

Harry Potter and the One Ring of Power

By

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Chapter 1 -- An Unwelcome Visitor

Hogwarts Castle, Great Britain

Albus Dumbledore stared in horror at the small leaden box that had been put on his desk. He glanced up at the Ministry wizards.

"Are you sure about this?" he asked quietly. Soberly, the wizards nodded.

"Quite sure, Professor Dumbledore. The four---*hobbits*, are they called? The four hobbits appeared quite suddenly, in Knockturn Alley, unconscious. Several wizards Apparated in to grab them, but we had undercover Aurors there on duty, and they managed to drive off the others and bring the hobbits to safety."

"Only to find that they're hopelessly catatonic, and unlikely to recover in any reasonable time," murmured Dumbledore. He had visited St. Mungo's Hospital before, and although the mental wards there were quite comfortable, he still had unpleasant memories of the place. The sadness seemed to have sunk into the very stones of the walls, very much like Azkaban. The thought of four such harmless, friendly people immured there, locked in the prisons of their own minds, was horrible.

"Have you penetrated the barrier to find where it came from yet, sir?" asked one of the younger Aurors, a coldly beautiful woman with a Welsh lilt to her voice. "We know it's highly magical, and literally emanates Dark energies of a sort not seen here before. The MoM is all agog over the chance to study it."

"I know where it came from," Dumbledore murmured. Opening the box, he chucked the contents into the blazing fire in the hearth, heedless of the cries of the wizards. Several of them took out their wands, but Dumbledore stopped them with a gesture. "Wait a few minutes and you'll see what this is all about." Muttering rebelliously, the wizards subsided, staring into the flames intently.

After about five minutes, Dumbledore pointed his wand into the fire, murmuring "*Accio Anulus*," and something small and golden leaped toward him. Stepping nimbly forward, surprisingly adroit for someone of his years, he caught the glittering thing in the leaden box. He looked into the box, nodded to himself, and held it out for the Aurors to see inside.

Inside, resting on cushions marked with arcane symbols, lay a golden ring. Glistening against its background, it did not seem to give off any heat, despite having been in the hottest part of a fire for five minutes. Tiny glowing letters could be seen on the side.

"As you can see, it took no harm at all from my fire, although it's easily hot enough to melt most jewelry. The letters you see are not in any script used in our world, but I know what they say. They are proof that what we have here is easily the most dangerous magical artifact ever made---one that could make Voldemort powerful enough to seize power entirely on his own, even with all his Death Eaters, the dementors, the hags, the giants and his other allies ranged on our side against him."

The Aurors gasped, both at hearing the Dark Lord's name said aloud and at what Dumbledore had said. Since regaining his body, several months previously, the Dark Lord had been on a rampage, as though he had a quota of atrocities to fill and was over a decade behind. Attacks on wizards had become almost routine, and the Aurors were stretched to their limits trying just to keep up with the Death Eaters, succoring their victims and performing hasty Memory Charms to ensure that the existence of wizards did not become generally known. Even with the best the Ministry of Magic could do, the Muggle newspapers were in hysterics, and Questions in Parliament were being asked about what could be done about this apparent upsurge of terrorism.

"Where did it come from?" Several of the Aurors asked it, looking at the golden ring in its ensorcelled box as though it were a gun pointed at them. "How did it get here and why is it so powerful?"

"It comes from one of the other worlds---continua, time-lines, call them what you will---that go to make up our universe. You know, although the general wizarding community does not, that we here are in only one of many possible time-lines. In some continua, Tom Riddle died young, or never turned evil. In others, he may already be ruling the world openly, oppressing wizard and Muggle alike." Dumbledore paused for a moment, taking a sip of his tea. "The other world from which this came is called 'Arda,' and is more magical, in general, than ours is, although magic works differently there in some ways. Broomsticks don't fly there, just for starters, so Quidditch is right straight out."

"How do we know this?" asked the Welsh Auror. She brushed a lock of hair back out of her eyes as she stared at the ring. Dumbledore shrugged.

"Nicholas Flamel's researches in search of the Philosopher's Stone took him many places, and into many worlds. So far, although Voldemort can reach into other worlds and pull things to him---as, for example, this object---he cannot travel there himself." Dumbledore shook his head. "Which, I must say, is very fortunate. Some of these worlds contain---or are ruled by---people who would be delighted to help Voldemort take over this world, in return for his help on their own projects. Others would happily send him such help as he needed, only to turn on him and betray him for the chance to rule here as well as in their own home worlds."

"So, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named can reach into other worlds and bring things from them here. What has that to do with this? Is this ring somehow useful?" Mad-Eye Moody shuddered at this question, and turned both his magical and normal eyes on the questioner, one of the younger Aurors who had come to the Department after the Voldemort years.

"This ring, Auror Cornelius, is one of the most powerful magical artifacts in any world, and easily the most powerful single object in its native continuum. It contains a great deal of the innate power and magical energy of a being who, for sheer evil, makes He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, Grindelwald and all the other Dark wizards you've ever heard of look like Squibs. *Constant vigilance!*" barked Moody, making young Cornelius jump. "This has to be the work of the Death Eaters, or their leader." Moody scowled deeply; his months of imprisonment in his own magical trunk had not improved his temper or his tolerance of anything to do with Dark wizards.

"While Auror Moody's words are not those I would have chosen, his facts are entirely correct," put in Dumbledore. "However, the ring also has properties that make sure that no sane wizard would dare use it. As its user wields its powers, so does the ring itself use its user,

changing him until, no matter what, he is the slave of his power. This object is too much for any human---any wizard, even Voldemort or myself---to control, and it would inevitably control its user. Even if the user started out with the best and purest intentions, it would corrupt him." Dumbledore shook his head. "I've been in communication with the highest-ranking wizard of Arda---a chap named Gandalf; he succeeded to the post after his superior, Saruman, was corrupted and fell into evil---and what he tells me only confirms what my own researches have said: This object is evil and must, at all costs, be destroyed."

"That's nothing but the truth, and you're too weak to see it," snarled Moody. "The Dark Lord's been lashing out even at his closest Death Eaters ever since this thing came into our world. I had to Apparate to Malfoy Manor, of all places, to stop a Death Eater attack a few days ago. Apparently the Dark Lord blamed Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy for the fact that we Aurors intercepted this ring. He either doesn't know how dangerous it is, or doesn't really care."

"How can we destroy it? Melt it? Break it?" asked the Welsh Auror. Dumbledore shook his head.

"Not that easy, Auror. Even dragon fire wouldn't be hot enough to melt this ring, and breaking it is literally impossible. There's only one way to do that, and that is to take it to the place where it was created, throwing it into the fires in which it was first smelted, in Arda."

"So what's the problem with that?" asked an Auror. Dumbledore closed the little leaden box. For a second, he looked every bit of his century-and-a-half.

"Well, we have to have someone who can survive the process of travel between worlds without harm. Non-magical people, who could probably carry the thing and even use it in some ways, can't survive the process as far as we know, at least with their minds intact. The people who were carrying it had their minds torn apart by the experience of being pulled into our own world. We need a wizard, but almost any normal wizard's too powerful to be trusted with this thing."

"In other words," whispered the Welsh Auror, staring in horror at the ring, "a student."

"Not just *a* student, Auror Tyler, but *four* students. Four hobbits were drawn into our world by Voldemort's spell, so to keep the balance, four people from our world must go to Arda and destroy the Ring. I have been in touch with Gandalf, and he knows what to expect, although nobody else in Arda does at this time. We have to move fast, or the rightful owner of this ring might find ways to travel between universes, and ours would be the first one he went for."

"And you mentioned that he made He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named look like a Squib." muttered Mad-Eye Moody. "Didn't that crazy Seer you keep around here for comic relief say that the students you need are here, and would volunteer if asked?"

"Professor Trelawney, bless her, is not crazy," said Dumbledore severely, "although she is a trifle eccentric, I fear. Yes, she went into a manic trance when she first sighted this ring---it was delivered to me when I was discussing her latest Divination classes with her---and prophesied that 'the dragon, the clayworker, the farmer and the musteline' would be the ones to do this deed. I must confess, though, that when questioned as to what this meant, dear Professor Trelawney fainted and is currently under heavy sedation in the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey was quite short with me when I wanted to revive her to ask her a few more questions." Dumbledore shook his head. "In fact, she threatened me with a Beard-Be-Gone

Curse if I didn't 'take myself and my endless patient-tormenting questions out of her infirmary.'"

"Well, it falls to us to interpret what she said, doesn't it?" said Moody. "The 'clayworker' is easy enough to figure out, but the others---that's a little more difficult."

"I've already figured it out," whispered Dumbledore. "The people she refers to are all students here at Hogwarts, in their fifth year. The reference to a 'clayworker' is obviously Harry Potter, which was what put me on to the idea of students in the first place. The 'farmer' is a reference to his classmate and close friend, Hermione Granger, and the 'musteline' is his other close friend, Ronald Weasley---a weasel, don't forget, is a 'musteline,' after all."

"So who is the dragon?" asked Auror Cornelius.

"Ah, that was the big surprise. Once I figured it out, it was blindingly obvious, but it took me quite a while to come to this conclusion. The 'dragon' in question is none other than Draco Malfoy, the son and heir of the Malfoy family." This announcement provoked general shock and dismay among the Aurors. Moody was the first to break the silence.

"You're mad! You can't be serious! Everybody knows that the Malfoys are up to their necks with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and you want to send a Malfoy on this sort of trip? Why not hand the ring over to the Dark Lord at once, and save a lot of trouble?" Dumbledore suddenly stood up to his full height, fixing Moody with a terrible glare.

"I am not mad, Alastor Moody. However, I am rapidly becoming *angry*. If you provoke me further, you may find out what that means, in a way you won't care for." White-faced and shaking, Moody shook his head, unable to articulate a sentence. "I have spoken with Mr. Malfoy, and he is eager to take this on. Apparently he loved his parents, even if nobody else did, and having Voldemort turn on them for no reason has embittered him against the Dark Lord. I *trust* you are not questioning my judgement and my decision to allow him to avenge his parents?"

"No---no, Professor Dumbledore. You know your students best. I was---was just surprised that the son of a Death Eater would behave that way." Dumbledore shook his head slowly and sadly.

"Many people don't know it, but I knew Voldemort's mother. She was in the first classes I ever taught at Hogwarts, many, many years ago. If anybody had told me that her son would become a greater menace to wizard society than Grindelwald, whom I had just defeated, I'd have thought them mad. Miss Marvolo was a wonderful student---biddable, quick to learn, a real joy to teach." Suddenly Dumbledore looked every one of his hundred-and-fifty years. "When I think of the waste---the waste of her life and talents, the waste of the incredible magical potential that her son had---I sometimes wonder why I go on..."

"Very well, Professor Dumbledore. You say that these four students can and will be the ones to destroy this ring. Have you talked with them about it yet?" Moody's voice was uncharacteristically gentle. Dumbledore nodded.

"I've spoken to all four of them, and all of them volunteered." He turned a guilt-wracked gaze toward the door of his office. "In fact, they're getting ready for the trip now."

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"Make sure you've got good stout boots, Harry," said Hermione, looking up from the list she had been working on. "From what Professor Dumbledore told us, we're going to have to do a lot of walking in 'Arda,' and bad boots will be murder on your feet."

Harry Potter paused from packing spare clothes into a leather backpack, looking shrewdly at his friends. Hermione had been frightened by Professor Trelawney's prediction, just as they all had, but had volunteered nonetheless. When she heard that he had to go, she had, in fact, been quite insistent upon going along. At the moment, she was wearing her usual look of fierce concentration as she worked on the list of things they were going to be bringing along on this trip.

Ron was working with her, chewing absently on the tip of his tongue as he went over a list they had compiled of things they would need. Like Hermione, he had insisted on coming along, and had been rather nonplussed to find that this had been predicted as necessary by Professor Trelawney. "My gods, Harry," he had murmured once out of earshot of Professor Dumbledore, "if that silly old fraud's actually making real predictions, what else can happen next?"

"Here are the swords," said Draco Malfoy, coming into the room and dumping four sheathed Japanese shortswords onto a bed. "It's a pity that brooms don't work in Arda, or I'd suggest bringing ours along, but at least the Hogwarts armories are well-stocked." He brushed a lock of blond hair out of his eyes, and sneezed. "Gods, they're dusty, though! What is Filch thinking of, letting them be neglected so?" He still showed the shock of having lost his parents; he was even skinnier than he had been before, and when he wasn't busy, he could be found sometimes staring into space, tears running down his face. The others had learned not to disturb him when he was like that, since he had turned on them in fury when they had tried to comfort him the first time. Harry knew that people felt sorry for him for having lost his parents, but he had never really known them; it was his considered opinion that losing people you had known all your life was much worse.

"From what Professor Dumbledore says, I don't think Filch is allowed into the armories. At least they've got the place Peeves-proofed." Ron Weasley gave a shudder at the thought of the castle's resident poltergeist. "Peeves and the weapons stores---worse than giving a chimpanzee a wand!"

"How are we keeping Peeves off us here?" asked Hermione, suddenly looking worried. Peeves was quite capable of sabotaging the whole thing just out of motiveless malice. Every student at Hogwarts could testify to his bottomless appetite for mischief and his endless creativity at finding new ways to harass people.

Malfoy buffed his fingernails on his robe, looking intolerably smug. Harry felt an urge to slap him, before he condescended to explain. "Getting a Slytherin in on this project was inspired, if I do say so myself. Peevesie doesn't bother *us* much." At the raised eyebrows and looks of skepticism he received, he raised a hand. "Oh, Baron, would you come in here a minute?"

The Bloody Baron, a terrifying-looking spectre covered in silvery bloodstains, drifted through the closed door and into the room, startling Harry, Ron and Hermione. Draco grinned mischevously, for all the world like Fred and George Weasley upon the success of a particularly spectacular prank. "You know the Baron's the only ghost that can keep Peeves in

line, don't you?" At their nods, he went on: "Well, m'lord Baron here is the *Slytherin* house ghost, which is why Peeves leaves us Slytherins alone, usually. When I explained just what we were up to here, and why it's important, he was perfectly willing to keep Peeves and Filch alike from getting in the way." The Baron nodded, smiling at Hermione, who returned the smile rather nervously, and disappeared through the door to resume his guard.

Ron shook his head in wonder. "All those years of putting up with Peeves, and you Slytherins just got left alone?" He finished loading his backpack up and slung it across his back experimentally. "You lucky, *lucky* Slytherin bastards. You lucky, *jammy* bastards. You never told us about this."

Draco chuckled maliciously. "You never asked. Besides, I'm a Slytherin. Keeping my cards close to my chest is the Slytherin way." He pulled his trunk, which he had had some house-elves bring from the Slytherin dormitories, over and began rooting through it. "Let me see, I've got those good wool socks in here..."

Hermione leaned over the trunk, and something caught her eye. Quick as a striking snake, she reached out and grabbed, producing a magazine. Before Draco could stop her, she got across the room and sat down, looking at the magazine as color rose in her cheeks. "Oh, my gods and goddesses, Draco, you mean to tell me you *read* this stuff?" Ron and Harry looked up, to see her paging through a magazine titled *Coven Cuties*, with a cover featuring a very attractive witch who had apparently mislaid her robes, winking and blowing kisses at whoever was looking at the cover. Hermione began paging through, giggling: "Oh, this is ridiculous! 'Twenty Hexes To Help *You* Get Lucky?' 'I Was A Test Subject For The Potion of Inexhaustible Potency---And It Worked?' 'Coven Cutie of the Month'---dear me, did the poor thing lose all her robes somewhere?" By this time, Harry and Ron were fighting to look over her shoulder.

Draco's face was flushed with embarrassment, and he whipped out his wand. "*Expelliarmus!*" and the magazine soared out of Hermione's hands, to come to its owner at his command of "*Accio Magazine!*" Catching the magazine, he rolled it up in his hands as Ron, Harry and Hermione looked up at him, startled.

"If we're *quite* finished discussing my private life, can we get on with this project?" Draco asked icily, his old manner returning for a moment. "Or, perhaps, if the agenda's changed to discussing things that may embarrass us, may I remind you that this is a game *all* can play?" He pointed at Hermione. "Just for starters, we could discuss Gilderoy Lockhart..."

"You're right, let's get packing!" said Hermione quickly, in a changing-the-subject voice. She picked up a paper bag from the floor, and spilled its contents out onto the table. Harry, Ron and Draco stared. Harry finally broke the silence.

"Hermione---why did you buy *ten* rolls of duct tape?"

"Is that really duck tape?" asked Ron, his eyes lighting up. "My dad talks about it---how Muggles use it for all sorts of things, and it's made out of ducks."

Hermione looked smug. "It's just in case. If we bring it along, chances are that we may not need the stuff. Leave it behind, and sure as anything we'll be wanting it." The boys looked at each other, shrugged, and divided the duct tape between themselves, stowing it in their packs.

A rap on the door, and Dumbledore came in. "Ah, I see you're getting ready. We're getting ready to send you to Arda, and everything will be in place in a couple of hours."

Chapter 2 - Hogwarts to Rivendell

Hogwarts Castle, Great Britain

When Harry, Ron, Hermione and Draco had decided what they wanted to take, they let the Bloody Baron know, and he summoned Professor McGonagall. As she looked at them, her stern demeanor changed slightly, and Harry would have almost sworn he saw her eyes glisten.

"Are you sure you have everything you'll need?" she asked. Hermione pulled out the list she had compiled with an air of triumph.

"We've got sturdy hiking boots and outdoor clothes, our Hogwarts robes, hooded cloaks to keep off the rain, one Ernie's Everlight™ Torch apiece, compasses, Swiss Army knives, those swords that Professor Dumbledore wants us to pack along, our wands, wizard water bottles that hold a gallon apiece, cooking gear, first-aid gear, both magical and Muggle-style, and bedrolls." Professor McGonagall nodded approval.

"Excellent, Miss Granger. If I were like Professor Snape, I'd give twenty-five points to Gryffindor, but since I'm not, let me just say that I'm very proud of you. Students like you are what makes a teacher's career worthwhile." Hermione blushed slightly. Harry looked studiously innocent. There were a few things they hadn't mentioned, such as his Invisibility Cloak, but he had always kept the knowledge of its existence a closely held secret, and even letting Draco Malfoy in on it had been a wrench. Not that it hadn't been fun...

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"You mean to tell me, Potter, that you've had this thing since your first year at Hogwarts? Welly-welly-welly-*well*, this does explain a few things, doesn't it?" Malfoy drawled. "Like the time I ran into your redheaded sidekick, the Weasel, up by the Shrieking Shack, and saw your head floating in the air!" Malfoy looked reluctantly respectful. "Devious, you are, and no mistaking it! 'Tis a pity the Sorting Hat didn't put you into Slytherin House; I think your talents have been wasted in Gryffindor."

Harry scowled: even though they were going to have to work with Malfoy, nobody had ordered him to *like* the arrogant brat. "I'm glad I ended up where I did, Malfoy. Besides, with me around, would people in Slytherin House have even paid attention to you? After all, I *am* the Boy Who Lived."

Malfoy raised an eyebrow. "You do have a point there, Potter. However, our motto in Slytherin is '*Me duce tutis eris*,' if you know what *that* means." His smug smile slipped when Hermione piped up:

"It means 'With me for your leader, you will be safe,' but if you think you're going to lead, Malfoy, just remember a few things. First, we don't necessarily trust you as far as we could throw you, whether you've reformed or not. Second, we've been working together as a well-oiled team for five years now, and we've foiled you again and again. Third---" Malfoy held up a hand, grinning ruefully.

"Very well, I see that I'll have to demonstrate my genius, not just have it unthinkingly accepted. Okay, I accept the challenge." Ron glared at him. Malfoy grinned, making Ron glare even harder. "It'll be a change from Crabbe and Goyle. Of course, those two are so thick that I've known farm animals that are geniuses next to them." Malfoy grinned even more widely. "Asphalt-sandwich level, if you know what I mean."

"Just demonstrating that you're *trustworthy* will do for now, Malfoy." Draco's eyes narrowed, and he moved toward Ron, but Harry and Hermione got between them and kept them apart. After a few minutes, the tension eased, and they went back to packing.

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"I think we're expected at Professor Dumbledore's office, so let's get going." snapped Hermione, picking up her pack and settling it on her back. The others followed. As Harry walked through the familiar corridors of Hogwarts, he looked around carefully, to fix everything in his mind's eye. He was under no illusions---none of them were---about the upcoming task being easy, or non-dangerous. Professor Dumbledore had explained that Arda was a primitive environment, and that it had a lot of very dangerous inhabitants. On top of that, the maker and original owner of the Ring was evil and powerful enough to make Voldemort at his worst look like Father Christmas.

Dumbledore was sitting in his office, the portraits of past headmasters and headmistresses of Hogwarts all watching attentively, as they trooped in behind Professor McGonagall. He stood up to welcome them, his face a mask of concern. On his desk, Harry could see a small leaden box, with arcane symbols molded into its sides and top.

"I'm glad to see you're all here. I have no words to express how proud I am of all four of you, for volunteering to do this." Harry felt himself blushing; despite all the adulation he had had heaped on him in the wizarding world, praise from Professor Dumbledore was still balm to his Dursley-scorched soul. Dumbledore reached for the box. "The ring is in here, to keep it from attracting Lord Voldemort. However, the box will not go through the dimensional barrier, so one of you must be the 'Ring-Bearer.'" He opened the box, displaying a beautiful golden ring, sitting on a cushion made of stuffed parchment with magical symbols written all over it. Harry recognized a few of them as very powerful Anti-Dark-Magic symbols; he had seen them in his texts. The others apparently also recognized them: Hermione shuddered, Ron looked slightly sick, and Draco turned even paler than usual, his hands twisting in an apotropaic gesture to ward off evil.

"Well, there's only one way to do this, and that's to draw cards." Harry managed to say, fear nearly choking his voice. "Is there a deck here?" Her hands trembling, Hermione reached into her pack and withdrew a deck of Tarot cards.

"Here---they're a present from my aunt. She doesn't quite understand about Hogwarts, but when she found out that I was studying 'magic,' she sent me these for Christmas one year." Professor Dumbledore took the cards. His eyebrows went up as he riffled them with expert hands.

"Ahh, Rider-Waite, the standard Divination deck," he murmured. "Your aunt has good taste, I see---some of the decks I see Muggles buying are far better for decoration than Divination." Hermione blushed slightly, and Harry wondered if she was feeling guilty about having dropped Divination after her exasperation with Professor Trelawney had driven her to

the breaking point. When he had last looked over the Divination syllabus, he had seen that they were going to cover cartomancy---divination by cards, whether Tarot or the regular fifty-two-card deck---soon.

Expertly ruffling through the cards, Professor Dumbledore separated out the Major Arcana from the deck. When he was through, he shuffled the deck with all the panache of a riverboat gambler, and held it out to the four students. "Pick a card, any card. Highest card gets the Ring."

His hand trembling, Ron picked a card---the Three of Wands. His relief was visible as Draco Malfoy came forward and picked a card. Malfoy's face lit up at what he saw. "Ha! The Two of Cups!" Hermione selected a card, and held it up wordlessly. It was the Eight of Pentagrams. She watched, sweat rolling down her forehead, as Harry finally came forward and made his selection. Harry looked at the card, and felt sick. He looked again, and it was still the same card---the Ten of Swords.

Professor Dumbledore shook his head sympathetically. "I'm afraid that this is your burden, at least for now, Harry," he said, holding out the little leaden box. "Things do seem to happen to you, don't they?" Harry reached in with hands that felt like they were twice their normal size, and took out the ring. It rested quiescently on his palm, feeling much heavier than its size would indicate. Under it, there was a thin gold chain, which Harry opened with a clasp and threaded through the Great Ring, hanging it around his neck under his shirt. Although it rested quietly against his chest, he could feel its power, coiled and waiting for the hand that could wield it.

Hermione touched him gently on the shoulder, and he turned to face her, startled at the sight of her eyes glistening. Hermione almost never cried. "Harry---if the Ring gets to be too much for you, let me know, and I'll take it for a while." Touched beyond measure, Harry patted her shoulder, nodding wordlessly.

"It might be a good idea, to pass the Ring back and forth among yourselves," put in Professor Dumbledore. "That way, it has less of a chance to get control of any one of you. Perhaps you should take regular turns with it." Ron and Draco looked worried at this thought--they were easily able to sense the Ring's power and evil will. Nonetheless, under Professor Dumbledore's gaze, they both nodded, gulping.

"So---how are we supposed to get to Arda?" asked Draco, his light tone not masking the fear he felt. Harry looked at the others, and then looked away; Draco was nearly chalk-white, and sweat was running off him despite the cool temperature. Beside him, Ron looked as though he was bracing himself to face a firing squad, and Hermione's face was set and still. Professor Dumbledore took out a staff from the closet behind his desk.

"This staff is a very specialized sort of Portkey, Mr. Malfoy. It's big enough for each of you to grasp it, and when all four of you have hold of it, the command word '*Portare*' will take you to Rivendell, in Arda. My good colleague in Arda, Gandalf the Grey, is awaiting you eagerly." His eyes twinkled for a second, and he looked much more like the old Professor Dumbledore. "He's said that I've praised you so highly that he can't wait to see you for himself."

"You mean that you're in contact with wizards in other worlds?" asked Hermione, her characteristic eagerness to learn breaking through her fear. "How fascinating that must be!"

What other worlds do you know of?" Professor McGonagall shook her head fondly, her eyes filled with pleasure at Hermione's thirst for knowledge.

"Well, in Arda, there's Gandalf, and before him, Saruman the White. In Midkemia, the main wizard's name is Pug, and he's also chief wizard for a neighboring world called Tsurunannu. On the Discworld, the closest equivalent is probably Granny Weatherwax---a terrible old harridan, she could probably eat Grindelwald for breakfast---in Krynn, there's Raistlin, in Ravenloft it's almost certainly Azalin---a truly dreadful creature, be glad you're not going *anywhere* near him---Greyhawk has Mordenkainen, Elminster's in the Realms, and Constant Drachenfels, in Warhammer. There are many, many others, but these are the ones I remember most clearly."

"Oh, they sound so interesting! The things I could learn from them!" Hermione's eyes shone. Dumbledore shook his head.

"Many of them are evil enough to make Voldemort look quite harmless. Constant Drachenfels, for instance, is in many ways what Voldemort merely aspires to be. Believe me, Miss Granger, you do *not* want to meet some of these wizards until you are far, far more powerful than you now are. Even I don't want to meet some of them." Dumbledore held out the staff. "Are you ready to leave?"

"No," said Harry, "but I know I've got to go. Come on, everybody, let's get this over with." They put their hands on the staff.

"*Portare!*" They chorused the command word.

And everything changed around them, swirling and dissolving, as they felt themselves falling, falling endlessly.

#

Rivendell, Middle-Earth, Year 3019 of the Third Age, October 4

Harry, Ron, Hermione and Draco found themselves standing in a beautiful glade. The air was chilly, but smelled incredibly sweet; Harry was reminded of the gardens at Privet Drive, when it was deep summer and they were a mass of flowers. Everything seemed almost impossibly clean and tidy.

His companions were similarly lost in awe. Hermione drew in her breath, savoring the wonderful air. Draco seemed quite drawn to the trees, which were of no variety Harry had ever seen, either in Muggle life or in his Herbology texts and lessons. Cautiously, as though offering food to a wild deer, Draco reached out and ran his hand over the bark of the nearest tree, caressing it without seeming to realize what he did. Ron was similarly rapt at their surroundings.

"Where are we?" asked Hermione. She came out of her trance by a visible act of will and looked around. "I mean, this must be 'Arda,' but I don't see anybody here to meet us, or anything."

"No doubt you don't," came a strange, musical voice from nearby, startling all four Hogwarts students. As one, they moved back-to-back, their wands out and at the ready. Musical laughter from all around greeted this maneuver. "Very good! Gandalf's colleague trained you well, we see. However, you need not fear us, if you are the people that Dumbledore sent. We were sent here to await your arrival."

"Show yourselves!" snapped Draco. "Let's see just who you are, and we'll go on from there." His words were greeted with more laughter, as several dozen lithe men appeared as though out of the woods themselves, carrying bows with arrows nocked. Harry's eyes widened. He'd heard of high elves, and seen a few pictures in old books, but this was the first time he'd ever actually seen any. Their features were nearly as delicate as beautiful women, but still managed to remain masculine. Their ears were pointed and poked up through their shoulder-length straight hair, and their upswept eyebrows were all that remained to make Harry sure of his identification.

The foremost elf approached, stowing his bow and holding up his hand in the sign of peace. "My name is Nenandil, which means---"

"Water-lover," broke in Draco. He stopped suddenly and looked very surprised at himself. "How did I know that?" At this, all the elves laughed out loud, and put away their bows.

"When one bears the blood of the Elves, their language often comes with it, kinsman. But since you know my name and its meaning, may I know yours?"

Harry was thunderstruck. Looking from Draco Malfoy to the surrounding elves, he suddenly noticed strong resemblances. Like the elves, Draco was slender and graceful, and yet filled with lean strength. Even their features were not dissimilar. Unable to contain himself, he gasped: "But how---how do you happen to be related to him? We've never been in this world before!"

Nenandil looked long and thoughtfully at Harry. "There are, or were, elves in many different worlds and places. Some of them crossed between worlds voluntarily, while others were forced to through no fault of their own. And, I notice that although you know my name, I *still* have not received yours---and you are in Rivendell, which it is our charge to guard."

Harry blushed at the reminder of his bad manners. "Of course. I'm sorry. My name is Harry Potter, and these are my---companions." Ron and Hermione looked slightly puzzled, then comprehending, as he went on: "The blonde---the one you claim as kin---is called Draco Malfoy. This---" indicating Hermione, who blushed, "is Hermione Granger, and the redhead is Ron Weasley. Professor Albus Dumbledore sent us to this world, from our own where we are students of sorcery at a school called 'Hogwarts.'"

Nenandil looked impressed. "I see. In any case, the Great Hall of Rivendell is just over this rise here, and we have orders to conduct you to the lord of this place, Elrond Halfelven. Come!" The four trailed after Nenandil, surrounded by his elven archers, up a small rise, until at the top they could see Rivendell itself, stretched out below them.

Rivendell was set in a beautiful valley, which looked green and inviting even though it was obviously autumn. There was a large main building, built in a style Harry had never seen before, surrounded by outbuildings in the same style. In and around the buildings were many

trees, leafy and green. In the distance, Harry could hear snatches of beautiful, sad, haunting song. Nenandil looked at him askance. "You have never heard elf-song, Harrypotter?" Harry shook his head, as though awakening from a dream.

"No---I've heard merpeople singing, and veela, but this is different. And, my given name is 'Harry,' and my family name is 'Potter.' Our names have two parts to them. Do yours?" The elf looked slightly puzzled.

"In some ways we do---dwarves, for instance, call themselves by their own name and their father's name with 'son of,' but this is not the custom of Elves. How may we address you without giving offense?"

Hermione, ever quick with facts, jumped in. "Formally, you would call us 'Mister'--- or in my case, 'Miss'---followed by our family name. For everyday, the family name is used, or the given name if you're a friend." Nenandil nodded, storing this information away, as Hermione plowed on: "So, I'd be 'Miss Granger' formally, 'Granger' for everyday, and 'Hermione' to my friends."

Nenandil bowed. "Thank you, Miss Granger. I hope that one day I may be among those privileged to call you by your given name." Hermione blushed pink; she was slightly taken aback by his courtly manners. "In any case, we are awaited. May I escort you into Rivendell, Miss Granger, Mr. Potter, Mr. Weasley, and Mr. Malfoy?" As they followed Nenandil down the path to Rivendell, the singing grew louder and clearer, and even more achingly beautiful.

The main hall of Rivendell was built of wood, each piece fitting to the others as cleverly as a jigsaw puzzle. Harry was willing to believe that the craftsmen who had built the hall had needed no nails. When they reached the front door, it opened and they were confronted by a very familiar-looking figure---a tall old man with a white beard going down past his waist, dressed in long, flowing robes, with a high conical hat. The four stepped back involuntarily. "Dumbledore?" gasped Draco Malfoy. "Professor Dumbledore? What are you doing here?" The others raggedly chorused variants on that basic question.

The old man laughed, a long, loud rolling laugh. It was very like Dumbledore's laugh, but as Harry looked more closely, he began to see differences. This old man was not dressed in the same sort of robes Professor Dumbledore wore, his beard was a purer white and rather thicker than Dumbledore's, and his face was different. The similarities had been so strong at first glance, though, that it was a natural mistake to make.

"Albus will be amused when I tell him this. Apparently we do look more alike than I had ever believed. I am not Albus Dumbledore. I have many names, but you may have heard of me as 'Gandalf.'" Harry's eyes opened wide.

"We're pleased to meet you---er, do you have any title you use, or is just 'Gandalf' all right?" asked Ron.

The old man chuckled. "Gandalf is just right. For full formal purposes, I'm 'Gandalf the Grey,' since each high wizard here in Middle-Earth is identified with a color. Hence, my robes." He made a sweeping gesture at the grey robes he wore. "I do have many names, though. Still, 'Gandalf' I am in this language and in this place, and 'Gandalf' is quite suitable." He gestured into the hall. "Won't you come in? We've been awaiting you eagerly;

young Albus was quite sure that you would be suitable to take up the task our four friends started out with. I will confess that I'm as curious as one of the cats of Queen Beruthiel."

