something seemed to have changed. Then he began to sing, and part of him felt like crying as he did. There he sung, for as long as his breath held, of the tale of his folks, of the gold and silver and the beautiful craft they'd made, of the songs they'd sung beneath the fells. And, last but not least, of Smaug the dragon and the tragedy that had befallen Erebor. His fist clenched around the frame of the harp.

Then he stopped, and the band stopped after him. Thorin punctuated the last words of the lyrics with a very quiet single word in Khudzul: Kill. So quiet he was that nobody, perhaps not even Gandalf, could hear what he had said; and all was good.

“Do excuse me, master dwarf. But I believe you owe me – us – an explanation or two. What do you here, if I may ask as such?”

Thorin cast a sideway glance and caught a Bilbo Baggins, standing positively straight, giving him a bow in a most gentlemanly manner and asked him, plainly and rather bluntly. Behind him, the aforementioned son-of-an-elf was nodding with approval.

“Tell him, Thorin son of Thrain, son of Thror,“ said Gandalf, looking mightily intrigued by the hobbit's newfound courage.

“Very well,” he said. “Let me be blunt, my good sir, since you prefer it that way.” He turned around to Balin. “Give the hobbit the contract.”

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Long story short, Bilbo's courage fell a little short of the mark. All it took for the hobbit to fall unconscious out of shock was a couple words: “laceration”, “evisceration” and “incineration”, not helped by a fancy description of a typical death by dragon: “Flash of light, searing pain, and poof, you are nothing but a pile of ash!”

It took Zero but a few seconds to carry him to his bedchamber and another few more to return to the meeting room. The nagging feeling that he was serving a man with a rather small liver, however, was there to stay for a good long while.

When he came back, all the dwarves were looking at him with varying expressions of disappointment. Hands meeting forehead, head shaking, slow clapping, sighs and loud exhales... never before had Zero observe such an amount of scorn from supposedly friendly forces.

“The hobbit will not join us, will he?” the dwarf called Thorin Oakenshield asked.

“I cannot speak for him,” said Zero, “but that would seem to be the best course of action.”
“Now that wouldn't do, simply wouldn't do, my good friends” said Gandalf as he gathered himself and made himself comfortable on his chair – which used to be Bilbo's just now.

“Well, you've heard the halfling himself,” said Thorin. “Fainted at the mere mention of a dragon! Who is to say he will not endanger the lot of us by merely being with us?”

“I can vouch for him myself,” said the wizard. “An excitable fellow he is, yes, but in a pinch-”

“We need someone reliable, Gandalf,” said Thorin, crossing his arms. “You know what we are facing.”

A dragon. Not that Zero was any stranger to dragons – mechanical ones, but dragons all the same with the spewing fire and swiping claws and the oversized body. Then something stirred within him, a thirst for battle that had never been truly quenched over a hundred years in stasis, a thirst he made a conscious effort to hold back.

Then he decided to just let the facade drop for a second. He picked up the long-winding contract and walked towards Thorin.

“If I read this right,” he said, “you want a burglar who would help you steal a little white gem from a dragon's treasure hoard; which you would then use to muster an army of fellow dwarves to kill said dragon.”

“In a nutshell,” said Thorin with a nod.

“What if someone agrees to join you to fight the dragon himself?”

All at once Zero felt the weight of a dozen pair of eyes on him.

“Let me have you know this is not a joke,” Thorin said, his blue eyes on fire. “I shall not tolerate anyone making a mockery of our quest.”

“I am no less serious than you are,” said Zero. “I owe Master Baggins a debt, and I do intend to repay it.” He looked to Gandalf with an eyes charitably described as accusative. “Wizard, if you intend to have him embark on this quest, I'll do it in his stead.”

It was no longer the matter of “debt of honor” or anything so fanciful. There was something – Zero could not pinpoint what – within Bilbo that reminded him of a person; well, maybe two persons so close to him once upon a time but whose name had faded from his memory. He had scant choice but to do what he had always been doing best: fight for that person, or instead of that person if they could not.

“Hmph,” said Thorin. “What can you do, son-of-an-elf?”

Then the table was turned. Half the room's eyes were trained on Thorin, coupled with shushs and rapid headshakes and wild hand gestures and whispers and murmurs in a language not registered in Zero's universal translation unit ('universal', what a joke, Zero thought).

Thorin stood up. He walked to the opposite side of the hall where Kili and Fili were seated. He bent his back and stared eye-to-eye at the two young dwarves.

“Did I say anything wrong, sister-sons?” he said, and was a fair bit crossed.

“Um...” said Kili, “I mean no disrespect, Uncle, but-”
“-this jolly fellow is the real deal,” said Fili. “Honest-to-Mahal real deal. I don’t know about the good hobbit, but I’d be much more inclined to believe in our survival if he’s on our side than if his master is.”

“Did you not see that speed, good cousin?” added Balin. “Give a proper axe to him, and he’d make chopped goblin out of the whole Misty Mountains. Or whichever tree-elf to stand in our way.”

“Mahal willing, he can even take out the dragon himself!” said Dwalin.

“I don’t like to boast,” said Zero, adding another pair of eyes to the many staring at Thorin. “But if you’d like a test of aptitude, I am quite sure I can do whatever you’d expect from a comrade of yours. And maybe a little more.”

For what seemed like the longest time Thorin said nothing, his fingers combing his broad but short beard and the braids in it.

“My company are fighters enough,” said Thorin with a firm shake of his head. “I doubt we will need another for the purpose-”

And then just for a brief moment it was as if all light had been sucked from the room and into the tip of the wizard’s staff. There he stood up, tall and mighty, his staff raised high and flashing, complete with a loud bang. Such was the shock that half the dwarf fell back, silent and more than a little trembling, while Thorin himself backed up a single step. Zero found himself doing the same – a sudden fright would do that to even the most hardened of fighters.

Then the flash of lightning faded, and Gandalf was back to normal again, a kindly smile on his face as he gestured everyone to calm down and sit down if they already hadn’t. Especially Thorin, who he gently nudged on the knee with the tip of his staff.

“Let me remind you, Master Thorin, that I put that sign on the door for a reason,” he said. “You asked me to choose a fourteenth man for your expedition, and I found you Mr. Baggins – and maybe a fifteenth, too, in his butler right here-”

Thorin folded his arms defiantly. “Then I should like our company to depart in ill luck but ample heroism then,” he said. “Because I cannot see how a burglar who looks more like a pampered housemaker than a master of the trade and a son-of-an-elf could have dwarven songs sung about them.”

The amount of objection Thorin got from his fellow dwarves was astounding – maybe even for him, looking at the way his face twisted and his eyes widening as if he had never seen any such resistance before from his comrades.

“No, no, no, no,” said Balin, placing a hand on Thorin’s shoulder. “O good cousin, do hear us out!”

“We’ll follow you anywhere, Uncle,” said Kili, his tiny beard trembling in abject horror. “But setting off on such a quest with thirteen?”

“Haven’t we gotten into enough misfortune already?” Fili pointed at Thorin’s forehead where a tiny but still visible (to reploid eyes, at least) lump remained. “Mam’s rolling pin wasn’t exactly good omens material! We don’t need more where it came from!”

“All signs point to NOPE, my good lord,” said Nori, throwing his hands in exasperation.

Bifur leveled his brows, combed his beard and started going on a tirade in that strange language again, but his objection was clear enough from the tone of his voice.
The others were gathering around, raising hands and arms and making wild gestures just short of the
dwarven equivalent of booing Thorin off the stage. The commotion only stopped when Thorin swept
the room with his ice-cold blue gaze. At once Zero was seized, as were the other dwarves, and hands
and voices fell into place.

“Let it not be said that I understand not your concern, because I do,” he said. “I very much do.
Which is why I do not wish for our expedition to be so tarnished by halflings with nary a callus in his
hands, unproven burglars, rusts of the forge... and elf-sons,” at which point Zero found himself
folding arms and tapping feet. *You keep using that word*, he thought, but kept silent.

“But in the event that you would petition me to,” he said, “as Thorin Oakenshield, son of Thrain, son
of Thror and future Lord of Erebor, I will take it into consideration as has been the way of my
grandfather, and my great-grandfather, and his many great and illustrious ancestors before him.”

He went around the room, a firm yet kindly hand falling on each of the dwarves' thick and broad
shoulders. “I'll think it over,” he said, “while you sleep, fellow dwarves.” He stopped in front of Kili
and Fili. “Especially you, sister-sons. Go and sleep well, because we shall be able to accord
ourselves with scant luxuries as such on the road to come.”

“But you *will* spare a thought on the matter,” said Gandalf with furrowed brows.

“That I shall, good wizard,” he said. “That I shall.”

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It was only when all the dwarves had been snugly wrapped in whatever beds (and makeshift ones
put together from chairs and benches and spare mattresses) that they could find, and Thorin was off
in a room thinking and brooding (and therefore would be of no disturbance), that Gandalf sought out
the cloaked gardener. He found Noughton just stepping out from his master's chamber.

The gardener shot Gandalf a razor-sharp glare, and for once the wizard actually felt a tiny pang of
remorse. “Do accept my apology for the mess that has happened today,” he said, bowing his head
kindly.

“You should have apologized to my master, not me,” said Noughton. “I am not the owner of this
household, Master Baggins is.”

“That might be so,” said Gandalf, “but I wish to apologize to you specifically, master butler.”

Noughton turned away. “I don't recall having done anything to warrant such attention.” The coldness
he spoke with implied that he truly thought what he said. A good sign, Gandalf thought. Pride was
usually the most outwardly symptom of the Enemy and their ilk (or allies who should deserve more
than a knock upside the head).

“Well, but you have very much had my attention,” said the wizard, “and I believe you know why. 
Now that all lights are off and all prying eyes are well closed, would you not spare an wizard a
moment of your time?”

Noughton looked deep into Gandalf's eyes, as if trying to detect any falsehood in his words and
deeds. When none was found, presumably, the butler shrugged both shoulders. “Fine,” he said. His
eyes did speak volumes about his willingness to cooperate with the Maia's quest, which is to say just
a pinch more than none at all.

The wizard led the butler into the living room and to the tea table. He lifted his staff: at once the
candelabra on the table burst aflame. The butler raised his brows (carefully hidden behind his truly
massive mass of blond hair hung before his forehead), but otherwise did not make any movement whatsoever.

“Let me begin with just a simple question, master butler,” said the wizard, setting his staff next to him. “If I might ask, exactly what are you?”

Mithrandir saw the butler’s chest heaved and fell, though he didn’t even for a brief moment break eye contact. It took him a solid while before he started speaking again, with surprising ease. “I used to be many things, but now I am a butler.”

“That didn’t answer my question, I’m afraid,” said the wizard. “You are ill like the Children of Illuvatar, though you look like them; and as for the hobbit of the Shires or the creation of Aule the Smith you resemble even less. Yet you belong not to the the spawns of Morgoth Bauglir and Sauron or the fallen Men who dwell in their shadow, so it would seem to me.”

Noughton looked at the wizard’s face for long, as if drinking in all the words he had said and returned nothing of his own. “Of course I am not insinuating you are the Enemy, master butler,” Gandalf added. “I wish only to know what exactly you are. Illuvatar willing, the road we may walk together in the future would be as good and long as my history with the lovable folks of the hobbit race.”

Noughton closed his eyes. “What if I said I were your enemy?”

“I find that possibility rather absurd,” said Gandalf. “Creatures touched by the Shadow have no love for beautiful things but to defile it, and would rather slay a hobbit than serve as his servant. Were you one of Sauron's spawns, there would be little left of Hobbiton but fire, smoke and mutilated hobbits. Especially,” he added, “since hobbits are like but children to them, defenseless and ripe for plunder and defilement.”

Then Mithrandir noted a big change in the butler's demeanor.

“That sounds like the doing of him,” murmured Noughton, and then fell quiet. His face hid his horror well, yet his eyes didn't. Neither did his hands, which was quickly balling into fists.”

“And who would this him be, if I may ask?” pushed Gandalf.

“Weil,” said Noughton. “Have you heard of the name Weil in your travels? Is he with this Enemy you speak of?”

“I would not say I have, because I haven't,” said Gandalf, “but the Shadow takes many form. If he is with the forces of Mordor in the East, there is no avoiding a confrontation with him, sooner or later – in your lifetime or another's.”

Noughton said nothing, again, lost in his own thought. Gandalf decided he would just try a little more to nudge him in the right direction. “But that aside, good butler, you still haven't told me what you are.-”

“I'm sorry,” came the answer, “but I don't believe I can trust you that much yet, wizard. I may tell you or I may not.”

“You have questions,” declared the wizard. “And I may well have the answer. I've been noting we may be working towards a common goal, even though you may not admit it right now.”

“That doesn't answer much, I'm afraid, master butler.”

“And yet it answers more than you want. I am Zero. I fight for those who believe in me – who happens to be Master Baggins at this moment. If an enemy appears before me, I will destroy it.” said Noughton. “And that is all I have to say for myself.”

“Is that all there is to it, may I ask?” asked Gandalf, adjusting the brim of his hat.

“That would be all,” said Noughton – or rather, Zero, as he obviously liked to call himself. “As for the dwarves' quest into this Erebor place, I'll go with them, if they wish and Master Baggins does not oppose,” he paused, and then added, “I want to keep him safe.”

“So do I,” said Gandalf. “Looks like we do have a common ground at last.”

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A Burglar and His Butler

Chapter Notes

Starting from this chapter my notes will take the following structure:
- I am assuming everyone who reads my work have a passing understanding of the Tolkien Legendarium at the very least.
- All my notes are at the end of the chapter
- Those who are familiar with the Megaman universe, go to Note (1).
- Those who are not familiar with the Megaman universe, go to Note (2).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 3

A Burglar and His Butler

Bilbo couldn't remember the last time he'd waken up so early in the morning. The sun had hardly risen in the East, and there was a distinct chill in the air despite its being April.

His stomach was rumbling. It was a well-known fact that there was only one creature that ate more and more often than a hobbit, and that was a frightened hobbit. To say Bilbo had gotten the fright of his life the previous night might sound a bit melodramatic, but Bilbo thought it no less true.

With eyes half-closed and a face unwashed – a never-before for a hobbit of such taste, position and pedigree – Bilbo scampered into the hall and into the kitchen, hands rubbing his eyes. He'd forgotten that he still had guests and therefore was still dressed in the messy outfit he'd fainted in the night before; and even if he had remembered it would make no difference. His belly was aching, and that was all that mattered.

Then, just as his tiny hobbitly form was still concealed behind a large cupboard containing a number of his parents' mementos, he heard some very heavy footsteps coming into the hallway. With a start, he dove into the shadow of the cupboard and peered out.

"Thorin?" he murmured.

It was the dwarven lord, stone-faced and grim, still wearing all his scaled fineries – had he even taken them off for the night, or at all in his lifetime? Bilbo peeled his eyes and watched.

For what seemed like forever, Thorin was pacing up and down the hall, thankfully never so close to the cupboard as to have Bilbo reveal himself. His hands fiddled the beads on his braids, then fidgeted a key he was wearing on his neck, then folded behind his back. His head was bent, eyes glued on the floor, his steps so rhythmic Bilbo would think he was dancing to a tune of his own making.

Bilbo didn't know how long he was standing there spying the dwarven lord, ironically, in the way a true-to-Eru Iluvatar burglar would observe a mark. He just knew he was there long enough that
when Thorin's lips became animate again, another start caused Bilbo to jolt.

“Gather the company!” yelled Thorin. “Gather the company, dwarves, gather the company! And summon the good Mr. Baggins' butler while we're at it!”

Bilbo felt himself electrified as he heard Thorin speak. He was an inch from jumping out, saluting and shout “Sir, yes, sir!” at the top of his voice, but held himself back just in time to realize who Thorin was looking for. Not me, but my butler?

Then Thorin walked in large strides into the living room. Almost all at once, the hallway came to life as many a dwarf – actually exactly seven of them: Kili, Fili, Oin, Gloin, Bifur, Bofur and Bombur – poured out from the many bedrooms and chambers along the corridor. Kili and Fili leaped and skipped, Oin and Gloin marched, and Bifur, Bofur and Bombur just trotted along while humming an old dwarven song in their deep, low throaty hums. Bilbo guessed the remaining were already in the living room and prayed they didn't break anything while spending the night there – which he was certain they did.

Now something deliciously, ironically Tookish truly awoke in good old Bilbo Baggins-Took. For but a fleeting moment he let his imagination drift along with the dwarves, and imagined awesome and marvelous adventures across all corners of the known world. But he still had enough with about him to know he wouldn't go on an adventure by simply dreaming it – his Took side basically shouting down the Baggins side at this point – but by doing things. Thinking so, quietly did Bilbo creep after the last dwarf, tiptoeing along and let his carpet of feet-hair do the rest of the work.

It took Bilbo but a few moments to present himself behind the doorway and peer inside. The industriousness of the dwarf, however, amazed him: Thorin's Company, if it could be called that, had already gathered around the table; some dressed in travel-garbs, some still in their casual wear but were completely alert and would change into functional clothing in a moment's notice. As for Thorin himself, he stood at the head of the table, spreading a large map on it, placing a key on top of it for all to see. Behind him stood old Gandalf, nodding sagaciously, as he stood leaning on his staff observing Thorin do his work.

What amazed Bilbo even more than the dwarf was his good butler Noughton, standing next to the good dwarf lord. He'd taken off the thick cloak Bilbo had him wear, and was now clad in the garment he wore on the day of his accident: a black full-body jumpsuit, a piece of white groin-piece, a crimson sleeveless coat, and oversized bracers and knee-high steel boots of matching color. One of the dwarves must have thrown a travel-hood of matching color on his head; which was good, because otherwise his mass of hair would be too conspicuous among all those who weren't elves. His back was a little bent as he peered into the map with as much attention as the rest of the dwarven company.

“Now as we shall soon be off ere the break of day,” Thorin began, placing his finger on the map, “let me be very brief with the details for the younger ones among us to catch up.” He scanned the eager faces of Kili, Fili and Ori, before glancing at Noughton. “And for the good Mister Noughton – or as he likes to be addressed as, Zero.”

All at once the line of dwarves began to mutter such pleasantries as “what kind of a name is Zero, anyway?”

Bilbo felt a heat rising to his cheeks. There went any semblance of normalcy and respectability his household would command now. Then again, his Took side pointed out, he was acting like a professional spy and burglar right about then, and there was nothing normal or respectable about that.

Defeated, Bilbo's Baggins side kept silent as he looked on. At about that time, the first light of the
day was shining through the open window carved into the hillside, and shining rather conveniently at
the map on the table.

“My grandfather, the late King under the Mountain Thror, may him find rest with our illustrious
forefathers, made this,” Thorin declared ceremoniously. “This is a map of that which was our home –
and shall be once more when we are done with our business and the area around it. We knew it well,
those of us who were born and fled Erebor.”

“So much so,” said Nori, “that I doubt it would be of any use at all – you've got an information-
gatherer for that which we don't already know, and that means me!”

“Much as I appreciate your service, good Nori,” said Thorin, his eyes lighting up. “Does anyone
among you know – or recollect – of a small side-entrance that leads into the lower levels of the hall?”

He tapped his finger on a specific spot on the parchment. “This rune marks a secret passage, 'five feet
high the door and three may walk abreast', if you would care to look.”

“And you reckon the dragon didn't know of it,” said Noughton.

Gandalf looked at the butler. “Indeed, he would, but he would have also ignored it. A dragon would
never be able to pass a door that small—”

“That is not my point,” Noughton said. “That dragon, as you said, has made himself master of the
mountain halls now. What is there to stop him from lining that secret door – or the exit to it – with
enough traps and mines to vaporize a small army? Or better, why not collapse that part of the
mountain to keep trespassers permanently out?”

“That's...” Gandalf hesitated for a moment before continuing. “That's a fair point, Master Zero, but I
don't think the dragon had the heart for that.”

“Why not?” asked Noughton, placing his hand on the map.

“Because he would see no reason to,” said Thorin. “Or rather, he'd be... preoccupied with something
else.”

“I hope this isn’t a new threat you haven't accounted for,” Noughton said, shaking his head.

“It is a threat when you think it is,” said Thorin sorrowfully. “Erebor is a rich place by dwarven
standard – suffice to say there was a time when the Elvenking Thranduil himself, may Mahal curse
him with brittle bones and a dearth of heirs, would covet the treasures of my grandfather Thror.
That's what drew the dragon to our mountainhome in the first place, and that's what will keep him
there bathing in the river of gold coins and ornaments so many dwarves had labored away for.”

There was a long moment of woeful silence as the dwarves took off their hood and stared down on
the map as if in memory of their ill-fated king and home.

He shook his head. “You'll know it when you see it, Mister Zero. When you've been afflicted by
greed – the thrice-damned Dragon Fever – you won't want to do anything but to wallow in the pile
of wealth before you.”

Thorin then exhaled loudly. “Do you have any more questions?” he said.

“Not for the moment,” said Noughton with a shrug, but Bilbo was sure his eyes were twitching in
abject disbelief. “Do go on.”
“One question, Uncle,” said Fili, raising his hand enthusiastically. “Shouldn't such a secret door be kept under locks and keys? It is Great-Grandpa's Secret Door.”

“It is, and I have the key,” said Thorin, raising the key dangling on the necklace he was wearing. He shot a glance at Gandalf before turning back to the little dwarf-boy. “A while ago our good friend the wizard Gandalf here recovered this key to the secret door from the hands of my father – your grandfather Thrain. He...”

His voice trailed off.

“His body lies buried in Dol Guldur now,” said Gandalf. “I wish I could have done more, or indeed earlier.”

“Rest assured, good wizard,” said Thorin, and his eyes was suddenly flaring like a flickering frosty flame was burning within it. “Gandalf could not save my father's life, but I shall avenge his honor. When all of this is said and done, I shall personally lead an army to Dol Guldur and tear it brick from brick.”

“Tread carefully, my good dwarf,” said the wizard, “for the Necromancer who dwells there is no ordinary foe. In truth I shall say he is of a league well beyond you and your kin-”

“The pride and honor of Durin's Folks demand no less!” exclaimed Thorin. “Let it be known that the Necromancer shall fall before me, even if my flesh should be strip to the bone doing so!”

“Fool of a dwarf!” said Gandalf, his brows very much raised and furrowed. “I have done more than what I should have to preserve the line of Durin; I shall not see you throw it all away in vain!”

Thorin and Gandalf looked like they were an inch from breaking down into a good old fist fight (or at least the manly exchange of a number of choice harsh words). But then, Noughton, being the good Noughton Bilbo knew, always knew what to say.

“I do hope we can get back on topic,” he said, and then eying both wizard and dwarf lord he continued. “What are we looking for in the ruins of your old city?”

“Very well,” said Thorin, not forgetting to shoot Gandalf another dagger glare, “what we want this time around is none of all that wealth, even though we could all use better clothing, housing and ale, and for Gloin here,” he patted the named dwarf on the shoulder, “a better upbringing for his little dwarrowling.”

He balled his right hand into a fist. “No, we want this white gem about half this size.” He shook his fist. “A most magnificent gem that radiates with the light of the sun and moon since the world was made. The Arkenstone it is called, the heirloom of my line, and a King Under the Mountain may not be crowned without it.”

“Once we've secured the Arkenstone, I shall be king,” said the dwarf, punching his fist into his left palm. “And then I will be able to summon the full might of the dwarven race to crush this dragon like the maggot he is.”

“And maybe more than a few other allies elsewhere,” added Gandalf. “The fair people of Gondor in their white citadel would be that much more likely to send aid for a true dwarven king than a fugitive who dwells in the wild. Also they would then be able to count on the aid of Arathorn son of Arador of the line of the Chieftains of the Dunedain. Which means enlisting also the assistance of Elrond Half-elv-”

Thorin stared back at the wizard coldly. “No,” he said, and waved his hand, signifying he would like
to hear no more of that. Gandalf leaned back, shaking his head and wore a scowl very grim on his face, but otherwise offered no more objection.

Noughton, as expected, had other ideas.

“And what if this dragon finds us while we're there?”

“That's why we needed a burglar,” said Thorin, throwing his arms. “Unfortunately, it does seem we cannot find one in your master as we expected.”

“You've got another fighter in addition to your own company,” Noughton pointed out.

“With the fourteen of us? I'll have better luck rowing a paddle-boat to Valinor,” said Thorin. “No, what I want out of you is to use that amazing speed and precision of yours. With luck and Mahal on your side, you might discover the Arkenstone before the dragon discovers you. And then... let's hope the dragon would enjoy a hundred thousand dwarven warriors hacking him to tiny slices of dragon-flesh.”

“May I remind you there aren't half as many dwarves alive, dwarrowdams and dwarrowlings included,” said Gandalf. “Much less warriors.”

“Figures of speech,” mumbled Thorin, before clearing his voice. “But the point still stands, we have a job for you, and the reward is one-fourteenth of all the gold and gems and ornaments and artifacts we'll have regained from this quest. The term, as you will find, is exactly the same as it was for your master.”

“That would be fine,” said Noughton. “I accept.”

Then just as Noughton was about to lay down a quill on the contract scroll, a dwarf broke from the line, approached Noughton and stared at his face. It was Oin, possibly the youngest of the bunch, and he looked positively flustered.

“And, err... don't think we're roping you into this because your master couldn't, good Mister Noughton – err, Zero,” Oin said. “If you aren't comfortable with-”

“I do not,” said Noughton. “I have my own reason for joining your expedition and see it to the end.”

It is at that last exchange that something revved up within Bilbo. Maybe it was his desire for adventure having come to a head. Perhaps he was just that unwilling to see someone else do a job meant for him. Or a mix of both. In any case, a hearty desire to speak, to shout and to make himself heard was building up within Bilbo, and then finally it burst out of him like air out of a balloon too full now punctured.

He cared not whether he was ready, or whether he was presenting himself in a respectable manner, or even that his hair and clothing was in a complete mess. He had to say something, and say it now.

“Excuse me, Noughton,” he said, and jumped out from the doorway. “I don't mean to admonish you, but in all cases if a contract is meant for your master, it is meant for your master. Thank you very much, and do have a good day.”

Then, feigning a huffy mood, he stormed up to the table where the company was gathered, and stared at the Great and Proudful and Armored to the Teeth Thorin Oakenshield himself, and stared him in the face.

“Do excuse me too, my good dwarf-sir,” he said, “But you've said so many times since last night that
you desire a good thief – a professional one at that, and one is presenting himself right before you. Why settle for the second-best while you can have the best?”

Part of Bilbo was quaking in his pants when those words escaped his lips. What was he saying? He was the one to observe first-hand what Noughton could do. He could run all the way from the Brandywine to the easternmost limit of Hobbiton in a flash. He could jump as high as three hobbits were tall, and then leap again in midair. He could lift a great boulder that a hundred hobbit-hands couldn't with one hand (the last of which he observed that one time when Zero was out looking for something he dropped out of town). Have you lost your mind, Bilbo? He asked himself so, but could not hold his posturing back.

“Master Baggins,” Noughton said. Bilbo stared deep into those crystalline eyes and was flustered again, even more so when those lips started dispensing more words. “You didn’t have to put up such a front.”

“What? N-no! I am not putting up no fronts.” Bilbo's mouth tinged as he tried to mutter the 'rough' and 'coarse-sounding' language of those ruffians he’d only read in books or heard from his ma's tales. “Imma serious! I'm the biggest, baddest, slinkiest little hobbit burglar you can find in these parts!”

“And he wouldn't be lying,” said Gandalf as he stepped into the clear. “I could find no burglar in Hobbiton or the Shire as a whole who is better at his trade than he is.”

“We could, I don't know, Uncle, take the both of them,” Kili said, a suggestion Fili was all too glad to take up judging from his furious nods. “One to lend an extra axe, and the other to do the fanciful burglary works.”

“We shall be moving through Mirkwood, let me remind you, sister-sons,” said Thorin. “And if I should clarify, that is elf country and Mahal knows what other manners of strange and deadly beasts dwell there. We want to make as little noise and be out of there as quickly as possible. The fewer men, the better.”

“Then pick me, pick me!” said Bilbo. “Let my butler take care of my home and hearth in my stead. I'll go with you, and I'll steal whatever stone you want!”

Seeing his audience didn't seem too convinced, he continued. “Well, I've been outside the door listening on your company chatting away for the last half hour! Did anyone spot me? See what I am getting at? Yes? Yes?”

Thorin's brows arched as he looked around the room. One shrug. Two. Three. A dozen. The only nod to come was from Noughton, for which Bilbo really wished he was in a position to administer the butler. Gandalf merely combed his beard with his fingers, as if amused at the whole business.

“He doesn't count,” said Bilbo, puffing his chest as he pointed at Noughton. “My point is, if so many dwarves can't spot your faithfully when he is just several yards from you, can a dragon drunk on greed and gold do so?”

Thorin said nothing, but his brows slowly relaxed and his neck began to crane up and down. “That's a fair point,” he admitted. “I suppose we could put you in – on probation, at least-”

Hardly had Bilbo stretched his open hand towards Thorin as a sign of agreement when his ears heard a large slam on the table – very nearly enough to crack it to the hobbit's chagrin. Everyone did, too, for in a flash all their eyes were on a rather cross Noughton. His hands were curled into fists, and Bilbo thought he could feel the air around the room condensing as Noughton's arms trembled.
“I shall not leave Master Baggins on this quest of yours,” said Noughton, and his voice was chilly beyond compare. Then the butler turned over to Bilbo: the hobbit very nearly squeaked like a fauntling.

“If you insist on going along with this company, Master Baggins,” he said, eyes fixed on Bilbo as if nobody else in the room existed, “I shall follow; with or without your permission.” he turned around to stare in Thorin's eyes in much the same manners. “Or theirs.”

Bilbo harrumphed. He had to do something, anything to win back his respect, and quick! “Do you – err, I mean, dare you disobey me?”

“My one directive now is to keep you alive and safe, Master Baggins,” said Noughton coldly. “That overrides every other.”

Bilbo exhaled in exasperation. “Why do you have to be so stubborn?”

Noughton didn't answer, but there he stood in the middle of the dwarves, standing tall and resolute. His posturing was enough: he had made up his mind, Bilbo realized, and there was no changing it. Not even his own order.

Then Bilbo saw Thorin step towards the butler, too, and stretched out his hand.

“Your... loyalty is commendable,” he said. “You would have made a very fine dwarf that I wouldn't be ashamed to call kin if you were one of our kind. I don't think I can turn down one such as you, whether or not you have elf blood in your veins.”

He looked around the rank with brows arched. “But then as for remuneration,” he said, and the dwarven concern over gold and payment started to color his voice. “fifteen men would mean everyone will be a little worse off-”

“That's not going to be a problem,” said Noughton. “I was just about to tell you to keep your gold. Now that Master Baggins wants to join in, that makes the problem even simpler. He gets the one-fourteenth share of gold you mentioned. And I get nothing.”

In an instant all eyes were trained on Noughton. Even Gandalf himself. “You sure you don't need gold, laddie?” said Nori. “Don't think I can trust a fellow who doesn't have the love for gold burning in him-”

“You'll be surprised,” said Noughton. “There are greater motivators in life than gold. Mine... happens to be one of those other things.”

As Bilbo looked into Noughton's eyes, an overwhelming kind of sorrow was transmitted unto him, that of much loss and even more death and destruction. Whatever Noughton had observed in his life, it must not have been a lot better than the plight of Feanor Curufinwe and his seven sons told in ancient tales passed down since the earth was young, that his mother had often regaled to him.

“Why are you doing this, Noughton?” he unconsciously asked. “If not for gold-”

“Because I owe you my life, Master Baggins,” the butler answered. “And also because you remind me of someone... very important to me.”

Behind them, Gandalf was nodding in approval. Thorin soon followed him, and the rest of the company, too, with the exception of Nori who obviously was till trying to compute the idea that someone could be motivated without gold.
“Confound me this,” he muttered, though by this point there was little changing things.

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The party departed the house called Bag End a little later than eleven in the morning.

Zero was feeling a small kind of excitement welling within him. He’d been so dependent on the wonders of the 22nd - 23rd century, up to and including Ride Armors, Ride Chasers, Cyber-elves, Trans Servers or just plain old teleport, that the idea of actually gearing up for a long journey on foot was something new for a change.

Not that he needed a lot. He put on the thick cloak Bilbo gave him, and asked Fili for a knife. Until he could find out how to fix his saber, buster and, by extension, his internal reactor, he’d have to regress to cold steel. Where was the likes of, well, whatever those engineers were called, when Zero needed them?

That, or... her.

*Her*, Zero thought, and closed his eyes.

She saved him. Brought him back from the brinks. Made him into what he was. Always kept a close eye and a close voice by his side.

She shared with him her ideals. She told him of a desire to see peace between mankind and reploids. In fact, so saintly she was, if the denizens of this *Middle-earth* place – elves and dwarves and hobbits and wizards and whatnot – would come to his world, she'd clamor for eternal peace among them all, too.

He was close to her. So, so close. She'd never told him she loved him, but there was no need for too many words, or fanciful words even when it came to Zero. Because he was Zero, and that meant action spoke far louder than words. Her actions were like the thunder to his lightning.

Then he killed her brother, oh, very surely and completely so, in a duel that didn't have to happen.

Then he killed her.

It was self-defense, too, or so his damaged memories tried to tell him. She'd tried to kill him, out of the moment's rage or a darker motive, he wouldn't know. But that was what she did, and he did what he had to do.

Was that not the moment he asked himself what he was fighting for? And was the next moment not the one he found the answer on her behalf?

And now he couldn't even remember what she looked like. What she sounded like. Heck, he couldn't even remember her name.

Zero found himself clutching his head just as Bilbo was stepping out of the smial. “You don't look very well, my good Noughton,” said the hobbit, as he opened those doe-like eyes at him.

“I am well,” said Zero, tearing his eyes from Bilbo's.

It was those eyes, Zero remembered, scrambled as his memories were. Whoever that girl was, and wherever she was now, whether floating in the cyber-world or lost forever in the graveyards of so many reploids of the past wars, her eyes were there, as if living on in the shape of one Bilbo Baggins. That was the other thing, other than gratitude, that had him stay with the hobbit.
“I owe you a life debt,” Zero said as he hammered the last nail on the wooden ceiling of the hobbit-hole, “and all you want me to do is fix your roof?”

“I suppose it isn’t all that surprising when you look at it this way,” said Bilbo. “I don’t really have anything I really need. I’ve got money, and wealth, and prestige, and a comfortable hobbit-hole; there may very well be a lovely hobbit girl waiting for me if I should only care to look, so that is out of the question too. The only thing I want doing of late is fixing that roof, and I’ve been procrastinating that for a while, too!”

“You are awfully... nice,” said Zero, shaking his head.

“Oh, but you cannot be a respectable hobbit without being quite nice, my dear sir!” Bilbo said, eyes widened as he examined the tiling on the ceiling. “And that’s splendidly done too! It would have taken some expert craftsmanship to do that, and I’m afraid there isn’t any in the Shire with the skill and the height to do right now.”

“Do you honestly not have anything else that need help on?” asked Zero.

“No, my good man, and I dare not occupy you further,” said Bilbo, beaming at Zero. “Don’t you have friends and family to whom you have to get back?”

Zero’s neural emulator in his chest cavity began to tighten. “I don’t think I have any,” he said. “I am a... well, you can say I am a vagabond. No friends.” Because, Zero thought, they’d all died. “And no family.” For pretty much the same reason.

“Then you must be the nicest and most reasonable vagabond I’ve had the fortune of meeting!” said Bilbo, extending a hand towards Zero. “I’ve just had this most brilliant idea if I have to say it myself: would you like to stay?”

Zero couldn’t believe his ears. “Stay?”

“Yes, you can stay here with me, in Bag End. I have been finding myself embarrassingly short of a good butler – someone who takes care of the house, look after the garden, making sure every and all things are in order,” Bilbo said, looking all around the house. “You see, I try to be as upstanding a hobbit as I can, but my house should like to be less predictable than I would rather. Wouldn’t it be better if I had someone to help me with it; someone like you, perhaps?”

Zero failed to quantify how long it took him to come to the decision, or how much the offer made his chest pain and his mind even further scrambled than it was. The next thing he knew, he was there, being Bilbo Baggins’ loyal butler.

And then this adventure happened on its own. Just like... well, another adventure at the back of his mind.

“What if I am not the Zero you are looking for?”

“In my mind, you are already Zero.”

“... you are already Zero...”

“... already Zero.”

“... already...”

“... Zero...”
“Noughton? My good man Noughton?” Bilbo’s voice shot across his ears. “Good grief, what happened to you? It isn't like you to space out like you did!”

When Zero looked up, he was facing more than a dozen pairs of eyes. Thorin was eyeing him with disapproval; Gandalf's were quite inquisitive, and Bilbo's face was inches from his, and there was much anxiety on his face.

“No, it's nothing,” Zero said, avoiding those eyes. “I was... my memory was just a little scrambled, that is all. That is all.”

“You look like that wretched Thranduil when my grandfather refused to hand him a box of white gems,” said Thorin. “Be a good dwarf-friend and don't be like Thranduil.”

“Please, master dwarf,” said Bilbo. “Anything I can do for you, Noughton? We could leave a bit later if you want-”

“No, no, I'm perfectly fine,” said Zero. “Let us not wait any further. Let me just lock the door, then we shall be off.”

As the lock clicked in the hinge and the door into Bilbo’s smial was firmly in its place, Zero took a deep breath. Yes, his memory can wait. Right now, he had but one directive:

Keep Bilbo Baggins safe, come what may.

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Chapter End Notes

1) For those FAMILIAR with the Megaman universe:
   - I believe a little explanation about Zero's (yet another) amnesia is in order. He remembers most details about his world and most of his deeds. However, he does not remember the specific people he did stuff with in the past: they might as well be a gestalt mess of indistinguishable reploids and humans in his memory right now. This leads to embarrassing mistakes, such as in this chapter he confuses Iris with Ciel and mixes up their stories to the point of believing them to be the same person. At some point he may mix even X and Axl into this composite mixture (I have not made up my mind on this matter yet). Either way, the driving force here is that he sees the same thing he saw in Ciel (and Iris. And X. And maybe Axl and Layer too) in Bilbo.
   - As the next chapter will reveal, Zero's body and weapons have seen better days. To be precise, his saber is only at half or quarter-strength at best, and he won't get back his buster until after Rivendell or later. He can still double-jump and dash all right, and his physical strength, speed, coordination and durability is mostly intact - hence the last chapter's dwarf-tossing and lifting and doing everything by himself. I noted that even in this very depleted state Zero would be punching several orders of magnitudes above the weight of Hobbit-era Legendarium, so something new to balance that will be showing up in the next chapter.

2) For those NOT familiar with the Megaman universe:
   - It is well-known that Zero - as in the red robot (the correct terminology is reploid) - has
never been a happy character in his own universe (with the exception of humor-based fan embellishments), and becomes progressively unhappier as his own story comes to a close. At the end of his storyline, he'd seen everything he'd known and loved be destroyed TWICE and under threat of destruction about eleventy million times, killed one of the women he loved, had his best friend for a century sacrifice himself for him, and then sacrificed himself to give the other woman he loved the chance to build a better world for the survivors of all those cataclysms over the course of two centuries (which, if Megaman ZX and Megaman Legends are anything to go by, also didn't go very well). I am plucking this Zero from the exact point his canon story ends. All of this is going to make him not the best merry-maker at parties.

3) Concerning dwarves and the storyline: What I will do is pluck what I like from the novel, from the supplementary material and the film and mix them together rather than sticking by one version against the other so long as it does not contradict the Silmarillion. To clarify a few points:
- Ori is the youngest dwarf rather than Fili and Kili.
- Thorin is a racist elf-hater. Also I might have made him far more bellicose than he used to be in ANY version.
- Azog is deader than dead.
- Gandalf is fully expecting to throw a War of the Ring sixty years before it is historically due by mustering all the Free Peoples if the needs arise.
Chapter Notes

IMPORTANT NOTICE:

Starting from this chapter, the direction of the narrative will begin to greatly diverge from the original Hobbit text. While the general order of event will be somewhat preserved (Troll -> Rivendell -> Stone giants -> Misty Mountain -> Gwaihir -> Beorn -> Mirkwood, etc), the exact way events unfold within each scene will not. Some characters who have very little role in both the book and film AND the fanfic community will have much greater role as a result (A preview: Arwen, Elrohir, Elladan, Glorfindel... and Bombur, to name a few). Do bear with me on that!

Also, important notes at end of chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 4

Of Food and Roasted Trollhide

Cough and sneeze and sniff. Such a nuisance.

Maybe it was just Bilbo, but he could swear he was feeling the heat (and therefore life) draining off the very earth itself as he left the familiar grounds of the Shire. Not to say the surrounding was not beautiful or lively itself. To any other eyes, the rolling hills and the thin forests and the great oaks and the many fields of green laced with large rocks of curious shapes and sizes would be a feast for the world-weary and a marvel to behold.

But Bilbo was hungry, thirsty, tired and sore and didn't quite agree with the pony he was riding on. He'd think the little creature was bumping along just to spite him and the large load he'd put on its back, however little sense it made. Ponies of the kind the dwarves brought along for the trip were hardy like the rocks from which the dwarves themselves were hewn, and could carry enough weight to break a donkey's back.

So it was just him; Bilbo sniffed and puffed and thought. It was then that he saw a pocket-handkerchief hanging before him. Just what he needed this very moment; he grabbed the handkerchief and blew hard.

His nose now clear and himself feeling a good deal better, Bilbo turned to the side at the person who'd just given him the accessory. It was Noughton all right; no surprise there at all.

"Thank you, Noughton," he said, trying to hide his surprise. Noughton had done nothing but pampering him since they embarked on this quest to Iluvatar knew where.

The butler was walking next to him – the only person in the company to not have his own pony, in fact. He didn't seem to be bothered by his lack of pack animal. Not that he had trouble keeping up:
over the past month he'd been maintaining a constant distance from Bilbo on his extremely nimble red feet, close enough to protect him if need be yet distant enough to not impede upon the hobbit's personal space. He'd kept a distance too, when they were stopping by at Bree and then at every camp when the hobbit was trying to socialize.

The hobbit didn't know if he truly liked the way he was being guarded. On one hand, he was free to mingle with the dwarves as he saw fit in the safety that he was being watched. On the other, he was being watched. Noughton himself had little interest in the dwarves beyond a very professional attitude: he'd show up if and when he was needed, either to pack, unpack or carry bags and sacks around his shoulders with nary a complaint. Just the previous night the butler had had a very curt exchange with the two younger dwarves. Kili and Fili, Bilbo observed, took offense at his lack of words and overall mechanical-like behavior. Noughton simply paid the lot of them no mind.

But Bilbo did mind, oh, he sure did. He was, after all, a Baggins of Bag End, and that meant an obsession with fitting in and not disturbing the peace and/or standing out.

Now the group would be making camp in another hour at most, Bilbo thought as he looked at the afternoon orange-tinted light painted upon the dwarves' hair, beards and backsides. Their journeys had been full of songs for all of the first two days, but ever since then everyone had been rather quiet and grim. It probably was not because of him or Noughton, but Bilbo couldn't shake the feeling. They are angry with me, oh, certainly they are; and good old Noughton too, he thought. How can I ever fix this state of affairs?

“Noughton,” he found himself calling aloud. “Have you a minute?”

“Yes, Master Baggins,” said Noughton.

“I, eh, I was just wondering if you could let me know,” said the hobbit, trying to pick the best and rightest and least offensive wording, “why you don’t ride like everyone else?”

“Memories,” said Noughton. “I have got some unpleasant memory with rides in general.”

“Why? Did you fall down one or,” asked Bilbo. He quickly covered his mouth with the dirty handkerchief when he realized Noughton was looking even more glum than he normally was. “I- I'm sorry. I didn't meant to intrude or-”

“No, that's fine,” Noughton said. “It is not all unpleasant.”

“Well, that's good to hear,” said Bilbo. “I mean, it's not good to keep your feelings bottled, you know? If you could tell someone, you'd better do; otherwise you'd explode like a party balloon too full!”

He paused, gauging Noughton's reaction. “And that won't do at all!” he added after noting Noughton wasn't quite as offended as he'd feared.

“Suggestion acknowledged, Master Baggins,” said Noughton.

“Well, that's good. That's really, really quite good!” said Bilbo, “So why don't you begin by starting to talk with the rest of the dwarves? They're good folk, I say. Coarse and a bit lacking in the civilized departments, but I would say they're as honorable and good company as any here in the West-”

So Bilbo said, and he meant it. Over the past few days he'd gotten to know the dwarves a little better. Not enough to truly call himself their friends, but he was starting to be able to tell one dwarf from another and recognize them by name; not a bad start at all for one not a dwarf.
“Hey, Mister Baggins!” Fili's voice rang out from behind. “What's that between you and Foot-slogger?”

Foot-slogger, the dwarves had so named Noughton. Quite a bit ironic, too, since they themselves were clumsy and more used to traveling and fighting on foot than any other race on the face of Middle-earth (Bilbo would refrain from commenting on the goblin-men or the Distant Folks in the far East or South, for about them he had heard nothing good or concrete from his mother).

“Nothing,” said Bilbo, trying to assume a jovial tone to match the young dwarf's. “Just trying to get the butler here to open up, that's all.”

“Well, that's good to hear!” said Kili, who was riding right next to his brother. “I was starting to think we could start using Mister Foot-slogger here as a portable ale cellar or something – he's just that cold!”

“If we had any ale at all, that is,” said Dori. Stern-faced as he was, Bilbo knew he was grumbling inside just as the hobbit himself was. There had been scant good food on the road and even less adequate beverages, to the chagrin of the dwarves, but Dori, Nori and Bombur specifically.

“I doubt we've got even enough ration to last until Mirkwood's edge,” said the aforementioned Bombur from behind still with a groan. “Mahal forbids, we'll have to ration. That would be terrible indeed!”

Bilbo realized too late what a can of worm he had opened. Soon the entire rank of dwarves was breaking out in talks about food, with the exception of Thorin (whose face was as cold and solid as a block of ice) and Gandalf (who was either too amused at the dwarves' antics or too busy with whatever was going on in his wizardly head to speak a word).

“I miss Ma's cooking,” said Ori earnestly. “I could use some stewed potatoes and beef cutlets with butter-cream sauce right about now.”

“Can't beat what my Ma makes in that kitchen of hers!” said Fili, cradling his belly. “Sausage-cakes with garlic and onion toppings, baked fish in batters and breadcrumbs served with aged cheese, or small honey-cakes about this size!” He raised his index finger into the air. “One bite, and poof, they just melt in your mouth!”

“And I envy the dwarrowling back home,” said Gloin, combing his beard and swallowing loudly. “Nowhere, nowhere, on this good earth can you find better honey hams or roasted chicken or gravy like how my Freida makes it! And what is a dwarf without some good old red meat and plenty of oil and fat, huh?”

Bifur mumbled a few words in the old tongue of the dwarves, while Bofur regaled tales of great feasts he'd treated himself to on the road of barbecued rabbits and morsels made from quickly boiling berries with sugar until they were just about melting. Further ahead, Nori was talking loudly about porridge made with fresh eels and seasoned with rich herbs he'd pilfered off a noble's estate when the servants of the latter weren't looking.

In short, the talks of food in the air was so thick Bilbo could almost taste them all, and his belly was starting to ache. He had missed four out of seven meals for a week now, and that state wasn't going to improve any time soon. For the better part of the next hour Bilbo sat there on the saddle, swallowing like mad, his empty stomach continuing to grumble in protest. He closed his eyes, and for a good while it was like he was sleeping and dreaming sweet dreams of banquets and parties made for the kings in the South as told by his mother, complete with dishes so strange yet so rich ad so delicate one could dine on them for years on end without growing tired.
But then he opened his eyes and glanced sideway. Amidst all that talk of food, his loyal Noughton was trudging along still without a single word. He'd thought the butler was dense before, but this was something else entirely: food, by hobbit definition, was the reason why life was beautiful, and he could hardly imagine one without a desire for food, plenty, often and well-cooked.

“That's right!” he declared out loud. “Noughton, you have apparently come from a place very far away, haven't you? Why don't you tell us a bit about the food you have there?”

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Inside, some part of Zero was rightly terrified. He had practically no story to tell about food, for obvious reasons. For all of ten seconds, pressure was mounting all around him as practically every dwarf was eying him expectantly.

But I have nothing to tell.

Bilbo was quick to come to his rescue. “Well, what is your loved ones' best dish?” he said. “Your mother, mayhaps, or even a lover?”

No, scratch that. Bilbo Baggins did not help at all.

“I have... neither,” he finally said. The word 'neither' was perhaps the most painful he'd uttered for a very long time now, if only because of how true it was. “And if I had... I don't think they would have cooked.”

“Well, then you should have cooked something for yourself!” said Dori, as if he was disciplining a misbehaving youngster. “Otherwise how could you have survived until adulthood?”

“You don't understand,” said Zero. “Where I came from, good food is far less a concern to mostly everyone. People are simply trying to survive. Food is whatever keeps the body in working condition until the next day. The next crisis.”

Part of Zero, again, gasped at what his mouth was disclosing. Technically, Zero was not lying: even in the best of days before he was sealed at the end of the 22nd century, the world as he knew it no longer had what would qualify as haute couture any more, much less fine dining. The situation in the next century would get even worse: if he remembered correctly, back in the Resistance Base, a pot of everything-stew made of anything the resistance soldiers and citizens could toss together into a massive solar-powered saucer qualified as a fine treat.

Several colony drops and failed superweapon discharges would do that to the world, as would the killing of the vast majority of humans and reploids through one crisis after another.

But then the way Gandalf was regarding him was nothing short of threatening. Did the wizard discover something he shouldn't have? Or worse, made an assumption to the same effect? Had he deduced he was not from their world?

But then again, the dwarves' reaction was completely different.

“I... feel for you, brother,” said Bombur. “However did you manage to survive such a life?”

“Man, I'm never going to complain about Ma's cooking again!” said Kili. “Neither shall I!” added Fili.

“I'd better thank Mahal that there was still good food in my line of work,” said Nori, to which Dori threw him a rather nasty glare.

They looked at him as if he'd been the victim of an injustice so great it was beyond their belief.
“No need to feel sorry for me,” said Zero. “We've each got our own issues to work with.”

Once again Kili and Fili met his ice-cold eyes. “Uh... ale, anyone?” said Fili. “Or anything that needs frosting, that is!” said Kili.

Bilbo looked like he was going to say something, but his mouth only opened a little and then closed again. For the better – Zero felt his master was coming really, really close to blurting out something stupid.

He looked at Gandalf again, then back on the ground. The wizard had stopped paying attention to him, though there was still something nagging at the corner of his mind that the old man would never forget a detail.

He needed to be more discreet from now on if he were to ever protect Bilbo as well as he could. And maybe rediscover his past when he was at it, too. The one was a rather difficult task given the nature of that little quest of theirs. The latter was... well, suffice to say his sanity demanded he not think so much about it. Thinking so, he decided to turn off his thought process – if only so he could have a bit of peace of his mind.

It was not until the sun set behind the hills and darkness began to paint dark the surrounding, that Zero allowed himself to snap back into alertness. The dwarves were setting up camp at the edge of yet another forest then, just like every other day during their last journey. Bilbo was running from place to place, trying (desperately) to make himself useful: ferrying this, carrying that, setting up a pot here and a pan there, that sort of things.

Meanwhile, Gandalf, as per usual, was out of sight.

“Watching the stars or somesuch,” said Oin, shaking his head. “Wizard business. You'd have better luck trying to read ancient elf text.”

“Or start a fire in the rain,” Gloin said, carrying on his hands a large load of firewood.

Then Zero heard Bombur's voice in the distance. “Hey, who took the sausages?” he seemed to have said. “My beautiful delicious sausages!”

It was just about at that moment that Zero heard a muffled whistle from a bush not far from the campsite. Zero's hand reached for the beam saber handle in the holster on his hip, and cautiously walked towards that particular direction.

There, behind the bush, he found the three youngest dwarves – Kili, Fili and Ori, gathering around looking perplexed. No, Zero thought, scanning their faces again. That was less perplexion and more like fright.

“Mister Foot-slogger!” cried Ori. “It's so good you heard us!”

“What's the matter here?” he asked. Nothing good, he assumed.

And he would be right.

“Well, err... you see, looks like Ori here,” Fili patted the youngest dwarf on the shoulder, “somehow lost Bombur's pony. Emphasis on somehow.”

“Bombur?” Zero asked. “Isn't he the one who has all the sausage and ham locked up in his saddlebags?”
“Well... unfortunately, yes,” said Kili. “Long story short, if we don’t find that pony, and soon, we aren’t going to have a proper dinner. And somebody’s going to throw a hissy fit.”

“And then somebody else is going to explode like some over-primed Durin’s Day firework,” said Fili, elbowing Zero on the kneecap. “Know who, or what, I mean?”

A certain older dwarf with an unnaturally short beard and a temper opposite to his dyework of choice sprang to Zero's mind. “I understand.”

“Well then, do grab Master Baggins for us, will you? Mighta need a burglar where we’re going,” said Fili. “You’re usually so quiet, nobody would mind you skulking around for a change.” Then he looked at Zero's face and quickly made a minor correction. “I mean, not skulking, but rather, well, moving.”

“Do try not to draw my brothers’ attention!” cautioned Ori, and he looked downright terrified. “I may have done it this time, so, uh-”

Zero found himself turning around. “Understood,” he said, and walked towards Bilbo Baggins just as the hobbit was done setting up the pots on a spit across the makeshift fireplace.

***

Part of Bilbo felt like he was dreaming, if only because his current adventure had been like one in its most defining feature: at no point did he feel like he was in control. Especially that night.

Sure, he could have expected trouble enough when he jumped out from his cover that day. He just couldn’t imagine it would come before they’d even arrived at Rivendell, “the last bastion of civilization in the wilds” to quote his mother (who had, apparently, been there and often too, if her songs in Sindarin were to be taken at face value).

Nor could he imagine it would involve trolls.

Where was he? Oh yes. As of this time – some time between nine and ten in the evening, which he would have been able to tell had he brought along his pocketwatch – Bilbo Baggins of Bag End was sitting there among bushes in the wild. This most respectable hobbit, surrounded by three antsy dwarves and one drearily emotionless butler, was observing a scene right from a horror story.

Three trolls, each as large as a small hill and a half, were seated around a fire of appropriate scale over which a pot sufficiently large to boil alive half a dozen hobbits was hung. On the opposite side of their camp, tied in a sack, was Bombur’s pony and all of their company’s meat-based food supplies. In any case, the whole place was reeking, as trolls were wont to be. Suddenly Bilbo's hunger and appetite vanished – he’d need a good retching before he could take in anything.

“Mutton yesterday, mutton today, and blimey, if it don’t look like mutton again tomorrer,” said one troll as he stared into the pot.

It wasn't a stretch of imagination to say when the trolls were done with whatsoever they were cooking (and Bilbo wouldn't want to imagine what), the pony would come next. And if they'd come out to ask nicely, they’d be next, too. Well, at least they were nice enough to give their names: William, Bert and Tom. Not that it would help if Bilbo was to end up in the cook pot, anyway.

Bilbo looked around him for a moment. Kili and Fili had their eyes and mouths agape from either fear, awe, disgust or all of the above. Ori were huddled behind the older dwarves, stealing glances outside once every few seconds. And Noughton...
Well, Noughton was being Noughton.

“The size of a Golem, maybe a little larger,” quipped Noughton as he studied the lot of them. “And far less well-armed.” Then he produced the little knife he got from Fili the other day.

“What are you talking about?” asked Bilbo. And then he put two and two together. “Wait. Don’t tell me you're going to-”

“It is not impossible,” said Noughton. “If I can get enough of an initiative to climb on the nearest one's back and stab it through the ear or eye-”

“Wait. Wait wait wait wait,” said Kili, looking like he was going to scream. “You're saying you want to go out there, right in the open and stab a troll in the face with Fi's spare knife? The thing he hasn't been sharpening for like two years?”

Fili quickly covered his brother's mouth. “Don't let Uncle hear that,” he said, and then was quiet again, his face flustered.

“If I had the rest of my weapon these... critters would have been dead now before they knew what hit them,” Noughton said, matter-of-factly. “But if all I have is a little knife-”

He looked over the two sibling dwarves. “Unless you have something better I can use...”

“Or a better plan, my dear butler!” said Bilbo. “Listen, I do know a thing or two about trolls thanks to my mother – may she find rest in the Undying Lands – all you need to do is wait until sunrise, which wouldn't be very long, and they'd have to scurry for a shelter, or else turn to stone!”

“I'm afraid there'd be little left of the poor pony by then,” said Fili, shaking his head. “Or our sausages and hams, for that matter. Bombur's going to be an earful for the rest of the journey.”

“And Lord Thorin's going to have me beard!” cried Ori. So hysterical the young dwarf had gotten that the other two had to cup his mouth and hold him down before he'd give the five conspirators away.

“Can't we call Gandalf?” asked Bilbo, once again looking exasperated.

“No can do,” said Fili. “You knew the man longer than we do according to him, you should know wizards are like to disappear when we need him most!” He lowered his voice. “Which is right about now...”

Bilbo exhaled loudly. “Naysayer,” he muttered under his breath.

“You know what's a better idea?” said Kili. “You go do your job!”

“What?” exclaimed Bilbo, cupping his own mouth when he realized he was a mite too loud.

Fili stole a quick glance outside, only returning to the hobbit when he'd confirmed that the trolls were still too busy cooking and arguing to realize they were being watched. “Aren't you the burglar? Isn't it sort of your job to get us out of messes such as this?”

“Then I'll do it for Master Baggins,” said Noughton, staring into the young dwarf's eyes. “I'll destroy these three trolls with my bare hands if need be-”

“Which would be fine and good if you could!” exclaimed Fili.

“Are you doubting me?”
“No, but... yes,” answered Fili, shaking his head finally. “Yes I do, Master Foot-slogger. Yes I do.” He took a deep breath. “We don't know who you are, what you are, what you want, or why you are even protecting Master Baggins to the point of preventing him from doing his work. Hell, we don't even know what nourishes you, because nobody, nobody, can subsist on the black bread you insist on eating for as long as we've known you!”

For a few moment there were no sound audible from the bush. Certainly they could hear still the trolls arguing on how to cook mutton and horseflesh in the most delicious way known to troll, but of the three dwarves, one hobbit and one Noughton no voice came.

“So you noticed.” Noughton said.

“Only Uncle Thorin didn't, because he's Uncle Thorin,” said Kili. “We were meant to ask you proper when we've gotten to some safer lands, like Esgaroth or beyond, but then, well…”

“I understand your concern,” said Noughton at last. “But this is neither the time or place for that-”

“Yes it is, and you know it!” Bilbo found himself exclaiming, this time quietly enough that the wind was enough to muffle down his voice. “What is it with you and your lack of self-preservation? It's like... it's like you aren't even a living-and-breathing creature!”

And then suddenly all at once the forest around them came to life.

Before Bilbo could register what was happening, his eyes were filled with fire. The clattering of metal arms and armor rang in his ears, and the pungent stench of what smelled like stale cooking oil except a hundred times stronger waft into the bush and up his nostrils.

The source of such unseemly sights and smells were soon upon them. An army of orcs and goblins.

And it would have certainly been orcs and goblins too, for in his mother's tales few other creatures were so hideous. Their skins were dark and ragged, their backs hunched, their legs crooked. They carried rusty weapons and made the most blood-curdling of screams and shrieks. They ran barefoot, and their bodies were covered in rags caked with dirt and armor plates crafted from junk metal and splintered wood. As did the goblins in those stories liked spikes, so did those goblins adorn their makeshift garments with more spikes and protrusions than would be otherwise practical. So much for fashion and sensibility, Bilbo couldn't help but think.

From the other side of the clearing opposite to them, they poured into the open. Bilbo had lost count of how many there were, but if he had to give a number he'd give an estimation of two hundreds and not a head fewer.

But then it was the creature at the head of their column that drew Bilbo's eyes.

He was an orc exceptionally large, maybe three times as tall as the hobbit himself. But instead of wearing the same rags and junks that his men were clad in, he was sporting something exceptionally well-made and sleek. Elvish-looking, even. A helmet with a visor decorated with set of four protruding fangs, set in a pattern alike to a dragon's open jaw. A mostly rounded armor that covered most of his body, though still sporting spiky protrusions on the shoulders and knee-plates. And it was pinkish-red, just a little lighter than Noughton's colors.

His arms, however, was another story altogether. His right arm was no longer an arm like respectable folks knew them, but rather was a very large claw of shining metal. Between the two pincers of said claws there was what looked like a huge cylinder, attached to the pincers by a complicated system of
nuts, bolts and wires. Another cylinder adorned his other arm, smaller, yet no less threatening.

And he wore boots. Boots that were in the rough shape of Noughton's pair, although far larger and more imposing to make way for the orc's enormous digits, no doubt.

“Orcs? This far West?” cried Fili.

“And... what IS that thing?” asked Kili, eyes trained on the orc at the head of the formation.

Part of Bilbo felt like running, and from the looks on the dwarves' faces they'd rather do the same now. But then common sense held his feet.

“Don't!” he cried softly. “If we run now, they'll hear us! They'll catch us for sure!”

Bilbo pointed at the rustling leaves, then to his ear.

The surrounding around them, by then, was almost completely quiet but for the sound of the wind. The trolls were no longer talking.

In a dumb manner like most other trolls, the three horse-kidnappers turned around to the direction of the commotion.

“'Ere, 'oo are yer?” said William, scratching his head.

“I am known as Bolg, son of Azog,” answered the newcomer. “And you three are maggots who don't know you're already dead.”

Then, in a swift dash with a style disturbingly similar to Noughton's own, the orc charged at the troll.

The creature never stood a chance.

Bilbo could only see a flash. Then the two prongs of that great claw slammed into the troll's chest. Then there was yet another flash and thunderclap.

Up leaped Bolg son of Azog, kicking his victim in the head and somersaulting backward. He landed on the ground just as the troll keeled over. Bilbo could barely hold in a retch.

The troll's chest was missing a chunk large enough for a hobbit to crawl through.

“Yer keeled 'im!” shrieked the other two trolls. They grabbed their weapons of choice: two large clubs each the size of a tree very old.

Too little, too late.

The first troll, Bert was his name, charged Bolg. This time the armored orc leaped even higher that before. There was one solid blasts and the troll was no more. Where his skull used to be, now only a smoking stump remained.

Then Bolg vaulted back. His clawed arm started to flare up. From it three fireballs larger than anything Gandalf had ever conjured emerged. Three explosions engulfed Tom the last troll. He fell dead with three hobbit-sized holes in him.

As Tom's carcass stopped twitching, the orc squads on Bolg’s two flanks began to scurry forward. “What are you waiting for?” cried Bolg in Common. “These carcasses aren't going to move themselves!”
The throng of orcs and goblins then opened, revealing three huge racks outfitted with many chains and cuffs apparently designed according to the size of trolls. Twenty each of orcs and goblins put their shoulders to the task, and the racks creaked and clattered their ways to the carcasses.

For the next fifteen minutes the orcs set on their dirty work. They produced their tiny little flesh-carving knives and punched many holes on the trolls' hide. Then they cuffed the iron rings into those holes in a manner reminiscent of hobbit-girls wearing earrings for the first time. Except with naught in the way of cuteness and a whole lot more horror and disfigurement. In no times, the trolls were hung up across the racks and quickly towed away.

“They aren't going to... to bury the trolls, I don't think?”

“Anything but that,” said Kili, visibly trembling. “I'd say they're going to eat them.”

“Or do something equally sinister,” added Fili.

Bilbo felt something tugging at his heart. Nobody, he thought, not even such monsters as trolls, deserved such terrible and undignified death.

Wait.

Why was he feeling sad for a trio of trolls again? They were evil monsters! They kidnapped innocent folks and ate them! They laid waste to entire villages, and robbed and plundered whatever they could lay their paws on!

“You, creatures,” snarled Bolg to a group of five orcs at the back. “Secure the area. I smell dwarves.”

“Mission acknowledged,” said the orcs.

Those few orcs didn't look anything like the others. Sure they had the hunchbacked appearance, and the filth from the calf of their legs down were clearly visible in the light of the firepit. Yet everything from their belt up was... different. Armor plates of blue and teal steel covered their chests, backs and sides. They each wore a very large pair of gauntlets of a design vaguely resembling Noughton's, and on their head...

Bilbo shuddered at the sight. If they had had heads of flesh and bones like all those he knew, those heads had been disfigured beyond recognition. Each was dominated by a very large glassy gem the size of a hobbit's head. Whatever happened to them, Bilbo dared not imagine.

Then the goblin army began to turn around, Bolg son of Azog at their head. “Go, go, go! Off to Dol Guldur where our rewards lie!” he ordered, and was off.

Hardly had the column of goblins been out of size when the five armored orcs began to dispense with their tasks.

In a blink of an eye, they'd discovered the pony tied up in the bag. One of them nodded at the others, and raised his right arm at the sack.

The arm morphed into a large cylinder.

There was a flash at its tip and three loud blasts.

Then there was a blood-curdling neigh.
And then the pony was... gone.

“Oh no,” Bilbo gulped. He had not imagined the full implication of Bolg's gesture before, but now he understood it enough.

They were going to tear apart that forest.

They were going to find them.

They were going to murder Bilbo and all his friends.

And if they tried to resist, they’d make so much noise that the rest of the goblin column would be upon them.

Oh no. Oh no. Oh no. Oh no. No no no no no...

The armored orcs, meanwhile, were extremely diligent as they turned over every nook and cranny of the clearing, upturning and tumbling over what they could and shooting what they couldn't. One orc noticed the bag of hams and sausages on the ground, and rather than rushing to devour it like the orcs would normally do, he stood back and calmly unloaded a volley of pellets at it. There was little left of the sack but a smoldering crater when he was done.

For a minute that seemed as long as a century, Bilbo and his dwarven friends (and Noughton) didn't move. By some blasted chance, or maybe Eru was on their side, the orcs had been too diligent. So diligent that they'd failed to notice the bunch of conspicuous spies hiding just out of sight as they went about tearing apart whatever was left of the clearing.

And then...

“It's time.”

Bilbo gasped.

Noughton was standing up.


“Oh no. Oh no!” went Bilbo, and probably all the three dwarves too. He had half a mind to pull the butler back down...

But it was too late. The orcs had turned to face them.

And then, one after another, all five shooting cylinders were trained on Noughton. And by extension, the rest of them hiding under his feet.

Bilbo could feel his heart stopping.

Then he heard the sound like a jet of steam being ejected from a pot over-boiled.

It turned out that the holster at Noughton's side was not a superfluous ornament for show. He drew from its hold a certain object – a small but fanciful-looking cylinder. Noughton's right hand grabbed the object and twirled it around.

The butler raised the object in the way a Warrior in the tales of Bilbo's mother's would ready his sword.
Then Bilbo heard a sound of something igniting.

It was like magic.

The handle in Noughton's hand had transformed itself into a triangular blade. A short blade, perhaps, just the size of a dagger to a grown man. But still a dagger. A dagger made of green light, no less!

Then the armored orcs' weapons blazed.

A series of explosions shattered the quiet night.

And Bilbo was still alive.

He opened his eyes and looked around. The only things dead around him were the four trees that used to flank the right and left side of their hiding place.

Noughton was no longer in the bush with them. He'd charged into the rank of orcs. Bilbo could scanty see anything but the flares and the blasts. He did, however, notice one key thing: those pellets that hit Noughton's light blade were instantly chopped in half and blowing up harmlessly akin to fireworks.

Noughton brought his blade down on the first orc's shoulder blade.

Then he swiped around at the second's neck.

Then the third's cranium.

Then the fourth's belly.

Then he twirled the blade around.

He stabbed it through the fifth's head.

It took but a few seconds until the last orc hit the ground, but then everything was quiet... for all of five seconds. One, then two, then three, then four and five, the orcs' bodies fizzled, sparked and exploded.

Noughton wasn't even fazed as the ground around him burned.

Then as the last explosion faded, he bent his knee down where the last orc had lain. He picked up what looked like a small, sparkling cylinder and stuffed it inside the fold of his gardener's coat.

One second. Two. Three. Five. Ten. Twenty. Then a full minute passed. The surrounding was completely quiet now but for the wind blowing and the leaves rustling. Among others, that meant the goblin army wasn't coming back.

Then Noughton's dagger, like magic, retracted back into the blade. Into the holster he slotted his weapon back in like nothing had happened.

He walked back to the bush where Bilbo and the gang was hiding.

He offered his hand to Bilbo. “It's fine now,” he said. “The enemy is terminated. You can stand up.”

At that precise moment, Bilbo could swear Noughton's lips had curved into a smile, however fleeting. Bilbo's face, too, was relaxing, and soon the hobbit was grinning loudly. There was fear in his heart still, but there was also the belief that everything would turn out fine.
Then the hobbit turned round and offered his hands to the three dwarves huddled and petrified beneath his feet. Kili and Fili coughed and harrumphed and let go of each other. Each took one of Bilbo’s hands, and pulled themselves up straight.

Ori, however, was still cowering and shivering. “I- I- I’m not standing up!” he cried. “Not until you— you tell me— what just happened! And... and what’s that thing you’re hid-hiding in your c-c-c-coat?”

“I... am not certain myself,” said Noughton, shaking his head. “But if it would ease your mind—”

He opened his coat to reveal the object he was hiding. It was a cylinder the size of a hobbit’s open hand, just like Bilbo noticed. But not any cylinder though: within it there was an array of crystalline objects, yellow in color and gleaming as brightly as any gemstone known to the hobbit race, orbiting around a central pillar. It was almost mesmerizing to the dwarves and the hobbit alike; both Kili and Fili were pushing each other to get a better look at it while Ori was peeling his eyes like a child seeing a new toy.

“Such pretty gems,” said Fili. “So bright,” said Kili.

Noughton didn’t seem to be paying the two admirers of his spoil of war any mind.

“You’ve been asking me about what I eat where I come from,” said Noughton, looking straight at Ori as he uncorked the top of the cylinder like one would a flask of water.

“This is my answer,” he said, and emptied the content of the cylinder into his mouth.

Kili and Fili’s jaws dropped. “You... ate it?”

“These are energy crystals,” said Noughton. “Where I come from, it is used as both currency and food. You are bound to find some sooner or later off the bodies of your enemies.”

By then Ori was already standing and inching closer to the butler, whatever fear he had replaced by amazement. He opened his mouth, but hardly had any words escaped it when heavy footsteps echoed from the East.

Into the clearing ran a tall, gaunt and grey old wizard. He no longer looked very venerable or respectable: his clothes were tattered, his hat was worn off-center, and he was leaning on his staff and breathing heavily.

“Dwarves! Bilbo Baggins! Master Nought- Zero!” he cried, as if a sorrow and terror very great had befallen him. “Explain yourselves!”

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Chapter End Notes

1) For those FAMILIAR with the Megaman universe:
- You may or may not notice that Bolg is being armed with something very similar to Fighting Fefnir/Biometal Model F. In this universe, Biometals do not exist (Yet, since it is only one year at best at this point since Ragnarok went boom), but that is not to say
there isn't another way...
- Yes, it IS orcs converted into makeshift Pantheons you're seeing. That's why they're dropping E-crystals which Zero is very, very much needing to power his weapon systems.

2) For those NOT familiar with the Megaman universe:
- In the Megaman ZX series, the central artifacts are those known as Biometals - roughly speaking, the arms and armors of past heroes in the timeline, infused with their programming/soul. What Bolg is wearing is vaguely similar to one such Biometals - Model F, corresponding to the MMZ series' Fighting Fefnir, a fire-and-earth themed, fight-crazy brute armed with dual flame cannons and a huge pair of pincers. Since in-game proper he may fire shots half as large as Zero is tall, it stands to reason such a weapon would punch a hobbit-sized hole in anything and everything that isn't made of metal (and that isn't Valar or Maiar, but we'll deal with the latter on a later date.)
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 5

What Are You Fighting For?

Now he'd done it.

Zero had seen much in his lifetime, but being seated in front of what looked rather like a makeshift kangaroo court surrounded by dwarves was a new one. Gandalf had assured him that he would not be treated like a criminal – because he wasn't one. The thing he faced, however, was far less friendly than Gandalf had guaranteed.

The two largest dwarves in the company, Dwalin and Bombur (the latter because of his mass rather than his prowess), were grabbing his arms, the one on the left and the other on the right. In front of him there was the campfire, and behind that a council of Thorin, Balin, Dori, Oin and Gloin, and Gandalf behind them all. To the left and right of that council squatted Bilbo, Kili, Fili and Ori. The remaining dwarves were sitting around them all as audience.

Zero shook his head bitterly. Those were the ones he'd protected at a rather hefty risk to his well-being. Those were the ones now basically testifying against him. Sure, all of them gave him looks that had “I am sorry” written on them in block letters, but that wasn't going to help given what they were saying to the rest of the company.

“You said this Bolg, son of Azog – curse his name,” Thorin hissed, “was wearing armour identical to our friend Foot-slogger here.”

“Not exactly identical, I should say,” corrected Bilbo. “Just very, very similar.”

“Their boots are identical, at the very least,” said Fili. “The shapes are so alike I can't fancy them having come from anything but the same hands.”

“Even the color, too,” added Kili. “Pinkish red to Master Foot-slogger's red.”

“They moved in pretty much the same way also,” said Ori. “They'd crouch for a bit, look straight ahead, then vroom! They'd be on top of you!”

“Thank you, sister-sons. And you too, good burglar,” said Thorin, shaking his head. “Now I've heard enough.”

He eyed Zero accusingly. “Well, Master Zero, what do you have to say for yourself?”

“What do you expect me to say for myself?” Zero asked back.

If it were the old Zero right here, he'd have gotten so mad he'd murder the lot of them dwarves. But that was the old Zero – the Zero before she brought the light into his life. The present Zero was far more composed, by which he meant 'resigned to whatever fate had assigned to him'.
Part of him felt like struggling. There was no way he was going to lose in a scuffle against a small squad of dwarves when he was the Zero, even though a hero he was sure he was not. But then if he was to fight them, he couldn't imagine Bilbo Baggins surviving it.

Then he looked at those eyes, and his hands grew limp. No, he could not do it. He could not lift his hand against those dwarves if it meant he'd have to see the light in those eyes extinguished before his eyes again.

“What use would my own statement be,” he said, “when Master Baggins and your dwarves' testimony is already enough to pass whatever judgement you want to pass?”

“The punishment for an enemy's spy is death by hammering,” said Thorin. “Given what your kind has probably done to my grandfather and father, I should like to personally carry out your sentence right here, right now.” He lowered his voice. “But I am to be King under the Mountain... and that means mercy if and when possible. I shall give you one last chance. Master Zero, what say you in your defense?”

And then he saw an arm raised from his right. It was Bilbo Baggins, and he was biting his lips and waving his hand furiously. “Master Thorin, if I may?” he said, his voice firm and resolute.

“Go ahead, Master Burglar,” said Thorin.

“So if I'm not mistaken,” he said, “you're saying that since Noughton here and whoever that Bolg is happen to wear vaguely similar outfit and use somewhat similar equipment, they must be in cahoot with each other, am I right?”

“I could hardly come to a more logical conclusion,” said Thorin with a nod.

“Well, in that case,” said Bilbo, “I should guess everyone in this camp are in bed with the goblins!” He wrinkled his nose. “Not literally, of course.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Well, do you see axes in the goblin ranks? Or spears, or daggers or blades of any other kinds? Bows and arrows? Helms and armours of varying shapes and sizes?” He slammed his hands together emphatically. “I am sure if you look far enough, you would see a similarity everywhere!”

“Says a burglar with no smithing experience whatsoever,” exclaimed Thorin, folding his arms. “Listen, Master Baggins, for I'll say this only once: There's a difference between weapons being of the same class, and being of the same design. The former says nothing, true, but the latter says... more than a lot.”

“Even so, it makes no sense whatsoever that Noughton is with the enemy!” cried Bilbo. “He was with me for eight months! Eight months, Master Thorin! He'd come to my shelter long before your dwarves even conceived this quest in the first place!”

“We all know the Enemy's plan is deep and insidious and more far-reaching than might be obvious at first,” said Thorin. “His arrival at your homestead could have been part of such a plan for all I care.”

“If I may, Master Thorin,” said Gandalf, and he stood up high from his seat. He'd recovered a little from the fatigue just now, and calmness had returned to him, though his robe remained torn and broken.

“Why don't you defend yourself, Master Zero?” he asked. "I have seen fallen heroes who have well and truly sinned putting more effort at inventing excuses for themselves, than you do for a crime you
“Because it would be fruitless,” said Zero. “My only defense is that I remember nothing that would help clear my name.” Which makes it not a defense at all, by definition.

“You did consume that thing the orcs drop though,” Gandalf pointed out. “And from the look of the container that isn’t something the orcs, or even the Evil Men in the service of Sauron could concoct. Don’t you see something isn’t right in this business?”

“I do, and I have no explanation,” said Zero. “If I had, I wouldn’t be here.” I'd be trying to find a way home.

For a few long and tight moments the wizards stood, alternating between looking at Thorin and at Zero. Finally he relaxed his shoulders. “What say you, good wizard?” said Thorin.

“I have no answer,” admitted Gandalf. “But I should say expelling the good Master Zero from the company – let alone execute him – would be the hugest mistake you shall have ever made.”

“Even if he has betrayed our trust and therefore filthier than elves and orcs put together?”

“Don’t you find this all very strange, Master Thorin?” said Gandalf. “Goblins and orcs are crude creatures except for a very limited few. Even those few are nowhere near the level of metal-working that would make the kind of armor like Master Zero is wearing here possible.”

“There is the Great Enemy,” said Thorin matter-of-factly, “spoken of in legends and myths long gone.”

Gandalf eyed Thorin cautiously. “My good dwarf, if you mean Sauron…”

“Whatsoever he is,” said Thorin, “that the forefathers of my line fought against along with the great warriors of Men,” he spat out a venomous blob from his throat, “and elves in the great war many generations ago.”

“In which case, let me assure you, this kind of armor is not his style (as much as he is a smith of the caliber of the greatest of elven lords), and that is even if he has collected part of the strength he’d lost after the Last Alliance,” said Gandalf. “No, Sauron works in a different manner, and you can take my words for it.”