As they filed into Rivendell, Harry looked at his companions. Draco Malfoy looked at ease, only his darting eyes betraying his awe at their surroundings. Ron was openly impressed, staring around as though he was a yokel that had never been anywhere in his life. Hermione had the look in her eye that Harry recognized; it was the look of 'I'm-going-to-find-out-what-I-want-to-know,' and if he'd seen it at Hogwarts, he'd have predicted that Hermione was going to be in the library until physically forced out. Since they weren't at Hogwarts, Harry imagined that Gandalf was in for a long, long session of answering Hermione's questions. Harry grinned to himself. Some things never, ever changed.

Their surroundings were impressive enough to justify Ron's open gaping. The architectural style was not one Harry recognized, although he had been interested in such things since before he found out he was a wizard. It looked like a combination of Gothic, Saracenic and Art Deco, all as if made by incredibly meticulous craftsmen who would spend ten years on a single detail, getting it just exactly right. The overall effect was as beautiful and restful to the eye as the singers they had heard outside had been to the ear, and just as obviously non-Earthly. He heard Malfoy mutter: "This place makes Malfoy Manor look like a rubbish tip," and inwardly agreed---Harry knew of no building on Earth that was anything like this.

The four Hogwarts students and Gandalf entered a large hall, where there was a long table laden with food. Others were there, both elves, humans and others that Harry had never seen the like of; shorter than Harry by at least a head, but broadly built and obviously very strong, with long beards elaborately braided and decorated, dressed in rich clothes. The babble of voices from the gathering was silenced as Gandalf preceded Harry and his companions into the hall.

In the sudden silence, Gandalf's deep voice sounded portentous as he announced: "As promised, they have come. I present to you the four replacements from 'Earth' that Albus Dumbledore sent to us, to replace the hobbits who were originally expected to arrive. We can now begin the meeting."

A tall elf that had been seated on a thronelike chair at one side of the room stood, nodding to the Hogwarts students as they bowed awkwardly. "Welcome to Rivendell, the Last Homely House East of the Sea. My name is Elrond, and this is my home. Please, do come in and introduce yourselves. We have much to discuss in the coming days."

Chapter 3 --- Meetings at Rivendell

In the next few days, the four Hogwarts students found themselves meeting a great many people. Among others, they were introduced to Aragorn son of Arathorn, a tall, dark, saturnine man who had escorted the four hobbits from near their home in a place called the "Shire" to the very borders of Rivendell. The hobbits had disappeared right in front of his eyes, and he still couldn't quite believe what he had seen.

"It was the most extraordinary thing I had ever seen," he told Harry. "We had just won through the Fords, with the Black Riders of Mordor on our heels, when all of a sudden, Frodo and the other hobbits vanished with a bright flash of light! At first, we suspected some trick of Mordor, but it was soon plain to see that the Riders were as puzzled as we were. Then a glittering green skull appeared in the sky, with a snake sticking out of the mouth as though it were a horrible tongue."

"That's the Dark Mark---the Dark Lord's way of showing that he's been at work," murmured Hermione. "He---and his followers, the Death Eaters---sent it into the sky over places where they had been killing people or doing other horrible things."

Draco Malfoy's face twisted. "I should know," he whispered. "I can still see it, in the air over Malfoy Manor, when the Aurors found me there in the ruins."

Aragorn was obviously very curious about what all this byplay meant, but he ignored it. "In any case, when we saw that, and saw that the Nine Riders were just as surprised and confused as we were, we knew that Gandalf would need to know. When we were sure the Riders were gone, we spurred for Rivendell to tell Gandalf, Glorfindel and Elrond."

Hermione looked questioningly at Aragorn. "Excuse me, Aragorn, but you've referred to the 'Nine Riders.' Who or what are they, and why would they be after the Ring?"

Aragorn was obviously startled that anybody wouldn't know, and equally startled to be questioned by a woman. He gave Hermione a searching look, as though seeing her for the first time. "The Nine Riders, Miss Granger, are great kings of Men, from the old times. They were given rings by Sauron, rings controlled by the Great Ring that he lost, and have been warped into his most terrible servants. They cannot die, unless Sauron himself is destroyed. Their great weapon is fear, and only the mightiest can stand against them. They give off cold and despair."

"Think dementors, times about a thousand, Hermione," put in Ron. Hermione looked at him in utter surprise. He held up a book. "Hey, you aren't the only one who studies. Since we got here, I've been reading up on everything I can find about this whole situation. These Nine Riders are to dementors what dementors are to---to boggarts."

"You've got the right idea, Mr. Weasley," interjected Gandalf. Harry jumped, startled, as the four from Hogwarts turned to see Gandalf standing behind them. "According to Albus, 'dementors' are the undying spirits of dark wizards, trapped in the world of the living, feeding off the souls of their victims. The Nine do not feed---their Rings give them their sustenance---but other than that, and the fact that they are peerless warriors, they are much like your world's dementors."

"Oh, joy," muttered Ron. "Dementors! That's all we bloody need, isn't it? Dementors!"

"Are you afraid?" Gandalf leaned close, looking deep into Ron's eyes. "You can turn back at any time, Mr. Weasley, and nobody will think the worse of you. The path you now tread will lead you into places far deeper and more perilous than you can easily imagine, and even I, Gandalf the Grey, would hesitate before going where you and your friends intend to go."

Ron turned white. From somewhere within him, he visibly summoned courage; Harry watched with admiration. "No," whispered Ron, and then, more loudly: "No! I won't turn back! Harry's been my friend for years, and if I turned back, well---" He drew a deep breath. "Well, if I turned back now, if I abandoned Harry, *somebody* would survive. Somebody wearing my body, answering to my name. I don't know if it would be me. I don't know if I would even *like* that person."

Gandalf's eyes widened. He turned to the others. Hermione straightened, looking Gandalf straight in the eye, with a touch of the manner Harry remembered from Potions classes, when she had stood up to Professor Snape. "I'm coming along. I'm going with Harry the whole way. Everything Ron said about what would happen if he turned back---well, you can just apply it to me, too! I'm not saying I'm not scared---I'd have to be a right idiot to not be scared---" her voice nearly broke, and then she went on, "but I couldn't live with myself if I let them face danger alone!" Tears were flowing down her cheeks, but her voice was steady, as she continued: "They've been the best friends I've ever had, and I'd rather die with them than live without them!"

Harry and Ron looked at Hermione as though she'd just grown another head, or kissed Professor Snape. Harry was deeply touched. For ten of the first eleven years of his life, he had never had any friends, and on some level, he had accepted that he deserved this. All the kindness he'd received in the wizarding world, all the adulation for being 'the famous Harry Potter, the Boy who Lived,' had not quite convinced him down deep that he was loved, that he was a worthwhile person, that he amounted to anything. Seeing his friends standing up to a danger that they admitted terrified them, for his sake, meant more to him than he could have ever expressed in words.

"And what of you, Mr. Malfoy?" asked Gandalf, turning that searching gaze on Draco Malfoy. Harry watched curiously. Seeing Draco Malfoy as anything but an enemy and future Death Eater had been a shock, and he was very interested to see what Malfoy would say to the chance to call the whole thing off.

If Draco was impressed by Gandalf, he hid it well. He leaned against one of the curiously-carved pillars of Rivendell, as relaxed-looking as a cat lying in a warm sunbeam, and smiled lazily. "You heard the others. They're all Gryffindors, that is to say, gallant fools who'll rush off to throw themselves into the first dragon's mouth they come to. They need me

along, to keep them alive." Aragorn looked at him in puzzlement. "I'm a Slytherin. We take a different view of things than Gryffindors do. Less idealistic, more pragmatic. To a Slytherin, winning isn't everything---it's the only thing. With me along, they have a better chance to get through to the Cracks of Doom."

"You haven't said that you're doing this because they're your friends," observed Gandalf. Draco shrugged.

"They aren't my friends. Potter, Granger and the Weasel have been at odds with me since we started school. We've done our best to make each others' lives miserable, and I'm quite sure that if I get killed here, they'll not regret it a bit. Still, although I won't say I like them----" his voice suddenly hardened, and he straightened, staring at Gandalf as though the aged wizard was an enemy---"I hate the people who murdered my whole family a thousand times worse, and if helping them destroy the Ring hurts my family's murderers, I'll help them!"

Harry, Ron and Hermione stared at Draco in utter shock. They'd always been on opposite sides from him, whether in classes, at Quidditch, or in extracurricular activities. This was a side of him they'd never seen. Secretly, Harry had to admit that Draco's help would be very useful; nobody had ever said that he was not a very skillful wizard for somebody his age, and his greater familiarity with Dark Magic through lifelong exposure from his father would probably come in handy.

Gandalf and Aragorn seemed to be willing to accept Draco's reasons for staying. "Indeed, one of the Dark Lord's worst weaknesses is that he raises up enemies against himself, merely by being himself," murmured Gandalf. Straightening, Gandalf went on: "In any case, we've got much to discuss here, and there are many people you should meet."

They were introduced to Bilbo Baggins, the uncle of the hobbit who had borne the Ring and been sucked into their world by Voldemort. Never having met a hobbit before, they looked at this short, elderly person with his bare, furry feet curiously. He studied them as intently as they did him, his shrewd eyes twinkling behind his wire-rimmed spectacles.

"My poor nephew," sighed Bilbo. "I should have taken this journey on myself, rather than putting him into peril. Thanks to me, he's now in a madhouse, and not even in his own world. Gandalf says that this 'St. Mungo's' is very good at dealing with magical maladies. I just hope they can restore my nephew and his friends to sanity." He shook his head, and Harry could see a tear trickling down his cheek. "If I had known what trouble that Ring was, I'd have let Gollum keep it."

"What is Gollum?" asked Hermione. "Or who is Gollum? Did you get the Ring from him?"

"Gollum's a twisted, evil creature that lived near a lake in an underground cavern. I found myself near his home, and happened to find the Ring where he had hidden it. Not knowing what it was, I put it in my pocket, and found out later that it could make me invisible. That came in handy many times before *that* trip was through, I can tell you!"

Harry grinned, and reached into his nearby pack. Pulling out his father's precious Invisibility Cloak, he showed it to the aged hobbit. Then, with a flourish, he threw it over

Draco Malfoy, who happened to be standing closest by. "I don't *need* a ring to make myself invisible, do I?" Bilbo gasped in awe.

Draco's voice came from where he'd been standing. "If you're quite finished using me as a visual---or invisual---aid, would you take your cloak back, Potter?" Hermione and Ron snickered.

"At last---the invisible Malfoy. Too bad the cloak doesn't make him inaudible as well, but I suppose we can't have everything," commented Ron, as Hermione sighed stagily. Draco pulled the cloak off and tossed it back to Harry, grinning rather nastily.

"You're just jealous that I'm better-looking than you are, Ron. Not that that's too difficult to be, but---" Harry cut him off just as it looked like they were warming up for a really good quarrel among themselves.

"Enough! If it makes you feel better, Malfoy, I'm sorry I did that without asking you first." Draco gawped at Harry in utter fuddlement. Then his expression changed to one none of the other three had ever seen before.

"You know, Potter---I think that's the first time I ever heard you apologize to me. For what it's worth, I regret a lot of the quarreling we did back at Hogwarts; all I can say in my own defense was that I was younger then, and still thought that my father hung the sun and the moon. I'd also always heard that Mud---er, I mean Muggle-borns," he amended hastily as Hermione sent him a glare, "were a threat to the wizard community because they had loyalties outside of it. Apparently I was wrong, or I was taught wrong. In any case, we're a long, long ways from Hogwarts, and keeping up childish inter-house rivalries, or squabbles about who's more pureblooded than whom, strikes me as stupid."

Neither Harry, Ron or Hermione could think of anything to say to this extraordinary statement. For a few seconds, Harry allowed himself to think of how much it must have cost Draco to make it. He shook his head, trying to rid himself of the strange feeling he was having...how could he sympathize with *Draco Malfoy*?

At last, everybody who was needed had gathered, and they went in to dinner. The food on offer was at least as abundant and delicious as it was at Hogwarts, and Harry found himself quite enjoying his meal; the spices used were ones he could not identify, but the overall effect was incredibly satisfying. As he carved a slice of roast for Hermione, who was sitting between him and Ron and quite enjoying the attention, he smiled at the thought of how Dudley Dursley would have reacted to this feast. *He'd probably have hogged everything in sight, and eaten until his belly was about to burst.* Savoring the delicate flavors, Harry sipped at a glass of excellent mead and listened to the elven singers. Their beautiful, otherworldly song discouraged conversation during the meal itself, leaving everybody free to concentrate on the food.

After the songs ended, Harry found himself talking to some of the other people seated near him. Bilbo introduced Harry and his companions to a couple of the odd-looking people---like short, very wide, big-boned men with deep voices and long, luxuriant beards---that he had noticed before. "This is my old friend and companion, Gloin, from the Lonely Mountain. He was one of the thirteen dwarves that I accompanied to the Mountain, long ago."

The old dwarf bowed politely. "Gloin, at your services. This---"pointing at the younger dwarf standing by, "is my son, Gimli. We are here representing our King, Dain Ironfoot, and seeking counsel of Elrond and Gandalf."

Slightly intimidated by the dwarf's stern demeanor and deep, rumbling voice, Harry bowed, his companions following his lead a half-second later. "Harry Potter, son of James Potter, at your service, Gloin and Gimli." The others murmured their names and slight variants on the polite formula. Gloin and Bilbo nodded in satisfaction.

"What is this 'Lonely Mountain,' and where is it? Are all the people there dwarves?" asked Hermione. Gloin looked at her in approval. He clearly had no problem with women seeking knowledge.

"The Lonely Mountain is north and east of here, near Dale on the Long Lake, the other side of Mirkwood." Hermione nodded, fixing these facts in her capacious memory. "It is the great kingdom of Durin's Folk, the eldest of all the kinships of the dwarves. We were long ago driven from our old home, in Khazad-dum, which the elves call Moria, and settled in the Lonely Mountain. From the Lonely Mountain we were driven by the dragon Smaug, until by the efforts of some of our folk, aided by the good Bowman Bard of Esgaroth and our friend Bilbo, Smaug was killed and our home was freed." Gloin stared at her shrewdly. "I see you love learning and knowledge, in the same way that my people love gold and gems and made-things. Perhaps you're wiser than we are---you need not worry about transporting or hiding your knowledge, and you can give of it endlessly and still have it all." Hermione blushed pink with pleasure. "Perhaps one day you can come to the Mountain, and we can go through the old records of my people's doings." Hermione's eyes lit up.

There were quite a few people there to meet---a young elf named Legolas, a son of the Elf-King of Mirkwood, stuck in Harry's mind, if only because of Bilbo's asides to him about how tough it had been for him, creeping invisibly around the Elf-King's halls while his dwarven companions had been imprisoned by the elves.

"That was a lonely time, Harry," the old hobbit said, shaking his head. "Wearing that ring for as long as I did got to be very uncomfortable, but I didn't dare take it off. I was the only hope my friends had of getting out of those dungeons."

"How did you do that?" asked Draco, admiringly. He had been fascinated by this story ever since Bilbo had begun it. "I know you were invisible, but that didn't help you open locked doors!"

Bilbo preened slightly, his eyes twinkling. "I got hold of some keys, got my friends out, and put them in barrels. We all floated down to Lake-town---that's not far from Dale---and the Lake-folk helped us." He looked up. "Hush---Legolas has something to say."

The elf was explaining to the company that the former bearer of the Ring, Gollum, had escaped from custody in Mirkwood. "We did not fail through lack of watchfulness, Aragorn, but rather over-kindness. We allowed Gollum out under guard occasionally; on the last such occasion, the creature climbed a tree and refused to come down. When darkness fell, dark creatures came from the forest and slew or drove off the guards that were set around the tree he had climbed, and when reinforcements had arrived, he was gone." Bilbo shook his head.

"I'm not happy about that," he muttered. "Gollum's one of the nastiest pieces of work you can find in a month of Sundays, and with his new friends he can get up to all sorts of mischief."

"Maybe he's dead," offered Ron. Bilbo shook his head.

"Much as I'd like to believe that, I don't think it's likely. He's apparently lived for centuries, and he's elusive and hard to kill. Aragorn had a dreadful time tracking him down, and only succeeded through luck."

At last, Gandalf called for quiet. When he had everybody's attention, he turned to Harry. "The time is here, Mr. Potter. Show us the Ring." Slowly, Harry pulled on the fine chain that held the Ring around his neck, and brought it out of his shirt. It glittered in the light, and Harry felt as though it was regarding him malevolently. Murmurs and gasps ran up and down the table.

"Isildur's Bane!" This comment came from a man that Harry hadn't met yet; he looked a little like he could have been a cousin of Aragorn's. He was staring at the Ring wide-eyed.

Gandalf nodded. "Indeed it is, Boromir. The same one Isildur cut from Sauron's hand, the same one that slipped from his hand and betrayed him to the orcs. Long lost, now found again." Boromir shook his head in wonder. "Bilbo Baggins, whom you've all met, held it for quite some time, and then passed to his nephew, Frodo. On his way here, Frodo was pulled into another world, by an evil wizard of that world who wanted the Ring for his own uses. The Ring was intercepted, and our friends here---" indicating Harry, Ron, Hermione and Draco, "have volunteered to bear it, at least for now."

Boromir's eyes lit up. "This Ring---it contains much of Sauron's own power. Would it be possible to use it to overthrow the Lord of Mordor, and free my country of Gondor from his threat forever?"

Gandalf shook his head, as Harry piped up: "If you could sense what I sense about this Ring, Boromir, you wouldn't ever say anything like that. I'm a wizard myself, if not as powerful as Gandalf. My friends and I can sense this thing's evil will. If we, or anybody, tried to claim it and use it as our own, we'd end up twisted and evil."

"Exactly," said Gandalf. "It's not widely known, but Gollum, of whom you've heard, was a hobbit once. He got the Ring by murder, and claimed it as his own for centuries. Even Bilbo here was beginning to feel the effects of the Ring by the time he gave it up---he didn't give it up easily, but he'd begun to feel very uneasy about it. He also wore and used it very little for most of his life, but even so, he began to feel---"

"Like butter spread over too much bread," supplied Bilbo. "The thing began to weigh on my mind---it seemed to be like an eye staring at me." He shook his head. "Gandalf tells me that one reason the Ring didn't affect me as badly as Gollum was because, in acquiring it, I pitied Gollum and spared his life. The other times the Ring had changed hands, it had done so with violence---Isildur cut it from Sauron's hand, it slipped from Isildur's finger and betrayed him to his killers, and Gollum killed his friend who had found it in the mud of the river."

"If you, or any of the Great and the Wise, tried using this Ring, in the end you'd be another Dark Lord. The only thing to do is to destroy it. We can't ship it over Sea; those who live there would not receive it, and as long as it exists, Sauron's power cannot be completely

broken. It must be destroyed, and the only way to do that is to cast it into the fire where it was made---at Mount Doom, Oroduin, in Sauron's own country of Mordor."

"That would be a perilous journey." Boromir looked doubtful. "And who will go there---go into the heart of the Dark Lord's own country, to destroy this Ring? I'd be willing to take the chance, for the sake of Gondor." Boromir looked around the table. "But who can bear the Ring? These four?" He snorted. "Why, they are but children, and one of them, a mere *girl!*"

Harry gave Boromir a furious glare. More impulsive than Harry, Ron snapped: "Children, are we? Can children of 'Gondor,' whatever that may be, do this?" Pointing his wand at the Gondorian, he snapped "*Expelliarmus!*" Boromir stared in shock as his sword flew from the sheath and into the air, to be caught by Ron. He looked at the weapon. "Not a bad toad-jabber, this. Want it back?" He handed it back to its owner, smiling nastily. "Swords are all right, for people who can't *really* protect themselves, but give me a wand and I'll make sure that anybody bothering me *or* my friends wishes he had never been born!"

In a shocked silence, Ron sat back down, his friends smiling at him. Draco Malfoy leaned across to slap Ron's back gently. "Way to go, Weasley! Don't let the Muggles push us around!" Ron grinned at Draco, as Harry reflected on the vagaries of human nature. Ron and Draco had, as Draco had said, been at each other's throats since their first meeting. However, being lumped in as "children" unworthy of consideration had given those old enemies a common enemy. Ron was less proud of his pure wizard ancestry than Draco had been, but being sneered at by Muggles irritated him, too.

Hermione gave Boromir a poisonously sweet smile; had she smiled that way at Harry, Harry would have been backing away and making nice. The last time he had seen her looking at anybody that way, she had ended up turning a Slytherin girl's hair green for calling her a Mudblood. "Before you start in on the fact that I'm a girl, let's get something straight, Lord Boromir. I'm a girl. I've been one all my life. I wouldn't change that for anything---where I come from, we have a saying: 'Girls rule, boys drool.' Magic doesn't care whether I have to squat when I pee, and courage doesn't only come to men. If anything, I'm probably better at spellcasting than Ron is. Would you like a demonstration?" She raised her wand, smiling ominously, and Gandalf intervened hastily.

"That won't be necessary, Miss Granger. I'm sure that Lord Boromir didn't mean any harm or any disrespect to you. You and your three friends have volunteered already to carry the Ring to Mount Doom. Nobody here can doubt your courage." Gandalf looked around, to meet averted gazes everywhere. "I'll be going along, as well. Who else wishes to accompany us?"

After a little more discussion, the composition of the group was settled. Besides Harry, Ron, Hermione, Draco and Gandalf, it included representatives from the Dwarves of the Lonely Mountain, and the Elves of Mirkwood. Gimli son of Gloin and Legolas Greenleaf would be accompanying the company, as would Aragorn son of Arathorn and, to Harry's surprise, Boromir.

"I'm the son of the Ruling Steward of Gondor, Mr. Potter," explained Boromir. "We've been the main shield of the West against Mordor for centuries, and I'm willing to do anything to see that threat taken away from my city forever."

A feeling of foreboding came over Harry, and he sighed. "Well," he said into a sudden silence, "we've decided who's going along. The sooner we get this started, the sooner we'll be

done. I'm for bed, myself. I want to make an early start---the days aren't getting longer, and I want to be on the road by daybreak."

"Harry Potter is wise," said Elrond, as the company arose. "Albus Dumbledore chose well, when he chose his Ringbearer."

Chapter 4 -- *'Tis Evil In The Wild To Fare*

As a gray dawn was breaking, early the next morning, the company set out from Rivendell. Each of them was carrying a pack. Elrond and Bilbo were at the door to see them off.

"Goodbye!" said Bilbo. "I doubt that you'll be able to keep diaries, out there in the Wild, but do try to remember everything so that when you get back I can put it all down in my book!" Harry, Ron, Draco and Hermione all shook his hand; Harry had developed a great liking for the old hobbit in the days of their acquaintance. In an odd way, Bilbo reminded Harry of Professor Dumbledore---you always knew where you were with him, and that counted for a great deal. Bilbo gave them a worried look. "I wish the season were different---as the old rhyme goes:

*"When winter first begins to bite,
and stones crack in the frosty night,*

*When pools are black and trees are bare,
'tis evil in the Wild to fare."*

"Farewell, my friends," said Elrond. "I have one last thing to say. This is the Ringbearer's quest; the others of you can turn back at any time. To the Ringbearer, I must say this: Don't throw the Ring away, or give it to the servants of the Enemy, or even let anybody else see or handle it---unless it's one of the Company, and even then, only do it if absolutely necessary."

After a few more farewells, the party set forth, heading up the ridges east of Rivendell. At the top of the ridge, Harry, Ron and Hermione turned for a last look at the Last Homely House. Below them, they could see its lights twinkling through the trees in the dim uncertain light of an early-winter dawn. Hermione shivered. "Well, that's probably the last of civilization we're going to see for quite a while. If we ever get back to Britain, I'm going to strangle that idiot Frodo for waiting so long to set out, instead of leaving as soon as Gandalf was overdue."

Harry shook his head in foreboding, as they turned to follow the rest of the Company. They had all looked at maps while they were at Rivendell, and what lay ahead did not look like it would be easy to cross, even without servants of the Enemy scouring the countryside for any trace of them. Speed and secrecy and sheer audacity were their best defenses.

They followed the Road to the fords of Bruinen, wading across in the shallows.

Harry was glad of his Earthly boots, with their gripping soles, as he picked his way through the swift-moving water; one or two of the locals weren't as lucky, and fell or sat down with a splash. After crossing the river, they turned south to follow the little-known paths through the moors. This country was little-travelled by anybody, and few servants of Sauron had ever been seen there.

For days they tramped along through the moors and gorse in single-file. Gandalf and Aragon went first, picking the trail they were to follow, with Gimli behind them, and then the four from Hogwarts. Behind them came Boromir, with Legolas taking the rear to search the landscape with his keen eyes. The weather was bleak and cloudy, with a sad wind sighing among the heather; it sometimes made Harry quite homesick for Britain in a way that sunny, cheerful weather wouldn't have.

At first, the Hogwarts contingent slowed the party slightly, as they got used to tramping all day and broke in their new boots. Every evening, Gandalf would rub liniment on aching muscles and check their feet for signs of blisters or other injuries. After a few days, though, Harry found that he was getting used to marching all day, and he noticed that the others seemed to be complaining less and needing fewer breathers.

Harry was surprised at how well Draco Malfoy took to the whole situation. Limber and lean, he easily kept up with the company, and only direct commands from Gandalf or Aragorn would get him to admit that he was tired or that he hurt. Rubbing his aching calves one evening, Harry gave his old rival a very appraising look. He had never seen Draco so cheery in all his life, even though his feet were soaking in a pannikin of water while they waited for Gimli to finish cooking the evening's meal over one of Hermione's magical fires.

"Draco," began Harry. Draco looked over at him, cocking an eyebrow in surprise. The Hogwarts students hadn't spoken much to anybody, the first few days of the trip. The bare countryside rather spooked Hermione; she was a daughter of the same sort of London outer suburbs as Harry was, and the wilderness made her vaguely uneasy. Ron was just homesick. "Malfoy, you seem to be really taking to this whole place. Why?"

Draco smiled, a more relaxed, easier smile than Harry had ever seen on his face. It was like the sun shining through a dark cloud, and all of a sudden, Harry understood why so many girls at Hogwarts seemed to like him. "Oh, I *like* it here! Malfoy Manor's in the Northumbrian moors, miles from any town, and when I was little, my mother and I would go up onto the moors and hike for miles. We'd have a picnic, fly a wizard kite or two, she'd sing to me and play her lute, and we'd go back to the Manor in the evening. This place is like a bit of home."

Harry considered this bit of news. He had never really thought to wonder what life had been like for Draco Malfoy prior to Hogwarts, but Draco had been as much a product of his family and environment as Harry, or Ron, or Hermione. "Did your father ever go along? I'll tell you the truth---that sounds like heaven, compared with what I had to put up with."

Draco's expression darkened. "No. To him, it was 'timewasting Muggle-imitating rubbish,' just like a lot of other things were. Anything that wasn't about magic, or gaining power, was timewasting Muggle rubbish as far as Dad was concerned. Besides, out on the moors, Mum and I could get away from him for a while; it was like heaven, out there with the wind and each other, and no 'Malfoy family expectations' to live up to." Draco gave Harry a considering look in his turn. "Still and all, even with my father leaning over you and breathing down your neck, I'd bet you'd have swapped with me any day and twice on Sunday."

Harry nodded. "No matter how badly your father thought of Muggles, I can tell you, the Dursleys were even worse." Draco's eyes widened as Harry went on. "They made me sleep in a closet under the stairs; they treated me like dirt while they spoilt[my horrible cousin Dudley rotten---he'd throw literal tantrums if he didn't get more presents at his

birthday than he had the previous birthday, and he kept count, believe you me!" Draco went white in sheer shock. "His mum fed him up like a Christmas goose, but no matter how fat he got his mother insisted that he was just a growing boy who 'needed his nourishment,' even when he was almost as heavy as---as Hagrid!"

Suddenly, Draco giggled. He shook his head at Harry's glare. "No, Potter, I'm not laughing at you. I'm just remembering something I heard down in Hogsmeade at the Three Broomsticks. I was down there with Crabbe and Goyle, looking for something for my mum for Christmas, and I heard Hagrid telling Madam Rosmerta about all the trouble he had getting your Hogwarts letter to you. I didn't understand about 'gave that great whining lump a curly tail---tried to make him into a pig, but he was so much like one already that the tail was the best I could do.'" Draco looked at Harry, eyes dancing. "Did he really do that?"

Harry nodded, smiling broadly at the memory. "Sure did. The thing you've got to remember about the Dursleys, Draco, is that they're absolutely down on wizards and magic and anything to do with it---sort of like Voldemort, or your father, in reverse. That was why they treated me the way they did. When my Hogwarts letters started coming, Uncle Vernon---Dudley's father---took us from place to place to try to get away from them, and finally out to a hut on a rock in the sea. Hagrid had to come out there and personally hand me my letter, and when Uncle Vernon said something about 'not paying to let some old fool teach me magic tricks,' Hagrid blew up, grabbed his umbrella---he keeps the pieces of his old wand in there, you know---and tried to turn Dudley into a pig."

Draco collapsed, giggling helplessly at the thought. "Oh, if my father had only *been* there!" Sitting up, he wiped tears of laughter from his eyes. "My father *was* kind of like your Uncle Vernon, but in reverse. To him, 'Muggle' and 'white trash' were one and the same thing. If he'd been there, even though he doesn't think much of Hagrid---frankly, he's got a point, you must admit; Hagrid's a little short in the commonsense department---your uncle and cousin would have been turned into newts." Draco winked at Harry. "And, no, they would *not* have 'got better,' either. I saw that movie, too, you know."

By this time, Ron and Hermione had come up. They had been standing there silently, slightly shocked by the sight of Harry and Draco talking easily, like old friends. Ron turned to Hermione. "After this, nothing could shock me." He shook his head. "I'd have been no less surprised if you'd tried to seduce Professor Snape."

Hermione shook her head. "It'd never happen; no girl *wants* to have to dress up as a potion recipe, after all." Ron snickered, and Hermione went on: "I'd've once said, and not all that long ago, either, that seeing those two getting along so well was about as likely as you telling Professor Snape that you liked him so much, you wanted him to give you more homework, permanent detention in the Potions lab, and take a hundred points off Gryffindor."

By this time, Draco and Harry knew they were there. Harry looked up and smiled. "Sit down and make yourselves at home, you two. We were just discussing home, and Malfoy and I have something in common that you don't share." His smile twisted. "At least, I *know* you don't share it, Ron, and I sincerely hope you don't, Hermione."

"What's that?" asked Ron, settling down Indian-fashion. "Other than Quidditch, I can't think of two wizard-born students who have less in common."

"A thoroughly *horrid* home life, Ron." said Harry quietly. Ron opened his mouth, visibly reconsidered what he was about to say, and shut it tightly.

#

Two weeks from Rivendell, the weather took a turn for the better, and the sun came out, pale and weak as the British sun in winter, but welcome nonetheless. Peering off into the distance, Harry could see mountains raising themselves above the horizon. "What mountains are those?" he asked.

Ready with facts as always, Hermione answered, peering at a map and at the mountains alternately. "Those have to be the Misty Mountains. I'm not sure how far south we've come, though, so I can't really say more." With the familiar lust for knowledge lighting her large brown eyes, she turned to Gandalf. "Can you show me where we are on this map, Prof--I mean, Gandalf?"

Gandalf leaned down and peered at the map, then stabbed a long, bony finger at one point. "We're on the edge of Eregion, or Hollin as men call it. Right here. We've come forty-five leagues as the crow flies, but the actual distance we've walked has been much greater."

"I need no map to know those mountains," said Gimli. He stared off at the three tallest peaks, miles away, with an unfathomable expression on his face. "I've only seen them once before in the flesh, but every dwarf knows them. They're called Baraz, Zirak, and Shathur in our language, and below them is Khazad-Dum, which was once *the* great city of the dwarves. The elves call it Moria, which means "black pit," with a sour look at Legolas, "and the Misty Mountains divide near there." Legolas returned his glare, but under Gandalf's eye, did nothing more.

"We can get through past Caradhras, near the three peaks, to the valley of Azanulbizar, the one no dwarf can forget, the one the men call Dimrill Dale. The Silverlode River rises there, in Mirrormere Lake, and we can follow it down out of the mountains, and through the secret woods---to the end of the journey," Gandalf supplied. Satisfied for the moment, Hermione put away her map. Gandalf went on: "We can rest here for a day or so. This land still bears the traces of the Elves that lived here, and that's a good thing."

"I can feel it, too," said Legolas, "but these Elves are a folk that we Wood-elves know little about. I can hear the stones lamenting them---*deep they delved us, well they wrought us, high they built us, but they are gone.* These Elves left Middle-Earth long ago."

That morning, they built a larger fire than usual, not needing Hermione's services, and had a better time than they had had for some time. Harry noticed that although everybody else was more relaxed than they had been, Aragorn looked as though something was bothering him. Leaving the others, he went to stand beside the Ranger, as he stood silently looking out over the moors.

"Something the matter?" asked Harry. Aragorn gave him a shrewd look.

"You don't miss much, do you, Mr. Potter? Yes. It's not that I miss the east wind, but when I've been through here before, I could hear the birds and beasts, especially the birds---they're

thick here. Today, though, I don't hear anything at all but our own group. I don't know what it means, but I don't like it at all."