“That doesn't explain why Azog's whelp is wearing such gear,” said Thorin. “Any other explanation, good wizard?”

“I know this might seem absurd, because it sounds quite daft to my ear, but it is the most probable explanation we have on hands right now,” said Gandalf. “Whoever was equipping Master Zero to begin with must be giving the Enemy a hand.” he paused for a while, his hands trembling at the idea he was giving himself. “In which case... we, no, the whole world might be in a greater trouble than I should ever have liked.”

“Or go with the simplest explanation that Master Zero belongs with the enemy,” said Thorin. “Why go for a roundabout when the simplest works fine? It is not like he denied-”

“Fool of a dwarf!” shouted Gandalf. “Master Thorin, I do wonder sometimes if Aule shaped your brains from rock or coal, because too often your kin are wont to make decisions more foolish than the worst of Men and Elves!”

Then, just as Thorin looked like he was about to retort with full animosity, Gandalf continued.
“Just think, if, and that's a tiny if, Master Zero were with the Enemy. Do you think you would be sitting here on your stool as comfortably as you are, playing the hanging judge?” he hissed. “Especially with Bolg and an army of two hundred goblins at the least rampaging in the vicinity? Or would you have been split limbs from limbs and thrown to the wargs before you could turn tail and run?”

“But have a hobbit-sized hole blown through you,” said Kili. “I'm sorry, Uncle, but the good wizard has a point.”

“I agree,” said Fili. “If Master Foot-slogger were with the enemy he'd have set the entire goblin population of Misty Mountain on our tail!”

“That's nice,” Zero blurted, making little effort to hide his bitterness. “First you dwarves testified against me, and now you're defending me?”

“Don't be daft,” said Fili, looking like he was about to smack Zero upside the head had it not been for respect for his uncle. “We dwarves tell the truth as they are when asked to testify. Our personal opinions are another thing altogether.” He paused. “And I trust the fellow, because he saved my life – when he could have easily taken it had he been with the Enemy!”

“And I have never not trusted Noughton,” said Bilbo. “I saw the kind of power he has. If he were, well, a bad fellow, I would have been dead; and most of the Shire, too. And as of now I'm here speaking in front of this most esteemed company of dwarves, and the Shire is still in one piece, and the Brandywine hasn't run red with hobbit-blood yet.”

“May I remind you all that he saved my brother,” said Dori. “I, for one, cannot fathom such a person ever working with or for the Enemy.”

“All those arguments are valid,” declared Balin. “As for the equipment matter, good cousin Thorin, would you turn down an elven sword that is perfectly fine and good and that cuts orcs just as well as any dwarven axe, just because it is elven?”

“I would not,” said Dwalin, his voice thundering right underneath Zero's ears. “Never turn down a good blade, that's my motto.”

“Fellow dwarves, you are not making this simple for your king,” said Thorin, looking around the meeting with an exasperated look on his face.

“You are the king,” said Oin, “It has never been a simple seat to assume. For the record, I don't have anything to say that everyone else hasn't – except that I want Fili and Kili and Ori treated at once for whatever injury they might have incurred. That is all.”

For a long while – exactly four minutes, sixteen seconds and five-hundred and forty-eight milliseconds – Thorin squatted down, thumbs at his temple. When he finally made a decision, he announced himself loudly. “I never wish to consult a wizard on a dwarven matter, but given the circumstances-”

“Given the circumstances, this trial of yours is no longer a dwarven matter, my good Master Thorin,” said Gandalf, shaking his head. “Given the circumstances, my recommendation is that I must ask you for a favor very huge.”

He looked around the meeting once more, as he often liked to do. “I hope you would allow the company to make a brief detour to Rivendell.”

***
There was that look on Thorin's face that really made Bilbo feel like going over and giving him a hug. Sure, he was still stone-faced like he normally was, and clenched his fists and gritted his teeth, and fixing his cold blue eyes on the wizard as though Gandalf had been an enemy most vile all along. His lips was quivering as he muttered a quiet curse in the ancient language of the dwarves when the wizard raised his great brows at him.

“You want me to bring a matter involving dwarves to the elves,” said Thorin, when he finally realized he couldn't dodge the issue any more.

“They are the closest who can help us on two counts,” said Gandalf. “On the one side, tonight has proven that your company might be woefully ill-prepared to face whatsoever is going on East of the Anduin. On the other, may I remind you even if all had gone to plan, which they haven't, Lord Elrond Peredhel is one of the very few people alive who can read your map?”

“They'll stop us from our quest, I'm sure!” Thorin cried. “Remember what happened in Erebor so many years ago, good wizard!”

“My memory serves me better than yours serve you, my good Master Thorin,” said Gandalf. “It reminds me that Lord Elrond's kinsmen aren't King Thranduil's. We are talking about the survivors of the Noldor kin, greatest and wisest of the Quendi, the majority of whom have long been slain and now dwell in the Hall of Mandos ere the world is remade.”

Gandalf laid a hand on Thorin's shoulder.

“They are like you and your kin, Master Thorin,” said he, and his voice was gentle again, as if trying to awaken a sympathy deep within the heart of the dwarven lord. “Not to say, of course, that King Thranduil's kin are alien to your plight, as they had lost very many of their kind and their good king Oropher for the Last Alliance.”

To say his attempt was a failure was an understatement.

“You have been holding whatever had transpired between us and the elves to be a misunderstanding since day one, wizard,” said Thorin, his voice trembling in anger. “It is not. It. Is. Not.”

“Oh, but it very much is, my good dwarf,” said Gandalf, still exceedingly calmly this time. “But then we might dally along and arguing about such trivialities and opinions until the next evening... or we may focus on the fact that you need to see Lord Elrond if you want to stand a snowball's chance in a dwarf-forgue of even succeeding in your quest.”

Thorin was about to open his mouth to object, but Gandalf shook his head.

“That, and I trust nobody other than Lord Elrond and the Lady of Lorien would be able to help us unravel the mysteries around out friend Master Zero here,” said Gandalf, casting a glance at Noughton. “Or deal with him accordingly, if he indeed turns out to be with the Enemy.”

“We could execute him right here, right now if-”

Bilbo didn't know what came over him. For just one, just one brief second, he was no longer Bilbo the respectable, demure and polite-to-a-fault hobbit. No, up he jumped from his witness stool; marched like his great-great-great-grandfather Bullroarer would have carried himself, right up to the dwarf's face. There he threw his hand across the mighty dwarf lord's face with a resounding smack.

The audience was petrified.

“Have you no brain, my lord Thorin?” exclaimed the hobbit, as though there were nobody around
him but for Thorin and Thorin alone. “You weren't there! You didn't see what we saw! You have no idea how powerful Noughton is! Do you honestly think we'd be even alive if he'd decided he want us dead?’”

It was only through the silence that ensued that Bilbo realized what he had done. There he was, a puny hobbit who would never hurt a fly, striding straight in front of a dwarven great lord and slap him in the face. A palpable fright began to spread through every single inch of his being. *That's it, I'm deader than dead.*

It was not until he looked around the meeting and saw nods after thumb-up after slow claps did he realized he had actually done something positive for once. Still, he took a step back and scratched his head sheepishly.

“Master Baggins is right, Uncle. He took down five orcs as heavily armored as the most elite of our kin from the Iron Hills in a blink of an eye,” said Fili, eying his uncle desperately. “I would think even trying to execute him would be like signing our own death warrant.”

Kili threw his hands into the sky wordlessly, while Ori was opening and blinking those puppy-eyes of his at Thorin. The reaction down below consisted of many a nod, too. “It looks like we've reached a consensus on this matter, haven't we?” said Gandalf.

Thorin's face, on which Bilbo's five fingers were clearly imprinted, was as petrified as a log of ironwood. Only his ice-blue eyes were animate still, looking around the room, probably looking for support and finding none.

“Fine,” Thorin finally said. “Fine, and Mahal take you all! I shall go to Rivendell, but only because I have little better choices. And you, wizard, you can tell your elven friends to expect no amity from Durin's Folks.”

“I'll keep that in mind,” said Gandalf. Disappointment was writ on his face, like a kindergarten teacher having to deal with a load of misbehaving schoolboys. “In the meantime, do let go of Master Zero. Treat him not as though he were guilty of a crime we have been unable to prove.”

“He is still a danger to us all,” grumbled Thorin.

“By simply existing,” said Gandalf. “As has been spoken before, he could have been rid of you, violently if he so wished, had he only found the will to do so.”

“I'm still going to take my measures, thank you very much,” said Thorin. He inhaled deeply, then shouted at the top of his voice. “Get me some ropes. The best ropes you've got!”

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Bombur was, for all intents and purposes, born to be a chef, and that meant a life of relative comfort. It wasn't that he couldn't or didn't want to fight, but in battle and slaughter and proving his strength Bombur found little joy. By extension, swords and axes and spears and war-mattocks fascinated him very little while ladles, spoon, pots, pans, saucers and cutlery did very much.

“And that's why,” Bombur explained, “I'm saddled with you while they get to search the troll hoard for loot, Master Foot-slogger.” He scratched his head. “I'm sorry, is your real name Noughton or Zero again?”

“It doesn't matter now,” Foot-slogger said uncooperatively. “Call me whatever you want.”

Bombur glanced at his prisoner sympathetically. That was, if Foot-slogger could be considered a
prisoner, even though his hands and feet are tied by several yards' worth of good rope. "Foot-slogger it is. Has a certain ring about it, you know?"

Foot-slogger merely shrugged both shoulders, otherwise offering no other objection.

"Anyway, apologies that you are so treated," said Bombur. "Want some food? That's something I can fix you with. No sausages or ham or any meat for that matter, curse our luck, but plenty of potatoes, tomatoes and celery."

"No thanks," said Foot-slogger. "Already eaten."

"Oh yes, Fili and Kili told me well enough," said Bombur, putting his water mug away. "So you eat gems? That would be a waste."

"Not gems," answered the prisoner. "Energy crystals."

"All the same," said Bombur with a throaty laugh. "If it has lovely color and shines, we dwarves would make something beautiful out of it."

He paused, looking down at his hands. "Not me though. Not these hands. These are for food only."

He lifted his right hand and thumped it on Foot-slogger's shoulder. "And I would not have it any other way, ha-ha!"

"If you say so." The prisoner squirmed a bit and turned the other way,

"Not a very big talker, are you?" said Bombur. He'd half a mind to spin the red-and-black-clad former member of the company around to face him, but then (wisely) decided against it.

"Neither are you," said Foot-slogger. "What's the point?"

"That's only because I talk mostly to food, and maybe diners," said Bombur. "Now thanks to those trolls, Mahal curse them, we won't have much in the way of that."

"I see."

From the fellow's attitude, Bombur imagined he was going to say something far more acerbic, but halted at the last minute.

"You know, kid, I'm rather glad they'd left me with you."

"Do educate me," Foot-slogger said, his indifference palpable.

"You know what's the worst thing a chef faces?" Bombur said. "As the saying goes, an army marches on its stomach, and Mahal willing that's even truer to us dwarves than to you Men. But how many cooks ever got to record their names on the big books of heroes, hmm? Nor are they ever supposed to leave camp, and had Erebor not been toasted to a fine cinder the likes of me wouldn't even have the chance to leave the mountain, ha!"

"Being a hero is not all that," said Foot-slogger. "Neither is being on an adventure."

"You speak like you've had enough of heroics for a few lifetimes," said Bombur, guffawing.

"That's right, and it isn't funny."

"Well then, mind proving it?" said Bombur, thumbing to the sky above. "The night's still young. The both of us aren't getting any sleep either way – not until good Thorin comes back with the rest of the
company. Why not share some of your old tales to an old dwarf stuck in a kitchen?"

A figment of moonlight shone upon Foot-slogger's face, revealing a (mostly) expressionless face.

“What is it with you dwarves and theatrics?” he said, and Bombur could feel silent rage building up underneath that countenance. “Don't you have a story you don't want to tell?”

“Depends,” said Bombur. “We dwarves love little more than gold but for songs and tales, after all, but yes, there are tales of great shame and dishonor we wish not to regale. There was one, aye, of the deal between some of our forefathers and an Elvenking of yore that ended in blood and tragedy over a mere necklace.”

He dusted his hands and patted Foot-slogger on the shoulder. “But from the look of your face I'd wager you have many an epic of your own. You have an eye like my father's when he came back from Moria seven-score years ago.”

“Moria?”

Bombur's massive girth puffed. “Mahal preserves you, you don't know what Moria is? The Dwarven settlement to end all Dwarven settlements back when it still stood, and you don't know what it is?”

“Color me surprised,” said Foot-slogger. “But I've thought it has been established I do not come from this world of yours.”

“Not established, just rather, well, somewhat likely,” Bombur said. “We'll leave that for the good wizard to decide.”

The next few moments passed in a silence Bombur didn't like. So he breathed in, puffed his cheeks and exhaled, and began clearing his throat.

“Where was I? Right, I said you have the eyes of my father when he came back from Moria,” he said, and elbowed Foot-slogger's side to make sure he was still awake. “On that day we dwarves lost very many a good and brave warrior to them, those thrice-damned orcs and goblins. There was no way the survivor could bury all the dead, so they built a great pyre to cremate them all.”

He brushed his beard sagaciously, like a scholar retelling a tale of great importance. In a sense, he thought, he kind of was doing that exact thing.

“Of my family five were Burned Dwarves, fallen in that great battle,” he said. “My father alone returned, and since then his words were few and far between till the day he rejoined our illustrious ancestors. His waking hours were filled with the terror of that which he had seen, and grief for those who had fallen, and the regret that he returned while his siblings and cousins did not.”

“I fail to see what that has to do with me,” said Foot-slogger, but his attitude was no longer as uncooperative as it was. His hands loosened, and his eyes were blinking, obviously taking in the information.

“But it has, lad,” said Bombur. “Y'eeve, I've known my father long enough – almost too long. Enough to know one who have eyes of yours would have incurred losses very great, and those who do not buckle under grief are great warriors indeed, who I cannot fathom for the life of me to be siding with the enemy.”

“In short, you believe me,” said Foot-slogger. “That's good to know.”

Bombur nodded his massive head. “In fact, I trust you enough to suggest you might want to talk
about it. Your losses, that is,” he said. “My old dwarf, may Mahal protect him in our ancestors’ hall, could never tell anyone how he felt. A dwarf's pride only grows as he ages, y'see, and admission of the weakness in spirit was unthinkable to him.”

He paused briefly to adjust his feet. His voice suddenly became distant. “And maybe even to me,” he said. “But I'm an aging dwarf. And you, kid, you're different. Assuming you aren't one of them elves, from your face I'd say you have another century in you, more if it's Dunedain blood that flows in your veins.”

Then Bombur turned and looked at Zero's face with the kindly eyes of a grandfather who'd seen it all. He felt more than a little relaxed himself, having said what he had to. The Company would never have guessed that a food-obsessed chef like him would have his own share of inner demons.

Then Foot-slogger twitched and adjusted his legs. He nodded, then shook his head, his expression unchanged, but his lips were twitching. “I wish I could,” he finally said. “It would be unwise to.”

“Nonsense,” said Bombur, thwacking him in the back. “My old dwarf thought the same, and died a bitter old dwarf with too many wounds to heal. Same story for many a survivor of that war against the goblins of the North.”

He paused a bit, twirling his mustache and clattered his teeth rhythmically in an attempt to think up a better solution. Bombur tended to do that, and often, whenever he had things to think about that didn't involve eating.

“Let's make it this way,” he said. “You can tell me whatever you want. Not a word shall escape me without you saying yes, for as long as I draw breath.” He put on the biggest grin he could manage. “Deal?”

Foot-slogger didn't say anything for a long time. A very long time, such that Bombur was thinking maybe he'd failed. And then he looked up at the dwarf and opened his mouth at last.

“I would have, I really would,” he said. “I simply can't tell a coherent story with a scrambled memory.”

“Right, amnesia,” said Bombur. “Can't say I didn't have some history dealing with amnesiacs after Erebor fell and especially after Moria. Certainly not the happiest time of my life. But you know what? When taking to those I'd encourage them to say whatever they like – whatever they remember. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't, but always someone would gain something out of it. Knowledge, peace of mind, even bits and pieces of lost memories.”

Then Bombur heard a chuckle that quickly grew into a grin. Sure, knowing it was from Foot-slogger such a joyful gesture wasn't to last, but it was certainly a first.

“You've got quite a lot of tales to tell for a cook,” said Foot-slogger. “A cook who claims to never leave his kitchen.”

Bombur guffawed. “You're talking to the one and only Bombur the Big, lad. And that means the fellow in charge of keeping the ale flowing,” he said. “You don't know how many good stories come spewing from the lips of drunk and depressed dwarves after a long day's work in a communal ale-house.”

Zero had to admit to himself he had well and truly lost control of the situation. Then again, he'd never been in a 'controlling' position ever since Ragnarok went boom.

But telling some of his life story to a fat, neckbearded and probably inebriated dwarf he'd hardly spoken a word to before had to be a new low. He did censor his story according to what he had learned of this world. So no mention of reploids, viruses, cyber-elves, the energy shortage in the 23rd century or any such terminology as would befuddle the dwarf.

Apparently he wasn't a half-bad story teller.

“... and so you killed her,” said the dwarf. What was his name again? Bombur?

Zero nodded. “I'm a creature made to destroy. When someone draws a weapon on me, I-”

A lump rose in the metallic tubing of his throat. Must be an imagination, but he swallowed it either way. “I did what I had to do.”

His gaze wandered to the dwarf's face. Bombur was sitting there, nodding his pudgy head attentively. Perhaps he had turned 'listen to drunken and therefore vulnerable patrons' into an art form where he came from, Zero would wager.

“Tell me, dwarf,” said Zero. “What are you fighting for? What is your reason to go on?”

“Hah, now that's a new one, lad,” said the dwarf, guffawing out loud – so loud he would have alerted all those so-called orcs and goblins within a mile if there had been any around.

“I just want to know,” said Zero.

“If I said 'meals, plenty and often', you wouldn't believe me, would you?” said Bombur. “But it is true for me, for the 'Ri brothers, and maybe even for everyone in this company whose name isn't Thorin Oakenshield.”

He closed his eyes.

“We were bad enough after the fall of Erebor, but it's not after that war against the orcs and goblins of the North that we reached our lowest of lows,” he said. “With so many of our warriors and breadwinners dead or crippled, we were driven to the very brink. Both Nori and Ori grew up in poverty and almost starved to death at least once. My youngest brother wasn't that lucky, Mahal guides his soul.”

“I suppose,” Zero said after a good long think. “That's what she wanted too – to have a world in peace, filled with songs. Where humans and repl- I mean, other races could live together, and nobody would ever grow hungry again.”

“More's the pity that the good die young, isn't it?” said Bombur.

And then the trees and bush in the distance began to stir.

Zero clenched his fist, rerouting all his power to three places: his arms, sensors and his saber. His teeth gritting, he scanned the surrounding. If just one head that wasn't a dwarf or hobbit would show up, he'd rip apart that mockery of a rope and jump into battle, respect for the dwarven lord's decision be damned.

That moment never came to pass.
From behind the trees came many a figures – familiar ones. First came Gandalf, casting aside the undergrowth with the butt of his staff. His hands carried what looked like two physical blades with extremely ornate scabbards, set with many jewels and glittering in the faint moonlight.

“We bring treasures from the trolls,” declared the wizard, placing two swords on the ground before the fireplace. “It is just as I expected.

Next came Dori and Nori, carrying a small but solid chest. “Not as much gold as we'd like to see in a troll's hoard,” said Nori. “I'm just not going to stay in that latrine of a cave for any longer!”

Then came Ori and Kili, Fili and Dwalin, and Balin in his lonesome, and Oin and Gloin and Bifur and Bofur, each carrying bags and sacks of what Zero took to be groceries. “Sausages, hams and crispy bacons!” declared Bofur. “Enough for a feast for a hundred!”

Last of the line came Thorin and Bilbo. The dwarf-lord was obviously guarding the rear, one hand behind his back and the other brandishing a blade as he looked around. The hobbit, however, was scurrying uncomfortably between Thorin and the remaining dwarves. If he was trying to make up with the dwarf-lord for the slap, Zero thought, he might be going the wrong way.

Zero did narrow his eyes at something the hobbit was carrying on his belt that he didn't have before: a dagger about as long as Zero's forearm, but to the hobbit would serve well as a short sword. Part of him wondered why Bilbo even bothered – he'd promised he'd protect Bilbo and save him from the burden of fighting.

Then his attention shifted back to the dwarf-lord. It was not until they’d entered the safety of their campsite that Thorin sheathed his weapon and examined their loot.

“Let's bury this treasure right here,” said Thorin, “and come back to it later.”

“It's just a small chest,” said Nori. “We can bring it along, right, right? Who know, there might be expenses and fees to pay, and-”

“We've just lost one pony,” said Thorin, “and if the situation is as serious as Kili and Fili reported, we will stand to lose more. We can't afford to carry anything superfluous.”

Nori was about to voice further protest, but Thorin glared daggers at him, and off he went, throwing arms in the sky. “But gold is never superfluous, ever!” he muttered impotently.

“Huh, elf-swords,” said Bombur, glancing at the jeweled scabbards of the long, leaf-shaped swords on the ground. “Never thought we're gathering them elves' souvenirs now.”

“Like I said,” interjected Dwalin. “A sword is a sword. So long as it doesn't have cursed enchantments on it, and it cuts goblin-faces just fine, I'm on board.”

“Master Thorin, I wish for you to take one,” said Gandalf, gesturing towards the two fine weapons on the ground.

“No thanks,” said Thorin. “I've got all the weapons I'll ever need: thick, strong steel of Iron Hills make and design. Leave the fancy elven junks to the tree-huggers.”

“That's why I want you to take one,” insisted Gandalf. “You aren't going to make many friends among the Noldorin kin with this attitude.”

“Nor do I need to,” answered Thorin. “Your point, wizard?”
Gandalf sighed. “We've been through this.”

Once again, someone interjected just in time to stop Gandalf and Thorin from having another verbal fencing match. This time, it was Fili – he stood forward, dipping his head before both the wizard and his uncle.

“If I may, my good wizard, sir,” he said. “If my uncle should refuse, I shall take up the sword for him.” Fili dropped to his knee. “Your permission, Uncle?”

“Do as you wish,” said Thorin. Then he gritted his teeth and sternly placed both hands on Fili’s shoulder. “However, I shall let you know I shall not suffer kin who befriend elves. Do as your good uncle Dwalin said: A sword is a sword and means nothing beyond its utility. Have I made myself clear?”

“Understood, Uncle,” said Fili. “Allow me, good wizard.” At Gandalf’s nod, he picked up the sword on the right and strapped it to his belt. Then Gandalf bent his tall, lanky self down and picked up the other sword.

Thorin sighed heavily as if he had just completed an excessively demanding task. “Break camp, dwarves! We set out!” he paused for a good long while. “To Rivendell!”

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Chapter End Notes

1) For those FAMILIAR with the Megaman Universe:
- This chapter, especially the long dialogue between Zero and Bombur, is supposed to be a reprieve of the two important themes in Megaman X(4) and The Hobbit: The one being the reason why one must fight (Which Zero unfortunately lost there, but regained a century later in Megaman Z3-4), and the other being Thorin’s "If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world". Mega, X and Zero have always suffered from what I call "superhero fatigue", where a being of great power suffers great personal losses, tragedies and pains in an attempt to use their power to save the world or otherwise do good to a great number of common folks. On the other hand, Bombur, being Bombur (at least my interpretation of him), believes in the near-exact opposite: He is THAT common folk, and his interest, in order, was to live happily, have everyone around him be happy, and eat as much as he can before his time in the world is due (Hence, that thing about him getting so fat sixty years down the line he needs six dwarves to carry him to the dining hall).
- I was running into much difficulty portraying Zero in this chapter: On one hand, he's not supposed to look, sound or behave in a suicidal manner. On the other hand, he's suffering from the aforementioned "superhero fatigue", and it doesn't help how he's kinda sorta mixing up Ciel and Iris (who seriously cannot be more different from each other, and here's me speaking as a former Iro shipper).
- And yes, the irony over Iris and Ciel's being each other's antithesis didn't go unnoticed.

2) For those NOT familiar with the Megaman universe:
- The chapter name and the mini-essay I posted up there concerns a certain infamous event in Megaman X4, where Zero killed Iris, the (reploid) girl slated for the whole
game to be his love interest. The aforementioned scene has Zero holding her body in his arm and screaming "WHAT AM I FIGHTING FOOOOOR!" (Seriously, look it up. It's cringeworthily awesome, at least in the original English dub).

- Zero's ENTIRE character arc throughout the three series (Megaman Classic - where his birth heralds the era's end, Megaman X and Megaman Zero) is all about a weapon created for mass destruction on more than one level turns his power to good end and his quest to protect those he believes in, culminating with, canonically, his DEATH to save what little handfuls of mankind and robots left in the world after so many years of war and conflict. Yep, when you look closely at the direction of the Megaman series, it's not meant to end in sunshine and butterflies, even though its individual moments might be incredibly light-hearted in comparison. In a sense, that's VERY like the good professor's vision for the Sil: the entire timeline from the Year of the Tree to the beginning of the Fourth Age is a long, long spiral downward of the Noldorin elves and everyone they know and love.

3) Concerning (more) dwarves and the storyline:
- In this chapter not much happens in the way of The-Hobbiti-ness, except for Bombur taking Balin's role in retelling Azanulbizar. I'm following the book version rather than the film in this regard, in which the Battle of Moria is the last of a six-year war between dwarves and the goblins and orcs of the North. I'm still deciding whether to have Thorin be the one who killed Azog (which would make the feud between the Azogion - lolinappropriateelvish - and the line of Durin that much more personal) or to stick to the book's version, or take a third option.
- Also Orcrist is Fili's sword now. Thorin doesn't know what he missed by being the racist he is.
- A fair warning from this point on: I may be accused for being a Noldor apologist. In all seriousness, the House of Fingolfin is made of concentrated win back in the First Age, when "win" actually mattered very greatly.
The Noldor Ride To War

Chapter Notes

IMPORTANT NOTICE:
- The divergence that has begun in the last two chapters starts to completely dominate the canon storyline from this chapter, to the point that I'm not very sure where it will lead to at the end of the day except that it's going to be very, very epic unless real life decide otherwise. (Let us hope not).
- Also, from this chapter onwards, the intensity and frequency of violence will skyrocket. I'll *try* to refrain from major character death, and should any take place you'll be given ample warning beforehand...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 6

The Noldor Ride To War

Fool of a Took! Fool of a Baggins! No, fool of a hobbit!

Long story short, Noughton hadn't been sparing a word with Bilbo Baggins ever since they left camp that day.

Now, if Bilbo could say anything negative about himself, it was his dreadful fear of being hated or disliked. If someone didn't like him, he had to find a justification that said person was evil, mean, unpleasant or otherwise not worth losing sleep over.

This time, it was Noughton. And Thorin Oakenshield. The one was his butler, and as had been repeatedly proven just about the most loyal person on the face of Eriador and beyond. And the other was the leader of the present company, and – denseness aside – as ideal a dwarf-lord as the Durins in his mother's tales. Over the course of two hours, he'd accidentally caused the former to be brought to a hanging court, and then slapped the latter in the face (and simultaneously hurting his pride, Bilbo was sure) in defense of the former.

Silly Bilbo! Stupid Bilbo! Good-for-nothing Bilbo!

Was there any way he could feel worse?

Oh yes there was: the fact that said butler was carrying him on his back!

It took Gandalf a long, long (and frustrating) time to persuade Thorin to let Noughton go free. Only when the wizard cited the two-hundred-strong goblin army presently running amok in the vicinity (because knowing goblins they would never go in a straight line to their destination, but would rather meander along to loot, forage and pillage) did Thorin give way.

"You could keep him as a prisoner and drag him along in a manner that would no doubt slow everyone else down," said the wizard. "Or you can unhand him, let him carry Master Baggins and
have Bombur take over his pony. I estimate going by the former we'll be in Rivendell in a week and a little more, and by the latter only three days. Now, if you'd enjoy hanging in the same vicinity with an army of goblins headed by that monstrosity your own nephews described, for any longer than you absolutely need to, be my guest.”

It didn't help Bilbo that the road offered less and less comfort as it went on. For two days now the company had been riding along the road East. They were in a distinctly wild land now: there were neither houses nor cabins, neither villages nor hamlets, and nary a soul along the road for the weary eyes. The fields on the open plain offered enough food for the ponies, but the company was consuming food far more quickly than Bilbo imagined. He'd been without for the last eleven hours; an unthinkable just a month ago, but completely within expectation now.

Bilbo clutched his shoulders as the company rode through an open plain unnamed on any maps or stories. Was he getting sick, or was the weather actually getting colder in early June? Either way, it wasn't a good sign.

“Master Baggins.”

Bilbo nearly jumped. “Y-yes, Noughton?”

“Your coat is unbuttoned,” he said. “It's getting breezy.”

“O-oh!” exclaimed Bilbo. “Silly me, silly me!” He leaned a little backward, and with shaky fingers began to redo his buttons. “Wait, how did you-”

“My eyes give me a 360 degree coverage,” said Noughton. If it had been anyone else, Bilbo would think he'd heard a joke. But since this was Noughton... he'd better take his words for it.

One, two, three... four buttons, counted Bilbo. “That'll do,” he said.

Even though they were in the middle of a sweeping plain, Bilbo could feel the air coagulating around him. He huffed, and puffed, and gasped, the tension mounting.

“Err... Noughton?”

“Yes, Master Baggins?”

“Are you st-still mad at me?”

“Mad?” Noughton tilted his head. “No. I reserve my anger to those far more deserving of it, Master Baggins.”

“You haven't been saying a word since that time, uh-.”

“Haven't I?” Noughton said. “Maybe I haven't seen anything worth commenting on, that is all.”

“I see,” said Bilbo, not convinced at all.

How little he knew of his own butler, thought Bilbo. To think of it, he'd been lucky that the fellow turned out to be the kind soul he was, or else the hypothetical 'had Noughton been evil' scenario he painted the other day would have been dreadfully true and there was not a thing he could do about it.

For a short while they continued to move briskly along the road, Bilbo's arms tightly wrapped around Noughton's neck.

“Oh, and for the records,” he finally said, finally deciding that the silence was bothering him more
than the concern he was intruding into Noughton's self-imposed silence, “you may stop addressing me Master Baggins from now on.”

“I thought you would want to be addressed as such,” said Noughton, displaying pretty much no discernible emotion. “You want to be seen as a respectable hobbit.”

“I’ve thrown any chance for that to the four winds, Noughton,” said Bilbo. “With all that has happened—”

Bilbo didn't quite have the chance to finish the conversation. Or his sentence, for that matter.

***

An explosion.

Some might thought Thorin near-deaf after all those years working at the forge, but he'd recognize an unnatural explosion when he heard one. “Halt! Halt!” he cried, voice gripped by apprehension.

Down he leaped from his pony, grabbing his sword and shield just as more explosions echoed all over the empty plain, like thunder across the clear sky. The ponies were neighing and shying. “Hold the ponies!” he ordered, his head sweeping from right to left.

Then the thundering blasts ceased, and the all-too-familiar growls and howls of wargs filled the air.

Over in the horizon, in the forest just ahead, a red flame was rising towards the sky. The wind was blowing against the company, carrying with it the smell of smoke and the stench of goblins and orcs. And an unfamiliar smell of oil and something else. He couldn't distinguish what that 'something else' was, except that it must have come from the earth, yet not so familiar that he could identify it.

Thorin turned around. Already the wizard and his two nephews had dismounted. Gandalf and Fili were drawing their two elf-swords from their jeweled scabbards. They were shining, a cold blue light like a full moon.

Thorin's teeth were audibly grinding. Knowing the property of elven equipment, this could only mean one thing.

“Orcs, orcs!” exclaimed Bofur, grabbing his war-mattock.

“In the direction of Rivendell,” said Gandalf, and the wizard was pale. “Eru preserves the last of the Noldor.”

“They're elves,” Dwalin blurted. “Surely they could hide up their fancy trees until the storm's passed—”

Just at that exact moment, they'd heard a scream. Not any scream, but one that carried with it such a weight of time and sorrow, and that carried so far in the wind and across the dale. It didn't take much imagination to realize it must have been an elf's death cry: yet another immortal soul of the Noldorin kin, departing to the Hall of Mandos as their kindred were wont to.

The wizard rushed to Thorin's side, “Hurry, my lord Thorin,” he cried, almost pleadingly. “We must come to the aid of Lord Elrond's folks!”

“What do we do, cousin?” Balin's voice rang next to Thorin's ears. “Do we-”

Thorin raised his hand in a firm move of his entire arm. His mind was blanking. He’d expected so
many things out of this quest, so many things, but none whatsoever of the unfolding events.

“You can’t do this, Thorin Oakenshield!” cried Gandalf behind him. “If you should not think about the fate of the Noldor, then at least think of your quest! If Lord Elrond is no more-”

The wizard couldn’t finish his sentence, and Thorin knew exactly why. It was unthinkable, just like Smaug's descent upon Erebor. Just like his grandfather's death at Moria. Just like how the final battle at Azanulbizar turned out for Nain and Frerin and myriad others. Just like his father's final fate. But there it happened. And yet it was so unthinkable. So unbelievable.

“Odds are the elves are already lost, good wizard,” said Thorin with trembling voice. “There’s little we can do.”

His voice lacked the steel and resolve of the Thorin Oakenshield he had known for the past one hundred and eighty-odd years. That was yet another unthinkable. Thorin Oakenshield, hero of Durin's Folk and rightful king of that most prestigious line, could not make up his mind at a moment all eyes were upon him.

“Thorin, son of Thrain!” exclaimed the wizard.

His eyes widened as the flame licked at the edge of the glen ahead.

Thorin Oakenshield, renowned throughout the many kindreds of dwarves for bravery, was afraid.

“I...” he hesitated.

And then came the sound of horse hooves upon cobblestone.

Out from the burning glen came a horse. Not the ponies the dwarves were fond of, nor the draft-horses that the Men of Dale had aplenty back when their kingdom was flourishing still. No, it was a war-horse, tall and swift and mighty, the likes of which were seldom seen but for in the employ of the elves (for their traditions in the arts of horse were long, so Thorin's mother used to tell him when he was a wee Dwarrowling). Astride its back rode a figure tall, yet bent and weary.

It was in mere moments that horse and rider was upon the dwarven company. The horse was close to collapse with three arrows in its buttock and shoulder. As for the rider, he was an elf, that was sure as day, but his hair was black as the night and his armor was blue and silver with gold inlays.

Down from the saddle the rider went, hurtling himself at the feet of Thorin son of Thrain. Hardly had he dismounted when the horse succumbed to the wounds and collapsed where it stood, and would not rise again.

“Mith-Mithrandir!” he cried breathlessly, his long black hair sweeping the grass.

“Elrohir, my lord!” exclaimed Gandalf, rushing to lift the elf to his feet. “Pray tell, what disaster has come upon here?”

“Monsters, Mithrandir!” the elf looked like he was going to fall into Gandalf's laps and cry like a little child. “Monster bearing the fire of dragons and the thunder of the fiercest storms! And goblins and orcs and great wargs innumerable! They're trying to break into the Secret Valley!”

“Lose not hope, good Elrohir!” exclaimed Gandalf.

Then Gandalf looked to the horizon, and was silent.
Thorin almost dropped his weapon.

Wargs. Many wargs.

Out from the glen they darted, a cloud of teeth and bristling furs and goblins astride them shouting obscenities.

In typical warg fashion, they rushed to within fifty yards of the company, and then stopped. They formed themselves in a semi-circle around their intended prey, bearing claws and fangs. Such was the way of wargs, battle or no: playing and teasing and drinking in the despair of their foes were like appetizer to their feral jaws.

Then out of the row a great white warg emerged, far larger and taller than any others; as tall as a warhorse and much thicker of build, and looked entirely able to swallow a dwarf whole. It licked its lips, and from the depth of its throat a voice came pouring.

“Well, well, well, what have we here,” it said, in a manner not unlike ruffians in the North. “Dwarves! This far West! A sight for sore eyes and empty bellies.”

“You attacked the elves,” said Thorin, brandishing his dwarven blade.

“Why, yes we did,” growled the warg. “Came a goblin-friend from the far East. Promised a feast of elves and wood-choppers. Didn't say dwarves in banquet too.”

“You goblins couldn't have done this alone!” demanded Gandalf. “Who summoned you, and who aided you?”

“No need to know,” said the warg, and there was that wolfish sound like a throaty grin from the back of its throat. “You all die here soon. Give up and feed my children.”

“Not in this lifetime!” cried Thorin, and his courage came back to him. He waved his blade in the warg's face, teeth gnashing as the memories of his battle prowess in the years of the war with the goblins in the North returned to him. “Baruk Khazad! Khazad-ai-menu!”

Without a further word the dwarves in the company all brandished their weapons, and soon the column was bristling with swords and axes and spears and mattocks, plus a bow and two elf-swords. They closed rank, in a semi-circle to match the wargs and goblins’s formation, fanning out their weapons in proper order. Behind that rank sat Elrohir, wounded and half-conscious, and Footslogger and his master Bilbo Baggins.

Then howled the white warg, a noise so fell and terrible Thorin's spine grew chilly. He held his stance and braced himself for a rain of claws and teeth.

And then he heard a thick coat being shed on the ground.

***

Over the rank of dwarves Zero leaped, like he had been doing all his life. His hair fluttered in the sky like a banner of gold. His saber ignited just as half a dozen riderless wargs noticed him.

In a blink of an eye, they were upon him.

In *another* blink of an eye, they all fell down. Heads severed from necks. Limbs cut from body. Torsos split open.
Zero stood there, at the front of the dwarven formation, his beam saber long and green as it had always been, pointed at the enemy. The thick black blood of his foes was boiling off the triangular edge.

“I’ve never claimed to be a hero,” he said. “But come an enemy, and I will obliterate it.”

Then he started walking, one step after another, towards the goblin ranks. His body was covered in a silver afterglow that only grew more intense as he strode forth. For exactly five seconds and five-hundred and sixteen milliseconds they stopped, staring at one another's faces.

Then one of the goblins, a large one at the head of the formation, pointed at Zero and shrieked. All at once the goblins drew their bows, crude and splintered as they are, and took aim.

And so Zero's advance was met with a hail of arrows. Half a dozen hit him in the arm, ten or so in each leg, and a whole score fell upon his head.

All shattered like twigs in a gale. If the goblins had been surprised before, now the astonishment had turned into full-on horror.

But then the great warg howled, and howled, and howled. The goblins rekindled their courage, and the cloud of them began to charge. Most of them converged on Zero's position; only those remaining few who realized their original mission would change direction and aimed for the dwarves instead.

“Khazad-ai-menu!” Zero's ears registered Thorin's battlecry. A tiny smile formed on his lips.

Zero fixed his gaze upon the enemy as he advanced, his internal computers rapidly calculating speeds, trajectories, orientations and deciding on the most efficient movement path.

The first goblin to meet him with raised blade fell dead, rider and beast bisected.

The next found his shield and torso pierced through with a flash of light.

The next had his ride's legs all cut off in one flash. He cracked his skull against nearby rock.

Two wargs and goblins tried to flank him. A circular slash and two screams later they were dead in a heap.

Another warg leaped over its dead kin. Zero merely jumped, spin around and saw it fall in halves. Then he charged his saber, glowing yellow in the process. The next three warg riders who ventured too close became crispy goblin bits in a flash.

From that point, Zero didn't bother with the combat log any more. He focused on the task at hand. Slash. Stab. Jump. Slash. Charge. Smash.

His eyes registered the dwarves fighting their own battle in the back row. Kili sniped a warg just as its closed on Fili, leaving the latter to stab dead the rider where he lay. Dwalin and Bombur and Dori met the incoming goblins with a hail of mattocks. Balin, Oin and Gloin presented three axes to the wargs' legs, and Bofur and Nori and Ori were stabbing and hacking at stragglers with their lesser weapons. The wizard Gandalf wielded his sword and staff with equal skill, cutting and smashing and crushing wargs and goblins alike.

As for Thorin himself?

He stood in the middle of the battlefield like an immovable boulder. The first warg and goblin to come close received a smash to the face and a slash that ensured neither would stand again. The next
quickly followed suit as he carved a bloody path of battered and decapitated goblins through their ranks.

In but a few minutes the tide had been turned.

Before the goblins could turn tail and run there were fewer of them than there were dwarves. The goblins’ faces grimaced in horror as they backed and backed and backed, until they – and the white warg – had their back against the burning glen.

In front of them stood Zero.

“Give up,” demanded him as he took two measured steps towards the survivors, saber ignited. Behind him the dwarves were watching closely.

“You killed my children... my grandchildren!” the great warg howled. “Bite you, gnash you, tear you apart I shall!”

Zero's upper lips curved in a disdainful smirk. “Try it,” he said, and then the warg was upon him.

Zero's eyes flashed.

So did his saber. One. Two. Three!

The white warg fell down behind him in half a dozen pieces. By the time Zero returned the saber to its holster, all that remained of the great warg was a pile of flesh marinating in its own black blood.

That development was the final straw that broke the spirit of the goblins. They kicked and kicked at the side of their rides and turned around, about to jump straight into the fire. Whatever death was facing them there was more comfortable than Zero's saber, obviously.

Or not.

From their flank a hail of arrow flew. One after another the goblins tumbled from their saddles while their rides fell dead where they stood.

Then Zero heard the noise of more horse hooves beating against the grassy dirt. Like a thunder storm the riders where upon the field, a detachment of cavalry wearing blue-gold armor and carrying bows that glittered under the first moon.

The last surviving goblin, an arrow through each shoulder, tried to drag itself away.

The rider at the head of the formation was upon it before it could.

Then Zero saw a silver flash and the goblin's head flying, and the massacre was done.

***

Elrohir leaned against the rock near him. His head was ringing like a bell. Tears were raining on his face. His vision was blurry. Was he dreaming? Had he died and was actually looking at things from that vantage point in the Hall of Mandos oft recounted?

“Is it over? Are we alive?”

Said the little creature huddled behind him. He’d hidden himself there, the poor creature, not even half as tall as he was. In the heat of the moment, Elrohir didn’t recognize the being but for that he was probably a hobbit. And a hobbit, he recollected, meant an old friend. And an old friend deserved his
Elrohir licked his cracked lips and tasted blood on them. His head bobbed up and down. “Yes,” he said, feeling adrenaline fade. “Yes it is.”

Pain shot up his legs and shoulder. He glanced at them and exhaled in relief: no open gash by goblin cleavers, and no black arrows smeared with goblin filth. He was going to live, but that didn't necessarily meant comfort: his body was black and blue all over, and the most minuscule movement hurt.

Elrohir blinked his eyes and tilted his head. The little hobbit was standing up now, and then kneeling again next to him. He screamed something about him needing help.

And then he was surrounded by dwarves. Honest-to-Eru dwarves. They looked and gawked and pointed at him like he'd been a rare specimen. If it had been any other time, he wouldn't have minded the attention.

But this wasn't 'any other time'.

Then the rank of dwarves parted, and a voice so sweet and familiar rang in his ears.

“Hanar! Hanar!”

“Arwen?” he cried, and suddenly his pain seemed to vanish. He threw his body up, just as his beloved sister's figure entered his vision. “Arwen!”

There stood his sister, clad in the colors of the House of Elrond so bright. Her face was pristine, unsoiled by the battle's blood and dirt. The moment his eyes met her, a weight as a mountain was lifted from his heart.

“Thank Eru!” she uttered, cradling him in her arms. “I- I thought-”

“It'll take more than a few goblins to take down Elrohir Elrondion,” said him, and his eyes twinkled. “How fares Father, Arwen? And Elladan, and-”

For but a brief moment Arwen said nothing, but then she breathed in deep and wiped her eyes. “It is all right,” she said.

But Elrohir knew his sister so well. Arwen would never say “All right,” unless something was not. She would never look so sorrowful and full of regret unless some events so horrible had transpired. By Eru, he could guess; his world began to spin and words choked in his throat.

No. No. No.

Then he heard a dwarf's heavy footsteps. A dwarf wearing a coat of scale with a rugged countenance stepped forward.

“Sorry for interrupting your touching reunion,” he said. “But do tell; what in Mahal's name is going on in here?”

“Thorin!” exclaimed Mithrandir, stepping between the dwarf and Elrohir himself. “Do watch your language, you stand before Lord Elrond's son and daughter Elrohir and Arwen Undomiel!”

“So?” said the dwarf. “We need information; does it matter before whom we stand?”

Arwen turned around with righteous fury in her eyes. She raised her hand at the dwarf's face.
“Stay your hand, Undomiel.”

Yet another familiar visage emerged in the clear. Golden hair washing over silver armor under the silvery moon, two crescent blades in hand. He stood there, tall and calm and filled with spirit and valor as could be expected from him at all times. “Glorfindel...” murmured Elrohir.

“But...” Arwen protested.

“Please, Undomiel. This is no time to squabble among ourselves,” said Glorfindel. “You must be Thorin Oakenshield, the exiled King under the Mountain of Durin’s Folk, are you not?”

“Rightly I am,” declared Thorin.

“Glorfindel, mellon, such a sight for sore eyes,” said Mithrandir, turning towards the elf. “That we should meet again under this circumstance – if only I had come but a half-day earlier.”

“Blame not yourself, good Mithrandir,” said Glorfindel with a bow. “Your coming to aid us is already more than we could have ever asked for.”

“I wish we could recount old tales as is our wont,” said Gandalf, looking around the party. “But as you can see, I have saddled myself with a group of ill-behaving dwarves who want explanations immediately, and I feel we don’t have time for the usual pleasantries.”

“The feeling is mutual, Mithrandir,” said Glorfindel. “Dwarven friend, what a day you have picked to come to Imladris.” He looked at the rude dwarf just now and paused for just a blink of an eye to make sure he was gathering attention. “The Last Homely House, under attack by the agents of the Enemy! Unthinkable, but it happened.”

“Tell us something we don’t already know,” said the dwarf impatiently. “Your lord – Elrond, is he not? What of him?”

“My Lord Elrond was separated from the rest of the host,” said Glorfindel with the utmost patience. “We tried to come back for him, but the Enemy, alas, was too numerous and too well-armed. They brought the horror of the dragon-fire not seen since Ancalagon scorched the earth to Middle-earth! There was indeed little we could do, to our unimaginable shame.”

“And Elladan?” asked Mithrandir, his great grey brows trembling. “Where is he?”

No answer came. Glorfindel only shook and evaded the wizard’s eyes; and Elrohir’s. Then Glorfindel hung low his head. So great was his shame, Elrohir would have felt it as though his own... had it not been drowned out by the screams and shrieks from the very core of his being.


For what seemed like a millennia to the young elf, nobody said a word, only exchanging sorrowful gazes. Perhaps the only movement he could see – sense – was his sister on one side calling his name, and a dwarf, stocky yet gentle, stopping over him on the other, examining his limbs and fingers.

And then a great mass of golden hair dropped from the sky with a thud and a crunch.

“Complete destruction of the enemy verified. All enemy vital signs disappeared,” the newcomer said. “Mission accomplished.”

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Bilbo couldn't remember very well where he had been amidst the pandemonium. He could, however, say one thing with the utmost of confidence: whoever enjoyed that kind of thing must be incurably wrong in the head.

The realization that their side was winning didn't ease his mind any. Not after a warg's innards was exposed thanks to Noughton's blade of light. Not after a goblin was thrown sixteen feet into the air and smashing head-first against a rock. Not after he stood up and see the field covered in the dead, blood and guts. He would have retched and vomited, and cried like a child for his mother.

But then he saw the elf next to him, and something was rekindled in his heart.

He didn't know the elf's name. He didn't know from which lineage he hailed (as his mother liked to introduce first thing in the morning). He didn't even know what kind of elf he was (because Gandalf had said of elves there were three kindreds, not counting a few fringe groups). If he had been a bard, there was little good yarn he could spin from that.

Yet one thing trumped them all: the elf was suffering battle with him, and that was all that mattered. That was no glamorous elf with a beautiful face and even prettier songs. That was no hero of legends and sorcerer of near-divine power. That was no warrior poet with a scroll in one hand and a blade in another.

No, he was no different from Bilbo: Wounded, frightened, confused and could be felled by a stray arrow or the sudden attention of a warg.

And so Bilbo stayed, and steeled his resolve. He said no word, and sang no song, and made no secret gesture that his mother said elves would rather see. No, he just squatted there, holding the elf's hand and readying the blade in its scabbard.

It was only when the last sound of battle had faded that he let go of his new friend's hand and stood up. “Is it over?” he asked, as though it had all been just a bad dream gone very, very wrong. “Are we alive?”

“Yes. Yes it is.”

It was only when he turned to face the elf that he realized something was dreadfully wrong. His skin wasn't broken, but his lips were bloody and his limbs weren't moving. His hand, too, was limp, as if all strength had drained from it. Bilbo was no hobbit physician, but he'd learnt enough about the living body to know the elf needed help.

Now.

“Oh no,” he murmured. “Do stay right here! I shall go get help! Anyone!”

He couldn't recollect what his hoarse voice recounted, but he was panicking, and that panic brought together all his dwarven friends and the good wizard Gandalf too.

Then an elven lady, slender and beauteous beyond songs, pushed through the crowd. Then people started speaking many, many words that Bilbo didn't understand. Then a blond elf bright and high in light did the same. Then they spoke even more words. He paid none of it any mind – he'd have shut down all senses now but for one person and one person only: Oin – the team medic.

It was only when Oin was already over and examining the wounded elf did Bilbo exhale in relief. Spent and exhausted, he sat down next to where the wounded elf sat, opposite to the elven lady who
claimed to be his sister.

“He will be fine, wouldn't he?” asked Bilbo, and he was genuinely afraid.

“Don't ask me about that, lad,” said Oin. “He looks mighty fine, and an elf to boot, but then this
doesn't look normal at all. Must be some serious internal injury.”

“This is all my fault,” said the elf’s sister – Arwen was her name if Bilbo got it right. “If only I had
fought a little harder... or been a little faster... I could have saved them all-”

That was not all she said; in the delicate elven tongue told in many stories she spoke many a word,
filled with sorrow and regrets and tears. Of that Bilbo understood well enough, even though he
spoke not a word of that language-

And then the ground quaked.

“Mission accomplished.”

Noughton.

Noughton is here.

The contraction in Bilbo's heart loosened. He'd seen enough now, that he'd be insane to worry about
his butler especially now that it'd been well established he was something otherly. But he'd be lying
if he said he hadn't been worried. He was just about ready to jump out and embrace his dear butler
when he was interrupted by, guess what? More words!

“I don’t think we've been introduced,” said the blond elf who went by the name Glorfindel,
extending his hand at the butler. “Glorfindel is my name – a vassal and herald of Lord Elrond
Peredhel Earendilion. At your service. We of Imladris are at your debt for what you have done
today.”

“I don’t think we've been introduced,” said Noughton. He hesitated a bit, but then took Glorfindel's hand. “My name
is Zero, a butler of-” his eagle-eyed gaze scanned the rank of survivors until they caught Bilbo sitting
where he was. “-Master Bilbo Baggins over there.”

“A Butler?” Glorfindel's lips twisted quizzically. “Surely you jest – not since the day of the First Age
when the Sun and Moon were young did I see someone take down an entire contingent of goblins
and wargs in their lonesome, and especially if they weren't one my Noldorin kin.:

“I've been many things,” Noughton answered. “But right now I am but a butler, and I intend to fulfill
my designation.”

Glorfindel was going to say something else, but then held it back between his closed lips. “Very
well,” he finally said. “I respect whatever secret you wish to keep.”

He straightened his cape and looked around the company. “I wish I could return you all to the safety
of Imladris and feast in honor of our victory today. Alas, the day is not. My lord Elrond is still
missing, his two sons lie wounded and cut off, and much of the beauty of the Hidden Valley has
been defiled.”

“We were looking for your Lord Elrond, actually,” said Zero. “Do brief me on what needs doing.”

“You were?” said Glorfindel, scanning Noughton from top to toe. The more and further he his gaze
swept over Noughton, the weirder his face became. “Then I suppose I am in no position to turn you
down. Still—’ He threw a peek at Gandalf with a gesture that clearly read 'Help me'.

Now the wizard stood next to the elf and towered over Noughton. He smiled kindly, and nodded at the butler... then at the mighty elf.

“Worry not about Master Zero, mellon,” said Gandalf. “I have known him for but a fraction of the time I’ve known your kin, but he is one you can trust. In fact, I daresay he’s our greatest hope of overturning the debacle that is today.”

“If you said so, Mithrandir,” said Glorfindel, his tense face starting to relax a little. “Zero, butler of Bilbo Baggins, if you would rather, we would be very glad to count on your assistance.”

Just as Noughton was nodding affirmatively, the dwarven company began to stir.

“Don't leave us out!” exclaimed Dwalin. “We of Durin's Folk can help, too – so long as there are orc-necks to chop!”

“And wargs to shoot!” shouted Kili. “Or stab!” Added Fili.

“I'll roll over them!” claimed Bomber. “And they'll never see what's coming for them!” said Nori, while Bofur simply bared the blood-splattered mattock of his.

There was that look on Thorin's face as if he'd had a decision forced upon him. This time around, he was smiling. Thorin. Smiling. The end of the world is coming.

“Well, you heard my dwarves,” he said. “Now don't get this wrong – helping elves leave a bad taste in my mouth,” he paused, and then reluctantly stretched a hand towards the elf-lord. “But it does look like we are all in this together.”

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Chapter End Notes

SPECIAL NOTE CONCERNING THE ELVES (warning, long essay ahead!): In this chapter you can see a lot of things that do not abide by the movie - or even the book version - of both LOTR and The Hobbits, namely:

- Arwen participates in battle and takes on a more assertive personality compared to the "meek princess of the elves and intended of Aragorn" in both film and book. My reason for this change is twofold. First, she has been compared to her ancestor Luthien rather often before, and Luthien is the most actiony, get-things-done girl in the entirety of the Legendarium by a long shot and I daresay even Eowyn and Galadriel can't compare. Second, and related to the point above, by the end of the Third Age she's made the decision to embrace the mortal side of her destiny. For a race of immortal people, that decision borderlines heroic sacrifice for love and/or that which is right and takes SERIOUS balls. It stands to reason that pre-Aragorn, her personality has to be basically as strong as can be, and whatever tragedies that's befallen her entire people do help matters in this regards.
- On the stuff the elves wear, there's been much dispute in this matter. The version of
"elvish" gear that P. Jackson provides is aesthetically pleasing, don't get me wrong - everybody loves a blinged-up army wearing leafy-gold everything and wielding curved two-handed sabers and kicking behinds while looking good (and that aesthetics is kinda-sorta copied by the Bethesda folks in making THEIR own Elven gear, too). Unfortunately, that version is also rather untrue to the good professor's vision, which had the elves being one of the big authorities on mail and heraldry. Merlkir (Jan Pospisil) provides a series of illustration and concept arts for elven arms and armors on DeviantArt (http://merlkir.deviantart.com/gallery/29988/The-Last-Days-Tolkien-related), and personally I take him to be one of the best resources on hand on this issue. Accordingly, I'm putting most of the elves in BLUE MAIL - blue being the color of the device of the House of Fingolfin from which Elrond is descended, and it isn't like Peter Jackson hadn't put blue on his golden Noldorin armor before.

- On the "elves ride with/without saddles" part: I've always taken elves riding without saddle the same as men are able to walk without footwear. We can, but we prefer to when there's a need to protect our feet and/or to look good. There are quite a number of illustrations that have the Noldor riding to war on horses with chamfron and peytrel akin to standard medieval knights. In particular, a draft for a First Age mod for Medieval II Total War give Noldor of Hithlum HEAVY HORSE ARCHERS as their top-tiers, and I'm drawing inspirations from that vision also.

- Three cheers for Glorfindel: Yeah, he's in. And that means he's going to totally steal the show for the next few chapters at the very least, being the absolute MONSTER he is across all adaptations. Sorry Thorin, Kili and Fili, but your short beard and dwarven stoutness has nothing on the FREAKING CHIEF OF THE HOUSE OF THE GOLDEN FLOWER OF GONDOLIN. Just for him, I'm keeping the Peter Jackson/Battle for Middle Earth's "silver plate armor". The curved sabers are out, though, and his hair is supposed to be blond for that matter. He has a bow too, which is also my creative liberty. In any case, this makes him into more or less "Noldo!Zero" (Blond flowing hair? Check. Expert swordsman? Check. Badass as it comes? Check. Having died before and "hid himself while he comes back to life"? Check, check and check. Now if only he wore blue...), and I'll be damned if I don't turn them into a good team.
Chapter 7

“We need a plan.”

Way to be obvious, me, Zero thought, looking around the camp.

Calling their gathering a camp would be like calling a sixth-grader's science project a reploid. No tents, no table and chairs, no water, little food, a single fireplace, a wounded elf (of the non-cyber kind, as Zero had guessed and was confirmed) being (clumsily) taken care of by a dwarven medic and a somewhat more skilled elven one... The only thing in abundance was the dead bodies of the goblins and wargs lining the battlefield.

It was, still, a fair-sized company. Sixteen elves, thirteen dwarves, one wizard, one hobbit and one reploid. Not enough to charge Neo Arcadia back in the day all by themselves, but given some coordination they might amount to something yet. Getting to that point of "coordination" was another entirely different matter.

“There's no need for one,” said the elf called Arwen. “My father and brother is in mortal danger – should we not make all haste and go after them?”

The dwarven crowd around the campfire burst out in a collective boo.

“If we could have solved everything simply by charging home and crushing the enemy, well, we wouldn't be here sniffing goblin corpse gas for supper, would we?” said Dwalin.

“We could have,” said Glorfindel, “but then our forces were scattered when the dragon-fire struck. Gathering all who can fight in one place would take a day at least, and that is if there are no more goblins deeper in the woods as we speak.”


“I've sent a runner to Lady Galadriel earlier today,” answered Glorfindel. “Eru willing, we may have to wait three days before help arrives. As for the White and the Brown, we'll have to spare them even more time.”

“But that would be too late!” exclaimed Arwen.

“I know,” said Gandalf, “That's why we need a better plan. What are their numbers?”

“More than any other prior goblin incursion, that is all I am certain of,” said Glorfindel. “It is almost as if they've got a passage leading from the heart of Mordor straight into our lands.” He paused and shook his head. “And for the sake of Estel Arathornion, let us pray this was the case. Otherwise-”

The moment the name Estel was uttered, the crowd fell silent. The dwarves looked around themselves in confusion, then at Thorin. The dwarf-lord, too, shrugged both shoulders and, perhaps
being constructive for the first time since forever, gestured his companions to stay quiet.

“No, the Rangers are fine,” Arwen protested. “They have to be fine – Elladan went back for them! If they weren’t—”

Her voice trailed off. “No. That’s not possible,” her tone dropped to a choked whisper.

Gandalf, too, gritted his teeth and fixed his gaze on the fire as if he’d just swallowed some medicine too bitter. But then he breathed deep and clasped his hands.

“Alas, we will have to face the truth sooner or later,” he said. “The goblins could only have gone above, under or through the Rangers. They couldn’t go above, for Lord Gwaihir and his kin would have known and acted against them. Nor could they go below, for tunneling so deep and so long underneath the earth has never been possible, not even when Morgoth’s power was high. That leaves only one remaining possibility...”

Gandalf looked at each and every elf, his gaze tracing the looks of their face – despair, sorrow and a myriad emotions in the same spectrum. “The heirs of Elros Tar-Minyatur... are lost.”

But then his wrinkly eyelids sprang open.

“We have to hope,” said him. “For if hope is lost, the Enemy would have won.”

Hardly had Gandalf finished his sentence when Zero's heat sensors detected a warm light, invisible as it was, radiating from his fingers. The light spread throughout the gathering, and as it washed over Zero he felt a warmth not kindled in him for a while now.

Then two images flashed before Zero's eyes: one pink, one blue, stretching their palms towards him. Such familiar silhouettes, and yet he couldn’t remember their name. But one look at their figure and the doubts and worries in Zero's mind was already dissipating. Yet at the same time the hole in his memory only grew more itchy and painful as their visages captivated him, like an organic creature having an infected wound.

“I trust you, Zero.”

“Please, lend us your strength!”

That one second Zero didn't know what he was doing. He lifted his right hand towards them, reaching for their fingertips.

And then Glorfindel's voice, sharp and alert, snapped him from his stupor.

“Master Zero! Do you have something to add?”

Zero woke up with a start. There, his right hand, instead of touching the two figures in his vision, was raised awkwardly in the sky as if he was asking for permission to speak.

“Err-” Zero said, eying the room awkwardly.

“I’d appreciate an attempt at comedy, Master Zero, but this isn't the time or place,” said Thorin sternly. “Now, unless you have something constructive to add, I would rather you stay in your place.”

Actually, now that Zero had woken up and was actively racked his brain, he might have one of those ‘constructive’ things.
One half of him screamed deep inside in protest. What are you thinking? You want to tell them about that? Do you realize what kind of trouble you'll face if you talk? Do you think for a second they'll believe you? Isn't that thing with Thorin the Blockhead not enough already?

No, another part said. They have to know if they want to stand a chance against... whatever is going on here.

The first half wouldn't give up. Why do you care? You owe these people nothing! Not even Bilbo Baggins! Bilbo isn't him, and he certainly isn't her! Not to mention these other people, were they there with you over the last two hundred years? Did they help you when you were blown to pieces half a dozen times over? Did they lend you a word of encouragement as you faced one ghost from the past after another? Are they helping you regain the memory of that past life of yours? No! Why should you care?

The second voice was no less adamant. Because they would have helped if they could. Because they'd trusted me – at least one did. And that's all I need to lend them my help.

Zero could hear the first voice sighing. Why are you so stubborn?

Because Zero is nothing, said the second voice, if not stubborn.

Zero inhaled deep. He cleared his throat, shook off the moment’s embarrassment, and opened his mouth. This is it.

“I wanted to say, there might have been another way your enemies could have gotten to you other than what you mentioned,” he said. “Such as a teleportation facility, or even a Trans-Server.”

Just as he expected, the moment the word 'teleportation' left his lips, every single pair of eyes within a fifty-yard radius was trained on him. The die was cast: there was no way he could possibly get off the hook now.

“Eh?” said Dwalin. “What's that you just said, lad?”

“I said 'teleportation','” repeated Zero. “The conversion of mass into energy, transportation of said energy at near-light speed, and reconversion back into physical mass at destination.”

At least Zero's explanation did have one positive effect: it caused elves and dwarves to stare at each other – the first time in a long, long while.

“What on Arda is he talking about?” said

“By Mahal, are you mad, lad?” cried Balin.

“What a poor attempt at humor,” said one elf from the back. “I'd expect no better from Men,” said another and shrugged.

“I stand by what I said,” said Zero, unfazed.

“Then I take you are trying to make a joke at the expenses of my lost kin,” cried Arwen. “I give you one chance to apologize, before I lop your head off!"

The booing and snide comments from the crowd – dwarves and elves alike – was quickly reaching a crescendo, while Thorin was sitting there, eyes rolling and brows shaking. Arwen's hand was on the hilt of her blade, looking like she would make good of her words.
But then from next to Gandalf a figure rose, in his all his silver and gold and blue splendor. “Order!” he cried with a voice loud and commanding. And then the noise from the crowd began to fade, sneers and jeers replaced by gasps and huffs. Once again elves and dwarves looked at each other, but then all eyes were on his figure tall and mighty.

“Master Zero,” said Glorfindel, for it was him, and bowed at Zero's direction. “I must ask your pardon, but I would be much grateful if you would lend me your blade.”

“My blade?” Zero asked back.

“Yes, your blade,” said Glorfindel. “The blade that took the life of so many goblins and wargs today, including the Great White Warg of Gundabad. I wish to have a look at it – and for my kin to do so as well.”

Rats, have I made a mistake?

“C-certainly,” he finally said.

He produced the weapon from the holster on his hip, hesitated a little, and gave it to Glorfindel.

“It has no blade,” Glorfindel noted.

“Until you activate it,” Zero explained. “Turn it on with the button on the side. And don't point the business end – that one – at your face or anyone else's!” It would be messy if an elf – any elf – would be impaled from one end to another due to Z-saber manhandling.

“Thank you, Master Zero,” said Glorfindel. For a second, Zero thought the elf's hand was shaking, but a blink later he was calm and collected again.

Then Glorfindel flicked the button, and the camp burst with many an 'oh' and 'ah'. In Glorfindel's hand Zero's saber lay, a triangular blade as long as any sword in that world. And infinitely hotter and sharper, Zero felt like adding. 

“Miraculous,” said Glorfindel, his eyes caressing the blade from hilt to tip. “Not once in the history of our kin have I seen a weapon so... strange. And so...”

He turned around, stopping in front of the boulder the elf-prince was rested on just moments before. With a flick of his forearm, the boulder – as large as a small electric car – was cut clean from top to base. Again the crowd went wild, and many eyes admiring and horrified stared at the rock.

“... destructive,” he concluded. Turning off the blade with another flick of his finger, he returned the weapon to Zero. “I would be honored to learn of its name and lineage, Master Zero.”

“It has no real name, if that's what you ask,” said Zero. “I've been calling it the Z-Saber for as long as I've had it.”

“Nice demonstration, Glorfindel. And nice sword, Master Zero” said Arwen impatiently. “I simply do not understand what you are trying to prove with it.”

“I would respectfully disagree.” Glorfindel clasped his hands. “Do recall, Lady Undomiel, what happened during the attack. What we saw behind the ranks of goblins and wargs.”

“Let me guess,” interrupted Thorin. “Some of the goblins were armed and armored in a manner not unlike Master Zero here.”
“That was exactly what happened, friend dwarf,” said Glorfindel. “And it was them who scattered us and pushed my brethren all the way back to the Hidden Valley. Their strength and prowess was simply, may I say, out of this world.”

Zero felt the pressure of a dozen pairs of eyes on his back. This time around, however, he wasn't just going to stand and let them pile accusations on him, no sir!

“If you're insinuating I'm on their side—” he protested.

“It is not impossible, Master Zero,” said Glorfindel, gesturing Zero to calm down. “But at this point it is also irrelevant. What is more relevant...”

He turned around the gathering, raising his arms, and only began speaking when all eyes were upon him again.

“... is that the Enemy is using weapons and artifacts that no one among us but Master Zero is familiar with,” he said. “Weapons and artifacts that are beyond the understanding and insights of even us, wisest among the Quendi and indeed all Children of Iluvatar.”

Then Gandalf stood up from his seat, propping his weary form on his staff. But there was a kindly smile on his face that eased Zero's worries somewhat.

“You speak my mind, Glorfindel,” he said. “I have had a hunch for a few days now – a hunch I wished to confirm with Lord Elrond and Lady Galadriel and perhaps Radagast too when we can, for he should surely know the Enemy best of us all. But now that we can no longer count on their collective wisdom right here, I shall have to go with my instinct,”

The edge of his lips stretched into a sad, but hopeful smile. “And pray it is not an evil I am betting on,” he finished.

Then he turned towards Zero, smiling still. “Tell us about this... thing you call 'teleportation', Master Zero,” he said. “With luck, we would be right, and have a pedestal to rest our hope upon.”

Zero hesitantly looked around the rank of elves and dwarves. Now there were few voices of dissent left – maybe except for Arwen, whose face was still marred by anger and whose hand was still on the hilt of her blade.

Alright, let's go.

“It's not my place to explain the full physics behind it; you'd better leave it to some omnidisciplinary scientist.” Like her. “The gist of it is, given the right equipment and enough energy output you can transfer any amount of mass – people, machines, goods, you name it – from a theoretical Point A to any Point B in the universe, at the speed of light. Any amount of mass, and any point B. In theory.”

“Methink an example might be in order,” blurted Bofur.

“An example? Sure,” said Zero. “It's been quite a travel from the Shire, hasn't it? If we'd had teleport technology, we could have covered all that distance between Master Baggin's house and this present location in two seconds. Or two blinks of an eye, if you aren't familiar with the metric system.”

There was an oddly delicious expression of utter rage in Thorin's face, akin to one who'd been looking for a distant answer all his life only to find it right next to him all along.

“You've got to be jesting!” cried Thorin.
“I'm not,” said Zero, staring down the dwarf lord. “I've done that more times than I can remember, back in my world.”

To be fair, the last one was a bit of an embellishment. His memory system did keep record of every single time he had ever teleported since he stepped out of his creator's lab on a certain autumn day two centuries before. Not that such individual records helped him any in piecing together his memory.

“You expect me to believe that drivel?” Thorin said, his face reddening.

He took a deep breath. “I swear, on my honor. You have to take my word for it.”

“I believe you, Master Zero,” said Gandalf. “But then there must be some restriction on such a miraculous device, or else it would have been... unstoppable.”

“Quite right,” said Zero. “You'll need the right equipment for that. That, and a lot of energy, because it's hard to transmit and process energy without even more energy to 'hem in' the whole process.”

Glorfindel nodded, eying Zero attentively. “What kind of 'equipment' are we talking about here?”

“Again, I'm not the one you should seek when it comes to the very specifics,” said Zero. “But to my knowledge, the bare minimum you need is a complex energy receptor capable of sending, receiving, reconfiguring and reconverting energy into mass. A satellite system would be useful but not essential, because the latest developments in this field I know of no longer require them.”

“This is absurd!” cried Arwen. “What make you think the orcs – orcs, spawns of Morgoth too stupid and evil to make proper arms and armor, would be able to use things as complex as... as what you're describing?”

“I am not making any conclusion, if that's what you ask,” Zero answered. “All I'm stating is just that, a possibility.”

“It is also the most probable possibility, absurd as it sounds, Lady Undomiel,” said Gandalf. “As far as I am aware, not since the Last Alliance have orcs and goblins pushed the banners of the House of Elrond so far back. An extraordinary answer is par for the course of an extraordinary problem.”

“Let me just assume, just for a moment, that what Master Zero said is true,” Arwen said, breathing out audibly. “That this... teleport exists, and that goblins and orcs are using it to transport their forces all over Arda as we speak. How are we supposed to even stand a chance against them in a battle, let a lone save my father and brother?” She muttered under her breath, “If they are indeed... in the Enemy's hand.”

“On the contrary,” said Zero, picking up a twig on the ground near the campfire. “If it is true, they've just handed us a very good opportunity to strike back.”

He bent down on the sand near the fire and began drawing one circle.

“Energy is formless and omnidirectional,” said Zero. “That's why you'll always need something to 'anchor' it in, and something to 'guide' it to the right destination. Teleport works on the same principle: You've got to have a lot of the right equipment at the starting point-”

He lifted the twig off the circle and began drawing an arrow, followed by another circle around the arrow's head. “And, by extension, a comparable amount at the destination. Think of it like...” he put his finger to his chin for a second. “Two ports on two separate islands. Without either, ships can't set sail. Always there must be a start point and an end point.”
Then he drew another arrow, this time leading from the second circle back to the first. “But then, in my time, there has been a widespread energy shortage – a consequence of which is the streamlining of the teleport device, so there's no more separate 'start point' and 'end point'. We call such a device 'Trans-Server'.” He bent the twig until it snapped. “It has been a very, very useful invention.”

Glorfindel clapped his hands. “In other words, if we find one end, we can travel to the other? No matter whether that end was intended to be the 'start' or 'end' point?”

“Exactly,” Zero said. “So if your enemy did create a teleport 'tunnel' between their headquarters and yours... we can make use of the same system to attack them at their heart.”

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Elrohir didn't understand.

His not understanding things was nothing new, to his father's chagrin. If you could count on one Noldo who would readily admit how little he knew, that would be him (And maybe Glorfindel, though the latter had Erestor to fix any issue on the knowledge side). Why bother with knowledge of the world when poetry, hunting, sparring and flirting around with dainty maidens was infinitely funner, and helping the Dunedain in their daily quests so much more heroic-sounding?

Something Glorfindel, Mithrandir and Arwen put together didn't understand, however, was different. If not for, well, whatever had befallen his family and the sensation of all his bones being ripped out of their sockets simultaneously, he would have rolled on the grass laughing.

“Master elf, sir?”

The young elf turned to his side. There the hobbit was kneeling, having waited on him since the night was young. “You are awake,” he said, and smiled in relief.

“I'm always awake,” he answered, trying not to grimace.

“Is that so?” the hobbit asked. “My mother did say elves do need to sleep, though to the eyes of mortal they don't, for the elven songs never cease even in the darkest nights.”

_Touche, Elrohir. Touche_.

He harrumphed, hiding his flustered face. “Well, has your mother ever seen an elf?”

“She had, sir,” came the answer. “In fact, she said she'd stayed for months on end in Rivendell and learnt the language of your kin, too.”

Elrohir's brow raised. “Really?” he said, and Bilbo nodded.

“Pity I was a lazy and playful child then, sir;” he said, “and never learnt from her knowledge.”

And then the force of memory hit him with all the subtlety of a troll's great club. “Is her name... Belladonna? Belladonna Took? Descendent of the one brave hobbit who slew a goblin chief by knocking his head down a rabbit hole?”

“That's her, sir,” said Bilbo. “Bilbo Baggins, son of Belladonna and Bungo Baggins, at your service.”

How could he have been so forgetful? It was barely fifty years since the last time he saw the feisty she-hobbit. Quite a marvel in Rivendell the lass had been in those days, too – went everywhere that
wasn't barred to her kind, and asked everyone more questions than there were drops of water in the
Anduin. But now he remembered, and the elf's lips curved into a smile.

“I was wondering why she hadn't returned of late,” said Elrohir, and he sincerely meant what he
said. “Marrying and settling down was the last thing I’d expected of her. Our librarian do miss her
fondly.”

“She would have much appreciated it, sir,” said Bilbo, taking off his hood.

Elrohir's eyes began to widen. “Would have?”

“Oh, I'm sorry, sir,” said Bilbo. “My mother passed away just shy of five years ago.”

Death! Sure as sun would rise and set, to all race but his own. How silly he had been! He should
have seen it coming for a race whose lifetime was like a brief candle in the dark. He looked at Bilbo,
offering his best look of condolence. “I see,” he said. “Mandos guides and protects her now,
wherever in this universe she has come to.” To which Bilbo gave a nod of acknowledgement, and
then fell silent.

For a short while the two spoke nothing. Part of the reason, it seemed, was the story the red warrior
was telling. The more he listened, the more Elrohir felt he’d have better luck listening to one of
Erestor's essays on the evolution of sword hilt decorations in the First Age of the Sun.

Yet from the supremely queer rambling of the warrior in red, something started to build up back
within Elrohir.

Hope.

“They're going to rescue Lord Elrond, aren't they?” asked the hobbit, and his hands and feet were
trembling in excitement – that, or anxiety, or both.

Elrohir took a deep breath and tried to set aside the stone pressed against his heart. “They're going to
rescue my father...” He sighed. “That man... he's quite something.”

“My butler,” said the hobbit, puffing his chest, “has always been 'quite something'.”

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“My butler has always been 'quite something',” declared Bilbo, and indeed he was quite proud.

The battle between Bilbo the Took and Bilbo the Baggins had never truly ended, but by now the
result was as good as conclusive.

They shook hands.

There was no more Bilbo the adventurous and Bilbo the kind fighting each other. No, Bilbo had
decided, he was adventurous because he was kind, and he was kind because he was adventurous,
strange as it sounded. Bilbo wouldn't believe himself, until he extended his hand at the wounded elf.

“I'll do it,” he said. “I don't know how long or how much it will take, but if I can help it, I shall bring
your father back to you, or do whatever in my power to ensure the same.”

While it was already hard to see an elf nowadays, they said, it was that much more difficult to behold
an elf dropping his jaw in astonishment. If that was true, he was beholding one of those rare things:
there the wounded elf lay, grabbing his hand and looking deep into his eyes, his lower lips trembling.
It was as if he'd beheld a phenomenon most peculiar yet immeasurably moving.

Indeed it was only after a long while having spoken nothing, presumably to pick the right kind of word to answer, did the elf answer. The two words he picked, incidently, was “Thank you.”

Leaving the elf to Oin (who was at least right kind of person to talk to when it came to injuries), Bilbo inhaled a lungful of evening air (goblin stench notwithstanding), and set about to do what he did best: Spying.

He stopped his tiptoeing behind a black-haired dwarf with an exceptionally broad shoulder. The, hiding himself behind his human (or rather, elven) wall's long cloak, he peeked out into the opening.

The female elf by the name Arwen was no longer berserking. It was unthinkable for someone so beautiful to have a temper so fierce, at least in his mother's tales of princesses and brave warriors anyway. Bilbo noted her hand had finally left the vicinity of her blade, and that made him let out a sigh of relief. From the tone of her voice, it seemed like Gandalf and the blond elf called Glorfindel would have a lot of work cut out for them to calm her down for good.

“... it could be anywhere,” she spat. “We can't spare the time or the forces to... dance around the forest looking for this 'Trans-Server’ of yours!”

“That's why I'm not asking for any help,” said Noughton. “I can take care of this alone. Like I always have.”

“I don't think so,” said Glorfindel. “Right now the entire glen around Rivendell is thronging with orcs and goblins—”

“You haven't seen what the Enemy can do,” said Glorfindel, doing the exact same. “Besides, you are a stranger to the glen around Rivendell – the wood will think you an enemy and its magic will work against you.”

“Bah, programming errors,” Zero said with a one-shoulder shrug. “Then tell me how you want it done.”

“I shall go with you, Master Zero,” said Glorfindel, “and maybe Mithrandir if he wishes. There is safety in number, and...” he looked around the camp for a second with hesitation before turning back to Zero. His looks drew different expressions, some nods and some more shakes, from the row of elves. “No offense meant, Master Zero, but some among us are still uncomfortable with your peculiar appearance and the strange tales you bring to us. Having me with you shall allay their fear... and maybe mine.”

Bilbo shuddered at the last three words. So much for elves being reasonable and endearing and everything hobbits were not:

“As for me, you need only ask, friend Glorfindel,” said Gandalf. “I shall not stand and do nothing while Lord Elrond's life is in danger.”

Then the elven lady stood up and paced towards Glorfindel. “What about I, Glorfindel? Father and Elladan need my help – I have to be there for them!”