"Maybe we should be quieter," muttered Harry. "I mean, we've been pushing hard ever since Rivendell; I hate to be a wet blanket, but I'd rather be a wet blanket than a dead Ringbearer."

That morning, Ron took the first watch, but Aragorn chose to join him. After the others fell asleep, the silence grew and grew around them. The deep, regular breathing of the others, the slight noises as Ron changed position, and even the rustle of his clothes as he moved seemed uncannily loud in the stillness. In the southern sky, Ron spotted what looked like a black cloud, growing larger and larger. Soon he could see that it was no cloud, but a huge flock of birds.

"What is it, Aragorn?" he whispered, pointing. Aragorn's eyes grew wide. He shoved Ron down into the shadow of a nearby holly bush.

"Lie still and be quiet!" commanded the ranger, as a detachment of birds broke off from the main body and sped over the very ridge they were sitting on. They looked very like crows to Ron, and he sensed something wrong about them. They flew overhead, thick enough to darken the very sunlight, and Ron heard a harsh croak as they went past. Aragorn held Ron down until the last of the birds were well out of sight over the ridge, and then he let Ron up and roused Gandalf.

"We've been overflowed by huge flocks of crows, including one group that went right over us here," reported Aragorn, "and they aren't local birds. Those were *crebain* from Fangorn and Dunland, and although they may have been trying to get away from something, I think they were spying. I've also seen too many hawks flying high overhead. This area's dangerous; it's being watched. As soon as it's dark, we'd better be moving on."

"Well, if this area's being watched, then so is the Redhorn Gate, which I had hoped to use," said Gandalf. "Getting past there without being spotted will be difficult, but we'll face that when the time comes. You're right; we'll have to move on as soon as it gets dark."

"If the fire had been smokier, it might have drawn the birds' attention. From now on, we'll have to have a cold camp." Said Aragorn. "We'll have to put this one out and not light another."

"Well, *that's* rich," snarled Hermione. Like the others, she had heard the news when they awoke in the late afternoon. "And all because of a bunch of bloody birds, Ahriman take them! Can't we use magical fires, the kind we've been using?" Harry knew that she was quite proud of her ability at lighting and sustaining magical fire, and it had come in handy repeatedly on their journey. Gandalf shook his head.

"No, Miss Granger. This is not an insult to your skills or your efforts; your fires have been a great comfort to us, and I don't want to cold-camp any more than the rest of you do. At least we're heading south, and the weather will be warmer."

"Too warm for comfort, or I miss my guess," drawled Draco. "Oh---did you mean *weather*?" He gave the others an overly innocent look. Harry glowered at him.

For the rest of that day, they lay low, keeping a sharp eye out as the flights of birds passed by overhead. When it got dark, they struck out again, heading for Caradhras while they could still see it by the light of the setting sun reflected from its sides. The stars came out as they trudged along, until Aragorn found them what seemed to be an old road. Under the light of the full moon, the stones they passed among seemed to be like old ruins, long abandoned by their builders.

Late at night, not long before daylight, Harry looked up at the night sky. He saw something moving overhead, occulting the stars as it passed by. "What was that that just flew past?" he asked Gandalf in a low tone.

"It may be only a bit of cloud," answered Gandalf in the same low tones. Harry thought he sounded doubtful.

Aragorn snorted softly. "For a cloud, it was moving very fast---and it was not going in the same direction as the wind is." Harry shivered, pulling his cloak closer about him.

#

Three days later, with the weather turning for the worse again, they were headed up the slopes of Caradhras. Harry was very glad of his thick woolen cloak, since it was now very cold and bitter, with a lowering sky and an icy wind blowing. Draco looked very worried about the weather. He looked up at the sky, frowning in thought, as they trudged along.

"There's a blizzard coming, or I miss my guess," he explained when Harry asked him what was wrong. "I'm from Northumbria, remember? In the North Country, we do get more snow than you do down in the Home Counties,---or the West Country," as he gave Ron a glance. "Believe me, though, when I tell you I hope I'm wrong this time. Blizzards are nothing to take chances with. I wish we were under shelter." In the lead, Gandalf and Aragorn were having a low-voiced argument about which path they should take.

"The Redhorn Gate is almost certainly being watched," said Gandalf. "We'll have to take the high pass, unless we go by the dark road." Harry's ears pricked up; he had heard enough of their argument to know that Aragorn did not like the idea of this "dark road" one bit. For that matter, he, Harry Potter, didn't much care for it---it didn't sound at all like fun. He'd developed a solid respect for the saturnine Ranger, and valued his opinions.

Boromir spoke up. "I've got experience with snow, and high places, and before we leave the wooded areas, I'm going to suggest that we take along a supply of firewood. Each of us can carry a few sticks. I know that fire may be dangerous, but if it's a choice between fire and freezing to death, I'll take the fire and whatever danger comes with it."

Harry and Hermione went off together to pull down some dead branches. Harry noticed that Hermione was beginning to show the strain of their journey. She had lost some weight---why had he never noticed how beautiful the bone structure of her face was, anyway?---and her skin was chapped and raw from being in the open all the time. She noticed him looking at her, and grinned, the old flashing grin that flickered across her face so quickly that if you weren't looking at the exact time, you'd miss it.

"This is tougher than a N.E.W.T. exam on Potions, with Professor Snape himself grading it," grunted Hermione, as they joined forces to pull a large dead branch from a tree. "To think that

we could have done this in the summer! When I get back to Britain, Frodo Baggins is going to get the kicking of his life from me for delaying his start for so long."

Harry shook his head. "Professor Dumbledore may have told me more than he told you about his condition. If he's in any shape to know you're kicking him, or why, it'll be a major medical miracle. And you wouldn't do it, anyway."

Hermione shook her head as she picked up her half of the branch. "I know, I know. Still, it makes this easier, thinking about it." She scowled at the sky. "I wonder if this blizzard's natural, or is the Dark Lord causing it somehow? Gandalf told me that Sauron's incredibly powerful, even without---" She stopped speaking suddenly. They took their wood back to the rest of the party.

#

As they climbed up into the mountains, snow started falling, and Harry noticed that Draco looked worried. He wasn't the only one, either. Hermione and Ron were not happy about the situation, and Aragorn was definitely uneasy.

"I knew snow was a possibility," said Aragorn, when Harry asked him about it, "but it isn't as dangerous as---other things. Also, we're far enough south that it shouldn't have come on this hard, not this far down in the mountains." He brushed snow off his broad-brimmed hat. "They say that the Dark Lord can control weather in the mountains that border his country, but I've never heard that his arm was long enough to do it here."

"There are other things in the world than Sauron, Aragorn." Said Gandalf. "Many of them don't love humans, or anything on two legs, and still are not in league with Sauron." Harry listened to the wind. Was it his imagination, or did it sound like malicious voices, crying out or laughing diabolically?

The party slogged on upwards for a while, but the weather only grew worse and worse, until it was a full-scale blizzard. Huddling deep in his thick woolen cloak, Harry wished bitterly it had a fur lining. Beside him, he could hear Ron's teeth chattering as he stumbled through the snow. Hermione gave a squeak as she fell down, only to be helped back to her feet by Draco.

"There you go, Granger. Can't lose our firestarter, can we?" Harry peered through the gloom and swirling snow toward Draco. Standing there with his hood thrown back, Draco looked completely at home in the snowstorm. His fair hair whipped around his fine-featured face as the wind tore at him.

"You weren't lying, when you told me that you were used to this, were you, Draco?" asked Harry. Draco shook his head as Hermione let go of his arm with a nod of thanks.

"We'd better stop soon and find someplace sheltered to lie up, Harry. I've seen worse blizzards, but not many, and I wasn't far from Malfoy Manor." When Harry passed this idea along to the rest of the company, he received unanimous agreement. Even the tough Gimli had had enough of trying to travel through the storm. When they found a spot where the cliff face gave them shelter from the prevailing wind, they huddled there and piled their wood up.

Hermione performed her charm, and soon they had a crackling fire. Gandalf nodded approvingly.

"We need this to stay alive," he told them, clapping a blushing Hermione on the shoulder, "but if I had used my magic to light it, it would have betrayed our position to anybody with the right sort of eyes to see for hundreds of miles around." They huddled around the fire, and each of them got a mouthful of the elves' *miruvor*---Harry thought of it as a much-improved Pepperup Potion. One mouthful, and he felt a whole lot better. He could see that it was a lifesaver for the others as well; Ron had been shivering uncontrollably for some time, and Draco had been coughing a nasty wracking cough. Hermione huddled close to him, and they threw their cloaks over each other, sharing their body heat to survive. They stared into the fire as the snow continued to fall.

Finally, toward morning, the snow stopped falling, but the weather still looked distinctly threatening. Looking down, Harry could see that the path they had taken up the mountain was shrouded in thick snow. The tops of the mountains were still hidden in ugly clouds.

The party decided quickly that going down was the best alternative, but this would not be easy. The snow on the downward path had drifted higher than a tall man, and breaking through would be a real problem. Legolas, who had not been much affected by the storm, volunteered to go over the snow, not sinking in, and scout around to see how far the high drifts went.

When Legolas had left, the others looked at each other. Boromir and Aragorn volunteered to break a path through the snow with their bodies, since they were the biggest and strongest people there. Ron shook his head.

"Not a bad idea, but we don't want to waste our strength---anybody's strength---unnecessarily," he explained, pulling out his wand. "Malfoy, you're from an area where it snows regularly. Shouldn't there be a charm, or something, that'll move this stuff out of our way?"

Draco gave Ron a strange look. "Surprising, the things you think of, Weasley. I was just remembering how we used to clear out snow at Malfoy Manor." At Ron's questioning look, Draco grinned. "Sent the house-elves to do it, of course, you prat!" He looked at the snow carefully. "Although, it occurs to me that a good Banishing Charm might be just the ticket here. You all know it, I know."

"That we do," said Hermione. She pointed her wand at the drifts, and snapped: "*Expellanix!*" The snow leaped up in front of her, then settled back, leaving about four feet of the pathway free. She walked forward, pointed her wand, and repeated her charm. Again, the snow cleared out of her path, and she turned to the others. Smiling, she said: "Well, come along, boys! My classmates and I can take turns, getting this stuff out of the way. Those storm clouds won't wait all day for us, you know!"

Progress was slow as they made their way down the mountain. When Hermione tired, Ron took over, blasting the snow off the path with the Snow-Banishing Charm. As they plodded forward, Legolas came back, his eyes widening as he saw how they were getting out of the snow.

"I'd never have believed it," he said to himself. Standing lightly on the snow, he looked offensively unaffected by the plight of the rest of the party, and Harry, who had just started taking his turn at Banishing the snow, felt an urge to kick him. "At least, I have good news to report. Not too far ahead, on the other side of a big drift, the snow tapers off quickly, until it's just barely covering the ground."

"So, it was Caradhras," muttered Gimli. He had been keeping a safe distance from the Hogwarts students' display of magic, and now, at the rear of the party, he turned and peered upward at the ominous-looking mountains. "That was no natural storm; it was the mountain. It hates elves---and dwarves."

When they had finally won through out of the snow, Harry looked downward, wiping frost from his glasses. In the tumbled hills below them, he could see birds flying around, below where they were standing. He pointed, and Gandalf came to see what he had spotted.

"I see them, Mr. Potter, but we can't do anything about them. We can't go up through the mountains, so we'll have to go down." Defeated and deflated, the party stumbled along toward the safer lowlands.

Chapter 5 -- -Into the Doors of Durin

As soon as they were out of the worst of the mountains, the Fellowship considered what to do next. The question of returning to Rivendell was brought up by Gandalf before anybody else could, only to be decisively shot down. "If we return to Rivendell, having set out, we could not leave again, and soon Rivendell would be under siege." He stared into everybody's eyes in turn. "The Ringwraiths are terrible foes now, but they're shadows of what they'd be if their Master got the Ring back."

"Very well," drawled Draco, "but we can't go over the mountains, at least not this late in the year. Granger, you're right---when we get back to Britain, remind me to accompany you when you throttle Frodo for setting out so late." He smiled rather nastily. "You're a Gryffindor, after all---we Slytherins know *how* to throttle." Hermione looked at him carefully, then nodded solemnly. Harry had the impression that Hermione had re-evaluated Draco, and come to a different conclusion about him than she had before.

"If we can't go over the mountains, can we go around them?" asked Ron. "According to this map I was looking at, we can get into the lands of the Lords of Rohan that way, and I was told they're friendly."

Boromir perked up at this idea. "The men of Rohan *are* friendly, and we would be passing close by Gondor that way. I like this idea!" Gandalf shook his head.

"It takes us too close to Saruman, and since he's turned evil, I don't want the Ring getting near him. Also, we're pressed for time pretty badly. There is a short way through these mountains--the old dwarven road through Moria."

"Moria!" gasped Boromir. "Moria's not much better than the Dark Lord's own dungeons! There are orcs there, thousands of them, or so I've been told."

"You don't know what you're talking about, Boromir," said Gandalf. "I'm the only one here who's been in the Dark Lord's dungeons, and that was only in Dol Guldur in southern Mirkwood---even I wouldn't try going into Barad-dur itself. Also, after the great battles of Azanulbizar and the Lonely Mountain, there shouldn't be nearly as many orcs there as formerly. We might even meet Balin, Bilbo Baggins' old comrade, there---he was going to try to set up the old dwarven kingdom in Moria, and he may still be there, in his ancestors' halls."

"Well, I'd like to go there," said Gimli, looking more enthusiastic than Harry had ever seen him. "I'd like to see the halls of Durin, if you can find the doors."

"Excellent!" said Gandalf. "A dwarf will be less confused in dwarven ruins than men or elves would be---and I have been in Moria before, looking for Thrain, years ago."

Aragorn looked very bleak. "I've been there, too, but I don't like thinking about it, and I'd rather not go back."

Legolas voted against going to Moria, and finally it came down to the Hogwarts students. "The Ringbearer and his companions should decide. What do you think, Mr. Potter?" asked Gandalf. The others awaited their decision respectfully, which was a little strange to Harry---

even Dumbledore usually did not treat him as an adult, much less an equal. Harry stood a little straighter, and gathered his friends with a gesture.

"First, I want to hear from Hermione---she's the one who's got the best head for facts. Hermione, what do you think? Do you think Moria's a good way to get through the mountains?" Hermione looked very thoughtful as she got out one of her books and began leafing through the notes she had scribbled in hours of research at Rivendell.

"It looks to me like unless we run into serious trouble in Moria, we should be able to get through in a few days. There was a dwarven road through the Lands Under The Mountains in the old days, and in those days it was a major trade artery." Gimli smiled at her praise of his people's work. "If we can get into the place, we can at least see if we can get through. If nothing else, we'll be out of the weather there, and light will be no problem with four of us carrying wands. We've also got magical torches that we brought from home."

Draco and Ron had nothing to say, deferring to Hermione, and Harry turned to Gandalf, saying "Moria it is, then. How far is the nearest gate?"

"Fifteen or twenty miles, depending on whether you mean in a straight line or going over land," said Gandalf.

In the distance, they heard the howls of wolves. At this, the whole party came to full alert. "The hunt is up!" snapped Gandalf. "The wargs---the evil wolves of Sauron---are west of the Mountains, and on our trail! The nearest door into Moria is fifteen miles away as the crow flies, twenty or so by land."

"We'll have to start as soon as it's light," said Boromir. "We don't know if there are orcs out, but we now know that the wolves are."

"Where there's wargs, there are orcs," said Aragorn.

At Gandalf's command, the company set up a defensive position on a small hilltop. Since the wolves could track them easily by smell, Hermione was permitted to build a fire, and the ones not on guard dozed off around it. Harry was on guard when eyes started shining out of the night, reflecting the fire. "Wolves!" he cried, and the others turned to as the wolves' leader, a huge he-wolf, howled long and dismally. Gandalf stepped forward.

"Gandalf is here! Fly, Hound of Sauron, or I will fry you!" he shouted. The wolf snarled, and leaped---and fell, with Legolas' arrow through his chest. The rest of the pack fled, but the Fellowship kept careful watch nonetheless. The night wore on, with the waning moon setting, shining through the scudding clouds. Harry drew his cloak closer and shivered. He was sleepy and homesick; he thought he'd cheerfully ask Professor Snape for a permanent detention in the Potions lab, if he could just let this burden go and be back at Hogwarts. Beside him, Draco, Ron and Hermione watched the night, their faces set and grim, wands ready in their hands.

Toward morning, the Wargs gathered and attacked. Suddenly Harry was startled to full wakefulness by a chorus of dreadful howls, as the company was attacked by long gray shapes leaping out of the night. Legolas' bow twanged again and again, and Gimli's axe struck home on Warg after Warg, while the two men struck at their tormentors with their long swords.

The four from Hogwarts had their hands full, even with the help of the others. Hermione struck one wolf with a *Conjunctivus* curse, causing it to break off its attack and paw at its eyes in pain as it howled, until one of its pack-mates attacked it. Ron used Binding Charms to tie several wolves up as they leaped for him, while Draco stood firm as a rock, watching a huge she-wolf coming for him. When he judged the moment was right, he raised his wand, screamed "*Avada Kedavra!*" and the wolf died in a green flash of light. Harry Levitated a wolf far into the air before ending the spell, sending the beast crashing to the ground and breaking its legs.

Gandalf strode forth to meet the wolves, a burning brand from the fire in his hand. Throwing it into the air, he spoke words of power, and the tree above him burst into flame, the fire lighting the night as the fire spread to the other trees around them. Legolas' last arrow burst into flame as it sped to its target in the throat of a wolf. The other wolves, having had their fill of combat, fled.

In the morning, they couldn't find any sign of the bodies of the ones they'd killed, and all of Legolas' arrows were scattered around in pristine shape, save only one that had lost its head. Gandalf shook his head at Harry's questioning glance. "These weren't just hungry beasts that thought we were easy prey," he said. "Let's go on." Harry shuddered.

* * * * *

As they travelled, the weather cleared. Harry looked up at the light-blue sky, wondering if the weather was clearing so that someone---or something---could track them more easily.

"How far is it to Moria?" asked Ron.

"Not far, but the road may be winding. Aragorn's never been here, and it's been many years since I've walked these lands," said Gandalf. He pointed into the distance, to a line of cliffs. In the middle of them, Harry could see a great grey wall.

"I'm not sure if I hope that the doors to Moria are lost for good, or that we can get into them," muttered Boromir. The Gondorian had been unhappy about the road the company was taking, and Harry could tell that he wasn't happy about going into the dwarven ruins. Legolas and Aragorn also looked uneasy. Gimli, on the other hand, was so eager to get there that he was out in front of the rest of the company, right alongside Gandalf.

By the side of a dried-up stream, they found a ruined road. Gandalf was pleased. "We're on the right trail. This is---or used to be---the Sirannon river. I don't know what's happened to it."

Finally, several hours later, they found themselves standing by the shores of a dark, still lake. "Well, now we know what happened to the Sirannon," said Ron. "I wonder how the stream was blocked, in the first place?" Harry looked out at the lake. For some reason, he just didn't like the look of it.

"We'll have to go around, unless we want to swim," said Draco. He wrapped his arms around himself, shivering slightly. "I don't know about you, but I don't fancy that idea above half." Out in the middle of the lake, a bubbling noise and ripples disturbed the still waters.

Some time later, after going around the north end of the lake, they were standing in front of the cliffs, among several dead holly-trees. The path they had had to take was tricky; narrow

and often choked with rock. Gandalf, at least, was pleased. "We've found what we were looking for. This is the end of the elvish road. Holly-trees were one of their symbols."

"So where's the door?" Ron looked at the cliffside curiously. Harry examined it closely, and couldn't see any sign of a door, or anything like one. To his eye, it was utterly untouched by the hand of man---or elf, or dwarf. Curiously, he took out his wand and muttered "*Aparecium!*" The party gasped as silvery lines appeared on the side of the cliff, outlining a door. Above the door, words were written in an alphabet Harry couldn't read.

"The Doors of Durin, Lord of Moria. Speak, friend, and enter." read Draco. Harry, Ron and Hermione were no less startled than the others. Gandalf looked closely at the lines of writing.

"You're precisely right, Mr. Malfoy. Apparently they weren't lying when I was told that you knew the elvish tongues." Gandalf turned back to the doors. "Now, the question is---how do we open them? There's probably a password, if we just knew it."

"Let me try," said Ron. Pulling out his wand, he shouted "*Alohomora !*" to no avail. Harry, Hermione and Draco stepped up, and they all tried at once. Nothing happened.

"Let's think about this," said Hermione. While Gandalf tried several spells of his own, she gathered the other Hogwarts students together off a little to one side. "Now, this password would have to be something that could be figured out---they wouldn't want to leave their people trapped outside, if the gates were shut and they needed to get in right *now*. So-o-o, I'd bet almost anything that the password is out there, if we can *just* figure out what it is." She looked closely at Draco, who returned her gaze with a slight smile. "Can you tell me exactly what it says on those doors?"

"I already *said* 'The Doors of Durin, Lord of Moria. Speak, friend, and enter.'" Draco jumped up onto a rock by the side of the lake, balancing easily on the top despite the fact that it was slippery and very narrow. Harry wondered if Draco did have a streak of elvish ancestry in him somewhere; of course, the elves of Arda and the house-elves he had known in his own world were as different as night and day.

"Is that all it says?" asked Hermione. Harry could hear Gandalf, still trying various opening spells and words, while the doors stayed stubbornly shut. Most of the others were still beside him, watching expectantly, except for Boromir, who got up and came over to see what Harry and the others were doing.

Draco looked thoughtful. "Well, below the part about the Doors of Durin, there's a line about the person who made the doors and the one who drew the signs. Narvi made the doors themselves, according to what's up there, and somebody or other named Celebrimbor---'Silver-tree,' in Elvish---drew the signs. I don't know what 'Narvi' means, so I expect he was a dwarf. At Rivendell, I found out that the dwarves' language is not taught to non-dwarves."

"How do you know Elvish, anyway?" asked Ron. "I've been meaning to ask."

"As have I," said Boromir, coming up and sitting down as though he was assured of a welcome. Harry gave him a measuring look; he did not quite like or trust the big Gondorian, for reasons he couldn't quite figure out. After questioning his and his companions' right to their roles, Boromir had generally been very quiet, but Harry had felt the Gondorian's gaze on

him, more than once. There was also something or other between him and Aragorn, and that made Harry slightly uneasy as well.

Draco hopped easily down from the rock, keeping his balance effortlessly. "I couldn't answer that if my life depended on it, Weasel," he replied to Ron. He smiled broadly. "For all I know, it's the same way Potter speaks Parseltongue." At Boromir's questioning look, Draco explained: "Parseltongue's the language of snakes. Somehow or other---it's a long story and I don't know all the details---Potter, here, can speak it if he's looking at a snake." Draco smirked. "However, I prefer to think that it's just another manifestation of my natural genius."

"Really? How interesting!" said Boromir, looking closely at Harry. Harry was uncomfortable with the way the Gondorian was looking at him, and turned away to look out over the lake. Boromir looked out, too, and his lips twisted. "How I detest this foul pool!" Stooping down, he picked up a stone and threw it out into the water.

The stone splashed into the murky depths, and Harry heard a bubbling noise. Far out, beyond where the stone had hit, a disturbance began roiling the water. Ripples formed on the oily-looking surface, moving slowly toward the shore.

"What did you do that for?" snapped Harry. "Leave the water alone! I don't like the look of it!"

Suddenly, Gandalf stood up and laughed. "Of course! I have it! It was on the door all the time!" Pointing to the doors, he shouted "*Mellon* !" The doors began to creak slowly open. Turning to the others, he said "They were more trusting then---all you had to do was to say the elvish word for 'friend' and the doors would open! Of course, you could expect that no goblin or Orc would know that word, or would say anything in an elven tongue, so they weren't completely trusting!"

Draco turned to Hermione. "You were right all the time, Granger. My hat's off to you," as he mimed doffing a hat. "That word *was* written up above the door, in Elvish. If I'd read the actual Elvish inscription, it might have been all that was needed to open the doors." Hermione smiled in triumph as the four Hogwarts students lined up to enter the Doors of Durin. Behind them, the ripples reached the shore, and suddenly a fingered tentacle, glowing faintly green, had Harry by the ankle and was dragging him back toward the water. The water seemed to be boiling as more and more tentacles came out of it, wriggling toward the Company.

Ron pointed his wand toward Harry, howling "*Expelliarmus!*" as Harry yanked out the Japanese short sword he had brought from Earth and hewed at the tentacle. Whether it was the spell or the bite of the steel, the tentacle released Harry, but others were reaching for him and his companions. Hermione and Draco flung Impediment Curses at the nearest tentacles, while Harry scrambled to his feet and away from the edge of the water. A horrible stench filled the air.

"All together now---*Wingardium Leviosa!*" screamed Draco. He waved his wand at the point where the tentacles seemed to be coming together, and a spherical body began to heave itself above the surface of the water. As Hermione, Ron and Harry joined their spells to his, the owner of the tentacles was forced into the air. Harry cried out in horror and loathing at the sight. It was a perfectly spherical body, with no eyes that he could see, but hundreds of long, thin tentacles sprouting from the top, and covered in a translucent skin, through which one could see alien-looking organs pulsing with horrible life.

"The Watcher in the Water!" shouted Gimli. He had been hacking at the nearest tentacles with his razor-sharp axe, but the sight of the Watcher rising from the waters had distracted him. "The creature that built that dam and dammed the Sirannon!"

"Truly did Gandalf say that there are other evil powers in this world than Sauron," said Legolas, sending arrow after arrow into the pulsating side of the Watcher. Revulsion was written all over his delicate-featured face as he pulled his bowstring back to the ear, sending yet another arrow on its way to bury itself into the Watcher's hideous soft flesh.

"Gandalf! We can hold it up, but we can't do anything else to it!" shrieked Hermione. Horror and wonder were in her eyes as she poured every bit of her power into the Levitation spell. Harry thought that the contact with the air was itself damaging the Watcher; it had ceased to try to grab members of the Company, and it was twitching convulsively throughout its body and tentacles alike. He closed his eyes to concentrate on his spell.

Stepping forward, Gandalf raised his gnarled staff. He shouted words in a language Harry didn't know, and a bolt of incredibly intense light leaped from his staff to impact the Watcher with a roar like a thunderbolt. The Watcher convulsed, and its body burst open, spilling its entrails into the dark lake. As the Watcher's body fell apart, Harry could feel the weight he was holding up lessening; the Levitation spell had fastened onto the Watcher's outer skin, which had to have been tougher than it looked to hold up under the strain. He let the spell die, and as the others followed suit, the remains of the Watcher in the Water fell into the water with a splash and sank. There were still a few tentacles reaching onto the land, but the greenish glow they had had was dying, and they did not even twitch.

"Well? Get in while the getting's good! That spell told everybody with the right sort of eyes to see for five hundred miles around where we are!" Gandalf's sharp voice startled Harry out of his paralysis, and he bounded up the stairs into Moria, the others right behind him. When all nine Companions were inside at last, Gandalf pushed at the doors, and they shut as smoothly as though they had last been used yesterday. In the sudden darkness, Harry remembered his Everlight™ torch, and he pulled it out and lit it. The Company was standing in a large, long-disused room, with a large flight of stairs at the opposite end from the Doors, going up into a dark hall.

"I don't know about you, but I'm hungry. Let's get outside some food." commented Ron. Harry suddenly realized just how hungry he was; he thought longingly of Hogwarts, with its huge banquets of carefully-prepared food appealing to all tastes. Sitting crosslegged on a dirty stone floor sipping stale water and gnawing on jerked beef and dried fruit wasn't the same, but he was so hungry that he didn't much care; it filled his stomach and soothed him after the horror outside. After their meal, Gandalf gave everybody another sip of *miruvor*, which Harry found wonderfully reviving.

"I wonder if Professor Snape could make this stuff?" mused Draco, after his sip of *miruvor*. "When we get back to Rivendell, I should ask Elrond how this is made; I'd bet that Professor Snape would be very interested." At Harry's incredulous look, Draco went on: "Look, Potter--I know you don't like Professor Snape. I've seen how he rides you in Potions class. He hated your father; my father told me how those two got along like cats and dogs. On top of that, he really does think you have a swelled head from being 'the Boy Who Lived,' and he thinks that he's the only one who tries to keep you humble." He shrugged his shoulders. "It so happens, Professor Snape and I get along fairly well. None of those factors apply with me---and I'm also in his House, and he's quite partisan, you may have noticed."

"So *that's* it," said Harry. "Believe me, after ten years with the Dursleys, I have no problem with being humble. I didn't even know I *was* the Boy Who Lived until Hagrid found me and got me my letter. I didn't know anything at all about the wizarding world---I'd never heard of Quidditch or Hogwarts or Voldemort or any of that." He smiled slightly. "Do you remember the first time we ever met? I didn't understand half of what you were on about---the various Houses, Quidditch, and all the rest of it."

Draco nodded. "I didn't quite know what to make of you, Potter. On the one hand, you said you were pure-blood---not that that matters to me any more---and on the other hand, you didn't act at all like you were familiar with the magical world." He smiled ruefully. Sighing, he went on: "I really, really regret a lot of what I did back then. Back then, I believed everything my father told me. I wonder what he would have said, if he'd known that Lord Voldemort would kill him and my mum on nothing but suspicion that they were planning to take his place?"

Harry's eyes widened. "You were there for that, weren't you?" he asked, his voice low. Draco nodded.

"We were at dinner in Malfoy Manor. The Manor's Unplottable, of course---can't have just anybody able to drop in---but Voldemort knew how to get there. We were just beginning to eat, when Voldemort appeared with a gang of Death Eaters. He was raving---livid. I've never seen the like in all my days. He screamed that his greatest chance of power had been lost, and that he had proof that Dad had been responsible."

"Oh, gods," muttered Hermione, her eyes wide. "He killed them?"

"Yes, and I think he'd have killed me, but one of his spells set off a booby-trap that Dad had set up, long ago, to ensure that in the event of a successful attack on Malfoy Manor, the Manor would be destroyed. Too bad it didn't catch Voldemort, but he Apparated out just in time. I remember---the floor heaving under my feet---" Draco paused, sweat starting on his brow, his eyes staring at nothing, "I---I can sort of remember getting through the French window, as my mother was screaming under the Cruciatius Curse---and then the next thing I remember was waking up in St. Mungo's, with Professor Dumbledore by my bed. He broke the news that my family was dead. The Aurors had been close on Voldemort's trail, but hadn't been able to get to Malfoy Manor in time to stop him. When they arrived, the last of the surviving Death Eaters were Disapparating, and the Dark Mark was in the sky over the ruins."

Harry had listened to Draco's tale with horror. It sounded as bad as what had happened to his parents, with the additional fillip that Draco, unlike himself, had been easily old enough to remember every bit of what had happened. They were opposites in temperament and in approach to life, but they truly had a great deal in common, as well. Harry remembered all too well what experiencing his parents' death had been like, under the influence of the dementors, and he wouldn't have wished it on anybody. He peered at his two best friends in the gloom. Hermione's face was pale and set, and Ron looked horrified.

Draco sighed. "In any case, that's what happened. The irony is, Dad was a devoted Death Eater himself---yes, I can say that now---and would no more have betrayed the Dark Lord than he would have broken his wand and gone to live as a Muggle. Thanks to the man he swore loyalty to, I now have no home but Hogwarts. Professor Dumbledore's going to see about finding me somewhere in Hogsmeade to stay over the summer holidays." He shook his head. "Right now, I wouldn't mind being back at Hogwarts."

Hermione sighed. "Gods and goddesses, I wish *I* was back at Hogwarts. This trip's been fascinating---and educational, the gods know---but right now, I'd give almost anything to see my old room in Gryffindor Tower, and the library---and even Professors Snape and Binns."

Ron grinned, reaching out to feel Hermione's forehead. "You *want* to see Professors Snape and Binns? Are you sure you're all right?" Hermione smacked lightly at his hand, and Harry thought she was blushing, but in the dim light it was hard to tell for sure.

After they finished eating, they went on. Nobody, even Gimli, wanted to stay in Moria longer than they had to. With the Hogwarts students' Everlight torches, light was no big problem, but the Mines were incredibly intricate, and Harry knew that without Gandalf and Gimli, none of them had any chance of seeing the outside world again. It put him in mind of things he had learned from ancient mythology, about the great Labyrinth in Crete. As Gandalf walked at the head of the group, he held a long straight sword in his hand, and occasionally would look at the blade.

"Glamdring, Gandalf's sword, glows if there are orcs close by," murmured Aragorn, when Hermione asked him what the wizard was doing. "It was forged by elves long ago, and their weapons have that power, to ensure that they won't be taken by surprise." Harry thought that a sword that glowed when enemies were nearby was much more useful than a scar that hurt when enemies were thinking of one.

They marched for a long time, deep into the bowels of the mountains. Around them, all was dark and quiet, save for water dripping here and there---except that Harry thought he sometimes heard soft bare feet pattering along behind them. It was difficult to tell, but when the group would stop for a minute, Harry would hear the footfalls behind them going on for a few seconds before stopping. Somehow, he didn't think it was an echo.

As the company went deeper into Moria, conversation slowed and ceased. The going was often quite difficult, with the path narrowing as they passed wells and chasms; worse was when the path itself was divided by deep holes. The widest of these was nearly seven feet wide, and as Harry leaped across, he could hear a noise far below, as of a water-wheel turning.