“No, Lady Undomiel,” said Glorfindel. “You need to stay and take over the command. Of the House of your father only you remain who can lead our brethren, and Lord Elrohir would need proper care from one of your House. I would only ask you not to,” again he paused, and looked her tenderly in
the eyes, “run off and look for Lord Elrond on your own.”

“But—”

“Didn't you have no faith in my plan in the first place?” Noughton replied, and for once the hobbit felt there was a distinctly mischievous sarcasm in his voice that Bilbo didn't know existed.

Of course, for his effort Noughton got a dagger-sharp glare from the female elf and, from the way she extended her hand – and quickly withdrawing it – very nearly was at the receiving end of a nasty slap. “You have one chance,” she said. “If I don't see you come back with my Father and brother, I shall let you know why Morgoth Bauglir himself dreaded the name of my ancestor Fingolfin the High King of the Noldor.”

“Mission accepted,” said Noughton, turning aside to his new companions. “I take it that you'll be my... partner, Lord Glorfindel. I'm ready whenever you are.”

Bilbo held his breath. Then he exhaled so loudly that the broad-shouldered elf had a start. Then he shoved himself into the light as every pair of eyes began to take notice of the tiny spy's presence.

“Wait!” he cried. The moment of truth, he thought, and his voice of courage came to a crescendo. “Let me go with you!”

“Isn't that the hobbit in the dwarven company?” asked Glorfindel as he gave Bilbo a good look. Bilbo wasn't sure if the shape of his mouth – twisted and a little upturned – indicated annoyance or amusement. Either way, he'd made up his mind.

“Yes, I am, your lordship,” he said. “Bilbo Baggins of Bag End at your service, and he brings with him his expertise as a thief and spy!”

Glorfindel turned to Gandalf. The wizard's expression, on the contrary, was fully on the amused side. “O yes,” he said. “Master Baggins is exactly who he said he is. I employed him in this adventure of ours, for there are queer little things that a dwarf's stout strength and heavy mattock cannot solve.

Then Bilbo heard the stirring of boots and mattocks and the clattering of dwarven mail behind him. “Wait,” cried a voice readily identifiable as Thorin's. “Burglar, whose side are you on? Ours or the elves? With whom did you have a contract, huh?”

Whatever came over Bilbo wouldn't be ever known to him, and he supposed there would be plenty of such moments before the adventure would draw to a close. He turned around, slowly but firmly to face the dwarf and spoke, in a clear and loud voice he never knew before that he had.

“You've heard the wizard, my lord Thorin,” he said, politely yet unflinchingly. “We aren't going anywhere until Lord Elrond is rescued and returned to his homestead. With an extra hand we'll be able to leave the elves' company that much faster – I am helping you, my lord, even if it looks like I am not.”

“Very amusing, hobbit friend,” said Glorfindel. “I never said we would need – or want – your assistance to begin with.”

“But you should accept it regardless,” said Gandalf. “I don't doubt for a second that the two of you put together might handily dispatch even the dreaded Durin's Bane in the depth of Moria, but there might be a time – indeed many a time – where a little bravery or resourcefulness of a hobbit would well shift the balance and carry the day.”
"This isn't a joke, Mithrandir," said Glorfindel, his voice suddenly becoming far colder than it had ever been throughout the night. "Time is of essence and I cannot imagine lose any to the coddling of a hobbit while Lord Elrond is in danger."

"You wouldn't give the only son of Belladonna Took a chance, old friend Glorfindel?"

Then the elf-lord stopped where he stood. He slowly turned around and faced Bilbo. "Is that the truth?" he asked.

"I am, your lordship," said Bilbo, making a mental note not to look surprise, even though he was very much astonished at how many people this far East had heard of his poor, old, frail and not very reputable mother. Important people, in any case!

Then he swallowed a lump in his throat, and spoke what he thought would be best. "But I wish not to be judged as Belladonna Baggins' son." he stressed the word 'Baggin'. "I am a burglar who – contrary to the job description – wish to do good, and let me be judged against that yardstick."

Then Glorfindel laid one finger to his chin, and walked over to Gandalf. "Do you want him in regardless?"

"That is what he is meant to do, friend Glorfindel," said Gandalf.

"Very well then," he said, "You may follow us, Bilbo son of Belladonna. But let me make it abundantly clear: I shall not be responsible for your fate, and if your presence would endanger my Lord Elrond's safety, consider your life forfeit. Are we understood?"

There was a tinge of discomfort in the way he said – apparently saying words so lacking in gentleness to a hobbit, or indeed any creature with goodness in it at all, wasn't in the elf-lord's nature. Not that Bilbo could fault him any, given the present situation.

"Very, your lordship," said Bilbo.

*I'll get your father back in no time, friend.*

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Chapter End Notes

1) For those FAMILIAR with the Megaman Universe:

- On Zero's hallucination: I guess it goes without saying that when it comes to "hope" the two people Zero would think of is X and Ciel; nobody else comes halfway close (Sorry Iris. Sorry Axl. Sorry Layer) As to how he actually got that feeling of "hope", see section (3).

- On Zero's split-personality inner argument: Now this is something I made up wholecloth for the sake of drama. If it had been X it would have been more understandable, since X has always been the one reploid who always worries and asks questions, while Zero is this no-nonsense, point-and-I'll-slash, no questions asked kind of fellow. My justification is that Zero starts having a more complex thought process starting from X4, and whether or not you see X6-8 as canon he steadily becomes more
human until the big 22XX reset button. And even then, Zero's characterization in the Z series shows plenty of "thinking" and "questioning", though much more subtle and overshadowed by his propensity to, well, do cool stuff because he could. So it's entirely possible he had learnt to worry and have second thoughts somewhere down the line, except it isn't shown as often as in X's case.

2) For those NOT familiar with the Megaman universe:

- On teleportation: Before I talk in-depth about what I feel about the Megaman teleport sciences, let me bring to your attention a very notable 'chink' that both the Megaman universe and the earlier works of the Legendarium has (much more of an issue in the former than the latter). The entire series wasn't meticulously planned out with extreme attention to detail from day one - at that point the goal of the creators was probably to produce something, anything, and sell it to the execs. Only over time as more works came out and building upon prior successes did the background lores and the little details come into existence, either to expand the story or to explain elements that didn't make sense in the earlier ones. As a result, plot-holes or lore-holes large enough to drive a Ferrari truck through is not just a common occurrence but also EXPECTED, and retcons can only fix so much.

One of such "holes" in the sciences of Megaman (granted, the entire thing is very soft sci-fi, charitably speaking) is how teleport is handled. The entire description of teleport right here in this chapter I got (with paraphrase and no small part my own reinterpretation) from the Megaman Knowledge Base indicates a VERY advanced level of energy and mass manipulation to the point that the in-game universe could well be considered "sufficiently advanced" to border "magic". To such a society very little is impossible, such that the later energy crisis that creates the Megaman Zero series and many of the personal dramas in might as well make no sense whatsoever, talking about which might take ages. The way I am treating "teleport" here, therefore, is based not on the hard maths-and-physics of things, but whichever looks and sounds the coolest and/or is most expedient to the plot. Not that a breach in logic here or there is too big a problem, since the other half of the crossover (with no disrespect to the Professor) gives you, among others, a MILE-LONG DRAGON by the name of Ancalagon the Black. I'd hate to think how many ecosystem the guy would have to eat everyday just to not starve to death.

3) Tolkienism notes:

- On the "hope" mentioned in section (1): Gandalf was making use of Narya to rouse hope in the crowd. Now I've found this part a bit of a point of controversy: Gandalf doesn't explicitly use the Ring of Fire throughout the books and especially The Hobbit, but he has had it on him all the time and he is in a position where using it would be the most logical thing roughly two-third of his screentime (We're talking about a ring that endows courage, bestows hope and resists despair and terror to those around good old Mithrandir here). As a result, I chose to depict its effect as something of an invisible aura of light/warmth that most peeps can't readily pick up, but whose effect they could feel anyway, and hope I'm not too far wrong. Oh, and Zero would know it's there, because heat sensor is such a cool thing.

- On Elrohir's emotional maturity: It would make a lot of sense to make Elrohir and Elladan as mature as or more so than Legolas, since they were born in the early Third
Age and are inching close to their 3000th birthday at the beginning of The Hobbit. However, for some reasons they are quite often portrayed in fanfiction as these archery- and fun-obsessed elven frat boys who like fooling around, playing pranks on other princely figures (like Leggy himself), flirting elven maidens and shooting orcs and spiders for fun and profit. I elect to go with this portrayal anyway even though it doesn't make all that much sense, because right now in my story there's only place for one Glorfindel.
A rock hit a goblin patrol in the head. Without a sound it fell next to the stream, not moving.

Bilbo made a shushing gesture. “Clear,” he said, and hid himself within the shadow of a very large oak tree. There was no way the rest of the group would miss it: that was the only oak tree still standing in a fifty-yard radius. Glorfindel's description of the forest being defiled was not a figure of speech. In fact, the burned-out husk around him, filled with the smell of charred trees and rotting corpses and goblin refuse looked more like a garbage dump in a large city told in his mother's tales, than the forest of songs and magic of the elven race.

The sorrow was clear on Glorfindel's face as he regarded the destruction around him. But then he wasted little time mourning the trees, as elves were wont to do. Instead he gathered his cloak and brandished his silver blade. “Let's plan our next move,” he said, and spoke no lament for the tarnished beauty.

“Where's the last place you saw Lord Elrond?” asked Noughton, leaping into cover. “A starting point as good as any.”

“Not very far from here,” he said, tilting his head towards the cobblestone road that cut through the forest. “Should not be more than a half-mile to the East.”

Quietly the company of four slunk into the shadow. The next stretch of forest proved to be even more sorrowful a sight than the entrance. There were no goblins there, but only because there weren't anything else alive. Trees were slashed down, burned to charcoal, or otherwise crushed, shattered and broken. The grass lay trampled, crushed and withering from heat. A partial carcass of a deer was strewn on the ground, one half nauseatingly burned and the other half ripped apart and eaten. As for what might have been berry bushes and saplings, all that were left of them was a layer of ash and charcoal where they once stood. Only the rocks and boulders of the forest remained, and even they were burned and singed.

The only good thing to come of the destruction was a very, very long and conspicuous trail of many footprints leading deeper into the forest, printed on the ashen ground. A little too conspicuous, to think of it.

Apparently Bilbo wasn't alone. “Want to bet it is a trap, Lord Glorfindel?” asked Noughton with an expression passable for a smirk.

“I wouldn't dismiss it so early,” said Glorfindel. “After all, this way leads into the Hidden Valley. I wouldn't be surprised if they had set up a forward camp there.”

Now Bilbo had crept a little ahead of the party. There was no real need: there was little he could see that Glorfindel couldn't, and he was certain to cause a bigger mess of a footprint than the elf-lord's trackless steps. But then he wanted to contribute.
For his trouble, what he got was a scene right from his nightmares. At least this time around he'd refrained from screaming, and his lunch remained lodged in his tummy. He made a 'come here at once' gesture, his face rapidly paling.

In the hollowed-out forest just ahead, there lay a troll. Whatever remained of one, in any case, for the creature had two dozen arrows sticking out of its body in various places. Either its death was extremely violent, or the survivors of the battle had seen it fit to cannibalize its remain: the creature was missing many chunks of troll-flesh from its arms, legs and lower jaw, revealing pale white bones underneath.

Just as Glorfindel, Noughton and Gandalf got around Bilbo's vantage point, the sound of wooden wheels rolling over burnt leaves filled the dead forest.

Two dozen goblins altogether, bearing small butcher knives and chisels, were pulling a wooden contraption out from the edge of the clearing. The exact rack Bilbo saw four days before, bearing the dead bodies of Tom, Bert and William.

Glorfindel's hands moved to the bow slung over his back. “Don't,” Gandalf raised his hand. “Let's see what they do.”

It took them a while sitting behind the rock – a rather compressed space and Bilbo didn't quite like the way Glorfindel's silver armor kept pushing against him. The scene they were entreated to was exactly the same as before: the goblins would butcher the troll's body, punching holes in the carcass, inserting rings into them and string the body on the rack. Not before some of them 'embezzled' some of the flesh, and tucked the bits into the folds of their loincloths.

“This is... not how goblins usually act,” remarked Glorfindel. “For ages now they are supposed to leave their fallen brethren behind to rot; the cowards.”

Noughton narrowed his eyes. “You mean they aren't supposed to 'recycle' the dead bodies of these – what do you call them again? Trolls?”

“They're both spawns of Morgoth, goblins and trolls,” said Glorfindel. “However many you slay, there are always more.”

Now the goblins were done with their monstrous work, and off they rolled the significantly heavier rack back the way they came. They were no longer silent, but instead started to sing in the terrible, dissonant and borderline blood-curdling singing 'talents' of theirs. So loud and brutal the noise that it would have made a bird fall dead in mid-flight.

In other words, they were doing Bilbo a favor.

Around he turned, waving at the others. “We have to go after them,” he said simply, and then was off.

***

Zero hated going slowly. Always had. Always would. Trailing the goblin corpse caravan once again reminded him of the one thing he could never quite get used to in Bag End – the fact that everything was so small and every day passed so slowly there was little need for dashing.

But at least back then Bilbo wasn't a terrible singer, the house didn't carry ten kinds of different stenches, they weren't in hostile territory, and the life of a certain elf-lord who carried the fate of the world on his shoulder (according to Gandalf, anyway) wasn't on the line. The reploid found himself turning down his smell and sound sensory processors, and silently pitying the elf behind him who
couldn't do what he could.

In other words, it was a long twenty-five minutes, sixteen seconds and seven hundred and eighty-six milliseconds.

At the end of the track, they were standing in front of a rather large camp. Primitive camp, of course – stick palisades, hide tents, wood fire everywhere, and the air reeking with the smell of dirty laundry, sweat and unidentifiable broth. And a dash of decomposing organic matters, too, about which Zero really didn't want to think too hard.

“Banner of the goblins of Gundabad,” said Glorfindel, kneeling next to Zero.

Suddenly Zero felt a pang of worry welling within him. What if he had been wrong? Those goblins, evil or barbaric or whatever, were obviously unable to handle anything more advanced than a 16th century wheellock. Whatever gave him the idea that they might have a Trans-Server in stock?

“You're shaking, Master Zero,” Gandalf's voice echoed behind him. “This isn't like how you've carried yourself earlier.”

Darn. He must be slipping up. When did he get infected with the Worry Virus?

“How I?” Zero asked back. “Must be the atmosphere. It feels... wrong, around here.”

Glorfindel nodded enthusiastically. “Of course it feels wrong, Master Zero,” said Glorfindel. “Such is the way of orcs and goblins. Their existence is a blight upon this world and a mockery of all that is true and good. An army of this size... I haven't seen such an incursion for three centuries, and so near Rivendell no less,” he gripped the hilt of his silver blade. “They shall pay for this very dearly. Now.”

“Wait, my lord,” said Bilbo, tugging at Glorfindel's cloak. “If Lord Elrond is in there somewhere, wouldn't attacking them head-on endanger his life?”

“Well, what would you suggest, Bilbo son of Belladonna?” said Glorfindel. “We cannot sit here and watch, can we?”

“That is why I am a burglar, my lord, and you are an elf-lord,” said Bilbo. “I'll go ahead and check. If something doesn't go as intended, well, I'll hoot twice like a barn-owl and once like a screech-owl, and you'll know something's up.”

Now that was a load of bull if Zero had ever heard one. “I don't recall you ever able to whistle, Master Baggins,” he said. “Much less 'hooting' like some very oddly specific avian specimens.”

“Noughton,” said Bilbo, grabbing Zero's hand and looking him in the eyes. “I am Belladonna Took's son. There has to be something I can do without needing you to mollycoddle me.”

“I'm not comfortable with the idea,” said Zero. “You're going into a goblin camp unarmed.”

“Not exactly,” Bilbo said, producing the weapon from the other day. He drew from the scabbard a steel blade with a sapphire-blue glow. “I can handle... some of the things,” he said. “Do keep an ear out for my hooting, and I shall do just fine.”

And then Zero's ears caught wind of a disturbance in the air above.

A squawk louder and more forceful than any bird known to mankind was able to produce.

“Great Eagle! Great Eagle!” cried Gandalf, pointing at the sky above. His voice was upbeat and
hopeful for all of sixteen hundred milliseconds. Then his lips sagged and terror filled his eyes, and the reason was plain for all to see.

In the sky above the goblin camp, an eagle as broad and large as a jet fighter was engaging in battle against a much smaller enemy. A much smaller enemy, in *green*, floating in mid-air with a *purple-pink* pair of what looked suspiciously like beam sabers and wearing a helmet with a very prominent *wing design* visible from several hundred feet below.

“Playtime's over, bird!” cried the figure with a hoarse cry Zero had now gotten so used to hearing. Then it flew right over the eagle. The beam sabers flashed as it glided.

Then there was a most gruesome squawk.

A shower of crimson fell upon the camp.

The eagle's right wing was sliced of the torso. It came hurtling down onto the forest below and crashed into the mass of trees just left of Zero's party.

“Watch out!” cried Zero, seconds before the rest of the eagle's body fell upon their party.

In a millisecond's time, he pushed all his processors to their limit. Falling trajectory, possible ambient hazards, positions and likely movement paths of allies, vital sign monitoring, possible crash scenarios and optimal reaction to each were quickly converted into raw data form. He could feel his head overheating from so many simultaneous operations.

Whatever would happen, he had one thing and one thing only to do right then, right there – grab Bilbo's hand and ignite his leg booster.

They were halfway through the dash when the eagle's carcass dropped like a rock on the spot Bilbo was standing. A cloud of dust and a gust of wind roused, far greater and stronger than Zero thought it would be. So strong, in fact, that the impact was like being punched in the face by a combat Mechaniloid.

Zero had miscalculated the eagle's weight by several orders of magnitude.

Then he heard a scream by his ear. The impact had ripped Bilbo from his hand, and the hobbit was sent flying into the thicket beyond. The hobbit's scream echoed up to the sky.

Then Zero heard a thud, and all was silent again.

Zero's eyes froze in horror. *S-shoot!*

He was just about to ignite his burner once more in Bilbo's general direction when a huge heat signal began to descend from above.

“Well, well, look what we have here!”

It was *the* green figure he could vaguely remember in his memory, but without a recognizable face or name. His face was that of an orc with the snarling and drooling and deformed bone structure. He'd landed next to the eagle bleeding out, and stabbed both beam sabers through the bird's cranium. A shrill gurgle escaped the bird's throat, then its eyes went milk white and it was no more. Then he took to the air, and began circling Zero in a manner not unlike an organic bird of prey.

Then Zero's scanner began to detect very many heat signals from all around them. The sneering and jeering and shouting and clamoring of goblins and the clashing and smashing of their weapons
worked better than any scanner. All signs pointed to him being completely surrounded.

“An elf, an elf!” cried the green-clad orc. “Catch it, slash it, pierce it, puncture it, break all its bones! Rip its hair from its head and its teeth from its jaw! Beat it till it goes red and black and blue all over! Hang it up a tall mountain so it may rot and the dragons may char its flesh! Ha-ha!”

Zero stood up. What felt like a static charge coursed through his body. Secondary data began to flow back from the remote processors in his arms and legs to the central processing unit. A rudimentary image was being rebuilt literally one pixel after another from the periphery data.

In other words, his body remembered the thing he was beholding even though his central memory chips did not.

The recognition was not merely one-sided – he was detecting abnormal statics from the enemy's outfit.

There was a grimace on the orc's face, as though its armor had a life of its own and its wearer was only struggling to keep it under control. But at last the orc won, and he took to the air. The sneer on its face was gone, however, and he regarded Zero with a kind of unwarranted apprehension!

“But wait, you are no elf!” he cried “No filthy kin of Lord Melkor's enemies so vile and arrogant, no! More you are! Not good, not good! What are you?”

Zero ignited his beam saber.

“I am Zero,” he said. “And you... are an enemy.”

***

The last time so many things went so wrong in so little time in Gandalf's memory was the eve of the War of Wrath (exactly six thousand nine hundred and thirty years ago next month, to be precise). Thankfully, this time it didn't end with him being crushed under the weight of a Great Eagle of Lord Manwe, else it would have been the peak of irony.

Cloaked in the cloud of dust and debris, Gandalf silently moved away from the impact site. Not a moment too late: hardly had he ducked from view when the green eagle-slayer dropped very near where he was standing just then. He settled himself next to the nearest unscathed tree, and looked on with arms and legs paralyzed as the pinkish blades in the orc's hand pierced through the eagle's head.

He uttered a quiet and certainly heartfelt apology to Gwaithir the Lord of the Eagles. There, at his feet one of the Great Eagles lay dead. A death most painful and unthinkable, and there was not a thing he could do about it.

Then he began to hear the distinct noise of a goblin horde gathering. He narrowed his eyes, mouth agape in horror: out from the bowels of their makeshift camp they poured, numbering to the hundreds, gathering behind the green orc.

*It was a trap all along*, the wizard cried silently. *And we walked right into it.*

Then he heard an odd ringing from the opposite side of the eagle's remains.

Then there was a blast and a thunderclap. And many a goblin's scream.

Gandalf rubbed his eyes.
Zero?

Up leaped the red warrior – for it was none but him – and landed on the back of the dead eagle. This time around he was holding not the green-bladed sword of light as in the previous fight, but a weapon vaguely resembling a tiny crossbow, except it had a cylinder where a normal crossbow would have staves. His hand was flashing yellow.

“At him, you useless snaga!” cried the green orc. “He has nowhere to run!”

Then the goblins began to stir and shout, and they started to climb up the dead eagle, trying to get to the warrior.

He didn't even move.

The cylinder in his hand began to spit out shots the size of a grown man's palm. They ripped and tore through the air and goblin flesh with equal ease. One after another they tumbled down the eagle's back with huge holes in them. In no time the goblins' battle cry were replaced entirely with screams, shrieks, whimpers, even cries for mercy and the protection of Melkor in the Black Speech. But Zero shot and shot and shot, until those with the wits about them turned round and ran back screaming into their camp.

Now the pile of dead goblins was getting taller and taller, forming a stepladder of sort up to the eagle's back, yet no more goblin would come. Indeed the only orc to stand in the way was the green monster in the sky. Gandalf was about to question why he didn't join in the fight when suddenly his right hand gave his chest a powerful punch with an audible thwack.

“Shut yer trap, yer rust-bucket!” he cried, as if arguing with his own armor. “Nobody mess with Blugbagkh of Gundabad and live!”

Without warning he swooped down on Zero, brandishing his two blades. There was a fearsome whoosh in the air; the two beams missed Zero's face by a hair as he leaped backward.

Zero threw his right arm. Off his cylinder weapon flew like a dart at Blugbagkh's direction, hitting the orc squarely in the face. Its body jerked backward as it yelped. Then and only then was Zero's green blade in his hands, and he had leaped to near the tail of the eagle, waiting patiently.

“So very weak,” he said, and made a distinct 'come hither' gesture with his left hand.

If the orc had been fuming before, now its rage was truly something to behold. Now he spiraled at Zero like a bird of prey, spinning the two blades before it. On its warpath the pink edges cut and singed and further defiled the eagle's body. Gandalf could only barely make out its form behind a cloud of eagle blood.

Then the three blades clashed, and Gandalf thought he was reliving one of the many heroic duels in the First Age of the Sun when the towers of Gondolin stood tall still in the West. Cuts, slash, blows and parries melded into one another, and soon both combatants were likened to mirages in the desert, and only flashes of green and pink were discernible.

Then the two combatants took to the air; one hovering, the other somersaulting. Energies terrible and beautiful smashed into each other, and the air was rent with spark and the smell of burnt things.

Then there was a thud, and a flash, and a scream.

The two combatants had parted. Gandalf's heart jumped – Zero had been tumbled further towards the eagle's tail. Up he sprung, but there was agony on his face as he clutched his chest, upon which a
His opponent was hanging in the air still, though his flight likening a wounded bird now. There was a gash very deep on its chest, and the cross symbol on its chest was rent. Black orc blood was seeping from behind the chink in the armor.

But then he was flying, and Zero was not. Up he soared into the sky again, staggering and bleeding as he was, and nosedived at Zero again. The red warrior rolled aside just as the two blades ripped a new hole on the backside of the eagle.

The clashing and slashing resumed. This time around, the orc became even more aggressive even as the wound on his chest spitted out black blood. On he drove, and the red warrior was pushed back, and back, and back, and back... until his back foot very nearly fell off the eagle's back.

Gandalf's heart skipped a beat. Zero could dodge the next blow still, but his balance was lost. Down he fell, and his blade slipped off his hands. It rolled off the eagle's back and landed on the ground, its green blade retracting into the hilt. Gandalf could only see that especially sadistic look – wrinkled face, bloodshot eyes and gaping mouth – of an orc in the midst of berserking.

Then the two blades fell on Zero's head.

Suddenly there was a whizzing noise. Sharp object piercing flesh. A throaty gurgle.

The orc backed off and staggered a few steps. An elf-arrow was sticking from its torso at the very spot its armor was rent.

From the trees behind Zero Gandalf heard a distinct, nimble elven tread. There, below the two combatants, stood Glorfindel in all the past splendor of the House of the Golden Flower. Up he leaped to the back of the eagle, and his sword was swift and vengeful. The silvered Noldorin longsword ripped through the armor's chink and out went through the orc's back.

Glorfindel primed his right leg, and a mighty kick propelled the green orc off the eagle's back. He flew into a large tree just on the side.

Then with a fizzle, sizzle and a blinding flash, the orc and its armament exploded. When the thunderclap faded and the light dissipated, there was little left of both orc and tree but for the hilts of the two swords of light lying harmlessly on the forest floor.

Now Zero was struggling back on his feet, panting. He was kneeling on one knee still, obviously winded, hurt, or both. Gandalf was about to emerge himself to see what he could do. But then Glorfindel had approached him, regarded him from top to toe, and then smiled.

“My apologies, Master Zero,” he said with a bow, and offered his hand to the red warrior. “I was occupied by a small... goblin problem. I suppose all's well that end's well, did it not?”

Gandalf noted he wasn't lying. His silvery armor was splattered with several streaks of black blood that wasn't there the last time he set eyes upon it.

“It's good that you survived, Lord Glorfindel,” said Zero, accepting Glorfindel's hand. “I thought the eagle had crush you.”

“Never account a Noldo for dead until you'd seen his remains, and sometimes not even then,” said Glorfindel with a prideful smile as was his kindred's wont. “Especially if his name is Glorfindel, Chief of the House of Golden Flower and Champion of the Gondolindrim.”
“I'll keep it in mind,” said Zero. “Not everyone can survive certain death as well as you can-”

And then something, a seemingly minor yet vitally important thing to both Zero and Mithrandir himself, struck the both of them with the hyperbolic weight of a dozen eagles.

Bilbo Baggins.

***

Bilbo squirmed in the dark.

He had never had a worse fall throughout the forty-something years of his life, nor had his limbs and tummy ever hurt so bad. Maybe that one time he nearly rolled down the Brandywine and got spanked for his effort. Or that time he ate too much mushroom and had an upset tummy for days. Or that time he... well, the point being he'd gotten into plenty of trouble as a fountling, but never, ever, ever had it hurt or confused or pained him as much as the last one.

In fact, he was sure he'd have broken all his limbs... until he could move them just fine.

Bilbo felt a warm light caressing his skin, and his eyes began to twitch. Then came his fingers. Then arms. Then body. Then his feet and legs, too, moved around.

“You are awake, Bilbo Baggins.”

“Who's there?” His hand reached for the blade on his side. “Show yourself!”

“I am in front of you,” the voice said, and Bilbo heard something twinkling in his ears. A funny sensation, and strangely invigorating.

Then Bilbo blinked, shook his head and rubbed his eyes until it went rather red and itched terribly.

Then he remembered his handkerchief. With shaking hands he dug into his jacket pocket, and lo! His fingertips were touching the silky object, a little soiled as he'd blew on it earlier, but otherwise perfectly fine and usable. He drew it from his pocket and lifted it to his eyes.

Better. Much, much better. The resilience and spirit of a good, honest-to-Eru hobbit returned to him, and he stood up and turned towards the direction of the voice.

A gargled gasp escaped his lips.

The thing he had been rubbing into his eyes had been something far worse than dust.

The areas around him was lined with the dead bodies of many a goblin. Black blood covered the floor, and the expression on the goblins' face suggested such pain and terror that Bilbo wouldn't wish upon anyone.

On that note, it wasn't especially clear where he was. It looked like a room or a corridor, since Bilbo could vaguely see walls (upon which various goblins were lying dead) and a ceiling, and the floor was solid and artificial.

Then Bilbo's jaws hung agape. He was looking face-to-face at the creature most likely to have caused all that killing.

And if the orbs glaring at him were of any indication, it was looking at him.

At Bilbo Baggins from the Shire, frightened and hurt and defenseless and jittery in equal measures.
“F-f-f-forgive me!” he cried. “I did-didn't mean to disturb y-y-your rest, O Master Most T-T-Terrible and Fear-fear-fearsome!”

“You are afraid,” the voice continued, and to Bilbo's horror it was only drawing closer to him. And closer. And closer. And closer. “Don't be.”

Now Bilbo's eyes were getting more used to the darkness (for which he might have to thank his fright). Above, the moonlight was shining through a hole in the ceiling, bathing the figure in front of him in all its silvery glory.

Bilbo decided, then and there, that he must be seeing a ghost. An exceptionally pretty ghost, but still a ghost no matter what.

He (or was that a she? Bilbo could make a case either way) stood there towering over him, looking at him kindly in a manner reminiscent of Gandalf himself. His body was clad in green and white armor all over lavishly decorated with wings and wing motifs, from helm to chestpiece to the elongate bracers and boots he wore. His face was like Noughton's, in the sense that his features were small and delicate, but on his face manifested a great sorrow not unlike that of the heroic Noldor of the First Age.

All of those things paled in comparison to how he seemed to be phasing in and out of appearance, his form shifted and pulsed and throbbed with every passing moment. Immaterial was his form, and Bilbo could see through his body as it jittered and flickered.

“I'm not going to hurt you,” he said, and raised his hand at Bilbo. Like the gentle-hobbit he was, Bilbo also stuck out his hand.

He jerked back the moment his hand passed through the figure's.

“I-I-I mean no disrespect, good Master,” he said. “B-B-But just what are you?”

“Sage Harpuia, I am... was called,” said the ghost. “I was one of Master X's servants and generals in the days Neo Arcadia's banner flew proudly still for the good of all mankind... and reploids.”

Now that Bilbo was aware, he noted that the ghost's voice was terribly inconsistent. Sometimes it would be airy and sweet like an elven song, at others as unclear and distorted as though spoken through the lips of a hobbit who'd smoked too much pipeweed and was in his deathbed because of it. Yet the gentleness and the sorrow in that voice suggested the figure was, if not benevolent, then at least would do him no harm. Bilbo's courage returned to him, and he took a deep breath.

“So you would be one of the elven heroes recounted in the tales of old? Are you, then, among the host of the Elvenking of the Noldor in Mithrim and Nargothrond and Tirion and Gondolin where the white toweres rise? Or are you among the hosts that fought in the flame and ash to the death against the tide of Darkness? Or are you one of the witnesses of Ancalagon the Black and the rise of Earendil into the starry skies?”

“It would be an honor to be called a hero,” said Harpuia. “Alas, I am not among those you have named. In fact, I come from a different timeline to you and your world, Bilbo Baggins.”

“A... different timeline?” Bilbo asked back, a look of utter confusion overtaking his face.

“I am sure when all is said and done, the stories of my world would not be much shorter than yours, albeit no less full of heroism and tragedy,” said Harpuia. “I wish I could recount it all to someone who would tell of it, but my time is far shorter than I would like.”
“Are you... fading from this world?” asked Bilbo. “Like the elven kindreds are foretold to?”

The ghost shook his head, and Bilbo fell silent. “I want you to meet someone, Bilbo Baggins,” said Harpuia, tilting his head towards the opposite end of the room. “Go to the end of the room. My Master X awaits you there.”

Bilbo strained his eyes and peered towards the indicated direction. He saw nothing. Nothing except a black shadow darker than the moonless night. Then again fear returned to him, and gripped at his heart like a clinging palm.

“You hesitate,” said Harpuia, and he smiled. “I expected that.”

“I-I-I don't mean to be a cowardly hobbit or anything,” said Bilbo, unconsciously taking a step back. “But my good sir! Can you not tell me what is happening here? And why am I supposed to-”

“You are a friend of Zero.”

Bilbo's eyes widened. “Zero? You don't mean Noughton, my butler?”

The ghost's head bobbed forward once. “We both know who I am talking about. To you he may be Noughton the butler. To me, he is the Legendary Reploid Zero and greater than any of his kind save for Master X himself. And to Master X... he is a friend, close as one half of himself.”

Legendary Reploid? Greater than any of his kind? Bilbo's head was spinning. He'd guessed something along the lines after seeing all that Noughton could do. But the bit about this Master X person was new.

“A friend... of Noughton?” parroted Bilbo. “One half of himself?”

“I wish I could explain all I could, but we may not have the time,” said Harpuia. “Can you feel it? Even as we speak Zero is fighting a powerful enemy.”

Bilbo's eyes dilated. Now he remembered. The clash in the sky. The orc in green armor that wielded bright blades of light. The falling eagle.

Then Bilbo looked again at the ghost again, and something in his mind flashed like a candle lit. “To think of it... he looks just like you!”

“Quite right,” said Harpuia with a nod. “That enemy you saw is wearing a coat that is a copy of my body – a mockery of what I was. Yet in Zero's current state, he'll be outmatched by the creature... for my powers in life is now the monster's, fake or not.”

Bilbo's hands were now curled into fists, but his shoulders were still trembling. He no longer stepped back, but he wasn't all that willing to step forward. “How can I trust you are on my side when a... copy? Of yours is fighting my friends out there?”

Then all of a sudden the room came to life. A light so blue, so... iridescent, began to blaze at the top of the room, drowning out the moonlight and the initial darkness alike. A feeling not unlike when Gandalf produced his red ring began to engulf Bilbo.

“That's enough, my loyal Harpuia,” a voice echoed from the top of the room, airy yet as warm as it came. The voice confused Bilbo to no end, for there was something in it that reminded Bilbo of a little child, yet something else that told of a maturity beyond all but the most long-lived of elves. Now and then it spoke, its voice enormously resounding, yet light as the wind and uplifting to the spirit.
“Master X...” murmured the ghost, stepping back and dropping down on one leg, looking to the ceiling.

“I have bothered you again, Harpuia,” said the voice on the ceiling again. “Rest now. I shall speak to Bilbo Baggins myself.”

“Yes, Master X,” said Harpuia.

His figure began to fade from the world as he spoke: first his legs, then his arm, then his body... then his head lost color and became transparent, and then was no more. Within but seconds, there was nothing left of him... nothing but a sense of dread and foreboding imprinted upon Bilbo of Bag End.

“Wait! What about Noughton?” Bilbo cried.“Mister? Wait!”

“He will be fine, rest assured, Mr. Baggins,” said the voice on the ceiling, “Because he is Zero. Because he is my Zero. Because he is your Zero.”

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Chapter End Notes

1) For those FAMILIAR with the Megaman Universe:

- The title is a direct reference to the Megaman Zero music track of the same name, "Fake", played during the final boss battle of the first game; and refers to the fact that the "X" in that game is, in fact, not the X series' X. I found that the name serves the context here just fine, and chose it for the chapter title because it is just that cool. In my opinion, anyway!

- Glorfindel invoking "Nobody can survive that" is on purpose. As I said, he REALLY is the elf version of Zero, right down to that ability to come back/reincarnate from the dead.

- Zero begins using the Z-buster in this chapter. Unfortunately, I don't think he's going to keep it...

2) For those NOT familiar with the Megaman Universe:

- On Blugbagkh the orc: I have noted once about the invention in the MMZX series called "Biometal". This guy wears such a biometal, based on Sage Harpuia from the Megaman Zero series - who is, well, a humanoid harpy armed with a dual beam-kunai/short blade.

3) Tolkienism note:

- On the eagle: One not-that-major-but-still-jarring problem I've had with most things the Professor wrote is the prevalence of "eagles saving the day" (though that's more of a Third Age thing than First Age). Without going so deep into the details, the Middle-earth eagles are that world's equivalence of the US Air Force, and are like anti-bomber fighters, close-air support, transport helicopters and tactical bombers rolled into one.
Nothing says "I win" for the good guys as well as the word "eagle" (with the exception of the two words "ring" and "destroy" in one sentence). That is why I want to do something new: a scene in which the eagles (well, one eagle) loses very badly to evil forces bearing overwhelming technological advantage.

- The "hoot like a screech/barn owl" quote from the second chapter of the book is used here, and quoted in a completely different context. I hope it would convey the sense that Bilbo is starting to steadily grow a spine now and accepts difficult missions that are, unfortunately, what burglars do.

- Blugbagkh is an original character, which I normally try my best to avoid. Then again, in a meta sense he's like an orc who is a mid-boss. I don't think I can really go wrong with such a character.
Chapter Notes

Finally, chapter 9: This is one chapter I've VERY much enjoyed writing, consider how much it explores into the Megaman Universe from beginning to (near - excluding ZX and Legends) end. The title of the chapter is a play on the ending song of MMZ3: "I, Zero, Your Fellow". Given that in a sense X kinda sorta DIED there, it is as sad as an ending song can be - and the Mythos remix made it EVEN WORSE. Look it up, I'm serious; the Mythos version WILL make you cry.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 9

Interlude – I, Bilbo, Your Fellow

If a month ago someone had told Bilbo he would one day stand frozen in a corridor filled with dead goblins, he'd have invited them to tea, then quietly send them the other way. Now he was doing that exact thing: standing in a corridor filled with dead goblins, fidgeting a certain object at the far end of that corridor with his gaze.

How would he even describe it? Bilbo was running short on good words, but he would try anyway. It looked like a round armchair, except without legs, and whose handrail were wrapped around the circumference. The area around it was free of goblin corpses and stench, so there was at least one good point. A panel of some sort was located where the backrest should have been had the object been an armchair. It was a glass panel, too, from the way it glittered under the blue light, inviting him to look at it.

It was an invitation such curious creature as a hobbit couldn't turn down.

Bilbo licked his lips and tried not to inhale so deep because of all the goblin stench.

He measured his progress towards the object by the distance he'd put between himself and the nearest goblin corpse. In that sense he was making good headway: One step, two step, three...

“Step into the Trans-Server, please, Mr. Baggins,” said the voice above, mellow and amicable.

Bilbo gulped. The 'interior' of the so-called Trans-Server was a raised platform contained within the perimeter handrail. It seemed designed to be stepped on... by humans, because the footprint indented into the raised floor was in the shape of footwears rather than bare feet.

Not to say hobbits couldn't try. So Bilbo rubbed his hands, pressed his temples, straightened his back... and put his left foot into the indent.

Nothing happened.

Then he put the right foot in.
All of a sudden the structure sprang to life. Lights on the underside of the 'handrail' began to flare, as did the ones located just under the footprint. An object looking suspiciously like a mirror above Bilbo's head began casting a purplish ray down upon him. It covered all of his body within the space of a brief moment, and then was gone.

Then the platform itself rumbled. Thankfully, Eru had made the hobbit race with a very keen sense of balance, otherwise Bilbo would have fallen off while the platform was raising him to the level of the glass panel.

Then it stopped, and Bilbo was left with a fine mixture of excitement, exhilaration, fear and curiosity. The glass panel stood there still, blinking and inviting him to look into it.

Guess what he did after that? No hobbit could resist, Bilbo told himself, and he was all over the glass panel. A soft "'Wow" left his lips. There were words on it – and Bilbo Baggins was nothing if not a bibliophile.

"INITIALIZING TRANS-SERVER OPERATION SYSTEM...

VERSION 2.0.0.1...

COPYRIGHT CENTRAL NEO ARCADIAN ADMINISTRATIVE AUTHORITY, 2199-22XX.

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INITIALIZATION COMPLETE.

CONNECTING TO NEO ARCADIA CENTRAL SERVER...

ERROR: NEO ARCADIA CENTRAL SERVER INACCESSIBLE.

CONNECTING TO PERIPHERAL SERVER...”

The letters were rolling off the screen about as fast as Bilbo could read them... and unfortunately that meant way faster than he could understand them. He knew the individual words, most of them in any case, but when put together in that particular order and syntax they became gibberish to his eyes and ears.

Then the screen brightened up: specific spots on the glass surface, each corresponding to a single letter, began to highlight itself. First came an 'R', then an 'U', then an 'N', then a bar-like button near the lower edge without any letter assigned to it. As the letters were highlighted, a new line appeared on the display section:

“> RUN SECURITY_OVERRIDE.EXE”

No sooner had the last letter been entered than the screen came to life again with three long beeps and three short ones, and the automatic scrolling resumed.

“COMMAND ACCEPTED.

ABORTING PERIPHERAL SERVER CONNECTION.

WARNING: ILLEGAL OPERATION DETECTED. PRIMARY FUNCTION OFFLINE.

ACCESSING MEMORY SUB-BLOCK 1 THROUGH 20.

SWITCHING TO SAFE MODE.”
The letter-entering resumed; this time a slightly shorter phrase.

“> RUN CIEL.EXE”

“Ciel?” Bilbo said, fingering the display. The next series of beeps and blips startled him and nearly tossed him off the high platform. He regained balance just on time to catch the next message.

“INITIALIZING CONVERGENT IGNITION BY ENERGEN LINKAGE SYSTEM...

INITIALIZATION COMPLETE. ENERGY CHARGE AT 74.6 PERCENT.

WELCOME TO C.I.E.L. SYSTEM CONSOLE, VERSION 3.0.0.4.

COPYRIGHT CIEL LIGHT, 22XX

PLEASE ENTER COMMAND”

Having learnt from the last experience, Bilbo decided to stand back and watch the event unfold. As he had predicted, more letters entered themselves on the screen.

“> MOUNT ROCK.X.IMG”

“Mount? Rock? Sounds logical enough,” Bilbo said, and kept watching. “There certainly are rocks on mountains... Doesn't explain the 'X' part though.”

“RETRIEVING WELCOME TEXT...”

“Welcome text?” Bilbo put a finger on his lips.

Then the screen clear, and a slew of new letters arranged themselves on the screen. They formed up in a column. Unfortunately to Bilbo, they appeared as little more than gibberish to his eyes.

“おはようございます、エッくスおじさま
おはようございます、エッくスおじさま!”

“What kind of runes are these?” Bilbo wondered out loud. “Doesn't look elven...” The hobbit would know if it had been, for his mother insisted to get a wedding ring with some flourishing Quenya scripts inscribed on it. It made quite the story back in the day, or so she told him, and that ring was in full display in a jar on the mantelpiece in his smial within his view.

His question wasn't unanswered for long.

“RETRIEVING WELCOME RECORDING...

PLAYING WELCOME RECORDING...”

“Ohaiyou Gozaimasu, Ekkusu-Ojisama!”

“Oh-I-Oh?”

Bilbo's mouth hung agape in complete confusion. For all he knew that could be the incantation to call back Morgoth the Enemy of All, or to end the world and everything in it. Well, he did know another thing – the voice he had heard was gorgeous. If not for the fact that one, she was speaking in a language he didn't understand and two, he didn't see her face and therefore she could be anything from a hobbit to a human to a Balrog, he would have seriously considered making a courtship proposal on the basis of her voice alone.
Then all of a sudden, his surrounding melted. Bits and pieces of reality collapsed right in front of his eyes, each fragment so palpable he thought he could catch them with his bare hands. He would have been so frightened, had his curiosity not gotten the better of him. There he stood, in the middle of what could be an endless void, as reality as he knew it was stripped away, like a bandit's mask at the Shire Reeve's office.

Behind that broken reality, Bilbo Baggins saw him. A figure clad in blue armor, blue dress and blue armbands, with a halo of rainbows atop his blue helmet. He, too, was flickering in and out of existence, as if his time in the world was numbered. He certainly looked the part, too, for the one thing Bilbo saw on his face as he smiled was a tired sort of gentleness: someone who had been stripping his very essence all his life just to be kind to others, and had drained himself to the bottom of the barrel.

In other words, he would be like Gandalf, should Gandalf ever grow weary of playing magic tricks, doing good and helping people. The thought gnawed at Bilbo's guts like a mild bothering pain that wouldn't fade.

“Welcome to my world, Mr. Baggins,” said him, and Bilbo could recognize the voice: the same as the one he'd heard from the ceiling, except clearer and surer now that the static was no more. “As you can see, there is not much remaining in it now.”

“The same to you, the same to you, my good sir!” said Bilbo. He would have said something far more profound, too, but his lips had betrayed him and simple pleasantries were all that left them. “You must be the one called 'Master X'. I guess I am at your service!”

“Pardon me, Mr. Baggins, but I'm no 'Master','” he said. “I've been just 'X' for most of my life... and in fact you can blame much of my tragedy on the title 'Master' that I had to bear against my will.”

“Very well, X it is,” said Bilbo, though his head was drumming with the entirely inappropriate question of “What kind of name is X anyway?” That, or what kind of person would not want to be called 'Master' or 'Mister' when it was just common courtesy.

The figure didn't seem to pay much notice to his entirely everyday concern, however.

“It is such a pity,” X said, “that I have to meet you under such a circumstance, Bilbo Baggins.”

“Well, uh...” Bilbo scratched his head, eking out a grin as hearty as he could manage. “I mean, that's perfectly fine! I should like to have invited you to my humble hobbit-hole first, you being Noughton's friend and all. Any friend of his is a friend of mine.”

“Thank you, Mr. Baggins,” said the figure. “Your words mean more than you think.”

He took a single step towards Bilbo – until his face was only a foot from Bilbo's.

“It is good to know my old friend Zero is in the care of a good man such as you,” he continued. “For he has suffered more than the world has any right to demand of him for nearly two centuries.”

“Two centuries?” Bilbo asked back. “That's a great deal of time!”

Bilbo felt like smashing his own face with a hard object. Way to be obvious, Bilbo! Your mother would be so proud of your witticism and brevity.

“I know,” said X. “It may come as a surprise to you... but Zero is not a human being; and neither am I. We're reploids, the both of us; robots programmed with the ability to think... possessing thoughts and emotions and a will of our own.”
The sound Bilbo just heard was the terminology flying straight over his head. “Reploid?” he asked. “And robots?”

“Machines. Contraptions. Creatures built of metal and plastic and programmed according to a certain algorithm... a certain routine.”

The bewilderment in Bilbo’s voice only expanded, and with it came a curiosity and interest matching in size. “You mean, it is possible to create a person out of iron and wood and other inanimate things and make them work on their own?” he cried. “Why, that’s wizard work! A miracle!”

“Somewhere down the line in my timeline it’s not wizard work any more, Mr. Baggins,” said X. “At some points there were about as many of my kind – reploids is what we are called, for we were ‘replicas’ of mankind – as there were human beings.”

“I honestly don't see anything wrong with that,” said Bilbo. “Sounds like a good jolly time for all!”

“It should have been good, and indeed it was good for a time,” said X. “Until some of us reploids started to go... Maverick, and tried to hurt or kill humans.”

“Whoops,” Bilbo said, his face sunk. “I spoke too soon, didn't I?”

“You did, Mr. Baggins,” said X, and although there was a smile on his face as if trying to say 'it's perfectly fine', the way his head swayed from side to side in a manner barely visible suggested it was not. “Ours was a long story. If you should liken a lifetime to a dream, then mine and Zero’s had been a nightmare of two centuries during which nothing ever got better.”

Bilbo didn't know how long he was sitting there in the void, but he kept asking questions like a curious hobbit very typical, and X was all too glad to provide answers.

He was told the tale of a Dr. Thomas Light, an expert in the field of ‘robotics' who was apparently capable of creating machines so like the Children of Eru Iluvatar as to be virtually indistinguishable.

He ingested the long and hard struggle of a certain Blue Bomber, made by the aforementioned Light, against a Dr. Albert Wily who might as well be made from the same cloth as the wicked kings of the Big People, of whom the mythical island of Numenor used to be the domain.

He wiped his eyes as the story of Light and Megaman came to an end, and the story of X and Zero began.

Then he learnt of the Maverick Wars, in which the innocuous desire to protect mankind through the Maverick Hunters laid the foundation for so many disasters in the future. He heard of the Repliforce, whose ill-fated effort at clearing their collective name ended up with millions of people – humans and Reploids – dead. He widened his eyes at the Eurasia Crisis, and deep inside he wept for a world subject to such an unfair cataclysm.

Then Bilbo's heart was lifted but for a moment at the mention of the Elf System, only to sink like a rock when the story segued into that Elf War that resulted in the near-extinction of all life on the planet, men and machines alike. The more he listened, the more he felt like crying, for the tragedies and heroics unfolding before him was indeed no less than that of the Noldor whilst the world was still young and the towers of Thangorodrim stood in defiance of the Valar in the West.

Then X told of Weil, a creature in human form who might as well have been forged in the depths of Angband from the malice of Morgoth himself, and Bilbo's hands were curled into hobbit-sized fists, as much good as that would do. By the time X was relating the story of Neo Arcadia, of Weil's atrocities, and of all the horror that had arisen from a good intention, the hobbit was bawling.
Oh, but it didn't stop there. Then X began telling the last tale of them all – of Weil's final weapon the Ragnarok and Noughton's last flight. It was Noughton, alone on a space station the size of the Shire, versus the man who caused all the troubles, with the fate of all that remained of the world in the balance. And...

“... he decided to stay,” said X. “There he was, given one last chance to leave the colony as it broke down all around him, and he turned it down. He turned it down... because he wanted to save everyone. Because had he left, whatever was left of Ragnarok would flatten Area Zero... and there wouldn't be much of a world or a future for anyone, any more.”

Bilbo bit his lips and wiped his eyes. “But he walked away, didn't he?” he cried. “Because he was here with me, my loyal butler in Bag End, right? And he's here with me on this silly quest to Erebor to claim gold and gems from a dragon, see? And...”

X shook his head.

“No, Mr. Baggins,” said X. “He did not walk away.”

“But I have been living with him for the past year!” cried Bilbo.

His body was trembling and sweating and shivering all over, his mind was in a knot, and fear was poured all over him like one would glaze a baked apple with fresh honey. He'd heard the tales before, although they were less tales and more rumors, of those touched by elves who'd died regretful deaths. They'd linger on in the world, living and eating and sleeping and doing anything ordinary people were wont to do, but the moment they were reminded they were supposed to be dead, they'd fade away, either to the Hall of Mandos or beyond.

The thought of Noughton being such a wight, after so much he'd done for him, was like as though all the knowledge that Bilbo had known and loved since he was a fountling had been a lie. For a long, long while the hobbit couldn't speak without breaking down in tears. “Explain to me,” he finally said, and not without much difficulties.

“It would be difficult for you to understand in full,” said X, “but I... cheated, in a sense.”

“Cheated?” Bilbo asked.

“Did you seriously think that Weil would just let death take him and go down with the ship?”

“Yes!” Bilbo cried indignantly. But then his voice sank, and logic caught up to him, and he stared at his feet. “I mean... no. He sounds too much like the dark lord Sauron to simply let a total defeat stop him for long.”

“And you would be right,” said X. “I don't know how he did it, but he had found a way to puncture the space-time continuum. Travel from one world to another, in layman's terms. Clever application of cyber-elves and the cyberspace, energy manipulation, one thing or another... even I am unsure about. What mattered is that he was having plans to use the Ragnarok as a vessel to look for greener pasture now that the Earth as we knew it had been wrecked to the brink of collapse, and a core ingredient of that formula is a LOT of energy.”

“And he looked to Middle-earth. To Arda. To... my world,” Bilbo murmured. “But... but didn't Zero blow that space... thing up?”

“Mr. Bilbo, remember what I told you,” said X. “The explosion of the Eurasia Space Colony released so much energy the surface of the world was virtually scorched. That was a civilian colony. Ragnarok was designed precisely as a weapon of war. All that energy had to go somewhere.”
A gasp escaped Bilbo's lips. “Weil used that explosion to take him to Middle-earth!”

X nodded. “Precisely. Even though Middle-earth as you know it isn't quite his destination of choice, at that time he had to go somewhere or die. He probably reckoned this world was a better place to go than hell.” X closed his eyes and shook his head. “And I... I used that chance to save Zero.”

Then X stayed silent for a long, long while, as though the memory hurt him too much to continue in one breath. Bilbo wasn't surprised. Deep inside, he could hear himself cracking also.

“You see, Zero has an... unique ability to regenerate himself, with or without help from others. If you nudge him in the right direction, he may make for himself a body of his own even if the previous had been utterly obliterated, as long as his soul is intact and if there is enough energy and raw material to work with. That's what the cyberspace was for, and that's what I did.”

“For over a year I'd abused my power over the cyberspace,” said X, and there was a thick regret in his voice one could cut with a knife. “I redirected energy and material meant for the reconstruction of the world and sent them through the wormhole created by Ragnarok's explosion to your world – to Middle-earth – to rebuild Zero. Energy and material that could have saved lives had I not appropriated them.” X shook his head bitterly. “To say nothing of how I've had to make use of the tools Weil had built for himself to my own end.”

Then he let out a dry chuckle, and once more his voice was filled with agony. “Funny, isn't it, Mr. Baggins?” he said. “The world had hailed me as its savior for two centuries and trusted that I, the Megaman X, could do no wrong. My last act that mattered in the physical world was to spit upon that trust... because I couldn't stand seeing Zero perishing while I sit around and do nothing!”

Bilbo found himself offering his hand. He only realized that X was as immaterial as it came when his hand fell on his shoulder and passed right through. If it hadn't, he would have given the blue man the hug he so sorely needed. “No,” said Bilbo. “No it's not funny. I would have done much the same, were I in your shoes – not to say we hobbits wear shoes, but if given the choice you had, well, maybe I would wear shoes, too, and be proud of it!”

Bilbo regretted not a single word he had said. He might be a Took; but he was also a Baggins. And a Baggins was nothing, if not devoted and protective of those important to them. “That's kind of you, Mr. Baggins,” said X, and there was a look of tranquility and gratefulness in his expression.

“What's more important is that you succeeded, right?” Bilbo added. “That's all that matters. Nought-I mean, Zero lives. He is in my service... my care. Isn't that a happy ending for everyone?”

“Then would be the best outcome,” said X. “It is with that desire that I did... something to him – a good idea at the time, and in hindsight it might not be all that bad, but-”

Bilbo felt like something was stinging him deep inside. “What is that you did?” he asked hastily.

“I modified his memory,” X said. “We are reploids, Mr. Baggins. Our memory is permanent unless we perform modification on them, or the memory chip is damaged or corrupted – the latter would be less amnesia and more the death of the reploid, mind you.”

Bilbo widened his eyes at the implication. If only hobbits could do the same, he thought, a lot of trouble could have been fixed, wouldn't it?

“Zero and myself have had a very long life and seen more carnage and loss than we could handle,” said X. “That's why we did what we did to cope. I ran away draped in the disguise of a heroic sacrifice, while he, well, he simply had himself put to sleep, his body changed and a host of memory
"So I did something vaguely similar this time. Instead of tampering with his memory in a way I would deeply regret down the line, I decided to separate all the proper names that matter in his memory and stored them on a protected file. This way, he'd remember he once fought with me, but he wouldn't remember my one-letter name. Or that he had had a lover whom he killed - who went by the name Iris - but that name he wouldn't recall and therefore connection would be lost to him. Or, Dr. Light forbids, he may or may not realize that there is a girl still waiting with unwavering hope for him to come back, but he certainly won't recall that her name is Ciel."

Bilbo raised his eyebrows. "Was it necessary?"

"I... don't know," said X, and there was that uncertainty in his voice as if a hole was being drilled from his heart (if he had a heart, anyway). "I did so in the hope that he would, of his free will, forget everything and start anew in Middle-earth. That's part of the reason I left him in the Shire where you found him. I didn't know you personally, Mr. Baggins, but there's no better place for a new beginning than the Shire, if the information I had collected on Arda is trustworthy. But then everything started to derail, and I'm looking at you today, Mr. Baggins." He paused, and shoot his head like a man defeated. "It looks like all those years had passed, and I've still underestimated my friend."

"And he would be right, thought Bilbo. Both on Arda, and on Zero."

"I suppose he didn't want to forget," said the hobbit. "I know, because I wouldn't too! That goes doubly true for Zero, because he's my butler... and because he is the Zero you knew, Mister X. The Zero in the tales you've told me wouldn't rest until all's right with the world," Bilbo's voice raised. "And we're a long way from there, though I do try... and he tries about eleventy thousand times harder than I do."

Then for what seemed like the longest time, X stood there, quiet and stunned. Whether he was immersing in his own regret, or trying to find a solution for the issue he had a hand in creating, or both of the above, Bilbo wouldn't know. He did know one thing: X finally regarded him from top to toe in a manner that made the hobbit feel like blushing - Bilbo was not in his best clothes, he was probably drenched in goblin blood and ichor, and he would smell the part, too, had it been the case! Not a proper way for a hobbit to display himself, no sir!

But then the do-gooder Baggins and the adventurous Took shook hand again, and Bilbo steeled himself, and there he stood as tall and proud as a hobbit could afford to be. "Perhaps there is something I could help you with, my good sir?" he said, with the same good-natured voice he'd assumed when he accepted Zero into his household a year before.

X's eyes brightened. "There is," he said, but there was hesitation in his voice. "It is a burden I wouldn't wish upon anyone but myself, but..."

"Just say the word, my good sir!" said Bilbo.

"Very well then," said X, though he didn't seem very happy having to resort to whatever he was resorting to. "There is a way for Zero to recover his memory. There is a key in my possession... and I shall it to you."

"You would?" Bilbo exclaimed. But then his voice sagged a little. "But... why me? I'm just a hobbit-well, a hobbit roped into becoming a burglar for a hare-brained adventures involving dungeons deep and caverns old and long forgotten gold..." The whole business was starting to sound more than a little... larger than life, so to speak, than he would have liked. And things so large and great and epic-
sounding, well, they might not be something a hobbit would like to do, would they?

He shook off his feeling of uncertainty in two seconds max. He paused, and then resumed, and if only there had been a mirror before him he'd realize at that precise moment there was a little something in him that resembled his maternal ancestor Bandobras Took the Bullroarer. “But I shall do as you ask,” said Bilbo, rubbing his eyes. “Because I'm quite fond of the fellow myself, and would ill like to see him suffer if I can help it!”

“As I've expected of you, Mr. Baggins,” said X, and for the first time since they began did the man—well, the reploid—truly smile, in that there was scant sadness and exhaustion in him. He clasped his hands in front of his chest, make a sound as if inhaling deep, and then began.

“There is a sentence—call it a magic sentence if you want—that is dear to both Zero and I,” X said. “In fact, it is this sentence that has irreversibly intertwined our fates with each other even before we were truly 'created'. It is, coincidentally enough, one you wouldn't hear very often in this world of yours, so the odds of someone accidentally awakening Zero's memories by chance is astronomically low. That is the password to the locked file and the content of the relevant hash files.”

“So if I speak this sentence to him, his lost memory will come back?” Bilbo said.

“Yes,” said X. “If you do that, his memory will be his again. The good and the bad. And the very ugly.”

“Wait a second,” said Bilbo, looking terrified. “There is a 'very ugly' part to this?”

“Positive,” X answered. “Beyond the memories so terrible and traumatic of his and mine, I've locked within those files a good portion of his combat skill, so destructive as it is and so capable of causing even more tragedy to your world. In fact, I've left him with little more than enough combat prowess to defend himself and his when he settles down. If... when you release his memory, he'll get everything back. All the skills he'd accumulated through two centuries, his handle over his many weapon systems and his advanced battle cognizance engine,” X paused, as if shuddering also at the thought. “He'd turn from a fine fighter... into a God of Destruction, as he had always been back in the day.”

The possibility baffled Bilbo. “So... you are trying to tell me Zero, the Zero that is now making the Noldorin Elves look like amateurs in the arts of fighting, can become much, much more powerful?”

No wonder their world was so... wrecked.

“Yes,” said X. “You do understand what this means, don't you? It's up to you to decide when to awaken him... or if he should be awakened at all. For his own happiness... and for the safety of your world.”

The transparent hand of the illusory X fell on Bilbo's shoulder. And it felt strangely warm and refreshing, so much so any fear Bilbo might have had vanished.

Bilbo closed his eyes as X spoke, and made sure he remembered everything. “And if you asked me why I trusted you so...” X's voice trailed long in the void. “…it's because you are a good hobbit, Mr. Bilbo Baggins. Sometimes 'goodness' is all it takes to right much of the wrongs in this world.”

Bilbo would incline to agree. And he was sure somewhere in the great beyond his mother would, too.

“Will you help me, Bilbo Baggins?”

Bilbo swallowed hard. The words spilled out of him as naturally as a hobbit needed seven meals a
day. “Aye, I am with you.”

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Chapter End Notes

1) For those FAMILIAR with the Megaman Universe:

- I am borrowing the fanon from Archaon's "Mistress Ciel" story also on this site, which states Ciel's full name. Some reviewers for that story had said it makes so much sense that Ciel would be a descendent of Dr. Thomas Light - perhaps a great-grandniece or something - and I am inclined to agree. Which basically means the Ciero ship is to the Megaman universe what the Aragorn-Arwen pairing is to the Tolkien Legendarium. It is just THAT significant.

- On the Japanese text: I've had two minds on this, but the fact of the matter is that I literally CANNOT imagine any voice for the Megaman cast other than the Japanese voiceactors. Especially Ciel: Rie Tanaka in her prime (2000s) IS Ciel to me ear and heart, and no dragons or goblins or giant spiders or ring-wraiths or dark lords with silly rings can persuade me otherwise. Also a little exoticism here and there shouldn't hurt my credibility THAT much, I hope. On the same topic of Ciel, it may be in "MIstress Ciel" or some other place I've read that Ciel actually called the original X "Uncle". Which is cute enough to my ear that I can't NOT include that.

- I was of two mind on the questionable things X did to/for Zero, but I decided to go with it this way. Fact of the matter is, at the end of the MMZ plot, X is a reploid/cyber-elf/cyberworld-dweller broken both inside and outside, and it wouldn't be a stretch for him to do anything he can, ANYTHING, to keep safe and happy the ONLY person he cared about at a cost he considers acceptable (not at all cost, because then THAT would run against the kind of guy X is).

2) For those NOT familiar with the Megaman universe:

- The C.I.E.L. System (Full name Convergent Ignition by Energen Linkage) is perhaps THE magnum opus of Dr. Ciel (not counting the Biometals because I am pretending they don't exist), and provided what amounted to infinite energy to a world that needs it the most. However, it was brought into use only after the series' end (though the concept had certainly existed before then and the thing took centerstage in MMZ3, IIRC), and to an astute reader its inclusion in an engine very possibly made in Middle-earth would be enough to fuel a LOT of speculations...

- In case it isn't obvious yet, yes, X is basically recounting THE ENTIRE PLOT OF THE MEGAMAN SERIES until Z4 to Bilbo. He's a being in the cyberspace at this point, he's got all the time in Arda and beyond.

- Also in case it isn't obvious yet, Bilbo is now Weil's second-biggest hater on Middle-earth, just as any decent person - much less hobbit - would be after hearing the things he'd done.
Battle for Rivendell

Chapter Notes

Many, many apologies for the delay! Real life has, quite predictably, got a hold of me at
the end of the day, and I've already burnt all of my reserves on the first-week posting
spree. It was as expected too: I can't really maintain a 5000-word-a-day pace while
keeping up with my real life commitments.

I've had to chop this here chapter into two, because it would otherwise be extremely
long. In any case, it has been a fun write-up, and I hope you'll enjoy this read as much
as I did writing it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 10

Battle for Rivendell

For the last quarter or so Kili had been clamoring for rest. Not just a rock on the road and black rye
bread and dried sausage with a quest hanging heavily on his mind, mind you. No, real rest was what
he wanted: a warm bed within the bosom of the mountains, a belly full of spiced mead and fresh red
meat, and thoughts of fun and courtship and beautiful things lingering in his dreams. Any other kind
of rest would be temporary.

And temporariness made him very, very tired and grumpy.

“Ki,” Fili's voice rang next to his ear, and he woke up from his doze with a start.

“What is it, Fi?” he asked, holding down a yawn and smacked his lips.

“You've nodded off again,” said the elder dwarf. “Third time this night alone. And drooling. And
mumbling like a mad miner-dwarf in the dark.”

“Can't help it,” he said, his protest sounding as lazy and uninterested as he was. “I'm bored. And
sleepy. And hungry.” He stared at the flame as if its flaming tongues held the answer to all his
troubles.

“We're in the company of elves now, Ki,” said Fili, and his face was sterner and more... how could
he describe it? 'Princely'? Than he'd ever been. “Not the snot-nosed green-clad oathbreakers, sure,
but still elves. Let's act in a manner more dignified, shall we? Let them not look down on us
dwarven princes.”

Kili knew better than talk back whenever Fili assumed such posturing.

Those who didn't know the two better would think Fili and Kili two halves of the same person, like
telepathic twins or swords forged in a pair; each existing only so long as the other did. Those who
did know them, however, would acknowledge it couldn't be further from the truth.
“We aren't princes, Fi,” said Kili, shaking his head. “And... I don't think that matters as much as you think it does.”

“We've been through this, Ki,” Fili said, and the campfire was imprinted in his eyes. “We are taking back that mountain so we can be princes again, and then it will matter.”

Of this topic they'd had many a chat over the last fifty years or so, ever since they were considered old enough to hold an axe and fight the enemies of the dwarves should they come.

“We've also been through this,” said Kili. “I'm not in Uncle's silly quest because I want a diadem on my head or anything. I don't want to be Prince Under the Mountain or anything of the sort. I want to be a working dwarf, son of Mother's, a hunter of deer and elks whose hands is where his mouth is. I'm in because you're in, Fi, no more and no less.”

“Whether you want it or not, you've been born into Durin's line. Like Mother. Like Uncle. Like me, and that isn't going to change in this lifetime,” said Fili. “If it's something we cannot change, we'll have to live with it... with dignity.”

“How long did I nod off this time?”

“Enough for something big to happen,” said Fili, gesturing towards the bigger campfire to their right.

Kili cocked his head and gazed over Fili's head. There, at the other campfire, his uncle was standing, in tried-and-true Thorin Oakenshield fashion, opposite to the loud-mouthed she-elf just now and another... that he couldn't tell whether they were male or female. Typical elf fashion, he thought, and so much thought he spent on that little detail that it was only when his uncle raised his voice did he returned his attention to the thing that actually mattered – what they were talking about.

“You want me to send my dwarves to help you break the siege,” said Thorin. “Before we even hear from Gandalf again, and against an enemy possibly outnumbering us a few dozenfolds. Without support, allies or even a secret weapon or two up our sleeves” Disdain engulfed his voice, and Kili would have to agree. “I was wrong about you. Thranduil's elves might be cowards, but at least they aren't downright suicidal.”

“Says the dwarf- lord who intends to face a dragon with an army of fourteen,” barked the she-elf.

“Erebor is our home!” cried Thorin. “And we will have it back, one way or another, in this life or the next!”

“Then Imladris is our home, dwarf,” said the she-elf. “And unlike the hopeless cause that is yours, we may still save ours yet!”

“You dare insult the memory of Erebor to the heir of Durin, to his face?”

“Do calm down, my lady!” exclaimed the other elf. “And may I beg your understanding too, Master dwarf, for our hearts are twisted and knotted and heavy now as are yours.”

“Then that would be a business of elves, not dwarves,” said Thorin. “I am already doing you lot a favor for not leaving this Mahal-forsaken glen at the drop of a hat!”

“You aren't getting your mountain back without Father or our wisdom!” said the she-elf, and then and again her hand ventured uncomfortably close to the hilt of her blade. “It isn't like you don't know this, dwarf!”

“We could walk off right here, right now,” said Thorin, “Secret door and secret key be damned; we'll
charge right through the broken-down main entrance and face the dragon like the warriors they are. We've got plenty of Burned Dwarves already, another fourteen more would only add to the richness of our honorable traditions! Better than risking necks and limbs for you elves' home... that you put in danger by not being strong enough.”

The she-elf muttered something under her breath, and from the movement of her lips Kili thought it would be something to the tune of “Hypocrite”. In which case, his chin sank into his palm as he rethink the whole dragon and Erebor business, she would be right.

Then the other elf pulled the angry elf-princess to the side and spoke something to her in that fascinating, melodic tongue of theirs. At first she shook her head intensely, but then he repeated what he said, and finally she backed off, her hand now maintaining a more diplomatic distance from her sword.

“Master dwarf,” the elf said, having returned to the 'discussion' (if it could ever be called one). “I know we are asking the impossible-”

“And the foolish,” added Thorin. “My dwarves and I aren't going anywhere within two miles of your goblin-infested valley – not without a thousand armored Longbeards, and especially not before it is made abundantly clear that we stand a fighting chance.”

“But you have to understand my brethren are getting restless,” said the elf, “and Lady Undomiel the most of all. Imagine if your family is in danger, and you are sitting around by the fire doing nothing-”

“Don't lecture me, elf,” said Thorin. “I was there in Erebor when the dragon came. I was there in Moria as my brother lay dead with an orc-spear in his throat. I was there, one bad harvest after another, as my own flesh and blood double over in hunger while I could do not a thing about it! Talk not to me as if you have monopoly over all the suffering on this green earth!”

“Is there no way I can persuade you to lend us a hand?”

“I have already agreed to do so, elf,” Thorin said with the tone of a grumpy school headmaster lecturing an immensely dense and naughty schoolboy. “I reserve my right and responsibility to act in ways that will not endanger my people and kin so stupidly. That is all.”

The elf was about to offer his own argument when suddenly he fell silent, his leaf-shaped ear twitching. At the same time the line of elves began to stir. First one stood up; then another, then another... within the space of a moment they were all standing up, faces turned towards the edge of the burned wood.

Then they began to cheer as if it had been Durin's Day celebration. Or, well, whatever the elven equivalent was. A few began singing, and not the soft, sweet melodies of lovely elven maidens often told in stories. No, those were war songs, filled with sharp notes and the beating and clapping of hands alike to the smashing of shields and clashing of steel.

It was only halfway through this celebration that Kili's all-too-dwarven eyes and ears saw and heard the cause for so much jubilation. There, from the forest's edge, came the beating of hooves and the marching feet of many dozens, and the sound of arms and shields were in the air.

He saw exactly what he thought he heard. A column was marching towards their makeshift campsite, and from the cheering alone not a hostile one. First came a rider, and Kili's jaws very nearly fell off when he saw his face and livery: Jet black hair fluttering like a banner atop blue mail with gold trimming, and a face Kili knew for a fact he'd seen before. It was that elf chap who was lying in a heap at the corner! Or someone who looked incredibly like him, at any length.
“Look what the lack of ale did to me poor senses! Am I seeing doubles?” he murmured.

Riding next to him was a figure no less exceptional: a Man, tall and statuesque in appearance, long-haired and adorned with a stubble more impressive than Kili’s own. The Man was wearing leather jerkins not at all befitting his stature, but his charisma was shining through: his eyes were brighter than the torch he held, and he took to the front like a general most mighty and inspiring.

Behind the two leaders were many men and more than a few elves too: padded leather freely mingled with rich blue mail, oaken longbows amidst gleaming elf-swords, and shields of simple birch and iron bands locked alongside elf-shields made from the secret metals known only to the elvensmiths. If he hadn’t seen it happen with his own eyes, never would he believe Men and elves could be so close.

In time they congregated around the campsite, the many dozens of them absorbing the band of riders they’d spent the better part of the night with. Suddenly Kili felt so naked and vulnerable: Their company sat there, a group of a mere thirteen (which was cause for concern enough), among up to a hundred assorted men and elves.

Then the two riders at the head of the formation dismounted, and to them the she-elf ran, wind along her feet and tears in her eyes. “Elladan! Elladan!” she cried, and flew into the embrace of the blue-clad elf-lord.

Then she let go of that elf-lord, and her eyes looked to his companion, and then they burned again in fury for an injury Kili couldn’t yet fathom. “And you, Estel. Just a little later, and your name would have meant to me the opposite of hope.”

“... Milady,” said the man, bending his neck, his right hand placed over his breast. “I offer no defense for my tardiness.”

Then on the face of the elf called Elladan sternness replaced the jovial expression he bore just then. He looked to the she-elf, and spoke to her in clear Common. “Leave the blaming and shaming later, Arwen, until we have ascertained Father’s safety.”

Then he turned to the mannish leader, and that harshness dropped again.

“It is not your fault, my friend Estel,” said Elladan as his hand fell on the other’s shoulder. “In fact, I am glad you weren’t there with your people when the fire fell; for you would certainly have rushed to our aid, and we will have to live for all eternity with the knowledge that the line of Isildur had died out and there was nothing we could do about it.”

“Let us not dwell on what happened, my lord Elladan,” said Estel. “The orcs and goblins have defiled enough today; it’s high time they pay a price very dear.”

“Where is Elrohir? Is he-” he asked, and his voice sank when his eyes reached his sister – as that was what she-elf seemed to be to him. “-safe?”

Trailing behind him Oin the company doctor ran, shouting expletives in Khuzdul. Something about stupid patients misbehaving and how Mahal would duly punish those who’d not cooperate with their doctors.

Perhaps Mahal did grant his wish, or maybe it was just the elf’s legs themselves giving way, but at that exact moment his knee buckled. Had the she-elf Arwen not be there to prop him up – and there was that look on her face that reminded Kili of his own mother when he broke his leg some eighty years before – the fellow would have planted his face on the rocky ground right then and there.
“I am here, Hanar,” said him, and there was a look of great pain in his face as he struggled to stand up straight. “Safe, but not entirely... well.” He coughed out what was meant to be a chuckle. “This has got to be another of my low points.”

“Then don't push yourself,” said Elladan, lending their sister a hand supporting the patient. “Go and rest – leave this to us.”

“Not like I have very many choices in the matter,” breathed Elrohir. He tilted his head towards Estel, and tried to eke out a smile as if nothing was wrong. “Do me a favor, friend Estel. Bring Father back, and-” his voice grew significantly more venomous. “Give those orcs a spanking I can't.”

“On my honor, my lord Elrohir,” said Estel with a bow. Then his eyes, sharp as those of an eagle, caught an Oin running after the wounded elf.

“Dwarves?” he mused. “I don't recall seeing many of your kind venturing this far to the West-”

“Now you know, lad. Now you know.”

The voice of Kili's uncle, like that of a bell of stone, rang out in the midst of the crowd. The in-exile King under the Mountain, back straight, eyes flaring and posture as proud and royal as a dwarf can be, in his full glory.

Living up to his uncle's incredibly lofty station, suffice to say, suddenly looked to Kili like a herculean task he wouldn't accomplish in a few lifetimes.

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“I see,” said the man called Estel as he offered a low bow, indeed more respectful than Thorin had ever remembered receiving from non-dwarf dignitaries. “It's my honor, my lord. Do forgive me for not recognizing you earlier – not many of us have had much occasion to mingle with your kin, so few we are and so many are our tasks here in Eriador.”

Thorin nodded and nodded. That was all he needed most of the time, really – that a king's due and respect be paid as a king deserved.

“I am called Estel here in elven company, my lord,” the ranger continued. “But among my people I am Aragorn son of Arathorn, Chieftain of the Dunedain and leader of the Rangers of the North.”

Now it was Thorin's turn to widen his eyes like a skinned frog. “Chieftain of the Dunedain? Bless me!” he exclaimed. “You don't happen to be a descendent of that Isildur, do you? Heir to the throne of the Kingdom of the North and indeed of all Men West of the Anduin?”

“At your service, my lord dwarf,” said Aragorn, and suddenly it was like there was an invisible crown on his head, as if the Valar themselves had dictated that this one man be destined for such greatness that Erebor would look like but a twinkle in the sky compared to the sun of his splendor. If there was a time in his life he'd have to admit someone was greater than his line and destiny, it would be that hour. Pride didn't allow him to say anything to that effect, however.

“And the pleasure is all mine,” he said instead, and meant every single word. “Thorin Oakenshield, King under the Mountain and future Lord of Erebor, at your service!”

“So it is entirely be a twist of Fate that your kin are here this very day on our side,” said Elladan, and there was both amusement and elation on his face. “I don't suppose you would lend us a hand to reclaim the Hidden Valley our home from the orcs, Master dwarf?”
And with just those words, Thorin's mood flipped from (somewhat) happy to sullen and uncooperative once again.

“That would be a yes,” said Thorin, “though rather out of necessity than good will, do not get me wrong. Our quest would require your father's counsel, and we can't have that until he is back to wherever he belongs.”

The last part was probably unnecessary from a diplomatic point of view, but Thorin couldn't help but add it. It would be terrible to suddenly look friendly to elves now, when the vast majority of his life had been spent in nothing less than complete and utter hatred for their kindred.

“That said,” he added, “if you would have no plan other than charge back into the forest to get us all killed, then do excuse me. I have my people to protect, thank you very much.”

“That has never been my plan,” said Elladan. “Much as my... attempt earlier in the day might make me look like I had a death wish, I do not intend on heading back to the Hall of Mandos before I can behold the beauty of Valinor with my own two eyes.”

Then the elf settled himself down, and began telling his version of the day’s events. In the disgustingly flowery language as his kind liked to use and with a kind of verbosity that would make Thorin himself blush, he recounted every little detail of his movement throughout the day.

The short version: the elf, either out of stubbornness or an admirable devotion to his comrades (or maybe both) didn't believe the orcs got through the Dunedain rangers, and decided on his own to ride off looking for them. Mahal blessed them, too, because apparently he was right. He'd spent most of the night until half an hour ago gathering up the many squads of the Rangers still in the woods, and lead them through a safe route out of it. They'd left a trail of goblin and warg corpses in their wake, too, and while he wouldn't trust a group of elves and a company of men could do so, those he saw did look at the very least like they were up to the task.

“I have taken also the liberty to gather the scattered riders, lancers and sword-bearers who'd strayed from the main detachment, or indeed the defenses of Imladris themselves,” Elledan said. “In total I have with me a full five-score of us Noldor and Dunedain put together.”

“Make that seven scores, my dwarves included,” Thorin said. “How does the Enemy fare?” By which he meant 'Do we stand half a chance?', but he'd rather jump down the Anduin in full dwarven plate armor than to be caught speaking anything along those lines.

“Not as well as we thought them at first,” said Aragorn. “None of the orcs bearing fine steel and fire and thunderclap blocked our path; those we'd caught were jittery and were easily routed.”

Thorin wasn't convinced. “Really now?” he said. “If it had been so easy, I wouldn't fancy the famous Noldor been driven so far from their bases as they have apparently been.”

Elladan gave Thorin a very quick glare, but then returned to a diplomatic tone at once. “Much as your words sting, Master Thorin Oakenshield, they are truer than we would have liked.”

“It could very well be a trap,” Thorin pointed out. “I am sorry, but until you can prove it is not a glorified mass suicide I am stepping into, my dwarves and I are sitting it out.”

“I-If I may have a word, my lords?”

Up into the air a small hand – for a dwarf – raised. The effect such a small voice and hand has on the atmosphere was staggering enough, however, the way all voices stopped and all eyes turned around towards the disturber of the peace. Thorin was stunned at first, but the moment he saw the little hood
within the crowd he knew exactly what was up.

Ori.

“I don't think this is your place, Ori,” said Thorin, glaring daggers at the youngest dwarf in the company. Not that he was angry or anything, but he had his appearance to keep, and letting a young dwarf butt into an important discussion wouldn't do well to that.

“My apologies!” cried Ori, and he held his chest in a manner like a young dwarf about to make a confession to his intended. Nervous, yet it looked as if he could die if not allowed to speak.

“Let us hear it then,” said Elladan, and there was a smile on his face like an adult would give a child. That was the most apt comparison at the moment, in all honesty.

“Thank you, my lord,” said Ori. He spent the next moment breathing and huffing and panting, and only began to speak when Thorin was about to lose his patience. “I believe I know why the Enemy would seem so weak.”

He paused and glanced at all the people that mattered before the campfire. “Master Zero is there, and Master Gandalf too, and Master Glorfindel with them!”

Elladan's child-cuddling smile turned into a look of horror the moment the last name was spoken and heard. “What... did you say?”

Then the reasonable elf who'd tried to persuade Thorin to lend a hand to Arwen's hare-brained attack plan (which, in turn, wouldn't have made him look very reasonable) stepped forward. “Lord Elladan, if I may. Much has taken place in the few hours we were separated.”

***

Part of Zero had felt like ignoring all that was going down around him and simply wander off looking for Bilbo Baggins. That, however would run contrary to all the programming – scratch that, contrary to everything that made Zero Zero.

They had enemies in front of them. Many enemies, and it wasn't just the ragged and tattered goblins this time around.

Now the camp was all but empty of the regular flesh-and-rags goblins, retired in large heaps on either side of the entryway with many arrows sticking out of their torsos. Now they'd been replaced by orcs in Pantheon armor (to whom Zero would refer to as Panthe-orc for the sake of brevity): they poured out of the great camp in groups of three, laying down suppressing fire as they advanced.

The first thing Zero felt like doing when the bullets started flying was to shoot something in the face; preferably one of those things training their guns at him. Then he realized a buster pistol with a spent magazine and a bent barrel (throwing his gun had been, to be fair, one of the stupider things he had ever done) was probably not the best tool for shooting things in the face. Then he found out a (comparatively) primitive bow and a quiver of sharp arrow would shoot things in the face much better than his bare hand.

Zero duck behind the eagle's remain. Bullets were whizzing over his head, and a fair few had carved more holes in the creature's broken carcass. Doesn't seem like they're letting me have a go at slashing their faces off, he thought. His computers rapidly analyzed the explosion sounds, the angle of fire and the trajectory of eagle blood splatters. Calculating enemy position based on such secondary
factors had never *not* been a pain; more so when all signs pointed to 'all guns are on me'.

And then Glorfindel had the *nerve* to steal the show.

Simply put, if humans fought half as good as Glorfindel was distinguishing himself, the Maverick Hunters as he remembered it wouldn't have been a reploid-only organization (and that could have solved a *lot* of problems that came back to bite them in the behind later down the line).

From one cover he glided to another, sending arrows flying as he moved. Once every few seconds Zero would hear a scream, an explosion, or both. If they'd been directing all their firepower at Zero's hiding place, their folly was now claiming interests. By the time Zero could feel the firestorm at his direction had lessened somewhat, there were significantly fewer bullets in the air as about two minutes before.

The enemies' shell always seemed to catch him a second too late. Blasts and bullet holes left a trail of dead trees, shattered stones and raked forest floor in the elf's wake. Once every so often one would catch an arrow in the eye, fizzle and explode like the orc-shaped grenade they were. The camp's gateway was covered in bits and pieces of metal, and black smoke painted against the moonlit sky.

Zero kept a counter on the number of kills Glorfindel had made. Twenty. Twenty-one, twenty-two... he wasn't doing too bad, but if he wanted to take on the entire camp with his pea-shooter, the'd be in for a rude shock.

Meanwhile, on Zero's left, perched behind the one surviving oak tree, Gandalf was launching his own barrage at the entrance. His performance seemed far more theatrical than practical: a flash-bomb of his hit a Panthe-orc in the face and only managed to tumble it over. The bombs that did go off as designed were plenty destructive: the armored orc to go after the aforementioned were swiftly retired in pieces as were the creature charging next to him.

More Panthe-orcs swarmed out from the entrance. Glorfindel's quiver was running thin, and Gandalf's great furrowed brows were visible as far as fifteen yards away.

But they'd bought him many a precious seconds, and that was all he needed. Now Zero had positioned himself well behind the pile of dead goblins, and he primed his saber and readied to strike the next group of enemies to pass through the gateway.

*Now*.

Up sprang Zero, and the flash of his saber shredded the darkness. Then everything became a blur of gunshots and saber beam, and mechanical parts exploding.

He might not remember the exact specific too well, but he could distinctly recollect the best way to deal with Pantheons were to run *real* close and chop their faces off before they could open fire. He turned out to be right: The sound of gunfire had virtually died off; his enemies turned to try to put a distance between them and him.

Like he was going to let them do that.

"Cover me!" he yelled, and the words empowered him in a way only he knew. Just like the old time, he thought, with him jumping in and cutting a swath through everything in the way while his comrades supported him from behind.

And *then* Glorfindel's arrows stopped. The elven quiver on his hip was *completely* drained. The next wave of Panthe-orcs had then arrived, and they began to form up in a semi-circle around him, intent
on keeping him off the entrance.

“All yours, Master Gandalf!” cried the elven knight, and from his scabbards two silver blades flew. He dashed forth, and his longswords danced in his hands. He slammed into the Panthe-orcs surrounding Zero. There was enough slashing and chopping and robotic parts exploding for a small festival.

Slash, swipe and smash, and the semi-circle started to crumble. Behind them, the grey wizard was pushing forward also, and sparks and small blasts would batter any enemy who wandered within sixty feet of him.

Now both Zero and Glorfindel had found themselves inside the goblin camp proper, and there was still no sign of an end to them. It was almost as if the earth itself was puking up orcs in Pantheon armor.

His analogy was truer than he should be comfortable with.

The ground was splitting open and closing at various spots. Every time such a thing happened, one or two Panthe-orc would leap up from the hole, arm cannon primed.

There were a lot of those little holes.

“Now that's... something I've yet to see before,” quipped Glorfindel.

“Don't be getting cold feet now, Lord Glorfindel,” said Zero, jumping aside just as two shells flew past him. His words might have been a little more acerbic than he'd have liked.

“This is nothing yet,” said Glorfindel, and his blade sank through the head of another blue-clad enemy. “Nothing compared to the likes I'd fought before.”

“Less talking, more looking!” exclaimed Gandalf. The wizard had also burst through the front entrance, and now was standing right behind him, staff and sword in accord.

Then all of a sudden the ground began to rumble. Hard.

A few Panthe-orcs whose footing were not so firm were staggering, even tumbling over. The others had their arms and legs shaken and unsteadied. Even Glorfindel was more than a little startled, while Zero had to turn on all peripheral processors just to calculate the best footing to not embarrassingly (and maybe fatally) falling on his face.

And then Zero had what could charitably be described as a deja vu.

The ground behind them had opened up while they weren't looking. Whatever underground that was puking out those abominations, it had decided to empty its belly in one fell swoop. Many hundreds of them now stood facing the trio like an endless wave of blue armor and grey skin.

Talk about an army from nowhere.

The last time he'd seen himself surrounded by that many Panthe-orcs, sorry, Pantheons, was a few years before in a middle of a desert.

Zero cast an aside glance at Glorfindel. This had got to be something the elf hadn't seen.

From his reaction, Zero was right.

“Elbereth Gilthoniel...” Glorfindel murmured, and gripped his blades even more closely. Gandalf
was backing off, and there the colorless light from earlier flared again.

Then and again the two voices from before resounded within Zero's artificial ear canals. “You can do this, Zero. You can do this,” said one. “Because you are the legendary reploid Zero!” said the other.

*I've been here before, haven't I?*

Thinking so, Zero gripped the handle of his beam saber. “I don't know how well this will go,” he said, and prepared to ignite his dash boots, “but let's give it a go anyway.”

And then noise and songs echoed all over. It was as though the forest itself had come to life with hooves and charging footsteps and songs and battlecries.

“A Elbereth Gilthoniel! Elbereth Gilthoniel!” came the voice from the wood. The another voice rang out, “Ecthelion! Ecthelion!” it cried, and the shouts and cries became contagious.

“ECTHELION! ECTHELION!” The cries echoed all over the clearing. Even the orcs in Pantheon armor, emotionless as they had appeared since the very beginning, began to let their single ruby eyes wander at each other in confusion. Or rather, fear. Towards the end of his career in the Resistance he'd seen that happen a couple times. Back then occasionally some Pantheon would just quietly scurry off in the other direction when it was abundantly clear that Zero was in the vicinity.

Never to the scale Zero was witnessing, however. And especially after Glorfindel, too, joined the “Ecthelion” chorus. His eyes were teary, too, and now he started dancing again. The enemies were actually fleeing from him, as if the hoarse cry from the back of his throat had awakened something truly terrible that no amount of cybernetic implants could supplant.

Unfortunately for them, the opposite direction of Glorfindel was the direction of whoever was coming to their aid; and unlike the two of them there was an army of those new people. Zero's eyes could catch the glimpse of a few less fortunate enemies at the forefront, tossed over by the mighty charge of the incoming host.

Soon the sound of Panthe-orcs exploding were like the drums to the lyrics of the battle-cries and the techno-strings of the arrows flying. An orchestra Zero wouldn't like to miss.

*Let's rock on.*

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How long had it been since Dwalin last felt the true exhilaration of true battle? Felt like a lifetime, that was for sure. The Blue Mountains had seen little in the way of actual battle outside of the lopsided bar brawls for years now.

But now there he was, charging at the front shouting dwarven battle-cries so loud his throat would rip. Hammer in hand, enemy ahead, and a single blow would send bits and pieces of armor platings flying (hopefully bits of his enemies with them as well). This was war, manly, manly war as them dwarves had been made for. Just that thought alone was pouring vigor into him, never mind the fact that he had been without food for about half a day now.

All around him, the familiar environ was taking shape, although quite a bit different from the other times he had known. Previous wars didn't have mannish rangers launching volleys after volleys of arrows from all visible vantage points at the enemy. Previous wars didn't have swords-elves (Noldor, as they insisted. Nonsense, he said, because to a true and stout red-meat-eating dwarf all elves were elves) charging the enemy and cutting them down about as fast as a true-to-Mahal hammer could smash (the horror, the horror!). Previous wars didn't have orcs in deep blue armor wielding cylinders
that discharged exploding shots, neither of which their race had any right to lay their filthy mitts on.

Oh, and in previous wars slain enemies didn't explode. Every single enemy slain, be it by arrows, swords, spears, axes or hammers, would keel over, and then five seconds later their body would blow up, consumed by a thunderclap and a rather fierce fire. Sizzle. Boom. Nothing left but a pile of scrap metal and ash.

Dwalin would have to admit, that little thing did douse the thrill of battle a little. No up-close-and-personal. No staring down an enemy as the life of them choked out in their eyes. No holding up decapitated foes and screaming bloody murder. Wait, that last one did make him sound too much like orcs for his taste.

He did have to thank Ori for reminding him of that little thing. Had he gotten carried away, he'd have ended up like that one over-eager man just next to him. He'd stepped away one second too late after killing his first armored orc. He was now lying at the back of the column, shaken, legs broken and burnt. Last time he saw the fellow, Oin was pulling him away from the warpath.

The battlefield was filled with the elves and men crying “Ecthelion” at the top of their collective lungs. He'd shout them down, there was no war-cry in Arda finer than “Baruk Khazad! Khazad-ai-menu!”. But then he was one dwarf, and they were seven-scores.

So be it. He wasn't a dwarf of words anyway.

He didn't know how long he had been actually fighting. It could be anywhere between two minutes to two hours, because his limbs were getting tired, but his nerves for war had merely had an appetizer. No such thing as enough dead orcs, and that was one of the few things Balin could agree with him in battle. His brother was trailing after him, slower than he used to be and a fair bit less steady, too.

Thorin, however, was still as much a warrior-prince as he was a century and a half before. He bashed, smashed, hacked, kicked battered his way through. No elf could catch up with him, and no man could match his ferocity. The fancy shot-spewing engines on the orcs' arms were silly toys now that the one and only rightful King under the Mountain was upon them, and a path of smoke and scrap metal trailed behind in his wake.

Then they cut through to the center of what used to be the goblin camp.

Dwalin thought he'd fallen in love.

Two figures, one black and red, one silver and blue, like two of a pair made in heaven, were dancing amidst the sea of orcs and goblins. Blades flashed amidst cries and explosions, their steps was as though gliding. Wherever they went, enemies exploded.

“Wait! W-wait! Wait!” cried Dwalin, and he was very nearly in tears. He didn't care who they were any more, elf or no elf, just that they were killing goblins beautifully, and that was all that mattered. “Three can dance this dance!”

Then on he rolled into battle – yes, rolled – closer to them, and his axe fell on the backs of the armored orcs desperately trying to come close to the brilliant show of light and blades. One orc, two, then three and four, lying in a smouldering pile behind Dwalin.

“Baruk Khazad! Baruk Khazad!” he cried, and dove deeper and deeper through until he was the only dwarf within ten yards. He could no longer feel his hands and legs, but he'd be damned if he wouldn't push on. It was just like Moria again, by Mahal, or even better. They were winning
decisively this time!

Then the ground beneath Dwalin shook and trembled. A huge crash, then a thunderclap.

The last thing Dwalin saw was a mound rising where there was none. He felt himself being propelled many paces backward.

“Du... Bekar...” he murmured, and then was silent. Then absolutely everything went black.

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Chapter End Notes

1) For those FAMILIAR with the Megaman universe:

- In this chapter I struggled for a time with the question of how strong the death explosion of a grunt - or anyone else for that matter - in the Megaman universe is. Most of the time the protagonists are unharmed by such explosions, but then (i) Omega's explosion KILLED the Three Guardians - Stupid or no, that is canon and one of the things I don't intend to change, much as I really, REALLY adore Harpuia and Leviathan, and (ii) X and Zero are made of super-durable metal alloys while Middle-earth people aren't. I'm choosing a happy medium, in which a grunt's explosion will hurt anyone too close, even kill them, if they aren't clad in high-grade Noldorin or dwarven equipment like Elladan or Glorfindel, and hope I'm not doing too badly.

2) For those NOT familiar with the Megaman universe:

- Um, nothing? This chapter should be self-explanatory aplenty!

3) Legendarium notes:

- This is the point I should be forthright with the adjustments I have taken the liberty to make regarding canon. As you may have been aware, the movie and book timelines aren't identical. In particular, the movie timeline omitted the 17 years between Bilbo's 111th birthday and Frodo's setting out from the Shire. There are two ways you can reconcile this with the book timeline: Either move The Hobbit up 17 years so it takes place in T.A. 2958 instead of T.A. 2941, or move the end-date of the Third Age to T.A. 3004 instead of T.A. 3021. I chose the first method, first because I want to preserve the 3021 end date, and second because it allows for a 27-year-old Aragorn cameo, as Chieftain of the Dunedain of the North. At this date, however, he would still be somewhat unproven and not the Aragorn we know and love in deed - though at heart he is still the same Heir of Isildur. In other words, the year is now T.A. 2958.

- I've also taken the liberty to reexamine the Aragorn/Arwen relationship in the context of this fanfic. One of the weaknesses of Tolkien, well noted by many readers and critics, is that he couldn't really write romance. Heroic tales and epic tragedies in the Greek definition of the word were the forte of the good professor, but when it comes to a man and a woman loving each other, he fizzled out, and I believe that is perfectly fine. At the same time, I saw that this weakness became an issue in the Aragorn/Arwen relationship
so much that many interpreted the latter to be either (i) a trophy wife, (ii) a calculating
femme fatale wanting to become the queen of Men, or (iii) a lust-driven elf in the same
vein as Juliet. That is why I'm taking the liberty - and I hope you would bear with me on
that - to make Arwen unconvinced and unimpressed by Aragorn at first, and that lack of
impression turns into full-blown antagonism when she perceives that Aragorn hasn't
been doing his job of keeping Rivendell safe.
Arm Cannon, Caverns and Laser Beams

Chapter Notes

I am alive and just barely so: the last few months have not been extremely kind to my stock of free time. As such, this chapter had actually been hammered out in not one day, not one week, not one month, but piecemeal over half a year. It goes without saying, I’m trying to get back in touch with the flow of my own fanfic, imagine that! If there’s any drop in quality as a result, do let me know.

With no further ado, here goes the eleventh chapter of A Reploid’s Journey!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 11

Arm Cannon, Caverns and Laser Beams

Bilbo could hear his head ringing like a bell. Everyone’s head would, if so much new information and raw emotions had been squeezed into it within the space of one hour at best. One moment he was there floating in a black void talking to the figure calling himself X, and the next he was back there in reality.

Still in one piece.

Still carrying all that made Bilbo Bilbo.

Still standing atop the raised platform, sorry, the Trans-Server.

Still staring into the blank colored panel.

X’s voice had vanished, and reality had returned to Bilbo like a rude awakening. The smell of dead goblins didn’t help matter a lot.

Then reality struck Bilbo squarely in the face with as much subtlety as the voice of dear old Lobelia Sackville-Baggins during a heated family quarr- he meant, debate.

Bilbo’s stomach was rumbling. His body was sore and tired and threatening to break down into a vaguely hobbit-shaped sniveling pile. His once-classy garment stank, stank, stank like a slab of rotten meat. As for his head, well, the less spoken about it the better. The thoughts in his dizzying head wandered back to the vicinity of his hobbit-hole, where there was a full pantry, ointment for the sores, pills for the headache and bath for the gentlemanly desire for cleanliness. This wouldn’t be the first nor the last time his thoughts would be of the comfort he had missed.

And then the panel sprang to life again, and Bilbo’s curious eyes were once more drawn to the flashing little buttons and his ears to the cute little beeps and boops they made. After keying in a series of characters, the panel once again went silent, as did the surrounding.

For all of five seconds.
Before Bilbo's bewildered eyes, a most miraculous thing was happening. An object was materializing in thin air, as if literal threads of it existence was being weaved into the fabrics of space and time. The object spun and spun, and the more it rotated the more of it became solid and tangible. When the whole thing had stopped its nigh-endless spin, before Bilbo hovered an object looking suspiciously like a bracer.

Bilbo's hands, shy and afraid at first, finally gave in to the temptation. He lifted the object up, cradled it in his arms and examined its every nook and cranny. It didn't hurt him, or administer a nasty shock to him, or indeed cause anything that would cause him harm and distress.

Well, except not looking very much like a bracer, that was. It had two pairs of fins, each perpendicular to the other, fixed along its length. The size of the interior looked like it was tailored just for him, for both the length and width was right, and there was even the a aroma of ointment emanating from the silky inner padding. Yet all in all the thing was thick and bulky, and Bilbo couldn't imagine himself putting it on and still have enough strength or dexterity to do just about anything.

That, and it had neither latch nor key nor lock nor any mechanism he could use to slip his arm in. Plus, there was just one of it! Who would wear a single bracer, for fashion's sake?

If there was any doubt the item was not for him, the next thing he heard dispersed it.

"Take it, Bilbo Baggins," the voice of X sounded again, soft and motherly. "A parting gift from me to you."

"Mister X?" Bilbo called, looking positively confusticated. "Well, uh, I... I thank you, my good sir, but this gift is just too-"

"You deserve at least this much help," said X's disembodied voice again. "After all, I have left such a great weight on your shoulder."

"Yes, yes, sure, I am aware, but how do I even put this on?"

"Ah," came X's voice, more than a little embarrassed. "I'm sorry. After all those years, I must have forgotten that not everyone is as tech-savvy as the humans and reploids of my era."

Bilbo spent the next five minutes fiddling with the thing X called "virtual control panel". If he had not insisted on that thingamabob and just said "The little button at the base of the red trimming", Bilbo would have caught on just fine. He was a hobbit, not an expert on futuristic terminologies, for Eru's sake!

Doing just that, Bilbo summoned up yet another panel, floating in mid-air above the bracer. Except unlike the panel embedded in the Trans-Server, this one had only a single button: that imprinted with the shape of a hobbit hand. He did the most logical thing a hobbit could think of: Print his hand on it.

"HANDPRINT ANALYSIS COMPLETE. DNA DATA IDENTIFIED. SECURITY LOCK RELEASED." Then it paused, as if to catch a breath. It had been so loud!

"WELCOME, D-RANK MAVERICK HUNTER BILBO BAGGINS."

Bilbo could swear his ears was betraying him just now. "D-rank? Maverick Hunter? Wait, didn't I hear about it somewhere?" He paused for a second, then a proverbial lightbulb lit up above his head. "Wasn't your old organization called 'Maverick Hunter'? But I've never been part of it, and- and- and I don't plan to!"
“Please don't mind the new title for now, Bilbo Baggins, though I would say you'd have deserved it had we met in different circumstances,” said X, and Bilbo could again swear he'd heard the fellow chuckle just now. “I had to register you as a Maverick Hunter, otherwise you wouldn't be able to use the Blade Armor Buster.”

“Blade Armor Buster?” Bilbo said, examining the bracer again. “Cute. What do I do no- Aargh!”

Bilbo yelped out loud. Who wouldn't at the sight he'd just saw? The bracer, as if having a life of its own, just opened itself up like the jaws of a great predator beast, and clamped down on his poor right arm!

Except unlike being eaten by a beast, the object did not hurt at all. Before long, Bilbo found himself admiring the beauty of the object, how well it fitted to the rather fatty calf of his forearm, how flawless the metal surface gleamed, and how intricate the design was. But just for the sake of safety, as was necessary in dealing with mysterious object of magical properties, a question needed to be asked. “How do I take it off, my good sir?”

“All you need to do is activate the virtual control panel with your other hand,” said X's voice, and Baggin did as he was told: Click the indent, press his left hand against the panel that had just been summoned.

“DISENGAGE B-BUSTER?” asked the voice of the bracer again, mechanical and monotonous.

“Aye, please do, my good man!” said Bilbo with the greatest of courtesy, as if addressing not an object but a living person deserving of respect – and maybe a bit of fear.

Then all of a sudden, Bilbo's short sword resting at his hip began to glow blue again. As if that wasn't enough warning, Bilbo's ears then caught the distinctive growl and the clattering of goblin armor in the distance.

His final warning, unexpectedly enough, came from the bracer itself. “WARNING! HOSTILE DETECTED. B-BUSTER DISENGAGEMENT ABORTED.”

From the other end of the room came a melange of growls and howls and trampling footsteps. Hardly had the poor hobbit the time to prepare – a small host of goblins burst through the doorway. Six of them, spitting and screaming and obviously not pleased with Bilbo's incursion. Bilbo would have cursed himself why he had not spotted that door before (so he could have planned a getaway accordingly), had the gleam of scimitars not gripped him in fear first.

And then again the bracer roared to life.

“HOSTILE IDENTIFIED. AUTO-LOCK ENGAGED.”

With a click and a glow, the bracer seemingly expanded. A contraption resembling a short yet broad cylinder stretched outwards and covered the entirety of Bilbo's fist. The hobbit's hand then turned towards the goblin closest to him.

Bilbo was already sort-of aware that the bracer had a life of its own not unlike a great many things of myths and legends from the ages past. What Bilbo did not know – until just then – was that it was capable of actually killing things.

Which it promptly did – and how.

There was a buzzing sound – the tip of the cylinder flared and sparked. From within a single shot as bright as the starlight beloved by the Eldar burst forth.
There was hardly a scream, and the unfortunate goblin's head was no more. Bilbo hardly had the time to realize what he had done. The weapon – because there was now no longer any doubt what the bracer actually was – boomed again. And again. And again. And again.

Within the span of a sixth of a minute, Bilbo was standing in a corridor that now looked as if half a dozen watermelon-sized blackcurrants had just been dashed against the wall. Six goblins, evil creatures as they were, as alive as any other creatures rightfully made by the Music of the Ainur just moments before, were no more. Their remains were in various states of dismemberment: the weapon was clearly made for things far bigger than goblins, and it showed.

Bilbo found his eyes wandering to the vicinity of a goblin arm on the floor, severed by the same round that ripped a crater in its torso. It was twitching. And twitching. And twitching. Bilbo's eyelids were peeled; horrified, terrified... and strangely mesmerized. The hobbit's back was to the wall, and he was sliding down as his knees gave way. His chest heaved, his breathing became ragged, and everything around him became blurry and spinning like he'd missed a dozen meals and about as many naps.

The moment the disembodied arm stopped moving, a voice rang out by Bilbo's ears. “ALL HOSTILE VITAL SIGNS TERMINATED. RESUME B-BUSTER DISENGAGEMENT?”

Perhaps the magical weapon, or indeed even its maker, did not intend to make Bilbo look like a serial killer in training. Didn't stop Bilbo from thinking so. After all, what kind of monster would even use such a word as “terminate” for entirely living, breathing beings (evil spawns of Morgoth in the tales of old notwithstanding)?

Bilbo could not recollect any time before when he'd come so close to snapping. But then he wiped his forehead, straightened his legs and stood up. Not a firm, strong standing-up, but not quite a wobbly, wimpy rise either. The stake was clear: He was here, in this chamber, for a reason. There was an elf-lord in need of rescuing, and a company to reunite with.

“Well done,” X's voice echoed again in the distance, having become far more airy and ambient than it was previously. “Would that this business could go on without bloodshed, but then... if it had not been the case in my time and my world, it is that much more unreasonable to expect pacifism in yours.”

“I am flattered. Though I am quite sure I did... did nothing.” It wasn't clear which was the stronger undercurrent in Bilbo's words: modesty or a denial of the guilt of bloody murder. Perhaps both. What he did know was that a tiny burden was lifted from his heart. Just a tiny bit, but that made all the differences in the world.

“So it seems, but that is neither important nor relevant,” said X, his voice now positively fading away. “I hope my old arm cannon will protect you from harm and carry you to wherever you travel.”

Bilbo didn't truly know what to say. “Aye, my good man,” he finally said, blurring the first thing to come to mind. “I'll try not to misuse it. Not misuse it.” The sheer power figuratively radiating from the weapon seemed to have eaten his tongue.

“Believe me, Bilbo Baggins. You will not misuse it.”

The voice of X had now faded to the point Bilbo wasn't sure if he was being encouraged or forewarned. It was also the last time Bilbo would hear the voice attributed to this X fellow, at least for a time, though he would not truly know of this chance meeting's significance yet.

Now that danger was over, the weapon began to do exactly what Bilbo had told it before:
disengaging. Hatches opened, metal plates slid, locks unlatched, and in seconds the weapon had detached itself from Bilbo’s poor forearms. Now the thing, diminished and looking not at all dangerous (if only oversized still), was sitting harmlessly in his arms.

Bilbo thought long and hard for a while. He certainly would see a lot of mileage out of this thing – especially if they were going further west into lands dark and untamed. In fact if the rumors are true, he might even want to keep it on hands – no pun intended – all the time. But then again, one wouldn’t keep a bare blade on permanent standby unless they were just that paranoid, violent like an orc and a half, or both. And this thing, Bilbo shuddered to think, was a hundredfold the power of any sword and about that much more brutal in its deeds.

No, he thought. The thing would stay on my belt, he thought, and may the Valar and their hosts forgive my transgression should I ever need to break it out.

Bilbo’s ears didn’t register his own footsteps as he tiptoed out of the bloodied chamber.

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Zero’s beam saber fizzled. Click, click, click, went his finger over the switch. Nothing happened. The former Hunter – Rebel – Terminator-of-Enemies let out a strained “Darn!”, drowned out by the cacophony of noises all about him.

Before Zero towered a hunk of metal the size of two elephants bearing fists about as large as he was. Somewhere in his memory unit some data on the Golem assault mechaniloid was brought up. Big, check. Clad in several feet of titanium, check. Hovering on stilt-like legboards, check. Packing a mean duo of laser cannons, check. And most importantly, something not to be engaged while unarmed, check, check and check.

Zero’s luck happened that his beam saber would run out of juice just as the thing ruptured through the ground, tossing men and dwarves and elves all over the place. That left him with only two weapons: his fist, or one of those fancy metal swords carried by those less fortunate elves. If the opposition was to be a Golem, Zero might as well start swinging an around oversized leek.

Pretty sure I’ve been here before. How did I get out of that again?

The machine didn’t quite see Zero for a threat yet – pretty sure he didn’t resemble a valid one at this rate – and turned its attention to the biggest, meanest looking creature among its enemies. There was an agonizing neigh that sounded more like a scream. The mighty elven prince’s fine Noldorin steed was now naught but several chunks of laser-processed horse haunches. Its rider tried to scramble away from the monstrosity, muttering under his breath what Zero could only assume to be some Elvish words not to be uttered in polite company.

“Lord Elrohir!” cried Glorfindel. For the first time the Noldo was helpless: the tremor had hurled him several dozen feet away, his left foot bent at an anatomically uncomfortable angle. The Golem was already training its eyes on the elven prince before Glorfindel could stand up himself.

Zero ignited his leg propulsion. Can’t have that, can we?

At that precise moment no less than five things happened, all at once. Zero launched himself at Elrohir. A horseman did the same from the opposite direction. A ball of fiery explosive arced right over his head. A standard-issue dwarven arrow zipped towards the Golem. For its part, the mechaniloid creaked and turned around again: apparently some pre-industrial elven prince was way lower on the AI’s “potential threat” chart than a charging Zero naked as the day Wily prototyped him.
The arrow struck first and true, doing absolutely nothing of consequence. A laser beam cleaved the ground before Zero in twain, spraying pebbles and bits of dirt everywhere. An exasperated gurgle escaped his throat: the crimson reploid was lucky he managed to brake where he did. the laser barely grazed his left foot's paintjob: too close for comfort. Zero felt like opening the floodgate on expletives: taking a three-week timeout to repair himself while he hid himself was not an option in Middle Earth, period.

The outrider didn't miss an opportunity when it came: he rode by Elrohir like a gust of wind, leaning over and pulled the elven prince astride with one movement of his entire upper body. “Wind beneath my wings, Estel!” cried Elrohir.

Then the fireball courtesy of Gandalf – for it was nobody's produce but the good wizard – slammed into the back of the Golem's head with all the force of a small grenade. The Golem flinched for all of one second, and then – from the look of its movement - resumed its attempt to lock Zero back into range of its laser.

Apparently a wizard tossing incendiary devices like it was running out of stile seemed less threatening to the mechaniloid's AI algorithm than a completely unarmed former Hunter. Zero thought Gandalf's self-esteem would have taken a hit in any other situation. As it happened – Zero scanned around the mess of a battlefield as he dodged the incoming beam – his ego was probably the last thing Gandalf should be worried about right now.

Indeed, the wizard way eying the rest of the small coalition of men and elves and dwarves from the corner of his eyes, his brows furrowing. His right hand trembled a little, betraying the shock his face certainly didn't. To say the expedition had been a mess was an understatement: About half the men and elves were lying on the ground, not moving. Those horses that weren't outright brought low were panicking – or had already panicked and bolted. The rest of the elves were fanning out trying to get as far away from the rampaging machine as they could.

Thorin's company seemed to be faring a bit better, for there was a distinct lack of dwarves among those knocked out. A quick scan revealed the company's resident boisterous weapons master lying face-down next to a dead horse, however.

Of course, out of the whole vanquished and routing company, the Golem had to specifically single Zero out for a target. Which, now that his analytical processor had got some time to assess the extent of damage, was more or less exactly what Zero wanted it to do. Weil's machines have never been known for their optimized AI.

“Listen up, the mech- the thing is aiming at me!” cried Zero. “I'll grab its attention! Just run away before the thing changes its AI logic!”

A quick look at the eyes of the man named Estel revealed that he didn't quite understand the vocabulary. At least he seemed to understand the 'run away' part. He nodded once; though his fists were clenched and his face betrayed a willingness to do anything but run away.

“Rangers! Rangers of the North, to me, to me!” he cried, his voice hoarse and wild like the arctic wind Zero was no stranger to. Zero couldn't help but admire his calmness: round the mechaniloid he wheeled, raising his shield as he masterfully gallopped by. Wherever he rode and cried, the rest of the men and elves stopped running and gathered around him in a formation of sort. Not that the young man could come up with a solution for the Golem. Even Zero couldn't, and he used to exterminate mechaniloids like those in droves.

“We'll cover you,” Estel exclaimed, and raised his hand to the air. “Dunedain!”
At his order, there was a small cascade of twangs of the bowstrings. A volley of fine elven arrows was loosed, pouring on what Estel's remaining company probably thought was the Golem's head. Not even scratching the paint job, though Zero appreciated the sentiment.

Meanwhile, more beams raked the ground behind Zero's feet. The reploid somersaulted just as another shredded a very old oak and uprooting whatever was left of it. His untied hair fluttered dangerously close to the beam, and the reploid let out yet another small curse.

Another beam missed Zero by a literal hair, this time pulverizing a nearby rock into tiny chunks. Zero rolled forward, grabbing a handy pebble within reach. With the power the reploid put behind it the throw might have killed an armored man, but since the target was the Golem, it simply bounced off the front visor. Granted, Zero wasn't expecting it to do any harm, but still. That was a darn good shot if I have to say it myself. He would have sweated if reploids could sweat.

At this rate, something was bound to hit him at one point or another...

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All his life, arguing whether live or dead goblins smelled worse was far from Bilbo Baggins' thought. He was pretty sure some of his Took ancestors might have considered the question, for purely academic purposes. As it happened, today the answer was clear to Bilbo: Live goblins tended to carry around whatever flesh that may or may not have gone off as snack. He could smell the stench from half a mile away. Such torture of noses should have been made illegal, illegal he said!

The only solace for his poor, poor nose was that Bilbo needed only follow the smell to navigate... well, wherever in Eru's name he was.

It looked half like a cavern, for there are jutting stalagmites and stalagmites and moss covering pretty much every twist and turns. The other half it resembled something far more industrial for lack of better words: Polished rocks, metal platings, small pipes that looked just like the Bag End plumbing except far more pristine. Once every so often Bilbo would encounter bulbs of light radiating a distinctly soothing blue hue from above – whatever purpose they serve, it wasn't for the benefit of goblins' eyesights.

For all of that amalgamation the place seemed awfully incomplete: there was an over-abundance of boxes and crates all over the place, while the plumbing and wall plating were clearly unfinished. If the tools and half-assembled contraptions (What is that? A wheel that spins on its own? Ballistae linked to tripwires? And what's with all the blinking lights?) along the cavernous corridors were of any indication, As if more extensive constructions was going to be done until something shut the whole thing down before it was complete. The atmosphere was almost haunting.

Bilbo tried not to think how someone – anyone – would be able to carve out such a thing so close to the elves' homestead without them knowing. Or, alternately, Eriador being as ancient as it was, perhaps the natural cave system had always been there. Whoever was behind this bleeding mess was only making modifications where appropriate, and the elves ran into them before they finish.

Either way, the distinct lack of goblins so far was starting to grate on Bilbo's nerves, though there was no shortage of their reek. As the goblin stench got worse and worse, the Blade Buster nestled on his belt started to feel more and more like it belonged on his arm. The hobbit gritted his teeth, creeping from one shadow to another: He wasn't going to use it, no, not after what he had seen and not unless his very life was being threatened.

And then the path split.
Bilbo's eyes bulged: three tunnels heading into three different directions were presenting themselves before him. At first sight, they all looked alike. The same flickering blue light hung over his head, the walls lifeless, the ground trackless and strangely lacking of all goblin presence. Not even the smell seemed to help: the offending stench was wafting out from all three pathways seemingly in equal measures.

It was as if whoever came up with this 'let's industrialize this cave' debacle had left a puzzle for would-be explorers just to spite them. If so, then it was very much uncalled for and unbecoming of such personage as would be powerful enough to even think about financing the project.

Bilbo swallowed hard. Sure, he loved maps and would have prided in his ability to come up with one on demand, but that was if he had quill and paper and all the panoplies of the budding cartographer at his disposal. Making a map in his mind as he went was far less fun than reading one in the safety of his study while armed with seed cakes and a bottle of good vintage or two. Oh, and not having goblins who may or may not be lurking behind the next corner would have helped, too.

And then his stomach was still rumbling. The goblin-stench had murdered his appetite, possibly for days, but that didn't mean the biting hunger pang totally alien to a well-off hobbit would just vanish. That would be too convenient.

In that split moment Bilbo's mind went all over the places. Mostly it just went back to his dining room filed to the brim with good food and drink, and his warm bed with an even warmer wood-flame burning in the fireplace, and a jar or two of perfume within an arm's reach, and the study where his collection of books and maps and curious things lay. The thought made his knees weak and the sores on the underside of his feet sorer, and reminding him how sleepy he was. By Eru, if he could not eat or drink or nurse his blisters, he still could just lie down there on the ground and forget all this had ever happened. If luck was on his side, he might even wake up to find himself a respectable and comfortable hobbit in his smial again with not one thing out of place whatsoever.

The desire for sleep and rest tended to override all nobler callings, just like that.

But then the next moment his thoughts wandered to other places. An estranged dwarven prince's visage, grimly determined to face off against a dragon if needed be to reclaim his people's home. The shape of an elven prince slumped in defeat and an equally vanquished princess of their kind, only less willing to admit her loss. A wizard, as eccentric as he was driven, a weight of something over his shoulder that he wouldn't tell, but it was there for all to see. And then, the red... reploid. Noughton. Zero. Whatever purpose his existence was to be, by Eru, it wasn't on his world. Yet there he was, fighting the very things the dwarves and elves and Gandalf were fighting without a word of complaint.

We've all got our jobs to handle, don't we.

Bilbo took a deep breath. Suddenly, the goblins' stench no longer seemed all that overwhelming any more. No reason for the master to give up when the footman's still kicking, no?

Bilbo clenched his teeth. Let me see... it's got to be the middle path. It's always the middle path in the fairy tales. With a gulp and imagining he was sipping a glass of aged wine for courage, Bilbo followed his instinct.

Well, here goes nothing.

Because standing around forever wasn't going to solve anything. Not when there was an elf-lord to rescue.
Chapter End Notes

1) For those FAMILIAR with the Megaman universe:

- Zero's saber running out of power: This serves more than one purpose. One, a pretty dominant theme in MMZ is "energy shortage" and it wouldn't feel right without referencing this somehow: the energy crystals that Zero got from blowing up the Panthe-orcs a few chapters ago can only go so far and he hasn't had time to pick up more. Two, Zero plus saber equals overpower in Middle-Earth, and much as it would "seem" so cool to have him tear through everything Sauron and company have to throw at him, that runs against the spirit of (i) good storytelling, and (ii) the good Professor's main thread of "hope" rather than brute force conquering the Shadow.

- The "Zero may as well swing around an oversized leek" part: If I remember correctly, I've run across a crossover pairing between Zero and a certain character from another fandom that doesn't have all that much to do with the Megaman franchise at all. The pairing is pretty out there, sure, but come on, it's a gigantic LEEK!

2) For those NOT familiar with the Megaman universe:

- This here mechaniloid (aka. giant robot) you see is called a Golem, and a quick Youtube search for the opening sequence of Megaman Zero 1 will familiarize you with this monstrosity's capability. It shrugs off most firearms, packs a mean laser cannon that SHREDS reploids to ribbons, and can be reliably harmed only with Zero's saber. I can imagine First-age Noldor bearing First-age weapons can still tear it apart - In fact, I think the likes of Fingolfin can solo most of Neo Arcadia's arsenal save for Omega Zero and Ragnarok. However, this is the THIRD age and the Noldor will have to suffer accordingly from their depleting power, hence the curbstomp.

- The gift X gave Bilbo is a modified Arm part of his Blade Armor in Megaman X6. It is pretty run-of-the-mill as far as arm upgrades go in the series; its real strength comes in only when used in conjunction with the Z-saber, which Bilbo doesn't have (yet?). Right now, it acts only as a weaker copy of X's Buster without anything fancy attached. But then, taking into consideration the much lower power level in Middle Earth, and there is some VERY real reason for Bilbo to fear his own weapon. That, and the weapon also has another utility function built in...

3) Legendarium note:

- Is there a cavern system near Rivendell in canon to the extent that I am describing? Probably not, for the exact reason I mentioned. The Noldor have this love for caves and hidden places of all things, like Nargothrond and Gondolin (and if you count the Sindar you can add Doriath and Thranduil's Hall, too), which I wager was born out of necessity as they were fighting a losing war for most of the First Age. If there had been a sufficiently deep cave system right next to the most iconic Noldorin holdfast in Eriador in the Third Age as I described, then Elrond should have already scoured it long before Bullroarer Took was even born. So what's the deal with it? Let's start by saying, by Third Age standard (again, not much so First Age, because Feanor and Family (TM) are Just That Broken), Weil's capability overwhelms everything everyone else, Sauron included, can throw at him, IF he has access to the resources he needs...
Chapter 12

The Green Elf

Slowly and gradually, in the span of ten minutes the cavern had receded behind Bilbo. Polished rocks and mortars replaced jagged walls and jutting stalagmites; actually functioning lights and lamps displaced wires and incomplete machinery, and the smell of goblins was supplanted by an equally pungent odor of iron and oil. There were something else, too, that Bilbo could not lay a finger on, like perfume water mixed with pony dung. It seemed at least some of the occupants took exception to the goblin smell, though their efforts to get rid of it had backfired.

Still, Bilbo thanked Eru the corridors were empty still. And it was actual corridors now that his little feet were treading on, angular and smooth and disturbingly symmetric. If the previous sight of tools and contraptions had not convinced Bilbo there were forces other than goblins and the stereotypical creatures of the Shadow at work, this sight would have.

Which brought to mind another, far more pressing concern. Bilbo was hopelessly lost. Every self-respecting hobbit would be, when faced with rows after rows of corridors each looking identical to everything else. The number of doors, too, were overwhelming: the last three hundred feet Bilbo walked through must have had no fewer than two dozens between them. There were no pointer whatsoever if a door would open into a pantry full of cakes and ham, or a hungry dragon, or things worse than a hungry dragon.

If the tales of many an adventurers dying horribly in the fairy tales were of any indication, then randomly opening doors in a dungeon without being a mythical hero of divinely proportion was a very, very bad idea. Not one he was keen on, at any rate.

Now Bilbo decided to nestle himself in a corner where the light didn’t shine, rubbing his sore knees as he sat down. The situation hadn't changed much for the better: the surrounding was still so quiet it was deafening, and Bilbo was still nowhere near the legendary jailbreak he was supposed to be doing. Perhaps Bilbo's flaring nostrils had gotten more used to the stench, but that wasn’t going to help save Elrond – and that was, the Hobbit shook his head as he thought, if the goblins had not already murdered the good elf.

No, no, no, Master Baggins, no time for pessimism. He slapped himself mentally. You’re supposed to solve the problem, not despairing over it! Think, think!

In a bout of desperation – or perhaps just his habit to let his mind wander about for want of specific things to focus on – Bilbo inexplicably cast his eyes upon the weapon on his belt.
The luster of iron and paint was mesmerizing. It probably wasn't supposed to be all that attractive, but somehow everything about the weapon suddenly looked to him like salvation. Its power could protect him. Its color scheme, blue and green and streaks of velvet, gave him an illusion of brightness and life in this monotonous crawl. And its design, why, its craftsmanship was top-notch and so, so terribly sleek. Bilbo would think it a curious toy for the exuberantly wealthy (not that he wasn't), rather than a weapon of terrible power...

“Hey, you there! Can you hear me?”

Bilbo felt like his spine had been replaced by a shard of ice. He blinked and rubbed his eyes.

Was the weapon speaking to him again?

Bilbo scratched his head, the pang of hunger in his belly suddenly vanishing, in its place a swelling curiosity. He pressed his ear against the bracer's fin.

“Hello? You hear me?”

The sound did come from the bracer, seemingly echoing from deep within. No, no, that couldn't be right. Certainly the bracer had spoken before, yes, but not with this high-pitched squeak like a little hobbit girl pestering him for cake!

“Augh, don't leave me hanging! L-i-s-t-e-n to me for once, please? Pretty please? With sugar on top?”

A ten-year-old hobbit girl pestering him for cake, to be precise. In the middle of a dungeon that might or might not be filled to the brim with goblins. That he was infiltrating to rescue an elf-lord. This, Bilbo thought, could make for a fine bedtime story for another day, if it hadn't been so utterly ridiculous.

“Very well, you win,” Bilbo said, as if giving up. “Wait, not another word – unless you like becoming goblin food. Or like me to become goblin food – which is not what Master X,” Bilbo made a nodding gesture and hoping the voice heard it, “wants to do with me.”

“Hmph, fine,” said the voice, still squeaky as it was, although at least she'd taken the hint, having spoken far more quietly as was appropriate for a stealth mission. “So, you're Bilbo Baggins, huh?” she paused, as if examining Bilbo with eyes invisible. “To be honest... I did expect someone taller. You're shorter than Axl!”

“What a surprise,” said Bilbo. “I doubt Gandalf picked me for a thief because of my height. He'd have had plenty of Big Folks to call on, if that'd been what he was after.”

“Well, if you can't help it, you can't help it,” said the voice. “Why can't I get to navigate for someone cooler... like, I don't know, Zero, for a change?”

Bilbo was nonplussed.

“I'd think if you're that serious about this, navigating, business – that's what you call it? You might want to lend me a hand. I'm trying to get back to him if it isn't obvious yet.”

There was a kind of quiet that Bilbo supposed was equivalent to a normal person flustering. “Well, I suppose you're all right. Good old X must have picked you of all people for a reason. He'd been prone to doing that for years now.” She paused, as if waiting for Bilbo to interject. When all she got was silent, she continued again, sounding suitably embarrassed. “A-anyway, I'm Pallette. That's two T's if you'd ever need to write my name down. Navigator for the Maverick Hunters – back when
there actually was a thing called Maverick Hunters, if you don't mind.”

An awkward five seconds of silence passed. For the voice, that was, not for Bilbo, if her tone was anything to go by. “D-don't tell me you've swallowed your tongue!”

“I was just going to ask how you'd got stuck into that bracer,” said Bilbo, and he was quite honest this time around. “But I'm not entirely certain if that would sound like asking why elves have leaf-shape ears, or whether dwarves can ride warhorses.”

“That's because I'm a cyber-elf, silly!” exclaimed Pallette in a voice that made Bilbo instinctively withdraw his hands to guard his scalp. The hypothetical swat didn't come, which made the resident hobbit feel rather, well, silly. “Been hanging around for ages now without anyone to navigate for.” She harrumphed. “In case you haven't realized, that's literally my cause for existence.”

Cyber-elf. Bilbo was sure he'd heard X talk about those beings of energy, and how 'they aren't the long-living, long-eared beings from your time, but in a sense quite similar'. His crafty brain immediately whizzed to life.

“Master X could have told me about you,” he said quizzically.

“Good old X decided it would be more funny to let you figure out yourself that the gift he gave you is... what's the human word for that again? 'Haunted'?” She let off a very girly giggle. “Do excuse him. X might have been terribly jaded and depressed and full of sorrow after all that, you know, death and doom and gloom and being trapped in Cyberspace now, but he does have a sense of humor.”

“And so do you.” Bilbo made a face quite like he'd showed Thorin's entire company back at the unexpected party. “Very funny.”

“Never said I'm not,” said Pallette. “You should ask Zero about that time I set him on a date with a colleague-”

Bilbo suddenly felt an urgent need to return back on topic. “Very well, Miss Pallette,” he said, cutting Pallette's chattering cleanly in half. “So... what is it that you do, exactly? Guide me towards where I need to go?”

“Well, that's what navigating means, hotshot,” said Pallette. “You do the walking, I do the pointing-you-in-the-right-direction, just so you don't fall into a pit. Or get impaled on spikes. Or fall into a pit and then get impaled on spikes. And maybe help you swipe potentially useful things that people won't miss, if you catch my drift.”

“Aren't you a burglar's best friend?” Bilbo remarked, not sure if he should laugh. “Maybe you could have even taken my job had Gandalf seen you before he'd laid his eyes on me.”

“Um... not really, I can't take your job, I'm basically a disembodied voice right about now if you haven't realized that yet,” said Pallette. “But then, y'know, most of the time Maverick Hunter jobs involved doing things that were essentially law-sanctioned breaking and entering, so I suppose I do have a history in that, too. So, uh...” a bit of bashfulness crept into her voice, Bilbo could swear. “Partners?”

That was the point where he was supposed to do some hand-shaking to seal the deal, but then he realized there were no hands to shake.

Or maybe there was a way to make that gesture. He picked up the armed bracer, and put it on. It strapped itself around his forearm with a mere thought.
“Partners, certainly,” said Bilbo, and here was this tugging feeling on his arm that worked quite like an ordinary handshake in any other circumstance. That would do.

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“Door on the left?” Bilbo whispered into the bracer as his feet crept around the corner. Still no goblins in sight, and the emptiness was starting to unnerve him even more than had a legion of goblins descended upon him.


A curious Bilbo decided to check it out anyway. And lo, the sliding door opened to a perfectly square and as perfectly empty room, lit only by a makeshift torch sconce. “That is surprising.”

“You mean unsurprising,” said Pallette as Bilbo stepped out of the room. “Has it ever occurred to you, maybe, just maybe, you’d broken into this compound before they finished building it?” she paused a little, as though relishing in Bilbo's confusion. “That's fine, don’t be embarrassed, back in the day X and Zero did it all the time. Construction site, garbage recycling facilities, water treatment plants, derelict factories… raiding criminally unsafe locations was kind of the job description.”

“Served me right for agreeing to be a Hunter,” Bilbo said, his voice surprisingly upbeat. It was just as well he'd met Pallette when he did: solitary a person he used to be, the tunnel would have driven him insane had he kept digging away at it without anyone on his side. “Where should I go next?”

“Well, that depends,” said Pallette. “I'm sure I'm seeing something that looks quite like an elf,” Bilbo heard a clear ahem, “well, your definition of an elf, anyway, at the end of the next corridor. However, if you're interested in some extra swiping, then there's an energy signature just lying around here somewhere, so large it would make an entire dying world cry tears of joy just by looking at it.”

“I'll take it you mean treasure,” said Bilbo. “And treasures, may I remind you, tend to be guarded.”

“I don't think I saw any hostile energy reading,” said Pallette, matter-of-factly. “There's a natural tunnel leading to what I guess is an underground lake. Not exactly near here, but not that far away if you've got the right Navigator – who you have.” The self-pride in her voice was borderlining obnoxiousness. “You’ll have to leg it a bit, but it might be worth the hassle, just sayin’.”

Bilbo stopped in his place for a short moment. The Tookish side of him was barely controllable: it smelled treasure of all things, and what a Took would do with that knowledge was to go and grab it on the double. Not because of any greed, but rather an insatiable taste for out-of-this-world curiosities. Maybe a short detour to grab whatever it was she was hinting at might be worth it?

But then the respectable – or rather responsible Baggins side took over. “I have a father to an injured elf and a lord of his realm I have to rescue, Miss,” he said. “Who might be imprisoned, or, may Eru have mercy on me for suggesting, tortured to death as we speak.” The grim thought had been lingering around the edge of his mind for the last hour or so, but only then did he gather the courage to face it.

And he'd imagine a small exchange of words was in short order between himself and the Navigator, too, when her voice suddenly rang out.

“Watch out!” she exclaimed, full of urgency. “Hostile energy readings, at ten o'clock!”

“Ten o'clock?”
“That way, silly!” Pallette said, and at once Bilbo felt his entire right forearm being yanked around towards the corridor opening in the northwest.

Sure enough, two goblins emerged from behind the corner. Correction: goblins with mechanical parts stuck on them, as the blinking single gem occupy most of their heads showed. Bilbo rolled out of the way just as a small barrage of shots fell on his previous position. He raised his forearm and squeezed the trigger button.

The first shot hit the goblin in the front, denting its chest armor piece and squishing bits of metal deeper into its torso. The creature staggered and growled, about to fire back when the second shot hit it on the head, removing everything above its neck.

The second goblin fared slightly better: Bilbo’s third shot missed it by a hair. He dove out of the way, just as the creature’s return fire drilled three apple-sized holes into the wall where Bilbo’s head was mere seconds before. Bilbo returned the favor; this time striking true on the creature’s chest. He must have hit an especially volatile part, too, for the goblin spontaneously combusted and exploded like a firecracker stuffed too full of black powder. As if prompted, the first goblin’s headless carcass also blew up into nothingness. Not complete nothingness, Bilbo noticed after rubbing his eyes: it left behind a small cylinder filled with bright pellets flashing yellow.

Bilbo was just about to walk over and grab the object when the corridor roared to life. To be more exact, only the lights on the ceiling did: the blue light had now turned into a flashing shade of crimson, accompanied by sirens screaming from all directions. It felt quite like Bilbo had been stuffed into a chamber filled with a thousand Lobelias shouting in unison. While he wasn’t used to the post-industrialization infrastructure just yet (and would prefer he’d never have to spend more time in it than necessary, thank you very much), Bilbo understood quite well what the whole blaring siren meant.

“Well, so much for the stealth effort,” spat Bilbo. “Miss Pallette? Where now?”

“End of corridor, turn right, then left into the open door; there should be an alarm control somewhere if the energy reading isn’t tricking me!” shouted the Navigator. “Oh, and don't forget to pick up the energy crystals!”

“One thing at a time, good gracious!” shouted Bilbo.

Off he dashed into the corridor ahead, intent on swiping the cylinder, and was rewarded with a small hail of concentrated gunfire just as he emerged from the corner. A shot whizzed by his face and dug a small crater into the stone floor. Had he been a second quicker, he would have grabbed the thing and gotten his bushy-haired hobbit-head ripped off. So much for swiping.

Bilbo pressed his back against the wall, his heart starting to thump like a hyperactive hobbit boy’s toy drum set. The bullets were making a right mess out of the floor in front of him and the wall just around the corner.

“Four energy signals, Pantheon Model-2201, gun type” exclaimed Pallette. “Should have expected these things around here.”

“Thank you, because obviously I need to know what they are called,” said Bilbo, clutching his chest. “Any other pieces of grand wisdom fit for the Noldor, Miss?”

Bilbo heard a huff. “Well, I was just about to say their arm-cannons have a stupidly small magazine and that you can maybe sneak a shot or two in when they're busy reloading, but since you aren’t interested—"
And sure enough, just as she finished her sentence, the gunfire stopped.

Bilbo took the hint. He peeked out from the cover and caught the four machine-grafted goblins clumsily messing around with their bulging metallic forearms. Hobbit-aim ruled the day again, and the first three goblins found themselves missing chunks in an order of seconds. The last goblin, having finally decided, perhaps, that reloading wasn't going to cut it, pulled out an object looking like a cudgel coated with sparking flashes of lightning, and charged Bilbo.

For a split second Bilbo was caught off-guard. The goblin was less dashing and more *gliding* along the corridor, just like Zero.

And then Bilbo's next click dispensed no bullet but a single 'click' sound.

“Oh. Good gracious.”

Pallette was muttering a word that sounded nothing like her childlike voice should be dispensing.

The goblin had closed the gap within the space of two seconds flat. Bilbo could barely roll out of the way as the cudgel hit the wall where he was leaning on.

And then his eyes fell upon that part of the walls and floor pelted by goblin shots.

The goblin promptly spun around. Smash went the crystal embedded in its forehead. A strangled gurgle escaped its throat as it fell over. A shard of rock the size of a child's fist had been surgically introduced to the creature's crystal.

The rest of its head blew up in five seconds flat, while Bilbo dusted his left palm.

“That was awesomely reckless,” said Pallette as Bilbo stood back up.

“Taking it as a compliment,” said Bilbo.

All that remained of the goblins were bits and pieces of blasted machinery. Bilbo tried not to think how much of *goblin* there had been to begin with in the monsters he'd just blasted – though all portents pointed to 'very little'. He didn't know if the implication was less or more disturbing.

Then again, two of the four left behind pellet-filled cylinders.

“I'll take care of these, I suppose,” he said, swiping the two objects from the floor and pocketing them.

“That doesn't look like you are,” Pallette pointed out. “If I were you, I would, y'know, reload my own gun lest it run out of juice in the middle of a firefight again. Just sayin’.”

And then Bilbo heard more footsteps ringing in the distance. “You never told me how to do that!” he cried.

“Oh, right, you're a rookie,” said Pallette. A ten-year-old voice had no right, Bilbo told himself, to sound so patronizing, and there she was. “Let me do it for you.”

The buster arm's side split open, revealing a small compartment conveniently the size of a full energy crystal cylinder. “Manual reload engaged,” said Pallette. “Crystal, please?”

Off into the slot went one of Bilbo's hard-won prizes. The compartment automatically slid back into place, and at once Bilbo could feel the whole thing thrumming with energy.
Then the first goblin-head, grafted with red crystal, emerged into the hallway.

“Hobbit-aim?” said Pallette. Bilbo could almost picture her nodding – that was, if he had known what she actually looked like.

“Here we go again,” said Bilbo, and raised his buster.

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The firefight flew over Bilbo’s head like a memory he would sooner like forgotten. Even with him basically winning with minimal effort: whoever gave heavy guns to goblins failed to give them the training needed to compensate for their terrible aim.

Within the space of ten minutes Bilbo might have broken his ancestor Bullroarer’s well-lauded “most goblins killed” record. He was mentally debating whether he should take pride in such an achievement as he walked along the corridor blackened with powder soot and littered with bent and charred mechanical parts. Six energy crystal containers were jangling in his pockets, one in each, and Bilbo was cursing himself for not wearing a waistcoat with more of the sort.

He might have single-handedly drained the industrialized goblin-cave of every single one of them capable of holding a buster gun.

He opened the door Pallette had designated. There were no goblin in it, except for a large...

“Security computer,” Pallette helpfully filled in. There was a screen before him, split into thirty two smaller screens, each showing what Bilbo thought was a part of the complex. He felt himself shaking somewhat: had the goblins been more competent, he would have been discovered long before he had known there was Pallette around to guide him.

“You know what to do,” said Pallette, and Bilbo complied, somewhat unwillingly. A curious object it was, indeed, and Bilbo would have liked to see it intact had it not been so utterly noisy and potentially harmful to his body being in one piece at the end of the day.

Five bullets, one explosion and a wild flickering of lights later, it was done. The lights on the ceiling returned to blue, and the blaring noises stopped.

“Can we finally rescue Lord Elrond now?” he said, exhaling in relief.

“Well, sure,” said Pallette, “though, uh... I don't know how to break the news, but there might be complications.”

Bilbo felt his heart squeezing. For a moment he thought all was lost. “Did they... murder him?”

“Well, no, I was just going to say we might have to go through a mechaniloid the size of a room to get him. There is large energy reading just outside of the room he's most likely in.”

Bilbo clenched his fist.. Images flashed before his eyes, of the elf crumpling next to him, of the forest on fire and the goblin horde screaming bloody murder defiling the heritage of the elves he'd loved so much from the tales his mother had been telling him since he was born, and of a certain red-clad butler-but-not-really fighting off hordes of them even as he thought. He was quite sure, had Zero, or Thorin, or Elladan, or even Gandalf for that matter, been around, they'd vote he do exactly what he was making up his mind to.

“Then we go through it,” he said.
Silence. Then a sound much like a muffled guffaw. “So much for stealth, Master Bilbo?” said Pallette, sounding like she enjoyed teasing him too much to be serious as the situation demanded.

“Yes, I'd like that.” He narrowed his eyes. “Unless you're telling me we don't have enough firepower.” He patted on his waistcoat for emphasis.

“I can't answer that, my specialty isn't in pinpointing enemies' weaknesses,” said Pallette. “Well, but I'll try. Out of the door on the opposite side of the room, up the corridor – small energy readings around, so keep your buster loaded – and you'll see a shutter.”

Off Bilbo dashed out of the room. The two goblins who showed their faces along the corridor found themselves missing body parts in very short order. Only the decency of a peace-loving gentlehobbit was keeping Bilbo from enjoying what he was doing too much for his sanity's sake, he thought, shoveling the next energy crystal cartridge into his arm cannon.

Sure enough, the duo was standing in front of a large, gaudy, purplish shutter with an emblem clearly reading “W” printed on it. Bilbo could feel Pallette being a bit giddy in his forearm, like she finally got to meet an old friend at long last. A really annoying old friend, but one none the less.

“Whoever made this couldn't have been Morgoth, the enemy of the world,” remarked Bilbo.

“Thank you, Captain Obvious,” quipped Pallette nonchalantly. “Button's on the right, unless you want to take a less, uh... direct path to it.”

Bilbo did as he was told. The door opened as it was supposed to.

Light filled Bilbo's eyes – light that the Shadow was not known for...

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Chapter End Notes

1) For those FAMILIAR with the Megaman universe:

- The Blade Buster running out of power and needing energy crystal reload: For the same reason as Zero's saber fizzling. I've always taken it that both Rockman and X have personal built-in reactors powerful enough to supply all of their weapon systems. Bilbo has no such luxuries. Neither would a large chunk of the reploid population in both the MMX and MMZ timeline (See: energy crisis), meaning that if arm-cannons were to be used at all they must contain a manual reload option using ECs for the non-Legendary Reploid law enforcers.

- On Pallette: Again, a piece of fanon I made up to fill in the gap between the X and the Zero series. I suppose at the end of the X-series a good chunk of the reploids we've known and loved chose to seal themselves somewhere as cyber-elves to escape the terribly bleak situation at that time, preserving themselves either selfishly, or in the belief that they might become useful in the future (and also as an energy preservation mechanism). Pallette, that navigator from X8, is among them, and she'd gotten a bit more acidic during the hundred-year timeskip without anything to do...
2) For those NOT familiar with the Megaman universe (Plus a bit of explanation on cyber-elves):
- Cyber-elves are energy beings, made during the Elf War and beyond in the likeness of (what the Japanese think are) elves. As purely energy beings they can only be used once to power up technology, giving reploids new powers, or even alter the fabrics of the world in a noticeable way. Cyber-elves can't really interact with humans, with the exception of Ciel, the teenage-prodigy-scientist heroine of the Zero series. Here, I am circumventing the rule by having Pallette inhabiting the buster X gave Bilbo, and using its audio-voice function to let herself be heard.

3) Legendarium note:
- Bilbo had just said no to the One Ring, if you'd squint your eyes. He may or may not be back for it in the future.
- Also, relating to point one and the note last chapter about there not being a natural cave system near Rivendell: Bilbo is, in fact, underneath Misty Mountain right now, proving that yes, Transervers can, and have been, used as two-way transport for the forces of the Shadow to transport their machine-grafted goblins all over the place...
Beyond the Shutters

Chapter Notes

Chapter 13 is up and running.

As proof of how far a piece of literary work (fanwork or otherwise) could spiral out of the writer's control, I wish to just say that my original (which is to say, when I wrote the first few chapters last year) intention for this chapter was *radically* different from how it finally turned out. All's well that ends well, however: I like this version far better than the original plan.

A small housekeeping announcement: Given the direction of the plot over the last few chapters, I think it is prudent to modify the story's tag to include the rest of the Rockman X fandom. This is positively definitely not because I wish to expand my readership base, no sir!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 13

Beyond the Shutters

It was William.

William the troll, suspended on several very large chains tied to the ceiling and floor of the very large room Bilbo found himself standing in.

Bilbo wished his eyes hadn't been so perceptive the first (and last) time he saw the poor fellow. He also wished the situation had not been such that he had to feel pity for such a monster as a mountain troll. As things stood, the creature would have better off been turned to stone.

The hole in his chest courtesy of Bolg had been filled in with plenty of metal: armor and machinery clanking and bleeping with every movement of the rest of his muscle. Much of his arms and legs had similarly been either coated in more armor, or else stripped out completely and replaced with mechanical parts – Bilbo honestly could not tell. And his head! It was as if someone (well, many someone) had gouged out half of his skull and what little brain he had had, and replaced them all with a huge, spiked metal ball with two red crystal orbs protruding from where his natural eyes should have been. His jaws were the most intact part of all his body, and even they were forcibly kept together by a pair of very large and very ugly braces.

“Who... could have done this?” Bilbo asked, his voice ringing hollow.

“The same people making the bio-Pantheons, I assume?” said Pallette, her voice suddenly losing a bit of its perkiness. “That must have been... messy. I wonder how-”

“P-please stop right there,” said Bilbo, “I... would rather not throw up, thank you very much.”

The odor around the room wasn't exactly helping. Gone were the smell of troll, in its place there was
the distinct sting of too much ointment and liniment, the kind one would find in the home of a hypochondriac apothecary, or an embalmer's workplace. The only smell more associated with death was corpse gas itself. How they'd made enough of it to fill an entire room ten times the size of Bilbo's smial was anyone's guess. Bilbo would rather his brain not wander there.

"Is he... alive?" he asked. "Doesn't look like anyone can survive that-" Despite himself, Bilbo was tiptoeing ever more carefully towards the creature, the weight of the buster on his forearm became almost unbearable.

"Depending on your definition," said Pallette. "The energy signature suggests that he's more 'alive' than you are by a factor of 216.896711, rounded down, but feel free to disagree with the statistics." Bilbo heard a wispy sigh. "Everyone does, until it serves their argument."

Just then, the chains began to stir.

Swallowing the scream rising from the root of his throat was the hardest thing Bilbo had ever done.

Next thing he knew, the whole room was shaking from a twenty-ton weight being dropped flat on the floor. The troll had somehow broken free of his restrain. Or rather, the restrain had been rigged to disengage the moment an intruder ventured too close to him; Bilbo wouldn't know.

When he finally got back on his feet, Bilbo found himself staring at an iron-grafted, iron-clad troll with multiple lengths of chains still attached to its limbs, more likely than not quite miffed at the fall. Bilbo suddenly lost all energy and compunction to scream.

Now the troll – or whatever it had become – turned towards Bilbo. He could no longer speak, and the gurgle coming from his throat suggested unspeakable agony.

"Uh... hello?" said Bilbo, backing away very slowly. If there had been pity within him just the previous blink of an eye, it was thoroughly replaced by utter fright the moment said gurgle changed into a blood-curdling howl.

"Oh dear," was all Pallette could say on that matter.

And then it began. The floor rattled, the armored troll was charging straight at Bilbo. At least Bilbo still had enough wits about him to dive out of the way. Momentum drove the troll right past him, slamming into the wall, rumbling the room and cracking the ceiling above. Not one second later, it was already wheeling around for another run.

"Now!" shouted Pallette, and Bilbo complied. His left hand slammed on the trigger three times in rapid succession. Three yellow pellets raced towards the troll's chest. They slammed onto the exposed iron where a hole used to be... and promptly glanced off without even making a dent.

"Wait, what?" Bilbo barely finished his exclamation when the troll launched itself at him again.

"Must be adaptive Titanium alloy," said Pallette. The rest of her sentence was lost as Bilbo rolled and rolled around again, dodging both troll and falling rock shards. He could barely make out the "reacts to conventional weapon" part. If she was going to give him a hint, he didn't hear it. If she was just being annoying, this was neither the time nor place.

Now the troll had slammed on the opposite end of the room and was just about to repeat the whole cycle all over again. Bilbo couldn't believe himself, but having a weapon attached to his arm did help him immensely on the courage department.

"Slow down, will you?" he shouted, not sure if he was addressing his enemy or his self-appointed
advisor. His buster’s muzzle flashed again at his trigger press, sending more pellets at the troll.

One hit him in the head. Glance, next.

Another, forearm. Glance, next one.

The next shot would have pierced his groin had it not been predictably clad in heavy armor. And then the troll was almost on top of him – again.

“Are you going to be of any help, or am I doing this alone?” cried Bilbo, again forced to stop shooting and get dodging. He barely avoided getting stepped on as the troll rushed past.

“It isn’t my fault X sent me instead of Layer!” Pallette cried, and had her voice only not been so indignant Bilbo would say she was about as scared as he was. “Uh... try chucking a rock at him or something! The thing might even be allergic to rocks!”

“Oh, please.” was all he could afford, and returned to what was comparable to prodding an armored troll with a stick to see where it hurt.

The next four shots hit the creature at the back of its head, gruff of its neck, left shoulder and right bottom. None so much as made William flinch. With a gulp, Bilbo emptied the rest of the magazine at the creature's general direction, and made about as much impression before William wheeled around again.

It appeared Bilbo had done naught but made the troll more mad, for he was getting faster. This time around Bilbo didn't even have time to properly reload: he'd barely ejected the spent energy crystal canister when the troll rushed him. He swinging the massive chain on its collarbone at Bilbo's general direction... only to step on the cylinder in the process. The poor object was pulverized, but William was off-balance for a split second. The swing went off-target and missed Bilbo by a hair.

“I-is this all we can do?” cried Bilbo, whipping around and began dashing away, no longer bothering to shoot.

“Well, uh, yes? I mean... oh dear, I mean no! I-I'm sorry, I was being stupid! How could I have forgotten that X's buster doesn't work like Axl's pistol?” she sounded like she was going to kick herself any moment now. “Bilbo, you can charge the thing! Just... just press and hold the trigger button, okay?”

The ground was shaking as the troll gave chase. Bilbo swallowed a lump in his throat. “Charge?”

“Yes, yes, just do as I say!” shouted Pallette. “Keep calm, keep calm, you can do this!”

It might have been flight-or-fight instinct taking over, but Bilbo asked no more question. He did exactly as he was told with a kind of clarity he didn't know he had. He had only been pressing the button for a second when the whole weapon began to glower and shimmer. Another second, and Bilbo could swear he could make out four firefly-like orbs begin forming around his forearm, flashing blue in his eyes. “MAX CHARGE,” the weapon's automated voice monotonously declared.

Bilbo whipped himself around and gulped again. William was, once again, almost upon him. “Release the trigger!” cried Pallette, and suddenly everything became clear to Bilbo again.

He drew a stiff breath, and did as he was told.

If Bilbo's previous bullets were just pellets (that were none the less capable of ripping limbs from limbs), the projectile his weapon now discharged was horrifying. Out of the muzzle shot a glowing
blue orb nearly as large as the hobbit was tall, launched at the troll's kneecap at breakneck speed. The recoil was such that it knocked Bilbo several yards backward.

Hardly had Bilbo reoriented himself when the edge of his eyes caught William's left knee colliding with the orb at full speed.

Then his eyes caught a blinding flash, his ears a deafening boom and a pained growl that caused the ceiling to tremble. Bilbo rolled away from the scene, as far as he could, until his back was to the wall. He was now more than a dozen yards from the creature – or whatever was left of it.

Then the flash faded and the dust settled. Bilbo's heart almost sank: William the revived troll was still standing. The explosion did a number on him, but not enough to stop him for good. The scratches on his body was quite minor, and given their regenerative power it might as well have been nothing.

And then Bilbo looked down at its knee where the shot hit.

“That's... brutal,” was all he could manage to say. The armored greaves he was wearing had been shattered, revealing underneath the rugged flesh of a troll, missing many tiny chunks as black blood flowed forth. He was not sure if the troll was in pain: if he was, Bilbo couldn't help but pity the thing.

For all he knew William could no longer charge; it was hobbling towards Bilbo, inching one step at a time, swinging around its chains with wild abandon, but deprived of any sort of devastating momentum whatsoever. It looked as if it was all it could do to not collapse under its own weight. Bilbo would have no trouble at all avoiding him now; he began strafing around, buster still trained on the troll. The used cartridge was discarded, and a new energy crystal canister was deftly slotted back in.

Bilbo's finger, this time, was far from the trigger. Pallette noted his slack with due disapproval.

“What are you doing, Bilbo?” she screamed. “You're winning! Finish him off!”

“I...” There was hesitation in his voice. “I can't do it,” he finally said. Something akin to pity welled up within him; pity for a monster as undeserving as Bilbo could think of, but it was there. Perhaps William had been the only creature of the Shadow that Bilbo had heard speaking and whose name he knew. It was, after all, far easier to sympathize with a suffering monster who seemed just like a person, than a faceless mass of dehumanized goons shooting first and asking questions later (if at all).

Unsurprisingly, Pallette was not aware of all of that. “What?” she cried out incredulously.

“I can't explain, not now,” said Bilbo, and he was sure Pallette could agree – they were still in mortal danger with a giant troll swinging around all those chains in the same room. “Look, can't we just find another way out of this room? Yes, yes, just... out of this room? Please?”

“The only way out is through him,” Pallette said, letting known all her exasperation. “As you see, Good Guy Bilbo, this troll is standing between you and the only way out of this room.” She coughed. “In case you haven't noticed.”

“The door behind us?” asked Bilbo, swinging himself back and forth again.

“Can't be opened,” said Pallette. “I tried my best.”

Bilbo's eyes made a rueful confirmation. If the back door wouldn't work, the only way out was back through where he came from. Which meant the troll was occupying the stretch between Bilbo and the shutter. William and his chains did not seem like they would just let the hobbit walk past.
Bilbo bit his lip, and raised his buster at the troll.

And just as Bilbo thought the fight was his (and that he only needed to discard his empathy to win), it happened. It only took a fraction of a minute, but Bilbo swore he would have recurring nightmares for the rest of his life.

William stopped.

And screamed, an excruciating scream barely held in by his jaw-braces.

The machinery on his chest was splitting open. The iron bit into the troll's flesh, ripping and tearing it like a bodybuilder tearing silk.

In seconds William was kneeling in a pool of his own black blood. The machinery had blossomed on its chest like a huge flower of iron as large as the troll was broad. Unlike real flowers, the emergent contraption's center was occupied by an array of smaller tubes surrounding a single larger one.

All of them were beginning to glow. The immobilized troll had turned himself, willingly or otherwise, into a murderous static artillery platform.

“Eru preserve me,” he cried. “What in the Valar's name is that?”

Pallette was equally terrified. “R-r-run!” she exclaimed.

It was all Bilbo could do to dive out of the way just as half a dozen beams of light shot forth from the tubes. They raced towards Bilbo's previous location, tearing and shattering the ground as they went.

As the beams faded, Bilbo turned around and went white as a sheet. William's shots of light had drilled a small trench into the ground and a Zero-sized hole into the opposite wall.

A sharp pain shot up from his ankle. Bilbo stared at his leg in horror: legs aren't supposed to be bent like that. Whether it was the shot's pressure, or he had finally slipped up at last, he could now move about as well as a hoofless cow. Bilbo tried to pull himself up straight, but failed and tumbled face-down again.

Bilbo could only arch his back and stared at the troll, his eyes meeting its gaze. There wasn’t even the gleeful look, as was expected in the eyes of trolls and goblins and orcs and other dark creatures in triumph. There was only pain – pain and suffocating hatred – as it turned the many barrels at Bilbo. Like a machine with a soul trapped within it, screaming to get out.

Bilbo was speechless. And so was Pallette.

There was a blinding flash.

And then it was all over.

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The first clue that told Bilbo he was still alive was the sound he heard: A loud, choked gurgle of a gigantic creature in its death throes.

He looked up. William the troll knelt there, the crystal glasses he'd had for eyes dulled and lifeless. Black blood was gushing from a huge gash on top of his head that had cut through the metallic casing, down his cheeks of rock and iron, finally dripping from his petrified double chin. The creature's gun barrels were still trained on Bilbo, but it had stopped glowing, and were slightly tipped
towards the ground now that William had keeled over.

The troll who'd eaten a village and a half between him and his two mates, was finally completely dead. Whether what he had gone through was just punishment for his crime, or simply too cruel and agonizing for anyone, Bilbo could not decide. It was not his place to, either way; Mandos alone would see to that — if the troll would go to the Hall of Mandos told in the stories. *Odds are pretty good he wouldn't.*

Then a gleaming flash of blue descended before Bilbo, and for a moment the hobbit thought he was looking at a Vala in all his glory. He knew for a fact, it was this figure who had just saved his life. Then the light dulled, and instead he realized it was an elf standing before him all along.

Yet it was not any elf, but a being of mythic proportions. He was tall and fair as the moon; a stream of black hair flows down his shoulder, and there was fire in his dark eyes. In his hand he held a long sword straight and sharp, the troll-blood dripping from the tip tarnishing its bright gleam nary a bit. A blue mantle was on his shoulder, a coronet on his brows, and a coat of fine elven mail hung to his knee, a keen light blossoming outwards as if on fire. It was as if he had just walked out from the tales Bilbo's mother told, of Fingolfin *Nolofinwe* the High-king of the Noldor who rode out alone to fight the Dark Enemy of all.

“Bilbo Baggins,” said the figure, in the melodious voice of the elves, filled with a sort of melancholy that words failed to describe. “May I... beg your pardon, for involving you in a plight such as you have just survived.”

Bilbo thought his heart had skipped a beat. “Could you...” he gasped. “Could you be Master Elrond Half-elven, lord of the Nold-”

Such was the grandeur upon him, that for a moment Bilbo forgot all about his twisted ankle. Pain returned to him, a rude reminder of the state of his foot and his all too mortal body, just as he tried to stand up to behold the elf-lord more clearly.

“Careful now, my friend,” said Elrond, for it truly was him, “Let me help you.” Before Bilbo could object the great and mighty elf-lord had whisked him up on his back, like a father would carry his baby.

Bilbo gulped again, this time more out of amazement than fear. He'd been looking for the elf-lord for quite a while now; having imagined all sorts of terrible torture visited upon him if he wouldn't make haste. And now that elf-lord was standing here, right before him, not only having saved him instead of the other way around, but did so in a manner that wouldn't look out of place in the legends! And, best of all, this mighty elf was carrying him when his legs had failed.