Several hours after they had entered, even Gandalf had to confess that he was stumped. "I'm not at all sure which direction to go from here," he said, as they paused for a moment at an intersection of several tunnels, "and I think we all need a rest. Outside, night is wearing on. When we get to the City proper, we'll be able to guide ourselves more easily; the dwarves of Moria built their city more regularly than they did these mines. Also, there'll be inscriptions saying where we are, and between me and Gimli, we should be able to find our way out."

Near the intersection, there was a large room with a well, where the Company took refuge for the night. Spreading out his bedroll, Harry looked uneasily at the well. He and Ron had shone their Everlight torches down into it, and still couldn't see the bottom. He wondered just how big Moria was---and whether it was still inhabited. He had seen droppings here and there, and there had been scratchings on the walls that did not look like accidental damage.

"Gimli," murmured Harry, "weren't there orcs or something like that in here after your people were forced out?" Harry knew that whispering, with its hissing, carried a good way farther than murmurs would, and he also knew that sound carried a long way underground.

"There were, Mr. Potter," murmured Gimli. In the light of the one torch they kept to see by, his face looked grim. "Durin's Bane drove us out of our city, and welcomed in orcs and all manner of evil creatures---trolls, and worse. We slaughtered them in the Battle of Azanulbizar, some decades ago, but Durin's Bane still may lurk here. I hope we can pass through without meeting it---best would be if we find Balin has met with success, and has set up the old kingdom in our ancestors' halls."

A little later, Harry heard noises from the well, as of a hammer knocking. It tapped out a regular rhythm several times, then stopped. Sitting up, he peered suspiciously toward the well. Gandalf and the others had heard as well, and Gandalf looked worried.

"That may have nothing to do with us---but on the other hand, it may be a signal. Sound travels very well in this place, and we could have been being tracked from the minute we entered, if the people tracking us knew the place well." He turned to the others. "Get some sleep, everybody. I'm going to take watch by myself, and think about where we should go next." As Harry rolled himself up in his bedroll, the last thing he saw before dropping off was Gandalf's face lit from below, as the old wizard lit his pipe.

* * * * *

When Gandalf awakened everybody, he said they'd slept about six hours. "I've decided which way we're going to go next. The left-hand way smells like there's bad air down there, and I don't like the feel of the middle way. We'll take the right way---it's time we started climbing up again." Harry was glad to hear it; he had had enough of Moria to last him a long time. His friends felt very much the same way.

"No offense, Gimli," said Ron, as he rolled up his bedroll, "but this place is giving me the creeps. Endless miles of dark, dark tunnels. Dwarves may like them, but I'm not a dwarf."

"That you most certainly are not, Mr. Weasley," said Gimli, a smile barely visible behind his beard. ". Also, keep in mind that we're in what were the mines; the city itself was very well-lit, and was the capital of Durin's folk for thousands of years. It's been abandoned for over a thousand years, unless Balin's managed to refound a colony here, so you have to expect that it would be dark." He began to chant a song, in a deep, rolling voice, detailing the glories and treasures of the great city of the dwarves.

"Tell me more about the history of this place," begged Hermione, as they left their resting place. Nothing loath, Gimli began filling her in, telling her of Durin the Deathless, who had founded Khazad-dum many centuries ago in the First Age of Middle-earth. "He was one of the first seven dwarves ever created, and the eldest. He lived for centuries and centuries, which is why he is called the Deathless. Nonetheless, he did die at last---only elves do not die---and he's buried somewhere in Khazad-dum. Were it possible, I would pay respects at his tomb."

Hermione drank in every word, her eyes shining with her love of knowledge, and Gimli went on as they walked, telling her more about the history of the great dwarven city. "For centuries, we worked on this place, Miss Granger. Until Durin's Bane came and drove us forth, our city was impregnable. We had gold, silver, iron, and *mithril*---and the last was by far the greatest source of wealth."

"What's mithril?" asked Ron and Hermione together. Harry was listening with half an ear; the other half of his attention was on the sounds that he thought he heard behind the party. Once or twice, he had turned suddenly and shone his torch down the dark tunnels they had just traversed, but he hadn't seen anything moving or shining back at him yet. Still, every time they paused, he was certain that he heard faint footsteps behind them, footsteps that were not an echo. Up ahead, Gimli was explaining that mithril was a wondrous metal, as shiny and beautiful as silver but stronger than steel when properly worked. Unfortunately, he said, the dwarves had disturbed Durin's Bane by mining too deeply for mithril-ore, and as a result, they had lost their great city and been forced out as wanderers.

Around them, the walls of the tunnels had changed; instead of the rough surface of the mines, they were now walking in areas where obvious care had been taken with even small details. Although the place showed the signs of long abandonment, under the dirt and neglect Harry could easily see how fine the work was; the dwarves' reputation as master-craftsmen was apparently well-deserved. They passed endless lines of dwarven living-quarters, standing there sadly with their doors long since torn off and carried away, and at one point they passed a long hall lined with the doors of dwarven crypts. The doors of most of these were also gone, and Harry shone his torch into one, illuminating several rock sarcophagi and rock-built cairns. Those had long since been broken into; their lids were on the floor and the stones were scattered. Harry carefully did not inquire into who could have done such a thing---he thought he had a pretty good idea. Behind them, he still thought he could hear soft padding feet, every time they stopped for a moment.

Finally, they came into a large, empty open space. The Everlight torches couldn't pierce the darkness as far as the outer walls, so Gandalf took a hand. He raised his staff, and for a second, in the huge flash of light that came from it, they saw that they were in an enormous hall, with walls that looked like they were made of onyx. There were three huge arched entrances, one on either side and one straight ahead to the east.

"We're nearly through," said Gandalf. "There were once huge windows on the side of the mountain, with shutters over them; it's night outside now, but when day comes, if I'm right about where we are, we'll see the sun peeping in. This is a good place to stop for now, though." It was Harry's turn to be on watch, so he propped himself up against one of the walls while the others stretched out in their bedrolls.

Sitting awake in the enormous, uncanny darkness, Harry peered back the way they had come. It was quiet enough that he could hear his own heartbeat, and he thought he could just about hear the others' heartbeats as well. For some reason, the place they were in gave him the creeps; he didn't like Moria much at any time, but this place, that had once been full of light and life, seemed worse somehow than the depths of the mines. Toward the end of his turn on watch, Harry was watching the western archway when he saw two points of light twinkling, almost like luminous eyes. Jumping to his feet, he grabbed for his wand, and the lights disappeared. Until Legolas relieved him of his duty, he remained standing, peering around, his wand at the ready.

When Harry lay down to sleep, he dreamed of a whispering voice and the two pale points of light approaching. Awakening, he found the others talking softly, and to his surprise, he saw that the chamber was dimly lit, with light filtering in through long shafts. Gandalf led them down a hall as soon as they'd breakfasted.

Harry found himself walking beside Gimli. "So, what do you think of this place?" Harry asked curiously. The dwarf looked at him sadly.

"Khazad-dum is great---greater by far than I had imagined---but it is dark, and terrible. I don't think that Balin ever even made it here." The dwarf looked around. "Still, it does my heart good to see how great our mighty ancestors were."

After some time, the Company found themselves in a chamber lit from the outside by one of the light-shafts. Harry squinted against the light, which he found dazzling after so long underground, although by normal standards it was rather dim. There was a thick coating of dust on the floor, covering things Harry couldn't identify. In the center of the room, the light from the shaft fell squarely onto an oblong block two feet high, covered with a squared-off white stone.

"Is that a tomb?" asked Hermione. She crossed over to take a closer look. "Yes, it is---it says '*Balin Fundinul Uzbad Khazadumu*,' and below that, 'Balin son of Fundin lord of Moria.'" At this, Gimli pulled his hood over his face; Harry guessed it was so that none of his companions could see him cry.

Chapter 6 - In the Halls of the Mountain King

After Hermione had read the inscription on the tomb, the company got very quiet. Harry could see that Gimli was grieving, and longed to comfort him, but he didn't dare---he didn't know if the dwarf would welcome or want his condolences on the death of his friends. In Britain, he'd have known what to do, but here he felt at sea among strange peoples with strange, unaccountable customs. Ron and Hermione looked around themselves uneasily. Draco went over to the dust-covered objects they had noticed when they entered the chamber, and began investigating them.

"Hello, what's this?" The company turned to see what Draco had found. In among broken weapons---Harry noticed curved scimitars of crude make, as well as what looked to have been finely-crafted swords and daggers---and bones of a sort Harry wasn't familiar with. Draco was kneeling and holding up a battered book. Hermione, predictably, hurried to his side to see what he had found.

"Trust Hermione---she'd crawl naked over broken glass to get to a book," Ron murmured into Harry's ear. Harry grinned and waved his hand to hush his friend as Hermione brought the book back, setting it on Balin's grave-slab to get some light. As she opened the book, the pages crackled; they were apparently made of some stiffer material than plain paper. Hermione began paging through, with Gandalf looking over her shoulder.

"This looks like it's supposed to have been a record of the refounding of the dwarven kingdom here," said Hermione after a minute. "It's written in several different scripts---at least it's not in the dwarven language." Gimli came over to take a look, and Harry noticed that his cheeks were damp with tears.

"This part dates from the fifth year of the colony. It looks like it was written by Ori---he could write well, and used these characters often. Here, it says that Balin was shot by an orc while looking into Mirrormere. They killed the orc, but many others came up the Silverlode. Balin was buried in the Chamber of Mazarbul, or Records---which is where we now are." Gimli looked grim. "From this, it looks as though they were trapped in Moria after a while---the Watcher in the Water took Oin, since the water was clear up to the western gate. 'We cannot get out. We cannot get out....The end comes. Drums, drums in the deep. They are coming...'" and Gimli put the book down, his face grey and set.

"Take the book, Gimli. Give it to King Dain, when you get back to the Lonely Mountain. At least their kin will know what happened to them," murmured Hermione, gently patting the dwarf's shoulder. Gandalf nodded his approval of her actions as Gimli stowed the book in his pack.

"We're going back to the hall," said Gandalf. "I know now just where we are, thanks to that book. We go through the eastern door of the hall, go right and south, and downwards."

Just as those words were spoken, there was a huge booming noise. It seemed to shake the mountain itself, and they jumped for the door as it came again and again. Horn blasts and many feet tramping could be heard from the hall. "They're coming!" cried Legolas, his face white with fear.

"Here we are, trapped. We cannot get out, either!" snarled Gimli. Unslinging his axe, he tested the razor-keen edge with his horny thumb, nodding to himself.

"I wasn't here, then! Let me see what I can do!" snapped Gandalf. The Hogwarts students drew their wands, and Harry began thinking of all the offensive curses he knew...why, *why* hadn't this task waited until he was at least in his seventh year? Apparently Draco knew the Unforgivable Curses, but most of the ones he knew himself were not that lethal. He looked at his classmates. Ron's face was pale under his shock of red hair, but his expression was determined; Hermione looked like anything that got in her way would live to regret it; Draco had an anticipatory smile twisting his face as he fingered his wand.

"Shut the doors, and wedge them!" shouted Aragorn, "Keep your packs on; we may be able to cut our way out yet!"

"No, leave the east door ajar; we may be able to slip out that way," said Gandalf, raising his staff. Another horn-call echoed through the hallways.

"Who comes here to disturb the rest of Balin lord of Moria?" cried Gandalf in a huge voice. The only answer was a shout of harsh, evil laughter. A deep voice called out commands Harry couldn't understand, and the great drum---*drums in the deep, indeed*---sounded yet again. Harry noticed in passing how dry his mouth was; he hadn't been this frightened since the Triwizard Tournament, facing Lord Voldemort in the cemetery at Little Hangleton.

There was a narrow gap in the door, and Gandalf thrust out his staff through it. A huge flash lit up the passageway outside, and left Harry blinking against the afterimage, as though he had been staring at a flashgun just as it went off. Gandalf drew back, looking worried. Arrows whined in through the gap, bouncing off the stone walls; Hermione cast a quick hex to make sure they missed everybody.

"Those are orcs---some of them are the Uruk-hai of Mordor, bigger and smarter than most orcs. I think there's also at least one troll. There's no way we're going to get out that way."

"If they come the other way, as well, we'll be surrounded," supplied Boromir. Harry rolled his eyes in exasperation---this was hardly the most profound statement he had ever heard on the subject of strategy. Aragorn shook his head; he was poised at the other door, listening intently.

"So far, there's no sound from this direction." reported Aragorn. "The passage goes down a stairway, away from the hall we were in. We can't block this door anyway. If we hurt the other side really badly, it may delay them for long enough for us to get away. Get ready to fight!"

As heavy footsteps sounded outside the door, Boromir, Harry and Draco threw themselves at it, wedging it completely shut with pieces of broken swords and other debris they found around the chamber. The whole company retreated to the other side of the chamber, but they didn't get a chance to run. A huge blow to the door made it shake, and then it began grinding slowly open, as a gigantic green, scaly arm and foot were thrust into the room. Boromir hacked at the foot, but his sword just bounced off.

Ron and Draco ran forward. Pointing their wands through the gap, they screamed "Stupefy!" in unison. The arm sagged, and Draco yanked his Japanese shortsword out, chopping at the foot. Where Boromir's sword had failed, the Japanese steel held up, hewing into the hideous creature's flesh. As the arm and leg were withdrawn, Ron threw himself at the door and shut it again, as Boromir and Aragorn wedged it.

"Good job, Draco!" yelled Ron. They high-fived each other; Harry thought for a split-second that back at Hogwarts, seeing those two acting like friends and comrades would have seemed about as likely as Professor Snape falling in love with Ginny Weasley. Then the door was smashed open, and orcs---ugly, bandy-legged creatures with apish features and grey-black skin like nothing Harry had ever seen---swarmed into the chamber.

The fight that followed was fierce and fast; later, Harry couldn't figure out how long it went on. Hermione cast Impediment charms on the first few orcs, stopping them in their tracks so that Boromir and Aragorn could slaughter them. Draco, Ron and Harry threw Petrifying charms at the next few orcs; in these close quarters, none of them dared cast anything really lethal, for fear of hitting one of their comrades by mistake.

The other members of the Company were also making their presence felt; Legolas shot two orcs through the throat that had missed being ensorcelled, while Gimli hewed the legs out from under one that had dared to leap up onto Balin's tomb. Even when the Hogwarts students' spells hadn't hit the enemy, Boromir and Aragorn's swords wreaked a terrifying slaughter. After the Company had felled about fifteen orcs with spells and blades, the rest fled, howling their fear as they disappeared down the hall. Harry looked at his classmates. When things had gone to close combat, they had had to resort to their swords, and all of their blades dripped orcish blood. Harry, himself, had taken the head off a particularly ugly orc that reminded him of a slightly-smarter, slightly-handsomer Dudley Dursley.

"Now! Let's get out of here before that troll returns!" shouted Gandalf. Before they could follow his orders, a particularly large orc in ornate armor leaped into the chamber, while his followers crowded the door behind him. He knocked Boromir back off his feet, dodged Aragorn, and leaped at the Hogwarts students, his hideous red eyes lighting up at the sight of Hermione. Before she could lift her wand, he was on her, bowling her over onto the floor as he tore at her clothes. Her wand flew from her grasp as her head hit the wall with a horrible clunking noise. Her eyes rolled back in her head. The front of her robes and tunic came away in his claw.

"No!" screamed Harry. Without conscious thought on his part, he levelled his wand as he cried "*Stupefy!*" Ron was simultaneously casting a Reductor Curse, and Draco threw a Cruciatus Curse. The combination of those three spells threw the orc-chieftain across the room with a flash of light; he lay still, smoke coming from his ears as black blood oozed from his mouth and nose, his head at an impossible angle. Again the immense drum sounded, booming loud through the corridors.

Kneeling over the unconscious Hermione, Ron levelled his wand, saying "*Ennervate!*" Hermione stirred, putting her hand to her head, groaning with pain. When she noticed that her clothes were in shreds, she squeaked, trying to cover herself with the remains of her robes and tunic. Harry handed her her wand. She slipped it into the sleeve-sheath she used to carry it.

"Can you run?" asked Gandalf. At her shaky nod, he snapped: "Right, then run! We've got to get out of here!" The Company ran down the open stairs, Gimli at the rear; he had been

very reluctant to leave Balin's tomb. They found a door that could be closed, and Boromir hauled the valves to, the hinges groaning. There was a latch, and they turned it, locking the door.

"Go on! Wait a little for me at the next landing, but if I don't come, keep choosing paths that lead right and down! I've got to try to hold off whatever's coming!" shouted Gandalf. Reluctantly, Harry turned and left the old wizard, helping Ron hold up the semi-conscious Hermione. Their Everlight torches lit the way well enough, and Harry turned to see what Gandalf was doing. By the light of his staff, the old wizard was visible, standing by the closed door. Again and again the drum beat, like the huge heart of some demented earth-god, but in between the beats, Harry could hear Gandalf saying something--it sounded like a spell. Then came an incredibly bright flash of light, and a rumble and thud. The drum beat wildly for a few minutes, and then stopped, as Gandalf hurried down the stairs. "Well, that's all I can do--I've met my equal up there, and I'm all out for now. Keep on going down!"

* * * * *

After an hour or so of steady travel downward, Harry began to hope that they'd be able to get away. There had been no signs of pursuit behind them. Finally, Gandalf called a halt. "I'm all in--I've got to rest, even if every orc in Moria's after us."

Hermione had managed to get some C-pins from somewhere---Harry suspected Boromir; the style was like the ones the Gondorian wore on his own clothing---and was putting her clothing to rights. She seemed to have somewhat recovered from the worst effects of her ordeal in the Chamber of Records, since the first thing she did after her clothes covered her decently was to go over to where Gandalf was sitting on a step. "What was it you met up there?" Her big dark eyes shone with the familiar light of curiosity, and Harry hid a smile. "Did you see what was beating that *damned* drum?"

Gandalf smiled wearily. "I don't know. I just know that I put a shutting-spell on that door, and at first, I heard orcs talking---I caught their word for fire. Then they went quiet, and Something took hold of the door. It sensed my spell, and cast a counterspell that nearly broke me. The spell I cast in my turn broke the door, and for a second, I saw something---something dark and terrible---and then the combined spells broke the ceiling and nearly blew me down the stairs." He reached out tentatively, ruffling Hermione's hair. "Your lust for knowledge is greater than any dwarf's for wealth, Miss Granger. I predict that in your world, you will one day be one of the mightiest sorcerers ever seen." Hermione blushed, and Harry could see a tear trickling down her cheek.

They now went on again, until a red glow appeared ahead of them. "What's that?" asked Draco. "Those orcs were talking about fire---are the lower levels on fire, somehow?" Gimli shook his head. As they went on, the light became unmistakably fiery, and the air became very hot. Finally they came to a doorway and Gandalf peered out. "I know where we are---the Second Hall. We're almost out---across Durin's Bridge, up a stair, take the main path, through the First Gate, and we're out! But have a look at this!"

Harry gasped in wonder at the sight. It was a huge hall, with pillars holding up the ceiling, carved to look like trees. Across the floor, a huge crevasse had opened, and the fire was flickering out of it. "If we'd come the way we had planned, that would have trapped us. With any luck, it'll stop our pursuers." murmured Gandalf. Harry wondered if the Flame-

Freezing Charm he had learned at Hogwarts would work---the heat was incredibly intense, although not yet life-threatening. "Let's go!" shouted Gandalf, as the drum sounded again.

The hideous orc-horde could be heard, crying out and sounding horns, but the sound came from across the fiery crevasse. "Looks like they outsmarted themselves, doesn't it?" drawled Draco. He wiped sweat from his forehead; the heat and effort of their journey had defeated any attempts on his part to remain elegant and unruffled. Still, the light of battle shone in his eyes; Harry was suddenly very glad that Draco Malfoy was along.

"Here's hoping the sun's shining outside!" called Hermione, as they sped across the floor to the opposite side of the hall from the crevasse. Another gulf yawned ahead of them, spanned by a narrow, gracile bridge no more than three feet across---King Durin's Bridge. It had been intended as a defensive measure by the dwarven architects of Moria, ages ago, Harry remembered Gimli mentioning. As they crossed, Hermione leading, arrows began landing among them, until Ron turned and cast an Impediment Curse to stop them. Across the fire, Harry could see what looked like hundreds of orcs; they waved spears and scimitars and shouted war-cries. The huge drum boomed again and again, until Harry wished he could smash it over its owner's head.

Legolas drew his bow and nocked an arrow, but his courage failed him, and Harry turned again to see what it was that had frightened the elf so badly. Two huge trolls could be seen, carrying huge slabs of basalt that they threw down to provide a bridge over the fiery pit, but that wasn't what had scared the elf. The orcs' ranks had parted, as though they themselves were afraid of what was coming---a huge form of shadow, surrounding something dark that gave off more fear than any dementor. "Look!" screamed Harry, and the others turned to see what he was seeing.

As---whatever it was---leaped across the chasm, the fire leaped up to swirl around it, igniting its streaming mane of hair. In one hand it held a flaming sword, and in the other a terrible whip. "A Balrog! A Balrog is come!" cried Legolas, terror in his voice. Harry couldn't blame him---the Balrog made Voldemort, and all the dementors that ever were, seem like Winnie-the-Pooh.

"A Balrog! Now I understand," muttered Gandalf. "I am already so weary..." Harry stepped up to stand with the old wizard, and out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Ron, Hermione and Draco were right with him. He looked up at them from under his bushy eyebrows. "Fly, you fools! This is beyond your strength!"

"Like bloody *hell* we'll run!" snarled Draco. As Gandalf turned to face the foe, Harry and his friends spread out on either side of the bridge, their wands in their hands. Although he knew they were all terrified, nobody watching would have known; their body-language radiated defiance and contempt for their enemy. Harry felt a moment's pride and joy, exultation warring with fear for possession of his soul, as Boromir's horn sounded. Behind him, he could sense the rest of the Company, none of them willing to let their leader face this horror alone. The Balrog paced toward them silently. The orcs had started forward behind the Balrog, but the sound of Boromir's horn had halted them. They watched, their eyes glowing red in the firelight.

Gandalf stood alone in the middle of King Durin's Bridge, leaning on his staff with one hand, his sword Glamdring unsheathed in the other. The Balrog stopped, and raised its whip; flame came from its nostrils. "You cannot pass." said Gandalf, into a sudden stillness.

"I am a wielder of the Flame of Anor, a servant of the Secret Fire. Go back to the shadow! The dark fire will not avail you, flame of Udun. You cannot pass!"

The Balrog did not answer. Instead, it seemed to grow, until its wings touched the far walls of the chamber. It stepped forward onto the bridge, towering over Gandalf, and suddenly swung its fiery sword. Hermione and Ron, in unison, cried "*Expelliarmus!*" and the flaming sword leaped from the creature's hand, falling into the endless depths below.

The creature turned its terrible regard onto the rash fools who had challenged it, and raised its whip. Harry pointed his wand, concentrated on the happiest thought he could call up, and shouted "*Expecto Patronum!*" A giant silvery stag leaped from the end of his wand, charging the Balrog and forcing it back off the bridge. Staggering slightly, the Balrog fell back, swinging its fiery whip at the Patronus until it dissolved.

When the Patronus was gone, the Balrog stepped forward again, glowing a fiery red with anger. Draco cried "*Avada Kedavra!*" and green light leaped from his wand to splash off the Balrog, throwing it back yet again. Even the Killing Curse didn't hurt the demon enough to drive it back permanently; although it was knocked backward and off its feet, it got back up, coming forward yet again. "*Crucio!*" yelled Draco, and the Balrog staggered as it stepped onto the Bridge. Despite Draco's repeated Killing and Cruciatus Curses, the Balrog shook its head and came on nonetheless, bending forward as though it were walking into the teeth of a storm---a storm of spells, as Ron, Harry and Hermione threw everything they had ever learned at their enemy. Magical energies flashed and played around the hideous creature, but still it came on.

Gandalf raised his staff, shouted, and struck the stone of the bridge, breaking it before him and beneath the feet of the Balrog. With a cry that Harry knew he would hear in his nightmares for years, the Balrog fell, taking its unnatural shadow with it---but as it fell, it swung its whip. Standing in the middle of the bridge, Gandalf couldn't dodge in time, and Ron's hastily-cast Impediment Curse had no effect on the fiery whip; the tails wrapped around Gandalf's legs and he was dragged forward and off the bridge. "Fly, you fools!" he cried, and then he fell.

The fires from the chasm died down, as Harry stared with horror into the abyss where Gandalf had disappeared. He wished frantically for his broom, to fly down and try to rescue the old wizard, and then he felt Aragorn's hand on his shoulder, dragging him away. "Come! We've got to get out of here---that was his last order! Run!"

They ran frantically up a wide stair and down a wide corridor; Harry was weeping as he ran, and he could hear his companions weeping as well. The drum beat behind them, slowly and mournfully. As they ran, the light grew stronger, until they were crossing a huge hall with great windows pierced into the side of the mountain, letting in the sunlight. Past it, Harry suddenly saw the Great Gates of Moria standing there, open wide with the sun blazing in.

Although there was an orcish force on guard at the gates, it stood no chance against the Company. Aragorn slashed down the orc-captain, and the others waded in with spells and blades until they fled, shrieking. Down a flight of stairs, and they were outside. The light was bright enough to hurt Harry's eyes, but he didn't care; he was crying too hard to notice the difference. They kept on running for some time, until they could run no more and cast themselves down on the earth. The drum could still be heard, beating a slow tolling rhythm. Behind them, out of bowshot, the gates of Moria yawned, dark against the mountainside. A

trickle of smoke oozed out of the gate. Harry wept, unashamedly; he had not felt such grief and misery and guilt since Cedric Diggory's death. Around him, the rest of the Company sobbed, all of them as heartbroken as he was, as the drum rolled on in the depths of the earth, slowly and mournfully.

Chapter 7---The Lady in the Wood

After an unguessable time, Harry finally stopped weeping. He sat up and then stood, noting in passing that he was weak and shaky with reaction. The others looked as bad as he felt. Aragorn and Boromir both looked as though they had lost their fathers, Legolas was shaking and looked nauseous, and even the tough dwarf Gimli had an expression on his face appropriate to someone seeing a train bearing down on him. All of them were chalky-pale, and blinking uncomfortably in the sunlight as their eyes re-adjusted to normal light after so long underground.

Of the Hogwarts students, Hermione looked the worst by far. The Ennervation she had received in Moria was wearing off, and she looked very bad. Now that they had light, with the noonday sun shining through a few bright, wispy clouds, he could see that there was an ugly lump on one side of her head, and the hair on that side was clotted and thick with dark blood. Peering into her eyes, he was relieved to see that her pupils were at least of the same size; he hadn't liked the thought of having to deal with a concussion. The others didn't look any better; Ron had a thousand-yard stare, and Draco was sitting with his knees tucked up under his chin, trembling violently.

"How are you feeling, Hermione?" Harry murmured. Even though her pupils were the same size, she seemed to have trouble focussing. At his words, she seemed to snap out of it---she stared at him wildly for a second, then bent over, retching helplessly. When her stomach was finally empty, she collapsed on the ground, sobbing. The sound of her sorrow cut Harry's soul to the quick; it was a racking, horrible sound like nothing Harry had ever heard from her before. Harry tentatively reached out and stroked her. She felt cold and sweaty to the touch.

"Do any of you know first aid?" he asked. At this, Draco seemed to come out of his trance, getting shakily to his feet and staggering over to see what was wrong. Hermione submitted quietly to his gentle probing, rather to Harry's surprise. He was no less surprised by Draco's air of competence and cool expertise as he checked Hermione over, taking her wrist to time her pulse, peering into her eyes and looking closely at the injury to her head.

"I didn't know you knew anything about that, Draco," said Harry. In a way, he felt a little jealous of Draco for being able to at least look as though he knew what he was doing when Hermione---his friend, not Draco's---needed help. Draco looked up, his eyebrow quirking up in a sardonic smile for a second. He looked more like the old Draco Malfoy than he had in some time.

"We aren't in all our classes together, Potter, and you didn't take Healing Magic. My father told me to take it---he probably figured that the Death Eaters could use a trained mediwizard. Before they teach us any spells at all, they check us out thoroughly on Muggle-style first aid, if only so that we know what we're dealing with---it also comes in handy in situations where spells don't work or are a bad idea." Dropping Hermione's wrist, Draco gave Harry a worried look. "I don't like the look of her---she isn't concussed, as far as I can tell, but she looks awfully shocky. I'd like to get a real mediwizard---or a Muggle E.M.T. or M.D.--in on this." Ron bit his lip. Harry knew that for Draco Malfoy to wish for Muggle help was a sign that things were very bad, indeed.

By this time, the others had begun to recover. Aragorn sobbed something about how he had warned Gandalf about Moria, and Gimli cursed Caradhras' storms for forcing them into the dwarven ruins in the first place. Shakily, the Company got to its feet, and moved down the valley. "We've got to get away from here---the orcs won't come out by day, but they have been known to chase people for many miles by night, if they've got a fallen leader to avenge. Night falls quickly at this time of year!"

As the grief-stricken company moved down the valley, they passed a deep, clear lake. Gimli said "That's the Mirrormere---Gandalf hoped I'd be glad to see it. I now see it, but I'm not glad." Some ways farther along, as the company followed a long-neglected stone road, they came to an inscribed pillar standing beside the road. Gimli stopped and pointed. "That's Durin's Stone! It marks the point where Durin saw his crown of stars, in the depths of Mirrormere! I've got to look!"

"All right, but hurry! We've got to take the most advantage of daylight we can! The moon's not going to be much help, and orcs operate well at night," snapped Aragorn. Gimli turned and went toward the pillar.

"Come on, Mr. Potter! This is something you need to see!" Curious, Harry followed the dwarf, his classmates behind him. Uncharacteristically, Hermione was lagging behind; normally, such a chance to see something educational would have had her leading the rest of them. Gimli pointed to the pillar; Harry looked at the carvings on it, but couldn't make them out, even though he had found he could read the local language---the pillar was very weathered and the writings were too faint to see.

When Harry and his friends stooped over the dark water, at first they couldn't see anything, but gradually, Harry's eyes adjusted and he saw the mountains reflected in the water, and deep in the reflected daylight sky, a formation of seven stars. However, neither he nor his companions cast reflections that he could see. Gimli sighed. "Oh, Kheled-zaram, fair and wonderful! There lies Durin's crown, until he wakes!" He bowed to the water, and Harry imitated him, before they turned away.

As they moved along the road, they passed a stream. Although Aragorn warned them that it was icy cold, Harry and the other Hogwarts students took the chance of filling their water bottles. Draco cast a quick spell to make sure that the water itself was pure, and reported: "It's glacial runoff, and quite pure. These bottles hold a lot more than you'd think, looking at them from the outside, but we ran through a lot of water in Moria." He tipped the bottle back, drinking deeply. "Gods, that hits the spot!" The drink seemed to do him good, and Harry did the same thing. The icy water hit his system and seemed to put new life into him. Aragorn watched in puzzlement.

"I had always thought that drinking cold water was bad for the system," he remarked, as Ron, Harry and Draco came back to the rest of the party, handing Hermione her bottle. Harry shook his head absently, watching Hermione carefully. She stowed the bottle back in its place, but she was moving slowly, and still seemed very vague.

"Not where we come from, Aragorn. We sweated off a lot of water in Moria, and that fight also took a great deal out of our systems. If you don't get enough water into yourself, you'll damage yourself," answered Ron. Aragorn looked slightly miffed at being corrected by someone so much younger, with so much less experience in wilderness travel, but kept his thoughts to himself.

Before them, they could see a huge forest stretching out. Legolas looked at it longingly. "Lothlorien! Fairest of all the elven realms!" he murmured. "I'd give anything to be there in springtime, with the mallorn-trees blooming!"

"I'd be glad to be there, even in winter, but it's miles away. We've got to pick up our speed," answered Aragorn. He led them on as fast as they could go, until Hermione was stumbling and staggering with the effort of keeping up, and the others were grey with fatigue. Finally, several miles down the road, Aragorn called a halt. They had found a sheltered dell with a stream through it.

"Forgive me, Miss Granger," he said, taking Hermione and setting her down gently on a rock, "but haste seemed urgent to me. I should have remembered your injury. Can you kindle a fire?" he asked the other Hogwarts students. Legolas and Gimli gathered fuel as Harry got ready to cast the fire-spell Hermione normally used. Aragorn examined her injury, his touch gentle and knowing.

When the fire was going, Aragorn pulled out his pouch, and extracted a bundle with some dried leaves in it. "This is *athelas*, or kingsfoil in the common tongue," he explained to Harry, Ron and Draco, who were watching him like hawks. "It's dried, so it won't be as effective, but it should do your friend's injury some good." When they had hot water, he soaked the leaves in it, and gently bathed Hermione's hurts with the resultant herbal infusion. Just smelling it made Harry feel better. Hermione gasped and squeaked, but as Aragorn went on, she improved visibly, color coming back to her cheeks. All of them also got a chance to drink a mouthful of the *athelas* tea, and Harry felt a great deal better after it---good enough to realize that he was ravenously hungry. He pulled some of their dwindling supply of food out, and began to cook up a meal, noticing as he did so that everybody, except Hermione, started to perk up and take an interest in eating.

After they had eaten, they destroyed all trace that they had been there, and went along their way. Hermione was still not up to her usual self, Harry thought, but at least she wasn't slowing them down. Gimli and Harry were walking at the rear of the company, as night fell around them. When Harry asked if Gimli heard anything unusual, Gimli smiled at Harry in the dusk.