“A simple Master Elrond would have sufficed, my dear hobbit,” kind and warm as summer in his appearance and, indeed, action. “The name of my kindred is scarcely spoken any longer, not least for that there are now sadly few descended from the host of Feanaro *Curufinwe* and his seven sons who walk still or Arda. Even I may tarry not for long, for Valinor beckons, and the sorrow and weariness in our hearts grow ever huger.”

Elrond nodded. “But now let us not discuss the business of melancholy,” he continued. “You might not look it or know it, Master Baggins, but you have just saved my life. As small things are wont to change the great in the best of circumstances.”

“Have I indeed, Master Elrond?” Bilbo asked back, “Why, I do believe I never did anything so extraordinary of the sort! It was you who saved my life!”
The good hobbit was rightly flustered. Anyone would be, if they found themselves so lavishly praised by an immortal being who had lived since the lost age of heroes in the past so distant as to have passed entirely into myths and legends.

“But you did indeed, Master Baggins,” said Elrond kindly.

Then Elrond told Bilbo, just in passing, of how he came across the hobbit. He'd heard Bilbo blasting his way through a small horde of iron-grafted goblins, and trailed after the noise. He found the chamber and Bilbo just as he was just about to be killed.

“And the rest,” added the elf-lord, “is history. Alone I would not have been able to defeat the troll, mutated as it is, not the least not without my ring. You and your courage, my dear hobbit, bought me what I needed to slay the troll.”

Now Bilbo was scratching his scalp furiously. He had never, in his fifty years of life, felt so important about himself as he did just then. For a second he fell silent, not knowing how to address such accolade.

“We were told you were captured by the goblins,” he finally said. “Your sons and daughter feared for the worst.”

“So you've met my children!” cried Elrond. “Are they... all right?”

“Lord Elladan, if I pronounced his name right, was hurt, my good sir, but not greatly so as far as I know,” said Bilbo. “Lord Elrohir and Lady Arwen are quite healthy, though they are understandably very worried for your wellbeing. That's why I'm here, 'tis all I can do to help to lend them a hand looking for you, Master Elrond. I know what it means... to lose a parent.” In this matter Bilbo was more truthful than he normally was – which was to say extremely so, for the hobbit had never really gotten into the habit of lying.

There was a fleeting bout of joy coursing through Elrond's face as Bilbo spoke of his children. Then the elf-lord's face became grim and severe once again.

“I suppose it is true in a way, that I was in the goblins' clutches for an embarrassing while,” said Elrond. “Though my captivity did not last very long. The goblins of Gundabad, grafted and perverted by so much iron, had forgotten why their kin fear the blade of my kin.”

“At first I thought being turned into these monstrosities addled their mind greatly, for they did seem to want to keep me alive even when it was not in their best interest to do so.” Elrond sighed. “And then I realized they were not looking to kill or capture me – they were after my ring.”

Elrond gestured towards a mark on his ring-finger. Sure enough, there his skin was a shade fairer than the rest of his hand: a ring must have been nested there for as long as time went. “I had a hunch, and dropped my ring. Sure enough, they stopped pursuing me,” he said. “It wasn't an epic feat keeping myself hidden from then on. There were far fewer goblins left here than the tunneling would have suggested.”

“But why?” asked Bilbo. “I mean, goblins love wealth that is not their own, but going this far for a single ring?”

“It is not any ring, Master Bilbo. Vilya it is called, meaning 'air' in the tongue of my fair kin. Its tale is long and tragic, that would take days to recount.” Elrond's gleaming eyes scanned the surrounding. “Days that, alas, we don't have here, away from home in the middle of goblin country. Suffice to say I must find my ring before we go anywhere. It pains me that this heirloom of my kin should fall into
the hands of the Enemy – or worse, be used to ill ends.”

“Permission to speak freely, sir?” Pallette's voice suddenly rang out, very nearly causing Bilbo to tumble off the elf-lord's back. “I may have a pretty good idea where it is.”

Elrond tilted his head back at Bilbo quizzically. “Your bracer... speaks?”

“Ah, well, it's... also a long story, Master Elrond.” said Bilbo, scratching his scalp. “Her name's Pallette, sir. With two 'l's,” he made a point to emphasize. “Quite the character, I might say, and she means well for the most part. I wouldn't be able to do half as much as to rescue half of you had it not been for her.”

“Pallette?” said Elrond. “Pardon me, but I have heard of nothing magical or mundane bearing that name-”

“Now you do, sir,” Pallette said, and Bilbo could bet a few gold coins a little self-importance had crept into her voice now. “Former Navigator for the Maverick Hunters, at your service.” Elrond must have thought the same, for Bilbo saw his tall brows just furrowing a little.

“I'll tell you everything, my good Master Elrond, but later!” he said hastily. “For now, uh... please trust her. She... knows what she's doing.” At least, as far as shooting down a troll is not in question.

Elrond's brows relaxed just a little. “Very well, Lady... Pallette, am I correct?” he said. “Tell me what you know.”

“If you would give me one second,” said Pallette. For that brief second she asked for, Bilbo felt his forearm trembling terribly, as if a large amount of raw energy had just coursed through every inch of it. Then his ears caught the rumbling and grinding sound of a large shutter rolling up.

“There you go, nice and easy,” said Pallette, sounding obviously pleased with herself as both elf and hobbit stared at the now-open passageway. “If the energy reading is anything to go by, your... belonging is most likely that-a-way.”

“You told me that door can't be opened just now,” said Bilbo incredulously.

“Couldn't be opened. Now it can be,” corrected Pallette. “The door control is linked to the cardiac circle of that... what do you call that thing again? Troll? Basically, it won't even bulge until the troll stopped breathing.” she explained. “A standard twenty-first century measure to ensure an intruder would not be able to break through a sensitive door until he'd somehow killed the reploid supposed to guard it.”

“Sounds... excessively gruesome and unnecessarily cruel,” said Bilbo, grimacing.

“Tell Dr. Wily, Sigma and Dr. Weil about it,” said Pallette.

Bilbo tugged at Elrond's mantle. “My lord Elrond,” he said. “I'd say it is worth a try.”

“Very well then,” said Elrond, although he did not seem very convinced, and strode off.

It took a mere minute for the trio to cover the distance between the shutter and the end of the corridor. Here the rock had been completely smoothed, and the iron plating had been more complete than anywhere else in the whole tunnel network. At the end of the corridor there was a circular chamber, like a dome carved unto stone. Many colorful lights were blinking, the dancing beams encircling what looked like a glass cage on top of a stone pedestal. Aside from the lights themselves, the room was otherwise completely devoid of any life.
On that pedestal, lying upon a conspicuous metal plate reflecting the glints, lay a ring. Bilbo had to squint his eyes to see it, but there it was: a ring of fiery gold, engraved with flowery scripts and set with a large, flawless blue stone. The ring alone would have been worth many a king and lord, to say nothing of the power it so obviously carried.

“Yes, that's Vilya,” said Elrond, just about to step towards the pedestal. “What did they do to it?”

It didn't take half a second for Bilbo to smell a rat. “Wait, my lord Elrond,” Bilbo whispered. “There might be a trap.”

“Already there, hotshot. I'm dealing with it, like, right now.” hummed Pallette mischievously. As if prompted, again the buster split open, spitting out a spent, steaming energy crystal container. The object dropped at Elrond's feet, drawing a frown from the elf-lord. “Energy, please?”

“Last one,” said Bilbo with a sigh, as he parted with the very last energy crystal canister from his waistcoat pocket. Into the arm cannon went the canister, and then his forearm began convulsing violently for some half a minute.

“Alright, battle routine, set – execute!” cried Pallette. Then she let out a tiny giggle. “Always wanted to say that for once,” she whispered.

Lord Elrond looked like he was just itching for a question or two, but then said nothing, opting to merely observe with eyes narrowing.

“Aaand... it's done!” cried Pallette after half a minute that felt like half an hour. “Alright, everyone, stand well back, this is going to get... kabloey!” There was a kind of giddiness in Pallette's voice that could have only spelled trouble.

Luckily for the trio, Elrond must have decided the girl in the bracer was worth listening to, for he backed off a good deal away.

And then it began.

All of a sudden, the room's walls split, revealing a dozen gaps. Multiple tubes and cylinders emerged from their depths, and, without warning, started to spit thousands of pellets at the cylinder. Bilbo let off a muffled squeak, completely drowned out by the rat-tat-tat-tat-tat of shots being discharged like no tomorrow.

It took only twenty seconds, and when the turrets had had their way, the room had been completely trashed. There was not an inch square on the wall that wasn't riddled with holes. The glass lamps had been all smashed, as had the glass cage been. The pedestal, in particular, reminded Bilbo of a large chunk of extra-holey cheese nibbled on by a small army of mice.

Elrond took one step back, aghast: Had he not been stopped, he would have been in a similar state of perforation. “My lady Pallette,” he said, sounding half terribly impressed and half enormously grateful. “It would appear I am very much in your debt.”

“You're welcome.” said Pallette. “This is what passes for 'sense of humor' by late-twenty-second, early-twenty-third century standard, by the way. Happy fun time for everyone.” And then her voice sank a little. “Uh... are you sure the ring is still on one piece after all that?”

In lieu of an answer, Elrond walked into the destroyed room and cast his glance all around. Sure enough, Bilbo's eyes caught a shimmer of gold and blue at the foot of the ruined pedestal. There the ring laid, silent at the foot of the destroyed pedestal, as if a lead weight had anchored it firmly against the ground.
“It is Vilya, one of the Three Rings,” said Elrond, bending down and picking up the ring. “Anything lesser than dragon fire cannot hope to put a dent on it.”

He dusted it and slipped it back on his finger where it belonged. Almost at once Bilbo felt himself energized, as if the ring’s radiant power had somehow seeped through the elf-lord and flowed into him who was hanging on the elf-lord’s mantle, and given Bilbo the satiation of a first breakfast, second breakfast, eleves and luncheon all at the same time.

“Why don’t you take up professional burglary?” Bilbo whispered into the bracer. His feet still hurt rather badly, but a weight had been lifted off his shoulder, and he was thoroughly happy.

“As you are aware, I already did,” said Pallette. “Am I right, Mr. Burglar Hobbit?”

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Chapter End Notes

1) For those FAMILIAR with the Megaman universe:

- On Bill the troll: I completely, totally made up his transformation: grafting a troll with titanium plates and other mechanical parts has never been part of the Rockman universe. However, there is no shortage of ridiculous and borderline pointless military mashup machines across all of the Rockman timelines built for cool rather than practicality. Both incarnations (MMC and MMBN) of Dr. Wily did some, Sigma definitely dabbled in them, the Bonnes went completely nuts; and Dr. Weil most certainly loved the concept as the resident mad scientist. So I asked myself, ‘sure, why not?’ and there you have it.
- On Pallette's power: I've also kinda sorta made up what she can do. The rule is, she can hack into and take over any system that she is familiar with from a short distance at an energy cost; a "wireless" version of what Lan Hikari can do in MMBN. Pointless in Middle Earth at first, it becomes far more relevant as Weil and 23rd-century technology enters play. - On security shutters: That part where the shutter control is linked with the life of the "guard" is thrown in as a handwave to compulsory mini-boss battles and other "must defeat all enemies to move on" rooms. I hope it makes sense.

2) For those NOT familiar with the Megaman universe (Plus a bit of explanation on cyber-elves):

- On Pallette forgetting X’s buster can charge: It IS a lame excuse, I admit, though I can handwave it by (i) her not being in charge of navigation for anything between several decades to a century or so by now, and (ii) Pallette is canonically more associated with Axl than X - see bonus mode of X8 - and Axl's guns sacrifice charge for rapid-fire.
- "Adaptive titanium alloy": Basically my way of handwaving away bosses' invincibility frame. And yes, if you haven't realized it yet, I get a kick out of handwaving and integrating gameplay elements into storytelling...

3) Legendarium note:

- Elrond's appearance: I decided to go with my own interpretation as opposed to Peter jackson's, and modeled Elrond based on how I imagine his great-great-grandfather
Fingolfin would have looked during his prime (See: Fingolfin vs. Morgoth). There are a few reasons for this: (i) Something of a generation xerox - I've always think the glory of the High Elves are still preserved somewhat in the direct line of Fingolfin in spite of all the ups and downs (mostly down, unfortunately) of the Second and Third Age; and (ii) In all but name Elrond is basically the High King of the Noldor in the Third Age (check your genealogy: he was a direct descendant of Turion through Idril, and being both cousin and herald to Gil-Galad means he could have made a VERY strong case for high-kingship in the Third Age when Gil-Galad himself died had there only been a kingdom left to rule at that point. There wasn't, so he was not), and he had better look the part. Of course, this kinda sorta *contradicts* the good professor's own writing in The Hobbit, where Elrond is described only as a chief of those who are descended from the High Elves and the "heroes of the North" i.e. half-elven, but I think this is one of those things we can take liberties with the interpretation of canon.

- On the power of Vilya: Let me get a complaint out of my chest first, and that is magic in LotR is rather ill-defined: to this days fans are still arguing just how to quantify how powerful (or not powerful) Gandalf is, for crying out loud. That's why I offer my own interpretation again: As the Three Elven Rings are supposed to be top-tier artifacts by Third Age standards, and given that Nenya in Galadriel's hands alone was capable of giving Lothlorien something of a makeover, Vilya making a hungry hobbit feel like he'd just been treated with a marvelous feast is (pun not intended) a piece of cake. Hmm... I wonder what will happen if *someone* wants to try converting the Three Rings into energy crystals...
Chapter 14 begins with an unexpected change in POV. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 14

He Whom the Wind Calls

The last time Kili had hurt his head so badly as to see stars before his eyes was thirty years ago. The accident, whose exact details he had neither desire nor willingness to recount, involved a cart full of coal and a very drunk fellow Erebor refugee.

Thirty years later, the now-grown-up dwarrowling hit his head again, this time on the trunk of a large tree, smack in the middle of a battle.

He didn't know whether he had passed out and woken up, or it had just been a concussion and he'd been semi-conscious all the time. Either way, he was not prepared for what he saw when he opened his eyes again.

Complete chaos.

The men and elves were shouting and screaming. Some of the horses were dead and mangled, burying their unwitting riders underneath their mass. The ground was raked and tumbled like someone had driven a massive plough fit for Mahal himself across the forest floor. Kili could vaguely make out the shape of Foot-slogger the intrepid butler fighting a gigantic statue of cast iron hovering in the air while the remaining rangers and elves under Aragorn's command was trying – and failing – to get a good shot in.

It then occurred to Kili, to his horror, that his uncle's company wasn't in much better shape. Oin was nowhere to be found. Nori seemed to have suddenly vanished as was his wont. Ori, screaming and crying next to Dori who wasn't moving at all. Bombur was suddenly finding the back of a tall tree extremely fascinating and cozy in equal measures. Meanwhile, Gloin, Balin, Bifur and Bofur were trying to approach the walking statue with little success. His uncle Thorin, as befitting of a dwarven prince and soon-to-be-king, was leading that charge – if it could be called a charge, anyway. once every so often it would shoot one of those beams that would cut to ribbons everything in its way, forcing them to withdraw back to safety.

Gloin, Kili noticed, had dropped his war axe and was holding an extremely familiar shortbow in his stocky arms. Mine, he thought, realizing his trusty bow was no longer upon his shoulder. Must have dropped it when I hit my head.

Kili clutched his sore head and staggered back to his feet. His eyes scanned around the field, horror filling him more thoroughly than ever before. He might have played at warfare before, chasing hares and harts and the occasional wolves, but this was real battle. Not the kind of glorious For Mahal and
Erebor business his uncle was so enamored with, not the exciting contest of strength like in the myths his mother would so often tell, not even a certain fight against a numerous but feeble foe like the goblins.

No, this was a fight for their lives, and one they were definitely on the losing end.

As if confirming his negativeness, Kili's eyes registered a Man – a Ranger of the North – screaming in excruciating pain as a beam of light slashed unto him, throwing him off the horse, half the man he used to be. Despair took over Kili as he stared at Foot-slogger's figure tumbling and rolling further and further away. It was just like he was leading the monster away – giving himself up for the company to get away. Had it been so hopeless that the very best of them would have no chance?

It was with such desperation that he turned towards family. Uncle Thorin? Fi? He cried and cried again and again, his hoarse voice drowned out by the explosions and crashes and the men shouting and the arrows bouncing off steel plating. Everywhere about him there was death, mangled goblin limbs and fallen elves and men piling one on top of the other. He dragged his leg in the mud, his hands clutching and pulling at the trunks of uprooted tree, and when he finally tripped and fell he crawled forth on all fours.

When he finally stumbled upon Fili, Kili thought he had lost his mind, delirious from the noise and the horror and the dull ache in his head, his hands covering his ears as tears streamed down his mud-caked cheeks. His brother was sitting there, winded but alive, next to a thick brownish mound.

"Ki, Ki!" he heard his brother cry. Then Kili felt Fili's callused hands grabbing his, as if everything was normal and the chaos before them was just a nightmare soon to past. At least that was what he hoped as he sat down – less sitting and more collapsing – next to his elder.

He rubbed his watery eyes. "What... what happened? I-"

"Durin's Bane happened," said Fili. "Or something almost as bad."

"Uncle Thorin?"

"I can't see him!" cried Fili. "I... well, I would go look for him, but then-"

Then Kili saw Fili looked down at something at his feet, and almost at once felt like screaming. That was no mound Fili was looking down at.

"Dwalin?" exclaimed Kili, his face blanched. Fili nodded ruefully, for it was truly Dwalin. Whatever was left of him, at any rate: the bald dwarf laid there, missing his left foot from the ankle down, while his entire right arm was crushed into a nauseating-looking mush. Blood was streaming from his forehead, while his cheeks and eyes were black and blue.

"Took the brunt of the-" Fili said, and rubbed his eyes. "Mahal preserve me, what a way to go."

"Go? What do you mean, 'go'?" cried Kili. "He's alive, right? Right? Isn't he... breathing?"

He was, but only just. His chest was heaving once every so often, and the ragged sound he made was less like breathing and more like dying gasps.

"We both know he isn't standing up after this, Ki," said Fili. "It... just doesn't feel right, leaving him to lie here like this. I'm guarding him, until-" He shook his head and left his voice hanging. The fact was too uncomfortable even for Fili – who had for as far as Kili could remember been all too keen on stating the awful truth.
“No...”

And then Kili encountered what was perhaps the strangest thing he’d seen for the day.

“This warrior does not have to perish today.”

The voice that burst out was as sudden as it was queer, and Kili's neck hair was standing on ends. It was like hearing stone talk, except the voice was too high-pitched and airy, and yet too full of sorrow and regret.

“Wait, what?” Kili and Fili stared at each other for a split second, before Fili made an I-think-I-know-what face, and sheepishly reached out for the blade on his belt. The very same blade that they recovered from the troll hoard, offered to Thorin and refused, was now shaking and trembling in Fili's hand, as if itching to fly out of his grip.

He drew the weapon from the jeweled scabbard and saw the most dazzling thing ever. The sword, engraved with many a flowery pattern, cast a blue light upon the two siblings and their wounded charge, soft as moonlight and as tantalizing as mithril. But then there was something else, too: a green light, no less bright yet a mite more somberly, was spiralling around its tip, hypnotically drawing in both dwarves as slowly spinning things were wont to do.

And then Kili and Fili stared at each other in realization. Whatever the green orb was, it must be where the voice came from.

“Who... what are you?” demanded Fili.

“A friend who wants to help,” said the voice, chiming through every vibration of the blade.

“Strange, I don't recall having any friends in talking swords before,” said Kili. “In fact, if I remember Ma's tales correctly, talking weapons tend to bring tragedy and ill fortune!”

“Not this time, I assure you. For one thing, friends tend to come in unlikely places if you should look,” said the blade – or rather, the light at the tip. “For the other, I can save your friend.”

“And just why do we have to trust a talking sword – a talking elf-sword?” said Fili cautiously. He might not meant it at heart, but Kili of all people would know how much of a poor influence he'd taken from Thorin as far as elves went.

“You don't have to,” said the voice. “But you don't want your friend die. You want to win this battle, too. I can show you how to do both, if you would only follow my instruction.”

“Something tells me listening to ghostly voices in the middle of a battle is incredibly foolish,” Fili said. “Or crazy. To say nothing about the omen-”

“The choice is yours,” said the voice with a disturbing lack of emotion whatsoever.

“Fi?” Kili asked, his voice hoarse and shaky. On the ground, Dwalin's ragged breathing continued. If they would do nothing to save him, if there remained one glimmer of hope, then that image of a broken Dwalin would haunt them both for the rest of their life. At least, that was what Kili wanted to say.

He couldn't stomach to spit the words out. He could only tug at Fili's arm like he used to do as a dwarrowling whenever he'd wanted his older brother to do something particularly bothersome for him. Normally, Fili would relent. “Fi?” Kili said again, eyes wet and voice pleading.
It turned out this was one of those *normal* time, abnormal as the circumstance might be.

“I hope we aren’t making a huge mistake, Ki,” said Fili.

Then the two brothers clenched their teeth and pretended they’d been hearing nothing of the pandemonium outside. The older held Dwalin’s shoulder, the younger carried his feet, and heaved up dwarf and weapon alike.

“Good,” they heard the voice ring out from the blade.

Then the orb disappeared, turning into a single green strand of light. “Follow me,” Kili could hear it say. The strand flashed forth and began floating towards an opening in the earth inconspicuously hidden behind some rocks and trees in the distance.

Sure enough, the two dwarves found there a slope and stair, sloppily slashed into the rocks by the lazy hands of goblins, leading into a tunnelway ten feet below the surface.

As they followed the light, not knowing what to expect, Kili thought he’d seen something awfully familiar. The feeling became clearer and more obvious as they stepped into a dank, mud-covered tunnel. There, on the dark walls and wet floor, were tiny foot and handprints that looked rather like they’d been freshly made by a certain hobbit. The prints and the green light converged at a single point at the end of the tunnel.

A contraption too fine and strange to have been made by goblins, that was what it was. Its look and design defied description, but Kili assumed whoever wanting to use it was supposed to stand on the raised platform and press on the colorful panel perched at the side. He eyed it like a curious dwarrowling staring at the first set of cogs in his life: at once admiring its sophistication and desiring to take it apart to see how it ticked.

“What is this thing?” he queried, and had he not remembered he was there to save Dwalin he would have run over and press all the buttons to see what they do.

“We call this a Trans-Server,” said the green light. “An exceedingly useful tool, in capable hands at least.”

“Right, what do we do now?” Fili asked, sounding not quite convinced of the prospect.

“Place your friend on the Trans-Server,” said the light, floating towards the platform. “And I will take care of the rest.”

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Dwalin was dreaming. It wasn't a very comfortable one, though doubtless as heroic as he would like to picture himself.

In it, he was no longer Dwalin of Thorin's company, an impoverished warrior dwarf lacking in wealth and renown. No, he was Dwalin of Erebor, a great dwarven champion clad in shining mail that hung to his knee, wearing a helmet engraved with the heroic visage of his ancestors and wielding a war-mattock as large as he was broad. It was no ordinary foe he was facing, too, but the dreadful old Smaug himself. There he sat, atop the mountains of gold and jewels that was the old treasury of Erebor, coated in flame and ash, nostril flaring and smoking as he snapped and whipped his tail about.

Dwalin was facing the dragon alone, a task suicidal for anyone who knew what a dragon was. And yet he was filled not with fear, but excitement and exhilaration: To fight and die against a dragon,
and putting as much hurt on the beast before he inevitably became a living torch, well, that was the stuff of legends right there!

Except that this attempt at dragonslaying didn't end very well for Dwalin. Smaug, a thousand curses upon his name, didn't bother to breathe fire on him. Instead, there was only a *snap* and a *crack*, and Dwalin was a dwarven champion minus an entire arm and a leg to the dragon's mouth. Then *whip* went the dragon's tail, and Dwalin was knocked unceremoniously down the very abyss dug by the hands of dwarves before him.

“A heroic dream... and a foolhardy one. But you know that already, don't you, Dwalin?”

The dreaming Dwalin picked himself up. “Who goes there?” he cried, reaching behind him for the war-mattock that simply wasn't there to begin with.

Then the void before him coalesced and materialized. Dwalin took a step back, his face awestruck. He was standing before an apparition, glowing and shimmering.

“What manner of elf or beast are you?” he demanded.

Faded as he was – it took Dwalin quite a while to decide that the being was *probably* male – there was no doubt the armor he wore (had worn in life, perhaps?) was of top-notch quality: a green chestpiece, green boots and green gauntlets intricately engraved, and a winged open helmet with a luscious red gem embedded in the forehead. He could have claimed royalty, and Dwalin would buy it.

The being made no such claim.

“A little of both, and yet truly neither,” said the apparition. “Sage Harpuia, of the Four Guardians of Master X, and now a Cyber-elf, at your service – though I have no doubt that name rings hollow to you.”

Predictably Dwalin took to the word *elf* like a fish to boiling wax.

“Hmph, of course it does!” huffed Dwalin, folding his arm. He had no spare amazement to give to the likes of elves. “I hope you have not come to mock, or you'll rue the day your precious *immortal* life began-”

“I didn't come to mock you, Dwalin, nor am I immortal – or my life precious for that matter,” said the ghost. “In fact, I've come to propose a deal that would see me part with my very existence.”

“Hold your high horses,” said Dwalin. “I demand to know where you have taken me, right now, before-”

“Your companions brought you here, at my behest,” said the ghost.

“What companion? What companion of mine would be so foolish as to hear the words of elves?”

“If you really must know, it was the two shortest-bearded of your company,” said the ghost.

“Kili and Fili?” growled Dwalin. “What did you do to them?”

“Nothing,” said the being again, shaking his head. “They wished merely to save your life, and I told them how to. You were... in a rough shape, if I should say so.”

Dwalin might not have looked it, but part of him was sinking. He didn't expect his saber-rattling to
bounce off a elf as it did: perhaps working on his intimidation skill was in order.

Still, the information more than explained the vision he'd had just now. It certainly wasn't a harmless sort of dream, for the pain seemed all too real to him. Much as Dwalin preferred a hero's death, having his arm chewed off by a dragon wasn't a sensation he was too keen on receiving. As for Kili and Fili, well, if he'd been hurt as badly as he felt it was entirely imaginable for them to run off at the nearest creature claiming to be able to help. His third cousins once removed are good dwarrows, he couldn't fault them for trying to save him.

“Well, I am here,” said Dwalin, his voice mellowing down just a tiny bit. “Now this had better not be a trick of your kind, or I'll see you torn limb from limb even if that's the last thing I'd ever do.”

The ghost lifted its hand to cover its giggle. “What's so amusing?” asked Dwalin quizzically.

“Ever the impatient warrior, my friend,” said the ghost. “I know preciously little about your kind, but you must be very much exemplary among your kind.”

“Never imagined the day I would receive compliment from an elf,” said Dwalin. “Not that I'm here for it – answer my question now, or face the consequences!”

“Very well,” The apparition nodded once. “You're presently within Cyberworld where Master X and myself still retain a measure of control over, Dwalin – brought here courtesy of your travel companions who, as I said, wish to see you healed.”

“Not sure if I understood half of your fancy vocabulary,” said Dwalin. “Cut to the chase before I lose my patience!”

“In a single sentence,” said the ghost. “It's only here that I can give you my power.”

Dwalin was taken aback. Power? Now that was something the warrior in him (which was to say pretty much all of him) could get behind. But then, he thought as he eyed the apparition with suspicious eyes, there was no such thing as a free lunch, was there? There were, after all, plenty of cautionary tales told to young dwarrowlings about such kind of bargains of power.

“How do I know I can trust you?” growled Dwalin.

“You don't,” said the apparition with a kind of honesty on his face Dwalin was quite sure elves were physically incapable of. “But you might as well do. Your body isn't exactly holding up in the real world, if you would pardon my language.”

“What is the catch?” he asked cautiously.

“The catch is my own existence,” said the apparition, “I am giving myself up, Dwalin, to give you and your friends a fighting chance against that which you are facing.”

“Giving yourself up? Bah, what nonsense,” cried Dwalin. “Never have I seen an elf willingly give up anything halfway valuable to them—”

“Let us not deceive ourselves, my friend. We are warriors, you and me both,” said the apparition. “We are all so willing, so long as there is a cause worth fighting for. Is that not why you are here, on a quest that we all know might very well end terribly? Are you not willing to give up your very life, just so to have a shot at maybe, maybe reclaiming your ancestral homeland?”

It had been a very long while indeed since the last time Dwalin had to do some soul-searching. The process was rather short – Dwalin prided himself in his simplicity of mind and stoutness of arm.
“Right you are,” he finally said. “But then that's true for dwarves, not elves.”

“Do elves have friends? Family? Home? An idol they'd hold higher than themselves?”

“Uh...” Dwalin spoke – more like rasped, for he found no answer. None that he would like to say, anyway. He disliked the elves as much as any refugee from Erebor, true, but he had also, at some point, lived in that time when dwarves and elves had been friends (or was the word 'trade partners'?). He'd be lying to himself if he'd say elves were all inhumane, selfish monsters – if anything even Thranduil's lot were more like honest-to-Mahal dwarves in their love for family and home.

Of course, he could spit on the argument and go his merry way as the stubborn dwarrow he was meant to be. But then, deep inside him something awakened. Dwarves, as Mahal made them, were meant to be steadfast and brave, with justice in their heart as much as the love for gold and beautiful things.

“Maybe you are right,” said Dwalin at last. “Maybe. Doesn't explain why you'd offer me such a deal – well, it isn't even a deal, and you know it.”

“What would you do, my friend, if you'd fallen in battle and can fight no more the enemy of your kind and the injustices they visit upon your kin?”

“Then my axe and shield and armor would belong to those who can fight our foes in my stead!” said Dwalin without a thought or hesitation. And then realization dawned upon him, like a gem unhiding itself from the bowels of the earth. “Wait. You don't mean-”

“I mean exactly what you think I mean, Dwalin,” said the ghost. “I can hardly fight any more as I am, while out there the enemy of my master and my kind remain still, alive and vengeful, surviving our very best effort to destroy him as he deserves.”

The apparition fixed his gaze on Dwalin, and suddenly the dwarf began seeing vestiges memories not his own flashing in his mind, too fleeting for him to catch a coherent image. He could, however, sense a warrior's epic when he touched one. A warrior, clad in green armor, flying through the sky, wielding dual blades of purple light, penning his tale with the flash of his swords. A tale of honorable service, of brave stands against incredible odd, of stalwart stewardship over a charge fair and noble in equal measures. And, last and certainly not least, a death as a warrior deserves – nobly in battle for a cause greater than himself.

Throughout the whole experience Dwalin could feel an emotion not foreign to the dwarves of Erebor: A heartfelt, immense regret so vivid, so palpable, Dwalin thought it would choke him. The images were touching enough to a warrior like himself, but it was those emotions that finally cracked him.

And so the dwarf stood there for long, not sure what to say – or even what to think.

“What a history,” said Dwalin at last, the sympathy and understanding to a fellow warrior finally shining through. “And you... you want to pass your axe to those who would fight in your stead.”

“I have wanted to do so since my unfortunate demise,” said the elf. “My power is not insignificant, although quite lesser than Zero at his greatest, and it should go to those who would take up the cause I have been fighting for: everlasting peace in a world that never had its chance.”

“Zero?” Dwalin narrowed his eyes. “The same 'Zero' that is the Baggins burglar's butler? You knew him?”

The apparition nodded. “And would have given him my power, had my master not expressly
Dwalin folded his arm. Zero, or Foot-slogger as the Company named him, certainly didn’t need more power. Already he could – and did – tear hordes of goblins to pieces with his bare hands. But then, if Dwalin was dying and to pass his axe to another, would it not stand to reason that he’d choose the very best?

“And now for the question of a million gold pieces,” he asked cautiously. “Of all the good dwarrows you could have picked, why me?”

“Because your king would not accept help from anything that looks or sound remotely elvish, never mind that my... kin, and I, are nothing like the elves you bear grudges with,” said the apparition with a dry chuckle. “In your present company you are the second truest warrior of them all, by skill and by bravery. Indeed, had it not been for your bravery, your physical body would not have been so... damaged as it is. Am I right?”

“At least you’ve got that one down!” exclaimed Dwalin. “Let no one, dwarf or elf or man, or creatures from beyond, say Dwalin son of Fundin is lacking in valor!”

“And the rest, they say, is serendipity,” the ghost continued. “You were just in the right place at the right time, to be gravely wounded but not killed, and to have friends who would deliver you to me. You are not any less meant to receive that which I would give you, than a hypothetical greatest dwarf to have ever been born. The fates work what they can, and we do what we must.”

Dwalin silently nodded. Serendipity and coincidences, he could get around that. It was, after all, complete coincidence that the Arkenstone, the Heart of the Mountain, came into the possession of his kin. Perhaps it was true that the world had been made to a grander plan, by Mahal or the greater and more ancient powers out there unbidden by the dwarves. Then, perhaps, accepting that which had been thrust into his hand by the greater power out there would be only just piety. “I can live with that,” he finally said.

“Well, then it becomes a question of whether you’re warrior enough,” said the apparition, and Dwalin could faintly make out a smirk where his lips were supposed to be, “to accept a gift of life and power from another warrior.”

Dwalin locked eyes with the apparition, striking a posture as fearless as he could manage. “As long as it is made in a warrior’s faith: honorable and valorous without lies or deceit.”

“It is as you demand,” said the ghost, returning the fire in Dwalin’s eyes. “Let no one, reploid or human, or the races of this world of yours, say Sage Harpuia of the Four Guardians is lacking in sincerity.”

He reached out his hand towards Dwalin, and the dwarf took it. Instead of touching flesh, Dwalin felt a rush of energy coursing through his veins, as if his blood had all turned into molten gold, rushing through and filling every inch of his body. The pain he’d felt in his dream was no more, and Dwalin thought for a second he could punch a dragon in the skull and shatter it like dwarven mattock on mountain rock.

As he got stronger, the apparition began to fade. When he was done, there was nothing of the ghost left for him to address: his greenish body had vanished into the void, and all that was left was a whispering wind circling around the dwarf.

“My strength, my power, my charge, I bequeath them all to you,” whispered the fading wind. “Go forth, Sage Dwalin, son of Fundin!”
And then it was no more. All that remained was a Dwalin, standing in the void, energized and ready for battle.

“Rest assured, fellow warrior. I shall live up to your heritage.”

He clenched his fist. Then his eyes snapped open.

Then it began.

***

Kili was beholding the spectacle of his life.

One moment Dwalin was lying there on the ‘Trans-Server’ thingamabob, looking as dreadful as death itself. The next moment he became clad in this strange-looking, shimmering light that looked half like magic and half like something else altogether.

And the next moment? Kili could swear his elder cousin had turned into light.

Up he soared, bursting through the ceiling, punching a dwarf-sized hole through ten feet of dirt and rock. Had Kili not seen it with his own eyes and himself completely sober, he would have blamed one manner of confusticating moonshine or another.

“F-F-F-F-F-Fi?” he stammered, his finger pointing at the gaping hole in the ceiling. “D-did you see that?”

“B-by Mahal, I did,” came Fili’s answer.

When the awe had finally subsided, the two young dwarves nodded at each other, and then, one after the other, sped out of the hole in the ground. Up they clambered on the nearest mound – which happened to be the remains of a giant eagle – and narrowed their eyes at the scene unfolding before them.

It was the most marvelous thing they had observed since they first signed up on Uncle Thorin’s quest.

There he was, their cousin and companion Dwalin son of Fundin son of Farin, levitating in the air fifty feet above the rest, clad in solid glory. On his head rested a tall helmet with two straight wings protruding backward as long as a dwarf’s arm. A red gem was on his forehead, brighter and huger than any Kili had ever known, save for perhaps the Heart of the Mountain itself. His body was armored in a bright green plate, set with a golden X on the solid chestplate, a pair of metal wings spreading from under the back of the shoulder plates.

In Dwalin’s left hand was the dwarven waraxe he would never part in life or death. And in his right, Kili gasped, was a blade of light just like Foot-slogger’s, except purple rather than green, and looked like a very long dagger rather than a sword. His long greying beard fluttered like a dwarven banner as true as any in the wind of his own making: a true champion of the dwarven race of epic stature and proportions.

“Time to end this, you sod!” cried Dwalin, and his left arm glowed green. Raising his hand above his head, he brought the large axe flying down at the creature of iron and steel like he was hurling but a tiny throwing hammer. Kili could swear the weapon turned into light the moment it left Dwalin’s hand. It collided against the creature’s head, and there was a deafening crash. Half of its skull was cleaved right off, pulverized like a stone pillar too fragile whacked by a great wyrm’s tail.
The creature was nowhere near taken out, however. Quickly it spun around to face the new challenger, its beam gun letting loose several deadly rays at the sky where Dwalin was. The move, all in all, was quite pointless. Kili had once supposed the only reason Mahal didn't give the dwarves the ability to fly was because it would have virtually impossible for any other race to take them down, and Dwalin was exhibiting exactly how this would have been the case. He glided like a swallow between the rays without any exertion whatsoever – in fact, Kili would throw in a few coins into the betting pool that the bald dwarf was probably enjoying the light show.

In just a few seconds, he had descended upon the creature. Now he'd produced another blade of light in his left hand, raising both above his head as he swooped. The creature also raised its fists, each the size of a very large dwarf, winding back for a hammering blow. Kili bit his lips – did Dwalin see it coming?

But then suddenly Dwalin stopped in mid-air with a maneuver that would make a hummingbird jealous. Off he tossed his second blade of light spinning into the air as the fist hammered on empty air. The weapon flew in an arc, before pinning itself into the ground in front of none other than Foot-slogger himself. The intrepid butler grabbed the handle with aplomb; and at that very moment Kili could swear the two exchanged a very quick nod.

The creature's fate was sealed.

Two blinding flashes of purple lashed through its gigantic form. Then came a breathless, silent second.

And then the great creature of steel began to dissolve into a series of flashes, blasts and explosions. As if its entire body had been made of firecracker, series of thunderclaps started consuming it from inside out, until the whole vicinity was covered in smoke and dust and the entire clearing lit up as if the sun had risen three hours early. Kili's heart was squeezed for just a second, only to explode in pure joy the moment he saw stirring underneath the dust. From the heart of the explosion, out walked Dwalin son of Fundin and Foot-slogger butler of Bilbo Baggins, a colored blade in their hands and sheer magnificence exuding from their very posture as the light reflected off from their armors.

Now the young dwarf could no longer control his outburst. Kili found himself clapping and jumping and cheering as if he was once again back to being a little dwarrowling. Better still, Fili only resisted for but a tiny moment before he, too, dropped his regal, princely pomp and joined the spontaneous celebration too.

And it was not just the two dwarven princes in exile: The entire company of elves and men, mounted and dismounted alike, erupted in cheer.


So exhilarating the cheering was that for a moment Kili could feel the joy of the elves, a sorrowful yet proud people well-versed in songs and war, whose love of gentle and beautiful things was not less than his own kin, and whose desire to protect all that is fair well exceeded that of the dwarves. For a second, Kili thought he could have turned into an elf, right then, right there.

As if things couldn't get any better, at that exact moment he was about to mimic the elves' cry, Kili felt footsteps behind him. Not heard, felt. He turned around, and saw a figure as kingly as any of the Kings of Erebor of Durin's line stepping out from the same tunnel that saved Dwalin. Tall and mighty he was, his mail and eyes shone in the night as if he was an incarnation of the stars, while his long black hair and blue mantle fluttered in the wind like war-standards from the age of myth long past.
Kili let out a gasp of relief and joy as his gaze fell upon the figure's back. There, perched on his shoulder, was Bilbo Baggins the burglar, looking a fair bit thinner but alive and quite healthy at that.

As he emerged and made himself seen, at once the cheering stopped. And almost as quickly an equally thunderous one broke out.

“Aiya Elerondo Peredhel Earendilion!” they cried. And then some creative soul went on and spontaneously added, “Elen lasselanta!”

Kili was not slow on the uptake. He drew both hands to his mouth like a funnel. “Aiya Elerondo Peredhel Earendilion, elen lasselanta!” he screamed at the top of his voice, never mind that Fili was tugging at his shoulder uncomfortably. That, and somewhere in the crowd, his Uncle Thorin was probably facepalming furiously too.

None of that mattered to Kili. He was a young dwarf having just survived his first battle and seen the spectacle of his life. His uncle and brother would just have to deal with his sudden appreciation for elven culture – or was it Noldorin?

And Kili giggled to himself as the crowd repeated his daring shout.

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Chapter End Notes

1) For those FAMILIAR with the Megaman universe:

- Concerning Harpuia: I have to say Harpuia is the hardest among the entire MMZ cast to write in Middle-Earth context, and I'm sure I didn't do him as much justice as I could have. Why? Harpuia, IIRC, has a very "knighly/sagely" style in both speech and demeanor, which makes him stand out in the MMZ universe where such type is sorely lacking. However, in Middle-Earth, every Noldorin and Sindarin elf and their mother with few exceptions wears the Warrior Poet schtick like a badge of honor. Sage Harpuia sounds less like himself and more like Elf-Lord-Who-Died-In-Dagor-Nirnaeth-Aenoediad #384, and I'm sorry for that. Any suggestion on this front would be welcomed.

- Concerning Harpuia's ability: I also made that up that Cyber-elf Harpuia could "possess" certain things and talk to people through it. Here's hoping this doesn't break the willing suspension of disbelief too badly. Also, you know what it means when Harpuia gives Dwalin his power. We knew him well.

2) For those NOT familiar with the Megaman universe:

- On Harpuia, version non-Mega-fan: I might have mentioned this before - Sage Harpuia is a semi-antagonist-anti-villain member of the Four Guardians, generals of the Neo Arcadian military under Copy X's rule (And Copy X is, well, an imperfect fake of Megaman/Rockman X, the protagonist of the X timeline. Think Grima'd Theoden as opposed to real Theoden, except a mite more insane and a whole lot more evil). His
ability includes dual-wielding beam sabers, agile flight capacity, and a tendency to get owned by Zero because.

3) Legendarium notes:

- On Elrond's name and title: Let me admit right here that I am not fluent in Quenya, like at all. While I can secure his Quenya name, "Elerondo (Star-vault) Peredhel (Half-elven) Earendilion (Son of Earendil)", the Quenya version of his title, "Lord of Imladris", is going to need some real linguist - suffice to say I dared not venture a guess. I instead went with some pidgin Quenya for the spontaneous honorary title: "Elen lasselanta" - "Star of Leaf-fall (autumn)"

- On the victory fanfare: More pidgin Quenya: "Túrë" (victory), "Eldar" (elves), "Atani" (Men), and "Naucor" (Dwarves). Make of these what you will? Suffice to say, if someone would help me with the delicate art of Elvish languages, I'd be much obliged.
Chapter Notes

Chapter 15 is up, though I am not completely satisfied. Any meeting with Elrond, in an ideal world, would result in a LOT of infodumping. Add to that the potential points of conflict that might arise from Thorin's bigotry and Zero's must-protect-Bilbo mentality, and I could easily have a ten-thousand-word chapter. I chose to trim down where I could, and the chapter still took me nearly six thousand words.

Still, chapter's here, happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 15

The Counsel of Elrond

Thorin Oakenshield, son of Thrain, son of Thror, and his two nephews and heirs Kili and Fili sons of Frerin marched triumphantly into Imladris – better known as Rivendell, the heart of the Noldorin folk who yet remained in Middle Earth. Behind him trailed the rest of his company, minus Dwalin. The giddy axe-dwarf had somehow transformed himself into a cross between a true Longbeard, a green-clad elf and a bird of some sort, and was enjoying his inexplicable ability to fly above the rest of them.

Glancing at his two nephews, Thorin nodded with pleasure. The two princelings were cutting a mighty fine image: wrapped in cloaks of dusts and grit fresh from the battlefield, weapons slung high over their shoulders, their beards (or flimsy excuses therefor) flashing proudly in the light of the rising sun. Keep up the good work, he thought, and the future of the line of Durin would be secure.

As long as they didn't suddenly realize they fancied themselves some Elven toys or Elven houses or Elven music... or, worse of the lot, an Elven girl.

Not that he would blame them: Rivendell was a mighty fine town, and Thorin could appreciate it not being despoiled by orcs. The town occupied a valley of its own, surrounded by many trees singing in the wind and glistening in the sunlight. The out-wall of oak and finely chiseled stone, sporting spires and ramparts elegant rather than lofty, was as good as anything his folks could provide.

Yet the mark of battle and slaughter had been etched upon the valley. Patches of the woods were burnt and charred, the ground defiled by masses of blackened iron husks. The only path into the town, cleft into the rocks and possibly enchanted to some degree, was littered with goblin corpses and a troll's, and paved with broken shields, swords, spears and axes of goblin make. More corpses, this time including dozens of trolls, laid strewn around the walls surrounding the front gate. The marks on said front gate, battered by heavy objects as it was, brought a chill to Thorin's shoulders.

The thought of how close the home of the elves in those parts came to destruction, and that it was the dwarves of Durin's line of all people that saved them, brought a bitter smile to Thorin's lips (in fact, it was Bilbo the thief, Zero the Foot-slogger and Gandalf the wizard who did most of the heavy lifting,
but perish the thought that the dwarves didn't pull their own weight.)

_We helped the elves, Grandfather, Father, he thought. We helped them. We saved them, even though they turned their backs to us. We are the better folk for it._

If the cheers of the elves who gathered along the streets welcoming the spontaneous victory parade was of any indication, he had every reason to be proud. For a day, his company had become a hero to the elves as much as any of theirs.

The combined army of dwarves, elves and men marched through the heart of Rivendell, along the breezy causeways, bridges, stairs and verandas for almost fifteen minutes. They passed wooden archways, rocky bridges and open stairways, cresting a great waterfall that fed the river below, roaring majestically like an endless symphony. The mighty Elrond leading them was probably checking how badly his city has suffered as they went, and if the final sigh of relief he had was of any indication, the answer was possibly, 'Thank the Valar, we are safe'.

Now the company (now including Dwalin at last, who had to be shouted off the sky by his blank-faced brother) was standing before the largest and most beautiful building in town. It was build of finely-carved wood and polished stone, yet the foundation had been cut into a cliff overlooking the river at the bottom of the valley. It was tall of roofs and delicate in decoration, and was a little too curvy for Thorin's liking, but he would not dispute what an architectural masterpiece it was.

Just walking along the meticulously paved flooring made Thorin's hair stand on ends: there were enchantments there, mighty and ancient beyond anything he could have thought possible. Had he arrived in more peaceful times he would not have noticed them, but now that the elves were at war the very foundation of their houses were ringing out. It was as if the many war songs from the age the world was made were reverberating, sweeping across the open space like the reanimated spirits of so many elves whose deeds had become the stuff of legends.

A wispy-looking elf was waiting for them at the doorway, sporting long black hair and a countenance so feminine it took his voice to tell that yes, he was male. “Master Elrond,” was what he said, with a quiet, subservient dip of the head, just as expected from the quiet, bookish type. If he had taken part in the fight, Thorin didn't see him. If the battle had scared him, he didn't show it either.

“Erestor,” said Elrond, acknowledging him with an equally measured bow.

Then he turned back towards the company.

“Welcome to my house, Master Thorin and company,” said Elrond with a deep bow. “That we should meet under such circumstance is deeply regrettable, though let it not be said that the hospitality of my kin is diminished by this... tragedy.”

There was great pain in his voice, and for a second Thorin would offer his condolences – it was always a sad day for a sovereign to see his home attacked, his people slaughtered and the very existence of his kind threatened. In the end, his bitterness of two centuries won out, and Thorin merely gave him an acknowledging nod, dripping with measured disdain.

Elrond's expression was inscrutable, if he indeed meant to answer Thorin. But then his face turned grim once more, and his eyes swept across the company's ranks.

“I fear we have little time for pleasantry and merriment as my kin should like to indulge our guests,” he said. “Given the situation I find it prudent that we call a war council at once.”

“My thought exactly, Master Elrond,” said Gandalf.
Thorin found himself nodding. “I am in no position to refuse,” he said.

With a swift blink and twinkle of the eyes Elrond began his work. The wounded – of which there were many and included both his sons, his best retainer, the hobbit burglar and many of the famed Rangers of the North – were carted off into the elves' healing house. A small group of warrior elves fanned out from Elrond's abode, their express order to clear the field – burn the goblin corpses and gather the bodies of their own fallen. Erestor (and a very *miffed* Arwen) followed the first group, while most of the unhurt Dunedain joined the second. Though Dwalin looked quite unhurt, Kili and Fili made every attempt to push him into the wounded group, which he only joined with a huff and a puff after much coercion.

Everyone else of importance – Gandalf, Elrond, Aragorn the Chieftain of the Dunedain and his retainer Halbarad (whose head was bandaged, but insisted he could not *possibly* excuse himself from the meeting) , and, of course, Thorin, being the most important dwarf of the company.

“I will see to Master Baggins,” said Foot-slogger, and he would have dashed off after the wounded had Gandalf not *yanked* his hand right back with a force Thorin didn't know the wizard had.

“Do pardon my impoliteness, Master Zero,” said him, “but you *must* join us. After all, we have agreed to see Master Elrond and hear his counsel regarding your-” he cleared his voice. “-strangeness.”

If Foot-slogger was of any mind to resist, he did not show it. He turned around, his long mass of golden hair flicking in the wind. “Fine,” he said. “Let's get this over with.”

As they were readying to leave, Thorin turned around to check his company and caught his two nephews eyeing each other incredulously. “Well, that was easy,” said Kili. “I thought he'd wreck the place getting to Bilbo-”

“Don't speak nonsense,” chided Fili, his eyes meeting Thorin's.

And Thorin was inclined to agree. He'd promised he'd give Foot-slogger the benefit of the doubt, and he would make good on his words.

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Zero glared all over the 'elven' great hall with some measure of animosity in his eyes.

He couldn't care for the pillars of white wood weaved with patterns and images, or the velvet curtains that were tapestries in and of themselves, or the large round table polished to such mirror-like sheen that it glowed underneath the sunlight through the tall window. The reploid had never been a big fan of ostentatiously decorated large halls. Chalk it down to megalomania being a common trait among his old enemies, but every time he'd found himself in such places he would be facing a battle to remember – and maybe one kind of heart-rending loss or another.

In the present hall, the same principle still applied. Only that it was a battle of words, not guns and beam sabers. At least, that was what he could logically expect as the various esteemed folks of this present world seated themselves around the table as some willowy elven ladies shuffled into the chamber, putting the chairs in place. Zero stole a glance at one of them: the poor woman was still shivering, obviously still shaken from the battle.

“I'll help with that,” he said and clapped his hands, and did exactly what he proposed: in a flash or two, some dozen chairs had been arranged, rearranged, or otherwise nudged into perfect symmetry around the table, with or without Elrond's approval. He didn't much care one way or another, dusting
his hands lazily as he finished his doing. Butlering for Bilbo Baggins did have its uses.

His act of chivalry pretty much set the tone for the entire meeting that followed.

Gandalf raised his big bushy brows, then sat himself down and folded his arms.

Elrond gave him a courteous nod, though Zero was certain his face had 'how did you do that?' painted on it, in big block letters.

Thorin looked like his palm was itching to come into contact with his forehead, while Kili's eyes were blinking like those of a teenage girl at a pop concert.

Aragorn said nothing, but the way he kept a piercingly attentive gaze on him from was starting to make him vaguely uncomfortable.

That aside, the exchange of words began without much of a hitch. After all, they'd all had questions to answer. Many questions – which meant it was prudent not to let Thorin have first words. In this, Zero glanced at Gandalf, he had the wizard's full unspoken support.

“Let us begin,” said Elrond, looking around the table and stopping at Gandalf. “I'm certain we have much to discuss, but if you would allow me, Mithrandir,” he turned around towards Aragorn now, his face severe. “Estel, how fared our brethren after the battle?”

“Poorly, Master Elrond,” said Aragorn glumly. “We lost many a good man. Had the tidings differed but so slightly I, too, would have perished.”

“There will be time for grieving and commemoration for them,” said Elrond. “Still, the defense of Imladris requires we steel ourselves and let grieve not overtake us – do we have still enough warriors to keep safe our city?”

“I would suggest sending for help from Lothlorien at once,” said Gandalf, shifting the pointy hat on his head. “And perhaps some spears from Mithlond would not go amiss. In the meantime, we will have to make do with what we still have-”

“I would not worry myself, Master Gandalf,” interjected Halbarad. The man would have sprung from his seat had his courtesy (probably) had not held him back, so excited did he seem. “Because we might be having the finest warrior we could ever ask for, right here, before us.”

Just like that, with a flick of Halbarad's hand towards Zero, the discussion had been derailed before the reploid could properly make up his mind. And now half a dozen pairs of eyes were trained upon him, betraying all sorts of emotions from hope to anger to disapproval to curiousness.

*Here goes nothing.*

“But of course, there is Master Zero,” said Gandalf. “This... man, if such a word were appropriate for him, is part of the reason I sought you with such urgency as I was able, Master Elrond.”

He paused and said nothing for several seconds, as if waiting for the air in the room to ferment, before clasping his hands in a sagacious and wizardly posture. Then he began speaking, perhaps almost exactly as someone was about to object to his theatrics and not a second before or after. He told them mostly everything: his meeting with Bilbo and arrangement to have him follow Thorin's company and how Zero derailed it by slotting himself in; the meeting with the troll en-route, how the orc Bolg murdered the three trolls and how his modified orcs were killed by Zero; the spontaneous trial that Thorin cooked up (“which, I reckon and still haven't changed my opinion on the matter, was unfathomably daft and poorly judged, especially by dwarven standards,” he said, and at this
point the dwarf-lord looked like he was an inch from hyperventilating) and how he had to intervene on Zero's behalf; and, finally, how and why they ran into Elladan just as he was about to, in the wizard's own words, “embark on a one-way journey to reunite with his ancestor from the age ere the War of Wrath sundered the world”.

As Gandalf told his share of story, Aragorn's gaze on Zero only intensified, as did the reploid's feeling of discomfort, as if he was a Maverick suspect under interrogation. Thorin was red-faced with indignation, and Elrond listened with due interest, though if he had any strong feeling about Zero in one way or another he'd not shown it.

“I see,” he said as Gandalf finished his story. “Master Zero – shall I so address you?” he only continued when Zero gave him a careful nod. “Very well, do you object to the good wizard's account?”

“I don't,” said Zero. “And while I don't much care for the dwarves' opinion of me, I have this gut feeling that if I am to protect Master Baggins as I should, then maybe I should get my name cleared lest they decide to give me the hammer.”

“I would say you've already done so by saving my son and the last true bastion of the Noldor in the North,” said Elrond, “You have more than earned the friendship of myself and mine...” he paused. “That is what I would have liked to say, but like the Elvenking Finrod Felagund before me I should like to be certain my friendship is not given in ill advise. Not least in these dark days.”

Zero clasped his hands and for a few seconds said nothing. “And your point is...?”

“Tell us your side of the story, Master Zero,” said Elrond. “Then we will decide for ourselves whether you are telling the truth.”

“And you can do so how?” Zero asked incredulously.

“Myself and my kin have suffered enough lies and deceit in our history, Master Zero,” said Elrond, “that by now few words untruthful can pass through us undetected.” There was a bright glare in his eyes that reminded Zero of a certain someone he had met, in one kind of capsule or another. Which was to say: exuding wisdom and strength of spirit.

Zero decided he could live with sharing information with that kind of person.

“Very well, I will do that,” he said with a sigh. “Though I can't guarantee you'll take it seriously, much less believe it.”

Time flew by more quickly than Zero thought it would, as he went through the story of his life as he remembered it. Omissions were made where expedient (22nd - 23rd century technology he deemed too advanced for these simple folks, for instance, were not elaborated unless pertinent to the story) and where he had reasons to believe a young Chieftain and his older retainer had no need to know (“what am I fighting for” chief among them). Names were omitted, too, but for the simple reason that he could not remember them. Except for one, of course.

“The name was Weil,” he said. “Doctor Weil. And I doubt you can find a man alive or dead more loathsome.” And then he went on to recount, with a steeled voice he had to try very hard to not erupt into rage, the horror the twisted man had tried to inflict upon whatever was left of the 23rd-century world, and ostensibly failed to. His tale concluded, as it happened, with the last battle inside the falling space station Ragnarok, and the supposed death of both Weil and himself.

The whole room fell silent. Dwarves and elves and men, plus a wizard, stared at one another. By
then time they turned back to regard the reploid, the only one to show any sentiment other than respect was Thorin Oakenshield. No surprise there.

“So you gave up your life,” Elrond concluded, “so that your world would survive. Such nobleness in thoughts and deed deserve applause, not unlike sacrifices of my own kin in the wars of legend long past.”

“You flatter me,” said Zero. “I don’t think I had a choice in the matter.”

“Not exactly, Master Zero,” said Gandalf, “Just as the brave always find opportunities to do good deeds in the most mundane of circumstances, so can the cowardly worm out of the most untenable of situations if they’d sink low enough. There is no such thing as ‘no other option’, but that which you chose for yourself.”

“I’ll try to take it as a compliment,” the reploid said.

“But that begs the question,” exclaimed Thorin. “I have made my case, elves, that the arms and armor of this... being,” he tossed Zero a semi-hostile stare, “does resemble that which were carried by the orcs and goblins we've been fighting. Certainly we need an explanation, loud and clear!”

Zero returned Thorin's stare with interest. “I'm getting to that part,” he said.

The dwarf-lord fell back on his seat and folded his arms impatiently. “Entertain me,” he said.

“I can offer only one,” said Zero. “Somehow Dr. Weil has survived his own destruction, and has come to this world of yours.” He started looking around the room. “The 'arms' and 'armor' found on these creatures you call 'orcs' are the standard-issue equipment of the dictatorship Weil was in control. The 'monster' that almost broke your entire company is a specialized anti-rebel juggernaught, the iron fist of said dictatorship's field armies. And the green-clad orc we fought...” His hands were pressing against his temples as he tried again and again to access relevant data and failed. “I can't put my finger down on the specifics, but I used to know rather well the warrior who his armament belongs to.”

“A champion of this 'Dr. Weil', I presume?” said Elrond.

“He used to cause me no small inconveniences,” said Zero, and for once something vaguely resembling a smile returned to his lips. “Enough to be something of a friend of mine.”

Thorin was yet to be persuaded. “How do we know it is this madman we're fighting?” said Thorin, “What threat is a half-dead creature who might as well be a bleeding-out broken husk of a man?”

“Weil's greatest strength is his brain,” Zero said. “As long as he has access to resources, energy and a place to set up shops, it doesn't matter where he is. His only limit is how much raw material he can lay his paws on.” He paused a second to let the facts sink in. “Surely you gentlemen understand what I am insinuating.”

Thorin's ridiculing expression disappeared. “You're telling me he's somehow gotten the support – if not the allegiance – of the orcs and goblins of Misty Mountain?”

Zero nodded very slowly, as if any faster gesture would fail to make an impression on the thick-headed dwarf-lord.

Gandalf produced from his robe his favorite pipe. “I have to admit, all of this sounds a fair bit far-fetched,” said him as he lit the pipe with a touch of his finger. “What say you, Master Elrond?”
“On the contrary, Mithrandir,” said Elrond. “With all the facts we have, I should say this hypothesis is not only possible, but probable. The creatures of the Enemy lack initiative of their own but to kill and destroy, and they would sooner gravitate towards someone who would show power and charisma enough to lead them. If this Dr. Weil is as brilliant and twisted as you say, he would be the leader the orcs would bow down to in lieu of the Dark Lord Sauron himself.”

Gandalf blew several smoke-rings, then set down his pipe with a grave look on his face. “I would say the same, Master Elrond, if not for the fact that...” He threw around the room an all-of-this-must-not-leave-this-council glare. “I have spoken to Radagast before I took the dwarves on their quest, and one of the things he showed me gave me reasons to be...”

He paused, and clasped his hand before his face. “...concerned. So concerned that, in fact, I had half a mind to speak before the entire White Council about the matter. Had Saruman not sent words that he is preoccupied, we could have been discussing this matter right at this moment.” He took a deep breath. “The question of one century ago, Master Elrond, remains unaddressed.”

Elrond nodded gravely. “So I recall,” he said, “as clear as it had been only yesterday that we had had the discussion.”

“Sauron is back, and Dol Guldur is his stronghold now, as surely as Angband had been Morgoth's before him,” said Gandalf. “The Enemy has been free to do as he wishes for at least a century now while the White Council does nothing. And there is not a thing you can say, Lord Elrond, or Saruman for that matter, that can dissuade me of this fact.”

Before Elrond could respond – and Zero noted he was looking slightly disturbed – Gandalf had turned his attention back to Zero. “My friend Zero, this world of ours already has more than its fair share of evil, of the sort that would seek to dominate or destroy all that is fair and good, and that which maintains an iron hold over that which is his. What are the odds that this Dr. Weil could establish a foothold among the dark creatures of the Enemy while their master remains afoot?”

“I never quite insinuated that,” said Zero. “You cannot deny that Dr. Weil's technology is in the hands of your enemy. I don't much care how this has happened, or who is controlling that arsenal now. I care that it is there; this much is fact. You are now faced with an enemy who possesses a technological edge that might as well be insurmountable given what you have, this is also fact. No offense, but does it matter who is in charge of the enemy if you have to fight them anyway?”

The understanding dawned upon Gandalf's expression as his brows raised – betraying terrible dread. “Sauron with this kind of power,” he said. “It's... unthinkable.”

“Wait, wait, wait a second there, Gandalf!” cried Thorin. “I'm quite afraid I've lost you there – Sauron? The Abhorred Dread? The Nameless Enemy? The Lord of the Rings? That who we're talking about?” For the first time since they met, Thorin was showing an emotion readily interpretable as fear.

Gandalf nodded. “This was why I warned you against approaching Dol Guldur, Master Thorin son of Thrain,” he said. “Know that your sire was slain by the Dark Lord Sauron himself, masquerading as something far less imposing than he actually is. My apologies, but there really are things you don’t need to know.”

For what seemed like a century, silence fell upon the discussion again. Gandalf reached for his pipe, and a series of colorful smoke-rings rose mournfully to the ceiling, as if the wizard was admitting defeat. Elrond was similarly clasping his hands, lost in his own thoughts, as was the young Aragorn. Thorin was darting his eyes all over the place, looking for one kind of explanation or another. Finding one, he huffed and sat back with a thud.
“Much as I applaud your spirit, Master Zero, things are never simple when it came to Sauron,” said Elrond. “Much of the ills that has taken place in our world for the last six millennia can be traced back to him. He had extinguished the illustrious lines of the great heroes of the North and slain some of the greatest elves who have ever lived through deceit alone. As for his raw power, his existence was enough to corrupt large swaths of green land into shrouded blight where naught lives but his creatures of the shadow.”

“Then I should think you must have had a plan to deal with him already; you've had six millennia!” exclaimed Zero.

“As a matter of fact,” Gandalf said ruefully, “we don't.” He looked back at Zero, whose eyes were now filled with incredulousness. “Not yet, anyway. The White Council I mentioned is the gathering of the greatest and wisest of the world, an alliance to fight against Sauron's corruption. We have not reached an agreement on how to best deal with his reawakening for the last hundred years.”

Zero shook his head and sighed. And I thought my old office was obtrusive.

“Well, then shouldn't we start a plan now?” exclaimed Thorin. For the first time, Zero was in complete agreement.

“With Saruman the White – that's our leader – blocking any idea to attack Dol Guldur, it's hardly likely we can mobilize ourselves to do so, however much we want to,” said Gandalf. “And if I strike out alone, as I have wanted to over the last century, I would have been defeated and broken.”

Then the right hand of a dwarf was raised, unexpected as it was, waving in the air like a flag in the wind. It was Kili, and he began before anyone had even said yes.

“Um... permission to speak freely, my lords?” he said. “Let's look at it this way: How likely is it that Smaug is allied with Sauron?” he glanced at his uncle, whose face was turning ruddy with rage again. “Because if the answer is any kind of yes, I'm kinda sorta really sure that we'll have to face him at one point or another, during or after our quest.” ‘If it succeeds' seemed to be on the tip of the young dwarf's tongue, but seeing how he was next to his uncle Zero had reasons to believe he was wise not voicing it.

More silence. Gandalf, in particular, was looking especially flustered, until all eyes were on him rather than the insolent dwarf princeling.

“Um... permission to speak freely, my lords?” he said. “Let's look at it this way: How likely is it that Smaug is allied with Sauron?” he glanced at his uncle, whose face was turning ruddy with rage again. “Because if the answer is any kind of yes, I'm kinda sorta really sure that we'll have to face him at one point or another, during or after our quest.” ‘If it succeeds' seemed to be on the tip of the young dwarf's tongue, but seeing how he was next to his uncle Zero had reasons to believe he was wise not voicing it.

More silence. Gandalf, in particular, was looking especially flustered, until all eyes were on him rather than the insolent dwarf princeling.

“Very likely, my friend Kili,” he said. “If I am to be honest, that's half the reason I urged you to undertake this quest in the first place. Someone has to distract Smaug from joining up with Sauron while we of the White Council would deal with him, someone sufficiently unnoticed by the Enemy's machination. A band of dwarves and a hobbit would have been ideal, that was my initial intention, and would be most likely to succeed on this quest.”

Now all eyes were on Gandalf, and not all of them approvingly. In fact, the most approval that Gandalf had got for himself was a quiet shake from Elrond.

“So, let me get this straight,” said Zero, “You have wanted to use my Master Baggins and all the dwarves in this company – and perhaps myself since I have signed up with them – as dragon-bait while you and your White Council would take care of the other threat.”
He tried not to appear angry. He failed miserably. “And you thought it good to not tell any of us a single word about this initial intention of yours. If we had not been fighting alongside each other, I would have decided you’d have dropped to the level of my enemy.”

“It was not something I wished to trouble you with, Master Zero,” said Gandalf. “All too often tasks of this nature would best be taken by those ordinary folks who do not realize the gravity of the matter, for otherwise their courage might fail them—”

Kili was equally indignant. “And what if we all die on the quest? What of us then? Our family? Our friends? Come on, Gandalf, we all know wizards are supposed to be all mysterious and inscrutable, but I thought you're better than this!”

“Quiet, Kili!” Thorin cried. “Die or not, you know we have to end this vagabondry! I have long decided, Gandalf or no, we would have to undertake this quest anyway! But then...” he took a deep breath and looked back at the wizard. “What do you have to say for yourself, Gandalf?”

“Alas, I have none,” said Gandalf, dipping his head. “Like all wizards' wont, I am not infallible, and I have made an error in judgement. For that I can only offer my apology.”

Too little, too late, Zero thought, and he would have gone on to say just that had Elrond not intervened. He stood up, and looked around the room – especially Zero – with his warm eyes and gentle countenance. Then, when the muttering has ceased, he looked upon Gandalf and spoke.

“Why the hobbit, Mithrandir?”

At first Gandalf said nothing, and Zero was certain he was trying to look for another excuse for himself.

But then the pipe in Gandalf’s hand stirred, and he turned up to look at Elrond. “Perhaps because I am afraid, and he gives me courage,” he said. “Some believe it is only great power that can hold evil in check, but that is not what I have found. It is the small everyday deeds of ordinary folk that keep the darkness at bay. Small acts of kindness and love.”

“Yes, kindness – it is with kindness that Bilbo Baggins has gained the allegiance of a mighty warrior like yourself, who would go so far as to throw yourself in harm's way for him. It is with kindness that he would defend you against overwhelming evidence in a spontaneous court. It is with kindness that he embarked on a dangerous mission to save the father of an elf he’d hardly known, because it was the right thing to do. We're all here, more or less unharmed, in no small part due to the kindness and bravery of the little folk. It was this kindness and bravery that gave me courage, and that which I have depended on to keep the Dark Lord at bay.”

“Then you have done him a disservice by not letting him know,” said Zero. “He deserves at least as much, if you do hold him in such high esteem.”

Gandalf clutched his pipe tightly in his hands for what seemed like a long, long while, before finally nodding. “Yes, perhaps it is time I let him know,” said Gandalf, “I will speak to Master Baggins again, and tell him what was expected of him.” He drew a breath that looked and sounded like the hardest in his life. “And then, if he should wish to turn back to his comfortable smial, his seven meals a day, his library full of stories and maps and his sun-swept front steps, he may do so.”

It did not look like a perfect solution to Zero's eyes, but he nodded. “I'll hold you accountable for your words, wizard.”

Apparently, not to Thorin, it wasn't a perfect solution at all. “This is not an excuse to sabotage our
expedition, is it?” Thorin growled. “We cannot do this with an unlucky company of thirteen, nor can we do it without a burglar and you know it."

“Quite,” said Elrond. “Rest assured, Master Thorin. At first, you would have been right: I would have tried to stop you – the power that which you will face is great and insurmountable, and I would not knowingly let the last sons of Durin saunter to their certain doom.” He rapped his finger on the table, and then continued. “But then the circumstance has changed, and so has my thoughts on the matter.”

“We are faced with a foe much greater than we are used to,” he said. “You are right, master Zoro: it doesn't matter who is commanding the orcs, Sauron or your Dr. Weil – or both – we will have to fight them sooner or later – possibly sooner, for they have targeted our Imladris. Alas, your having come to our aid in this time of need also means you have made yourselves visible: you are as much their foe as are we, and wherever you go you can expect danger to beset you from all sides. In that case, your continuing this quest would perhaps contribute more to the war effort of the free peoples as a whole than anything else.”

“Great,” said Thorin. “So now not only have we saved some elves, we have to involve ourselves in your war?”

“It is not our war, Master Thorin, and you know it,” said Elrond, his words just so stressed as to make Thorin falter. “Your father was slain by Sauron, now that you are aware. Orcs and goblins are the sworn foes of your kind, and they still infest the halls of Khazad-dum. To say nothing that if the Shadow is to triumph, there would be no place so safe for the dwarves to delve any longer. Is it not your war, to avenge the wrongs done to your kind? Is it not your war, to retake that which is yours? Is it not your war, to fight for your future?”

Kili and Fili both shot their uncle a gaze that had 'he's right, you know' written all over it.

“We will do whatever we can to help you, Mater Thorin,” said Elrond. “With our assistance, your reclaiming Erebor would be that much easier and more likely to succeed. And if by any chance we should encounter the forces of Sauron or this Dr. Weil again, we may even be able to take the fight to them.”

For a minute straight Thorin didn't answer – refusing to answer would be more apt. It was Aragorn, of all people, who broke the uncomfortable stranglehold.

“If I may, my lord Elrond,” he said with a humble bow. “Whatever the choice Master Baggins makes, I shall accompany the dwarves to recover their homeland.”

“I'm afraid that would be ill-advised, Estel,” said Elrond. “But perhaps... the expertise of the Rangers of the North would not go amiss to guide them across the Misty Mountain and maybe Mirkwood? By then, I'm sure, Thranduil would be willing to lend his assistance, for he is as firmly on our side as any of the Free Peoples of Eriador. I will have you bring him my letter.”

The name Thranduil must have stung Thorin like a bee; immediately he jerked up. “Thranduil? Thanduil! I'd sooner die in battle against the dragon than—”

“And, Master Dwarf, that would be helpful to your kin how exactly?” exclaimed Elrond. “A death in battle is worth half as much if you could have survived, and a tenth if by surviving you could have done greater good for your side than by dying.”

It took Thorin another minute to relent, and even then not fully. “If you insist, Master Ranger, you can follow us,” he said. “But I would not bet on gaining Thanduil's support, with or without a
letter. He is just that much of a bastard."

Zero and Gandalf shared a brief glance at each other. “Well,” they both said, almost on cue. “It is worth a try.”

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Chapter End Notes

1) For those FAMILIAR with the Megaman universe:

Nothing this chapter! Understandable, this episode is quite Middle-earth-centric, after all.

2) For those NOT familiar with the Megaman universe:

See above.

3) Legendarium note:

- Gandalf's Dumbledore-ness: I am certain these days I am confusing Mithrandir and Albus Dumbledore with each other to some extent, but I have an excuse for that: as far as The Hobbit goes, Gandalf is as manipulative to Bilbo as Dumbledore is to Harry Potter. The whole thing about sending the hobbit on an adventure more or less against his will, withholding key information from him, and pitching him against an enemy he is unprepared to meet, all of it screams Dumbledore to me, though at least Gandalf has more excuses on his side: Sauron is a MUCH scarier thing than Voldemort because seriously, and Gandalf's Greater Good (TM) does not include Bilbo dying as an integral component. It would be out of character for Zero to NOT call him out on this. Which, as it goes, serves as an okay-ish hook for Gandalf's "Perhaps because I am afraid, and he gives me courage" speech.

- On the White Council: Let me say outright, in canon the White Council's meeting schedule needed work. It took them NINETY YEARS (One hundred in my film + book merged timeline) to come to the decision that maaaybe the evil enemy of the world hiding in a corrupting fortress right next door to their ally Thranduil's home could use some thrashing. The Earth in the MMX timeline suffered like a dozen world-threatening crises in about a quarter as much time! Granted, Saruman's ring-madness might have something to do with it, but again, come on, Elrond's family and friends. You could have done better.

- A parallel exists between this timeline's Elrond and his grand-uncle Finrod Felagund which may or may not be further explored in future chapters.
A Short Rest

Chapter Notes

Chapter sixteen is up!

My progress would be quite slow these days: July went by without much of an update. I'm caught up with a large project of original fiction which takes priority over fanfiction, and my job is hardly enabling to both. Still, I'll count my blessings and see how things go from here.

Rest assured though: I have big plans for this fanfic!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 16

A Short Rest (And Planning Forthwith)

In another world, Bilbo Baggins would have known the full extent of the elves' hospitality: A perfect house, where there would be an abundance of everything to every taste whether he fancied food, or a sleep, or work, or story telling, or singing, or just sitting and thinking. In fact, in that timeline he would have fallen so deeply in love with Imladris that in the years to come he'd seen it something of a second home: a place every scholar would desire, and Bilbo liked to think himself a scholar most of all things.

But in that timeline, there would have been no Zero, no goblins armed with tubes discharging huge pellets, no undead troll with a giant beam cannon embedded in its chest, and most importantly no hobbit suitably daring to rescue an elf-lord by his lonesome against all odds.

So Bilbo was, all in all, not quite concerned with the slightly lacking treatment he was receiving: the bed was a little less than perfect, though still warm and cozy, and there were newly-created cracks in the cream-colored walls that shouldn't have been there, and that was completely fine. It was only fair, was Bilbo's thought as he drifted in and out of a slumber caused by Elven medication, that he suffered his own share of pain. Greater beings than him, high elves born in the sight of the Two Trees and seen the world broken and healed, had died that day while he yet lived.

Bilbo counted his blessings, and sank into another sleep as the comfort of the warm bath he'd taken lingered in his bones. He would have gone on for a day or two: his bed was still soft and warm by any standards, and sang songs in his ears as he slumbered. The scent of perfume in the air was a welcome change after a dreadful twelve hours in the company of goblin corpse gas.

But then, he'd had the distinct misfortune of getting to know a certain cyber-elf.

“HELLO? HELLO! CAN YOU HEAR ME, SLEEPYHEAD?”

Such was the magnitude of the scream, Bilbo's sweet dream of the Shire during a good harvest turned into a nightmare: The Shire went up in flames, hobbit corpses everywhere, Bilbo's carcass
rotted underneath the rubble of his own smial, while a dragon enormous and terrible circled the skies above. A blood-curdling scream escaped his lips, and Bilbo very nearly rolled off the bed.

He shot up, eyes wide open. “Fear! Fire! Foe! Mortal danger!” he screamed. “Dragon! Death! Ruination and the world's ending! Run for your lives! Preserve yourself!”

And then his ears caught a distinctly mischievous and immensely girly giggle. There, on the table next to his bed, a certain colorful vambrace sat, rumbling in what sounded very much like a laughter unleashed. “Oh dear,” said the voice within it. “Interesting dream, wasn't it, Bilbo?”

Bilbo's chest sagged as a large amount of air left it all at once. “Miss Pallette,” he said, and was answered by more giggling, for it was nobody else but her.

“Good gracious,” he murmured. “What is the matter with you, my dear miss?” Of course, there was no 'dear' in his voice at all: in fact, he was almost as annoyed as that day Gandalf showed up on his doorsteps unsolicited.

He picked up the bracer, and slipped it back into his right arm. “Well, I'm bored!” cried the voice within. “And you're asleep!”

Bilbo rubbed his eyes, not sure if he should be annoyed or amused – or even a little bit of both. “Why don't you, o mighty and plenipotentiary voice, not embark on some sightseeing, or something?” he said, making no attempt to conceal his grogginess.

“I would, hotshot, if only I had feet.” Bilbo had a vague gut feeling he was being pouted at.

“And if you would have looked, you'd realized my foot isn't exactly in a good way,” Bilbo pointed out, and tapped his knuckle on the fanciful cast on his hairy foot for emphasis.

“You're no fun,” concluded Pallette with a huff.

“My apologies for my lack of 'fun','” said Bilbo, and sank back into his pillow.

And that was the end of that. At least, that would have been the end of that, had Pallette been a mature, respectable hobbit-like creature with some modicum of self-restraint. She wasn't by a very long shot.

“Hello?” she cried. “HELLO? I'm not done yet!”

“I'm listening,” said Bilbo, mouthing off a yawn, making sure to sound as uninterested as he could (though deep inside he was more than a little amused). He passed the test with flying color:, Pallette's voice was turning frantic.

“Uh... how about you tell me about stuff and I tell you about stuff?” she said, and then hastily corrected herself. “T-to pass the time, I mean?”

“What kind of 'stuff' in particular?” Bilbo said. This time, his yawn was genuine.

“Whatever you'd like! The Maverick Hunters, what we used to do for a living, life in general... or Zero's love life-” cried Pallette – Bilbo was making a show of closing his eyes shut. “HEY, WAKE UP, SLEEPYHEAD!”

“I've had one too many gossips in my life, thank you very much,” said Bilbo as the Sackville-Bagginses' image flashed in his head. As it was, the hobbit was not unkeen on hearing juicy tales, as long as it didn't concern him or his. “But I suppose you wouldn't mind telling me about Mister X, if
that's to your liking?"

Bilbo could feel his bracer rumble excitedly. “Ooh, ooh! What would you like me to tell?” Pallette chirped. “You know, I've got a hundred years' worth of story to-

“Whatever is relevant only, please,” said Bilbo, and punctuated his request with another yawn.

Then the bracer settled down. Bilbo could just imagine the giddy girl of a cyber-elf was thinking really, really hard. Then she quietened her voice, in a manner much resembling little fountlings whispering around the corner barely out of sight of adults. “Did you know,” she begun, “that for the longest time everyone was saying X was Zero's-” The pitch of her voice raised with every word, and nearing the end it was almost a squeak.

And then his chamber's door creaked open. A quick “Eeek!” escaped his bracer, and then it went silent, as were the wont of all talking magical toys.

Bilbo turned towards the door and instantly understood why. He would have responded in more or less the same way (albeit with more flair and politeness as expected from a proper hobbit genteel) if he'd been caught (nearly) red-handed gossiping by the exact same person about whom he was gossiping. His butler, Noughton, or Zero, as was his proper name, was standing right there, wearing his butlering cloak, his hair tied in a ponytail behind him. It was like a late morning in his smial, as if nothing had changed from the day before Gandalf turned his life upside down.

“How fared the council?” he asked, and there was genuine curiousness in his tone.

“Time-out,” said Zero. “Elrond and Gandalf are checking Thorin's map. He was rather unwilling to let anyone in on his 'family secret'. No more than is absolutely essential, he said”

“I see,” said Bilbo, falling back on his pillow.

A few awkward seconds passed, until Bilbo realized Zero would react better to a direct question.

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“I see,” said Bilbo, falling back on his pillow.

A few more quiet seconds passed: Now Zero regarded his master, arms folded, his large eyes blinkless, and for a swift moment Bilbo thought perhaps he had changed overnight into a curious object worth close examination.

“Well,” Bilbo began awkwardly. “I was just hoping, maybe I don't have any unseemly spot of smudge on my face! That would be quite an embarrassment!”

“No, you don't,” said Zero. “Though I would worry about something else. The medic – I mean-” his face twisted just a tiny bit; Bilbo thought he was still trying to wrap the terminology around his head. “- healer, she said your ankle is 'in a bad way'."

“As a matter of fact, yes, unfortunately.” Bilbo nodded and made a mock gentlemanly displeasure face. “You see, the goblins haven't been very courteous hosts. Setting a troll on a visitor is not generally accepted etiquette!”

“My apologies,” said Zero stiffly. “I didn't manage to catch you and-”
“And that's perfectly fine!” said Bilbo with a small grin. “At the end of the day, we routed the goblins, slew a troll or two, saved Master Elrond and the fair homestead of his, and earned our rest.” He drew his blanket closer to hide a shudder. “Not too bad for a first battle, if I should say so myself.”

“You still hurt your feet,” Zero pointed out.

“Could have been far worse,” said Bilbo, and his shudder grew just a bit more intense. “Zero, I must say I'm quite pleased with how things have turned out.” No need to bash yourself over it was what he wanted to add, but he thought his jolly attitude was enough to convey the message.

“You are otherwise unharmed, are you?” Zero asked.

There was a look on Zero's face that Bilbo could only interpret as befuddlement. Care, yes, but there was a measure of confusion that didn't belong anywhere near a sick bed.

The hobbit started thinking. Back to the day he found the fellow, battered and amnesiac and clueless. The day he fixed his roof. The day he agreed to be his butler. The day Gandalf and the dwarves came, and everything that followed.

Almost without fail, Zero was most alive when there was one kind of challenge or another: something to fix, some letters to deliver, some guests to entertain... and of course, something to fight. In every other situation, he had had trouble emoting, much less communicating what he truly thought. It was either a logical puzzle to solve, or something to smash for the poor fellow. Nothing else mattered.

And then he recalled the long history lesson X had recited, and suddenly everything became so clear. He had been keeping in his household for all that time a being created almost exclusively to do battle and not much else. It was already a huge effort on Zero's part to make himself available as some kind of household servant, and accepted the offer only because of a sense of justice.

Because it would not have been right for a decent person to accept Bilbo's lodging without doing anything in return.

Bilbo felt like slapping himself. Why didn't he see it earlier?

“Master Baggins,” Zero said again, and there was a kind of awkward anxiety in his voice that made Bilbo feel even worse about himself. “Are you sure you are... unhurt?”

“Uh... yes! Certainly! I'm particularly hale and hearty, thank you very much!” he said hastily. “The elves' herbs should work quickly enough, and then I'd be on my proud hairy feet again! Up, up and away, that is!”

Bilbo spoke and spoke and spoke, and meant every word even if he did not intend them to come out in that exact manner. Gandalf hadn't been entirely wrong when he spoke of Bilbo being excitable. He reckoned even the great Bullroarer Took would have been, when faced with things plainly unexpected.

“I see,” said Zero, and then zipped his mouth as he lodged himself on the chair, seemingly intent on keeping an eye on Bilbo for as long as was needed.

Now Bilbo was thinking, and thinking hard, and thinking even harder. He was trying his darnedest to evade Zero's gaze, but once every so often he'd steal a glance at the butler and catch what looked like sorrow very great in those eyes of his. There was not a small chance Bilbo was only seeing what he was expecting to see – after all, by X's stories Zero's life must have been terribly depressing and
But then something distinctly gentlehobbit-like awoken within him. A respectable hobbit he had been, and though he had essentially thrown his reputation to the four winds by embarking on this present quest, there were things he could not simply toss away.

*Gentlehobbits should take good care of their fellows.*

“I was wondering, my dear Zero,” he said, “is there anything you would like to tell me?”

Zero bolted up straight. “Tell you?” His eyes were narrowing.

“Let’s be forthright, my friend,” said Bilbo. “I have met a number of... interesting people, so to speak, in the goblin caves. They told me about you.”

Zero clasped his hands and steeled his face.

“What exactly did they tell you?” he asked.

His blank expression didn't lend itself to Bilbo's confidence, but the hobbit decided to shoulder on regardless. “Lurid, unhappy things, and a few happy ones,” he said. “Yours' a long tale, longer than I thought it was, but then again my policy is not to dwell upon sorrowful past if I can help it.”

Zero showed the slightest sign of a nod. “And... if you wouldn't mind, who was that interesting person?”

“Alas, I don't know him,” said Bilbo, and technically it wasn't a lie. For all he knew, X could have been an illusion or a trick of some sort. “At any rate from my perspective it doesn't much matter.”

“I see,” Zero said. If Bilbo read his gesture right, he was probably waiting for him to finish his piece. So he did exactly what he thought was expected of him.

“And... based on what I've heard, well, I want you to know that I have now every reason to give you my highest vote of confidence and a share in my brotherhood.” His voice was solemn – or as solemn as he could make it. It was Bilbo's will-and-other-important-document-reading voice, which should be good enough at any rate.

If Bilbo's arm had been long enough, now would be the time he would place a hand on the reploid's shoulder. It wasn't, so he resorted to a single nod and smile instead. “I'm not here to lord over you, Zero, in other words. I'm here to help you, if my strength and luck would let me do so.”

For what seemed like an eternity Zero said nothing, and Bilbo was starting to fear his goodwill was going to be brushed away. When Zero finally got to talking, there was now a mellowness in his voice that made Bilbo relax – just a little.

“You want to be my friend,” said Zero.

“That's one way you can put it,” said Bilbo. “And I should like to ask you to share your burden with me if you could find it in your heart to do so. Many hands lighten the load, and many ears perish the troubles of the mind. And—”

Bilbo was flustering. Why didn't he think of this earlier? “May I apologize,” he said sincerely, “for failing to see the pain from which you must be suffering all those months. We hobbits have so much to learn even when it comes to that which we should know most intimately – to love and to care.”
“I'll take your kindness,” said Zero, “but I don't think I can tell you anything yet. I...” He hesitated a little, but then looked straight into Bilbo's eyes. “I have a fairly good idea just who it is, though I can't remember a name. And if you've spoken to him, there's not much I can tell you about myself that you haven't already known.”

Bilbo made a point to keep his cheerful face on. “Then you can tell me how you feel,” he said.

“About what?”

“About anything.” Bilbo said with the enthusiasm he once had as a fountling. “For instance? I can tell you right now that I love this place. I love this bed, I love this room, I love the little ornaments hanging from the ceiling, I love the scented perfume, I love the fact that the wallpapers probably have their own stories to tell. Bless me, the elves have a way to make magic through telling tales!”

He made an exaggerated grimace. “But I don't like the way my foot has let me down. No sir, not at all!”

“Small talks. That seems hardly productive,” said Zero, shaking his head, though there was maybe the slightest hint of a smile on his lips.

“Not all things in life has to be productive,” said Bilbo. “Why else do you think I stock maps and books and atlases of places I did not think I would ever visit?”

“Because you like it,” said Zero.

“And because it gives me peace of mind,” said Bilbo. “You might want to do that sometimes. Do something you like, and tell someone about how you feel about everything.”

Bilbo was teaching his butler how to do small talks. It was ridiculous as a concept, but as an endeavor? Worth it. And it was rather effective, too: Bilbo could see Zero's face just nearly, nearly, nearly breaking through the ice now, when the door creaked again and gave him a nasty start unasked for.

At the doorway stood two dwarves with uncharacteristically short beards and mischievous faces. Fili and Kili, at his service.

“Master Baggins, sir!” shouted Fili ceremoniously. “And Master Footslogger, too!”

“Mostly just Master Footslogger, sir,” said Kili with far less ceremony. “Well, our Uncle Thorin wishes to see you – on the double, sir.”

“What's the issue?” Zero said, and Bilbo's face sank. His expression had slipped back into work/kill-stuff mode again – so much for the effort to break the ice about him.

“He would not say,” said Kili. “He probably wants to keep the matter between himself, Lord Elrond and Gandalf. And you.”

“Really now?” Bilbo exclaimed. “What happened to the Thorin who would want to give my butler the hammering?”

“Change of plan, change of heart, Master Baggins,” said Fili with a shrug. “Extremely important, he said. He wished for you to come, too, Master Baggins, until Gandalf-”

“Until Gandalf smacked him upside the head and reminded him you had a bad case of twisted ankle and would very much appreciate a rest,” said Kili, and he looked like he was barely holding back a
chortle at Thorin's expense.

Bilbo and Zero exchanged a look. It didn't take a second. “I'm on my way,” said Zero.

“Oh, no, no, best that you come with us,” Kili said hastily. “How an elven city could ever be so confusing, we don't even know. Fi got lost thrice just to the healing house alone!”

It was all Bilbo could do to not blurt out a joke about dwarfs and sense of direction above the ground. Zero only closed his eyes and let the palm of his left hand graze his forehead.

“Very well,” he said. “Then lead the way.”

“Sure thing,” said Kili. He pinched Fili on the shoulder. “You got the way now, right, Fi?”

For reasons only known to himself, Fili did not answer, but instead eyed Zero (worriedly) and Kili (a bit angrily). “Well, uh...” Kili said, looking pretty confused himself. “Let's, well, do our very best?”

“We'll continue this later, Master Baggins,” said Zero, and trailed off behind the two bumbling dwarves.

Bilbo watched Zero leave the room, and a sigh of relief escaped his lips. And just then, just then, his peace and quiet was disturbed again, this time by the giggling voice beneath his pillow.

Pallette's voice was best described as unduly giddy. “Operation: Reach Out To Zero wasn't a complete failure, now was it?”

“All thanks to, my dear miss, your palpable willingness to stay quiet when it matters,” said Bilbo, this one time meaning no sarcasm.

“If I hadn't done so, X would have ripped my vital code out and rolled over it with a cyber-giant-mechaniloid,” said Pallette. Then she paused, and immediately changed her tone. “Uh... you know I'm joking about that last part, don't you?”

Bilbo supposed his sudden blanching might have had something to do with it.

“Never can know for sure with you,” said Bilbo. “Though I suppose it makes sense. Master X wouldn't want Zero to know you're around. After all, you used to know him. In person.”

“Too well, like I said,” Pallette said proudly. “I have a history of setting him up on dates with this really cute reploid-”

Bilbo scrunched his nose. “Too much information, thank you very much!”

“Shush, you,” said Pallette, “Y’know, keep hanging around me and I might just be able to set you up with someone some day, too. If you'd only tell me your type-”

Bilbo started silently cursing the adolescent-minded girl inhabiting his new weapon.

“This shall be the last I hear of this,” he said, knowing full well this wasn't going to be the last time that he would have to put up with that.

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If too much information could kill, then Thorin Oakenshield would have been a dead dwarf. As it was, the last half an hour had flew all over his head; so much for his reputation as, among others, a smart dwarven prince.
“Have I fallen to the point,” he began, “where I would have to ask you gentlemen to point me where to go or who to kill? Because I'm rather unsure-”

At long last he saw Elrond’s palm met his forehead, and for once Thorin did not (as much) take offense. The fussy black-haired elf wearing long robe tending to the black board before them both wasn't making any sense.

Said blackboard, hastily pulled into the meeting room from one of the elven studies, was now covered with, in no particular orders, arcane diagrams, flowery elven scripts, arrows pointing up, down, left and right and diagonal all over, what looked like a chalk-drawn map of Middle Earth all the way down to Minas Tirith and Umbar with the location of Dol Guldur and Erebor marked with huge crosses, and an artistic rendition of the thing Footslogger had been calling “Trans-Server”.

“-what all of this has to do with anything.”

And said fussy elf (Erestor was the name, so he claimed) had the gall to look at him like he was a silly schoolboy. If Gandalf understood anything, he was making sure not to share. He was doing all he could to keep up his 'mysterious wizard' facade: complete with sagacious nods and large numbers of smoke-rings floating to the arched dome above them.

“Very well, Lord Elrond, Mithrandir and master dwarf, let's have another try,” said the elf, erasing a good quarter of the blackboard. In Common script he drew up two columns – one was labeled What we want, the other What we have to do. Thorin could swear he was muttering some very bad Elvish words underneath his breath.

“You want to retake Erebor and hopefully return it to its glory days,” he said, jotting down the words as he spoke. “And we want to thwart whatever Sauron is planning.”

“With or without Saruman,” added Elrond, waving his hand as Gandalf was rising to speak. “We are in complete agreement on this matter, Mithrandir.”

“Tell me something I don't already know,” said Thorin impatiently.

“And doing so,” said Erestor, turning his nose up, “involves several endeavors all at once. In as few words as I can manage: strengthen defenses in Imladris, rally the Silvan folks, summon the remaining dwarven clans, bring words to the Men of Gondor, secure Misty Mountain, and-”

“Kill Smaug.” Thorin roared, and his eyes blazed.

“I was going to say, ensure Erebor is finally in dwarven hands, but yes, that does invariably involve dealing with Smaug in one way or another,” said Erestor. “Which, I should remind you, means being physically present in Erebor, preferably with a large host. The largest we can muster without detracting from the other tasks, at any rate.”

That Thorin could agree too. He was in the process of nodding thoughtfully when the door swung open with a loud creak.

Thorin turned around. There, at the doorway, stood the blond butler who had somehow elevated himself to the same level of importance as the lord of the High Elves and himself. Kili and Fili were flanking him, and – an acknowledging smile came to his lips – they were finally behaving like princes ought to: back straight, faces steeled and eyes straight ahead.

“Just in time, Master Zero,” said Erestor. “As I said, the last component involves you – you and Master Thorin here.”
Foot-slogger, or Zero as he apparently was known, looked thoroughly disinterested as his eyes touched upon the blackboard. Thorin wasn't sure if he should be happy knowing he was not the only one not keen on Erestor's lengthy discourse.

Zero sat down at the table and waved his hand. “Just point me in the right direction,” he said.

“Well be better if I bring you up to date with the news first, my friend,” said Gandalf. “You see, we have had a good look at Thorin's map. There is a way into Erebor, after all, that does not involve a frontal scuffle with a dragon. So long as we make haste—”

Then Gandalf unfurled the map – *Thorin's* map – before the butler-warrior. It honestly didn't take all that much time relating the moon-runes and the secret message.

“So, if we somehow make ourselves present at just the right place and the right time, you can put that key of yours to use. And then all we need to do is—” said Zero, arms folded and eyes narrowed.

“Get the stone,” said Thorin. “And then I can call upon all my kin over Arda to reclaim Erebor through force of arms.”

“How much time have we got?”

“Several months, actually,” said Thorin gravely. “From today till Durin's Day – that's the first day of the new year of us dwarves – that's four months, give or take a day or two. It sounds mightily abundant *now* certainly, but I am willing to bet one-fifteenth of our prize that we're on a tighter schedule than I'd like. It is many hundreds of miles from here to the Lonely Mountain, and we will doubtlessly have enemies hounding our every steps.”

“Which brings us to the next pertinent issue,” said Elrond. “The so-called Trans-Servers.”

If Thorin had not yet seen his own nephews swearing grave oaths they'd been telling nothing but the truth, he would have been tempted to think the whole Trans-Server business was just some sort of elven conspiracy, as was his thoughts on anything else involving elves. When Dwalin, too, swore his part (and even if he hadn't, the new armament he was parading about worked better than any oath), Thorin had scant choice but to believe what he had been told.

There was also the matter of what to do about Dwalin's new panoply, but that would be a concern for a later time.

“If not for such miraculous devices – not to detract from the bravery and resourcefulness of one Master Bilbo Baggins, of course” said Elrond, “I would not have made it back as promptly as I have. Not from the bowels of Misty Mountains.”

Gandalf squinted his eyes beneath his thick bushy brows. “Misty Mountains? You went as far as Misty Mountains?”

“I am no dwarf,” said Elrond, “but I have seen enough of Eriador over the last six thousand years to tell the general location just from the rocks alone. Yes, I was underneath Misty Mountains, and spent an unhappy half a day wandering around a goblin-infested cavern, although where exactly I could not have known. Not least because they were *redecorating.* The word left Elrond's lips with sharp sarcasm. “Hewing the caves into square corridors and rooms and chambers.”

He picked up a long stick from the table and tapped on the general location of Misty Mountains on the map. “If we take this device back, we could cut at least a few weeks off the itinerary, and save us all a lot of hassles and unpleasantries.”
Thorin scowled. “What are the odds,” he said, making sure everyone in the room understood he was not convinced, “that they would have locked this thing? If I were to run my own city – and I will, mark my word, when this is all over – and I were to find there’s a convenient backdoor into my fair city that friends and foes can take at any time, I would do my utmost best to collapse it – or lay a great many spells on it, such that intruders would fall dead before they could violate our halls.”

“That might indeed be the case,” said Zero, folding his arms. “At the very least, they could have reconfigured the Trans-Server network.”

Thorin stared at him for a good long second. The fellow was agreeing with him? Arda was surely going to be unmarred soon.

Or not.

“But that doesn't mean there is no way we can't take advantage of it,” Zero said, and there was a twinge of uncharacteristic mischief in his eyes. “Like all things from my time, a Trans-Server terminal can be hacked.”

Thorin's bewildered eyes met the blond's, and immediately a hasty explanation was squeezed out of him. “As in, alter its working in such a way that it serves our purpose rather than theirs,” he said noncommittally.

Thorin grumbled. “Now, just assuming we can do this at all,” he said, “who will do this hacking, hmm?”

“I can,” said Zero. “It might take time, however, and more importantly energy.”

“Well, then what's the point?” cried Thorin. “We want to save time, not spend more!”

He might taken a little too much enjoyment in his detraction.

“I said might. High risk, high rewards,” Zero answered. “Teleporting an army inside an enemy's base without them knowing what hit them equals a free victory,” he whipped his head towards Elrond – for emphasis, perhaps, but rather more likely for support. “As would have been the case for this city of yours had we not arrived when we did.”

“You are more right than we should like to admit, Master Zero,” said Elrond humbly. “I concur, if we may turn the Shadow's own weapon against them in such manner as would not compromise our integrity, that would be most... advisable. What would this 'hacking' business entail?”

“Myself and a yet undetermined number of energy crystals,” said Zero. “First I will need to survey the actual device. I heard it's in a cave in the clearing we fought in?”

“Indeed. Master Bilbo and the two Dwarven princes here,” Elrond eyes deferentially at Kili and Fili, “know the way, as do I. I can guide you personally if they would not, at first light.”

“Which,” Erestor harrumphed. “segues nicely into the point I wish to make. It would be prudent for the present company to split up.”

The rest of the room all at once turned their collective gaze at the elf – but not for long. Footsteps clad in mail were echoing along the corridor outside the room, and before long the great engraved door swung open again. At the doorway stood Elrond's two largely unhurt children: Arwen and Elrohir, wearing full battle livery on their persons and a bewildered look on their faces.

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Chapter End Notes

1) For those FAMILIAR with the Megaman universe:

In light of the latest comment I've received praising my characterization of Zero, let me spend some time talking about what I think of Zero's original characterization.

Zero's original schtick is "badassery", and that's the one trait he consistency carries throughout the entire length of his tenure. This has been deconstructed rather often in both fan interpretations and fanfics: Zero is, deep inside, a creature made entirely for war (as opposed to both Megaman and X, and to a lesser extent even Axl, whose schtick has other applications than fighting) and therefore is emotionally stunted and unable to express himself as fully as he could and should have. The trauma conga piled upon him in the course of two centuries adds to that, and leaves him extremely cold and distant in demeanor.

At the same time, his second, slightly-less-but-still-consistent trait is an unwavering, yet distinct sense of justice. It's not X's "must fight to bring peace and build an utopia" (Let's discount X7's X for obvious reasons here); it's not Ciel's "Let's fight tyranny and save as many people as we can". It's a much more detached "All in a day's work" mentality, coupled with nagging questions about his origin and his purpose that are never truly answered satisfactorily. This makes him in all but name a sword-for-hire on the good guys' side, who fights to satisfy that nebulous desire for "doing good" and to protect those around him, rather than material compensation of any sort.

None of this is actually spelled out explicitly, and can be argued either way. This, however, is my way of looking at Zero. This also makes him an ideal character to experience THE philosophy of Middle-earth: that real power to defeat evil comes not from liberal application of earth-shattering firepower, but "little acts of kindness". I personally think this theme synergizes extremely well with that which the entire Megaman timeline explores.

2) For those NOT familiar with the Megaman universe:

- Hacking plays a limited, but distinct role in the Megaman universe across all continuities. I've been combining the Megaman Battle Network version with the Megaman X/Zero series version in my interpretation of hacking: Someone will need to 'jack into' the system, then overcome its cyber-world defense in one way or another. This will be further explored in the chapters to come. Promise!

3) Legendarium note:

- Erestor's role: The fellow generally plays the 'infodump' role in the eyes of the community, and I can't see any reason why not. So here he's doing more of the same - after all, he is in an ideal position to draw up plans and maps and strategies. Someone
should advise Elrond, after all...
The Eagles and the Radiant Dwarf

Chapter Notes

Huge chapter alert! I've considered cutting this 11K monstrosity into two, but then that doesn't feel very "right".

An additional bit of trivia: The chapter title is a reference to "The Eagle and the Radiant Cross", a once-famous, yet irrelevant-to-both-fandoms modification of one very delightful game called Mount and Blade.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 17

The Eagles and the Radiant Dwarf

If Gandalf had looked into a mirror he'd have seen his bushy brows furrowing.

To say he was no stranger to the noble messengers of Manwe Sulimo was like saying a dwarf was no stranger to stone and iron and gold and the bounties of the earth. Much of his history with them, as rich and eventful as it was, he'd kept a secret – out of expediency rather than any desire to hoard knowledge.

And yet throughout thousands of years and so many lifetimes of men, he had never felt such great personal guilt facing Gwaihir. His comrade. His benefactor and beneficiary. His friend.

Now the great Lord of Eagle successor of Thorondor in title and magnificence alike, had landed on the great yard before Elrond's house, as did three of his flight. There they perched themselves, and there was such sorrow and anger in their pose as nothing Gandalf had beheld of them before.

There was great uneasiness on Elrond's face and those of his children as they beheld the eagles, that Gandalf never thought he'd had to witness. The Noldor kin, even at their most wicked, had maintained the friendship of the eagles. Now those steadfast friends stood before the elven lord, eyes full of grief and indignation in equal measures. Their sharp gaze panned around the yard, at the elves, at the wizard, and at the sizable squad of dwarves fanning out in an arc centered around the elf-lord himself.

“Friend Gwaihir,” said Elrond. “This is most unexpected. What has bidden you to my humble home?”

“Unexpected indeed,” Gwaihir said, and edged closer towards the elven lord – uncomfortably so. “It is with wings and heart both turned to stone that I face you, Elrond Peredhel.”

Gandalf would not claim to understand the eagles completely: nobody can claim such perfect understanding over another sentient being, unless it was the case of a cruel master and a subservient slave. But he could make a guess, and his guesses were rarely too wrong.

A giant eagle had fallen in battle. A giant eagle that Gandalf was certain he had seen before. This
Two days ago some of my kin spotted smoke billowing to the sky from the woods surrounding Imladris,” said Gwaihir. “This I was informed but too late. When I arrived with a host of my own eyrie, my son Fainamloth had already left – eager to assist our allies and friends since Beleriand was yet ruined.”

Alas, again Gandalf was right. He wished he hadn't been.

“We found him – just hours ago in a clearing not far from here. My son, slain and defiled. His remains lay in the mud, wings severed, body pierced by so many weapons.” His beak was now in chest from Elrond's face. “Tell me, Elrond, how did this come to pass so near to your home?”

Gandalf stepped forward, his head hanging low – in respect and in shame.

“Friend Gwaihir,” he said. “That the event of today has come to pass is a great fault of mine. It is my own carelessness and arrogance that—”

His voice trailed off. Gwaihir's great neck swayed ever so slightly. He is much displeased.

“Had I come to lay blame or seek compensation, friend Mithrandir,” said the Windlord, “an apology in empty words would not have sufficed. My firstborn lies slain on the ground, his wings clipped and his remains defiled. Never again shall the wind lift him and whisper to him the infinite mercy of Manwe.”

Then Elrond stepped forward, and the quick glance they exchanged indicated he had understood, too.

“He has fallen in the endless fight against the Shadow, Gwaihir Lord of the Eagles, in a most noble way, according to the account of my champion,” he said with a bow. “For your loss I offer my deepest condolences, yet his demise was not altogether an evil thing. He had fought to protect the sanctity of our haven, for which we are in his debt as we are in yours.”

“In this moment of grief I wish not to lay blame, Elrond,” said Gwaihir. “All I want is answers. Fainamloth was among the swiftest of my kin, and in might his was greater than most. He... could have performed deeds fit for the time when the Eldar were tall and numerous and waged war against Morgoth himself! What could have slain him? What could have deprived him his future, and us of him?”

“It is a long story, friend Gwaihir,” said Gandalf, “and grows more bizarre in the telling.”

“Then tell me,” said the eagle. “Tell me what you know! For our beaks and claws hunger for vengeance, and shall give no mercy to this foulest of murderer!”

“It is a blink of an eye before everyone’s gaze was on the red-and-black butler on the sideline. Zero let his arms down, and took several steps forward, facing the eagle. As were everyone else, Zero was much dwarfed by the gathering of giant eagles. Gwaihir could have picked him up with one talon and tossed him down a cliff, and yet the chief of the giant eagles was... shying off?

“Who... is this creature?” he cried. “The smell of metal hangs about him, cruel and wicked. Why have you let such monsters in your company, Mithrandir?”

“He is a comrade who has helped immensely in Imladris' darkest hour, my old friend,” said Gandalf.
“Indeed, had we been a little more timely arriving at the scene, we could have saved your son.”

“Is he really?” said Gwaihir, eying Zero suspiciously. There was uncertainty, too, like he knew not whether to treat him with hostility or cordiality. “And... you were there at the time, Mithrandir, were you not, to speak with such certainty?”

Gandalf raised his palm. “I was, and I stand by every word of mine.”

Zero shook his head. “Well, in any case, don't you want to learn more of your child's death?” he said. “Then I have some good news. We defeated his murderer. There's not much left of the fake except two stolen blades and a pair of stolen boots burnt to a crisp.”

Gwaihir lifted one quivering talon, then lowered it back again. “And who,” said him with some difficulty, “was the foul creature, and why did you call him a fake?”

“Because he was an – was the word orc? - who was posing as someone he was not,” answered Zero. “Someone from my world that I might have known.”

“Your world?” cried Gwaihir. “Are you suggesting- are you even suggesting your kind came not from Arda?” “What drivel!”

“Friend Gwaihir, please keep your calm,” Gandalf said. “It is as I said: The tale grows more bizarre in the telling. I would not have believed it, had I not seen with my own eyes. And should my words not be enough, even Lord Elrond is willing to vouch for what I am about to say.”

“Then speak, Mithrandir,” said Gwaihir, relaxing his claws. “For many thousand years we have been friends – see it that you do not let our long friendship down.”

It took Gandalf a while to relate all that he needed to say: as much as he reckoned the Windlord was keen to hear. He told of the unexpected siege of Rivendell. Of Lord Elrond's disappearance and presumed capture by the Shadow. Of their rescue squad. Of the clash between the eagle son of Gwaihir and the machined orc that glided in the wind brandishing two blades of light that cut through steel as well as it cleaved flesh. Of how Glorfindel and Zero together brought down the monster, and, of course, how the day was won – though that last piece might not, he thought, be relevant to what Gwaihir wanted to hear.

“Now, my old friend, you might have questions aplenty – such as why I happened to Imladris in the company of dwarves, or what this man that smells of metal has to do with it. I shall try to answer what I can, but I cannot promise as much as you should like. I have been as much in the dark as you are in several matters of utmost pertinence, and such state of affairs shames me to no end.”

“Indeed your storytelling grows taller with age, Mithrandir,” said Gwaihir. “And yet so does your sincerity. I shall take your account, but not without questions.”

He turned his massive body towards Zero, and pointed his talon at the butler.

“You have not told me what you are, creature of iron and death,” said the eagle. “If it is as Mithrandir have related, that you have fought my son's murderer, then I should be in your debt – yet your very presence unnerves me overly much. What are you, and what sent you?”

“Just Zero would suffice,” said Zero. “I would describe myself a reploid, though what that word actually means... well, not that it matters a lot. As for who sent me...”

Zero's mouth opened, but for a while no words came out. When he finally spoke, Gandalf was sure those weren't what the butler initially intended. “I wish I could tell you more. Only thing I know, I
would eventually need to track that person down. I have unfinished business with him.”

Naturally, that attitude and those words didn't lend much credibility to the good fellow.

“How do you know he is trustworthy, Mithrandir?” asked Gwaihir.

Gandalf nodded firmly. “He has proven himself on more than one occasion,” said Gandalf. “And even if he hadn't, he has something we all need.”

In this he has Elrond's full agreement. Forward did the elf-lord walk, and faced the great eagle.

“The Shadow has suddenly grown stronger, Gwaihir savior of my great-grand sire Beren Erchamion,” he said. “The Enemy has ostensibly gained new power, as anyone who has had a part in the last battle can readily vouch to you.”

He made a sweeping gesture that ended at Zero. “While we are in the dark as to what such new powers are, or who brought it to the hands of the Shadow,” he said. “what little information we have had came from this man. Without him, you would have come today not to my home resilient and steadfast as it always has been, but a wretched plot of scorched earth bereft of all that my kin hold dear.”

Now Gwaihir's wings slowly lowered till their tips touched the dusty ground. At length did the eagle remain motionless. Indeed, such was the information he had just dispensed, it was rather understandable that he would be so overwhelmed.

“Gwaihir, my brother, there is truth in their words” said the second eagle in the group. Landroval was his name, and Gandalf recognized him by his namesake – two exceptionally broad wings. “We have all seen Fainamloth’s remains. No blade of mannish, orcish or even elvish make could cause wounds so terrible. If this power is indeed in the hands of the Shadow, then I fear his death is just the beginning of yet another chapter as dark as the War of Wrath upon the annals of the world.”

Then around he wheeled, and faced Zero. His large eyes narrowed considerably.

“If Mithrandir and Lord Elrond has trusted you and your tall tales so, then I have no reason not to,” said Landroval. “But that being the case, man of metal, I must ask you this: Where do you stand? Do you stand with the Shadow that wishes nothing but to ravage or destroy, or those who would stop them?”

It was meant to be a rhetorical question... and received a rhetorical answer.

“It is my job to complete my missions and defeat the enemy,” Zero answered. “That is all there is to it.”

“Is it really?” said the eagle. “That is what you say, but pretend not you have no sense of justice about you.”

“Sense of justice' is a tall order to fill.” said Zero. He was trying to mask his irritation behind a veil of stoicness – badly, Gandalf would add. “But if you mean whether I will help you fight your enemies... Have we not been through this, Gandalf? I have no intention to repeat myself that I will.”

“You have, indeed, Zero.” said Gandalf. “Friend Landroval, I have enlisted his help not on ill advise. He has his own reasons to pursue the Shadow, just as Thorin Oakenshield and his company has their own cause. Though our specific purposes may differ, as a whole we are on the same side, sharing the common goal of thwarting the Enemy.”
Gandalf noted the dirt beneath Gwaihir's feet had been ploughed and turned so thoroughly there were furrows now, criss-crossing every inch-square of that patch of ground.

“Very well, I will give you my trust this time, friend Mithrandir,” said the eagle, “and pray to Manwe Sulimo I have not committed a grave error.”

“And for that I thank you, friend Gwaihir,” said Gandalf, and he meant every word.

“Yet that begs the question. What are you planning?” thundered the eagle. “Keep no secret! I am no stranger to you and your machinations, for the greater good though they may be.”

Telling every ally from the Shire to the edge of Eriador what his original purpose was had never been Gandalf's intention. Yet he'd long lost his handle over the situation. Honesty was his only resort now.

“We are on our way to slay a dragon,” he said. “A potential ally of the shadow remains, a worm of Glaurung's brood, a vestige from the First Age who yet delivers death and misery to the free peoples of Arda. Years ago he alone laid waste to the dwarven halls of Erebor, and even as we speak dwells there atop the mountain of the dwarves' treasures.”

“You speak of Smaug, Mithrandir?” said Gwaihir. “Alas! I should have known this has been your purpose. Long has Smaug been a threat to all that flies as he is to all that walks! Had he not entrenched himself within Erebor, we would have readily confronted him.”

“And perhaps we will have to, sooner or later” added Landroval. “A live dragon would not lie complacent and contented with a single mound of treasure, no matter how large.”

And then, without bidding, Thorin Oakenshield stepped forward. He faced the giant eagle with the face and fire of the line of Durin, and spoke with a voice that thundered around the great yard.

“Well, then, Lord of Eagles, perhaps you could still assist us, as we share the same enemy!” he cried. “No dwarf shall rest while the dragon defile our old home and deprive us of our birthright, and we shall fight him in this life or the next! If only we had the power to do so – I am a king with neither throne nor army, and has to stoop to receive the hospitality of elves!”

To say the two eagle-lords were dumbfounded was an understatement. “And you are...?”

“Thorin Oakenshield, heir to the illustrious line of Durin, and by the vagaries of fortune a king uncrowned, at your service!”

“Very well, King Thorin, you try my patience,” said Gwaihir annoyedly. “Here my firstborn and heir has just been most wickedly slain, and here you are already asking for my favor! Have you no scruple or shame, dwarf?”

Landroval's reaction was more measured. “I have heard of that name, dwarrow-lord, as have my brother. For a time you were famous, for valor rather than for wealth and avarice. Had you only asked at a more opportune time you could have gotten the favor you wanted without so much as a grumble.”

Thorin's thoroughly dwarvish stubbornness was showing: now he stomped his feet, and now he clapped his hand, and his voice was so loud it could break bricks and shatter rocks.

“But this time could not be more opportune! You want revenge, o lord,” said Thorin. “And we will march to this revenge you crave, with or without your participation! The road we walk shall be paved with orc carcasses, whether it is in our heart to wish for battle or not! Why should you not take
the chance for vengeance when it is so generously offered to you, by the hands of Fate and doubtlessly by the will of the Valar no less?”

“Perhaps my companion has been a tad hasty, friend Gwaihir,” said Gandalf. “But there is truth in his words: the Enemy shall hound his every step from Imladris to Erebor, either because they have guessed our plans, or else try to doom the dwarves' attempt out of ignoble pettiness alone.”

“There's also that possibility they are after me,” said Zero. “And since I am part of their company now and answer to them, my enemy has become theirs just as their enemies are now mine.”

“Overestimate not your place!” crowed Gwaihir. “Who are you to claim the Shadow, enemy to all things fair and noble, is after you alone?”

Zero narrowed his eyes. “I never said it is the Shadow that is after me, but rather a dangerous madman with an arsenal of weapons of the sort that killed your son. This foe of mine might have attached himself to this Shadow you mentioned as we speak.”

Now it was Gwaihir's turn to flinch. He swayed his neck at Gandalf, then at Zero, then at the tall elven lord son of Earendil the Mariner.

“Does he speak the truth, Elrond?”

“It remains to be seen,” answered Elrond gravely. “But all signs seems to agree with him. We are faced with a strange foe with an even stranger agenda. It would be entirely probable Master Zero is, if not their prime target, then an important one.” He folded his arms and drew a ragged breath. “And we are in no position to deny them battle.”

For a blink of an eye Gandalf thought his old friend the great eagle had shrunken. There he stood as if on shaky ground, his wings sweeping the ground instead of raising to the sky, and his bright eyes stared upon the hard earth. Whatever storm of thoughts and emotions the eagle was experiencing, Gandalf could only guess.

“We have so much to gain in joining forces once again, old friend,” said Gandalf. “And everything to lose for not doing so.”

When his beaks finally moved, Gandalf realized, the eagle lord had taken a far weaker ground than he would ever have been comfortable with.

“Tell us what you have in mind,” Gwaihir said, unsure and bereft of pride. “And we will consider it.”

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Bilbo's foot took five days to heal. That was five days fewer than he'd expected, and five days more than he'd liked. Outside his windows, everything was blurring by. It was as if every day the Company would learn new things from their enemies, observe some new developments, or engage themselves in more preparations. Everyone but Bilbo.

Every day Zero would come in before breakfast, before lunch and at supper – briefing him of the current events. He never stayed for the food or the socializing, but Bilbo could tell there was a sort of twisted happiness in the way he go about his business. Just as the butler clad in red and black hated idleness and made a mortal enemy out of it, so was industry his best and finest ally.

For his own sake, Bilbo was in no shortage of people to talk to. There were the elven healers as curious about hobbits as he was about them. There were the occasional drop-ins, either by Thorin
(“Get well soon – we did not hire you to lie in a heap with a broken leg”), Oin (“Hmm, you sure that's a good idea? No, no, no, this is how you fix a sprain!”), Ori (“Try not to get left behind, Mr. Baggins! We need a burglar as good as you!”) or the Fili-Kili duo (who rarely spoke anything quoteworthy).

There was also Aragorn Arathornion, about whom Bilbo's verdict was that he was roughly five times the king Thorin thought he was despite being a fifth as old. Only twice did the man come to ask after Bilbo, and never for too long – claiming one kind of responsibility or another for an excuse – yet he had completely won the hobbit over with his witticism, his optimistic melancholy (oxymoron as it was), and his being kingly at the same time he was humble (again, two qualities that rarely met in a single person).

And if all else fail, there was Pallette.

Contrary to what he'd thought of the cyber-elf in the bracer, she managed to live up to her claim of being from Zero's time. She'd told him much – outlandish things, like how the Big Folks of her age reveled in building machines that could think for themselves (“I am one, and so is Zero!” she claimed cheerfully). They'd built giant tubes that connected the ground to the moon, great cities that floated in the sky and above the sky in that vast darkness where no birds flew (however that was supposed to work), and devices that allowed people to access the entire breadth and depth of human (and reploid) knowledge at a touch of a finger.

They'd created weapons, too, unspeakably horrible beyond anything Bilbo thought the sane mind was capable of: the sort that could vaporize cities and incinerate millions in seconds, leaving earth and air and water poisoned for generations to come.

The more he listened, the more Bilbo was aware X had not told him the whole story. In fact, Pallette's voice would lose her playfulness altogether when she had to relate her account of the so-called Elf War. Indeed the hubris and depravity of the Big Folks grew ever huger with every passing generation, he thought.

“I wouldn't want to live in that kind of time,” said Bilbo.

Answering him was an uncharacteristically grave voice. “No. No you wouldn't. Nobody would, human or reploid or whatever.”

And then she'd invariably cheer herself up by letting loose more details about Zero's former personal life. Even with his continuous refusal, Bilbo has still heard enough to come to the conclusion that his butler had been, one-sided or otherwise, romantically involved with no fewer than four women and possibly two men throughout his eventful life. That was, again, four women and two men more than the hobbit could have wished for himself.

“Why are you so interested in talking about the poor fellow's love life?” Bilbo said indignantly.

“Why would you not be?” Pallette said as if she'd been the injured party of the outrage, not its perpetrator.

At any rate, between the visits and the occasional peeks through the window, Bilbo was well aware theirs was no longer a small-company expedition. Though not necessarily a military campaign, this was the closest Bilbo had ever gotten to one – hopefully for his entire lifetime. The Last Homely House was gearing up for war, and Bilbo was smack in the middle of it all.

Carts rolled along the formerly elegant, narrow in-roads of Imladris, carrying crates and sacks and barrels full. Here and there, elven builders had already started working on repairing and reinforcing
fortifications. The dwarves had ostensibly joined in the effort, too, for more than a few times he'd seen one of the company – he'd recognized Balin's great white beard, Gloin's large war-axe, or Nori's roguish posture behind a laden wagon.

And then there were the giant eagles. Through the window he could see giant eagles taking off and swooping down once every so often, always with something on their backs. If he'd squint he could catch the glimpse of two extraordinarily large eagles even among their kin leading the effort.

A Bilbo Baggins of two months before would have cowered in fear and awe at the sight of such majestic creatures. After all that the Bilbo Baggins of two months later had seen, even giant eagles were no longer anything that much out of the ordinary. Giant eagles he'd heard aplenty about in songs and tales and the words of wise halflings. Tortured trolls with beam cannons embedded in their chest, or goblins whose skulls were (forcibly) embedded with rubies the size of a Big Folk's fist, armed with tubes discharging terrible pellets? That was beyond the imagination of most tale-spinners.

At last, on the morning of the fifth day, at the doorway to his room stood a tall, bushy-browed, grey-haired wizard, leaning on his thick walking-stick.

“Good morning!” cried Bilbo. The wizard had, as was his wont, arrived exactly when he was meant to and not a moment earlier or later – Bilbo's thoughts were starting to wander towards the horizon where the Lonely Mountain lay, and questions were bubbling within him that required the wizard to even attempt to answer.

“Good morning, indeed,” said Gandalf. “I hope you mean it is a morning to be good in, Bilbo Baggins, because I should like you to be able to walk again!”

Bilbo stretched his leg, and scratched on the carpet of hair on his formerly injured foot.

“Goodness, this could have gone a lot better, couldn't it?”

“It could also have gone a lot worse, as is the wont of fortune in troubling times,” said Gandalf, sitting down on the stool next to the bed. “Wish that I could have attended to you more often these days, my dear Bilbo.”

“I don't have much problem with that if at all,” said Bilbo. “You are Gandalf, and Gandalf means an important person!”

“I could only wish your observation had been less true,” said Gandalf. “Indeed, these have not been my most leisurely or relaxing of stays in Rivendell.”

“Zero has told me all about it. Well, almost all.”

He paused, waiting for Gandalf to take the cue to fill him with all the rest of the details. That he did, but not before blowing an enormous smoke-ring that floated to the tall ceiling.

“Then, I'm afraid, he has told you enough to let you know I owe you an apology.”

But of course, thought Bilbo. His butler had made an off-handed comment about how he should be expecting an apology from Gandalf at some point.

“He told me you have not revealed to me all that should have been revealed on that day we set off from my home,” said Bilbo. “Is that true, Gandalf?”

Gandalf settled his pipe on the table and looked Bilbo in the eyes.
“Alas, it is so,” he said. “‘Tis a habit of wizards to make arrangements and preparations as if the whole world were a game of elaborate chess played against the Enemy. Not infrequent have we – have I – forgotten that making pawns out of those who have faith in us would make me not quite different from the Dark Lord Sauron himself.”

Bilbo didn't see Gandalf blink even once, though his gaze was heartening and warm rather than intimidating, as was Gandalf's wont. And Bilbo? Well, Bilbo wasn't one to hold a grudge – especially if he had no reason to see it as a grudge.

“That might have been so, but no, I don't think you owe me anything of the sort,” he said with a smile. “It was you who made me the offer and set the company on me, certainly, but it was me who took it. It wasn't even that lopsided of a contract – I'm entitled to the same share of proceeds as a dwarven king. The Sackville-Bagginses would be jealous for years!”

Perhaps you should know,” Gandalf said, “Thorin has never been crowned, and I must admit there is a small part of me that wishes he never will be.”

It might be a joke, but Gandalf's tone made it quite clear: Thorin's dislike of elves of all sort wasn't going to do his own quest – or the wizard's – any favor.

Not that it had anything to do with the argument at hand. “Uncrowned, but yes, the point stands. Nobility, of another people!” said Bilbo. “Bottom line, I do miss the smial, and the hot baths, and the pantry, and all the amenities I would not be seeing any time soon – after we leave Lord Elrond's hospitality at least. But with all the things I've seen? Well, perhaps that is a small price to pay after all.”

Gandalf's lips curled into a small smile. “Your optimism astounds me, Bilbo Baggins. Why, you are even more of a Took than your late mother – Yavanna blesses her soul – and that isn't a lightly made observation.”

Bilbo scratched his scalp sheepishly. “I appreciate the sentiment, Gandalf,” he said.

Then the aforementioned Tookish side took over, quick as a breeze. He breathed in a lungful of air, and his face assumed the most business-like look he could fashion.

“I guess a more pressing question at this time is, what's our plans? Where are we going after this?” he said. “I can't fancy your initial plans haven't changed in light of... well, the last week's incidents.”

Gandalf nodded, then his face, too, turned grave and stone-like.

“An apt observation, and sadly true,” he said. “I must first ask, what did the good butler tell you?”

Bilbo spent the next few moments selecting his words, and finally settled with, “That Thorin is having a hard time working out a plan, I presume?”

Gandalf nodded. “Thorin, and the rest of us. Funny, that is.” He immediately shook again. “Thorin has been clamoring for more power to reclaim his home for a century now, and when he finally gets what seems awfully like what he might need to wage a serious effort, he's having trouble with how to use it.”

“Don't you mean the support of Lord Elrond?” Bilbo asked.

“Aye, though by no mean the only one,” said Gandalf. “You'd imagine, his wife's uncle Finrod Felagund the Cave-Hewer was both a great friend of the dwarves and an elf who never left a debt unpaid, even should his fea be rent from his flesh. Elrond is no different from his forebear in both
regards. As you have saved Lord Elrond personally while your butler his home, by proxy Elrond owes Thorin as the leader of the Company some kind of debt – and he will personally drive Smaug out of Erebor if that's what it takes to repay it.”

“Can he do that?” Bilbo said, brows creasing. Deep inside the hobbit was picturing a battle fit for so many epics: An elf-lord, mighty as the age long past, challenging a dragon to single combat... and winning.

“He can,” said Gandalf. “Underestimate not the power of the line of the house of Turgon, formerly of Gondolin.”

“Then why didn't you enlist him instead of me?” Bilbo asked. “I mean... it isn't like I didn't want to be on this quest, but you've got a friend who could have helped so well if you should only ask, don't you?”

“Simply put, Bilbo, neither myself nor Elrond are free to act as our best nature would have inclined us to. Elrond, because his responsibility is as much to his kin as it is to the fate of Middle-earth. And myself...”

Gandalf's voice trailed off. For long did he remain quiet, ostensibly to choose the most suitable word. When he finally spoke again, his voice was low and secretive. “Because I have sworn an oath most solemn and exalted to act within the bounds of certain principles – principles that precluded the use of all the power I could have had at my disposal otherwise. Besides, my power is in persuading, exhorting and encouraging, and I cannot make anyone join a quest of any sort until and unless they find it in their heart to do so.”

Bilbo's curiosity settled on why Gandalf would have sworn such a, frankly speaking, daft oath. But then he refrained from asking – if Gandalf was already so uncomfortable with his previous question, his chance of getting an answer for this one was about the same as his odds of beating Smaug in a brawl.

“But now you are fine with Lord Elrond joining us?”

“He won't truly join us – not travel with us, no, but we will have his full backing,” corrected Gandalf. “But you're right: this decision was Elrond's to make, and he is bound by debt as any honorable elf would be after the good turn the Company has done him.”

“So isn't that all settled then? Shouldn't we just head off to the Lonely Mountain with whatever we have, and deliver vengeance upon the dragon?”

“That's what we planned at first, and that's what has changed.” Gandalf said. “With all of these... machined orcs out there, suddenly the road between here and Erebor becomes far more perilous. Between Elrond, Thorin and myself, we have been putting together several plans of actions, only to scrap most of them. Unacceptable risks, especially when we are still largely in the dark about the Enemy's new capabilities.”

Now Bilbo had sat up straight facing the wizard, and put up his best analyst's visage. He rarely made such faces, not unless he was busying himself studying one sort of ancient map or deeply intellectual book or another. Only his monocle was missing, still lying in a gilded box in his study back in Bag End.

“What are our options?” he said, and hoped his voice had the kind of gravitas it should have discussing such a weighty matter. “I mean, what are the options you have not discredited yet?”
Gandalf looked at Bilbo appreciatively. “Erestor – that's Lord Elrond's advisor, and never you mind his fussiness – suggests splitting the Company into three. Makes us stand out less, and allows us to pull a fast one on the Gundabad orcs.”

Another smoke-ring left his mouth, this one tinted a flaming shade of orange-red.

“If Zero's 'hacking' plan works, at least – then we may even land a small army right in the middle of Misty Mountain with nobody any wiser. But that's a big if – even the man himself has shaky faith in his own suggestion.”

“And the eagles?” Bilbo asked hastily. “Zero did not tell me overly much, but he did mention your... being in a disagreement with them?”

“Well, disagreement is such an unkind word for a friend as noble and just as Gwaihir – that's the name of the lord of the eagles, mind you,” said Gandalf. “Elrond is trying to persuade him to ferry us all from here directly to the Lonely Mountain in exchange for either a great heirloom of his House, a favor to be repaid at a later date, or both. Gwaihir doesn't seem interested in the prospect of taking to the skies against the Shadow in this manner. Not, at any rate, as much as he used to be many lifetimes of men before when he helped save Beren and Luthien from their cruel fate in Angband.”

Bilbo was nodding, out of recognition of a household name rather than any agreement for the great eagle's newfound attitude. The tales of Beren and Luthien were a part of any well-bred Hobbit's childhood, and Bilbo's had been no exception.

“But that makes no sense, does it, Gandalf?” he said. “The eagles of those old tales were noble and sacrificing, and as much warriors against the creeping shadow as the likes of the elf-lords of the Noldor!”

“That they were, and that they still are,” said Gandalf. “It is just that my old friend has been dealt two hammer blows in one day, from neither of which he is likely to soon recover. I don't know which is more shocking to him: that his heir had been killed so easily, or that his kin can be killed so easily. No father should have to bury a child, and no king to see his kin faced with a threat beyond his ability to protect them from it.”

“You saw it happen with your own eyes, Bilbo.”

Bilbo bit his lips. He did catch a full picture of the giant eagle that day in battle with the green orc. No, it wasn't even a battle, but more like a cat playing with a mouse before biting its head clean off.

“That I did,” said the hobbit, hiding a shudder. “And worse things, down in that tunnel.”

If that strength was indicative of the Enemy's new capability, well, he'd cower too if he'd been the eagle-lord – and he'd like to think himself brave when the moment called for courage.

“Aye, Lord Elrond has already briefed me on what he'd seen. Thorin doesn't comprehend yet the weight of this matter, but that might be for the better,” said Gandalf. “It's almost despairing to imagine such power in the hands of the Enemy.”

“I wonder,” Bilbo said with a long sigh, “are all people in Zero's place so mighty they could lay low even the giant eagles?”

A bell-like voice chimed underneath Bilbo's pillow. “Good news: Not all of them. Bad news: Most of the bad guys.”

Both Bilbo and Gandalf were stun-stuck at the sudden outburst – until Bilbo caught the clue and
removed his pillow. There, underneath the white fluffy thing, was the Blade Buster X had given him, and the cyber-elf that dwelt within it.

“There! That’s better, isn't it?” said Pallette. “Not like I dislike the fluffy pillow, but I could use some air, don't you think?” She paused. “Speaking of which, you’ve got a guest, I suppose?”

Gandalf’s brows shook. His eyes caught Bilbo’s new bracer, and there was a twinkle in them. “Your bracer... speaks?”

“Long story, Gandalf, and I will tell you on the way if you would promise not to tell Zero. Or Thorin, for that matter.” Bilbo said quickly. “But let us first dispense with the introduction like gentle-hobbits, shall we? Pallette, Gandalf, wizard and master of tricks and firework extraordinaire. Gandalf, Pallette, one of Zero’s contemporaries and a... cyber-elf, whatever that is supposed to mean, but I think a ghost of one sort or another is an apt description for want of any better.”

Gandalf nodded understandingly. So far, so good.

Bilbo exhaled in relief. “I have certain doubt about the possibility of you becoming friends,” he added, “but best of luck all the same.”

Pallette hissed. “Do you have to be so mean?”

“Just a fair warning,” said Bilbo. “Anyway, Pallette's told me the wildest things about Zero's old life, and not all of them helpful or relevant.”

Pallette hissed again. “Hey, I tried my best!”

“I am sure, Miss, that Bilbo Baggins meant no malice against you,” said Gandalf, his lips curved upwards just barely visibly. “Pallette, you said? Is that your name, or the name of this arm-guard?”

“My name, thank you!” said Pallette indignantly. “I only happen to be tenanting in this ancient piece of pre-Elf-War artifact!”

“Elf War? That's a rather strange way to call the Beleriand Wars,” said Gandalf. “Or is it the Kinslaying of Alquelonde you meant?”

“Excuse me, Mr. Beardy, I did mean the Elf War. Not sure what's this Bereriando or Arukeronde thing you mentioned.”

Gandalf stared at Bilbo. The hobbit only shrugged rather triumphantly. “As I said. Zero's contemporary. I suggest discussing anything but history lessons.”

“Speaking of which,” Pallette cooed, “I'm a repository on Zero's sultry former life, if you would only ask~”

Bilbo planted his hands firmly on his waist. *Oh no you don't.*

“I don't think, Pallette, a list of women who may or may not have been romantically involved with the good fellow is of any use to a wizard as important as Gandalf, or a quest as important as Thorin’s.”

Gandalf raised his brows – amusedly rather than annoyedly. “And as much as my curiosity has been piqued, I am inclined to agree.”

Pallette made a muffled huffing sound. “You two are killjoys, you know that, right?” she said. “Well,
then what would help?"

“If you are at all willing, we could start with a reasonable critique of Zero's 'hacking our way into Misty Mountain' idea.” Gandalf said. “And, if you should so incline, anything to placate the giant eagles would help. It is scantly the fault of my good friend Gwaihir lord of the eagle to have been as griefstricken and intimidated as he is.”

“Hmm... You know what, Mr. Beardy?” Pallette said with a little too much enthusiasm in her voice. “I might have something good to tell you about that if you'd care to listen.”

“Then tell me,” said Gandalf with a surprising amount of calm. Bilbo's eyes did catch another blink-and-miss instance of his raising his brows, this time genuinely out of annoyance.

“Alright, alright, where do I even start?” Pallette said, and the bracer rumbled in Gandalf's hands. “Point number one, Zero can totally do that hacking. I've seen him done it not half a year ago – flawlessly given the occasion, and before that still he'd got plenty of experience with bashing his way through the cyber-world. Point number two, if my... sources are correct, the bad guys know this and may already be taking precautions as we speak.”

“Are you suggesting it isn't worth the risk?”

“Depends. What are the prize we're talking about here?”

“Having our quest cut down by roughly a third, and an excellent opportunity to remove the enemy from Misty Mountains for good.” Gandalf said. “If it succeeds,” he added.

“Then it's totally worth it,” Pallette shot immediately.

“How so?”

“Because, have I told you if Zero had set up his mind to do something he's about as likely to give up as it is to snow in summer?” She paused. “Actually, pardon me; poor analogy. Climate's changing all the time. Point still stand though.”

Now Gandalf's attention was completely focused, staring at the bracer without a blink. “What do you suggest we can do to increase his chances?”

“Me,” came the one-word answer.

“You, miss? What can you do to help, pardon my bluntness?”

“I'll have you know I was a Navigator back in the day,” Pallette said, voice ringing with so much pride. “As in, monitoring missions, pointing out flaws in enemy systems and defenses, painting big red crosses on alternate routes and secret passages, that's what I did. And since 'hacking' is essentially transmitting yourself into the Cyber-world and beat the ever-loving snot out of any cyber-defense in their way? Yeah, that's the sort of mission I used to help them take care of, all the time.”

“And how do you intend to do that?”

“Simple!” said Pallette. “Just bring this arm piece of mine to the Trans-Server when Zero does his thing. I'm pretty sure my old boss has this device equipped with a jack-in cable or a wireless port. The rest is up to me.”

Then her voice all of a sudden sank into a whisper. “Just... you know, whatever you do, keep me out of Zero's sight or earshot. He's not supposed to know I'm around at all. Helping from the shadow and
all, that's my job.”

“That would be... difficult,” he said. “As Lord Elrond has already hinted to him of your existence.”

Bilbo heard a gasp. “Uh, Mr. Beardy?” said Pallette. “I'm sure I sound like I'm joking, but I really am not. He isn't supposed to-”

Gandalf turned the bracer over. “In case you haven't noticed, Miss, I was not as surprised as I could have been, meeting you,” he said. “That is evidence enough I am not joking.”

There was a soft whimper emitting from the bracer as it stopped moving. “Oh. Shoot.”

Bilbo could easily picture Pallette going blanche, if she'd been a living person.

“Though Master Zero doesn't seem to pay any overly great attention to your name, if it is of any relief. That perplexed Lord Elrond more than it should have.” He paused a little. “I'm sorry for your predicament.”

Not that it placated Pallette a lot. “Oh. Oh no. Oh no. Oh no.” she mumbled. “This is bad. This is terribad.”

“Please do calm, Miss. I am certain you are overreacting. Our good friend Zero has proven to be an amicable sort – he wouldn't lay a finger on you even if-”

“No. You don't understand.” Pallette said. “He is supposed to find out as little about his past as we – that is, Bilbo and me – can help it! And... and I am part of that past, and-”

Gandalf looked at the bracer for long. “Indeed, you are right,” he finally admitted. “I do not understand what you mean.”

“I guess a little explanation is in order, Gandalf,” said Bilbo. “Thank you, Pallette. I'll be taking over from here.”

While the girl in the bracer took her time calming down, Bilbo went on relaying her stories to Gandalf. He tried to be brief and concise, and made an earnest attempt not to obfuscate too much in his eagerness for story-telling.

Ten minutes passed, and he was pretty sure he'd ingrained in Gandalf's mind the image of Zero's world as one of magic on par with Valinor during the height of the Two Trees' light, of craft that would make Feanor Curufinwe jealous, and of the sort of violence and savagery that Morgoth would delight in. At least he got the main point across: That Zero was a hero of that world as much as Lord Elrond was to elves, Durin the Deathless (whose name was related to him, with all due ceremony, that one time Thorin visited his sick bed) was to dwarves, Elendil (ditto Aragorn, who was also ostensibly descended from his line) was to men, and Bulroarer Took was to hobbits.

“He'd lived out the majority of his life being a weapon of war, and was disturbingly good at it,” Bilbo concluded. “That is why his benefactor thought his predicament in our world might be a good chance for him to turn over a new leaf. Some... memory manipulation might have been used, I believe.”

“Memory manipulation?” said Gandalf, dread welling in his voice. “That is a craft most foul!”

“Well, not... entirely foul. At least the intention was not, I think,” said Bilbo, not sure whether he should make up his mind one way or another. “This benefactor wishes only to remove all clues connecting Zero to his old world. Hoping that at some point he'd give up trying to go back.”
“That sounds rather ill-advised,” said Gandalf. “And you, miss? Are you saying you are a part of this too?”

The bracer stopped twitching. “Please,” said Pallette, “I would have no part of this misadventure until X pulled me out of retirement and stuffed me into this, as I said, artifact.”

“This X person does sound like a most unpleasant fellow, doesn't he?”

“I do not believe that is the case,” said Bilbo. “I've spoken to him at length. He seems a good man, albeit very... wearied and desperate.”

“Then you'd pardon me for reserving some modicum of suspicion,” said Gandalf. “Well, seeing that as you mean well, Miss Pallette, I can promise you that your... identity shall not be further compromised by myself. But should the need arise, I must apologize beforehand for putting the interest of the many before that of the few, and dispense of this information as is prudent.”

“I'll try to make it so that point-of-no-return doesn't happen, in that case,” said Pallette. “Geez, what have I done to deserve this?”

“I suppose trying to gossip about my butler's former love life at every turn has something to do with it,” said Bilbo, and he could not deny himself the luxury of a chuckle. The bracer rumbled angrily, but Pallette herself made no more objection.

“Alright, you win, I accept,” said the cyber-elf. Then again the bracer jerked in Gandalf’s arms. “Anyway, where were we?”

“Ah, yes, I was hoping if you could share some thoughts on the Lord of the Eagles,” said Gandalf. “Do you have any thoughts on exhorting his spirit, so low had it sunken?”

“Now that would be troublesome,” Pallette said. “Sorry to say, the moment Zero got himself dragged to your world, your 'eagles' have already lost the air superiority battle. Badly.”

“How so?” asked Gandalf, and Bilbo could see his ring-finger going stiff.

“To put things into perspective: In our world, aerial weapons are made with blowing up stuff made of metal in mind. What chance does creatures of flesh and blood stand against, say, rockets capable of leveling entire building blocks in one shot? Or giant beam cannons meant to be used against floating cities? Or autocannons spitting out a per-minute bullet count upward of five digits?”

She paused, as if giving time for the words to sink in. “And lest you think dodging projectiles are easy when you're flying, let me remind you: Heat-seeking warheads and radar targeting systems exist and have made life a lot easier for us Navigators. You should try getting acquainted with them sometimes – hopefully not on the receiving end.” There was a certain kind of pride in her voice – not completely unfathomable, though rather not helpful. “Heck, I could have shot down my fair share of enemy air force back in those days when I still had my handgun, and that gun wasn't even military-issue!”

Gandalf’s face was losing color faster than a head of cabbage overcooked with too much water. “You can't possibly mean every enemy who take to the sky we'll have to face will be like a dragon?” he said gravely.

Pallette's voice was almost triumphant. “Haven't seen any live dragon in my life, can't comment too much. But you know what? From what I know of mythical dragons, that might be less an analogy and more an understatement!”
The last time Bilbo felt so faint in the knee was the first mention of 'furnace with wings' in his own home. “How should we fight such... creatures if they show up?” he cried.

“Well, I know as a former law-enforcement officer who should be all about preventing the proliferation of deadly force I'm not supposed to say this, but arms race might be a good place to start.” said Pallette. “Except please do call it 'getting stronger' from now on. My former boss would give me no end of earfuls for suggesting all-out war.”

Bilbo refused to be placated. “Isn't knowing about such tribulations going to make the Lord of Eagles even less inclined to help us?”

Gandalf laid a hand on the hobbit's shoulder.

“In the capacity Lord Elrond wishes, yes,” he said. “In some other ways, not quite. Regardless of the actual weaponry the enemy has, the giant eagles are still superb allies to have if we ever have to take to the skies. Not to mention, my old friend Gwaihir has a personal stake in this now,” his voice was torn between sorrowful and excited. “You do not murder the son of the mightiest eagle to glide the winds since Thorondor and walk away. All we need to do is persuade him that his kin aren't completely outmatched in this battle, and honor will bind him to act accordingly.”

Pallette sniffed. “Is this the part where I have to tell you people how not to have this Eagle-lord fellow kill himself on an anti-ship rocket or something?”

“Actually, that would be prudent,” said Gandalf. “If I wanted to protect the great eagles in battle against enemies from Master Zero's world, what would you suggest?”

“Hmm, plenty,” said Pallette. “The usual things the Maverick Hunter training facility used to teach recruits still apply. Avoid glowing things, doubly so if that glowing thing is pointed at your direction. Keep your eyes about you. Never stop moving.” The bracer quivered in Gandalf's hands. “Oh, and the most important one: Everything that lives and moves has a weakpoint somewhere. I'm not sure about how strong your eagle friends are, but poking at a glassy bulb underneath a giant mechaniloid a few times with a pair of sharp talons would go a long way bringing it down.”

Gandalf raised his brows. “Is there anything else you'd be willing to share that can be more helpful?”

“You're in luck, because there are,” said Pallette. “I used to run my own R&D shop back in the day: rare metal bits were in real demand that time, and my colleagues and I could make the most fanciful things out of the stuff a broken mechaniloid would yield. Pretty sure if you could give me some material I might still be able to cook something up for these eagle friends of yours. They wouldn't object to an upgrade or two, I presume?”

“We'll see,” said Gandalf, “but if proven trustworthy, they should have no qualms against tools that would help them survive against a stronger Enemy.”

“You were making things in your previous life?” cried Bilbo. “You never told me about that!”

“You never asked,” said Pallette nonchalantly as Bilbo grumbled. “Anyway, that might take a while to set up, I understand. Specialized equipment if that's at all available, and if not some needs to be made to order, and then I'd also need some crafty people who'd follow instructions without asking too many questions.”

“If it becomes absolutely necessary, I would pass the word to Lord Elrond,” said Gandalf. “He would be keen to help, especially if it has to do with making artful craft. 'Tis in the blood of the Noldor to treasure such makes.”
“Oh, and there's this thing too you might want to know,” Pallette continued. “I spied the other day with my little eye a... you call him a dwarf, right? Who inherited a certain fly-type battle reploid's powers. Such power has to come in somewhere, don't you agree?”

Bilbo looked up at Gandalf. “Wasn't that Dwalin?”

“Balin's brother! I'm rather sure that's the fellow,” said the wizard, his great beard shaking. “Indeed it was a tremendous feat he pulled off the other day, and an equally tremendous folly on my part – I'd had too much in mind to sit down with him for the interview he deserves!”

Not being there to actually observe the deed, Bilbo did hear a lot of whispers and hearsays from the rest of the Company. Ori claimed Dwalin had had Mahal's gift bestowed upon him for his bravery and steadfast loyalty. Dori said something to the effect of “he lost some limbs and gained some new ones”. Kili and Fili's accounts were by far the most trustworthy, but there were still plenty of gaps between “putting Dwalin on that contraption” and “he flew off laying waste to everything.” Zero, as expected, refused to indulge in any speculation or theorycrafting whatsoever.

Perhaps he'd have to ask either Balin (as a brother to the dwarf in question he should know best) or Thorin himself (as Dwalin was sure to have told him everything out of loyalty to his prince and cousin.)

Or, more conveniently, ask Pallette herself. Which he promptly did. “What do you think happened to him?”

“He received an upgrade,” said the voice nonchalantly. “Now I'm sure you don't want me to bore you out by the details. All you need to know is he's inherited more than a fair share of power that used to belong to one of the best battle reploids in the 23rd century AD whose name does not begin with 'Ze' and end with 'ro'. Though...”

Bilbo thought her voice trailed off right there. It wasn't only him who noticed, however. “Is there something you'd like to tell us concerning our dwarven friend?”

“Yes, actually,” said Pallette. “Getting himself a shiny coat of armament is one thing. Using it properly is another matter entirely.”

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The green-clad dwarf counted his footsteps, silently and in the secretive mother tongue of his.

For a while now Dwalin had been pacing around in a clearing just outside the walls of Imladris. It was honestly easier to slip off than it was to entertain himself during the wait: impatience was ever a tough beast to rein in. The hour seemed like a century, and though his new metal limbs felt little in the way of weariness, his brain and heart were flesh and blood still, as was most of the skin on his face. Who could have known the nights in Rivendell could have been so cold away from the warm fires?

His counting was supposed to help him keep his mind off unhappy, unpleasant and unproductive thoughts. It just wasn't successful enough. Part of Dwalin was resenting the lack of accolade piled upon him after the spectacular victory he had single-handedly won for the Company and their ragtag coalition. Well, single-handed would be a bit of a shameless overstatement, but he was doubtlessly a prime contributor.

Thankfully it was a small part. Rather less thankfully, the larger part of him was concerned more about how he was now invariably grafted into the green panoply of his. Beneath his green greaves
and left green arm, there was literally nothing left of the stone flesh he was born into the world with. 
A sentient suit of armor that was as much of himself as his own blood and bone sounded like the 
stuff of epic... until it actually happened to him.

Kili and Fili (more or less only the latter) were the only one in the company who had any 
understanding of the state of his body. The rest of the company would find out soon – presumably 
after they’d set out from the hospitality of Rivendell, and Dwalin dreaded the kind of look they might 
give him understanding that. True, the dwarves have a fine tradition of treating with utmost respect 
and courtesy to those who’d lost arms and legs in a battle in the name of their people, yet it was a fine 
line between respect and pity.

No, he could do without that, Dwalin thought. After all, who needed arms and legs made of flesh 
and bones, so vulnerable and so inconvenient to a warrior, when you could have good metal, 
vibrantly painted and tough as if come from the forge of Mahal Himself?

He was a warrior. He was blessed with a chance to be an even greater warrior, who could dominate 
his foes no matter how fierce and fearsome from the crest of the wind. Now, if only he could make 
better use of the blessing.

And that was precisely why he’d stolen away when no fellow dwarves or annoying elves were 
watching. At first he thought he could use his brother by his side, or failing that his cousin and king. 
But then he’d put his foot down and said no to himself. Whatever he was going to do, whatever he 
was planning, it was better that he did it away from the prying eyes of the rest of the Company. After 
he’d reached some sort of concrete result, it wouldn’t be too late to let them know.

At long last his ears caught the distinct flapping of two giant wings. It was a veritable gale from 
above, growing louder and more intense as a large silhouette in the sky descended into the clearing.

Good to know that the giant eagles, like all noble peoples on beautiful Arda, kept their promises, 
thought Dwalin as he raised his arm and hailed the figure above.

Now the gale about him grew even more intense, and his feet were trembling. An eagle, large as a 
massive statue of his forebears and majestic as the North wind, had landed before him. Before such a 
figure, it was impossible not to feel diminished. Even more so when he had a favor he wanted –
needed to ask for.

“Lord Landroval,” he said, bowing respectfully. He was going to say something more polite, but 
then for want of solid understanding of eagle culture (“Behold! The giant eagles are a race most 
ancient and noble, and long have they fought in defense of the Free Peoples against the darkness of 
now Angband and now Mordor,” Gandalf had briefed the lot of them) Dwalin thought he’d go with 
something simpler and more sincere. He settled with, “I am grateful, m’lord, for heeding my request 
and granting me this audience.”

A little too humble in hindsight, but then by all rights Landroval was a prince among eagles, and that 
meant he outranked the dwarf as far as the nobility pecking order was concerned.

The broad-winged eagle walked forward – rather clumsily, Dwalin noted – until he was within a few 
feet of the dwarf.

“I have come as you have requested, dwarrow,” said the eagle, for indeed he was Landroval, greatest 
of the Eagles of the North second only to his brother Gwaihir. “What may I do for you?”

Now Dwalin was dismayed to find his courage faltering. It was one thing to consider asking a giant 
eagle a favor, and another entirely different thing to actually do it.
Finally, something deep within him rekindled a forge-fire in his heart: the desire of a dwarf to defend first his home, then his honor, and to regain both if lost. Forward he stepped, and dropped to one knee before the giant eagle. He looked even smaller and insignificant before the noble creature, but aside he brushed his fear.

“My lord, I wish to be taught in the art of striding in the skies, to where the sun sails and the moon walks.”

At once he felt a pair of enormous eyes burning a hole through him.

“Pardon me if I heard you wrong. “You wish to learn... to fly? I certainly hope you aren't joking – for I have no time for such drivel.”

“Certainly not!” cried Dwalin. “I swear to all my forebears and Mahal Himself, that I meant no falsehood or disrespect.”

The eagle's look mellowed a little at his show of sincerity, but his voice did not. “No offense, my dwarrow, but even your maker Aule the Smith did not intend for your kind to fly. You have neither wings nor beak, your arms and legs are rugged and heavy... and most importantly even had you wings your mind would wander to your caves and mines and hall under the ground, not the openness of the skies and the wind on your face. How could I, even if I wanted, teach you how to do that which you are not meant for?”

“That is indeed the case with everyone of my kin, Lord Landroval, but myself alone. I have been given a... a gift, from a warrior who can no longer use it. And I am not in full command of this most precious of boons.”

Dwalin had never found himself more humble, or more eloquent.

And then said eloquence melted away. “I can fly,” he said, “just... not particularly well, m'lord.”

At least, his statement drew the eagle's attention. “Surely you are jesting – and yet... no, you aren't. You wouldn't look me in the eyes like you are if you were.”

“I can show you, m'lord.”

The eagle leaned closer to Dwalin, then withdrew his head. “Then let me see this flying of yours, dwarrow of Aule's making,” he challenged.

Dwalin bowed respectfully, and then stepped out into the open.

Everything he had learnt from the green warrior in the dream flooded back into his mind. He gritted his teeth, and clenched his fist, and stomped hard on the ground. He emptied his mind as best as he could, and replaced it with thoughts of the skies. Not an abstract concept of the air, the winds and the clouds, but a logical visualization of the space around him – what went where and where was which, and which was the best flight course to reach any given point in the open sky.

Then rang out a voice in his head that may or may not have been his own. “Clear for take-off,” it said, and that was his cue. A pair of metal wings unfolded from the back of his breastplate. The tubes attached to them each began to flare out, and there was roaring gale in the air.

Then two jets of green flame erupted from the two tubes' ends.

Up went Dwalin into the air like a verdant arrow. Within the space of several seconds he was already two hundred feet above the ground. Then he spun around, scrutinized the ground beneath him, and
again shot back down, a dwarf-sized meteorite.

When he was but twenty feet away from a terrible crash, the flame jets instantly reversed themselves. The effect was apparent and immediate: Dwalin was now floating rather than falling, and resembled more a falling leaf than a dropped boulder. He landed on his two feet light as a feather.

The rest of his body, however, was aching. His dwarven weight plus that of his panoply was doing him no favor. Taking off and landing was only fun when he was watching some birds do it, not try it himself. But he bit his lips and weathered the pain, and bowed to the eagle as ceremoniously as he could manage.

Not that the eagle was aware of all that struggle. “Interesting, dwarrow. Very interesting indeed,” said the eagle-lord. “I wonder, where could you have gotten such a precious gift?”

“I was unconscious at the time, m’lord, and received it as much to honor the fallen warrior’s memory as to save my own life. Would that I knew more of it.” Dwalin said. “I can only vouch that the warrior who bestowed me this gift is one with honor, and only wished me well in doing so.”

“I see,” said Landroval. “A dwarrow who can take to the sky... truly this is a rare thing I am beholding. And as such a gift deserves someone who knows how to use it to proper ends, perhaps it is just appropriate that you have come to me as you did.”

“Will you teach me, then, m’lord?” Dwalin asked eagerly.

“I wish to, aye, but alas – that does not mean I can do so as well as you deserve,” said Landroval. “It is not an easy thing in the first place, teaching even an eaglet to fly. You understand, even for a nestling born in an eyrie aloft there is a natural tendency to fall, as even an eaglet is not born without weight. There are rules of nature that Eru All-Father and the Valar have instated, that not even we are exempt from. I can be a teacher, but perhaps not a perfect one, if that should be fine with you.”

“That might be all I need, m’lord. I can take off and land just fine,” said Dwalin. “I wish only to do so with the grace of your kind – so I may outfly our foes and do so without...”

His voice fell sheepishly. “...without crushing my limbs under my own weight.”

At about the same time his face betrayed the mildest of grimaces. He presumed none of that escaped an eagle’s gaze.

And indeed it had not. “Ah, but of course,” said the eagle-lord sympathetically. “The sky and wind can be treacherous to those who does not know them well. My own child asked as much of me when she was but an eaglet, and my answer was thus: Trust the wind, and the strength of your own wing-span.”

His head swayed just a little from right to left and back again. “But that wouldn’t be so helpful an advice when given to a dwarrow rather than an eagle, would it?”

Dwalin had to admit as much. “So, m’lord, how would an eagle trust the wind?”

“The way we fly, the wind is supposed to be an intimate friend, and you treat it as such. You do not quarrel against the wind, you follow it. You do not fight it, but make use of it. And you don’t just take from it, but give back as much as your wings may.”

Dwalin was pretty sure none of that made any sense. Not in dwarven terms, at least. “I would much appreciate an example, m’lord,” he said, “if you would grant it.”
“That I would, dwarrow,” said Landroval. “Watch.”

Then his wings spread, and his head held aloft. With a lift and a nible flat of the wings, the great eagle took off. The wind was under his wings, above his wings, and all about it, and elevated him above the clearing. In turn, a great gust fanned out below him, and Dwalin was very nearly blown away, at once both covering his face and understanding what 'taking from and giving back to the wind' was supposed to mean.

The image he saw then would forever be burnt into his mind: The giant eagle floating in the air, gliding amidst the wind effortlessly, as though his wings were sails and the skies an endless ocean.

It wasn't going to be the last lesson Dwalin would take, and not by any means the most useful.

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Chapter End Notes

1) For those FAMILIAR with the Megaman universe:
- I’ve had to (in my mind) alter the design of Harpuia's armor when it was given to Dwalin. Specifically, back-mounted wings and wing boosters have been added - first because it looks more badass that way, and second because it makes (a little) more aerodynamic sense that a creature as thick and bulky as a dwarf would need wings to support flying.

- On the weapons and armor circa 22XX that Pallette mentions: Some are explicitly present in canon (namely the anti-colony Enigma and Ragnarok, or radars and tracking tools), some others are only implied and/or are part of the ubiquitous enemy armament (like heat-seeking missiles and autocannons). And some I made up entirely, such as the mention of nukes, because there is no logical reason that the Megaman universe does not harness nuclear power and/or weapons in one form or another, being a continuation of the modern world of ours at any rate (the complete absence of nukes in canon might be due to Japan's nuclear taboo, I think).