"I don't hear a thing but the wind." He stroked his beard. "I hope that means the orcs aren't coming after us; they'll sometimes chase people for miles if they've got a leader to avenge. I'm hoping that they weren't interested in anything more than driving us from Khazad-dum." His expression darkened. "Although that was enough of an affront right there---how those filth dare to desecrate my ancestors' halls, I'll never understand. Durin's Bane---" Remembering what had happened to Gandalf, Gimli broke off.

Although Harry respected the dwarf, he wasn't quite so sure they weren't being followed. Again and again, he thought he heard the fall of soft bare feet, pattering along behind them, stopping a few seconds after they stopped to listen. When he whirled and shone his Everlight torch along the path they had come, he thought he saw two glowing points of light for a second. "What was that? *Are* we being followed?" asked Gimli. He bent and put his ear to the ground. "I hear nothing but the night-speech of rock and stone, Harry. We'd better hurry along." Harry followed, still feeling uneasy, as though eyes he couldn't see were on him.

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Some time later, they found themselves facing a huge shadowy wood, as the cold wind blew up the valley. Harry thought that it was what he had heard called a "lazy wind"---instead of going around him, it tried to blow right through him. He huddled deeper in his cloak, envying anybody who wasn't as skinny as he was; the wind sucked the heat out of his body quickly.

"Lothlorien!" said Aragorn, as proudly as if he had invented it. "Alas that it is winter! This is the safest place for us to stop---the virtue of the Elves is on this place. They dwell deep in this forest, though, far from the northern border, where we are."

Gimli looked skeptical, but the one that spoke up was Boromir. "I'd rather we went another way. In Gondor, they say that few enter these woods, and of those few that come out again, none are unscathed."

Aragorn scowled. "Try *unchanged*, Lord Boromir, and you'll be closer to the truth. However, if they're speaking evil of the Lady of the Woods, things have changed for the worse in Gondor. In any case, there's no other road---unless you want to try going back to Moria, or swim the Great River."

"Lead on, then!" sighed Boromir. "I advised against Moria, if you'll recall. If we must enter the Golden Wood, I'll come---but it's dangerous."

"Only to those who are evil, or who bring evil," answered Aragorn.

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Some ways into the forest, the Company halted. They had passed over a stream called Nimrodel, and Legolas had told the tale of an elven-maid who had had the same name as the stream. Harry hadn't really understood all the story, but hearing it in Legolas' musical voice had cheered him somewhat. Legolas also explained the custom of the elves of Lorien of sleeping in the trees. "That's why they are called 'Galadrim,' which means---care to tell them, Mr. Malfoy?"

"Tree-people," said Draco. He looked at the trees. "These don't look like they're really big enough to sleep in."

"No, these aren't the ones that are used for sleeping in, Mr. Malfoy," said Legolas. "Those trees are much bigger, and are deeper in Lorien than we are now. The people of Lorien didn't build fortifications, or need them, before the Shadow came." He led the company in a different direction, deeper into the woods, away from the path they had followed. Finally, he came to a stand of huge trees. Harry thought that the smallest of them were ten feet in diameter through the trunk---how high they went he couldn't begin to guess. "I'll climb up," said Legolas. As he touched the trunk, a voice rang out, commandingly.

"*Daro!*" Legolas stepped back, keeping his hands in plain sight.

"Easy does it! Don't move, or speak!" hissed Legolas. A burst of silvery laughter came from overhead, and Harry heard words in an unknown, musical tongue. Draco cocked his head, listening, as Legolas replied slowly.

"Those are elves, Potter," explained Draco at Harry's questioning glance, "and they say that we breathe so loudly they could shoot us in the dark. They've been tracking us ever since we entered this forest. I---sort of knew---they were around, but didn't want to say anything as long as they didn't show themselves." He listened again. "They heard Legolas' voice, and knew he was one of their kinfolk, so they didn't stop us. They want you to climb up, Potter---you and Legolas." Another burst of unintelligible, musical speech, and Draco nodded. "Ah---they've figured out that I can understand them. They want to see me, too." He turned to the others. "The rest of you best stay right here. You're covered---there's archers all around us."

A ladder made of some sort of silvery rope, glowing faintly in the dark, came dangling down, and Harry went up, following Legolas, and with Draco right behind him. As he climbed, he looked back at his friends, giving Ron and Hermione what he hoped was a confident smile in return for their worried expressions. The branches of the mallorn-tree stretched out nearly horizontally, and finally Harry found himself standing on a platform among them.

Legolas was sitting amid three other elves wearing grey clothes that looked to be tinted to blend into the color of the bark. One of them held up a light, examining Harry and Draco. "Welcome," he said, speaking slowly. "Please pardon us, but we seldom use any language but our own. We seldom deal with outsiders---even our brethren of the north in Mirkwood seldom come here. I am Haldir, and these are my brothers, Rumil and Orophin." Harry bowed, wishing bitterly that he spoke the elven tongues instead of Parseltongue. Draco followed suit, and spoke for a few minutes in the same musical language Harry had heard earlier. The elves' eyes widened at this.

"Legolas was right---your friend does speak our language fluently. If anything, his accent is a bit more elegant than ours. My only criticism is that his word-choice is somewhat archaic." Draco grinned triumphantly. Haldir went on: "Since Legolas is with you, we are willing to admit you into Lorien. How many of you are there?"

"Well, there's me, and Draco Malfoy here, and our friends Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger---we're all mages. Then, Legolas, of course, and Aragorn, and Boromir---they're both men. Aragorn's a Ranger, and Boromir's some sort of lord or other from Gondor---or so he says." Legolas lifted an eyebrow at Harry's qualifying statement, but held his peace.

"That's seven of you. We counted eight, and were expecting nine." Haldir looked grave. "Who is the one you haven't mentioned?"

"He's Gimli, a dwarf from the Lonely Mountain." At Draco's announcement, the elves looked shocked and somber. They muttered to themselves in their own language, and Draco turned to Harry, his face grave.

"This doesn't look good, Potter, from what I can hear. They do not like dwarves here---not one little bit." Draco moved his arm slightly, and his wand fell into his hand. "Get ready for a scrap." Harry unobtrusively reached for his wand as well; he didn't want to fight the elves, who, after all, were on the same side, but he didn't want to abandon the stout-hearted Gimli, either.

After a low-voiced colloquy between the elves, Haldir spoke again. "We will allow the dwarf to pass, but he's got to be blindfolded. Aragorn and Legolas will be responsible for his

behavior. Right now, we've got to get your people off the ground. We've seen orcs marching north toward Moria, and danger's not far behind you. You, Harrypotter,"---Harry did not bother to correct the elf---"and your friends may use this platform for the night; the others may use a platform in the next tree over." Harry relaxed slightly; he had not been looking forward to a fight with the elves, in their own country, at night, with Hermione injured. Beside him, he heard the tiniest sigh of relief from Draco, as he discreetly made his wand disappear.

When Ron came up, helping Hermione, he told Harry: "We've brought our packs up. Aragorn wanted to hide them in drifts of leaves, but we felt it would be safer for them up here." After eating food offered them by the elves, the four Hogwarts students stretched out on fur rugs provided by Haldir, and were soon deeply asleep.

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Later that night, Harry awoke, wondering what sort of sanitary facilities the elves used. All thought of such matters was driven out of his mind when he heard a harsh laugh from below, and the tramp of heavy-booted feet. He rolled over, to see that Ron and Draco were awake as well. An elf appeared at the entrance to the platform.

"What is it?" asked Harry sleepily. The elf pulled up the rope-ladder, whispering "*Yrch!*" Silent as the wind, he disappeared. Harry looked at Draco, and was not reassured; Draco looked rather worried.

"Orcs?" muttered Draco, careful not to wake Hermione, who was tossing and muttering in her sleep. "That's all we bloody well need, isn't it?" He pulled out his wand, and Harry and Ron did likewise. Harry began to get worried; he knew that orcs could track by scent as well as dogs could, but unlike dogs, they could climb trees easily if they wanted to do so. Even though he couldn't hear the orcs, Harry's feeling of being in danger grew and grew. When he went to the opening, he was sure he heard something at the foot of the tree, many feet below them, and that it was no elf.

Whatever it was, it scabbled at the tree-bark, and then began to climb the trunk. Harry could see two pale eyes looking up toward him, and he wished that his Everlight torch had not been packed away. Something touched the trunk, and whatever had been climbing slipped away rapidly.

Haldir came back up. "It was orcs. A large company of them have crossed the Nimrodel." In the dim light of the moon, Harry could see that the elf was puzzled. "I also saw something---something I have never seen before---climbing this tree. It was too small to be one of your company, and it vanished the second it knew I was there.

"We've lured the orcs deeper into the forest, and none of them will ever return---Orophin's gone on ahead to alert our people. Sleep now, while you can!"

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When dawn came, Harry and his schoolmates awoke, and were guided along their way by Haldir. They crossed a deep, fast stream by the use of ropes, walking along on one while holding another. Hermione was in worse and worse shape, and finally Aragorn took her on his back for the crossing. Draco took Harry and Ron aside when they were on the other side.

"Look, you two---I really, really don't like the way Hermione's looking. She's still very shocky. As soon as we get where we're going, we've got to get help of some sort for her. I'd love to have her back at Hogwarts---Madam Pomfrey'd have her up and dancing the kazatsky in no time flat---but we're not there." A ghost of a grin flitted across Draco's face, startling Harry. "That is, Madam Pomfrey'd have her up and dancing the kazatsky, if she only knew how to dance the kazatsky."

Haldir came up to them. "It's now time---we're entering the most secret parts of Lorien. Very few strangers are allowed here at all. As was agreed, I'm going to blindfold the dwarf. The rest of you may walk free for a while, until we get farther in."

"You're going to what?" gasped Harry. Behind him, he heard Ron mutter something that would have displeased his mother a great deal, and Draco drew himself up to his full height, generations of aristocratic Malfoys looking out through his eyes. Hermione was still not tracking very well, but Harry didn't care for the look she was giving Haldir at all. Unobtrusively, all four Hogwarts students drew their wands, holding them close by their sides and trusting to the wands' non-weaponish look to fool the elves.

Gimli was no less displeased. "I will not walk blindfold, like a prisoner or a beggar, and I'm no spy. My people have never dealt with the Enemy, and I'm as loyal to the company as anybody here."

Haldir looked stern. "It's our law---I've already stretched a lot of points just letting you come this far."

Gimli snarled: "Either no blindfold, or I turn back and seek my own land, even if I die alone in the wilderness."

Harry didn't like the look of the situation at all, as Gimli argued back and forth with Haldir. When he was told that he couldn't go back, that the paths were guarded and he couldn't cross the streams, Gimli finally drew his axe, and the elves bent their bows.

"*Expelliarmus!*" shouted Harry, and the axe and bows flew from their owners' hands. They landed near the Hogwarts students, and Ron stood over them, his wand out and his expression warning of consequences to anybody stupid enough to meddle with him.

"Now, Haldir, will you listen to us?" snapped Draco. "We've been a fellowship for quite some time now, and all of us have pulled together for the common goal. You apparently thought that we were children, as Boromir, here, did back at Rivendell. That's an easy mistake to make, but you've now seen how mistaken it is. Either none of us will be blindfolded, or all will be!" He crossed his arms on his chest and stuck out his chin, pride and confidence radiating from him.

:"Would you all go blindfold, for the sake of this---this dwarf?" asked Haldir in wonder. Aragorn suddenly shouted laughter.

"We would look foolish, wouldn't we? Still and all, I think Mr. Malfoy's suggestion of all of us being treated alike is a good one. Yes, even you, Legolas---it'll go easier on Gimli if we're all blindfolded."

"I'm an elf! I---" Legolas broke off, paling, as Ron and Draco raised their wands and pointed them at him. He had apparently not forgotten the fights in Moria. Raising his hands in an appeasing gesture, he stepped backward. "You're not serious---you *are* serious!" Aragorn stepped forward, only to stop as Harry raised his wand. The ranger blanched slightly---he hadn't forgotten, either.

Harry smiled rather grimly. "I'll agree to be blindfolded, if anybody must be." He winked at Draco. "As at least one of us will testify, sight's not my strongest suit." Draco smothered a snicker.

Blindfolds were produced, and soon all the company was blindfolded. Putting his hand on Haldir's shoulder, and feeling Ron's hand on his, Harry began to go forward. Pitching his voice low, he warned: "Haldir, if I trip, you'll end up on a lily pad."

As it turned out, the paths were smooth and straight, and none of them had any trouble. Legolas complained bitterly about missing the sight of Lorien. Haldir explained that the times were dangerous enough that the Galadrim had no choice but to be wary. Even with that, the feeling of peace that Harry had noticed, when he first crossed the river, grew deeper and deeper; he thought it was rather like what it must be like in a Zen garden somewhere in Japan. The air he breathed seemed sweeter than any he ever remembered---or was it just the contrast with the smoky, close air of Moria?

That evening, Haldir received a report from some elven warriors. The intruding orcs had been destroyed, and a strange creature had been seen, prowling around and snuffling. "All of you, even the dwarf, are to walk free. The Lady's aware of who and what you are--- apparently new messages came through from Rivendell." They unbound Gimli's eyes first, apologizing, which gratified Harry considerably; he knew how much it hurt to be singled out.

When his own eyes were unbound, Harry fished his glasses out of his pocket and put them on. Gazing around himself, he gasped in wonder at the beauty of the scene. While the others sat down on the ground, grateful for a rest, Harry looked around for a while, groping for words to describe what he saw. The whole place looked as though it had newly come from the hands of a wise Creator---the colors seemed brighter, the air seemed sweeter and purer, and everything was in perfect harmony. There was an air of deep peace and timelessness over everything. In a way, he thought that even when he was gone, Harry Potter from England would still be there.

Ron and Draco felt it too. "This is like---being inside a song, or something like that," murmured Ron. Draco was transfixed by their surroundings---he had lost his usual wariness, and looked open and happy as a little child, drinking in the air and enjoying the colors. Harry looked at him rather sadly---could this be what Draco could have been, if his father had not been a Death Eater?

Chapter 8---The Lady and the Mirror

After a while, the company went on, deeper into the woods. Night was falling and the elves began lighting silver lamps to illuminate the scene. They finally came to a clearing, and Harry could see the evening sky again; it was darkening rapidly and the stars were coming out. On the far side of the clearing, he could see *mallorn* trees, growing higher than he had ever seen trees grow before. "Welcome to Caras Galadon!" said Haldir. "We'll have to go around to the other side to get in, and it's not a short walk---the city is very large."

As they went around, Harry watched Hermione. She was beginning to look very shocky again, and he wished that Draco's wish for a mediwizard, or a Muggle MD or EMT, had been granted. Her eyes were unfocussed, and she stumbled along, hardly taking notice of their surroundings, but willing to go where she was told, leaning on Ron. For a second, Harry caught Ron's eye, and Ron shook his head, looking as worried as Harry felt.

Finally, they came to a great gate, which opened when Haldir knocked and spoke, but Harry couldn't see any sign of guards. Within the walls, they found more trees growing, and Harry could hear elven voices all around them, but he couldn't see anybody. After following an intricate, winding path, they came to a fountain. Behind it stood the biggest *mallorn* of them all; Harry thought it was about as big as the sequoias of his own world, and wondered what the elves would think of those---they seemed to like trees. There were three elves in armor sitting by a ladder that led up into the tree. They came to their feet as Harry and his friends approached. Haldir said: "We're here---this is where Celeborn and Galadriel live. I'll go up first, with you, Harry, and you, Draco; the rest can come as they please. It's a long climb."

After climbing for a long time, and passing many platforms, Harry finally came to a huge platform that supported a great hall; it would have been a respectable-sized building even by the standards of people that built on the ground. Draco let out a soundless whistle, and Harry could tell that he was quite impressed. Inside, the tree's trunk formed a huge pillar in the middle of an oval-shaped chamber. Celeborn and Galadriel sat there, side-by-side with the pillar at their backs, and many other elves stood around.

Harry was reminded strongly of a veela, looking at the Lady Galadriel. She was tall, with a carriage as straight as a guardsman's, and very beautiful. Her hair was deep yellow, and only something in her eyes betrayed that she had already lived for many centuries, unchanging and unaging. Her husband, Celeborn, was handsome enough to make Gilderoy Lockhart fall down in fits of foaming envy; his hair was silver but his face was as youthful as his wife's. Both of them were dressed in white from head to foot, and they stood to welcome their guests, which made Harry feel slightly nervous and tongue-tied.

An elf ran into the hall behind them, coming up to Haldir and speaking rapidly in a low voice. Haldir turned, and snapped something back. Draco turned to Harry. "That doesn't sound good, Potter---they're saying that Granger's had trouble getting up those ladders. I'm not too surprised." Harry felt slightly sick inside. The elves began to mutter among themselves, until the Lady Galadriel stopped them with a crisp command. She fixed her eyes on Haldir, who began to explain. His explanation obviously did not please the Lady, since her

expression darkened, and she snapped something that sent several elves running out of the hall as though their trousers were on fire.

Draco grinned, obviously impressed. "*Man*, Potter, you miss a lot, not being able to speak the elvish languages!" He shook his head in respect. "When the Lady heard that Granger's been made to march that far into her realm wounded, and with her wound untended, she ripped a few strips off people, including our mate Haldir here. Those elves are going to raise her up into the tree on a stretcher, it sounds like."

Draco's low-voiced commentary had attracted the Lady's attention. She turned to Harry and Draco. "Welcome, Mr. Potter---I am informed that this is the correct form of address for you. Sit by my side as I greet your friends." The others were just then getting into the hall, with Hermione being carried on a stretcher. Hoping that the elves knew what to do about her wounds, Harry sat where he was bid, watching as his friends were greeted. She had kind words for everybody, praising Ron and Draco for their bravery in choosing to accompany Harry, welcoming Legolas and Aragorn as old friends, and expressing hopes that Gimli's presence meant better relations between dwarves and elves. At her praise of Gondor's long stand against the Shadow, Harry was slightly amused to see the stern warrior Boromir blushing like a schoolboy. Then she leaned over Hermione's stretcher.

Concern edged her voice as she turned to Harry. "This young woman---girl, really--- shouldn't have been traveling in this condition. How long has it been since she was hurt?" Gentle as Hermione's own mother would have wished, she probed the place where Hermione had hit her head, and Hermione stirred and cried out, not fully conscious. Harry's eyes prickled with tears, and he saw that Ron was terribly worried. Even Draco was concerned, although nobody not familiar with him would have known it. The hardships and dangers they had shared had welded the four who had set out from Hogwarts into a team.

"Two days, more or less," said Aragorn, looking rather abashed. "Pardon, my Lady, but we were being pursued by orcs---and possibly something even worse." At this, Galadriel gave Aragorn a very sharp look.

"That brings us to the next question I have; and no, it is not 'what fumble-fingered butchers were tending this wound,' although that would be just. The reports from Rivendell said that there would be nine of you, but I only see eight. What happened to Gandalf the Grey?"

"He went down in Moria, my lady. In Khazad-dum, he fought with the shadow, and didn't escape." At these quiet words from Aragorn, a cry of grief and horror came from the watching elves. Galadriel's lovely blue eyes widened in shock, and Harry thought he saw tears start, before she mastered herself.

Celeborn spoke for the first time: "This is bad news; why weren't we informed at once?" He said something to Haldir that had Haldir wilting and Draco's eyes widening with admiration at his eloquence; Harry rather envied Draco his command of the elven languages, and would have traded Parseltongue for them in a second, at least until they got back to Hogwarts.

"We didn't tell Haldir at first," said Legolas. "At first we were too tired to talk, and later just being in Lorien was salve for our grief."

"Even so, our grief is very great," said Harry, rather surprising himself. "Gandalf guided us, and saved us in Moria."

At Celeborn's command, Aragorn told them the full tale of their journey, up to the fight with the Balrog. "It was an evil of the ancient world, such as I had never seen before---a shadow and flame at once, strong and terrible."

"It was a Balrog of Morgoth," put in Legolas. "Next to Sauron, it was one of the deadliest creatures in Middle-Earth."

"To us Dwarves, it was known as Durin's Bane---it drove us from Moria single-handed," murmured Gimli.

"We have long feared that something evil slept in Moria," said Celeborn. "Had I known you had awakened it, I would have forbidden you entry to Lorien. Gandalf must have been mad, to go into Moria. He threw away his life!"

"No, he did not," said Galadriel. "He never did anything rash or needless. In any case, it's not the dwarf's fault---and if we had long been exiled from Lorien, can you say you would not have wanted to see it again, even if dragons were living here?" Harry's heart warmed at her compassion for Gimli, who had looked for a second as though Celeborn had slapped him. Gloriously handsome as Celeborn was, with his silvery mane framing his ageless face, for a second he reminded Harry unpleasantly of Professor Snape at his least tolerable. Harry wondered if Professor Snape would have dared be so rude; it was, to say the least, an interesting question.

"We didn't have much choice, Lady Galadriel," said Ron. "The storms forbade us to cross the mountains, and the passes were watched. We needed speed, and we thought we could get through without stirring up trouble. As it turned out, we were wrong." He gave Celeborn a very hard look. "In any case, we were there and fought the Balrog---me, Harry, our friend Hermione, and Draco. Even though Hermione had already been hurt, we stood there with Gandalf, and threw every spell we knew at the creature." At Celeborn's wide-eyed expression, he went on, smiling grimly: "Yes, Harry, Draco, Hermione and I stood up to a Balrog. As it turned out, we weren't able to stop it or kill it, but it knew we were there." *Could you have done as well?* was the unspoken question Harry heard.

"Forgive my hasty words, Mr. Weasley---and Gimli," said Celeborn. "I hadn't realized how bad things were for you. In any case, thank you for reminding us of your friend's hurts. With your permission, we'll see about mending her injuries." He snapped commands, and several elves carried Hermione out. "We will do all we can for you---particularly for he who bears a terrible burden." He gave Harry a meaningful look.

Galadriel explained that she had called the White Council together, and had planned to have it led by Gandalf. She told them that things were balanced very finely, but that they still had hope while the company held true. She bent a piercing gaze on each of them in turn, and only Aragorn and Legolas were able to stand it for long. Draco paled, Ron blushed and shuffled his feet, and Harry felt as though she were looking into his mind.

"Tonight, you will stay here---and for as long as you need to, to rest from your travels." At that, elves led Harry and his friends from the presence of the Lady.

When they were alone, Harry turned to Ron and Draco. "Did you feel what I felt, when she looked at us, that last time?" He looked around uneasily. "I thought that she was looking into my mind. She's nicer than her husband, but I didn't like it."

Ron and Draco looked at Harry, their expressions of unease eerily similar. "You felt that way, too?" asked Ron. "I thought that she was asking me how I'd like to be back at Hogwarts---and on the Quidditch team, and a prefect." Draco nodded, but did not confide what the Lady had tempted him with.

Harry compared notes with the rest of the Company. The report was the same from everybody. Every member had felt as though he was being offered a chance to turn aside from their quest, and in so doing, get something wonderful that they wanted. To boot, they told Harry that they had felt that their choices would remain secret and known only to themselves. All reported that they had refused.

Harry didn't quite know what to make of it. He didn't think that the Lady had anything like the power to come through with what he thought she had offered. The vision of himself, safe back in Britain, living with Sirius Black and Remus Lupin on his holidays from Hogwarts, had been inordinately tempting, but he wasn't willing to pay the price of risking Voldemort obtaining the Ring to get it. "That's if she could even do it," he told himself, firmly banishing temptation.

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They stayed for some days in Lorien, resting from the rigors of the road. It was an incredibly peaceful, pleasant place; the weather itself seemed to be cooperating, with only a little rain to keep things dampened down. Legolas spent a lot of time with the other elves, not sleeping with the rest of the company. He took Gimli with him on his mysterious errands, and Harry wondered why.

As they rested up, the grief they felt for Gandalf became more pronounced. When they spoke, it was often to reminisce about the old wizard. They heard elves singing lamentations for his fall, and more than once, Harry caught Draco listening, tears running down his face as he lost himself in the beauty of the music. Draco wouldn't translate the songs, and neither would Legolas; they both said that for them, the loss was too recent.

After a couple of days, Hermione reappeared, looking as good as new, or even better. Harry stared and stared at her. The clothes she had worn were gone, and she was clothed very like one of the elvish warriors they had seen, in close-fitting trousers and boots, a mid-thigh-length tunic, and a grey cloak. Her eyes sparkled with amusement at the reaction she had caused. Harry spared a glance for his schoolmates. He was gratified to see that Ron was gaping at Hermione like a guppy-fish at feeding time, and even Draco had been startled out of his usual pose of aloof indifference.

"How do you like the new me?" she asked, turning around so they could see her from all angles. She smiled broadly, well pleased with her new look. Harry could see that it was quite a practical outfit for long trips through wilderness. "I'm feeling wonderful, too! These elves could teach Madam Pomfrey a few things, and I'm just sorry that she and they'll never get to meet and compare notes."

"Great to have you back, Granger," croaked Draco. She grinned at him, rather knowingly.

"Good to be back, I must say. By the way, Malfoy, did you know that you've caused a bit of a stir here?" Draco's eyes widened as she went on: "The elves are quite impressed with your command of their language. They all think you're some kind of distant kin of theirs. And who am I to say you aren't?" Behind Hermione, several elven women appeared. Harry thought they were young, but you couldn't tell with elves. They giggled, though, which he associated with girls of about his own age. They spoke in the elven language, and Draco's eyes widened. He replied in the same language.

"See you later, Potter. I've been invited to come and meet some of these ladies. *Alone.*" Draco sauntered over to meet the elven women, who surrounded him and led him away. Hermione looked after him, worry in her eyes.

"I do hope he'll be all right. They did say they wanted to meet him. I'm sure they won't hurt him." A mischievous glint appeared in her eyes, and she began to giggle, before she cut it off, knowing that Harry and Ron disliked giggling. "He may be in for a few new experiences, though. Having long, long lifetimes means that elves sometimes get spectacularly bored, or so Aragorn says."

When Hermione had gone off to show off her new look to the rest of the company, Harry sat down, and Ron sat down beside him. Ron finally broke the silence. "That lucky, lucky, lucky *bastard!* That lucky, lucky, *jammy...* Slytherin *bastard!* I could kick him!"

"No, Ron, you couldn't," said Harry quietly. At Ron's puzzled look, Harry condescended to explain. "Because you'd have to get in line behind me, and by the time I was done with him, kicking him would be redundant, believe me!" Harry shook his head. "What is it about Malfoy, anyway? The leather pants?"

"Search me, Potter. At least he isn't Gilderoy Lockhart." Ron thought for a minute. "I kind of think it's the attitude. The 'I-don't-care-what-you-think' air." He sighed. "Still and all, I'd give anything to be where he is now."

Harry jumped as a slender hand landed on his shoulder, and he turned to find himself looking up into the face of yet another elven woman. She looked down at him, amusement in her large, slightly tip-tilted eyes, and signed that she wanted him to stand up. When he did, she turned and led him off by one hand. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that another elven woman had laid claim to Ron.

"Fight to the last, Ron! Never surrender your virtue!" murmured Harry. Startled, Ron jerked out a laugh as their fair captors led them away.

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When Harry awoke the next morning, he found himself back where the rest of the company slept. Everybody else was there; Ron and Draco were so deeply asleep that he thought he could have fired a pistol without waking either of them. He was amused to see that both of them were obviously naked under their coverings. Beside them, Aragorn snored away softly, and Boromir turned in his sleep, moaning. Gimli slept deeply as well.

Harry, on the other hand, felt rested and full of bounce. Getting up, he scrambled into his clothes, blushing slightly at the signs of last night's activity. A giggle from behind startled him, and he whirled, to find himself looking at Hermione. "You needn't be so modest with me, Harry Potter. I *know* how men are made." She grinned the old flashing grin that flickered across her face so quickly that if you blinked, you'd miss it. "After all, there *are* books on the subject," she said, in an uncanny imitation of Ron's intonation and voice.

"Hermione!"

"I thought they'd try something like that. Some of them do know how to speak languages other than the elven speech, and they were full of questions about you, and Ron---and, of course, Draco." She grinned at Harry's shocked expression. "You really don't understand about women, do you, Harry? When we're alone together, we talk about everything, and I do mean everything. When I told them that we'd never---well, you know---they were quite shocked. Both at you, and Ron, and Draco, for not taking more of an initiative, and at me, for not forcing the issue." She cocked her head to one side. "Don't be such a Victorian, Harry. They don't have the idea that sleeping with someone has to be because you're passionately in love. They put me in mind of Polynesians before the missionaries came."

The others were waking up, and Hermione put her finger to her lips to silence Harry. "Good morning, sleepyheads!" she caroled. The sight of their consternation obviously amused her, and she snickered madly at Ron's and Draco's discomfiture. "If I only had a camera!" she laughed. "Ginny'd get such a kick out of this!"

"You even *think* of telling Ginny about any of this," blustered Ron, as he scrambled into his clothes under his blankets, "and I'll hex you so badly that Madam Pomfrey'll be working on you for six months!"

"Come now, I'm sure Miss Granger means no harm." Aragorn managed to make peace break out, and they all went off for breakfast. Harry felt, though, that it was getting close to the time when they'd have to leave Lorien.

He smiled to himself---at least he'd received the traditional hero's farewell! He thought about what the Dursleys would think of what he had been doing, and smiled even more broadly. Uncle Vernon would turn green with rage and envy, Aunt Petunia would act as though he, and he alone, had ever done such dreadful, wicked, naughty things---and Dudley would gnash his teeth that Harry had yet again done something that he, Dudley, would never get to do, if Harry knew anything about girls! He remembered the responses he had gotten from his female Hogwarts classmates when he had shown them Dudley's picture. "*Re-PULSE-ive!*" had been the most positive comment he had heard, and that had been from Gregory Goyle's little sister---an expert comment if ever there was one!

That evening, the whole company seemed to feel that it was time to leave. They were packing their gear, double-checking everything to make sure it was in apple-pie order. Harry rather hoped that they would see the Lady Galadriel one last time, at least---if only so that he could thank her on behalf of his friends and himself.

As though the wish were father to the fact, the Lady herself came around to see how they were doing. She beckoned, and Harry and his classmates followed. Harry was curious about just what she wanted. Hermione's face was alight with eagerness to see something new, and

maybe learn something new as well. Galadriel led them into an enclosed garden, where there were no trees growing and the sky could be seen. Looking up, Harry saw that the evening star, Earendil, was above the horizon in the darkening sky. The Lady led them down a long flight of stairs into a hollow near a stream, where a basin of silver stood on a low stand, and a silver ewer was nearby. She filled the basin to the brim, breathed on it, and spoke for the first time. "This is the Mirror of Galadriel, and I have brought you here so that you may look into it."

"So what does it do?" asked Draco. His normal drawl was not to be heard; he was as awed by the Lady as any of the others.

"It shows you things. It may show you the future, it may show you what may come to pass or may not, it may show you the past. I can command it to show what is desired, but the visions that come of themselves are more valuable, if you can interpret them."

"Professor Trelawney should be here," murmured Hermione in Harry's ear. "The old fraud would absolutely die of envy." Harry shushed her absently. At Galadriel's gesture, the four companions came up and peered into the water.

At first, Harry couldn't see anything but the stars, and he thought that this would be like staring into that stupid crystal ball in Divination class. Then, all of a sudden, he saw something else---Hogwarts Castle. The point of view was from across the lake, and he thought he could see the Gryffindor team out practicing Quidditch. Then, the scene changed, and he saw Bilbo, sitting in a room at Rivendell. He was writing something in his book, and the rain lashed down onto his window.

"Hogwarts!" said Hermione, in a voice aching with longing and homesickness. Harry privately agreed with her. He'd have given anything, at that moment, even to see Goyle, Crabbe or Professor Snape again. Hogwarts was far more his home than the Dursleys' ever could be. It was the only home he had. He then remembered all the fun times he'd had at the Burrow, and wondered what was going on there. At that thought, the scene shifted again.

They were now looking at the Burrow, and Ron let out a cry. "That's my family, and my Dad! But why is Dad at home?" Then the scene shifted again, and Ron yelled angrily. "That's Cornelius Fudge---sacking my Dad!" He turned wildly to Galadriel. "I've got to get home! My family need me! I've got to get home!"

"That, you cannot do, Mr. Weasley," said Galadriel, smiling sadly. "Firstly, the Mirror shows things that *may* happen, as well as things that have happened or are happening. Besides, at home you could do little or nothing to help, and you couldn't get there without your friends. Would you abandon Mr. Potter?"

Ron's face crumpled, and he sank to his knees, burying his face in his hands. "No. No, I won't abandon him. Still and all, if what I saw is true, somebody's going to catch it when I get home!" He began to sob, rackingly, and Hermione knelt to try to comfort him. Draco looked on, helplessly. Now, only Harry and Galadriel were looking into the Mirror.

The scene shifted again, and Harry let out a cry of fear. Against a black, black background, he was looking at a red, lidless eye, with a slit pupil like a cat, or Voldemort. The eye turned, and Harry knew, without knowing how he knew, that he himself was one of the things it sought. The Ring suddenly grew heavy, dragging him down.