2) For those NOT familiar with the Megaman universe:
- In her original, Megaman X8 incarnation, Pallette is two things: A navigator who specializes in finding "backdoors" and hidden passages/goodies (as opposed to her colleagues Layer and Alia, whose specializes in identifying boss patterns, and in nothing in particular respectively), and the go-to character for purchasable upgrades using rare metals as currency. Both will be well-represented here, once I get around to them.

- Shipping notes re:Zero: For a series largely bereft of actual romance, Zero has been shipped with pretty much everyone of import regardless of gender. In chronological order, the fandom has shipped him with: X, Iris (canon), Axl, Layer (semi-canon), possibly Marino (from Command Mission), Ciel (pretty much canon), and Leviathan (one-sided, from Levi's side). That's not counting some really out-of-the-way elements, like Omega Zero/Nightmare Zero (which is pretty much selfcest), Sage Harpuia and Lumine. For a while it was as if Iris was meant to be Zero's canonical beau... and then MMZ happened, boasting a Ciel who completely blows Iris out of the water as both a person and a character. I guess there's something to be said about reploid ladies digging
badasses.

3) Legendarium note:
- Concerning eagles: I have said that I really don't like majestic and mystical creatures noble and mighty in their own rights being treated as merely some sort of war beasts by the good guys, and I'm inclined to think the good Professor would have agreed. That's why I am writing them like I did: If you take the eagles to be not a race of non-sentient beasts but a nation of proud individuals with their own thoughts and will, then it follows that Gwaihir is basically a KING, and should be treated accordingly by both the narrative and the characters.

By the same logic Gandalf can't really summon the eagles and in particular not Gwaihir. He doesn't and can't summon kings, he does not wield such powers and I think would not use it even if he had it. He only persuades them to do what he believes is in the best interest of the world and its denizens, that's what he does.

- On Gwaihir's family tree: Gwaihir has one canonical brother, Landroval (broad-wing), who, as you have seen, will play a key role in this plot of mine. The eagle who died several chapter back is an OC and has a name now: Fainamloth (White-Crest). I considered using Meneldor (the last named eagle in LotR) for that purpose, but then decided against it for several reasons that will become apparent in the chapters to come.

- The parallel between Elrond and Finrod intensifies. No other way sounds righter to my ears: They are both THE anti-thesis to the "arrogant, holier-than-thou, enemy-to-dwarves-for-no-real-reason elves" trope that Tolkien never quite meant to take off as much as it did. In the same way, it's just right that the tale of Beren and Luthien be mentioned occasionally, because, in this alt. universe, the morals of friendship, love and oath-keeping of that tale rings true.
Chapter Notes

It's been, what, four months? Five? The last quarter of 2017 was not, so to speak, a good time for me or my creativity. At any rate, a big "sorry!" for those who's been watching this work - though I have every reason to keep my words back then: I have quite a few plans for this story.

That aside, enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 18

Ghosts of Conflicts Yet-To-Come

A stiff draft funneled through so many cracks in the cavern walls.

Bolg son of Azog was making his way through yet another section of grimy cavern and rickety railing. His upturned nose sniffed, his remaining ear swayed.

Down, down to Goblin Town, sang the many goblins the orc-lord saw along the way. Some were carting off loot into whatever cracks and crevices in the rock. Others were dragging along prisoners – feckless men who they'd caught by surprise in the dead of night, who'd surrendered without a fight and now were doomed by their cowardice to slavery unto death. Still others gathered around in groups large and small, and passed the time doing whatever that caught their fancy, instead of working, training, or out capturing more prisoners.

Bolg scrunched his nose. The Great Goblin's horde had never been known for being orderly or hygienic, or even efficient.

Normally he would pay no heed to the disorderly slum known simply as Goblin Town – yet in his new armor of solid iron and steel it was entirely suspect whether the cavern platform could comfortably support his weight any more.

The great orc took careful steps, telling himself that if the Great Goblin – the wad of meat and fat he was – could travel those platforms suspended over the abyss below, there was no reason he couldn't.

Besides, the armor now grafted into his old body was capable of so much more than any other orc could boast. He could now cling onto solid vertical rock and climb up faster than an orc bearing the sort of weight he had on his shoulders had any right to, for instance. To say nothing of the face that silly elf made when his gleaming sword just bounced off his armored chest like a toy. And that scream of his as Bolg literally plucked the coward's head off with his pincer-like new arm.

Priceless. Utterly priceless, and he had the Glass Man to thank for that – as daft it was for an orc to ever be grateful to a man caged in glass and steel.

And besides besides, he was certain at some point Glass Man would become an enemy to be put
down. Trust nobody, not even other orcs, that was how his kind had survived everything the world had thrown at them throughout the last three ages.

As he stepped down to the last layer of platforms, however, the air of general disorder and chaos above suddenly vanished. Bolg raised a brow – barely visible, covered by the helmet as it was.

There, questionable railings were out, and solid scaffoldings of iron and steel were in. Good iron and steel, Bolg noted, as they gleamed uncomfortably under the light of torches, like so many elf-made weapons designed to slaughter his kind. A network of blinking bulbs flashed underneath his feet and above his head, their blush lights mixing with the yellow-gold flamed flickering atop so many torch sconces. The cavern section ahead had been apparently carved now, and looked almost dwarvishly symmetric. Lightless bulbs, bits and pieces of colorful cables, and a collection of new tools littered those parts of that cavern where work had not been finished.

Change had come to Goblin Town, one tunnel at a time. Again, thanks (or no thanks) to Glass Man. And the Necromancer who'd deemed it wise to work with the enigma... for now.

The other orcs and goblins might question why the Necromancer – or Lord Sauron, as that was who he actually was – would bother. Some of his brethren kept questioning, too, even as they were dragged off to have metal bits forcibly grafted into their bodies. They'd only stop when their brains were replaced by that large gem-like crystal that glowed and blinked so eerily at friends and foes alike.

But Bolg understood. Now they no longer questioned. Now they'd work to a common plan, a common vision. Now they'd be a better tool to realize Lord Sauron's designs.

That design was order.

Order for His realm, order for Eriador, order for Middle Earth and Arda as a whole. Order, in His image. A continuation of Lord Melkor's most holy work, in defiance of the unholy elves and their false Valar gods.

So when all of a sudden Glass Man came and offered a hand to his Lord Sauron to that exact end, much more efficiently than any of his servants before ever could, why would he not say yes? Why would he not welcome the crotchety old man into his fold with open arms (and a threat or two, as was his wont)? Why would He not make allowance to this man who'd brought to His side crafts and skills that would make the Noldor's craft look like rusty forgeries?

Besides, it was not like it was all bad for His faithful orcs and goblins.

Bolg sniffed as he walked across the now well-chiseled cavern. That part, previously at the deepest end of the Misty Mountain, so close to where things so dark and frightening slept, had now been carved into a veritable underground palace: spacious, smooth and otherworldly.

So many blinking buttons everywhere. The goblins now running along the tunnel were no longer the unwashed rabble at the upper levels: they were either very, very well-dressed by goblin standards, clad in what could have passed for mockeries of robes, or otherwise were grafted goblins whose very metallic skins were clothes.

The armored orc-lord's mechanical claw-hand reached out for the nearest button. A section of the cave wall split open – stone withdrawing into a fitting sheath with a crunch.

Now Bolg found himself standing at one end of a lavishly decorated hallway (by goblin standard) with a troupe of overhauled goblin guards at the opposite. His glaring eyes inspected the goblins.
They didn't flinch or tremble as he entered. The huge emerald crystals embedded in their skulls might be the reason. *Good.*

“My Lord Bolg,” said one of the guards with that mechanical drawl.

“I come to see the Great Goblin,” said Bolg, waving around his pincer arm in a habitual show of force.

It was, of course, an unnecessary gesture. With this new breed of goblins, you'd either be authorized and they'd let you in, or you'd not be, and they won't. Intimidation, flattery, trickery... none was going to work. In this case, on this particular day, Bolg actually *was* expected, and the goblins reacted accordingly: with a bow and a press of the appropriate wall-button that split open the wall section behind them.

As Bolg had thought: Order. Just the way Lord Sauron would like.

The rumbling harrumph from the Great Goblin's throat could be heard a mile away. Bolg folded his arm as he walked through the opening, trying hard not to laugh at his old *acquaintance’s* habitual show of force.

There, at the opposite end of the newly-hewn throne room, sat the Great Meatbag – *Goblin*, Bolg corrected himself. All being told, the coward had been doing pretty well for himself: sitting on a mound of treasures and trophies, attended by numerous other goblins, and inspecting yet another bunch of fancy toys no doubt from the Glass Man's own forge.

The Great Goblin's hands left the vicinity of the panel of buttons and levers attached to his throne. Bolg raised his furry brows: that bit of fancy accessories hadn't been there the last time he was down here.

Now the Great Goblin stares down at Bolg, clapping his pudgy hands

“Friend Bolg son of Azog!” he said. “What an occasion. I was wondering when you would show up!”

“Oh, look at that!” sneered Bolg. “*Formalities*. I suppose all these *luxuries* have made you *elf-like*. More than you usually were.”

“Not elf-like,” said the Great Goblin. “I'd prefer the terms *orderly*, and *to a greater purpose*. Like you do.”

“Hmph,” was all that Bolg had to say to that. At least the coward knew how to pay lip-service.

“Why, friend Bolg, you don't look too *happy*, do you? Guess that last battle might have something to do with it, no?”

The bestial side of the orc-lord was screaming within.

“Indeed,” Bolg said. “While *my* orcs fight and die like true warrior against our most hated enemy, what were you and your precious goblins doing, huh? Hanging out in your caves, snagging a prisoner or two, and growing fat on the fruits that Glass Man brought you – to be used in service of Lord Sauron rather for your own comfort?!”

His voice was low, and the raspy tones of the Black Speech seemed even harsher on the ears.

“Such feverish words, friend Bolg. I would have you know my goblins were... not unhurt in this
disaster. Surely you've heard—"

Bolg spat. “What, some incompetent goblins getting killed by a silly hobbit and an elf breaking out of prison?” he shouted. “Lord Sauron should have had them all executed for their failures! And you, too, for failing to supervise them!”

“Again, harsh words, harsh words,” said the Great Goblin, eying one of his attendants. The unfortunate goblin immediately stood up, shuffled to Bolg’s side, kneeled down, and began wiping the bile away with his loincloth.

Bolg ignored the pitiful servant. He took another step towards the throne.

“Our numbers may be great,” he drawled. “but that does not mean we can throw away orcish lives – our brethren's lives – with reckless abandon!”

“Now, now,” the Great Goblin said, rubbing his meaty hands. “What if I told you, all of this losses we took had been useful to our Master in some way?”

Bolg clenched his mechanical claw. “How so?”

“Data gathering.”

The sound of Common Speech in the air was almost painful to hear, and very nearly made Bolg fire up his arsenal. It was the voice of the enemy, or so he’s been brought up for his whole life. A few months ago the very sound of those syllables at home would have been unthinkable.

But a few months ago such extensive refurbishments of these caverns would have been equally unthinkable, too.

Both had one thing in common: The man currently standing against a doorway, previously hidden, just behind the throne. The so-called Glass Man.

What was so special about him? Bolg had often asked himself such lately. Then he’d answer his own question: Everything.

He was no more a man than Bolg was a Noldo: a mockery. He had no limbs any more, unless one would count iron claws and soles, nor had he a torso. Whether there was any more flesh and blood underneath that great blinking iron box encasing his body, Bolg couldn’t tell. Even his head looked much like that of a desiccated corpse: a shriveling skull-like countenance contained in a glass tank, suspended in a pale green liquid bubbling with every breath.

Perhaps that was why he was here, in the company of orcs – to round off a congregation of perverted copies of what had been. What could have been.

The only orc-like thing in him – and indeed the thing that counted the most – was his very soul, reflected in his blood-red eyes that flickered with extreme disdain and hatred at just about everything. It was the kind of glare that would make Bolg’s black blood run cold in its veins.

And then there was that cockiness exuding all about him, that just ticked Bolg the wrong way no matter how unliving he seemed.

“Use words we can understand, old fool,” Bolg snarled.

The Glass Man snapped his finger. At once a powerful shock coursed through the orc’s body. The real Bolg, the flesh-and blood part of him, shuddered and would have buckled over, had his metallic
support not propped him up.

“Come now, my good orc,” said Glass Man. “Have I not discussed the goodly value of patience enough? Worked quite like a charm for me at any rate...”

“Explain,” Bolg growled.

“But of course – I was getting to that exciting part when your orcly impatience took over!” said Glass Man with a sneer. “Now, where was I? Oh, right! I was talking about data gathering, which, in language your simple minds can understand, means getting to know your enemies – how they fight, how they travel, how they organize themselves – so as to take appropriate measures.”

“And that has to do with my brethren dying like animals?”

“That, my good friend, can't be helped. Sacrifices are to be made to bait your enemies into revealing themselves. Their strengths, their weaknesses, condensed into pure data format.”

The Great Goblin shuddered. “And what have you found out?” he said, cringing at Bolg's predicament.

“Much,” said the Glass Man. “Several terabytes of data to be analyzed, after which I could tell you in very great detail...” He threw a mocking glance at Bolg. “Though if you're impatient enough to ask at this stage? Let's just say I've devised quite a few ways to hit these elves where it hurts the most.”

Bolg bit his parched lips.

To be fair, the Glass Man did have a leg to stand on. When was the last time his kind got so close to the wretched Imladris, much less deliver the Noldor such a blow? His grandfather's grandfather's time? Or the time of his grandfather? If the tribal lore-weaver's words were of any indication, it took them hundreds of brave warriors just to lay a hand on Elrond Half-elven's wife – and it was an ambush rather than a fair battle.

Fast forward a dozen generations, and there he was, Bolg, son of Azog, who'd claim to have quite honorably pushed the elves to the very brink of destruction with fire and orc-steel. And for that he'd have to thank the Glass Man, much as he'd never willingly admit it.

The Glass Man stared at Bolg for a second. Made the orc feel strangely uncomfortable; as if everything he was thinking was being read like a parchment.

The desiccated head in the glass cage nodded. “Besides, there is this matter of the creature in red armor who's been tagging along with the dwarves... Do you not want to know more about him?” He stressed every syllable. “He's more dangerous than anything you have known in your pathetically uneventful life.”

Bolg very nearly leaped at the Glass Man.

“You-”

“Why, your temper's got the better of you again, my dear friend.” said Glass Man, flicking his iron thumb playfully.

An electrocution hit the orc before he could move a limb, and made sure he couldn't for all of ten seconds. Don't try it, was the clear message.

The Glass Man looked at Bolg, steepling his fingers. “And for your information, I meant every word
I said. That creature; Zero is his name – he'd been in more battles than ten generations of your entire family if indeed that is a thing in orkish society. I should like you not to face him in battle. Because he can and will murder you in a heartbeat, and you're no use to me or your Great Leader dead.”

Bolg gritted his teeth. “Is he also the one who killed Blugbagkh?”

Rage filled the orc's every word. Blugbagkh the swift, was what his tribe's called the poor fellow. Fast on his feet, handy with a knife, as brutal as a hungry wolf and about twice as strong – the quintessential orc. He'd been so proud when the Glass Man approached him with the offer of an advanced armor that would have let him fly and devastate even the wretched eagle. Which he had.

And then he was killed. Honorably, according to the reports from the survivors.

“That would be the doing of the one they call Glorfindel – nice swordplay, that fellow, I should like to get a sample of his DNA.”

“You said he would have been invincible,” Bolg growled. Most other orcs would have found it enviable to fight to the death the reincarnation of one of Gondolin's finest, but that was little solace to this one orc who'd lost an oath-brother.

“He would have been,” said the Glass Man, “had Zero not been part of the equation.”

“And what exactly is this 'Zero'?”

“Many, many things,” said the Glass Man. “In the shortest number of words: a war god.” His tone sounded quite like grudging respect. “Be thankful he'd now lost most of his weapons he'd had with him at his peak. Otherwise all the orcs in this world wouldn't be enough to stand half a chance.”

“Exaggeration won't get you anywhere in our company, old man,” said Bolg between his ragged breaths.

“Wish I were,” said Glass Man. “Saw that sword of his? The Z-saber, that's what it's called. In the two hundred years between his birth and today that thing alone had altogether taken more lives than there are lives in your pathetic backward world.”

“Makes no difference,” said Bolg. “I shall delight in ripping him limb from limb and sticking his head atop a pike!”

“My dear, dear orc,” said Glass Man. “Which part of ‘I should like you not to face him in battle’ do you not get? More's the pity I can't siphon off your stupidity and convert it into energy crystals.”

“Well, then,” said the Great Goblin. Bolg wasn't sure if the pudgy filth was being exasperated, or amused, or a strange mix of both. “What would you, so very smart that you are surely, like us to do?”

“Fool!” Bolg exclaimed. “We don't take order from the Glass Man! We have one master only, who resides still in Dol Guldur till Mordor beckons once more!”

Surprisingly, this time Bolg's outburst did not earn him an electrocution. “My dear friend, the goblin-lord here asks only for an advice. And advice, why, I've learnt to be generous with them.”

The visage in the glass tank twitched. “You need more equipment, and I've got just the right thing to sell you.”

He turned about, iron hands clasped behind his iron back. “If you please, Great Goblin, turn on the
main screen.”

The Great Goblin scratched the back of his head. “Uh... which button is it again?”

Glass Man's mechanical claw reached for that part of his glass cage behind which his shrunken forehead was.

“Third on the first row, on the left. Under your elbow.”

The instruction wasn't clear enough – or rather it was too clear, because the Great Goblin spent the next minute fumbling with the rows and columns of colorful buttons etched into his new throne's armrest.

One click conjured a mechanical arm bearing a mug of steamy brew and splashed it all over his face.

The next caused the floor on the right and left of the throne to fold over – luckily there were no unfortunate goblins that happened to be standing right on the spot.

The next click set off a blaring, deafening alarm as the room was flooded with red light, that the oh-so-Great-Goblin could only turn off after several unsuccessful clicking, pushing and pulling attempts.

“Please. Trigger the self-destruct mechanism while you are at it. I implore you.”

And there was that half-amusement, half-exasperation undertone again. It had only been the third time he'd met the Glass Man in person, and the exchange of snide remarks overt and covert had already gotten tiring.

Finally the Great Goblin got smart for once. His long, thick finger flipped over a mechanism hidden directly underneath his armpit. At once the ceiling responded: part of the rock split, and a box-like object jutted outwards from above the gap. A beam of intense light flickered towards the opposite end of the room. Pictures formed on the wall – moving pictures.

Now the Glass Man rubbed his metallic hands, heedless of the screeching noise they made. So much anger, thought Bolg. Encouraging.

“Very well then, my friends... it's story time.” He tossed a glance at the projection, then back at the two orcs “Let me tell you of what happened that day when I died... and how we can do it better this time around.”

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The trans-server.

Part of Zero still couldn't believe his eyes. It had only been little less than half a year since the last time he'd seen one, yet it seemed to him like an existence away.

Even the background was so familiar. There he was, standing in a chamber flooded to his ankle, surrounded by rubble and the stench of old rotted things (in spite of the elves having made all the effort to clean up the goblin mess), and attended by a short, stout person he was meant to protect.

The difference was that this time Zero was surrounded by a much larger crowd than he was used to working with. There was Kili and Fili on his left and right, the latter with an unsheathed elf-sword (“It detects orcs”, the dwarf had said). There was Oin and Gloin behind him, axe and knives on the ready, as if goblins and orcs could pop up any second now. There was Balin a little further, gleefully smoking tobacco – pipeweed, Zero reminded himself – from his large curved pipe.
The fussy-looking elf by the name of Erestor was keeping his distance from the device, scrunching his nose from the stench. The helpful Man wearing a thin stubble was staring blinklessly at the machine, looking a tad more curious than a chieftain should be (“Aragorn, son of Arathorn, a Ranger of the North and the Chieftain of my people the Dunedain,” he had introduced himself.)

“Well, here we are,” said Bilbo, walking around the device. Zero's eyes caught a tiny shiver in his gait – either his ankle hadn't fully healed yet, or the very sight of the trans-server was unnerving him after all he'd seen.

“Aye,” said Kili. “Took Dwalin down here, we did.”

“Not coming along, the sneaky chap?” asked Gloin.

“Busy with business of his own,” said Balin, shaking his head. “Been helping Lord Landroval with something, last I heard. Thorin approved.”

“That's not like him at all,” said Oin. “Always the first to leap into the unknown, he is.”

“I wouldn't blame him.” said Fili. “This... artifact – that what we call it? It unnerves me.”

He shuddered and gestured towards the trans-server.

Zero nodded and approached the machine, signaling the rest of the crowd to give him some space.

“It's really nothing frightening,” he added.

Fili was rather quick to obey while Gloin struggled to inch just that bit closer to the object. Meanwhile the man and elf, naturally taller than the dwarven crowd, could afford to hang back and just look.

Zero ignored the eyes on him. Perhaps it was the deja vu filling him: it might be another world he was on, yet the machine’s design hadn't changed at all.

There was the teleportation control, cyber-world access and system map, all accessible at a touch of the finger. There was the automatic safety railing and adjustable central platform for convenience's sake. There was also that slot for downloading and feeding cyber-elves, welded shut and rendered inoperable – a blessing in disguise. He'd loathe to have to explain to flesh and blood elves what exactly that compartment was supposed to do, and what that business implied for those involved.

Then he lowered the railing, and stepped onto the central platform – just like the old days.

“You're stepping into that thing?” cried Erestor. “Is it safe?”

“Unless it's been tampered with,” said Zero. “Quite sure it hasn't been, but you might want to keep your distance just to be safe.”

A moot point, since the elf was standing the furthest away from the device. It would take a giant mechaniloid exploding before he should worry about his skin.

“Ah, well, then, I'll just stand right here and leave you to your work,” he said. “Oh, and do recall Lord Elrond's counsel: we aren't going anywhere today, no jumping inside Misty Mountain, or summoning the horde of goblins within, or...”

“I heard that,” said Zero. “I do understand what a recon mission means, thank you very much. Now for the sake of the mission...”
Immediately Zero’s fingers started to work. With just the right combination of buttons, the machine hummed to life: the railing rose and locked into place as a faint halo flared up around the platform. And yet the noise of the machine was almost completely drowned out by the choir of ohs and ahs from the dwarves, elf, man and hobbit.

“Fascinating. Truly fascinating,” said Erestor. “Now, what can this... object probably do aside from blinking like so many candles?”

“One second,” said Zero, his fingers rapid-firing inputs on the screen. “I'll see if I can access its network function...”

In a few seconds’ time the chorus grew even louder: Zero had just summoned a holographic system map that filled the space above the machine.

What he’d got on hand was a green wire-frame image, covering the topography seemingly across the length and breadth of Middle-Earth, with helpful dots denoting where trans-server terminals lay, color-coded according to their status: red for inactive, green for active and accessible.

The number and layout of the dots was both worrying and encouraging: whatever the enemy had been up to, they'd wasted no time covering the entire country with trans-server access. Which meant the enemy could theoretically be everywhere and anywhere across the land, but so could Thorin’s company and the elves.

“Is... is that green...frame...floating... thing... an illusion? A mirage? A-a-a phantom ?” exclaimed Fili with a very un-regal tremble. “Is-is it safe to touch?”

Zero lifted his lips in a smirk. “You can try,” he said. He tapped a combination of buttons, which zoomed the map out and panned it about.

“What is it?” exclaimed Gloin. He was just about to try poking at the hologram with the pointy end of his axe when Bilbo's hand fell on his shoulder excitedly.

“It is a map. A map, I say!” said the hobbit. “It is a map that displays height and depth! How novel!” his tiny, thick fingers started pointing all over the wire-frame. “Look, this is the road we've been traveling over the last month! Which means this dot right here is Rivendell! Why, that's just like those maps of mine, except better! So much better!”

Erestor said nothing, but the corner of Zero's eyes did catch him mouthing off something in his Elven tongue that he hoped meant ‘fascinating’. Aragorn nodded at the hobbit, before his eyes were scanning the map, probably taking note of places and landmarks in the same way Bilbo was, albeit with far less fuss and fanfare.

Now Bilbo's stubby feet carried him all the way around the hologram, pointing and hollering like a child. He stopped somewhere on the opposite side of the room, where the wire-frame had leveled into a plain-like surface.

“My, my, that's the Brandywine! That's Bree!” he cried. “And... Good gracious! Yavanna willing, is that Bag End I can see from here?”

Zero had been listening – with a certain degree of amusement – to Bilbo's outburst... until he heard the very last part.

“Bag End?” he murmured.

And just at that moment, his eyes widened in horror.
Bilbo was right. There was where his home (probably) was, in the hilly country of the Shire in all of its wire-frame grandeur. And there, underneath a certain hill...

There was another trans-server lying dormant.

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Chapter End Notes

1) For those FAMILIAR with the Megaman universe:
   - Weil's appearance differ in quite a way from how he looks in-game. Simply put, being caught in a colony explosion and then having to "hide himself while he repairs himself" (or in this case, weld whatever is left of him into a machine) would do a number on everyone's good looks...
   
   - What does the Trans-server even do? I'm extrapolating a bit from the in-game functionalities, where it acts as a teleporter, an elf-feeding-station, and a place to report missions. As such, I suppose accessing a trans-server console would allow perusal of the trans-server network and any maps thereof - thus the gigantic holographic map Zero conjured (though that one is more inspired by X's Third Armor helmet functionality than anything from MMZ).

2) For those NOT familiar with the Megaman universe:
   - Not much here today - the explanations about the trans-server is simple enough to understand that (I hope) you need no extensive MMX/MMZ knowledge to grasp.

3) Legendarium note:
   - Concerning orcs and orc society: Tolkien has never truly fleshed out orc-societies, at least not to the same extent as later fantasy writers do. It is even a debate within the fandom *what* orcs truly are, with the two main hypotheses (to my knowledge) being "orcs are elves corrupted by torture and vile things" and "orcs are Morgoth's failed attempts at making elves". I tend to gravitate towards the latter.

   It is also worth noting that Tolkien's orcs aren't really supposed to be, again, the later fantasy writers' "strong, brutish, barbaric yet honorable warrior folks". They're more like the traditional rendition of goblins: cowardly, cruel, vindictive, torture-happy and terribly lazy if they can get away with it; and are supposed to be far less sympathetic than, say, the Southrons or Easterlings. This is perhaps the part I'll diverge the most from the Professor's canon for the sake of telling a good story - a villain without any redeeming value is, ultimately, one-dimensional and rather boring.

   What I will do is to apply *how* the orcs as a society would or should work - they are a band of wild people who exist for no reason except to destroy (as per canon) and survive. As such, they would naturally value such qualities or virtues as would help them excel in that existence: strength and daring (got to have that in a community full of weaklings and cowards otherwise), the ability to work in semi-organized team (again, it's a harsh wilderness out there), and an almost satirical desire for order of all things
(which I shall explain below).
- On the orc's (Namely, Bolg's) desire for order: One lesser-known fact about Sauron as a villain, is that he wasn't meant to be a Dracula, and he wasn't meant to be a Joker. In fact, his pre-seduction-by-Morgoth incarnation was a Maia for ORDER, and one can argue the very reason he fell so low is that he loved order too much. Or, alternately, he might just be the Middle Earth incarnation of a control freak - that works too.

While the rank-and-file orcs may not necessarily know this, I think a good case can be made that those orcs in leadership position may - and it's then a matter of their own intellect whether they buy that "ideal" or not. I've kinda sorta characterized Bolg as a somewhat-typical barbarian warchief, meaning he buys it; while I make the Great Goblin the natural extension of Peter Jackson's characterization of him, meaning he kinda sorta... doesn't.
It must have been several lifetimes of man since Gandalf had last been so restless.

The warmth of Lord Elrond's hearth offered little to soothe his mind – nor did the copious amount of pipeweed he'd been consuming since the sun went down. The flame crackled in the draft; the wizard's smoke-rings rose to the ceiling, confused and disturbed.

His company was a worried one: Bilbo to the left staring at the flame like it contained every truth worth knowing, taking a puff every so often from his short pipe. The dwarf-lord was to his right, and opposite to him sat his two nephews and loyal cousin Balin. Behind Bilbo, the red-clad enigma stood, arms folded, as motionless as a statue of bronze.

Once every so often Thorin would rub his feet against the flooring, poised to rise and speak, only to stop and sit back down. Frustration flickered in his eyes: that Gandalf could sympathize. They'd all sought him out for a solution, not for him to just sit there blowing smoke-rings saying nothing.

“What would you do now, my lord Thorin?”

Gandalf couldn't recall if he'd ever made a less helpful question.

“Well, that's why we've got a wizard among us!” said Thorin. “Just so you're aware, friend Gandalf, my company's path is set. We are merely... wondering if you have other ideas. Which of course we'd take into consideration...”

His voice trailed off. Gandalf could almost hear him mouthing off, 'because without you this expedition might as well be doomed to fail'.

But the wizard would rather not answer that question just yet. “And you, Bilbo Baggins?”

“You could stay right here, Master Baggins. Wait till we've made heads or tails out of that dormant trans-server,” said Zero. “Even if you return to Bag End right now, if an army of goblin's coming that way you aren't going to be of much help.” He paused. “No offense meant.”

“No offense taken,” said Bilbo. Gandalf nodded ruefully: it was many generations since the Shire had last been blessed with a Bullroarer Took, and it might well be many more before another would be born.

There was just that tingling anxiety in his eyes that grew more intense by the minute. “Though if there's something I can do—”

“Bilbo Baggins,” said Gandalf, “You shall not return to a burnt-down home ravaged by wanton destruction if I can help it. I give you a wizard's word – meant to be kept.”
“In that case I should like to follow Master Thorin to wherever course he deem suitable,” he said after much consideration. “I've signed a contract. Nothing else need be said.”

Gandalf raised his bushy brows just a little. The hobbit-folks, simple yet steadfast as they were in their ways, had never quite failed to usher in hope where the wizard could find little cause for rejoice. Such times as these.

“If you would excuse me, then, Thorin Oakenshield, I shall be staying right here for just one more day.”

“Just one more day?”

“Just as a wizard is never late or early,” said Gandalf, “he should only leave exactly when he is meant to.”

The Thorin he'd known would have demanded to leave at once, with or without the wizard himself. But the Thorin before him today, well, he was gazing at his feet as keenly as Gandalf was. The events of the past few days had taken a toll on the dwarf’s sense of what was real and what was not.

For long he measured his words, and when he finally got around to his grandstanding speech-crafting again, deliberation was thick in his voice.

“Tomorrow morning,” he said, “is as good a time to leave as any we've got. So leave I shall, and leave we shall, with or without you.” His voice was hard, but miraculously neither hateful nor ironic. Not as much as Gandalf feared, at least. “Unbelievable as it is, the elves have been... kind enough, so to speak, to show us some shortcuts we can take towards the foothills of the Misty Mountain at least – further, if Nori's map-reading is to be trusted.”

His determination did leave something to be wondered about. “Why tomorrow morning, my lord?” asked Gandalf.

Thorin rolled his eyes. “Do I have to answer?”

“I'd rather you do,” said Gandalf. “If it's merely because of your aversion to the company of elves...”

“Everything I do, I do for the sake of friends, family and my kingdom,” said Thorin. “That is everything, I am afraid, that you need to know.”

“What about the hacking plan?” asked Bilbo. “We've seen what that machine – that Trans-server – can do in the right hands. Surely we can-”

“My good burglar,” said Thorin. “I would be more inclined to trust the strength of my axe-arms and my companions' expertise than a piece of oversized toy nobody except your butler can tinker with.”

“This wasn't what you said yesterday,” said Bilbo incredulously. “You didn't object to the plan at all!”

“Exactly,” said Thorin. “I've said nothing on this matter before. Now I have, and my decision is final, such as it is. Would you fault a leader – a king no less, to take his time on a matter of such import?”

Bilbo's eyes widened and widened and widened. For a moment Gandalf was worried the good hobbit would say something incredibly offensive or incredibly inflammatory – or both.
He'd underestimated Bilbo's civility. “Gracious me,” the hobbit merely said after disproportionately much deliberation. “Unbelievable.”

“You should like to get used to it, I'm afraid,” said Thorin. “Now, my good burglar, what shall it be? Would you stand by the Company, or would you like to do your own thing?”

“Unnecessary question, my good lord,” said Bilbo. “Have I... not said I shall follow the course you've chosen?”

This proclamation, Gandalf noted, was uttered with far less conviction and faith than the one the hobbit had just made just minutes ago.

“Then pack up,” said Thorin. “We shall away, as is our wont, ere break of day lest the elves get any funny ideas.”

“They shall not stop you, my good dwarf, if that is indeed your heart's desire,” said Gandalf.

*Though*, thought the wizard with no small indignation, *I wish they would.*

***

“Something's the matter, Thorin?”

It was with those words that Thorin was roused from his slumber. No, it was not quite a slumber, more like a coma, as if induced by a virulent fever.

“What time is it?” he murmured. “Is it yet time to leave?”

“Nay,” said Balin – for it really was him, white long beard and sagacious gesturing, pipe in hand and a strangely focused look in his eyes. “But you have been tossing and turning, and a nightmare is hardly a good way before a long journey.”

“A nightmare.” Thorin rubbed his forehead. “I wish that had been the case.”

“Then what was it?” asked Balin.

Thorin did not answer, but instead looked around him.

His Company, his band of plotters, were still hanging about the lounge Elrond had granted them. Most were asleep, slouched over their bags and packs, or leaning against one another. Ori, Dori and Nori were huddled in a bunch. Oin and Gloin slept standing next to their weapons. Bofur and Bifur were apparently having a snoring contest. Bombur wasn't around – Thorin supposed he'd taken another of those frequent visits to the outhouse.

All in all they looked less like a Company now, and more like a group of miners trapped in a shaft waiting for rescue.

The hobbit and his butler were nowhere to be found, though for now Thorin would take his promise to rejoin at dawn for it. *And he would*, Thorin thought uneasily. Throughout that first leg of the quest, his loyalty and daring was nothing less than stellar – more so for someone who had never truly embarked on something so grand as this adventure of theirs.

His eyes fell upon his two nephews. The cheerfulness had long vanished from their faces: Kili's sleeping face was contorted in worry, while Fili looked like he'd went to sleep half-frightened by an unknown horror. He recalled the discussion he'd had with them just after that meeting with Gandalf.
Saying they hadn't objected to his decision was about as true as saying a Were-worm of the Furthest East was of the same species as a garden snake: correct, but only on a technicality.

Also Dwalin was still absent on questionable leave. Thorin was inclined to think his new armor had driven him insane somehow. “Is Dwalin back yet?” he asked absentmindedly.

“Just,” said Balin. “He took off again shortly before you woke. Said he will be back in time for our departure.”

“He’d better,” said Thorin. “I hope I won't have to regret giving him as much leave to act on his own as I have.”

“You know us, good cousin. Dwalin is many things, but ill-disciplined or irresponsible he is not.”

“He isn’t.”

Thorin nodded, and drew a breath stiff as his own back.

“Balin,” he suddenly said. “What do you make of all this?”

Balin set his pipe down. “All this?”

“All this that has transpired over the last week.” said Thorin. “I should have asked you earlier, cousin, but hadn't. Accept my apology.”

In fact, it was more like he hadn't dared. Ever since that last battle and Dwalin’s transformation, he'd thought it was a good idea to leave Balin well alone. The idea that his brother had come back from a battle with his limbs shuffled out for cold steel, as much a blessing as it was from a combat standpoint, wasn't something Thorin would wish on anyone, much less a relative.

“Never you mind,” said Balin. “If you meant Dwalin, well, there's nothing to worry about overly much. He is happy with his new... appendages, far more than those our mother have birthed him with. And I, well, I can't argue. His late Majesty would have for a moment considered parting with the Arkenstone to have arms and armor as fine as Dwalin's.”

Balin drew an uneasy breath. “Perhaps we'd have been better off with such arms and armor as heirloom of the line of Durin,” he said with a measured voice. “Would have kept the dragon away. Or killed it outright.”

Normally Thorin would have found that line of thought disrespectful – if not outright treasonous. This time around, all he could manage was a dry chuckle and a nod.

“That is good to hear,” said Thorin. His attempt to sound halfway detached (as he thought that was how a king was supposed to carry himself) was not very successful, if Balin's understanding nod was of any indication.

“But if you meant everything else, well,” said Balin. “Pardon my frankness, good cousin, I can't help but think it entirely foolhardy to carry out according to our old plan. The situation has long changed too much.”

“Would you rather have the whims of fate carry this quest instead? The future of our kingdom? Or let the elves do it for us?”

Thorin's words horrified him. They were far less angry, far less forceful, far less... authoritative than he should have liked.
Uncertainty, that was what it was. That was why he'd had trouble making up his mind over the better half of the last two weeks. That was exactly what he was dreaming just now: a blank void, as empty as his grasp over the company's very predicament.

That was exactly what he had wanted to fight by putting his foot down and calling for decisive action.

And he'd lost. Uncertainty was welling up from deep within him, and at once Thorin clenched his jaws shut. Fearing, perhaps, that another word would unleash his anxiousness like a flood for all to behold.

Again, Balin nodded sympathetically, and Thorin's blood ran cold.

“There is no shame in accepting the unknown and proceeding cautiously, good cousin, just as there is every regret in rushing into it and suffer the consequences.” he shook his head ruefully. “Our line has seen enough of poor decisions, has it not?”

Once again, such was the reality plain for all to see but nobody had dared admit. Thorin sighed – part of him could not help but see how his grandfather and father's tragedies had stemmed from poor decisions before anything else.

And just like they did, he would turn away from such lessons. Proud, indeed, were Durin's folks, for good or ill.

“It's too late to back out now,” said Thorin.

“We can work out a middle ground, surely,” said Balin, “that doesn't involve trekking over the Misty Mountain with Mahal-know how many of these armored goblins wielding thunder-tubes are crawling through it as we speak. Besides, there's the matter of that Trans-server... thing.”

Thorin's rage – or what he thought would pass for one – was far less decisive than he'd have liked. “You're buying that 'hacking' tale the butler weaved too?” he growled.

Balin nodded. “It has a possibility of cutting our journey by that much,” he said.

Thorin raised a brow. “What if it fails? We would have wasted time for nothing waiting.”

Balin lowered his brows. “What if it succeeds? We would have wasted time for nothing leaving.”

Thorin sat down, leaning against his pack. Suddenly he felt an intense craving for pipeweed – some good one. There was none on hand, so instead he resorted to closing his eyes for a good, long while while a mild headache coursed through his skull.

“Let's hear your middle ground,” he finally said, rubbing his temple.

***

Bilbo's early retirement to bed – with much huffing and annoyance – gave Zero some alone time. Some alone-time he'd been desperate to avoid, at any rate. Alone-time meant questions unanswerable. Or worse, vision of things that had been or were yet to come. Both were equally frightening.

Even not counting those perennial questions plaguing Zero's existence ever since he emerged out from a glass capsule in a certain run-down laboratory upwards of two centuries ago, or the regret over things he had done, had not done or may or may not have done, the very state of this world
he'd found himself in posed way too many puzzles.

The most pertinent one at the moment was, unquestionably, “Who'd been littering the world with so many trans-servers?” *Silly question, that's definitely Weil's doing.*

But how? *Darned if I know*.

It wasn't easy to put a trans-server console anywhere. The process would require much investment in both material and energy if not cyber-elves, even with the technology level of the 23rd century AD. For the people of this era with their swords and spears and non-mechanized agriculture? Next to impossible.

And now one had popped up, as it happened, within the Shire. Either Weil had sneaked in a construction team and built one when and where nobody was looking (a silly proposition), or this world's so-called magic had, well, *magicked* the thing into existence, again when and where nobody was looking (an arguably even sillier proposition).

It didn't matter how. What mattered was that the blasted thing was *there*, and for as long as it existed the trans-server access was an existential danger to the peace-loving folks of the Shire. The whole place would last about as long as it would take him to fully charge his buster... and nobody had so far come up with a proper solution in one way or another.

There was something he could do, surely?

Well, there was. He could hack into the network, as he promised, and see if he could open a direct path to the Shire – see if everything was still the way they were, and try to defend it if he'd arrived not too late. He'd done it before and in a direr circumstance (the exact detail of which had, unfortunately, gone the way of the dodo), and was about to do it anyway albeit to a different destination.

But then there was the possibility that Dr. Weil and whoever was abetting him... didn't know about that Trans-server, didn't care about it, or couldn't open a link to it. If he'd linked the Shire Trans-server to the network, that meant giving the enemy access to the Shire, too, and draw a big red target on the whole place to boot.

Ignoring it meant there was a *chance* everything was fine and nothing was wrong to begin it. But what if – what if something *was* already going wrong, and he had the power to stop it, *and* didn't do anything because of his hesitation?

*So, what shall it be, hero?*

He could almost hear Weil's sneering voice calling out for him, armed with biting sarcasm and self-important superiority.

*I'm no hero. Just a thing made to do battle without questions. And do it very well.*

Zero heard a huff. *But of what use is a machine of battle who cannot – would not – fight for peace and justice?*

That's a simple one.

*Exist. Follow orders. Destroy enemies.*

The night wind sneered around the red reploid like a hundred laughing voices.
Then it is a wretched existence indeed.

To which, truly, he had no answer.

Perhaps it is.

Zero sat down on a chair next to a window.

Perhaps it really is.

I don't care all that much nowadays. Zero closed his eyes, and tried hard not to think just for a moment. And that is the end of that.

What came next was a brief moment of clarity.

It was decided. He would not do it, not on his own volition. If Bilbo Baggins willed it, he would take the trip back to the Shire and see what he could do – but only if it was meant to be a mission. If not, he'd resume the protection of the hobbit's person until circumstance dictated otherwise.

Then he opened his eyes, and drew in a deep breath.

There, underneath, Rivendell's great waterfall was cutting through the landscape, foaming and bubbling all the way. All over there was the chirping birds and singing breeze, like a choir of nature made with the express purpose of soothing the weary and healing the scarred.

All was quiet. All was peaceful.

Zero smiled. It was amazing how Elrond's Last Homely House could ease the mind much like a seasoned psychiatrist despite obviously having none in the way of modern medical degrees.

He could certainly live in a place like this, unmarred by war and destruction and those who wished to enslave their lesser. If he could bring that person with him, with her hair flowing gold and brown, that ever-optimistic smile, that unfaltering belief in the eventuality of peace between humans and reploids... well, life would be good.

But then, accepting the fact that he was Zero meant also accepting the unfortunate corollary that life would never be good.

Besides, she is dead. I killed her. There's no coming back.

He looked ruefully down the waterfall. Rivendell, pretty and soothing as it was, was just that – a short rest. Besides, he'd given himself a mission, and missions were meant to be completed.

Perhaps he should thank Thorin some time for his determination to keep going.

This rest had gone on long enough.

***

While it was true that Bilbo had retired to his warm bed just as Zero noted, the hobbit wasn't, in fact, sleeping. Though decidedly not for want of trying.

“Hey, hey, hey, hey! Asleep already?”

He'd been around the Cyber-elf-in-the-armband for the better part of the last two weeks. Her propensity for rousing his annoyance had never failed to amaze him.
“Not yet,” Bilbo said grudgingly. “No thanks to you, my dearest lady.”

“Ah, good,” said Pallette. “Whew. This is boring. And tiring. And annoying.”

The girl had been mouthing off like an elven sentinel with a longbow would loose arrows for the better part of the night, in spite of any protest from the hobbit’s part.

Apparently her introduction to Lord Elrond’s craftsman company hadn’t gone over very well. Bilbo wasn’t there – only Gandalf was – and didn’t know exactly what entailed, but from Pallette’s tantrum it seemed they just gave her a shrug and a ‘come back when we can find something that requires your talent’. “Without giving me half a chance!” she’d exclaimed.

“You poor dear,” said Bilbo boredly.

Somehow that sounded funnier than it should when Bilbo tried speaking in the iconic Lobelia Sackville-Baggins voice: patronizing, pompous and wannabe-upper-class.

*Lobelia, huh?*

All of a sudden once his humor soured, and anxiety set back in. Otho and Lobelia certainly were no fine hobbit gentry, but they were still *family* in a sense. And if he was to take Zero’s warning at face value, the Sackville-Bagginses were in as much danger as the rest of the Shire if the madman behind this debacle would spot that conveniently-placed trans-server.

No, more like ‘when’, Bilbo thought in horror.

“So, miss—” he said, his voice taking a turn for the grave. “How easy do you think restarting a dormant trans-server would be?”

The armband rumbled. “As are all things technological, partner,” said Pallette, “that depends almost entirely on circumstances—”

Bilbo was adamant. “But on average? With someone like Zero’s arch-enemy – whatever his name is?”

“Dr. Weil, and I’d rather you not forget it,” said Pallette. “Anyway, if he’s got access to everything he used to have? Five minutes. Ten if he’s spending time publicly executing the poor technician who’d keyed in the input twenty milliseconds too slow.”

Bilbo swallowed hard. “I wonder why he hasn’t...” Or if he hasn’t...

“Oh, you mean that trans-server off the network under your house?” said Pallette. “Probably because he doesn’t have the resources any more. Or he doesn’t know it’s there. Or he doesn’t care. I don’t know, I’m not a mad scientist with a desire for total subjugation of reploids and humans.” She giggled. “Or maybe I am and just don’t know it yet?”

“Truly, the Shire bows before your supreme sense of humor,” said Bilbo with a huff.

“Thank you.”

Awkward silence ensued. Or, Bilbo supposed, it was awkward on the cyber-elf’s end – she must have expected him to react in any way other than silence. Took her no time to break the quiet.

“Uh, I mean... don’t worry yourself sick. If Dr. Weil really wanted the Shire to go up in flames, it would have by now.”
“We haven't been exactly in the Shire for a month now,” reminded Bilbo. “Anything could have happened!”

“And? The place has either been burnt to the ground as we speak, or it hasn't. If it has, there’s nothing you can do. If it hasn’t, well, you heard Zero. Still nothing you can do.”

More awkward silence. This time Bilbo's mind was racing to so many uncomfortable places to really react. His thoughts first went to his cousins: Dora, Drogo, Dudo, Posco, Falco and Odo to name just a few, and of course Otho and Lobelia. Then he thought of his neighbor Hamfast – a young chap helpful in spite of some grouchy moments who would never agree to an adventure even if it held him in the neck. Then there was the rest of the Shire-folks he could name on top of his mind: the Bolger and the Brandybucks, the Boffins and the Proudfoots (Proud feet, Bilbo reminded himself), the Burrows and the Goodbodies, and the multitude of those folks down the road whose name he hardly knew.

His thought flashed to Bag End, consumed by a flame from within as if smoked by a dragon.

His overimagination crossed over to reality. In his mind the flame was fanning out, like a torrent so great and unrelenting. Everything was burning, and broken, and shattered, and dead. For a second he thought he could almost hear the screaming, feel the burning flame, smell the charred wood and smoldering remains, and see absolutely everything and anything he'd known and love consumed by the sadistic whim of one madman whose face he didn't even know.

Bilbo had thought hearing of his (possible) fate facing the dragon Smaug was already bad enough. He'd thought wrong – in five seconds flat he could feel his throat contracting. His vision blurred, and his temples rang like a bell.

It was a testament to his newly-discovered strength that he didn't keel over unconscious like he did in his smial a month ago.

“Bilbo? Bilbo?” her voice was filled with some panic (at least). “What is wrong with you? Why are you pale and purple all over like that?”

What roused Bilbo from another episode of the faint was none of Pallette’s babbling, but the sound of the door opening coupled with the rapping of a staff against the wooden flooring.

“You are being supremely unhelpful, my dear lady. If I should say so myself”

Bilbo looked up, and rubbed his throat. There Gandalf was standing at the bedside, having made his way in without knocking – though at the moment his lack of courteous consideration was probably the least of the hobbit's worries.

Now the wizard shaking his head at the bracer with just a little too much disapproval.

“And, if that isn't the wizard,” said Pallette, her voice filled with questionable regret. “Rest assured, I didn't do anything to the fellow. Just... reminded him of how bad things could be at home-”

“Apparently all your craft and intellect, so incredible as they may be, do not apply to your sense of tact and courtesy,” said Gandalf sternly as he went over and pat the hobbit on the shoulder. “Do get a hold of yourself, Bilbo Baggins!”

Bilbo rubbed his chest. “I-well, I'm fine. Not *fine* fine, but I could use some tea. Milk tea, and then maybe a smoke or two, and maybe a look out of the window. Of my smial,” he sighed. “So to know that the Shire’s safe... nobody's dead... or burnt... or buried under a mountain of debris... or...”
Gandalf shook his head. “Indeed, Master Zero's discovery was terribly disturbing,” he said, “but that
is not to say all hope has yet been lost.”

“But what can we do, Gandalf?” Bilbo asked. “If Zero's enemy has indeed-”

“Bilbo Baggins,” said Gandalf. “If it is any consolation, I have passed the news of the discovery to
one Aragorn son of Arathorn.” His eyes twinkled. “He promised the Rangers of the North will keep
the Shire protected to the best of their ability, as they have ever been-”

Bilbo would loathe to say it was not a consolation at all – which was, unfortunately, just the case.
“But they are underequipped,” he said. “And-”

“Hope, Bilbo,” said Gandalf, and brandished the flame-red ring on his finger.

At once the room began to feel much warmer than it previously was. The candle seemed just that
much brighter, Bilbo's lungs felt just that much less tense, and the hobbit's head cleared.

Hope had returned, and with it came some modicum of rationality.

“I see. I... see.” Bilbo rubbed his temples. “Humblest apologies, good wizard. I must have been
terribly irrational and-”

Gandalf shook his head again as he sat down next to the bed. “If anything I am the one who should
apologize, for hope – with or without basis – is the only thing I can offer in any adequate quantities
in these dark times.” He picked up the armband. “And you, miss Pallette, this is the time you could
have helped... if you weren't so absorbed in your own dark humor.”

“Well, if you say so,” said Pallette **darkly**. “Hard to be helpful when help isn't wanted, no?”

“That is unfortunate,” said Gandalf. “You've found out for yourself that haughtiness is one of those
weaknesses of the Noldor that not even six thousand years of exile could truly dispel. But now with
this new development, I'm sure even the proudest of the Eldar will need some help more so than
ever. In wisdom and in objects of interest.”

The armband rumbled in protest. “Don't think I can work with them like this, thank you very much!”
she said.

And then she fell silent – until the two pair of eyes in the room were both staring at the armband
intently.

“You know what? I've got a better idea,” she announced. “What do you make of this Aragorn guy?”

Gandalf raised his bushy brow quizzically. “I would trust him more than any other Edain of his
generation, in Eriador and in the land of Gondor below, perhaps save for only a certain shape-shifter
I have planned for us to meet with later down the line.”

“And would Mister Aragorn appreciate being waken up in the middle of the night by a buster- I
mean, a talking armband, shouting terminologies he is entirely unfamiliar with?”

Gandalf narrowed his eyes. “Not at all, if it would serve greater justice.”

At that precise moment, Bilbo could almost – **almost** – imagine Pallette, or what she would have
looked like as a woman, jumping up and down and doing a fistbump with a twinkle in her eyes.

Or perhaps he'd really, really need that smoke and that milked tea...
A younger Bombur would have liked to think himself a people person. The merchant, the mediator, the one who'd do the talking, persuading, cajoling, chatting up... whose tongue would be his best asset.

Unfortunately, it was hard to be so sociable glued to the stove and the chopping board most of the time. The older Bombur had mostly given up that pretense a long, long time ago, trading the speech-making aspiration for the food-crafting (and munching) pleasure.

But deep down inside he'd still like to think himself a helpful person. Someone who'd lend a hand to a fellow dwarf too drunk on his feet to get back to wherever he needed to be. Someone whose shoulder another love-lorn dwarf could cry on (and given the gender disparity among his kind, this had so far occurred more often than he should have liked).

Or, on more solemn and sorrowful occasions, give his ears and his nods to hear the tales of a scarred veteran of one too many campaigns or another. Lay to rest the ghosts of the past, and ushering in as much hope as he could with his admittedly faulty bedside manner, that sort of thing. Such likes had happened more often than he should like. The dwarves of his age, after all, had become a people of war by circumstances rather than by choice.

So it was no surprise that such part of Bombur that was kind and considerate and helpful decided to forgo sleep for once, and look for Mister Baggins' butler. He was at any rate the only dwarf in the company that had truly talked to the fellow, and heard (part of) his sorrowful tale. Mahal's law dictated that whoever was most helpful should do the job: if someone was to give the poor lad a pep talk or two, shouldn't it have been him?

It was with such noble thoughts and much hope that Bombur had swept his drowsiness aside and braved the in-roads of Rivendell, intent on finding the red-clad enigma. His feet stumbled across the verandas and corridors of the Last Homely House, his footsteps soon spilling into the vast open courtyard before Lord Elrond's keep.

He would have run into the fellow, too, he was certain of that, until a certain thing the corner of his eyes caught gave him an uneasy pause.

Bombur gulped. He was now standing smack in the middle of the smooth courtyard awash in moonlight. Everything about him was empty: No elves standing guard, no torches alit, and no sound... except for a veritable gale whipping up right above him.

The portly dwarf swallowed hard, and slowly, slowly, turned his eyes up towards the sky.

Then Bombur's jaw dropped.

Was he hallucinating?

No, no, no, he shook his head, he hadn't eaten all that much for dinner. Besides, no amount of greasy sausages and bacon, or even the best and strongest of ale, could conjure an image as incredible as he was beholding.

It was all he could do to stand right where he was, picking up his jaw, fixing eyes upon the skies in a manner more befitting of elves than dwarves. And why would he not gawk, when it was one of his fellow dwarves who was right there in the sky, taking flight along a giant eagle?

It was Dwalin.
From this far, Bombur might not be able to make out his bald head, his thick arm or his long beard braided in a warrior's style – but he could catch the glint of the moonlight off the green plate armor he'd received during that last battle.

How did the chap lay his hands on such a treasure in the first place? Bombur only knew everyone that mattered – namely Thorin and his nephews and Dwalin's brother himself – had made every attempt to keep the detail away from the rest of the company, for whatever reason. Bombur hadn't cared much about the business... until right about now.

The Dwalin he'd known was gliding in the sky, freer and swifter than he had ever been on foot. There he soared among the clouds, circling around a giant eagle with a correspondingly huge crest. Up he rose, trailing behind his back a jet of solid fire, only to drop down fifty paces in half a second. Then he'd draw a grand circle in the air, and repeat the process over again.

He was mimicking the pattern the great eagle was weaving in the air. Not perfectly, but well enough that to Bombur's eyes the two fliers resembled a pair of exquisite dancer at a feast fit for the kings of the North once upon a time.

For how long had the dance gone on? Bombur couldn't tell, so mesmerized as he was that his perpetual drowsiness had vanished. So mesmerized, indeed, that Dwalin's less-than-stellar maneuvers (including a sharp-brake-and-turn in the middle of a glide that would have make any bird cringe – if they could cringe) looked like the most beautiful thing known to men and dwarves.

It was not until both eagle and dwarf had descended close enough to the ground – the great eagle now casting a shadow the size of a castle upon the plain underneath – that Bombur was snapped from his trance.

Still suspended in the air, the green-clad dwarf bowed to the giant eagle, one hand placed where his heart was.

“Good. Very good. Very good indeed, dwarrow.” The eagle's voice thundered across the clear sky. “You have learned fast.” His neck was craning in approval.

“I do what I must, Master,” said Dwalin. “Durin's line demands no less.”

“Indeed,” said the great eagle. “Your unyielding will is truly a credit to the line of your father and his father before him.”

He soared ceremoniously above Dwalin. “As far as lessons go, dwarrow, like a young eagle you have learnt all you need to from me. The rest, well, the sky shall be your teacher, as shall it be your friend and your partner.”

“Then it shall be, Master,” said Dwalin, his voice loud and his fist clenched.

The eagle's grand wings flapped. “Our paths will cross again, my good dwarrow. 'Eaglet' I name you, Dwalin son of Fundin, for you are as one of ours, not by blood but by valor and hard work,” he cried. “Carry it with honor always, and may the wind under your wings bear you where the sun sails and the moon walks.”

“And the same to you, Master Landroval,” said Dwalin. His voice echoed in the night air, as was the wont of the line of Durin ancient and majestic. “May you and yours know naught but the wind most favorable till your eyrie receives you at the day's end!”

The wind carried Dwalin's voice far and wide, so it still lingered about even after the great eagle had long departed.
There, in the middle of the sky, stood Dwalin son of Fundin, alone of his kith and kin, stout and majestic as Durin the Deathless himself incarnated. He floated towards the ground, his axe in one hand and the blade of light in the other, with such grace and flair as was by all reasons impossible in that kind of armor. He looked Bombur in the face, and laughed heartily.

“Well, my good chef?” he said. “Ready for the next quest leg?”

His laughter was punctuated by periodic grimaces – whatever he had been doing, it must have been far from painless.

But he was grinning, and that was good.

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Chapter End Notes

One of those rare chapters without anything to clear up... for now!

In place of the notes, have this exercise for the imagination: Imagine that piece of official album cover where Zero was kissing Ciel. Now imagine if the background was not a scorched desert, but Rivendell at its best as the Professor himself drew it...
Departure in the Dark

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is originally meant to reference the "in the dark" motif in The Hobbit and TLoTR's chapter titles... and then I realize it also unintentionally referenced the track "Departure" from MMZ2 as well. A pleasant surprise, as story-telling occasionally encounters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 20

Departure in the Dark

Rivendell had awoken long before the sun rose.

Or rather, it seemed only Elrond's guests who were stirring. Less than half of the company was more than half asleep: Kili, Fili and Ori were yawning all the way, while Nori looked like he had just drowned himself in too much ale the previous night. Bombur was snoring even as his legs trailed along. Bifur and Bofur were muttering curses in Khudzul under their breaths. The rest of the company was more alert, but only just.

Thorin didn't mind. Balin was nowhere to be found, which was part of their plan. Neither was Dwalin, which was another part thereof. Thorin was quietly praying to Mahal his two cousins were doing exactly what they were supposed to.

Yet it was only when Thorin had led them halfway to the main gate that the unsuspecting part (which was to say, most) of the company started to realize that very subtle change of plan.

“Eh... Uncle Thorin?” said Kili with a yawn. “We are not sneaking any more, are we?”

“No. No we are not,” came the extraordinarily confident answer. “We are actually doing the opposite of sneaking.”

Before long they found themselves standing not before the ornately carved door standing between Rivendell and the wilderness, but the steps into Elrond's hall itself. There, a couple of High Elven guards, clad in blue tabards bearing the symbol of the sun of the House of Finwe over shining mail, were vigilantly keeping a close eye on the surrounding. Or, as vigilantly as they could, singing a silly tra-la-la-lally and fa-la-la-lally elf-tune even as they were gazing back and forth.

Their songs ceased the moment the dwarven company poured into the courtyard. They stood up straight, hands rested upon the pommels of their blades, as the exiled king walked towards the steps.

“Alarm yourselves not!” cried Thorin. “I wish to speak to Lord Elrond – to bid him farewell before parting.”

The two guards looked at each other, then back at Thorin. “Pardon me, noble dwarf?” said one of them, straightening up his cap. “But Lord Elrond hasn't-”
“Perhaps he hasn’t,” said Thorin. “Yet by all laws and customs a king goes as he please - though he shall not leave the hospitality of another king without a commensurate gift.” He glared at the two guards. “Well? Are you not sending words to your lord as such?”

Long did the two elves stare at the dwarf-lord, before apparently deciding gawking was maybe perhaps not very polite a gesture; they then looked away, and nodded at each other.

“We shall relay your message,” they finally said. As if afraid the dwarves would try something drastic, one of them remained behind while the other quickly vanished behind the carven door.

Meanwhile most of the company were still staring at Thorin. No matter. To be a dwarf of the main line of Durin meant to secretly or overtly preferring to be the center of attention.

It did not take too long for the elf-lord to reveal himself. In fact, it was almost too quick: like the wind Elrond Half-elven had brought himself to the courtyard, clad in a robe of white silk with silver inlay and a large pearl set in the collar. Not quite ceremonial, but not his sleeping gowns either – the elf been prepared for this, Thorin thought bitterly. He could only suspect the elf had guessed they were planning to sneak off; either that, or Gandalf had tipped him off.

Again, no matter. The elf had thought wrong, and part of Thorin was dancing in childish triumph. Assuming Balin had done what he should, in half an hour Thorin and company would be leaving, and not like thieves in the night either, but marching out of those gates in broad daylight – fanfares optional.

“Lord Elrond,” said Thorin with a very, very slight bow out of manner and courtesy rather than anything. “I do hope the night has entreated you well.”

“It has truly,” said Elrond, bowing back. “What a coincidence, my lord Thorin. I have been expecting you for some time.”

“So you have,” said Thorin. “As it happened, I have an urgent matter to discuss. Last-minute entreaty, if you will.” The way he glared at Elrond was not at all conducive to talks by both diplomatic and civillian standard, but that was all he could bother himself to summon.

Just as the two (crownless) kings were locking eyes, Balin shuffled into the courtyard from a side door. Just Balin, and nobody but.

Thorin raised a brow. Balin most definitely wasn't supposed to appear alone, much less as battered up as he was. No, Thorin looked at his cousin, and examined him from top to beard to toe, to say battered up was not outright incorrect, yet rather misleading. Balin's clothes and beard were a mess: disheveled and torn at various places, like he'd been tossed around in the literal sense. Yet there was a strange lack of bruises and cuts, had the former actually been the case, and his expression was equally strangely amicable.

Thorin's choices were two. He could either ask Balin what was wrong, and risk unraveling everything the two of them had planned. Or he could try to keep up appearances, and hope the truth would come out soon enough.

Thorin being Thorin, he went with the first option without so much as a second of pondering.

“Ah yes, there he is,” he said, clearing his throat loudly and emphatically. “My lord Elrond, there's my cousin who shall be Seneschal of Erebor once the dragon is removed – let his... appearance not fool you. With Mahal's blessing he's come up with an arrangement, that is no doubt mutually beneficial to both of us.”
And then...

Elrond Half-elven smiled.

“Actually, my lord,” he said with his soft, kindly voice, “your cousin and I have come up with a better agreement.”

At that exact moment, Thorin realized...

… He'd missed something incredibly important.

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Five hours ago...

“The name's Pallette,” spoke Pallette quickly as Aragorn was holding up the bracer. “Yes, with two 'l's. And no, that's not too important, mister... uh...”

That was quick. In fact, Pallette was already mouthing off before Bilbo could fully take a seat, or Gandalf could close the door behind him. With a huff the wizard took a brisk step into Aragorn's chamber, leaving the door slightly ajar.

Meanwhile Aragorn was squinting at the bracer still. “Aragorn,” said the Ranger with all due reservation, “son of Arathorn, of the line of the Chieftains of the Dunedain, at your service.”

He lowered the fanciful vambrace. “I’ve heard certain things Erestor and his company speak about you. Curious and somewhat unsettling things.”

He tossed another log into the fire as the radiance washed over him. Bilbo regarded him closely: The young Dunadan's face was rugged and alert, yet the toll of the last few weeks had etched new wrinkles across his forehead. His eyes had not left the bracer at all, and there was something kingly about him: authority and reason draped in a cloak of healthy skepticism.

“Well did he?” said Pallette. “Did he include any word to the effect of 'mad', 'crazy' or 'lacking in sanity and rationality'?”

“He hasn't, not to my knowledge,” said Aragorn. “He was almost... frightened, to my understanding. About how you know almost too much, about things far too complex as to sound like the Black Speech to his ears.”

“I am flattered,” said Pallette. “Here's hoping you aren't so easily scared off, because there's more of those complex stuff coming.”

“And I am, forgive my bluntness, curious why you would ask me of all people for help.” Aragorn said, setting the armband upright on the nearby table. “I am no loremaster, much as I wish I could have been – and even if I were, to think I would triumph where Erestor didn't would be nothing but sheer conceit.”

Bilbo couldn't help but draw himself closer to the fire. He was trembling, half from the night breeze and half from the weight of the situation. Part of him regretted letting Pallette do the talking: she might be a genius elsewhere, but she was apparently as good at persuading people as a goblin was proficient with the viol.

“If it helps, I'm not going to ask you to make a laser device or an orbiter engine out of stick and stone,” said Pallette. “All we need is access to the trans-server. The rest is up to us.”
“Tell me more, if you will,” said Aragorn, folding his arms.

“Long story short: we'll get into the network, make our way through to the trans-server allegedly under – what's your home again? Bog-end?”

Bilbo cringed. “Bag End, thank you very much!”

“Right, whatever,” said Pallette, “So we'll get there, and we'll knock it off the transport grid for good. Bam, no more eleventy thousand hostiles with guns and missiles and flamethrowers suddenly appearing in a peaceful town burning it to the ground!”

There was a certain disturbing tone about the way Pallette said burn to the ground that didn't have to do with the already morbid image. Bilbo just couldn't put his finger down to what. He could only shudder. The closest word to spring to mind was 'hyena-like'.

Aragorn didn't blink, not once. “And you believe this will work?” He looked to Gandalf, who was combing his long beard, eyes closed.

“If I had everything I used to for my job, that would be a 100% yes,” said Pallette. “But I don't, so I have to downgrade my confidence rating to a mere, mathematically proven, 99.99%”

Now finally Gandalf opened his eyes, and looked around the small chamber. The wizard's expression was indecipherable as he stopped at the fire. “What is the catch?” he asked, not looking at the bracer at all.

“The catch is we won't be able to use that Bog- sorry, Bag-End side trans-server console any more, of course, because we'd have taken it offline, see?” said Pallette. “That, and the job may be mildly dangerous. We're sending someone into the network and break it from within, that comes with the territory. But that's what Bilbo's here for, right? Right?”

As far as Bilbo's ears were concerned the entire room was struck silent. Aragorn said nothing, and neither did Gandalf – though the wizard did shake his head in a mildly disapproving manner. That sound Bilbo was certain he'd just heard was actually the Baggins side in him protesting.

'Danger?' screamed Bilbo Baggins, 'Nobody said anything about danger before!'  

'Well, too late for that,' rebuked Bilbo Took, 'You knew this would be dangerous, the whole thing about getting into a dwarven ruin with a dragon inside, and you went along anyway. What's possibly worse about this?'

'At least I know what a dragon looks like!' said the Baggins.

'Too bad, Master Baggins, but dragons are not that much more outlandish than cyber-world and whatnot. When's the last time we saw a dragon – and Father's tales doesn't count – this side of the Brandywine? Not part of your life before, but it's now here to stay.'

'But...' began the Baggins, only to be shouted down.

'But we've been there before, that cyber-world thing,' exclaimed the Took. 'Where else did Miss Pallette come from?'

The Baggins harrumphed (quietly), and would have come up with a counterargument in due time... that was until Aragorn's fingers rapping on the table dispelled both Took and Baggins, leaving Bilbo with himself whole again.
“Well, it does sound like a plan of a sort,” said Aragorn, “and though I might approve of it, the consequences is indeed so grave I cannot and shall not make a decision on my own.”

“Excuse me?” exclaimed Pallette.

“I shall let Lord Elrond be the arbiter,” said the ranger, shaking his head. “This I shall do as soon as dawn breaks. And I do mean what I have said, my lady.”

The armband rumbled on the table Bilbo's hands as the flame in the fireplace crackled.

The flame.

Since that time they'd discovered that inert trans-server on the network, the very concept of fire was bringing great fear and trepidation to Bilbo's heart. 'Tarry as we should,' remarked Bilbo Took, 'And there might be no home to return to!'

Having so drowned out the Baggins side, the Took side took over and at once Bilbo's courage took flight. “Would it not be too late, my lord?” he said. “Who knows what may happen to the Shire-”

“I understand your concern,” said Aragorn, “yet make no mistake: there is a time and a place for everything. Lord Elrond will hear of this, hopefully with the counsel of all else who matter, when it would be most expedient. And then he should come to a decision to the best interest of all.”

“I am afraid, Bilbo, that Aragorn's suggestion has wisdom,” said Gandalf. “Would that I could assure you the Shire is fine as it is, but patience is oft a virtue of itself.”

“Then perhaps it would be assuring, Master Baggins, that you would not have to wait.”

It was a voice most friendly and most familiar by now to Bilbo's ears, yet the suddenness of the interjection – as was the equally sudden opening of the door – very nearly caused his heart to jump. Excitement and a certain optimism quickly flowed back into him, however, when he finally got his grip back. Because it was Lord Elrond, and, for the past week now, that meant wisdom, and kindness, and solution of problems.

“Master Elrond!” cried Aragorn. “Forgive me, my lord. I didn't notice your coming.”

Now Elrond was clad in a fine white robe with silver threads sewn along the hem and a large jewel embedded in the collar. He walked through the doorway, quiet as the night, hands clasped before his chest.

“And I beg your forgiveness for eavesdropping and entering uninvited,” he said. “I have come across a discussion that I thought would have been necessary to listen to without leave.” He nodded at the bracer's general direction. “Yet I had wished to witness this discussion free from all biases, either for you, my lady Pallette – as you've saved my life; or against you – so much as Erestor has dreaded your very presence.”

“Ah, never mind that!” said Pallette. “The more the merrier?”

To that Elrond didn't answer, but instead only nodded quietly again. Then he clasped his hands, his bright eyes looking towards the young ranger captain.

“Estel – Aragorn Arathornion, who would one day be King of a realm reunited should he remain steadfast and wise,” he said. “You have heard the case, the pleas and the arguments. What say you?”

Aragorn kept his head down – he may or may not have blushed just that little bit, to Bilbo's
observation. Either way, it was a passing gesture, and soon he was already looking at the elf-lord in the eyes.

“My piece has already been said,” said Aragorn. “Important as such matters are, I await your counsel at such time as you would find suitable.”

“And my counsel is,” said Elrond, “this is entirely within your right and authority to decide, as Chieftain of the Dunedain of the North.”

He had wasted nary a moment, though there was that resoluteness in his eyes that told Bilbo it was not because of haste or arrogance. It was more likely a matter the elf-lord had pondered long, and only found an occasion to truly present now.

For a moment Aragorn said nothing. Back he looked at the flames and rubbed his hands. Thrice he looked up, as if about to say something, but then looked down again. It was only on the fourth time that he managed to voice something at all.

“Can I truly?” was his answer of choice. “The trans-server – as it is obviously called – is as much a dangerous artifact as it is a great potential weapon. Should it truly be up to me, my lord, to decide whether to use it?”

To which Elrond kindly nodded. “Once upon a time, your father asked me in much the same manner. And before that, your father's father and his father too,” he said. “They were doubtful, just like you are, and would rather let me decide for them on many important matters, for indeed many were the sufferings borne by the Dunedain – for the recklessness and arrogance of your forebears who had let such intemperance rule them.”

There was much sorrow in the way Elrond spoke, as there was in the manner Aragorn kept his head low. Of the events they were alluding to hobbit lore had preciously little, yet one needed only read or hear the tales of the defeat and loss of those realms in the North to make an educated guess.

But now the elf-lord stood tall – as high as three of Bilbo put together – and laid his hand on Aragorn's shoulder. It reminded him, to no small extent, of his own grandfather the Old Took, and how he'd talked to his parents once upon a time: a parent and a bearer of wisdom all the same.

“Yet there comes a time, Estel Arathornion,” said Elrond. “that the kingly must make a decision – rely not on another to make it for him, and bear the full responsibility for it. Perhaps the time has come that you do so.”

Now Gandalf produced his pipe, inhaled deeply, and blew a huge smoke-ring. “My lord Elrond,” he begun, but then his voice trailed off and for a moment said nothing. When he did resume, it was with a sagacious nod of his own. “You have made plans for this sort of challenge.”

“For many lifetimes of men, Mithrandir,” said Elrond. “Greatness is a mantle, and like all mantles needs to be earned – rightly and boldly.”

For long Aragorn son of Arathorn said nothing. He stared into the fire as if it contained all the wisdom he could hope to absorb, such that the flame was reflected in his eyes.

In another universe, or perhaps another time, the Ranger before him would have most gladly and enthusiastically taken up the mantle.

But that would have been a much older Aragorn.
An Aragorn who'd have campaigned across the length and breadth of his ancestral realm.

An Aragorn who'd have ridden with the Rohirrim atop the finest chargers of Middle-earth.

An Aragorn whose alias Thorongil would have struck fear into the hearts of those Corsairs of Umbar so used to plundering Gondorian coasts with impunity.

An Aragorn who would have borne the Sword Reforged and with it led a Fellowship, an Aragorn who would stand unbroken upon the rampart of the Hornburg against all odds, an Aragorn who would have reclaimed the oath of the Men of Dunharrow, an Aragorn who would charge the Black Gate itself with a tiny army just so his friend could finish the greatest task in the Third Age of the Sun.

An Aragorn whose love story with the finest Eldar lady of his age would inspire generations into the Fourth Age of the Sun and beyond.

An Aragorn Elessar Telcontar, King of the Reunited Kingdom of Gondor and Arnor; whose deeds would have been unmatched by any of his line save Elendil the Tall and those heroes of mythical proportions in the ages ere Numenor was shrouded by darkness and punished for its transgressions.

That would have been another Aragorn of vastly greater stature and destiny. One who was, at the moment, unavailable.

This Aragorn was little more than a boy - A boy who would like to try.

And oft that 'would like to try' attitude would made all the differences.

Now this Aragorn, this veritable boy whose chin had nary grown a real stubble, stood up, his stature growing taller, more imposing... more kingly.

“I shall do as you asked, Lord Elrond,” said Aragorn.

Then he stepped to the middle of the chamber. He drew a deep breath, and spoke with a voice deeper than his humble age would have otherwise suggested.

“My father and his line before him would defend the meek and innocent with their very lives,” he announced, eyes alit, fist clenched, voice loud and clear as thunder across a clear summer sky, “and though neither Arnor nor Arthedain stands no more the duty of king to subject remains far as the Shire is concerned. If this calls for action swift and decisive, so shall it be. Bilbo Baggins of the Shire, in the name of my line: I shall see to it that this threat to your home is removed.”

“Which mean we can do it now?” said Pallette giddily. “Right now?”

“Aye,” said Aragorn, “And not alone: To this task I lend my sword and bow, as is the wont of the line of Elendil the Tall – may the Valar guide them true.”

“Then, my lord, let us waste no time!” said Bilbo hastily. “I should like to get this business over with, with your permission, before the dwarves set out tomorrow!”

Having said so, Bilbo noticed two things – of particular concern.

One, Elrond was raising his brows in a mildly disapproving manner – which he wasn't sure was directed at himself and his (lack of) manner, or the news that the dwarves were planning to leave.

And two, Bilbo could swear the corner of his eyes had caught something short and stocky, that may
or may not have a thick mane of beard and hair, moving just underneath the window-sill he was standing next to.

*It's probably nothing so important, he thought. 'Not, at any rate, compared to what awaits right about now,'* added the Baggins side of him.

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Balin was gasping and huffing for air, pressing his back against the wall beneath the window-sill. He could swear his eyes had met the hobbit's, if only for a moment.

He clutched his chest and held his breath, only to puff out in some measure of relief at the lack of reaction from Bilbo's part – or anyone else in the room for that matter.

That was close. Too close.

Had he known what he was to get into, he'd have woken Nori and pulled him by the ears if need be along. That Balin had been able to keep himself undetected up until now was a bit of a small miracle – to which he had to thank Mahal.

He hadn't intended to be an eavesdropper, not at all. But when his task was to talk to the hobbit and persuade him to look at things Thorin's way, and the hobbit in question was locked in a heated debate with other prominent people, what choice did he have but to be that burglar out of expediency?

As he stole out of his vantage point, trying his very best not to make so much noise, his brain raced towards the next pertinent issue: what was going on?

From the sound of the discussion alone, certainly the elf, man and hobbit were planning among themselves on 'hacking' that machine – which he'd just assured Thorin might be the solution to a quick and hopefully painless crossing of the Misty Mountain.

*But what for?*

That, alas, he hadn't been able to catch. By the time he'd found his way to their gathering, they'd been past that point and on to the Dunadan-grandstanding part (surprisingly alike Thorin-grandstanding, if he had to say so himself).

Speaking of Thorin, had he been around he'd jump to the conclusion that the hobbit had been in cahoot with the elves all along in trying to deny the Company a convenient passage through the Misty Mountains. But Balin wasn't his cousin, and should very much like to give the benefit of the doubt not only to the hobbit, but the man and even the elves, too.

Nonetheless that begged a very important question. Assuming that the hobbit had nothing but good will, as he'd shown, then why had he done this business as sneakily as a thief in the night? A business that had been expressly brought up before everyone else, elves and men included, and not even his idea to begin with?

*Noughton. Zero. Whatever he goes by.*

Balin's brain raced. Of course, the butler! He was the one to think up this bright idea in the first place. He should have at least an inkling how to handle the development, thought Balin. To Mahal he prayed, and rushed into the night.
And Mahal, as if happened, rewarded the faithful that night.

In the distance, up atop some tower, was Zero. He was as plainly clad as he normally was: a leathery overcoat covering most of his body, hiding the bright red color of his armament. That habit, Balin ruminated, he must have picked up during his time working in the Shire.

But then his hair was the deepest shade of gold much like the long forgotten treasures of the dwarves, left to flow freely and glinted under the moonlight. One couldn't mistake that from a mile – and he was fifty yards away at best.

Balin couldn't tell what the fellow was doing – his best bet was sky-gazing. At any rate he did the only thing he could: run. Silently cursing Elven architecture under his breath, his stocky feet beating like hammer along the floors and stairs of wood and stone, Balin made his way up that tower.

Five minutes, a lot of twists and turns, and one (necessary or otherwise) dodging of guards later, the dwarf found himself standing inside that post on top of that tower, huffing and panting. There, sitting atop the window-sill, back leaned against the window-frame, was the man himself. He was turning his head towards Balin, but otherwise looked entirely unconcerned.

“You are...” He paused. “Balin.”

“Aye, lad, that's me.”