"Do not touch the water!" warned Galadriel. The water itself had begun to steam, and Harry jerked back with a considerable effort. As he sprawled on the grass, panting and shaking, he saw Galadriel stepping back from the Mirror. "I know what you saw last, Mr. Potter---and it's something I see often myself. However, know that I know all that is in His mind, at least all that concerns the elves. And He strives to penetrate my thoughts, but the door is closed!" She spread out her beautiful hands, in a gesture of rejection and denial. Harry saw a beautiful ring on her finger, with a gem that shone like starlight.

"Yes," said Galadriel, "you see clearly, Mr. Potter. Elrond couldn't tell you, and it is not allowed to speak of it, but I bear one of the three elven-rings. You can see it because you bear the One. This is why I wasn't happy to see you, because your coming, no matter how things turn out, means the end of Lothlorien. If you fail, we're defenseless against the Enemy, but if you succeed, either I and my folk must leave for the West, or fade into something not dissimilar to your world's 'house-elves.' Yes, Mr. Potter, they were once mighty and beautiful, and they still bear traces of that."

"Maybe you should take the Ring," offered Harry. "You're great, and wise, and all sorts of things that I'm not."

Galadriel laughed softly. "And now I receive payment for my reading of your heart, at our first meeting, Mr. Potter. I've thought for years of what I would do if I had the One Ring. I've wished it had never been made, or that it had stayed lost. And now you offer it to me? In place of the Dark Lord, you would have a Queen. And I would not be dark, at least not at first. I would be beautiful, and terrible---and all would love me, and despair!" She lifted her hand, and the light from her ring's jewel suddenly illuminated the whole clearing, and to Harry, she seemed taller, and more beautiful than any veela, and like a goddess. Then she lowered her hand, and smiled sadly.

"I pass the test, Mr. Potter. Such things hold no charms for me, for I can see the end of that road. Rather than become a new Sauron, I shall go into the West, and stay Galadriel."

Harry bowed. "To be Galadriel should be enough for anybody, I should think." Galadriel smiled and bowed back, obviously delighted at his courtesy.

As Harry and his companions followed Galadriel back out of the clearing, Harry asked: "Why is it that I can't sense the other rings, and know what their owners are thinking?" Galadriel looked at him in concern.

"You have never put on the Ring, Mr. Potter. If you did so, it would have affected you far more severely than it has so far. Even so, you have been changed; you would never have perceived my Ring if you hadn't been." She turned to Ron. "Did you see my Ring?"

"No, Lady," answered Ron, wiping his eyes. "I saw a star near your finger. I wish you did have the One Ring, though. You'd set things to rights, dead quick!"

"So I would begin," said Galadriel, sadly. "But that's not where it would end, unfortunately. Let's go, and not speak of this any more."

Chapter 9---On the Anduin River

The next morning, after emotional farewells, the company set off again, in boats provided by the Elves. Their clothes had been repaired or replaced as needed, they had been given a great deal of the Elves' standby for long journeys, *lembas*-wafers, which were as good as a whole meal in themselves, and each of them had been given a gift by the Lady Galadriel. As they set out, Harry remembered the gift-giving. Legolas had been given an elven-bow of the Lorien make, which was longer than the ones his own people used, and a quiver of arrows for it; Gimli, after making a very graceful speech disclaiming any need for a gift beyond the privilege of having seen the Lady, had been given a tress of Galadriel's own hair; Aragorn had gotten an elvish jewel, and Boromir, a golden belt.

Draco and Ron had also received belts, although Draco had protested that the hospitality they had received in Lorien was already beyond his wildest expectations. At this, Ron had blushed nearly scarlet, sending Hermione into a fit of giggling that nearly had her choking. "You never said a truer word, Draco," she finally managed to sputter out, which made both Ron and Draco---and Harry---blush even more. The belts they had were silver, and had buckles on them that looked like leaves.

"For you, Miss Granger," said the Lady, distracting Hermione from the pleasure of embarrassing her friends, "I have this." She held out a big, thick book, and Hermione squealed with pleasure. She reverently accepted it, and began paging through. She looked up at the Lady, her eyes glowing with happiness.

"A comprehensive history of Middle-Earth? Oh, Lady, *thank you!*" She stuffed the book into her bag. "And it doesn't weigh anything or slow me down? This is wonderful!" Her face shone with such happiness that Harry wished he had a camera to record it. She radiated such pleasure that the whole company felt it, like the heat coming off a radiator. Even Aragorn, whom Harry had seldom seen smile, had to crack a grin.

"To give a gift that is so welcomed gives the giver pleasure, Miss Granger. After your dangerous journey is over, perhaps you will want to share the book with your fellow students at ---*Hogwarts*." Harry noticed that she was careful to pronounce the name of the school correctly; most elves he had met tended to pronounce it rather like Fleur Delacour's 'Ogwarts.' The Lady then turned to Harry, who felt slightly uncomfortable with those glorious eyes focussed entirely on him. "And what would the Ringbearer ask of the Elves?"

"Nothing, Lady," said Harry. He had been thinking about it, and he honestly couldn't think of anything he needed much. Particularly with a long, dangerous journey on his hands, he didn't want to be burdened down. He swept a hand to encompass the Fellowship of the Ring. "With friends like *these*, can I ask for more without being greedy?" Ron and Hermione both gaped at him, and Draco looked slightly abashed.

"Oh, listen to him, you Elves!" cried Galadriel. "The most deserving of all asks for nothing! But I can't let you leave without a gift, Mr. Potter." She handed him a crystal phial. Harry could feel that it was full of magic. "It contains a bit of the light of Earendil's star, as you saw it in the waters of my fountain. It may be a light for you when all other lights fail."

As Harry held the phial, he saw Galadriel with other eyes, as he had by the Mirror; a great, queenly figure, far more impressive than any veela, but not to be feared.

On top of everything else, they had all been given cloaks woven by the Lady and her waiting-women. The cloaks were grey, and they were told that those wearing them would be very hard to see, unless the eyes seeking them were friendly. The boats had been stocked with everything they needed, including coils of elven rope, thin and strong. They arranged themselves in the boats, with Harry and Ron sharing one with Aragorn, Draco and Hermione with Boromir, and Legolas with Gimli. The dwarf looked uncomfortable at being in a boat, and Harry himself wondered how he'd handle it; he'd never been in a boat before he had come to Hogwarts, although Dudley, of course, had been in many---and been horribly seasick, at least if his uncle and aunt's accounts had been correct. As they pulled away from Lorien, Harry felt a wrench of sorrow, knowing that whatever happened, he would almost certainly never see that beautiful place again.

None of them were glad to leave, but Gimli, in particular, was down in the dumps, moaning to Legolas about how wonderful the Lady was. Harry tuned out his complaints, thinking instead about what they were to do next. There were basically two choices: to head directly for Mordor itself, or to go to Minas Tirith, as Boromir urged repeatedly. Many of the Company wanted to go to Minas Tirith; they were weary of travelling by night, and of the wilderness. Harry, on the other hand, wasn't so sure. They had agreed that when they came to the Rauros Falls and the Tindrock, they would decide what to do next. Harry wished Gandalf had been able to be there. The responsibility that had been laid on him felt like too much for him to deal with.

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The first few days of their trip were uneventful. The lands they passed through were deserted, and the only living things they saw were birds. Once they saw a huge flock of black swans, flying across the sky. Everybody was uneasy, and their minds were obviously elsewhere. Boromir, in particular, seemed to be twitchy, and several times he paddled his boat up close to the one Harry rode in, staring at Harry with an odd look in his eye. Harry fingered his wand, wishing he knew a spell to tell if somebody was planning to do him harm. Unfortunately, that would have been covered in the studies for the N.E.W.T. in Defense Against the Dark Arts, and before he had been called on this journey, he had just been getting ready to study for his O.W.L.s

On the evening of the fourth night out from Lorien, they camped on a small islet in the middle of the River, for greater security. As Hermione made a fire and Aragorn prepared some fish he had caught, while Legolas dressed a woodcock he had shot, Ron took Harry aside.

"Harry---I had an odd dream last night, when we were going along by night. I dreamed I saw a log---with eyes!" He looked pale, and not at all amused by his dream. Harry sat down on a tree-stump and motioned Ron to continue. "I was dozing, and I must have dreamed this, but I thought I saw a log, following us. That's nothing unusual, except that this log had legs, paddling it along, and eyes!"

Harry felt a ripple of fear along his spine. "Go on, Ron," he said, quietly.

"Well, it was like it had two pale, glowing eyes, and it was catching up to our boats. It got up to Gimli's boat, and peered in. I sat up to see it better, and it vanished, but I thought I saw something slipping onto the shore. I didn't say anything before because I thought you might think I was cracking up."

"No, Ron, you aren't cracking up," said Harry. "Remember that thing the elves were chasing in Lorien? Not to mention, I've seen and heard things too---in Moria, I sometimes heard footsteps following us, and once I saw eyes in the dark. I think I can put a name to your dream---a nasty name. Gollum." Harry fingered his scar absently, although it didn't hurt. "I think he must have been hiding out in Moria, and picked up our trail there. I'd have thought that going into Lorien would throw him off the scent, but he was probably watching us set out from some vantage-point."

Ron shuddered. "That's all we need, isn't it?" he asked bitterly. "On top of wondering if servants of the Enemy are on our trail, we've got to be wary of his nasty fingers around our necks one night." Harry got up and led him back to where the others were getting ready to eat dinner.

That night, Ron and Harry quietly agreed among themselves to share the watch. Ron took the first watch, and Harry awoke to Ron shaking him gently. "Sorry to wake you up, Harry, but it's your turn now. I heard some snuffling and splashing, but that could have been all sorts of things." Ron lay down and went to sleep, and Harry sat up, wrapped in his blankets against the cold, and fought sleep.

Some time later, he saw something float up, something dark, and grab onto one of the moored boats. A pasty-pale hand grabbed the boat's gunwale, and Harry could see two cold, lambent eyes as they gazed into the boat, not more than a yard or so away. Pulling out his wand, he whispered "*Lumos!*" and in the sudden light, he saw something small and man-shaped and horribly pale staring at him for a second, before diving into the water with hardly a splash. Harry whispered "*Noctus!*" and the light went out.

The light had awakened Aragorn. "What are you doing, up? Not only that, why were you showing a light?" The Ranger was rather irritated, if the tone of his voice meant anything. Harry pointed toward the river.

"I saw something fooling with the boats, Aragorn. It looked a lot like the way I've heard Gollum described." Aragorn stared at Harry shrewdly.

"Oh, so you've figured out that he's on our track?" The Ranger rubbed his chin in thought. "He started following us in Moria, and he's been after us ever since. I had hoped that taking to the River would throw him off our scent, but he's much too experienced around water to be stopped. I'd like to catch him; he could be useful. He's very dangerous, though. Even aside from the chance of him murdering some or all of us, he could put our enemies on alert that we're here. Any servants of Sauron that see him will know what he wants."

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For the next few days, as they paddled along the river, they all kept a sharp watch, but they didn't see any sign at all of Gollum. If he was there, he was being very careful indeed; even Legolas' keen elven vision could detect nothing, and there were no sounds at night that

could have been made by him. They travelled harder than they had before, and mostly at night. By day they lay up in what shelter they could.

Seven days out, they saw an eagle; Legolas wondered what it was doing so far from the mountains. The country they were travelling through was bleak and bare, and there would be little of the game eagles subsisted on to feed the great bird. Hermione couldn't believe how big the eagles got.

"You mean to tell me that they're big enough to carry people off easily, and to fight dragons?" Her eyes went wide. "But---but how do they feed themselves?"

Legolas smiled. "There's a great deal of game about, Miss Granger, if you know how to look. Deer are very thick on the ground in some areas; if it weren't for the eagles and other hunters, they'd be starving to death in multitudes every winter." He shrugged slightly. "An eagle can see a rabbit from a mile up, fairly easily."

Harry tried to imagine a bird big enough to carry him; a bird big enough to fight one of the dragons he had faced during the Triwizard Tournament with a fair chance of winning. "Are they evil?" he asked. Legolas shook his head, and Aragorn snorted.

"Evil? No! They're proud, and they don't often meddle in the affairs of the lesser races, but when they do give help, the help they give is decisive. If Gandalf were here, he could tell you about how when he was on his trip with Bilbo Baggins, the Eagles rescued him and his companions when they were cornered by orcs near the Misty Mountains." Legolas smiled rather grimly. "It's a good thing for those of us of the speaking races that the eagles do not care to eat us; they could easily swoop down on people and take them, if they were so inclined. However, they do go after farm animals sometimes, which makes them unpopular with rural Men."

"I can imagine!" said Harry. He was quite glad that Hagrid wasn't along. Hagrid would have been scheming to get a giant eagle egg or chick to take back to Hogwarts, and somehow, Harry doubted that the eagles would have had any sense of humor about that project at all. He grinned at the thought of Hagrid trying to raise such a bird at Hogwarts, and at what the Ministry of Magic would have had to say about it.

"Can you imagine what Hagrid would want to do?" murmured Ron. Apparently he had been thinking along the same lines as Harry had. Hermione, Harry and Draco all nodded.

"I think stealing a giant eagle egg or chick would be beyond even Hagrid," said Draco. "He'd want to, there's no doubt about that, but when the nest-owners came back, he would have a sudden attack of sanity and common sense." He chuckled. "Hagrid displaying common sense about 'interesting creatures'... isn't that one of the signs that the world's about to come to an end?" Hermione let out an unwilling giggle.

Aragorn came up. "We're going to travel by night tonight, so turn on in and get some sleep while you can." Harry rather doubted the wisdom of travelling by night, since it threw a lot of advantage to the other side, but he decided that Aragorn probably knew best; he'd been surviving in the wild places of Middle-Earth for a very long time.

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That night, they went on. Aragorn planned one last journey by night, and then they would have to go by day. "We should be quite a few miles from the rapids of Sarn Gebir, but we'd still best go carefully. There are rocks and islets in the stream that could rip the bottoms out of our boats, so keep a sharp eye out."

Harry was resting at the bow of the boat, peering ahead, when he began to hear a different noise from what he had been accustomed to. It was a dull mutter, that slowly grew into a roar. Behind him, he heard Hermione shriek: "Those are rapids!"

"That's Sarn Gebir---we went farther than I thought we had!" shouted Aragorn. "Paddle for shore, as fast as you can! We can't shoot those rapids by night!" Harry grabbed a paddle and paddled as hard as he could, regretting bitterly that while Dudley had had plenty of chances to learn how to paddle a boat, he, Harry, had never been allowed to learn. *What a laugh if Uncle Vernon's wish came true, and I was drowned here*, he thought, as the keel of the boat finally scraped stone.

Just then, bowstrings twanged and arrows began flying at the company. One struck near Harry in the bow of the boat, quivering; another flew close enough to him that he felt it part his hair. *Just a couple of inches lower, there, and Voldemort would have his dearest wish*, ran through Harry's mind crazily. Up on the bank, he thought he saw dark shapes, crouching and aiming bows.

"*Yrch!*" shouted Legolas. After Lorien, Harry needed no help to know that that meant "orcs," as his companions shouted with surprise and, in one or two cases, in pain; Harry hoped fervently that none of his friends had been hurt. Raising himself slightly, he shouted "*Petrificus Totalus*," waving his wand at the shadowy figures on the bank. To his delight, he saw many of them topple over, stiff and still. Shouts of rage greeted this development, and the standing orcs redoubled their shooting.

From the other boat, Harry could hear Hermione and Draco casting Banishing Charms, sending the arrows back at their tormentors. Ron cried "*Expelliarmus!*" and the orcs shouted in surprise as their bows and arrows flew out of their hands.

"There are times I forget what wizards you and your friends are, Mr. Potter," said Aragorn quietly. "Then you do something like this, and I'm reminded yet again." He guided the boat skilfully through the foaming water, pushing them to the opposite bank from where the orcs were waiting. When they finally got there, Harry, Ron and Aragorn leaped out, pulling the boat up so that it wouldn't float away. A little ways away, the others were doing the same thing.

Legolas went up on the banks, the Lorien-made longbow in his hands. From the South, Harry could see clouds boiling up, covering the night sky. "Damn that *bloody* Gollum, for leading our enemies to us!" he muttered.

A darker shadow, one that was not a cloud, appeared in the night sky. Harry felt his scar twinge, and then begin to hurt, as it got closer. Soon he could see that it was no cloud, but a great winged creature of some sort. Closer and closer it came, and Harry could hear gasps of fear from all his comrades.

There was only one thing for it. Drawing his wand, Harry pointed it into the air, summoned up the memory of winning the Quidditch Cup for Gryffindor, and screamed

"*Expecto Patronum!*" At the same instant, as a silvery stag erupted from Harry's wand and soared into the air, Legolas' bow twanged, and Harry heard a croaking scream as the winged thing was struck, a second before the stag arrived, lowering his antlers and charging through the sky. The winged creature fell on the other side of the river, and a chorus of wails and howls arose. The stag flickered out, and Harry wiped his brow; the pain was gone.

"Praised be the bow of Lorien, and the wand of Mr. Potter!" muttered Gimli. "Whatever that was, I didn't like it one bit!" He shook his head. "It reminded me of Durin's Bane."

"That wasn't a Balrog," said Harry. He didn't know just how he knew, but he knew. "It was something else, something colder." He shivered. "Thank Professor Lupin, back at Hogwarts, for teaching me the Patronus Charm."

"Whatever it was, it wasn't friendly. I'm glad it was shot down," said Ron, looking across the river. Hermione shuddered, huddling in her cloak.

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They stayed there for the rest of the night, and nothing could be heard of their enemies. When dawn came, it came in foggy, grey and sad, and Harry felt a twinge of homesickness; the weather was so like Britain that he almost expected to see familiar sights. Instead, he was in a strange place, in a whole strange world, among people who were alien, except for his three friends from Hogwarts. He looked at them as though he had never seen them before, noting everything.

They had all been changed by their days and days of travel, mostly for the better, Harry thought. They were all tanned by the sun and wind, except for poor Ron, whose skin was much too fair to tan, and who could not seem to escape burning; at the moment he wasn't suffering, but Harry knew that he had been quite uncomfortable. None of them had been fat before they set out, but the endless marching through rough country had hardened all of them. Their boots were well-broken-in by this time, and they could all hike for hours without trouble.

Harry felt a rush of affection for them, which he carefully kept to himself. He knew that without the need to support him in this lunatic quest, they'd be back at Hogwarts at that moment, probably replete from a huge house-elf-cooked breakfast, with nothing worse than a Potions or History of Magic class facing them. Instead, they were huddling in what little shelter the river bank offered, gnawing on dry sausage and hardtack and washing it down with river-water, dirty and bedraggled. *And to think that I used to think I'd never have friends*, he thought.

Aragorn and Legolas scouted ahead as the rest of the Company ate. Harry worried as they disappeared into the mists, but they came back after a few hours, none the worse. Aragorn reported that there was a usable portage-trail around the dangerous part of the river, and the rapids themselves were not long, but much too dangerous to traverse in their boats. "Maybe the boats of Lorien would survive, but we wouldn't; nobody's ever shot the rapids of Sarn Gebir and survived."

Accordingly, they emptied the boats and repacked their packs, and then set off down the trail, carrying the boats over their heads, Indian-style. It turned out to be an endless,

tortuous task, slipping and sliding along the path, burdened with heavy backpacks and holding the boats overhead. If the boats had been heavier, they wouldn't have been able to do it, but they were very light. Even Legolas didn't know what they were made of, but Harry was glad of it, whatever it was, and wished he could bring samples back to Hogwarts for his teachers to study.

At the end of the trail, it was getting dark, and they settled down to camp again. All of them were worn out; even Gimli, who was probably the toughest of them all, was about done in. The night passed uneventfully enough, which Harry thought was a wonderful thing, after their ambush. He wondered where Gollum had got to, and what evil he was up to.

At first light, they started again, through the thinning fog. Soon they were paddling along through a rock-sided ravine, as the river picked up speed. Harry began enjoying the ride, although it would never, in his opinion, compare with flying. In any case, it beat tramping for miles through the wilderness, footsore and thirsty. As he leaned over to dip a cup of water from the river, he saw two towering things ahead, one on either side of the river.

"What are those?" he asked Aragorn. Aragorn cracked a rare smile as he steered the boat for the middle of the river.

"Those, Mr. Potter, are the Pillars of the Kings---the Argonath! Steer for the center of the river, and keep the boats apart!" he roared to the others, as they drew nearer and nearer to the Pillars. As they got closer, Harry was more able to see them than before; they turned out to be huge sculptures of kings, weathered but still recognizable. They were terrifying to contemplate from up close, and Harry fought an irrational desire to cower and cover his head as they passed between them, where they half-blocked the river and forced it to go faster.

The sight of them put new life into Aragorn, though. Harry couldn't believe the change in his attitude as they passed the statues. It was as though years had dropped from him, and he suddenly seemed regal and proud, sitting in the stern of their boat. "In the shadow of Isildur and Anarion, their heir Elessar has nothing to fear!" he called to Harry, catching Harry's eye and smiling broadly. Then a sad look came over his face. "I wish Gandalf were here; I'd love to go to Minas Tirith, my own ancestral city. Right now, I'm not sure where we should go." A little later, they came out from the chasm and back into the light.

Some little while later, they came out into a good-sized oval lake. Harry could hear a waterfall in the distance. Aragorn waved his arm around. "This is Nin Hethoel," and, pointing to three peaks in the distance, "and those are Tol Brandir, with Amon Hen and Amon Lhaw---the Hills of Hearing and Sight. In the old days, they had watchers on them, but nobody's ever climbed Tol Brandir itself, or so they say. Tonight we'll have to make camp---I can hear the Rauros waterfalls from here."

Harry nodded, looking unseeingly at the scenery. This was where he knew he would have to make a choice, whether to go to Gondor or to Mordor. This was the place where decision would have to happen, since the paths to Gondor and Mordor diverged here.

Chapter 10---Farewell to the Fellowship

That evening, they drew up their boats and rested on what Aragorn identified as the lawn of Parth Galen. Harry and the others were glad to get out of the boats, although they had gotten used to them. The ground felt good under their feet as they took their supplies out of the boats and pitched a camp. Hermione made a fire, and they tucked into dinner with a good appetite. Draco took charge of the camp-cooking, and they had managed to catch some fish and find some wild vegetables to supplement their trail rations. Washed down with watered wine, the meal went down a treat.

Rubbing his stomach with pleasure, Ron told Draco: "Malfoy, I take back every bad thing I've ever said or thought about you. You have, to my surprise, one lonely virtue that overshadows all your vices---you can cook."

Hermione wiped her mouth with a bit of cloth from her pack. "He's right, you know. You'll make some lucky girl very happy some day." She grinned her old grin, the one that flashed across her face so fast that if you blinked, you missed it. "My mother would be absolutely mortified, you know. She's convinced that all women, merely by being women, are naturally gifted cooks, and that any 'mere male' in a kitchen can be trusted to burn water."

"And where did she pick up *that* idea, Granger?" asked Draco. He was obviously pleased at being praised for his skill, but only someone who had known him for as long as Harry, Ron and Hermione would have known it. To anybody else, he would have seemed his same old drawling, insouciant self. "Cooking and potion-brewing aren't too wildly different, so Father and Mother had me in the kitchen from the time I could walk. A lot of the skills carry over. Did you know Professor Snape's a *Cordon Bleu* chef in his own right?"

"Gods! I'd never have thought it!" gasped Harry. He grinned suddenly. "Hermione, you're the only one who'd understand this, since wizard-born children don't watch the Muggle telly---but can you imagine Professor Snape going head-to-head with Gareth Blackstock of the *Chef* show?" He looked awed. "That would be a battle worth going a long way to see---Blackstock and Snape, sarcasm at within-the-kitchen range, no quarter!" Hermione turned pink, and began to giggle madly at the thought of such a confrontation.

"For us poor, underprivileged wizard-born types who haven't been exposed to the glories of Muggle culture, could you explain?" asked Ron, irritation in his voice. Draco nodded in agreement, and then looked surprised to find himself agreeing with Ron Weasley on anything.

"Gareth Blackstock's a chef at a fancy restaurant called *Le Maison Anglaise*, and he's about as arrogant, overbearing and perfectionistic as Professor Snape---but with a better gift for invective," explained Hermione. "Like, for instance, when one of his assistants counsels backing down from a challenge, he asks 'Did Sir Edmund Hillary get within sight of the top of Everest, say that he'd now found what he was there for, and then go back down again?' The show revolves around his adventures and misadventures, like the time he gets invited to Paris to do a contest. The contest requires him to use only English ingredients, including English wine, which causes a lot of trouble when his competitors nobble the only bottles of English wine in all of Paris."

"*English wine?*" Draco was agog. "*English wine?* Isn't that a contradiction in terms, like 'military intelligence' or 'Lockhart's modesty?' If my father had ever heard of anybody *wanting* English wine, he'd have been convinced that Muggles were barking mad!"

Hermione shrugged. "I didn't write the show." Draco laughed so hard he lost his balance, and the other members of the Fellowship looked at Harry and his classmates curiously. Apologetically, Hermione told them: "It's kind of a private joke---it would take forever to explain." The others were still curious, but turned back to their own pursuits.

That night, Harry noticed that Aragorn was very restless. Even though he wasn't on watch, he kept on waking up, and when he was asleep, he tossed and turned uneasily. Finally, Harry went over when Aragorn was up and about.

"Is there something wrong?" he asked quietly. Aragorn looked at him. "I don't mean to pry, but something's bothering you. Can I help?"

"I don't know, Mr. Potter." Aragorn looked around uneasily. "I keep feeling like something's out there---something evil, and I don't necessarily mean Gollum. Can you cast a spell to see if there are orcs about? If Frodo were here, we could look at his sword, Sting. It was elven-made and would glow if orcs were near; the closer the orcs, the brighter the glow."

"Let me try a Foe-Location Charm," said Harry, delving into his bag for spell components. A few minutes later, he was casting the spell as Aragorn watched, fascinated. When the spell was finished, Harry looked up at Aragorn. "It shows that they're near, but not terribly near."

"They may be on Amon Lhaw, and may only be spies of the Enemy," said Aragorn. "I've never heard of orcs daring to climb Amon Hen. Still and all, we'll have to go carefully tomorrow."

* * * * *

The next day, the dawn was red and gloomy, as the sun illuminated clouds in the East from beneath. After a while, as the sun climbed, the weather grew more pleasant, with a few clouds in a bright sky. As soon as the whole Company was awake and fed, Aragorn called them together.

"Well, here's where we've got to make a choice, people. Either we go to Minas Tirith, or on into Mordor directly. There are arguments for both paths, and both have drawbacks as well. We also don't have to stay together; we can split up and go our separate ways. We'll have to choose quickly, though; we know there are orcs across the river, and they may be on this side as well. Mr. Potter," Aragorn continued, "this choice falls to you. You're the Ringbearer. What do you want to do?"

Harry knew what he wanted to do, even though it frightened him a great deal. He was wrestling with temptation, temptation like nothing he had felt since Cedric Diggory had offered him a free run at the Triwizard Cup, even though Diggory had been closer. He looked at all the faces, looking at him, and couldn't force himself to decide between the two ways.

"Give me an hour, and I'll get back to you. I've got to think about this, and think very hard. Just don't bother me for an hour, all right?" Harry asked. Aragorn nodded, sympathy in his eyes.

"Very well, Mr. Potter. We will give you an hour, and nobody will bother you." Aragorn led the others off, and Harry sat down on a rock and put his head into his hands.

After a little while, Harry got up and followed a path he saw, up through a wood, until he finally found himself at the top of a cliff, on a grassy lawn overlooking the river. He could hear the Rauros waterfall in the distance, and all seemed to be peaceful and serene. He sat down on another rock, and thought for a while, until he suddenly sensed that he wasn't alone. Jumping to his feet and reaching reflexively for his wand, he found himself staring at Boromir. The Gondorian looked at him with a kindly expression.

"Hello, Mr. Potter. I was wandering around, and happened across this spot. May I join you?" At Harry's nod, Boromir sat down near him. After a few minutes of companionable silence, Boromir spoke again: "Have you got any idea about what you're going to do next?"

"I don't quite know what to do next, Boromir. On the one hand, I know I'm going to have to go to Mordor. That scares the daylights out of me. On the other hand, I don't dare go anywhere else."

"Not even to---oh, say, Minas Tirith?" A terrible, yearning hope shone out of Boromir's eyes. "In Minas Tirith, you could rest from the rigors of the wild, and gather your strength."

"Lord Boromir, you've been harping on that idea for days now," sighed Harry. "Again and again, you've brought up going to Minas Tirith. I don't think you're doing it just because you're homesick. Is there some other reason you think I should go there?"

Boromir looked at Harry closely, and Harry squirmed under his gaze. "Well, Mr. Potter, since you ask, I do have reasons. The more I think about it, the more I feel that the Ring has come back to be used, not destroyed. With it, I---*we*---could overthrow the Dark Lord, and restore Gondor to her proper place among nations." Harry regarded the Gondorian closely, and quietly slipped his wand into his hand from where he usually kept it, in a sheath up one of his sleeves.

Harry decided to try reason first. "Look, Lord Boromir, you don't know what you're talking about. I've been in close proximity to the Ring for longer than you have, and I can sense that it's evil. Also, just *who* would be using this Ring, anyway?" A sudden suspicion grew to near-certainty in Harry's mind, watching the play of expressions over Boromir's face. "You? You want the Ring? By the gods, Boromir, have you gone mad?"

"Yes, I want the Ring! If you won't use it yourself, then let someone who has the will to use it have it!" Boromir sprung to his feet. "With the Ring, I could throw Sauron down, and restore Gondor's glory! I'd raise armies, and I'd march into Mordor and avenge my nation's suffering on the Dark Lord! We'd defeat his armies, and I'd take Barad-dur and cast it down for all time! I could cleanse Mordor, and make it a paradise, and tame the wild, making it a safe place to be! I'd---"

Harry cut him off in mid-rant. "You'd turn into a new Sauron, sooner or later, Boromir." Startled at being interrupted, Boromir stared at Harry as though he had sprouted wings. "No matter what sort of good intentions you started out with, you'd eventually become like Sauron."

"But can you be sure?" Boromir came closer, and Harry unobtrusively gripped his wand, getting ready to fight. "In any case, how can a child---a mere youth---stand against me? If I choose to take the Ring, I can do it, whether you will or not!" With that last statement, he came at Harry, his hands out to grab. His eyes were wild, and his face twitched.

Harry hadn't quite been expecting a move like this, and he hurriedly raised his wand. "*Stupefy!*" Boromir ducked the spell, and came at him, his face a snarling mask. Before Harry could dodge out of the way, Boromir grabbed him, holding onto him with hysterical strength.

"*Expelliarmus!*" came a cry, and Harry found himself flung from Boromir's hands, landing on his rear and knocking the wind out of him for a second. As he struggled to breathe, he saw Boromir turn to see who had enspelled him. The Gondorian's hearing was very good, and he apparently figured out where the shout had come from. He started for one corner of the clearing, drawing his sword.

"I'll have the Ring, whether you or anybody else try to stop me! With it, I can save Minas Tirith!" He hewed the air with his sword, but didn't connect with anybody. Harry struggled to breathe, and wondered what he'd do if Boromir decided that getting the Ring was more important than finding whoever had cast that spell.

No sooner had he thought that, than Boromir seemed to have the same idea, sheathing his sword and turning toward where Harry was sitting. In his desperation, Harry remembered what Bilbo and Gandalf had told him about the Ring and what it could do. Before he could lose his courage, he plunged his hand into his shirt, gripped the Ring, and slipped it onto his finger.

The world seemed to change around him as soon as his finger was within the metal circle. Harry's vision seemed to dim, but his hearing became extremely keen, and he could sense and smell things he hadn't been able to before. Boromir cast about wildly, trying to see where Harry had gone and calling his name.

Harry had gotten his breath back, and he was getting very angry. He had trusted Boromir, and to have him turn bad was a crushing blow. He understood just how Sirius Black had felt when Peter Pettigrew had turned out to be a traitor, and why he and Remus Lupin had wanted to kill Pettigrew when he had been exposed as Ron's former pet rat, Scabbers. Harry gripped his wand, struggling with the urge to blast Boromir down where he stood. Finally, he got control of himself, and pointed the wand, taking careful aim this time. "*Stupefy!*" The Gondorian fell like a poleaxed steer. Harry was amazed; he had never known his spells to be that powerful before.

"Harry? Is that you? How did you---I mean, where are you?" Ron Weasley was standing near where Boromir had been, pulling off the Invisibility Cloak and looking around. "How did you make yourself invisible? Or did you Apparate---no, I just heard you. Where are you?"

"Over here, Ron. I'm wearing the Ring." Harry reached out and gripped Ron's hand as it involuntarily twitched up; Harry didn't want to be ensorcelled by mistake. "Look, Ron, I think it's time that we split up. I'm going to Mordor, even if I have to go alone. You three can come along, or stay---it's up to you. I've got to go. This thing's too bloody dangerous for me to keep."

"You won't be alone, Harry," said Ron. "I'll be with you every step of the way. Let's get back down to the boats and get on out of here before the others come." Ron turned and started back off down the path, pulling the Invisibility Cloak on again as he ran. Harry pelted after him, feeling like there was a dreadful doom behind him, and it knew where he was, and it was coming ever closer.

Down by the boats, they found Hermione sitting and thinking. Ron pulled off the Invisibility Cloak as soon as he got there, startling her. "Ron! I thought---where's Harry? I think I can hear him, but where is he?" She peered around, her wand in her hand.

"I'm right here, Hermione. I'm wearing the Ring. Apparently it does make whoever wears it invisible. It also seems to soup-up any spells you cast. We've got to get out of here, fast! Boromir's gone bad. He wants the Ring. Get our stuff into one of these boats, and let's get going!"

Hermione didn't argue. White and pale, her face set with anger, she began throwing the Hogwarts students' packs into one of the boats, as well as some of the supplies they had been given in Lorien. "Boromir! I wondered about him, you know. He's been chattering about Minas Tirith until I got sick of the subject. Does he think he can use the Ring and not be mastered by it? He must be mad!"

Harry didn't notice much of what she said. Instead, he was exploring the new senses that the Ring gave him. It was as though he could sense how things were for miles and miles around them, as far as the Misty Mountains to the west or Mordor in the East. Everything seemed astir; there was a cloud of smoke over Moria, and fighting between elves and orcs in Lorien. The birds and beasts, and even the very trees, seemed to be getting ready to take sides.

When he turned his senses East, though, Harry's courage failed him. He could sense the power and malevolence of Mordor, radiating from the terrible fortress of Barad-dur---and he could sense that Sauron sensed him, as well. He could feel Sauron's will and attention, suddenly focussed on him and searching for him. Helplessly, he watched as that power reached forth, across miles of wilderness, to seek him out.

"Harry! Harry! What's the matter?" Ron had taken the Invisibility Cloak off, and was staring around wildly. "Are you there? Can you hear me? I said we've got to get moving!"

"He's---coming---for---me," gasped Harry. : "He---knows---where---I---am." Ron grabbed his shoulders and shook him; he had managed to figure out where Harry was standing.

"Take off the Ring, you chump! When you aren't wearing it, he can't track you!" Hermione's voice penetrated the fog in Harry's mind, and he pulled the Ring off. The world snapped back to normality, with his vision suddenly no worse than normal and the extra-keen hearing gone. For a second, Harry was dazed by the change. He felt Sauron's power as it passed by, seeking him, but without the Ring on his finger, it couldn't pinpoint him.

Draco Malfoy appeared, his eyes wild. "What was *that*? I just felt worse than I have since Moria!" He took in the scene. "Oh, planning to go off without your old mate Malfoy?" He pulled out his wand. "Well, you can just give that plan up, like right *now*!"

"Do you think you can stop us?" asked Harry. None of the three made a move for their wands, but Harry could sense them tensing beside him, getting ready to fight.

"No, Potter, I'm not going to stop you. You're going to Mordor, if I have to drag you every step of the way there. These other two can skive off to someplace cushy like Minas Tirith if they want, but you and I, Potter, have a little errand to make. An errand in Mordor!" Desperate sincerity radiated from every inch of Malfoy's wiry frame, as he pointed his wand. "And, I should add that the first of you to draw a wand'll get a curse, right between his or her beady eyes!"

"You mean---you want to go to Mordor?" Surprise edged Ron's voice. "We thought you'd be the first to want to go to Minas Tirith. We're just heading out to Mordor right now."

Draco smiled, but the smile didn't quite reach his eyes, which were watchful. "And you decided to take my pack along, so as to lighten my load?" Harry risked a glance sideways, and saw Hermione blush. "Well, that's kind of you, but you'll not be rid of me that easily. *You* are not going to Mordor. *We* are going to Mordor. With four of us, we've got a better chance of at least one of us getting through, don't we?"

Ron looked very thoughtful. "Professor Trelawney did say that you were essential to success, Malfoy." Draco nodded. "Right, then," Ron pointed to the boat. "Get on in, and let's get going!"

With four passengers and their gear, the elven boat was more sluggish than it had been with just two, but they managed to get across the river. As they paddled, Harry told the others everything that had happened from the time he had gone off to think.

"I knew I had to go to Mordor, but I didn't know if any of you would come along. I kind of thought that Boromir had other ideas, but I hadn't expected him to try to take the Ring."

Draco's eyes widened. "So he did decide that he could handle the Ring! I had wondered about him, you know. He was always on about Minas Tirith, as though the rest of Middle-earth didn't really matter. I'm sorry to hear that he's gone bad, though. You didn't hurt him, did you?"

"No, I cast a Stupefication spell on him. It hit harder than I thought it would, but I was wearing the Ring when I did it, and I think that added extra power to my spell." Harry took off his glasses and polished the lenses absently. "Damn it, all I wanted was one bloody hour to myself! I was mostly thinking about how I was going to tell you goodbye. Living with this thing's convinced me that it has to be destroyed, but I hate to see you putting your necks on the chopping block, too!"

"Well, I'm sorry to have to tell you this, Henry James Potter," began Hermione, her voice dripping freezing indignation, "but whether or not I choose to risk my life is not your decision to make. You are not my father, nor my husband. It's my life, and I assumed the risk when I agreed to come to Middle-earth in the first place. I meant every word I said at

Rivendell---remember?" Her voice shook with the intensity of her emotion. "I may well be killed on this little trip. I came closer than I like to think to just that when I got hurt in Moria. I'd rather deal with that than have to live with myself if I just let you go off alone---so put that in your pipe and smoke it!" She burst into tears.

Harry was utterly nonplused, and a glance at Ron and Draco told him that they didn't quite know what to make of this either. Awkwardly, Harry patted Hermione, which made her cry even harder. "Okay, Hermione, okay, I didn't mean to insult you. I'm glad you are along. For that matter---" Harry looked around at Ron and Draco---"I'm awfully glad you are both along too. This will be a lot easier to handle with some familiar faces along."

"Even mine?" asked Draco. Harry regarded him narrowly. Behind his usual lazy drawl and insouciant pose, Harry could see a real fear of rejection. Harry's heart went out to Draco, remembering the things Draco had let slip to him about what life had been like for him before they had met.

"Even you, Malfoy. You've got skills and strengths the rest of us don't have. If nothing else, if we run into more Elves, you'll come in mighty handy." Harry suddenly quirked a grin, sparking reminiscent smiles from both Ron and Draco. "Of course, there are some ways of communicating with Elves that even a couple of fumble-wits like Ron and I can manage."

Hermione looked around, amusement warring with exasperation on her face. "Men!" At this, Harry, Ron and Draco burst out laughing, and Hermione finally, reluctantly, joined in. They beached the boat on the other side of the river, pulled out their packs and distributed the load of other things they had brought, and set out across the Eryn Muil, looking for a way into the Land of Mordor where the shadows lie.

Chapter 11- - What Is Courage Now?

“Welly-welly-welly-well, we are in the soup and no mistake---up to our ears we’re in the soup,” drawled Draco Malfoy. Sitting on the edge of a cliff, he wrapped his arms around his knees and stared off to the south and east.

“Must you mention food?” snapped Ron. He hadn’t eaten all day---none of them had. Peering off in the direction Malfoy was looking, he could see a dark line on the horizon, with an occasional flash of red light from beneath it. “How are we found for food, anyway, Hermione?”

Hermione looked up from the map she had pulled out. “We took a lion’s share of the food the Fellowship had, including most of the *lembas*. I feel bad about that, but Aragorn’s an expert on wilderness survival, and the others aren’t far behind. None of us are, so we need every edge we can get.” She looked abstracted for a minute or two, as she considered the question. “We’ve got enough food to see us right for about a month or so, and that should be enough to finish this trip---barring the unforeseen.”

“But the unforeseen’s a given here,” put in Harry. “Just for starters, I didn’t plan on leaving when and how we did, although I thought the time would come when we’d split up. Also, those maps don’t show how difficult these *bloody* hills are to get through.” Absently, he took off his glasses and polished them with a scrap of cloth, replacing them firmly on his nose.

It was the third day since the Hogwarts students had fled the Fellowship. After abandoning the boat, they had headed into the hills of the Eryn Muil, hoping to find a way across and to Mordor. They had beat their way eastwards, as best they could, although they had had to retrace their steps again and again because the ways they could find were not always easy to follow; they had found themselves faced with unclimbable cliffs more than once. Now they were at the eastern edge of the Eryn Muil, and could find no way down. Below them, they could see---and smell---marshes.

Ron looked carefully at his old friend. Harry seemed little the worse, but he had changed, somehow. He had developed a habit of clutching at the front of his shirt, at about the point where the Ring hung on its chain. Other than that, there were no changes that Ron could quite put his finger on, but he sensed that Harry’s donning of the Ring had been a turning point for him, in ways that he didn’t quite understand.

“Mordor,” murmured Draco, his eyes fixed on the southeast. “If we’ve got to go there, I’d just as soon get it over with quickly. *Damn* this place for not letting us ride brooms! What I’d give for my broom, right now!” He got up, giving the cliffs they were sitting on an appraising look. “Even I’m not keen on trying to climb this lot. Night’s falling, too, and that’ll make things more dangerous still.”

“We should camp for the evening,” said Hermione. “Tomorrow we might be able to find a way down and to Mordor.” She brushed a lock of hair back from her face; Ron thought that she looked tired and drawn, as they all did. “I wish we had taken the other way, leaving the others behind long before we did. According to this map, we could have avoided getting tangled up in these hills, and gone over what is marked as “the Battle Plain” and into the passes to Mordor. It’s too late to retrace our steps, though; the orcs are out and about, looking

for us.” She drew her Japanese short sword, contemplating the blade absently. “Even with wands and weapons, we’re no match for a whole company of orcs, I fear.”

They spent the night in a stony hollow, sleeping as best they could. The weather was cold and raw, and they took turns keeping a watch. None of them really slept well, and Ron, for one, was almost glad to see morning come, if only so that he could move about and get the stiffness out of his arms and legs.

“If they could see us in Lorien, now, how they’d laugh,” murmured Hermione, as they sat around eating some of their dried meat and fruit. At her companions’ questioning looks, she explained: “The elven women there would never let me forget this. Here I am, after all, the only female among three males, and none of you have made so much as a move toward me.” She grinned her old grin; it flashed across her face in a second, lighting her whole face up like the sun coming from behind a dark cloud. “I guess real travel, particularly under these conditions, kind of puts a kibosh on romance. I doubt I could get much interested in that right now.”

“Even if Gilderoy Lockhart showed up and wanted a quick snog?” asked Draco, his eyes dancing with mischief. Hermione threw a fruit rind at him and made a face.

“Don’t remind me about that--I was only twelve years old, for the gods’ sake! If you’re still annoyed about me teasing you about that silly magazine, I’m sorry. It’s just that we women find those magazines incredibly amusing.”

“You know, in a way, I guess Lockhart was lucky he lost his memories,” mused Harry. Ron gave his friend a curious look, and Harry explained. “Think about it, Ron. What do you think would have happened to him, if he’d been just fine, when your Mum found out that he had been willing to let your baby sis die in the Chamber of Secrets, and had tried to destroy your memories?” Harry gave Ron an evil grin. “I think that before your Mum was done with him, Lockhart would have thought that Azkaban sounded like a nice, safe place to be; she couldn’t get at him *there*, after all.”

Ron thought about what his mother would have done to Lockhart, and gave a theatrical shudder. “She’d skin him alive and roll him in itching powder, and then my dad and all my brothers would take turns.” Memories of Hogwarts were comforting, in a way, although it also hurt to think about the place. If they had been at Hogwarts, they’d have just been waking up in their dormitories, with nothing more challenging than a difficult test ahead.

Changing the subject, Ron asked Harry: “Do you think Gollum’s still on our trail?”

Harry considered carefully. “I haven’t seen or heard anything for some time. I’d bet that even he would have a hard time tracking us. I hope to the gods we’ve seen the last of him.” He looked off to the south and east. “Come on, we’re burning daylight. I feel exposed here. There’s got to be a way down, if we can just find it.”

For the rest of that day, they explored along the cliff’s edge, but they couldn’t find a way down, no matter where they looked. They sometimes heard what sounded like bare feet padding along after them, or a stone falling, but when they stopped to listen, all they could hear was the wind. Ron didn’t like that sound, either---it was too much like the sound of breath hissing between sharp teeth. He remembered the glimpses he had had of Gollum vividly, and hoped fervently that he had seen the last of the creature.

Finally, as the day was coming to an end, they found a ravine cutting the cliff in two. Draco looked at it, appraisingly. “This looks like the best way down, at least that we’ve found so far.” The cliffs were lower, and the gully led downward toward the marshlands below. “At worst and least, if we do have to climb at the end of this, it won’t be nearly as bad as trying to clamber down those cliffs all the way.”

The others deferred to his opinion; since leaving the Fellowship, Draco had become their oracle on matters of outdoorsmanship. Harry and Hermione had been children of the suburbs, and Ron had never had much chance to gain outdoor skills. When asked how he had learned so much about outdoor skills, Draco had drawled: “Given the choice between Malfoy Manor or the moors and fells, the moors and fells don’t look so bad.”

The scramble down the gully was tougher than it had seemed at first; midway down, they found some trees, mostly dead ones. Finally, they came to the edge of the gully, and Draco peered over. “We’re down a good way from where we were,” he reported. “From here down, I think we can climb; the cliff face isn’t nearly as steep as it was back where we were.”

Ron looked up uneasily. The sky was clouding up rapidly. “Right now, I vote we get down there fast. That’s a thunderstorm coming, or I’ve never seen one.” A distant mutter of thunder confirmed his prediction. “Where is that rope?”

Draco and Hermione opened their packs. “Looks like we need about a hundred feet, or a little more,” said Draco, pulling out a coil of the light, strong rope the elves had given them. He took one end of the coil and began measuring it, paying it out between his arms. “Let me see, I’m just short of six feet tall, so we can call each of these five-and-a-bit. Five, ten, fifteen…”

Hermione looked up doubtfully at the sky. “Hurry up, Malfoy! That storm’s coming fast!” The wind had picked up, moaning among the rocks. “Here’s a stump we can tie the ropes to, but we’d better get moving!”

Ron came over and looked at the stump, with Harry behind him. It looked strong enough to take their weight. Draco called: “There---a hundred and twenty feet!”

At that moment, the storm broke. The wind howled down on the four wanderers, driving a pelting, cold rain with it, as the lightning flashed and thunder rolled. Ron howled with dismay, pulling his cloak tighter around him, as a close lightning strike dazzled him.

“Get back! Get away from the edge!” screamed Hermione. Suiting action to words, she scrambled away, pulling Harry; the lightning had apparently blinded him for a moment. When the four were back together, Hermione pulled out her wand and cast a Water-Repelling Charm.

“This kept Harry’s glasses from crippling him, in that Quidditch game in the rain, back at Hogwarts,” she explained. “I don’t want to get soaked through. Getting dry will be the devil, and we could get hypothermia really, really easily. Hypothermia can kill you as dead as any orc’s arrow or Killing Curse.”

“I didn’t know *you* knew that, Granger,” said Draco. He looked at Hermione with what looked to Ron like unwilling, but genuine, respect. “How did you find out about that?”

Hermione gave Draco a smug smile. "I read it in a book, Draco." Ron shouted with laughter.

"If it's in a book---*anywhere*---you can bet Hermione's read it, Draco." The rain continued to sluice down, but protected by the Water-Repelling Charm, Ron was able to take a purely academic interest.

* * * * *

Some time later, the storm blew itself out, heading West over the hills. Hermione watched as the clouds rolled away and the stars peeked through. "Looks like Gondor's going to catch that one, boys," she commented. "Hard luck for them, but they've got houses to shelter in. Right now, we've got one cliff to get down."

Under Draco's supervision, the rope was tied around the tree-stump that Hermione had found. Then, the question arose about what to do with their packs. "I'm not keen on taking chances with mine," said Draco. "Among other things, I've got some potions and the like in there that I don't want to see damaged."

"There's nobody around for a long way, as far as we can tell," said Harry. "How about if one of us goes down, then we tie the packs to the rope and lower them, one at a time, while the one at the foot of the cliff stands guard?"

"Sounds like a plan, Harry," said Draco. Before anybody could do anything, he grabbed the rope, stepped to the side of the cliff, and lowered himself over the side. His voice floated up: "With this rope, the climbing's fairly easy. Just remember to wrap it once around your waist, and take your time!"

Once Draco was on the ground, Harry, Ron and Hermione tied the packs to the end of the rope, which they hauled back up to the top of the cliff, two at a time, and lowered them slowly until Draco told them that they were safely on the ground. Then, it was time to climb down. Ron noticed that Hermione was looking pale.

:"Something wrong, Hermione?" he asked. Hermione nodded her head rapidly. "What's the matter?"

"I---hate heights." She wouldn't look at Ron, but cast her eyes down at the ground. Ron slipped his arm around her shoulders, and she suddenly leaned into him, letting him put both arms around her. Harry looked at them curiously, then came over.

"Does this bother you, Hermione?" he asked. His voice was very gentle. Hermione suddenly started sobbing, clutching Ron desperately. Ron gave Harry a slightly panicked look, but didn't let go of her.

:"I hate heights! I don't even like flying---why do you think I don't care for Quidditch! I want to go home! I want to go back to Hogwarts!" Harry patted her awkwardly.

"It's okay, Hermione. Nobody's going to think any the worse of you. We've all got something we're scared of; for me it's dementors, for Ron, it's spiders. If heights bother you, we'll just have to work out something to do about it."

"What's going on up there?" Draco's voice drifted up from below. "What are you lot waiting

for?”

“Hermione’s scared of heights,” Harry called down. “We’re trying to deal with it.” Hermione sobbed into Ron’s chest even harder.

“Hermione?” Draco’s voice went a bit louder, and Hermione stopped crying to listen. “Hermione, there’s a way to deal with it. All you have to do is not look down, and concentrate on your footing. One step at a time, you can do it. I know you can do it!”

“If you’re afraid of falling, Hermione, I’ll go first. With me and Malfoy on the ground, we can hold you up with Levitating Charms if you lose your grip.” With that for a farewell, Harry turned, gripped the rope, looped it around his waist as Draco had, and began to make his way down the cliff. After a few minutes, he called up “I’m down safe and sound!”

Hermione went over and took the rope in her turn, her expression fit for someone going to the gallows. Ron watched, admiration filling him, as she looped the rope around her middle and backed carefully up until she stood on the edge of the cliff. When the rope went taut in her hands, she stepped backwards, and began to climb down. From below, Draco and Harry called encouragement to her.

After what seemed to Ron like hours, but had to be just a few minutes, shouts of gladness from the foot of the cliff told him that she had made it safely. Feeling as though a thousand-pound weight had been taken off his heart, he looped the rope around himself and began to go down in his turn. The climb was actually fairly easy, with plenty of footholds, and he was standing at the foot of the cliff in jig-time. Hermione, Harry and Draco were waiting for him; Hermione had an expression on her face that reminded Ron of nothing so much as the first time he’d seen her cast a successful spell.

“I did it! I did it! I did it!” she gasped, tears of happiness running down her face. She grabbed Ron and kissed him, and before he could get over his surprise, she did the same to Harry, and then to Draco. “I was scared, but I did it!”

“You did it, Hermione.” Draco’s face and voice showed nothing but profound respect. “I’ve been climbing all my life, but for you to do it took more courage than I’ve ever seen. I’d take off my hat to you, but I’m not wearing one. Let me say, instead, that it’s an honor to know you.”

“For once, Draco, you’ve said just what I wanted to say,” said Ron. Patting the radiant Hermione on the back, he went over and picked up his pack. “Come on---let’s get going. I’d love to see old Gollum get down that cliff!” Then, as realization struck him, he slapped his forehead. “Oh, gods above and below, the rope! Gollum’ll be able to climb right down it!”

“Oh, will he?” asked Hermione. Taking out her wand, she pointed it at the rope. “Accio funis!” The rope came tumbling down to lie in a heap at their feet. She smiled triumphantly. “There. Let’s see him get down the cliff without a rope!”

They moved a little distance away from the cliff, toward the edge of the marshes. Full night had fallen, and they were tired. Nibbling on their trail rations, they finally found a bit of shelter in the lee of a rock. The night was cold, but despite that, Ron found himself drifting off to sleep. Beside him, Hermione slept the sleep of exhaustion, and Harry murmured in his dreams. Ron spared a second’s concern for his friend; his dreams never, ever seemed to be

pleasant. At least he wasn't crying out in fear in his sleep this time.

Suddenly, he felt Draco shaking his shoulder. In his ear, Draco murmured: "Look! Look back at the cliff we climbed!" Ron peered through the gloom, and caught his breath. Something was climbing down, like a spider. For a second, he fought unreasoning panic, before he saw that it had only four legs. A frisson of horror went down his spine as he focussed more carefully---whatever it was, it was climbing down head first, like some giant insect.

"Gollum?" he whispered. Draco nodded, his expression grim in the pale moonlight. "I thought he'd be balked by that cliff!"

"We all did---we were all wrong. I'll alert the others." Gently, Draco shook Harry awake, and then Hermione, putting his hand over their mouths to stop them crying out in alarm. "We've got company, it looks like."

Rubbing his glasses with a scrap of cloth, Harry put them on and peered out at the cliff. "How is he tracking us? By smell?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, Potter," muttered Draco. "I don't know about you, but I'm getting sick of him shadowing us all the time. I want to catch him!" Wrapping himself in his elven-cloak, Draco moved off toward the foot of the cliff.

"Wait a second, Draco!" Harry rummaged in his pack and pulled out the silvery Invisibility Cloak. "He probably can't see you, but he might be able to hear you. He's very, very dangerous!" Pulling on the Invisibility Cloak, Harry disappeared. His voice drifted back to Ron's ears: "Come on, Ron, Hermione!"

As they drew closer to the cliff's foot, they began to be able to hear the creature. Its breath hissed, and sometimes it spoke to itself. "Ach, sss, my precious! More haste less speed! We mustn't lose the scent, no, precious, we mustn't, *gollum!*" For a second, as it raised its face, Ron could see the light of the moon reflected in its eyes. "Ach, sss, the White Face! We hates it, hates it, yes we does, my precious! Slowly, slowly, we climbs down this nasty cliff!"

Draco's voice rang out suddenly: "*Wingardium Leviosa!*" Gollum squealed in fear as he found himself torn from the side of the cliff, floating in midair, unsupported. He began to struggle madly, squealing and hissing.

"Petrificus Totalus!" Hermione cast a spell in her turn, and Gollum's struggles stopped as he froze in a grotesque position in midair. Only his eyes still moved, and they flickered around madly as Draco brought him gently to earth. When he was safely on the ground, Hermione called "*Finite Incantatem!*" and, suddenly freed, Gollum sprinted for cover---right straight at Ron. Before Ron could raise his wand or draw his sword, Gollum was on him, his strong fingers reaching for his throat.

"None of that, now!" came a sharp command, just as Gollum gripped Ron's throat. Gollum gasped in surprise and fear as something tore him from Ron and held him in mid-air. Coughing and feeling his throat, Ron recognized the voice as Harry Potter. A resounding slap sent Gollum's head snapping back. "Hold still and don't try anything stupid, or I'll kill you! Do we understand each other?" Another hard slap. "I *said*, do we understand each other?"

Ron had never heard such anger in Harry's voice in all their acquaintance.

"Don't hurt us! Don't hurt us! We wasn't doing anything, no we wasn't, gollum!" Going limp in Harry's grip, Gollum began to whimper pitifully. "We were losst, yess, losst and looking for our preciouss. Who are you, and what are you going to do with us?" He began to sob and weep. "Are you going to kill us?"

"Let loose, Harry," said Hermione. As Harry released Gollum, Hermione conjured up ropes, binding the gangrel creature before it could flee. Rubbing his throat, Ron stared at Gollum. This was the first time he had ever had a good clear look at their tracker. He was anything but prepossessing, being incredibly thin, and smaller than Ron had thought at first. Gollum was about the size of a seven-year-old child. His skin was fishbelly white, and his face was dominated by two huge eyes. His expression was a mask of malice as he hissed at them, his mouth showing only a few snaggle teeth.

"Welly-welly-welly-well, if it isn't our little chum Gollum," drawled Draco. "And what do you think *you* were doing, my dear little fellow, following us, your betters, around through this nasty dangerous wilderness?" He nudged Gollum in the ribs with the toe of his boot, not very gently. "Planning a bit of robbery and murder, were you?" Ron glanced at Draco. Draco had an expression on his face that reminded Ron of Professor Snape confronted with one of his brothers' pranks, and an unwilling stab of pity for Gollum went through his mind.

"We were losst, preciouss, losst and looking for our preciouss," whined Gollum. "We were trying to find our way, when we got jumped on, yess, jumped on like cats with poor little mices. Such nice peoples you are, jumping on poor preciouss."

"Let's have a quick talk, people," said Harry, coming out from under the cloak. "He's not going anywhere." To make sure, Harry cast a Stunning Charm on Gollum, and the creature relaxed as far as he could in his bindings, snoring a whistling snore as his huge lamp-like eyes shut.

"What do we do with him?" Harry gave Gollum a speculative look as he sat down on a nearby rock. "I don't fancy just turning him loose. He'd be right after us again, and we might not be able to catch him again." He took off his glasses and rubbed them with his handkerchief. "Somehow, though, I can't really bring myself to the point of killing him."

"Neither can I," said Hermione, looking troubled. "If we had only not crossed his path in Moria, or lost him in Lorien! I had pictured something a lot bigger and scarier, not this poor little wretch. I'd feel a proper brute if we killed him---and you'd have to go through me to do it." She stuck her chin out, looking very determined.

"Easy enough for you to say, Hermione," growled Ron. Gollum's fingers on his throat were a recent memory, and he knew that without his friends there to help him, he'd have been in a very bad way. "If there's anything he wouldn't do, it'd be a shock to me."

Draco shrugged his shoulders. "Me, I'm neutral. Part of me---the old, bad part, the part that's my father's son---says to kill him. The rest of me says that he may prove to be useful. Didn't Aragorn say something about how he thought Gollum had been in Mordor before? He might know a way in that isn't guarded."

"Then it's decided. As long as we can keep him under some sort of control, we don't kill

him.” Ron stared at Harry in awe, and a little fear. Harry was taking command of the company, and doing so as though he had been doing it all his life. Harry looked different, somehow; older and grimmer, and very sure of himself. Comparing this Harry Potter with the bewildered child he had met on the Hogwarts Express, Ron could hardly believe the change.

Going back over to where Gollum lay, Harry took out his wand and snapped: “Ennervate!” As the Stunning Spell came off him, Gollum awoke, looking around wildly. For a second, he struggled with his bonds, then appeared to accept them. “Smeagol! We won’t hurt you, but you have to come with us. We’re going to Mordor, and you’ve been there before, so you’re going to show us the way.”

“Mordor?” A look of fear twisted Gollum’s unlovely face. “Ach, sss, he doesn’t want to go there, does he, preciouss? Assh, dusst, thirsst! Pits, pitses everywhere, and Orcs! Thousands of Orcses, Orcses and more Orcses! Nice people doesn’t go to such places!”

“But you do, don’t you, Smeagol?” Harry’s voice was soft and insistent. Behind him, Draco and Hermione stood, wands at the ready in case Gollum got free. Harry squatted down, looking directly into Gollum’s face. “You’ve been there before, and we want you to show us a safe way in.”

“No! Yes! Once, once only, and that was years ago!” Gollum began to writhe in his bonds, weeping and whimpering. “I don’t know! O my poor hands! Leave me alone! We can’t find it! They’re always awake, *gollum, gollum*, dwarves, men, and elveses, terrible elveses with bright eyes! Go away! Don’t look at us any more! Go to sleep!” He turned his head toward the southeast. “We won’t! Not for you!”

Ron and Draco glanced at each other, and Ron was startled at the look of pity on Draco’s face. There’d been a time when he would as soon have expected to see Hermione kiss Professor Snape. “I hate to say it, but I think something...happened to him in Mordor. Something really, *really* bad,” murmured Draco. Ron nodded, and turned his attention back to Harry and his colloquy with Gollum.

“Show us the way in, Smeagol, and we’ll let you go where you will. That’s all we’re asking.” Harry stood over Gollum, wrapped in dignity and power. Ron was filled with admiration for how much his friend had grown.

“No! No, we won’t! Never show you the way!” snarled Gollum. Hermione got up and squatted down beside the imprisoned wretch, an ominous smile on her face.

“Oh, yes you will, Gollum. You’ll tell us anything we want to know. You want to know how I know this?” Staring at her, his huge eyes wide, Gollum nodded fearfully. “Because, if you don’t--I’ll tickle you till you tell! Tickle-tickle-tickle-tickle!” As she began tickling Gollum, the creature screamed and laughed involuntarily, writhing frantically in a futile effort to escape. Finally, he gasped out his acquiescence.

“Yess, yess, we will! We will show you the road to the Black Land, preciouss, *gollum*! As long as we don’t go in there, precious will show you the way!” Gollum began to rock back and forth in his bonds. “Now loose us, loose us, preciouss wants to be loosed! Can’t show you roads if we’re tied up!”

At Harry’s nod, Hermione made the ropes vanish. Gollum sprang up, capering with delight to

be free. “We musstn’t go, not yet, gollum! The White Face is out. It hurts our eyes, and shows enemieses where we are, doesn’t it, my preciouss?” He squatted down, limber as an Indian fakir, and looked up at the four, his eyes seeming to glow. “Resst, yess, resst a while before we goes!”

Harry nodded, and the companions sat down nearby. Ron began to feign sleepiness, and he noticed that the others were doing the same thing. Slowly, slowly, he let his eyelids slide almost shut, until he was watching Gollum through the narrowest of slits. Harry slumped to one side, and began to snore, and Ron stifled a chuckle; it didn’t sound a bit like Harry’s real snore---but it was an uncannily faithful imitation of Neville Longbottom! *Of course. He never has heard himself while he’s asleep, but he’s heard Neville.* Ron joined in, doing the best “Harry Potter asleep” impression he could, short of actually crying out in his sleep and cursing the Dursleys.

Just as Ron had anticipated, Gollum waited a few minutes, peering around with his huge lambent eyes. As soon as he was convinced that all four of them were truly asleep, he leaped to his feet and made a run for it. All four of them were on their feet in an instant, and Gollum went down in a welter of Binding Charms and Stunning Spells.

“And where do you think *you* were going?” snarled Ron. “Off to find some orcs, or something worse, I bet. I ought to cut your worthless throat!” He yanked out his sword and tested the edge with his thumb, smiling mirthlessly.

“No, Ron! Don’t!” Hermione aimed her wand at Ron. Her eyes narrowed, and her voice became very low and even. “Put—that—sword—back. Right *now!*” There was a snap of command in her voice, and Ron stared at Hermione in utter surprise before he sheathed the sword.

“Hermione, are you barking mad? We can’t trust him! What promise can he make that he’d keep?”

Hermione did not answer, but pointed her wand at Gollum and snapped: “*Ennervate!*” Gollum revived, whimpering and weeping to find himself bound yet again. “That’s a good question, Ron. I’m not pleased with him myself, but I think he can be made useful. He’s been in this country before, after all.” She turned to Gollum. “Well? What promise can you make that you can be trusted to keep for five minutes at a time?”

Gollum looked up at Harry, a terrible hunger in his eyes. “Smeagol will swear on the Precious.” Ron shuddered at the naked longing in his eyes. He had never seen such raw need.

Harry was shaking his head, rubbing his chin. “On the Precious?” Harry smiled rather sardonically. “I don’t think you know what you’re saying, Smeagol. Once you make that sort of promise, it’ll bind you, whatever you may think.” He drew himself up to his full height. “If you break a promise to That, It’ll destroy you.”

In that moment, Ron could see the man Harry was becoming: a mighty wizard, wise and terrible, easily the equal of Dumbledore---and before him, a little dog, cowering, that happened to be somehow akin to the wizard. He blinked, and it was just Harry Potter, tired, bedraggled, and---could it be?---beginning to need a shave. He rubbed his own chin, and was startled to find that he was getting bristly too.

“On the Precious we swears! On the Precious!” whined Gollum. He wriggled in his bonds, trying to work his way closer to where Harry stood, his arms crossed on his chest. “We swears on the Precious!”

“Oh? And what do you swear, Smeagol?” Harry looked down at Gollum, his face impassive. Gollum whined louder.

“We swears---to never, never let Him have it. Smeagol will keep Him from ever getting It. But we must swear on the Precious!” Harry shook his head, looking tired, and sad, all of a sudden.

:”No, Smeagol. It would drive you mad to see it. But you know where it is. Tell the Precious what you will do, and it will hear you.”

“We swears---swears never to let the Enemy have the Precious. We swears to serve the one who bears the Precious, whatever he may want us to do.” Gollum struggled. “Unloosse us! Let uss go!”

At Harry’s nod, Hermione raised her wand and made the bindings disappear again, and Gollum got up. “Very well, Smeagol. You say you know a way into Mordor. Show us the way.” Gollum capered about, delighted to be free, and pointed off across the marshes.

“There’s a way, yes there is, O yes. Orcses don’t know it, but I do. Let me show you. Come with Smeagol! I found it, years ago, hiding from Orcses.” With Smeagol showing them the way, the four companions passed on into the Dead Marshes.

Chapter 12 --Candlelight in Marshlands

After a while, Gollum, who had moved ahead, crouching low and using his hands almost as much as his feet, pointed forward. "Here it is, yess, the way to the marshess!" He had not tried to escape, but Ron remained very suspicious of him, and he could tell that Hermione and Draco felt very much the same way. They exchanged frequent glances eloquent of mistrust, and kept their wands at the ready.