Only now, so close to the fellow, did Balin realize how unnerving Zero could be to the uninitiated. His eyes were cold and piercing, and his lips never once shifting into a smile – not once that Balin knew of at any rate. One needed not see him in battle to be cowed by the way he carried himself alone.

“I thought you were asleep,” asked the butler, turning away from the dwarf and back to the sky. “Shouldn't you? We are to leave early tomorrow.”

“That I was, lad, that I was,” said Balin.

“Perhaps you should return,” Zero said.

For a second Balin's hair stood on ends. How could it be that the chap was so frightening speaking in that monotonous voice? More importantly, how should he proceed? Should he lie? Or tell the truth? Mahal, how well could Zero tell truths from falsehoods in any case?

Balin closed his eyes for a moment, or as much as he could have without obviously giving himself away. In that fraction of a second he recited, quietly in his head, the commonly accepted practices of the dwarves on such matters. Which was to say, to be slow to trust, but to not tell a lie unless doing so would bring the greater benefit to kith and kin.

The truth it is, he thought, and mentally rolled up a sleeve.

“Actually,” he said after a commensurate deep breath, “Lad, I need to ask you for a favor – which I shall repay as soon as is appropriate.”

“Go on,” said Zero. He was looking at Balin – not eye to eye, though the fact that he was looking his way was maybe a good sign for the dwarf.

“I was supposed to have a talk with your master,” Balin said, and made a shrugging gesture. “Let us say a more.. pressing issue has arisen, and I can no longer do so.”
Zero shifted his posture: now he was leaning a little towards him, though Balin knew not whether it was curiosity, concern or annoyance that prompted it. “What did you say? What do you mean can no longer do so?”

“Because he's left,” said Balin. “To tinker with the blasted trans-server of yours, actually. Him, the elf-lord, the wizard, even that Dunadan Ranger lad. Probably had to do with that thing we discovered this afternoon-”

Zero bit his lips. “Where did you hear this?” he asked.

“The lot of them had a talk just now, see?” he said. “I, uh... caught wind of that. Too late, though – I couldn't hear as much of the exchange as I should have liked.”

For a moment Balin thought the fellow might actually take off after the hobbit, as he was most likely to.

But then he just shrugged. “I wouldn't worry so much,” he said. “Master Baggins does not have the right tool.”

Balin didn't know, for a moment, whether he should be relieved or even more concerned. “Ah, that would be good,” he did blurt. “I was just worried the hobbit lad's got a tool or two hidden in that oversized arm-guard of his-”

The statement made all the differences.

At once Zero’s eyes widened. “Oversized arm-guard?” he asked quickly. “What did it look like?”

“Not like I had a close enough look at it, but it looked... blue. Or green. Teal, more like it? Colorful stripes all over, red and white and indigo – like a rainbow.” Balin scratched his scalp. “Gandalf had been all over it of late – would fancy it some sort of treasure or another-”

Balin never had the chance to finish.

"Blue? Blue?" Off from the perch Zero sprang, his eyes snapping open, bright and sudden as a forest fire ignited by a bolt of lightning. “When. Was. This?”

“S-since that last battle of ours?” he squeaked.

The next thing Balin remembered was him being forcibly lifted from the ground – by the collar.

Everything else went by in a blur.

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Those who were acquainted to Zero normally attributed the Legendary Reploid's success to a matter of tautology: he was legendary because he simply was.

Those who did know him, however, would say he had a sort of hunch of an almost wizardly sort. As in, he'd most likely arrive precisely when he was meant to, and save those who mattered to him in a blaze of gallantry and sheer berserkergang.

It had not worked all the time, nor had it saved him from those tragedies upon him as if fate ordained. But there were numerous times that it helped.

Such was this one time.
The dwarf clutching to his shoulder might have thought he'd gone mad with concern or grief or some manner of extreme emotions, and had flown into a berserker rage as such.

That couldn't have been further from the truth. Lingering worry for his benefactor aside, Zero was feeling very much alive.

He couldn't exactly explain why, not on the spot; he had never been much for analyzing his own feelings and inclinations. Though he could tell, just then, just at the sound of that description, he felt... refreshed somehow. Figuratively, and literally – a small piece of the fog mucking up his memory was being lifted from his eyes, and that energized him and fueled so many *whats, hows* and *whys* circling around his processor like a swarm of moth to a fire.

*I knew that color scheme. I knew that person.*

*But who were they? Why can't I remember?*

*Better question, how can I remember again?*

*No, no, no, better question, should I?*

So much so that the walls and gates of Rivendell – and probably even the entire armed forces of the Noldor of that age – couldn't have stopped him if they'd tried. As it happened, no guards were in the way, and all it took to overcome the Last Homely House's was a steady jump-climb he'd done more times before than there had been years in the history of the place.

The rest was a literal walk in the park: even as he dashed along the beaten path Zero noted that the beauty of nature outside of Rivendell was the very sort scientists and urban-planners planetside and on colonies alike had been trying to recreate for years, to little avail.

They made their way to the entrance of that cave. It was, unsurprisingly, no longer as unguarded as it was earlier in the afternoon. Now two mail-clad elven guards each holding a long winged spear stood there at the entrance, eyes leveling at the surrounding.

Now the two conspirators (if Zero could count himself one) moved off to the side. Zero hurried into a nearby shrub, and placed Balin down as he peeked out.

"No doubt looking for orcs or goblins," remarked Balin as Zero put him back on the ground. "Doubt they'd let us through so easily-"

"Diversion," were the only three syllables Zero said. He bent down, and picked up a pebble under his feet.

Elf-eyes were already good. Computer-assisted targeting was better.

There was a fling, and a crack. Within five hundred and sixteen milliseconds sharp, a piece of broken branch right above the elf on the left came crashing down and clonked him on the crown of his helmet.

"Who goes there?" yelped the guard, darting his eyes about. *I, thought Zero, and there's more where it came from.*

Zero reached for another pebble. Off it bounced off the ground and into yet another bush several dozen paces away, rustling a great many leaves in one fell swoop, before finally ending its flight arc on a boulder – and set off a loud alarum. The guard on the left looked up and down, left and right as he restrapped his helmet, befuddled and confused as he was.
The elven guard on the right shook the other’s shoulder. “Gildor! Gildor!” he cried, “Gildor Inglorion! Hold fast, hold fast! The Enemy is upon us!”

One after the other they took off, spear on the ready. For good measure Zero flung a third pebble at yet another bush, this time hitting a rabbit by complete accident. He didn't have to do anything else: the rabbit and the two guards’ panic had done the rest.

The cave – and the trans-server was wide open.

Inside, however, was an alarming sight.

“Empty?”

Indeed it was. The trans-server was still there, but the rest of the chamber was quiet and dark and particularly more empty than it had been in the afternoon. Perhaps Lord Elrond had started an effort to clean up the place – which did naught but make the place look emptier and more desolated than Zero was comfortable with.

More importantly, there was neither man nor hobbit nor elf nor wizard anywhere in sight. Yet the trans-server console was brightly lit.

Zero approached the trans-server, holding his breath.

And just as his luck would have it...

“We're too late,” he said, shaking his head in exasperation. “They've activated the system.”

The signs were tell-tale, from the network signature to so much data floating the screen to the rapidly destabilizing system infrastructure readings. Zero's head was ringing alarms all over. The exhilaration quickly faded, and in its place came worry and concern. What were you thinking, Bilbo Baggins?

“Four signatures, just transferred last minute.”

Behind him trailed Balin, struggling against the ankle-deep water. “Bet that's Master Baggins, the ranger, Gandalf and the elf-lord.” Balin coughed. “Well, lad, what do we do now?”

Zero paused for a couple hundred milliseconds. “I'll follow them,” he said. “Stay here. It's safer.”

Part of Zero still didn't know why he’d picked up the dwarf in the first place – the moment's rush could do terrible, terrible things to one's sense of rationality and professionalism; Zero being no exception, legendary reploid or otherwise.

“Safe? Safe, you said?” Balin ground his teeth and clenched his fist. “Hah! Let nobody say a dwarf of Durin's line fears a little danger! Let me at it!”

“Trust me,” said Zero, “That dragon of yours has nothing on running into the cyber-world unprepared. Keep the goblins or orcs or whatever, if any, off our back and I'd be grateful enough.”

He tossed the dwarf a glare, and that was the end of that.
1) For those FAMILIAR with the Megaman universe:
- When has Zero ever been exactly where he needed to be? I can name plenty, in the X series alone: In X1 where he jumped in to save X from Vile (twice!); X2 where he (in the good ending) jumped in and nuked the fake Zero in one hit; and X3 where he did kind of the same (again, twice, the first saving X from Mac and the second from the Sigma Virus in the good ending). The incidences of Zero-explicitly-saving-X's-behind dropped off significantly after he got promoted to playable, but by then he'd have had the biggest right-time-right-place guarantee ever: *the story follows his point of view*.

- On cyberspace (Would be more apt to put this note on the next chapter, but this chapter's note section is getting a bit lackluster): I've got basically two ways to depict cyberspace as far as the entire Megaman franchise is concerned: either take the Megaman Battle Network incarnation (grid structure, internet-being-parallel-to-real-world, can change reality by hacking/modifying underlying cyberspace elements) or the Megaman Zero incarnation (world-of-the-dead where cyber-elves dwell, shortcut to places, everything turns green)... Or I can take a third option, merging whichever part of the MMBN incarnation and the MMZ version as would make for a good story and run wild with it. No cookies for guessing which option I picked. Since you CAN import MMBN 4 data into a MMZ3 game, I think my interpretation at least has *some* basis in canon...

2) For those NOT familiar with the Megaman universe:
- Cyberworld, version non-Megaman-fan: It would be best to describe the Megaman Zero Cyberworld as what is quite literally reployd/robot Valinor: (cyber)elves dwell there, dead people kinda sorta go there, and until the event of MMZ3 happened it is largely detached from the physical world. My approach is slightly different, and takes a bit from the MMBN version (see above) where the cyberworld is much more easily accessible through hand-held devices much like the real internet today.

3) Legendarium note:
- Young Aragorn: In LotR fanfics dealing with young Aragorns (as in, Aragon in his childhood/20s/early 30s) I've noted a few tendencies. You either treat him as a carbon copy of the 87-year-old and incredibly more experienced Aragorn at the time of the Fellowship; or you make him into this prank-happy younger-brother-to-Elladan-and-Elrohir who really doesn't have that much maturity about him. Both interpretations are questionable: being who he is means that an of-age Aragorn logically *cannot* be immature because of his history, his closeness to the elves and therefore their wisdom, and the huge responsibility on his shoulder. On the other hand a 20-year-old Aragorn who has not experienced some of the more defining moments in his life as I've listed (his service or Rohan and Gondor as Thorongil, to be exact) cannot and should not be as mature, as experienced, as confident or as resolved as the older Aragorn.

Here I am trying to strike a balance: you have a young Dunadan who is capable but inexperienced, who desires to live up to his ancestry but lacking in confidence at times, and who has that 'spark' of kingly greatness in him, but that spark is not nearly a fire just yet. Characterizing Aragorn as such is a significantly greater challenge than caricaturize him into either existing fanon mold, but I think it will make for some exciting possibilities.
- Gildor Inglorion. Enough said.
"Jack In! Fellowship.EXE, Transmit!"

Chapter Notes

This has been an incredibly exciting chapter to write, not only because it was mostly action, but also because I've had to make up quite a bit to fill those parts that both canons did not adequately make for.

For the sake of transparency, a distinct segment of the second half has been brought to you by the canon Gandalf himself atop the bridge of Khazad-Dum (TLoTR)

The chapter title is, quite obviously, a reference to the Megaman Battle Network series.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 21

Jack in! Fellowship.EXE, Transmit!

“Transfer!”

If Bilbo had to describe how he felt at the exact moment Pallette had shouted those curious words, he'd say it was as if someone had stuffed him into a rickety barrel and roll him from the top of The Hill all the way down Bagshot End. Except that instead of the barrel shattering and flinging the poor hobbit eleventy dozen paces away on impact, Bilbo opened his eyes to find himself lying on his back. The queasiness and ringing head remained, but all the momentum as there should have been had vanished as if it had never existed.

Or perhaps – he rubbed his head – it had never existed to begin with.

Where was he? Perhaps the better question was, 'Where was this place that he was?'

Because, Bilbo opened his eyes as much as hobbitly possible, the scene before him looked nothing like anything he'd seen, and that meant on either side of the Brandywine.

Everything around him was tinted in a crystalline green of jade and turquoise, for starters. The air itself felt unreal, like during that meeting with Mr. X, and yet far more... real, in the sense that there was a sense of space – the sky was above, the earth was below, and if he moved his feet he could actually walk. Yet hardly had he taken a step when Bilbo felt queasy again: the weight of his rotund body had been cut in half or even more, such that his single step almost turned into a leap.

On second look, he concluded that they were still in Rivendell... except this version of Rivendell was so surreal it might well be a dream. He was surrounded by the elven architecture still, yet every line, every beam, every inch of the walls and the plaster had been distorted into a grainy parody of themselves, like they'd been reconstructed entirely from tiny blocks hastily glued together and nothing but. Neither was the ground underneath him so whole any more, but instead broken into nauseously symmetric grids stretching as far as the eyes could see.

At this point he'd stopped thinking too much about those incredibly advanced happenstance around
him, yet Bilbo couldn't help but let out a soft 'wow' looking at himself.

His chubby body was covered in a sleek breastplate with rounded pauldrons that fitted his form like a tailor-made vest. His left arm had been fitted with a second bracer looking much like the one he was gifted. He touched his head to find it covered in a smooth, snug helmet with a jewel fitted to the forehead. Bilbo would wager he'd look rather dashing, in the same way his great grand-uncle Bandobras Took was dashing. Which was to say, not exactly the pinnacle of respect irregardless.

About the only thing he didn't quite like about his new outfit was the pair of absolutely humongous greaves covering everything below his knees: including the feet that all hobbits would rather be left without any sort of footwear whatsoever.

In other words, Bilbo Baggins of Bag End now resembled how Mister X looked in those tales he told him, so to speak. And with it came a certain sort of power: His body was thrumming with energy, as if a great many spells had been simultaneously laid on every ounce of his flesh.

Just then he heard the sound of fingers rapping on metal. He swung around.

“Welcome to the cyber-world, Bilbo. That's five points off your mission score,” said a so very familiar voice. “Just kidding. Nobody gives a fuss about mission scores, except maybe Zero and X, once upon a time.”

Bilbo's brows jittered. “You are... Miss Pallette? Is that you?”

“That's-a-me,” said Pallette, as it was indeed her, doing a mocking curtsy.

Then she placed both hands at her hips, and glared at him. “What, do I look so strange?”

Bilbo wouldn't say she looked exactly like he had imagined, but he wasn't too far off. He'd guessed (correctly) that she was perhaps blonde and small of stature—she was taller than him, that he'd assumed, though only by half a foot at best. He'd guessed correctly, too, that she had that childly smile that was all about annoying you and making your heart melt at the same time; except she wasn't a child any more and that was jarring. If he could make a comparison, she'd rather resemble an overgrown version of those golden-haired fauntlings playing down the row he'd wave at and hand out sweets to, once every so often.

What he hadn't expected was the pair of goggles that meshed into her hair—however that was supposed to work out. That and, perchance, that thing she held in one hand, that curious bent stick with many rings floating around it, which he strongly suspected he would not like to see pointed his way.

“I had a hunch I'd run into you here,” said Bilbo. “Just not... right away.”

She smacked Bilbo across his round pauldron. “Of course you would see me right away. I'm a cyber-elf, remember?” Then she rubbed her hands and winked. “So, uh... welcome to my world, hope you enjoy your stay?”

“I'll make every attempt,” said Bilbo, turning his neck round and about. “I ill like this place – it resembles the waking world, yet it is not. Like I am in a dream, yet fully awake.”

“Partner, that's the nature of the Cyber-world,” said Pallette. “It is made to resemble real life where the server is placed, on purpose. And if there's no one to make it, well, the system would do its best within the bound of its assigned AI to copy the real world.”

Bilbo was not sure if he liked the sound of that. “So you are saying we are in a... a mockery of
“Mockery is such an ugly word,” said Pallette. “I prefer the term ‘imperfect copy’.”

“Somehow it sounds worse,” said Bilbo. He resumed looking around – he had a hunch he would very much dislike it should the discussion on semantics explode into a full-blown debate. “Wait, where is the ranger?”

“Oh, that Aragorn guy? He's just fine, I can still pick up his vita-digital sign.”

As proof she produced a box-like device that beeped and booped noisily every time her finger touched its surface. “Looks like he's warped into the next sector rather than this one though. I blame the shoddily-made trans-server.”

“And Gandalf?”

“Same place,” said Pallette, glancing at – and then putting away – the device. “Why don't we go lend them a hand? The viruses there might be a handful for someone not used to this place yet.”

Bilbo knitted his brows. “Viruses, you say?”

“With any luck we'll run into them soon enough,” said Pallette.

And true to Bilbo's luck of late: hardly had they taken a couple steps along the gridded ground than Bilbo heard a sound coming from the side of the path. “Met, met,” came a chirping voice, and before Bilbo could rack his brain for a matching sound, in his way materialized a...

… A curious being.

Now how could Bilbo describe this delightful-looking fellow? He resembled a disembodied head half-hidden inside a yellow open helmet with green stripes. Two pad-like little feet stuck out from its underside, but no arms. There was that comical look about it – in fact, had it been a mite smaller Bilbo would have been tempted to swipe it and hand it out to his favorite tweenaged cousins (of whom he could name no fewer than a dozen) when the journey was over.

And then it attacked.

“Met, met!” it went, popped up from its helmet and bounced in the air. And then poof! A huge pickaxe-like weapon appeared out of nowhere above its head (not even remotely connected to the rest of the creature's body). Down it went with a slam – and sent a wholly visible (and therefore most definitely highly destructive) at Bilbo's general direction.

At once Bilbo dove out of the way. He was so much faster here than his best in the real world, and it wasn't even because of his vastly reduced weight. There his brain was thinking “run, run, run” and there his feet were already complying, and sent him jetting across the ground in a manner he'd only seen Zero done before.

The shockwave missed him by approximately half a mile. That was the good news.

The bad news was Bilbo very nearly fell face-down in the attempt. “What in Yavanna's name was that?” Bilbo cried, flailing both arms in the air in a (moderately successful) attempt to regain some semblance of balance.

Pallette chuckled. “Ah-ha. The world might change, but the Mettaurs most definitely won't.”
“Mettaur?”

Bilbo glanced back, and thought he saw the eyes on the creature’s ‘face’ making an exaggerated so-annoyed-I-am-narrowing-my-eyes expression. The creature would have been so laughably twee, had it not obviously been out for his blood.

“Most basic enemy ever, in the real and cyber-world alike,” said Pallette. “Think your orcs, except way cuter.”

Bilbo narrowed his eyes. “What is so cute about it trying to murder us?” He received a nudge on the shoulder for the effort.

“We’ll see. Go on, see if you can handle it,” she said.

Bilbo’s gun barrel faltered. “Uh...”

“Just shoot it until it explode. Easy peasy.”

And then Pallette produced from her coat pocket what looked quite like a bar of sweet in tinfoil wrapping. She began munching on it, leaning against the wall in an infuriatingly comfortable posture as she ate.

Needless to say, Bilbo was nonplussed. “Good gracious,” he murmured, “truly you are an exceptional teacher.”

Again came a shockwave in his face, and again Bilbo dodged. He jetted off in the opposite direction, swift as a thoroughbred (not that a hobbit would ever get to ride one any time soon) and light as the wind.

It was an intoxicating sensation – like he was riding the wind itself. Perhaps even more addicting was that feeling of superiority: one second he was in danger, the next he'd caught his assailant in a blind spot.

Bilbo spun around and raised his bracer-cannon. Out came a volley of three shots zeroing in at the creature’s general direction.

Again “Met, met!” the creature went. Bilbo widened his eyes: there the creature had collapsed the mass of its body underneath the giant yellow helmet, like a spooked turtle.

The volley plonked harmlessly off the helmet like water off a duck’s back.

“Wait, what?”

“Oh yeah, that's a Mettaur's selling point. That cap might as well be made of Indestructonium. Try catching it off guard.”

Pallette winked and resumed munching on her sweet. Bilbo spent the next minute dodging shockwaves. The unfairness of life sometimes, thought the hobbit.

Bilbo’s legs grew more used to their new accessories soon enough: he was now and again dashing off and around the place, leaving small puffs of dust underfeet as he glided across the landscape. Fighting was another matter altogether, in particular with this creature so daft and twee in equal measures. Try as he might, Bilbo couldn't land a clean shot. It seemed like the creature could literally do only three things: Slam the ground, hide under its helmet, and make those “met, met” sound while doing the former. Unless...
Bilbo's eyes opened wide; a spark of brilliance. He stopped his dodging, and stood still in his place. He considered folding his arm in a mockery sort of way, but then decided against it at the last millisecond. No need to taunt a creature so intrinsically aggressive.

“Met!” went the creature again, and slammed its pick into the ground.

At that exact moment, Bilbo's arm-mounted gun flashed green – and then blue.

Out came a hobbit-sized ball of light. Off it blasted towards the attacking Mettaur, and swallowed it whole.

There was a sharp “MET!” followed by a dishearteningly brutal explosion.

When the smoke and debris finally settled, there was quite literally nothing left on the ground. No scraps of metal, no bits of charred remains, not even puffs of dust to remind that a so-called Mettaur once existed at that exact spot.

“Not bad for your first battle in the cyber-world,” she remarked. “Could have been a lot better, but again it could have been a lot worse.”

Bilbo Baggins, the gentle-hobbit, felt weak in the knees. A wave of indescribable guilt washed over him.

It was not that he hadn't utterly destroyed living things before – goblins and orcs, and before that, he was rather sure meat off a butcher's would count in a way. But goblins were ugly and nasty pieces of business, and beef and pork and chicken were food.

The thing he'd just destroyed was neither.

“D-did I kill it?” he murmured. “For real? For good?”

“Busting a virus, that's what,” said Pallette. “Don't sweat it – that thing isn't what we would call a living creature. In fact, I'm pretty sure the goblins you shot the other day were more alive than it is.”

Bilbo took a deep breath and felt like a vein was popping. “Then what are they?”

“Corrupted data. Or data purposefully corrupted to wreak havoc,” said Pallette, patting on Bilbo's helmet. “Either way, it is just that: data. The numbers zero and one arranged in a pattern. Not even programmed to have independent thoughts.”

“I... see. I would say, I got rid of it, then, and be done with it,” said Bilbo. The explanation did not make him feel any less confused, though the notion that the creature was neither living nor sentient was... alleviating, so to speak. “But then... could it have killed me?” he asked half-heartedly.

“The terminology I'd prefer is 'delete', which, yes, they can,” said Pallette. “Though since you are not literally inside the network, your consciousness would just be booted out of the system. More likely you'll wake up with maybe a hangover and a lingering pain where, uh, the killing blow has been dealt.”

“Comforting,” said Bilbo. And then the implication sunk in. “Wait, does that mean it can kill you? Since this is your world... dimension, whatever you say it is?”

“Well, yes,” said Pallette, taking the last bite off her bar of sweet.

Bilbo blinked. “You are not exactly worried about the possibility of sudden death,” he remarked.
“Why should I?” said Pallette, crumpled the wrapping into a ball and tossed it into the air. “Sure they can delete good old me, but that's not extremely likely; unless we're talking about humongous killing machines of a virus. Which neither Mettaurs nor their more advanced versions are.”

The piece of litter never hit the floor. Instead it simply dissolved from existence into a rapidly dissipating explosion of grainy blocks.

Now Bilbo, hobbit as he was, couldn't help but stare at the disappearing wrapping. His thoughts almost at once went to the food. The treat, if it was the case, didn't look particularly alluring, and had no aroma whatsoever about it, but it looked like edible food. And food, especially this late at night, had the tendency to remind Bilbo how his supper had vanished from his tummy like snow in a furnace.

Pallette stopped chewing, and giggled into her hand. “Processed data. Want some?”

Without waiting for an answer she produced from nowhere what looked like another foil package, and tossed it over to Bilbo.

“Data?” Bilbo repeated incredulously. “How can you eat data?”

“That's how it goes in the cyber-world.” “Not going to give you constipation, that's for sure.”

For long Bilbo stared at his mentor, then back at the package. It looked so simple and so plain, and the prospect of eating data was enough to kill every bit of appetite Bilbo had worked up.

He opened the pack anyway. For one, it would be impolite to return food given to him. And for the other, part of Bilbo was terribly, morbidly curious.

“It is whatever you want it to be,” said Pallette.

Well, if she says so...

His first thought was of a scrumptious buttered scone of the sort he'd make one of those days. The relatives loved scones, and that meant chiefly Drogo – his favorite cousins of all, who was less adventurous and more devoted to good food than most (which would make him well-poised to be the respectable hobbit Bilbo definitely wasn't).

And at once his tongue tasted that sweetness of newly-baked buns, that soft and smooth butter with a dash of honey, and that crunchiness of sesame on top. Why, that was a tastier treat than he could imagine his grandmother bake, and hers was already a slice of Valinor packed into a mouthful!

“How-”

“Data,” said Pallette. “In this processed form it reconstitutes itself into a perfect copy of whatever you fancy eating at the moment.”

“Well,” said Bilbo. “This isn't a bad place to live after all.”

“Don't get me started,” said Pallette.

At once Bilbo didn't know whether she meant it in a good or bad way.

Well, perhaps that is for the best.
Power. Unbridled power. That was what Gandalf now harnessed in his staff, in the very Maian essence of himself, available to him at the point of the fingertip.

There they'd been attacked by those creatures resembling helmeted, disembodied heads, and he annihilated them all just by pointing his staff at them. Poof, and they all perished, dissolved into little blocks that dissipated into nothingness.

For a moment he felt... all-powerful. Like he could do literally everything he wanted whether or not the Valar approved. Bend rivers. Raise mountains. Rewind time. Bring the dead back to life. Make an artifact that outshone the three Silmarili put together. Remake Arda in his image. Be everything Sauron ever wanted to be, and more.

Here he was, leaning against the grainy mockery of a tree, breathing raggedly like he'd exerted himself a mite too badly for his age. The opposite had been true: he was feeling younger and stronger and fairer and more in command of his touch than he'd been in forever. He was like Olorin once more, walking in Arda like he was striding on the blessed plain of Valinor among the Eldar ere the Two Trees were lost to Morgoth and Ungoliant's fell machinations.

An intoxicatingly addicting sensation.

Gandalf could not recall a time he had been more frightened of himself.

“Mithrandir?”

“I... am quite alright, young Aragorn,” said Gandalf, clutching his oaken staff. “Quite alright.”

“What... was that?” said Aragorn. “It was as if... as if I was beholding the power from those ages long lost with my very eyes. Mithrandir, what did you do?”

“Would that I had known,” said Gandalf.

Could it be that this strange dimension was bestowing new powers to everyone inside it? No, Aragorn was still himself for the most part – the color of his tabard and the tint of his skin did change a little, but that was the extent of it. No, it was just Gandalf.

The limits imposed upon his power, as had happened to all Istari by the Valar, was gone. That was Gandalf's only explanation. An explanation Aragorn had no business knowing yet.

At any rate, was this power surge something that came with this dimension? Or had the limits on his power been removed for good without the express consent of the Valar? If the latter was true, how was it that a creature trapped in a bracer – enchanted as it might be – had such power at her disposal?

Gandalf rubbed his face hard. Perhaps 'how' wasn't the question he should ask, but 'what now'. They'd put themselves into this for a reason, for a task. Since the power at his disposal wasn't going away, why not put it to good use?

“I should ill like to use this power, yet use it I shall if I must,” he murmured. “Pray I shall not be enthralled by its allure ere the work here is done.”

Then Gandalf closed his eyes. Clearing his mind had never been easier or more convenient – it was like he could literally touch the innermost of his thoughts like so much clay, and mold it into a shape of his liking. Perhaps, he thought, this was also a blessing of this dimension.

In which case it couldn't have been more welcomed. There he stood up straight, appearing taller and more immense than he ever had been.
His eyes snapped open. “Where is Bilbo? Where is our hobbit?” he asked, his voice thundering across the landscape.

“We must have been separated,” said Aragorn.

The ranger sheathed his sword and looked around. There was a sort of befuddlement in his face, like a child being thrown into an unfamiliar playground, or a dwarf having just tunneled into a cavern that may or may not be filled to the brim with the unknown and terrible. Aragorn bit his lip, and then only spoke with great effort. “What are your counsels, Mithrandir?”

“We look for him,” said Gandalf, and already a solution had taken shape as he spoke.

“There are no footsteps,” said Aragorn, shaking his head dejectedly. “I cannot track him.”

Gandalf patted on Aragorn’s shoulder with his enlarged palm. “Rest assured, good Aragorn. There will be yet time to fulfill your duty as king and liege.”

Then Gandalf stood forward. He straightened his back and dusted his robe. He cleared his voice and raised his staff. To his lord Irmo the Vala of dreams and visions he uttered his pleas, echoing from his very being.

At once the dimension around him complied. Chains after chains of symbols shaped like lines and circles emerged and materialized, green and iridescent, and surrounded him like a cocoon. In time they converged, and flowed into his like liquid into a great flask.

In a circle Gandalf drew his staff, and all at once released every single symbol he'd drawn in. They poured out into the circle, flashing and blinking, and coalesced into shapes and images, first blurry and slurry like porridge with too much flour. Then the shapes stabilized, and Gandalf's eyes brightened.

He was now gazing into an object not unlike like a third-rate fortune teller’s crystal ball, except it was so clear and crisp rather than foggy and murky, and there were sounds to accompany the images. In other words, it worked. “Thank you, my lord,” said Gandalf, in the Eldest Speech tongue of the Valar unknown to Men and Elves.

And then he turned to the shapes on the screen proper.

What did he see? Bilbo Baggins trailing behind a curious-looking figure. He raised his bushy brows just for a little: The woman – because that was what she seemed to be – looked both mannish and not quite. Her glass were embedded into an extension of her solid hair to the point one wouldn't know which was which. Same could be said of her limbs, lithe as they were, since those fore-limbs of hers were so armored that Gandalf couldn't tell whether she actually had flesh beneath.

“Hey, hey, hey, Bilbo, keep up!” A pause. “Oh yeah, D-rank hunter.”

“Could that be... Lady Pallette?”

“I would assume,” said Gandalf, his brows quivering.

The view panned out a little, and at once Gandalf understood. There the woman ran, the ringed wand in her hand ejecting bright volleys of steel-blue rays at the mass of things standing in her way.

Gandalf squinted his eyes. What a host! Yellow-hatted abominations. Stationary fortifications-statues belching out huge shots from its open mouth. Charge-happy floating shark-heads. Wee bunny-heads discharging fulminating rings. Blocky fish swimming in air, shooting huge bolts in unison like a...
battalion of Galadhrim sentinels unto themselves.

Not a single attack got through – there she was dodging, jumping and shooting with such reflex like no children of Iluvatar save the Calaquendi in those Elder Days long forgotten.

And behind her, well, there was his hobbit.

A quiet “Ah,” escaped Gandalf’s lips, and he began to nod. There was Bilbo, not exactly as the wizard had known him: since he was now clad in a sort of solid blue mail that glinted bright in the flame of battle; and on his head rested a full helmet bejeweled with a red ruby that reminded Gandalf of so many magical crafts forged by the Noldor yet vigorous and unweary in those ages long lost.

And at once a sort of pride emerged within the wizard.

Bilbo was keeping up.

He was dashing along the ground, covering the space between himself and the petite woman, his shots fanning out to the left and right. Here he was dodging a shot, there evaded a blow, and then again struck back a counterattack of his own. Once every so often he’d make a mis-step, or dashed too quickly or too slowly, and on two separate occasions even slammed into the woman taking the lead – though no damage was done.

If Gandalf was to be honest with himself, he’d once had little expectation of the hobbit being anything more than a source of hope for the weary and a trickster in a pinch. Seeing him playing the warrior, wearing liveries not his own as he was, rekindled inside of the wizard a bright flame.

“Should we lend them our strength?” asked Aragorn, fidgeting the pommel of his sword. The young chieftain’s eyes were fixed upon the image, and he looked half a mind to simply leap into the sphere.

Gandalf shook his head. “One does not simply leap into Irmo Lorien’s granted vision and hope to reach his goal,” he said. “At any rate patience is oft rewarded, my lord, and our hobbit is indeed exceeding all expectation. Give him some space, it would do him good-”

And then his smile faded.

They’d dealt with most of their enemies... except one.

The duo had now come upon what looked like a tall and nigh impassable wall, of the sort that Gandalf was certain none existed in Rivendell. A hundred paces from foot to summit it ran, but it was not an uniform, smooth and pleasing to the eye sort of wall. Some parts of it had been indented inwards or were jutting outwards, creating alcoves and vertical barriers – more obstacles even with the right tools. Several other segments had been clumsily broken and shattered, so that in those parts the surface was no longer smooth but rather spiny, like a bed of spikes laid on the vertical plane.

If it had been Gandalf, he would have had to call upon the favor of the giant eagles again.

Then the view panned out again, so that Bilbo and Pallette were merely dots against a landscape so vast.

Gandalf clapped his hands. There, on the very top of that wall, was a plateau. The very plateau that had Gandalf and Aragorn’s silhouette imprinted upon the grainy greens of its backdrop.

It all made sense now. The hobbit and his cyber-elf was seeking them out, and all that stood between the duo and the wizard’s duo was that cliff – a wicked parody of the fair cliffs above Imladris, and the waterfalls that ever poured down its fair streams.
Now the view panned in again, back to Bilbo. The hobbit was standing at the cliff's foot, jaw sagging. Which was all too understandable, Gandalf thought: this was likely the first time in his life Bilbo had ever come close to a vertical obstacle so massive between himself and where he needed to be.

Next to him Pallette was pinching the rim of her goggles.

“Well, shoot,” she said. “Listen, I shouldn't need to tell you this, but watch those spikes. Even with X's armor, one graze and you'd be deleted.”

“Wait, what?” asked Bilbo. “How so?”

“Let's just say spikes and our armor aren't best of friends,” said Pallette with a shrug. “In the cyberworld, our weakness becomes magnified. One touch, and boom! You explode into eleventy thousand rings of light!”

“Goodness gracious, and here I'm already bebothered enough thinking how to climb over that wall without ropes as is!”

Pallette raised a brow. “Ropes?” And then she started laughing. “Ropes are for chumps! Watch me.”

Up at the wall she jumped, stretching out her arms. The moment her palms and knees touched the wall, they stuck, like a magnet to iron. Again she leaped, stretching limbs out at the wall. The same happened, again and again, until she was a dizzying height above the ground. Then she turned around, raised a thumb at the jaws-agape Bilbo beneath, and began her descent: sliding down the cliff as effortlessly as a wall-lizard.

“How-how-how did you do that?” Bilbo asked. Took the words right out of the wizard's mouth.

“Wall kick. Once upon a time only Special A Hunters could do that, but after a while technology moved on. Before I... retired, it became part of the standard issue Maverick Hunter repertoire,” said Pallette. “Like I said, this is just the basic stuff. Back in those days Zero could do so many cooler tricks, you'd think he'd been a ballet dancer in the air.”

“Could I learn?” asked Bilbo.

“You're armored in a basic Maverick Hunter suit capable of all simple functions,” said Pallette, “What do you think?”

Bilbo bit his lips. Then his eyes opened, wide and resolute. He approached the wall, and leap he did. A pang of anxiety grew in Gandalf's guts, but it vanished as soon as he saw the result. Bilbo was dangling on the vertical cliff with nothing but his hands and feet.


He did good. Almost too good.

“Alright, that's enough!” Pallette hollered, both hands raised to her mouth. “You're getting the hang of it!”

Bilbo turned around. Gandalf's eyes widened – both his hands had left the wall.

It took only a blink of an eye.

Bilbo Baggins fell fifteen yards like a rock.
He hit the ground with a thud...

... Then the hobbit stumbled back on his feet. The morbid gasp had yet to die on Gandalf's lips.

Pallette clicked her tongue and shook her head. “You alright there?” she said, stretching out her hand.

“Didn't hurt quite as bad as I thought it would have,” said Bilbo, taking her hand with a grimace. He straightened his back and started dusting his coat of mail. “My heart ached worse than my feet,” he admitted, “Never beaten harder than it did just now!”

“Of course,” said Pallette. “The basic Hunter suit also has pretty good shock-buffering built into it. So long as you aren't, say, jumping down Abel City Tower without a parachute, you shouldn't break any bones.” She harrumphed. “Anyway, the one rule of wall-kicking is, always have a hand on the wall. Otherwise, well, you've seen the consequences yourself.”

Maybe it was just Gandalf, but he could swear Bilbo just went a little paler. “I'll keep that in mind.”


Pallette shifted her form, bent down to Bilbo's level, and looked him in the eyes. “Feeling like trying again?” she said.

Maybe it was just Gandalf, but he could swear Bilbo's colors came back. “I should like that,” he said.

The duo exchanged a knowing nod. Then off Pallette went, hurling herself up and up and up like a monkey among its woodland elements. Bilbo did the same, trailing after her at about half the speed. Gandalf would blame the hobbit's size rather than anything. Here and there he fumbled, as were the wont of beginners, yet again the hobbit's fast learning triumphed.

Up, up and up they went, ten, fifteen, twenty, thirty, forty yards above the ground. Now they took shelter in an alcove deeply cut into the wall. Bilbo looked up and at once shuddered, and Gandalf would fathom: The dreaded spiny part of the climb was roughly two yards – give or take a couple feet – above him.

“What now?” he said, half to Pallette and perhaps half to himself.

“There's certainly a way,” said Pallette. “Otherwise the system would have registered this path as impassable.”

Her voice trailed off. She looked above, and at once gasped.

A block had materialized in the air where none had been before. It stood there for five seconds, perhaps six, and then vanished as quickly as it had appeared. Then another a little above it came into being for about the same length of time. Then another, then another, then another...

... until the very first block reappeared.

And then the circle began once more.

“What is that all about?” asked Bilbo, his eyes blinking at the light-show.

“Yoku blocks,” Pallette said. “Should have guessed.”
“I beg your pardon?”

“Yoku. Blocks. They appear and disappear in a specifically designed pattern – basically force you to time your jumps.” She drew a circle in the air, and a cross over it. “My old squadmates hated, hated, hated this bull.”

“Suppose I can see why,” said Bilbo. “Should we-”

“For now? Just watch, don’t move. Yet,” she said plainly, and looked up at the blocks periodically shifting in and out of existence.

The duo spent the next five minutes doing naught but watch.

From his vantage point Gandalf had to admit: it was an eyesore just to keep up with the disappearing blocks, much less remembering the whole sequence.

Gandalf combed his beard and stared hard at the disappearing blocks' pattern. It took him two full cycles to realize that yes, if they'd do everything perfectly they would arrive at the next alcove, and if they would throw another flawless performance again they’d be up top.

In theory.

There was one, at most two ways one could navigate those blocks – and since each would only remain solid for all of a blink of an eye, the would-be crosser would have to be terribly fast on their feet and even quicker of mind. It was as if the whole place had been purposefully designed by a sentient and malevolent force, one endowed with a twisted and sadistic sense of humor.

At long last Pallette made a show of dusting her palms, and winked at the hobbit. “Well? Ready for some parkour, Hunter Bilbo?”

At that exact moment, Bilbo gave Gandalf a sharp reminder just why the wizard had bothered to choose him in the first place. There was that twinkle in his eyes, like a child having figured out a most puzzling jigsaw. “I'll give it a shot,” he said.

“Don't look down,” said Pallette, and took the first leap.

“I shall not,” said Bilbo, and hopped after her.

For the next minute or so the two pairs of feet pattered rhythmically along that path, plotted by disappearing blocks and therefore fraught with danger by definition. The duo skipped and skipped, the blocks disappearing beneath their very feat just as they jumped.

Bilbo did not look down, not once.

“Last jump incoming!” said Pallette, whipping her head back at the hobbit. “Gonna be a big one!”

At once Gandalf's anxiousness came back. Bilbo was looking tense – biting his lip and breathing raggedly. It was rather like that last time he fainted at the mere mention of Smaug.

But that was in his smial, where no disappearing blocks and fifty-yard drops existed. Nor had there been a need to cover three yards' worth of a chasm in a single leap.

But then there wasn't Pallette around that time either.

The girl gave Bilbo a quick nod. “Here, take my hand,” she said, winked at him and stuck out her hand. “Let's do this together, alrighty?”
“No objection there,” said Bilbo. “Not at all!”

He took her hand, and clenched his jaw.

Off the last platform the duo leaped. They sailed three yards over the chasm. They landed on the next alcove with two thuds – first Pallette, then Bilbo.

Behind Gandalf, Aragorn looked like he had not been able to breathe very well for the last minute. Kingly patience and self-control, mused the wizard, were a quality that would only come with time and experience.

“They did it,” said Aragorn. Credit where credit was due: the young chieftain did not sound as out-of-breath as he might have been.

The wizard nodded. “Now if only they would do as well once more,” said Gandalf.

If only everything in the world was so easy. It decidedly wasn't.

The two travelers had not even caught a breath when the space above them rumbled to life.

Out of the blue appeared a huge purple block half the size of Imladris put together, covering much of the space above the duo. Before his horrified eyes the block closed in, slowly, surely, unstoppably, until it rammed into the cliff... only to part again, and draw back to its original position.

There was no way anyone caught in the juggernaut's way could survive.

When it came back for the second time, all semblance of blood had been drained from Bilbo's face, and Gandalf could not fault him.

The first person to regain some faculty for speech was Pallette. “What in blazes?” she cried. “First spikes, then Yoku blocks, and now Giant Sigma-size crushing wall? Just how badly corrupted is this place?”

“Goodness, why are you asking me?” said Bilbo with a gasp, “I thought you knew the place like the back of your hands!”

“Newly-shaped cyberspace. What can I say?” was all the defense Pallette came up for herself.

Bilbo rubbed his chest. “I think I may be a little...” He stammered. “...unsteady.”

“Eeeeargh... Don't think I'm jumping any time soon,” said Pallette. But out she looked anyway, trying to observe the pattern of the next disappearing block sequence.

It was an impossible task. For one, the next sequence was that much faster than the first. For the other, it did not match the rhythm of the crushing block. Gandalf would not think any elf who dwell now in Middle-earth who could make such a crossing but Glorfindel alone – and even he might fail, and be sent back once more to the Hall of Mandos, broken and shattered.

No, that simply wouldn't do, Gandalf decided. He had to act.

“That way,” he cried. “Aragorn, lend me your ropes, hooks, tools of the ranger's trade as you may have them!”

“Alas!” cried Aragorn. “That I have brought none of the kind.”

But he took his ranger luggage of his back anyway, and rummaged through the content; his face
deeply sunken.

And lo! In his hands appeared what looked like a coil of grey rope, artfully twisted and woven. Gandalf's brows raised: it was the same rope, he recognized, that Artanis' host would make in great quantities, but that they would jealously keep to themselves all the same, and not grant to anyone but those deemed worthy.

“Is this sufficient, Mithrandir?” asked Aragorn, his nervous hand unwinding the coil. “The crushing block-”

“I shall see to it. Personally.”

Then Gandalf walked and walked and walked, until – as he expected – the cliff appeared before his eyes, as did the monstrous purple block doing its round. Now the wizard stood up, straight and tall and terrible as the mightiest lords of the Noldor against the tides spilling forth from the bowel of Angband itself.

He slammed his staff on the edge.

“I am Olorin!” he cried. “I am a servant of the Secret Fire, wielder of the Flame of Anor!”

Again the symbols of lines and circles emerged, breaking and crashing through the fabrics of the dimension's constructed reality. Now they formed into fiery chains and padlocks at Gandalf’s thought, and wrapped themselves around the giant block, restraining it like a dangerous beast.

“YOU. SHALL. NOT. MOVE!”

And lo! The chains worked its magic, and the block stalled. It struggled and quaked, and shocked the entire landscape. Some of the links broke, circles and lines shattering and vanishing into the emptiness from which they came. Yet the restrain itself held: for every broken chain more would emerge. The ground quaked, and so did Gandalf's very being: His full might was being put to the test, the likes of which had not come since the First Age passed into myths and legends.

“RISE, YOU FOOLS!” he cried. At once Aragorn caught the hint. He spun the rope above his head, and with a mighty toss sent one end down below.

The duo below had got the message, too.

“Hang on tight, Bilbo!” came Pallette's voice. Suddenly Aragorn leaned back, and dragged at the rope with all his might; teeth clenching, forehead covered with a sheen of sweat.

That was also Gandalf's tipping point. He was struggling with a veritable beast the size of the dragons of old, and infinitely more persistent. With every moment more chains came, but more still broke. He was not going to hold out forever.

But then from the cliff's edge the rope inched and inched and inched, and soon emerged one armored hand, and then another armored hand, and a bit of what looked like hair-

Then the last chain broke, and Gandalf was sent tumbling backwards.

“Up!” shouted Aragorn, and tugged hard at his end of the rope.

And indeed up leaped the hobbit and his helper (Or should it be, the cyber-elf and her helper?). Not a moment too soon: hardly had Aragorn pulled them both away from the cliff's edge than the huge block finish its round. The entire cliffside shocked and trembled, the tremor shocked everyone off
their feet. That, however, was where it ended.

The ordeal, such as it was, was over and done.

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It felt to Gandalf like forever before they'd left the place, putting a healthy distance between themselves and the deathtrap beneath. Bilbo was panting, Aragorn was huffing, Pallette was resting her back against what looked half like a boulder and half like debris, hands on her chest.

Gandalf's strength had now come back, but he could hardly recall a time he had been more exhausted in the past hundred years or so.

Then Pallette looked up at the wizard and then at Aragorn.

“Whew, thanks, guys,” she said. “Guess I owe you one. A big one.”

“My duty,” said Aragorn, slightly dipping his head.

Then Gandalf clasped his hands. He had half a mind to address the elephant in the room, which was...

“So,” he said, nodding sagaciously, “this is what you look like, m'lady. Your fea.” He could not help but lift his lips in a small smirk. “I can't say I am altogether surprised.”

“Sorry, not familiar with that terminology,” said Pallette, “But yeah, this is me, this is my world, welcome to you guys, enjoy your stay and stuff.” She winked at Gandalf and then at Aragorn. “Missed me?”

“I am afraid, my good lady, most of our anxiousness was reserved for Master Baggins who knows not the way without you,” said Gandalf.

“Ah, thought as much.” She stuck out her tongue. “They never built me for attractiveness anyway.”

“At any rate,” said Aragorn, and there his lips curled into a hearty grin, “Lady Pallette, it is good to have you among us, for blessed indeed are causes reinforced with unlikely allies.”

Grins, as were their wont, had a way of being contagious. In a heartbeat Bilbo was grinning, too, and Pallette with him. She took Aragorn's hand, and shook it with a genuinely grateful glint in her eyes. It must have been, if Gandalf would fancy a guess, a long while since she'd been shown appreciation as intense as over the past few hours alone.

Gandalf joined in the laughs, and lo! he was Gandalf again, diminished in the merry-making of folks lesser in stature yet greater in joy and virtues unexpected.

This was, in all, as good a leg of adventure as any.

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Chapter End Notes
1) For those FAMILIAR with the Megaman universe:
- In this chapter Bilbo learns to platform. As such much of the happenings herein are directly taken from gameplay itself: wall-kick, wall-jump, the ridiculously unrealistic impact of spikes on the oh-so-soft bodies of reploids, Yoku blocks (Mahal curse them) and crushing walls of doom.
- Recognize the enemies? Tell me you recognize the enemies!
- What do cyber-elves eat? That much is not covered in canon, I admit, but I would guess they, being creatures of data, would consume some sort of data either for sustenance or because they like to, similar to how we, carbon-based lifeforms, would consume other carbon-based lifeforms to sustain ourselves. (This is totally not because I find Pallette catering to Bilbo's hobbit-ness rather cute)

2) For those NOT familiar with the Megaman universe:
- Uh... there's an essay below?

3) Legendarium note:
- Where did Gandalf get all the power from? Recall that Gandalf used to be a Maia before being powered down by several orders of magnitudes and sent to Middle-earth by the Valar; his express purpose being to empower those who would fight Sauron rather than go mano-a-mano against the Dark Lord himself. The fact is that the Gandalf that we know does not have all the tools of the Gandalf that *is*.

Now, how did he lose his power limiter? That's a long essay.

From a meta/philosophical standpoint, writing any crossover with the Legendarium while still respecting Tolkien's philosophy is a *very* complicated matter, not least because at its root the Legendarium is a faithful representation of the Professor's Catholic beliefs (though cloaked in a superficially pagan dressing) that, frankly speaking, not every modern human would completely agree with, a diverse bunch of interesting people as we are.

When you look at the underlying narrative, the entire Megaman series cannot be further from the Professor's Catholic sensibilities - and by extension the Legendarium's philosophy. At its heart the Legendarium is an espousal of the ultimate good and omnipotence of the God-figure, who alone has the power to create and bestow both life and free will. It is also a staunch attack on the merits of technology - as in man-made industrial instrument - as an evil that would bring naught but suffering. Tolkien's philosophy is that of the era of divinely-ordained kings, of the Merry England blessed with relatively few but hearty folk, where the last, true victory belongs to those who gain it through moral superiority rather than force of arms. That is why the elves must eventually return to Valinor or vanish for good. That is why Sauron must be beaten by a combination of sheer luck and superior virtues. That is why all real lasting victories through force - the defeat of Melkor before the Years of the Trees, the War of Wrath and Dagor Dagorath (in due time) - are fought by the Valar, quite literally angels explicitly carrying out the will of God. To do otherwise means divorcing the Good from the will of God: Tolkien was, to my understanding, very much a subscriber of the "good equals godliness" school of morality.

Meanwhile, the Megaman series (in my understanding) is a modern/post-modern view of what makes a man, a man. There is no God except that which Man makes for himself: in creating robots and reploids, PETs and NetNavies, Reaverbots and Carbons,
it was by Man's hands, the human brain's sparks of genius and the miracles of
technology that life is created wholecloth. technology is acknowledged to be a
dangerous thing, but only in the wrong hands that would create strife and destruction
(e.g. Wily, Sigma, Weil) and would be the ultimate bringer of good (again, the "socially
acceptable" good) in the right hands (e.g. Light and Ciel), which would bring
prosperity, comfort, and most importantly, sentient life. As such the definition of "good"
is less regimented, and refers only to things that are "socially acceptable" in today's
world. Megaman is good because he tries to thwart Dr. Wily, who is evil because he
goes against the modern socially acceptable code of "don't hurt, don't seek to dominate,
don't be greedy". X and Zero are good by the same logic. No other logic would work,
since Megaman, X and later Zero are essentially man-made gods unto themselves by the
merit of technology and industry.

In short, Tolkien's philosophy and morality does not work in the Megaman world,
because there is no God. Vice versa, the Megaman logic does not work in the
Legendarium, because there is no technology.

I seek to reconcile these two wildly different things by adopting a specific rule, that to
each world its own rules apply, and only to those within itself. The most important
implication is that *Eru's and the Valar's powers over life-giving does not apply to
things coming from the Megaman universe*. The moment Gandalf steps into the
Cyberworld, his power limit vanishes.
Chapter Summary

Yet another unannounced hiatus. Also partly because this chapter is quite a bit difficult to get right...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 22

Where the Earth Met the Moon

The transfer was successful – in the sense that it filled Zero with a fleeting sense of *familiarity* for a fraction of a second.

As the flash of light heralding his arrival faded, Zero opened his eyes and looked around. He raised his brows, finding himself completely alone in a landscape that resembled pixellated Rivendell. The streams and waterfall above them foamed blue, flakes of simulated water splashing and washing over the banks. The trees and bushes were green – that shade of lifeless industrial green used to spray-paint precision parts in a factory rather than the crisp turquoise of natural foliage. In the distant there was the town-fortress itself, made out of raw colors, vectors and sprites collated into a makeshift whole that was both more and less than the sum of its parts.

Another mission, another day in the cyber-world.

All was not normal, however. There was no hostile presence, not a one. Yet his surrounding was not stable at the least: Zero felt like he had entered a house expecting people and noises and light and *life*, yet finding nothing inside but silence and darkness. And a vague yet acute sense of danger looming about, waiting to pounce at the unprepared.

Eerie as the mental image was, it wasn't Zero's chiepest sensation.

He *felt* alive, and that was important. He had not felt so alive for too long.

There he stood, in a cyberworld body he wasn't sure belonged to him – at first. It was too heavily armored: solid square pauldrons and actual plating encased where he'd had only a red jacket. Those and those two large gems on the chestpiece all too well harkened to an era now hazy at best in his memory. So did his saber: a flick of the familiar handle get him a green curved blade instead of the tapered straight sword he'd grown used to of late.

Yet Zero was *himself* still, guided by instincts he didn't remember he'd had, now revived, revitalized, rebooted. Instincts, as were their wont, did not die easily for humans and reploids alike.

Said instinct, for instance, told him to put his saber on the charger rack on his back, rather than the holster on his hip – not that there *were* any holsters there any more, he noted. The handle fitted like a glove.
Said instinct also told Zero to secure the perimeter. This, too, he complied.

The eeriness hit him with full force.

Hardly a minute of strolling had passed before Zero started turning up bits and pieces of what looked like shattered data: viruses busted, wrecked, deleted, perforated, disintegrated... *destroyed with extreme prejudice*. It wasn't long before it became obvious he was walking among a literal graveyard of data. Someone, or something, had apparently wiped the area clean of all corrupted data, along with any innate defensive mechanism the cyberspace in the sector had to its name.

The efficiency could not be described as anything but *frightening*.

*Bilbo could not have done this. Not alone.*

Zero rubbed his head. *Then who?*

Not Gandalf, certainly. He clearly wasn't a fireball-throwing wizard in the generally-accepted-fantasy-fiction definition, and his digital form couldn't have been much more powerful.

How about that 'Ranger'? Aragorn was his name, and he did make a passable performance during that battle two weeks before. But in actual combat he was about as impressive as Zero could expect from a human native to this low-tech world. Which was to say not that much.

Glorfindel, the partner he'd taken on during the same scuffle? Last Zero had heard the fellow was off on a mission to a place called “Karas Galathon” (or at least that was how Zero thought it was spelled). So not him, unless the elves in this world could somehow split bodies at will.

Elrond, the lord of the place? More likely, and even that dwarf Balin would testify to the same if he'd asked. But even assuming Elrond himself had been around, something didn't add up. As powerful as he was (purported to be), the elf-lord didn't have the kind of *knowledge* on how the cyber-world worked to completely wipe an entire sector like Zero was witnessing.

*Certainly not at that speed*, Zero thought. *I couldn't have been more than a couple minutes too late-*

His heavy footsteps took him up a slope. And not any slope: this was where the path into Rivendell had been hewn into the surrounding cliffs in the physical world, now faithfully reproduced in the digital space.

Zero's eyelids twitched. *Which means...*

Zero hurried along the carven path.

His instinct, again, was right.

At the top of the slope, there was a long, straight path stretching as far as the eye could see in either direction. It was the digital version of that great road they'd been traveling along for the past month, except far more barren and lacking in life and color, and probably fraught with dangers the real-life version had not.

That was the less impressive part.

The more impressive? There, underneath the computer-generated reproduction of a huge oak tree just off the road side, stood an all-too-familiar thing.

*A... Ride Chaser?*
So conspicuous was the construct, the only way it could have been more obviously a trap was to paint bright red arrows pointing to it, complete with flashing neon signs and blaring sirens.

Yet Zero sensed nothing inherently wrong with the construct itself, or even the simulated digital space around it. The data signature was uncorrupted and pristine. No sign of tampering whatsoever.

Zero approached the machine, and something within him fluttered.

The machine looked exactly like he could recall. He couldn't put a specific model name to it, much less a serial number and specs. Not even when he'd previously ridden on that machine.

No, what he recalled was the simple fact that he had been there.

The horizontally aligned “wheels” that were actually the hover-board. The throttle and gearbox, encased in several layers of composite material. The weapon system, a funnel-shaped laser capacitor meant to project a short-range beam in a wide arc. The chassis, reinforced with linear shock buffers. All rendered in lovely, somewhat-pixellated Cyberworld reconstruction.

How long has it been?

Good question...

It was as if someone had purposefully left the vehicle there for him, just for him and his purpose. Its front had already been helpfully poised towards the direction of the road that would lead back to the cyber-world version of the Shire. It was even tinted crimson the way Zero liked it.

Zero circled the machine for one last time, and summoned every bit of technique on top of his mind.

No trap detected. No tampering. No alteration. Just a perfectly fine machine, tuned up for a perfectly fine mission.

The reploid did the only thing he could: Jump on the seat, twist the throttle and blast off.

***

In hindsight, taking the (cyber) hilly road back to the (cyber) Shire had not been one of Bilbo's more ingenious moments. Not, at any rate, when he was stuck behind a green cyber-elf who drove quite in the same way as she persuaded others: bumpily.

Then again, saying so was to imply Bilbo had any real choice in the matter.

“P-p-pray ease it on the stops!” he cried as Pallette ran over a very large multicolored boulder. The contraption lurched a dozen feet into the air before coming crashing back down, very nearly sending the poor hobbit hurtling off the seat like a frisbee. Bilbo's posterior was threatening to go on strike – perhaps it would really do so later down the line.

Pallette never let up on her excitement. “Pshaw, do you see the two gentlemen over there complaining?” she scoffed.

“Bless me!” exclaimed Bilbo. “They got horses, what did you expect?”

And some mighty fine horses they were, too! Gandalf had gotten himself a grey steed without saddles or reins, that galloped like the wind at his very thought. Aragorn looked downright kingly atop that horse of his, barded with chamfron and peytrel bearing the heraldry of the kings of yore long ere Hobbiton was yet settled. Both had been granted, as Gandalf himself had explained, by Orome the Huntsman Himself at the wizard's pleas.
The poor hobbit, to his name? Hanging on to dear life on a back seat a mite too small even for a hobbit, one hand clinging to the girl's utility belt, the other flailing helplessly in the air.

The reploid girl's shoulder raised. “Give me a good Ride Chaser any day,” she said, sailing right over a crack on the road with a “Yahoo!”

The road looked and felt little like the one they’d been traveling over the past month. In fact Bilbo thought it must have been designed by a malicious force: it was littered with holes and cracks and unfortunately-placed boulders, rocks, fallen branches and obstacles too numerous to count. There was no life about him, nothing that grew or grazed, no color but that which looked unnatural and fake, like a parody of real life – a joke that had overstayed its welcome.

“Give me a good Ride Chaser any day,” she said, sailing right over a crack on the road with a “Yahoo!”

The good news was, they had been covering ground rather quickly. The surrounding zipped pass in a blur before Bilbo's eyes as the wind batted against his face. He tried not to stare at the road, yet couldn't turn himself away from it. There was no rule precluding things morbid and nauseating from being mesmerizing, in the same way a curious crowd would invariably gather around a crashed wagon or a house on fire.

Once every so often a so-called 'virus' would show up, and Pallette would thumb a button next to those handlebars of hers. There would come a volley of lightning bolts, and the unfortunate creature would be as dead as a barmy fellow who'd fancied tickling a live dragon.

Those wandering too close to Gandalf or Aragorn would quickly (and painfully) find out just why Gandalf was known for his fireworks. Or less frequently, how the lineage of the Chieftains of the Dunedain wasn't for show. Bilbo had never before seen a Warrior embellished in myths and legends fight. Now he did, and it was not a sight he would soon forget.

Then he would his eyes back on the road, and before long Bilbo noticed against the horizon a curious silhouette. There, rising above the trees and mountain in the background, stood a great black pillar that connected the ground to the very base of the clouds above. Needless to say such a thing did not exist in the real world, and its very frame poised against the endless blue background filled the hobbit with both dread and awe.

As they rode faster and faster and Bilbo saw more and more things he could comfortably recognize (the signposts pointing to Bree, for instance, and a bit later the bushy shrubs and tall oaks that heralded the Brandywine Bridge), so did the silhouette grow larger and more oppressive. By the time they were speeding past the Bridge, the pillar had taken up a whole chunk of the horizon before him, behind the trees and bushes.

And why wouldn't it, when it turned out that the pillar would happen to occupy, in essence, Hobbiton in its entirety?

“Alright gents, here we are.”

As it happened, the curious pillar turned out to be their destination after all. The shrill brake and the horses' breathy neighs did little but to snap Bilbo back to his senses. Cliched as it might sound, no word could describe Bilbo's thoughts better than 'he could not believe his eyes'. A sort of unspeakable horror welled up within him as the 'Ride Chaser' skidded to a halt.

“Is this... is this supposed to be Hobbiton?” he murmured.

Certainly it wasn't meant to be, but the resemblance where such existed was so uncanny Bilbo's mind
could not help but wander to very uncomfortable places. There was the Hill, and the winding Bagshot Row and the valley about, sickly green as they were in this simulated dimension. There was the vestige of the Party Tree and the silhouette of the houses and hobbit-holes where they were supposed to stand.

But that was where the resemblance ended. Most of this Hobbiton, except for vestiges of those landmarks Bilbo could recall, had been replaced by the pillar itself. And it was no ordinary pillar, now that Bilbo was staring at it with his eyes peeled. No, it was a tower very large and very tall, raising all the way from the ground to the sky, piercing through the clouds such that its tip was no longer visible past the pastel-like fluffy white above.

“This is not Hobbiton, right? Right?” he asked, and his heart was filled with so much awe and horror and anxiousness his voice sounded more like a squeak against the wind streaming about.

“No it's not,” said Pallette, jumping off her seat. “What made you think it would literally be your hometown? It's just a computer-simulated version of the Shire like everything else about. Oh, except with some alterations, as you can see for yourself.”

Bilbo managed to steal a glance at Gandalf and the ranger. The latter was predictably in awe: his mouth agape, his arms fell to his side, his eyes gazing up and down the great tower. The former was behaving like a wizard's wont: hand brushing his great beard, eyes narrowed at the esoteric majestic thing, and nodding twice, as if acknowledging 'this is something relevant to my interest'.

Then he straightened his back and dusted his robe. “Are you sure we are at the right place?” he asked. “Exactly where we are meant to be?”

“Can't be surer,” said Pallette. “Don't mind the oddness. The trans-server defensive systems takes priority over real-life simulation.”

Bilbo did not quite understand what the girl was saying, but from the way Gandalf was nodding at him there was probably no shame in it. At any rate his understanding of the subject matter (or lack thereof) didn't matter quite so much.

What did matter was that the tower was standing there, in place of his hometown's very heart, a beaten path leading to its very doorstep. It hulked above the group, its shadow loomed over them like the ghost of a frightful past, taunting and challenging them to confront it – and Bilbo could but take one deep breath after another. Was this how the heroes of yore felt, confronted with the spires of Thangorodrim that would stand unbroken ere come the Valar themselves to throw them down?

Now Aragorn stepped forward, his eyes still glued to the construct. “This... tower,” said the ranger. “I dread to imagine the kind of garrison or contraptions that keeps it under locks and keys...”

“This 'tower' as you call it is the defensive system, pal,” said Pallette. “The name is... Jakob. The Jakob Orbital Elevator.”

A spark coursed through Bilbo's mind. “I remember the name!” he cried. “You certainly have told me once – was that the mythical construct that allowed Men to go to the moon if and when they please?”

“There's nothing mythical about it. When you think about it, the whole thing's just a really, really long tube with an elevator inside it,” said Pallette, “but aside from that, A+ memory, would tutor World History 101 again.”

“That's all well and good,” said Bilbo. “What do we do now?”
“What else?” Pallette swept her glance across the group. “We get inside it.”

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It had been the most magical adventure Aragorn son of Arathorn Chieftain of the Dunedain had ever had – and he was the one who grew up in the company of elves.

He got to jump into a machine. He got to face off against creature both outlandish and comical in equal measures. He got to feel the wind across his face, galloping along a straight path atop a charger that might as well have been of the Mearas bloodline swift and strong and willful, raised solely on the green fields of the Calenadhon.

And now he was stepping into a grand tower that dwarfed the greatest and mightiest of spires ever constructed by the Dunedain race, in Numenor or otherwise. An undefended tower at that: no archers sniping, no logs rolling, no boiling oil pouring down from the walls, no portcullises to cut off the would-be invaders. Not a one shadow in sight, in fact, but for said would-be invaders whose feet were stepping deftly along the beaten path.

A great door slid into its iron sheath as they moved towards it, revealing an entrance that could fit half a dozen knights and their squires riding abreast. From within no light shone – at first. Only when the girl took her first step upon that iron floor did the lights come to life, one after the other, until Aragon’s senses were saturated.

As his eyes got more used to the light, Aragorn noticed the interior was a lot less overwhelming than he thought it would be.

He was now standing inside a hall very huge, whose ceiling had vanished into the great blackness above, beyond which no living eye could penetrate. In the middle, there was a tube-like construct, not unlike a miniature tower within a tower, that ran all the way upwards through that dark veil into parts unknown. The gleaming floor and walls, as if laminated with steel and mithril and enchanted with elf-magic, stood in such sharp contrast with the oppressive unknown above that Aragorn struggled to comprehend how they both could ever have been part of a complete whole.

Indeed 'quiet oppression' was the best descriptor Aragorn could find for the very existence about him. The young Chieftain felt a cold draft from above – imagined or real – that brought to mind the image of the ruined fortress of Amon Sul, or any number of relics from the time when the Witch-King of Angmar ravaged the North, desecrated and broken and filled with things that wandered in the night unbidden. Like all those places this 'Jakob Elevator' was virtually empty; whatever life that might have dwelt here had abandoned it, or perhaps fallen victim to the all-consuming shadow closing in on all sides.

It was with such apprehension that he looked to the enigmatic Pallette as she did... well, whatever she was supposed to do.

The girl approached what looked like a square plaque next to a closed shutter. With a flick of her finger she and split it open. Aragorn’s eyes widened: the object was no mere decoration, but a hidden compartment filled with buttons and levers tinted in so many colors like gems in the night.

She pressed a few buttons here, flipped a few levers there, and snapped her finger.

“One, two, three, four,” she said – probably to herself, “aaaand... System all green!”

With a loud rumble, a segment of the solid wall split open, revealing inside a... room? A chamber? A hall? Aragorn wasn't sure if he had ever seen such like in his life. At any rate it was circular, half-
metallic and half transparent like elven glass. And more importantly, absolutely gigantic: five of Lord Elrond’s guest halls could comfortably fit inside that space laid bare before them, and their group were only four in number.

“What are you gents waiting for?” said Pallette, skipping inside the huge chamber. “Get in and hold on!”

“Would it not be imprudent,” said Aragorn, waving his hands “to step inside a closed room without fathoming what it is, my lady?”


Something snapped and cracked and clicked in Aragorn's head. “We are... going to take this... contraption... all the way to the moon?” he stammered, his kingly voice faltering.

“Not the literal moon, no,” said Pallette. “The top of the elevator is where you'd take a shuttle to the moon, but I'm pretty sure no service runs here any more.” She paused, as if savoring Aragorn's thoroughly confused look. “I have a pretty good guess the trans-server's control access is up there.”

“And how far above the ground would it be?” said Gandalf, and there was something apprehensive yet not quite like fear in his voice.

“Several hundred kilometers,” said Pallette, “as opposed to three hundred thousand to the moon. Now hold on, this is going to be a bit of a doozy.”

She approached a panel on the opposite side of the room, blinking buttons and all. Her fingers danced around the board, each press punctuated by an audible beep. It was almost as though she was playing a most esoteric of tunes on a most arcane of instruments.

Hardly had she finished the last press and shouted “Done” than the floor began to rumble.

Aragorn's head told him he was being squeezed into a pancake-shaped Man. His arms and feet told him he was a Man-shaped pancake. He could barely held on to the nearest object – a circular rail that ran around the perimeter of the cylinder – and avoid falling flat on his face.

When the ranger's sense returned to him, the first thing he realized was that they were shooting upwards much faster than the swiftest horse could gallop. Through the glass he saw the floor and the earth left behind further and further and further, until absolutely everything terrestrial – the grass and trees and ghosts of houses and hills – became tiny and diminished, like toys for a toddler. Was this how it felt, he asked himself, when the giant eagles of Manwe would take flight? So high up there was nothing so significant that walked any more, not even the stone giants who yet dwelt in the recesses of the Misty Mountains?

Five minutes passed by in absolute silence: more because everyone save for maybe Pallette was deep in awe than any sort of urgent necessity. As Aragorn's senses got used to the jump and his arms and legs became his again, his stomach began to flutter. So this is how it felt, journeying into the unknown unbidden, he thought, and his mind very briefly wandered to the tales of his distant ancestor Earendil the Mariner who sailed into the sky bearing on his brows one of the Silmarili once wrought by the hands of Feanaro Curufinwe greatest of the Noldor who dwelt in Valinor beyond.

The time for recounting myth and legend was over quickly, though, as Pallette broke the silence. Rather rudely: her bulky gloved fingers were tapping on her portion of the railings, and there was a grin on her lips.

“If I recall correctly...” she said. “Arm yourselves, gents. We will be having company in
approximately fifteen seconds.”

Hardly had she finished her sentence when the elevator began to slow down. The pace was just enough to make Aragorn tether around the edge of comfort. He had barely counted to fifteen when the platform ground to a complete stop.

It was just time enough for him to reach for the hilt of his bastard sword.

Now they found themselves on the same level as four doors evenly arranged around the shaft. Aragorn only had enough time to catch a sharp breath before they flung open. His eyes caught one, then two, then three, then about a dozen angry red glints from the deep darkness behind them.

“On your guard!” cried Aragorn. He had only time enough to unstrap the shield on his back: many shots rang out from the shadow, though they hit no mark and did little but to alert the rest of the group.

Out from the openings rushed what amounted to a small army of foes. And what a menagerie of adversaries there was: humanoid and non-humanoid; some on foot, some rolling on wheels, others taking to the air with their wings and spinning blades above their heads; some looked almost alive, others resembled machines animated through foul sorcery.

“Are these... Wraiths?” cried Aragorn, immediately regretting not bringing with him torches and fire-starting implements.

“Viruses,” said Bilbo.

“Both of you gents are kind of off,” said Pallette, and triggered her light-spewing stick. The first two ‘wraiths’ caught a stream of light each in the chest. They fell backwards and blew up into tiny blocks and grain. “But not too far off.”

With feet of clattering iron they streamed through the opening, dividing themselves between the four.

Bilbo Baggins immediately duck beneath the next volley to come his way. He raised his armband that had now morphed into a tube-like shape swallowing his entire forearm. A volley of yellow pellets burst forth from the tube, hurtling towards the crowd. A bat-like enemy fell to the ground with a scree, followed by a blade-wielding foe. Their bodies dissipated into blocky grains, melting away like sand in the wind.

A third took out his tower shield and blocked the last few shots. It tried to rush Bilbo with its shield raised – turning its back against Pallette.

It fell face-down with a hole on the backside of its head.

On his left a trio of enemies rushed Aragorn, wielding what looked like long spears tipped with searing light.

The ranger dodged the first, then ducked and swung his bastard sword across the second’s knee joint. He was just about to spring and parry the third when the creature’s head suddenly vanished in a cloud of smoke. Gandalf had quite literally swept away his share of adversaries - the glass wall on his part of the chamber was smeared with rapidly evaporating bits of enemies – and was now back to assist the others.

In a flurry of fireballs and lightning flashes, within fifteen seconds flat, the chamber was cleared. Aragorn had never felt himself so insignificant before – and he was the one who grew up among elves.
“Yes they are programs,” said Pallette, providing a too-untimely-to-be-useful answer. “No they aren't corrupted ones – not yet, anyway. Well, it's good to see the server's defenses are working as intended.”

“That's all well and good,” said Bilbo, “as long as they don't shoot at us!”

“Oh, you'd bet they would. Don't let your guards down, more of them are coming!”

Just then the elevator clicked and clanked, and Aragorn was back to that sensation of being a pancake again.

“One stop done,” said Pallette. “Seven to go.”

And then, as if on cue, the elevator slowed down again...

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Handling the next six or seven stops – Gandalf stopped counting past the third – was more an exercise in boredom than any sort of threat. The enemies that rushed their party were quite a bit more of a threat than the average orcs and goblins and perhaps even trolls if he was to fancy an estimation. But he was as strong as he used to be three ages ago, and that meant those fights weren't even remotely fair.

If anything the business was an exercise in self-restraint. Power, especially that which he once enjoyed and had given up for the greater justice, was an intoxicating thing best not to get too used to. Gandalf had only comforted himself in the fact that said power was used to protect, and from pure purposes corruption would not be so likely to take root.

But now the silence had returned for the seemingly last stretch of their journey and suddenly all of Gandalf's power as Olorin seemed no longer too immense.

They had gone past two shutters that opened as the young woman laid her hand on them and closed as soon as the last of the party was through, as if having a benevolent mind of its own – or at least not malevolent. Twice they'd been faced with empty corridors, and that somehow made Gandalf shudder more than all of the previous foes in the tower put together. They were anything but alone; on the contrary Gandalf could feel something crackling in the air that indicated a power very great and ominous.

He was still confident, certainly, that he could handle whichever the place would send his way. Yet oft the unknown was most frightening even to a well-ordered mind. To Manwe he offered his prayer, his feet trailed after the hyperactive woman in green, and hoped he was still on the right track.

His companions were equally dumb-struck. Bilbo was taking one awkward step after the other, puffing and rubbing his chest through his armor plates. And Aragorn, well, it was all he could do to walk with kingly pose: back straight and breathing unperturbed, though if Gandalf could fancy a guess it would take all of a sudden start to throw down his guise like a castle wall mined underneath.

Now they were facing yet another empty corridor, and Gandalf's fear spiked. That power was drawing closer, and it felt to him like the very air around him had changed and become more volatile.

It seemed almost an age and a half to him before the last shutter snapped open.

What he saw justified the wait.

They were standing beneath a very large roof that was clear as fresh water, walled inside a great
dome of framed glass. All around them there was darkness: they’d gone so far above the ground that there was only nighttime eternal there. But there was also light, for right above them stood the moon itself, far larger and brighter than Gandalf recalled, its silvery luster almost as alluring as of Telperion three ages and a half ago.

The hobbit was suitably baffled and curious, and Aragorn was looking around the chamber, his mouth agape. There was that twinkle in both pairs of eyes, as if they’d become children again, wanting to run about and explore this most mystical of presence; only barely reined in by the natural hobbitish aversion of things too queer in the one case, and the well-trained mind of a ranger and chieftain of his people in the other.

“What is this... place?” were all that Aragorn could manage.

“The top of the world,” said Pallette. “Where the earth met the moon. In theory.”

And then she left their company. Off she walked, taking slow and steady steps to the middle of the room. She looked around, as if the vast chamber concealed secrets and wonders other than its very own existence.

“Show yourself,” she said, and her light-shooting tube fell to her side.

And what a secret it concealed, too.

“Well, well, well, what have we here?”

With a voice clear and childlike the fabrics of existence twisted and bent and distorted. At the opposite end of the room where the dome ended appeared a twisting vortex of light and darkness. From its abyss appeared first an arm, then another, then a head and a body and legs that matched. Then the spiraling black hole closed and reality was re-sewn like a dress expertly mended.

Now standing before them in its wake was a boy, youthful and innocent from the look of his face. In fact, if not for the battle-ready armor in which he came clad – blue and white and red-striped, glinting under the silvery light – he would have appeared like a perfectly normal mannish lad who’d grown up in the bosom of Eriador ere the shadow returned.

In that armor, though, he carried with him the grace of elf-lords who once rode to war in the First Age of the Sun. A large gem embedded in the chestpiece. Two wing-like spikes protruding from the back. Embossed arm- and leg-plates. Hair glinting orange like the flame of the sun, flowing from the back of his helmet. From his very being radiated raw power like a fire in the night.

Yet all was not well with the boy: There were two cruel scars across his face on the bridge of his nose. There was also a hole in his forehead.

Not literally in his forehead, Gandalf corrected himself, but rather, on the crown of his helmet there lay a gem long since shattered. And within that gem, which would have been a masterpiece coveted by dwarves and elves alike, reigned a distinct tint of blackness. Gandalf could sense no real evil within the artifact – in the usual definition of evil. There was, however, immense regret and sorrow welling from deep within: and oft sorrow and evil were but only once removed.

There was something else, too: a sort of power similar to that of creation itself, both like and unlike the flame of Anor, yet not exactly what he could call a mockery. It was power made in earnest, and rather than good or evil by design, it just was.

It was as if a power had manifested differently – though not completely separate – from that of Eru almighty, one capable of making life and thought where there before was none, unfettered and
unprincipled, above the simplicity of good and evil.

The mighty Maia took a single step back.

This, right here, was the very sort of power that Morgoth had craved and failed to grasp for many ages. Gandalf knew not which disturbed him more: that such power existed in the first place, or that it was quite literally at the fingertips of this... boy, who probably had no idea what he was in control of.

Then the boy's lips curled. "Pallette!" it said with a tone too jovial given the weight of the situation. "Should have guessed, eh?"

"Just as I thought," said the woman in green, and there was something apprehensive yet not quite like fear in her voice. "It's been a while... Axl."

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Chapter End Notes

1) For those FAMILIAR with the Megaman universe:
- The Jakob Orbital Elevator is, by Megaman standard, an excellent piece of world-building that is none the less incomplete no thanks to the very episodic nature of the Megaman series. I have taken the liberty to fill in the bits and pieces not shown in its MMX8 incarnation, mainly its ground floor structure, its atmosphere, and how its central elevator works.
- Zero, if you squint, appears as he did in his MMX incarnation.
- And we meet an old friend. My headcanon is that MMX8 comes after, not before, MMX Command Mission, making it the last title in the X timeline. This has some *very* important implications for the next few chapters...

2) For those NOT familiar with the Megaman universe:
- The Jakob Orbital Elevator is, as you can already guess, exactly what it sounds like: a hundred-miles-tall tower with dozens of winding motorways twisting around it, leading all the way past the stratosphere. Its inside houses at least one massive elevator shaft; and the penultimate level of MMX8 consists of the protagonists fighting all the way to the top.

3) Legendarium note:
- A huge cliffhanger is hung over the nature of Axl's (and by extension Lumine's) power, which will be the philosophical crux of the next couple chapters. Stay tuned!

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