The way turned out to be the bed of a river, leading down from the rocks to the marshes. Gollum splashed along in the shallow water, which seemed to please him greatly. Occasionally he would even sing what seemed to be a song, or recite a poem about fish. Ron knew that he had lived on little but fish and goblins' flesh for centuries in his cave home far below the Misty Mountains, and wondered how he had managed to keep himself fed since leaving there.

"That's a good question, Ron," murmured Draco; Ron jumped slightly, then thought that he must have been subvocalizing his thoughts, and Draco had heard. Elves, as he had learned in Lorien, had keen senses, and apparently this was another thing that was inherited, along with their language. "I doubt there's anything he's too good to eat, if it comes down to it, promises or no promises. Harry seems to trust him for now, but me, I don't, not half I don't. He reeks of treachery and double-dealing---and after growing up around Death Eaters, I should recognize that if anybody does!"

When they paused, weary from hours of tramping through the twisting gully, Ron brought the subject up. "What's to eat?" Hermione looked into her pack.

"We've got what's left of that jerked meat and dried fruit, as well as the *lembas*. I'd rather we left the *lembas* for later---for emergency rations. It'll keep you going for a long, long time, and a little goes a very long way. Who wants some dried meat and fruit?"

Gollum came padding up, his eyes alight with hunger. "Yess, yess, nice meatses! Pretty girl gives us, gives us nice food!" When Hermione handed Gollum a chunk of the meat, he fawned on her, all but wagging his tail. Ron looked away, feeling slightly sick at the way the creature was willing to abase himself.

"He reminds me of my father---sucking up to Voldemort." Draco shook his head, disgusted, as he gnawed on a dried pear. Gollum had passed on the fruit, expressing disgust at it, and had regarded the suggestion of eating *lembas* with horror. Ron wondered if he had a natural horror of elven things, or if the stuff just didn't suit his tastes. When he spoke of that to Draco, Draco expressed similar bafflement.

After the meal, they rested for a while. Harry and Hermione stretched out and went to sleep, and Gollum did likewise. By unspoken agreement, Draco and Ron stayed awake; neither of them trusted Gollum an inch. Ron thought it was strange to see Draco Malfoy as a trusted friend and comrade, but decided that it was all a matter of degree. Compared to Gollum, who Ron thought would eat any of them if he got the chance, Draco Malfoy was a harmless and friendly sort.

After a few hours, Hermione awoke, and Ron and Draco lay down and took their turn sleeping. At first, Ron thought that he would never, never be able to sleep so close to Gollum, at least as long as the creature was not tied securely, but when he opened his eyes, the change in the light and his own rested feeling told him that he had been asleep for hours. Gollum was nowhere to be seen.

"Where's that little wretch? Did he run off?" snapped Draco. Draco was always a little crabby about being awakened, even when he'd had enough rest. Ron had asked him why that was so, and been disconcerted by the answer. "Well, Weasley, it's like this: I lie there, caught up in a horrible nightmare. Then I awaken, and remember who I am, and where I am, and what I am---and I wish I had the nightmare back."

"I gave him leave to go. He said he was hungry." Hermione looked rather grim. "When we were figuring out how much food we had, we didn't figure on taking on a new member of our happy little group, so every bit of food Smeagol finds for himself is one less bit we'll have to give him." She smiled rather sardonically. "For that matter, he's probably a lot better-adapted to survival here than any of us. He'll eat anything---worms, insects, what-have-you." She shuddered slightly. "I'd bet on him surviving a nuclear holocaust."

Sure enough, in a little while Gollum came back in, gnawing on something that Ron decided very quickly not to investigate too closely. Thinking about what it might be made him feel slightly queasy, and not at all hungry. Harry finally woke up, stretching and yawning, looking as rested and refreshed as though he were back at Hogwarts, with nothing worse than double Potions to worry him. He smiled, and it was the old smile, the one that Ron had seen so seldom since this task had come to him.

"Well, another fun day in Middle-earth, everyone! Don't you just feel *glad* to be alive?" His voice sounded cheerful, but with an undertone of sarcasm. Draco looked at him in reluctant admiration.

"Bloody *hell*, Harry, you've been hanging around with me for too long! You're starting to sound like me!" Hermione dissolved in giggles, and Ron snickered, before something struck him. Draco was absolutely right. What in the world was Harry Potter doing sounding like Draco at his most Malfoy-ish? "What's the matter, Harry? Is the 'Precious' getting to you?"

Harry sent Draco a look that wiped every bit of levity off his face, to be replaced by fear. "Never, never, *never* say that again, Draco Malfoy!" Ron felt a *frisson* of alarm at the change in Harry. Had Draco hit on something? Was the Ring beginning to alter Harry's mind? Ron had a moment's vision of Harry, centuries old, twisted and altered into a second Gollum, and felt slightly sick.

Draco raised his hands placatingly. "Okay, Harry! Okay! No offense meant!" Ron could see real fear on Draco's face, something he normally didn't see there. Had Draco figured out what Ron had? Ron made a mental note to ask him when they had a chance to talk.

At the end of the gully, they found themselves standing on the edges of the fenlands. In the distance, Ron could see the mountains of Mordor, hanging there like clouds. In front of them, the fens stretched out, gloomy in the gray light of day, with mist rising off them. The air was thick with the smell of decaying plant-life.

"Well, do we have to cross this lot, or is there a way around?" asked Hermione. She looked out at the marshes with distaste all over her face. "I'll tell you all the truth: I'd as soon not try going into that bloody bayou if there's any feasible way around."

"Hear, hear, Hermione," said Draco. He peered out into the mists. "I can't see anything that looks like a path, and it's awfully easy to get bogged in those places. This place puts me in mind of nothing so much as Dartmoor."

"I doesn't know about Dartmoor, no I doesn't." cackled Gollum, watching the four friends carefully. "All I knows is that you doesn't have to cross nasty marshes, no, you doesn't. You can go north, yes, north and find hard roads, roads that go right straight to the Enemy's country. His people are there, there all the time. They caught Smeagol long ago there." He shuddered. "Since then I've used eyes, yes, eyes and ears and nose, and I found ways in and out, ways the Enemy doesn't know about."

"So I suppose we've got our usual choice---Hobson's," sighed Harry. He tucked his thumbs into his belt and stared out across the marshes, his stance reminding Ron of his father, bracing himself before tucking into a big job of work back at the Burrow. A second's longing for home, for familiar faces and the knowledge of his parents' unconditional love surrounding him, ripped through him with an intensity that was physically painful. *Stop it, you damned prat*, he told himself sternly. *Think of Harry---or Draco! They've got it far, far worse and you don't see them whinging!*

The sky was getting brighter, and Gollum seemed anxious to be off, so they stepped out into the fens. The terrain turned out to be an endless cluster of stagnant pools separated by hummocks, and to Ron's surprise, it proved possible to cross, although the path meandered and wandered. Gollum led the way, and Ron could see that it took every bit of even his skill to find their way; he crouched low, sniffing and using his hands for balance as his head swiveled around, peering for the next bit of firm ground for them to use. Sometimes he would even listen, his ear pressed to the earth, although what he thought he would hear was a mystery to Ron.

It was dreadfully wearisome; the landscape would have depressed nearly anybody. "'Save the wetlands,' eh, Hermione?" Ron murmured into Hermione's ear. She snorted. Above them, the Sun was rising, and they could just see its outline through the layer of clouds. Gollum looked up, hissed and snarled. Ron, on the other hand, was glad to see the Sun.

They stopped at the borders of a great reed-thicket. All around them, the swamp stretched out, dead and grey, the only green the mold to be found on the surfaces of some of the slimy tarns. All of them were weary, and Ron, for one, was thoroughly fed up with the marshes. Between the dreary scenery and the apparent lack of life other than themselves, it was never going to be high on his list of holiday choices.

As the day wore on into evening, their progress slowed. The firm bits became harder and harder to find, and even Gollum, the expert, was sometimes at a loss for a while. The waning of daylight didn't help much; Ron liked the swamps even less as darkness fell than he had when he could see them clearly. He pulled his cloak close around him as he shivered, and not from the cold.

They moved forward slowly, the mud clinging to their boots. If they had been full-grown adults, they wouldn't have been able to make it, and even so, they had more than one nasty turn. Again and again, they linked hands to pull one of them out of the mire as the darkness thickened. After one bout of pulling, with Draco's feet back on relatively firm ground, Ron stopped to wipe sweat from his face, and let out a shout of terror. Out around them, he saw what looked like distant candle-lights.

"Gods! We're caught!" Instinctively, the Hogwarts students went back-to-back, their wands out and at the ready. Gollum squeaked, startled, then cackled at the sight.

"Yess, they're out there. Candles of corpses, they are! Don't bother about them! Don't follow them!" He went back to snuffling around for a trail to follow. After a few minutes, when no attack came, Ron and the others put their wands back and went back to following Gollum.

A few minutes later, Hermione tripped over something and went down into the muck, face-first. It wasn't deep, but she had her face under water for a second. She reared back, screaming, and scrambled to her feet. "There are faces in the water!" Harry, Ron and Draco whirled, their wands out. Shaking, Hermione pointed at the fen. "I saw faces in there---dead faces!"

Harry bent over and peered in. "Yes, I see them too. Noble-looking men, and elves, and orcs. All of them dead, though." He looked drawn, and very tired. "There is a light in their eyes---a light I don't like."

Gollum cackled, highly amused. "Yes, yes, those faces are why they calls this the Dead Marshes. There was a battle here, long long ago, I heard it when I was young. Before the Precious came, I heard about it. Fierce elves with bright eyes, and Men with long swords, and Orcses, all fought here. For days they fought. Then the swamps came, creeping, creeping, swallowing the graves."

"How long ago was that?" asked Hermione, her lust for facts conquering her fear. She bent over, in her turn, looking carefully at the faces. "That kind of armor hasn't been used for centuries! How can they be visible? Is this some trick of the Enemy?" At Ron's questioning look, she snapped: "Oh, don't be so surprised, Ronald Weasley! There were books of the history of this place at Rivendell and Lorien, and lots of them had illustrations. I can recognize that armor, and it's not armor that's been used for many centuries."

"How? Smeagol doesn't know, pretty girl," admitted Gollum. He looked down at the faces. "We tried to reach them once, I tried, but it can't be done, no it can't." Ron shuddered. He figured he knew perfectly well what Gollum had tried to reach them for. Gollum turned and beckoned. "Come on! We doesn't want to go down there and light candles! Follow Smeagol! Don't look at nassty lightses!"

When they finally reached firm ground, Ron noticed that Gollum himself was happier. He led them off down what seemed to be a path among high reeds, whispering "Must take pretty girl and nice mages away from nassty lights, yes I must," as they followed him. All of them were slimed with mud; they had all fallen in the mire more than once, and they stank to high heaven.

After a bit, Gollum stopped, sniffing and peering around. "The air is moving, it's changing. Smeagol doesn't like it, no he doesn't."

Draco murmured "I'd be glad of a change myself, if only to get away from this smell. We all pong something horrid."

As they progressed on, Gollum got twitchier and twitchier, reminding Ron of the way Ginny had acted before disappearing into the Chamber of Secrets, three years previously. He wondered for a second how his baby sis was doing, and if she'd gotten over that crush on Harry Potter. He'd talked with Harry about it, and Harry had explained why he had been at pains to discourage her:

"It's simple, Ron. I'm sitting on the bulls-eye of a target, no matter what. The least I can do is to try to keep Ginny out of the line of fire." A shadow had passed over Harry's face. "I can face this by myself, but I'd never forgive myself if I got anybody else killed." Ron shook his head, remembering; he had wanted both to hug Harry and to shake him till his teeth rattled for being so stupid. How he could be both so noble and such a prat was beyond Ron. He was just Harry Potter, whom Ron loved like a brother.

A breeze sprung up, blowing the clouds away and revealing the Moon. As one, Harry, Ron, Draco and Hermione turned their faces to the sky, glad of the extra light, but Gollum hid his eyes and cursed. "Ach, sss, the White Face, *gollum!* It shows us, shows us, doesn't it?"

Ron was breathing deeply of the purer air, glad of the way the breeze was blowing away the marsh-fetor, when he saw it. A dark shape, darker than any cloud, was flying out of Mordor. It crossed the moon, letting out a cry that they could hear even far below, and wheeled, heading back to Mordor. Gollum grovelled on the ground, gibbering, and Ron, himself, was terrified as he had not been since Moria. "Wraiths!" wailed Gollum. "Wraiths on wings! They sees everything, tells their masster!" He shook his fist at the moon. "Curse the White Face! It shows them everything! Nothing can hide, *gollum, gollum, gollum!*"

After that, Ron began to note a change in Gollum. He began to slip back into his old way of speaking, and eyed Harry oddly sometimes. Harry himself began to slow, and to tire. Frequently, Ron, Draco or Hermione had to tell Gollum to slow up and wait for Harry.

"Are you all right, Harry?" asked Hermione during one pause. Harry wiped sweat from his forehead, shaking his head rather dazedly. At a snapped command from Draco, Gollum came back, fawning and servile, but with a look in his eye that Ron didn't trust for a second. It put him in mind of Quirrell, back in their first year at Hogwarts, when he thought about it.

"No. I sense the Dark Lord, off in the distance. My scar's not hurting, but that only happens when Voldemort's near or feeling murderous about me. This is different--- more like an eye looking for me." He looked off toward Mordor, and shuddered. "Right now, I'm still hidden from it, but the veils are getting thinner all the time. It's like knowing where the sun is on a sunny day with my eyes shut." Hermione touched his face tenderly, running her finger along his scar as gently as the mother he had never known. Ron could see tears running down her face.

"Oh, Harry, I'd give anything to make it easier on you," she whispered. Gollum sidled up, smiling a rather evil smile. Draco stared down at him with a very Snape-ish expression on

his face, fingering his wand ominously, and Gollum leaped backwards as though he had been scalded.

For the rest of that night they pressed on, and dawn caught them on the far side of the marshes, in a land that sloped away up to the mountains of Mordor. The air was clear and cold in Ron's lungs, and he didn't like the taste of it--it had a sulfur reek, somehow. During daylight, they took cover beneath a big black stone, taking turns to sleep and keep an eye on Gollum.

For two days, they struggled onward, the air itself growing fouler and fouler with the sulfur fumes from distant Mount Doom. Finally, they came to an utter, total wasteland. It put Ron in mind of the ash-heaps he had seen on a trip into Wales, the mountains of slag and rubble from the coal mines there. There was nothing growing, nothing at all; spring would never, ever come to this place, even when it came to the Dead Marshes behind them. There were pools here and there of stagnant water, but it was thick with ashes and worse.

"This makes the worst pollution I ever heard of back home look like nothing," murmured Hermione. Harry put his arm around her to comfort her.

After a little while, they moved on, finally finding shelter in a round hole where, Ron hoped, the Eye that Harry had mentioned would not be able to see them easily. The daylight itself seemed tainted, and designed to show them their utter insignificance next to the power and puissance of the Dark Lord of Mordor and his creations. As had become their custom, they took turns to sleep, and Ron drifted off gracefully, hoping to dream of home.

When Ron woke up, the others were sleeping a sleep of exhaustion, but as he slowly opened his eyes, he heard two voices. One sounded like Gollum-as-Smeagol, and the other sounded like Gollum's old self. Cautiously, he peered around, not letting on that he was awake, and he saw Gollum having an argument with himself. As his voice switched back and forth, his eyes changed color, going from a pale light to a green light in the gathering dusk.

One voice argued for keeping to the spirit of Smeagol's promise to Harry and the others, while the other---the Gollum-voice---urged that the Ring was his "precious" and that he could keep the promise to keep it from Sauron just as easily, if not more so, with the Ring in his own possession. After all, wheedled the Gollum-voice, Harry and his friends were going nearer and nearer to Mordor, where the Enemy himself was in residence.

Finally, the Gollum-voice seemed to win, and Gollum's fingers went toward Harry's neck. A dry "*A-hem*" froze Gollum in his tracks, and he whirled, to see Draco and Ron both pointing their wands at him.

Harry stirred, yawning. "What time is it, everybody?" At this, Hermione came awake, muttering something uncomplimentary about people who woke decent folk up. The Gollum-personality disappeared, and "Smeagol" came back, fawning and grinning with dog-like delight. Harry apparently took it nearly at face-value, but Ron, Hermione and Draco, catching each others' eyes for a second, shook their heads slightly.

"Yess, masster and pretty girl has had sleep, beautiful sleep," croaked Gollum. "Now it's eveningses, night is creeping, and time to go! Where does we go now, masster?" Harry took off his glasses and wiped them thoughtfully with his handkerchief.

"How's this sound, Smeagol? You head off and see if you can't find something to eat--you can eat stuff we can't. We'll wait for you here. Be back in, say, an hour or so, and then take us to the Gate. When we're there, you're free to go, as long as you don't go to the Enemy."

"Yess, Smeagol is famished, famished!" With a bound, Gollum turned and left. After he was gone, Draco squatted down low, gesturing Harry, Ron and Hermione to join him.

"Look, Harry," began Draco, his narrow, clever face grim under its coating of half-dried grime, "you can't trust that creature as far as you could throw him. He was having a little argument with himself just now, and the part of him that wants to take the Ring away was winning."

"He seems to like me," said Hermione, doubtfully. She shuddered slightly. "I'd rather drink one of Professor Snape's potions without asking what it was than have him slobbering over me, but, let's face it, boys---we couldn't have passed through those awful marshes without him."

Harry smiled rather sardonically. Ron was struck, in that moment, how very much like the old Draco Malfoy he had become. "As long as we keep a sharp eye on him, I think he'll be useful for a while, yet. If only Gandalf were here, he might be able to tell us what's in Smeagol's heart..." Harry's voice trailed off, and they all sighed. "What a waste that was, to have him go down in Moria. What a bloody, *stupid* waste! If I'd known what awaited us in that damned ruin, we'd have gone on over Caradhras, blizzards or no blizzards!" Ron and the others nodded agreement, regret on their faces.

A rustling noise near them had them all whirling, their wands in their hands. It was Smeagol, looking seriously disgruntled. "We couldn't find nothing to eat, no we couldn't," he muttered. Ron gave him a sharp look, as he generally did when Gollum relapsed into his old way of talking. "We goes to the Gate now, doesn't we?" Harry nodded, and they scrambled out of the pit and went on their way.

Before long, they felt the same fear they had before, when the dark shadow flew over them again. It reminded Ron, and the others, of a dementor's passing. Gollum squeaked and gibbered for a while when it was gone. They pressed on, and an hour or so before midnight, they felt the fear again, although this time it seemed less intense; Ron thought that the Nazgul, or whatever it was, must be flying past far above the clouds. This third time all but unhinged Gollum, though.

"Wraiths on wings," he whimpered. "They sees us, sees us! The Precious is their master! We can't go this way! They feels us here! It's no use!" Harry and Hermione pleaded with Gollum, but to no avail. "Three times! Three times is a threat!" was all they got.

Finally, Harry had had enough. "Come, Smeagol!" he commanded, one hand on his wand and the other clutching his shirt, over where the Ring rode on its chain. "Guide us, as you promised you would!" In that second, Ron saw him with other eyes---a mighty wizard indeed, who chose to veil his power and majesty, stared from the green eyes in the pinched, familiar face under its shock of black hair. Beside him, Hermione stood, her wand in her hand and a look in her eye that would have intimidated Professor McGonagall. Before them, Gollum quailed, and went on before them, unwillingness radiating from every inch of his

wasted frame. On they went, their weary way seeming endless, and the wind whistling in their ears.

Chapter 13—To the Gates of Mordor

"Well, here we are," murmured Hermione, looking up with a look of mingled wonder and despair. "The Gates of Mordor---the Black Gates, as ever were." She shook her head. "They couldn't be any more tightly closed if they were welded shut!"

As Gollum had promised, rather to Ron's surprise, they had penetrated to within sight of the Black Gate. It had originally been a pass between the two mountain ranges that guarded Mordor, the Ephel Duath to the east and the Ered Lithui to the north. However, it was far from a simple pass any more; the Gondorian-built castles on either side of the pass were now held by the Dark Lord, and there was a huge wall across the pass, with a mighty gate set in it.

"You know, there's something missing here." Draco cocked his head on one side, in a considering way. Ron and the others stared at him. He looked at the Gate appraisingly, as though it was something he was being offered in Diagon Alley but wasn't sure he wanted to buy. Somehow, even in battered, filthy clothes, with grime smearing him, he still managed to be elegant.

"Okay, Mister Clever. Just what's missing? They don't have the sort of high technology Muggles use in our homeworld, but between those fortresses, that big gate, and those orc-holes I can see on either side, I don't think anybody could get through that gate with anything I've seen here!" Harry looked at the gate, and shook his head in rueful admiration. "I've got to say---it's an impressive fortification."

"What it needs, Mister Under-Educated, is an inscription over the door." Draco quirked a grin. "And no, I don't think the inscription should read 'No Hawkers, No Missionaries.'" Hermione giggled, startling Ron and herself alike.

"Okay, you've got our attention, Draco," sighed Harry, in tones of martyrdom. "What inscription would you suggest?" He looked theatrically put-upon, but Ron thought that Harry was kidding on the square---he'd been worried for his friend for quite some time.

"The same one Dante Aligheri said was on the great Gates of Hell, in the *Inferno*," answered Draco. At their questioning looks, he straightened, ran a hand through his blonde hair, and recited:

"Through me is the way to the city of pain,

Through me is the way to eternal woe,

Through me is the way to the forgotten world.

Abandon all hope, you who enter here."

"Thank you, Draco Malfoy, for *that* lovely thought," drawled Hermione, "but, cheery as it is, it doesn't help us figure out what to do here, does it? I mean, we don't exactly have Virgil to guide us---and Smeagol, here, is not quite the same, somehow." Hearing his name, Gollum came up, fawning over Hermione like a dog desperate for a pat. She shot Ron a martyred look, and when he grinned at her discomfiture, she stuck out her tongue.

"Well, if we can't get in here, we'll have to get in somewhere else," mused Harry. "And, come to it, Smeagol---you've been in and out of Mordor, and I doubt you came this way. How did you get out last time?"

Before Gollum could answer, they heard horns blowing from the gate. Instinctively, they ducked for cover, peering out toward the Black Gate. Ron had had a moment's wild hope, but this was not the army of the West, coming to challenge Sauron. "Those aren't Gondorian horn-calls," murmured Hermione. "Those sound more like signals of greeting."

Ron could see that the approaching army was being greeted as friends by the holders of the Gate. As he watched, the gates were opened, and an endless-looking army in unfamiliar armor, flying flags that Ron had never seen before, marched on in. Ron shook his head at their sheer numbers. He had never in all his life seen such a force of soldiers, and he knew this was a small part of the might of the Dark Lord. *And we are challenging him*, he thought in one small part of his mind. *We must be absolutely mad!*

When the last soldiers had passed, Harry bent his gaze on Gollum, who quailed under his regard. "As I said, I am going into Mordor, one way or another, Smeagol. If you know another way, tell me about it. Otherwise---I'll do what I have to do."

"No!" squealed Gollum. "Mustn't go to the Gate! He'll get it that way, he'll eat the whole world! Go away! Give it to Smeagol, give it to us!" Harry shook his head slowly.

"You will never hold it again, Smeagol. I am going into Mordor. You can show me the way, or I will find one myself." Harry grinned suddenly, without a trace of mirth. "I will go into Mordor, and if you won't show me the way, I'll go up and knock on the Gate right now!"

At this, Gollum's will broke, at least on the surface. Ron watched him carefully; he remembered the debate between Gollum's good and evil sides, and didn't think that the long-buried "Smeagol" side was dominant. About the only thing that "Smeagol" and "Gollum" agreed on, though, was that the Enemy should not have the Ring. As long as helping Harry and his friends kept the Ring out of Sauron's hands, Ron concluded that Gollum would work with them.

"Yesss, we knows another way, we knows another way that was there yearses ago," muttered Gollum, not daring to look up at Harry, who stood over him grimly. "Let's us go and see if that way's still there!"

"Very well, Smeagol," said Harry. "Remember your promise, though---and remember what I've said. You will never, never get It back. If I have to, I'll put It on, and if I do that, you will do what I say, no matter what that is. Even if I tell you to throw yourself into a fire, or off a cliff, you'll no more be able to disobey than you can grow wings and fly!"

Draco and Hermione looked at Harry with as much amazement as Ron himself felt. Ron had always thought that Harry concealed a good deal of steel beneath his unassuming exterior, and this merely was the final confirmation of that suspicion. After all, without a core of solid tool-steel hardness, he'd have been so broken by the Dursleys' mistreatment that even Hogwarts wouldn't have helped him much. Gollum, thought Ron, had had better excuses for being mistaken about Harry Potter. For that matter, if Voldemort had been there at that moment, Ron thought that even he might have quailed at the thought of crossing swords with Harry.

Gollum squeaked in terror, and cringed, begging for mercy. He grovelled at Harry's feet, begging Harry to be kind to "poor little Smeagol." Ron watched closely, and thought, with a stab of fear, that Harry looked like he was enjoying the situation. The old Harry Potter would never have revelled in such abasement on the part of anybody; the new one seemed to be, on some level below consciousness, to not only be relishing every whine and whimper, but to revel in it and accept it as his natural due. It reminded Ron, uncomfortably, of the old, bad Draco Malfoy at his most unpleasantly arrogant.

When Gollum had finally been calmed, Ron asked: "So where is this other way into Mordor? Do we have to go all the way to the Harad countries, and go around the mountains, and come in from the east?" He shuddered at the thought.

"That would make sense, but we're already a bit short of food, and I don't know how easy it would be to stock up." answered Hermione. "When I was in Rivendell, I was looking at maps, and most of that country is desert, or the next thing to it. Also, it's pretty firmly in the clutches of the Enemy." She shook her head firmly. "That's an absolute last resort. We don't want to go there, do we, Smeagol?"

"O no, O no, pretty girl," crooned Gollum, happy to be getting attention from Hermione. "The road goes west, west it goes from Ephel Duath. When you gets to a crossing, in a circle of dark trees, there is a crossroads. Go to the right, and you comes to Osgiliath. Go straight ahead, and you goes to the South, south to the Great Water. The Great Water is never, never still, and has fishes in it, nice fishes, and birdses eats them, but we never saw it, O no, never got a chance."

"Very well, what of the left-hand path?" asked Draco. He quirked an eyebrow up, and hooked his thumbs in the belt-loops of his leather trousers. "We don't want to go to the sea, or to Osgiliath---do we, Hermione?" Hermione shook her head abstractedly.

"O yes, the left-hand path," whispered Gollum, fear shining from his huge lambent eyes. "The left-hand path goes back up into the black mountains, up up up it goes. It turns around the black rock, and suddenly you see it above you, and you wants to hide."

"*What* do you see?" Hermione's voice held an edge of exasperation, and Ron had to sympathize; getting facts out of Gollum was like herding cats sometimes. Gollum shook his head violently.

"The old city. Very old, very horrible. It was built long ago, long long ago, yess, we heard tales long long ago. Long ago, it was the Tower of the Moon, and there was a great stone there like the Moon." Gollum cowered slightly. "Very beautiful, it was, with its white walls."

"Okay, we're getting somewhere. That would be Minas Ithil. Isildur built it, after he defeated the Enemy and cut off the finger that held the Ring." Hermione pulled out her map. "I see it---it's marked right here."

Gollum shuddered. "Yess. He has only four on the Black Hand, but four are enough! He hated Isildur's city." Ron thought of actually meeting Sauron, and felt a wave of pity for Gollum, and of awe for his toughness. The Balrog had been terrifying, and from what he had learned, Sauron was far greater than even the Balrog. He looked into Draco Malfoy's eyes, and saw understanding there.

"I think some of my contempt's been misplaced, Weasel," murmured Draco. "I thought he was just a snivelling little wretch, but if Sauron's one-twentieth as bad as everybody says he is---he apparently makes Lord Voldemort look like a little old lady---meeting him would break almost anybody." Ron nodded, keeping most of his attention on the interrogation of Gollum.

"He hates everything---this isn't news," sighed Hermione. "But what does the Tower of the Moon have to do with anything? Isn't it garrisoned?" Gollum nodded eagerly.

"O yes, O yes, it has many people there. His people. He conquered it long long ago, and now it is very terrible, O yes it is." Harry shook his head in exasperation.

: "Okay, let's see if I've got this absolutely straight. Let's see if I understand what you're saying. We can go a long way out of our way, and at the end of the road, run up against just the same sort of trouble we've got here?" He gave Gollum a terrible stare, and the creature quailed, crouching low and shielding his eyes.

"No! No! The Enemy is not expecting attack from that direction. Right now He is watching to the north, expecting an attack from there. He expects a big army, not four wizards."

"You seem to know a lot about what He is thinking," drawled Draco reflectively, tilting his head over slightly as he watched Gollum. "How do you know? Talking with Him? Or hanging around with Orcs?" Gollum gave Draco an angry look.

"Smeagol has talked with Orcs, O yes, and with many other peoples. He has walked very very far, in many places, before he met nice master and pretty girl," hissed Gollum. "What Smeagol says, he has heard in many many places. Right now He is worried about armies. He will come out of the Black Gate, one day, soon. Off by the Tower of the Moon, he is not afraid, because he thinks that any attack would have to have boatses, many boatses, and he would have warning. There are also the Silent Watchers."

"And what are the Silent Watchers?" Ron asked, wishing bitterly for Professor Snape to show up with a big jug of Veritaserum. *What am I thinking*, he suddenly thought---*wanting Professor Snape to show up? Am I mad?* Still, the thought of how much easier it would be to get the facts they wanted out of this creature with a dose of Veritaserum wouldn't leave him alone. It would be so easy, so easy, compared to trying to get Gollum to talk without it...

"No, master and pretty girl and their friends mustn't go to the terrible city," continued Gollum, giving Ron an annoyed look. "There is another path, one on the way to the city. We found it, we knows it. A little path, leading up into the mountains, and then a stair, a narrow stair. O yes, very long, long and narrow. Finally, a little cleft, and a pass high above the main pass. That's how we got out of the darkness, many many years ago. The path may not be there still."

"And, if it is, wouldn't it be guarded? This sounds like a trap to me," drawled Draco. At that, Ron caught a green gleam in Gollum's eyes that he didn't like. "I mean, I certainly would know about such a path, were I in the Enemy's boots---"

"The gods forbid," murmured Hermione.

"---And if I were, I'd have that path watched all the time. What about it, Smeagol? Did you escape---or were you let go? Did the Enemy let you go, on an errand for him? That's what Aragorn thought, when he found you by the Dead Marshes, long ago."

"It's a lie!" snarled Gollum, a green light coming into his eyes at the mention of Aragorn. "He lied on me, yes he did. I was told, told to search for the Precious, and I did---but not for Him! The Precious was ours---mine! I did escape!"

Ron didn't quite know what to make of this. On the one hand, when Gollum used *I* instead of *we* to refer to himself, it seemed to be a sign that some of the creature's original Smeagol-nature was near the surface. On the other hand, even if Gollum himself believed that he had escaped on his own, the escape could well have been allowed to happen, and been perfectly well-known to Sauron and his minions. Gollum, after all, was a long way from infallible. And now he was whining; the mention of Aragorn's name had apparently offended him. Ron sighed.

"Isn't it guarded?" persisted Draco. Gollum whined, and acted indignant, and would not answer. Hermione looked up from her map.

"I think I've spotted what he's talking about. It's called Cirith Ungol---Spider Pass. I have no idea what that refers to. Still, it looks like that's the only way we can get into Mordor, at least according to my maps. I wish to the gods that Gandalf were here!"

Ron silently echoed Hermione's wish. If Gandalf had been there, he might have been able to spot Boromir's lust for the Ring before it got control of him, and either prevented him from trying to take it, or shown him why it was a bad idea. If Gandalf had been there, Ron thought he would have known a better way into Mordor, without having to trust a creature like Gollum. Looking at his friends---yes, even Draco Malfoy was now a firm friend---Ron could see that they shared his wish. Gandalf had been taken from them too soon, on a fool's errand into Khazad-Dum.

Ron looked longest at Harry. Harry showed the strain of their long travel and peril most, which made sense to Ron, since Harry was the one with the responsibility of being Ringbearer. Behind his glasses, Harry's green eyes glittered in his smudged, dirty face as he rubbed his chin absently, thinking. His hair was longer than Ron had ever seen it, and for a second, the thought of his mother's reaction at the way Harry now looked nearly forced a chuckle from him. Of course, his mother would have been aghast over all of them, as thin, drawn and dirty as they were. Imagining Draco Malfoy's embarrassment at being made a fuss of by his mother was another amusing thought, which gratified Ron; amusing thoughts were rare here on the borderlands of Mordor.

"Well, let's head on south and see what there is there. At seventh and last, we may even be able to mountaineer our way over these cliffs and get into Mordor that way," decided Harry. "Draco---do you think these mountains are climbable?"

The others deferred to Draco, who, they knew, had far more experience with such things. Draco looked up, consideringly. For several minutes, he studied the mountains, before shaking his head.

"Not here, I don't think. The climb itself would be do-able, with the right sort of equipment. Unfortunately, all we've got is ropes and duct tape. I'd want more serious stuff---

crampons, ice-axes, and the like. However, right here would be suicide, because these mountains are so heavily watched. Down by Cirith Ungol, if we can't get through on this passageway that our dear little friend here has so kindly told us of---" Draco paused to give Gollum a sardonic smile, which the creature misinterpreted as friendly and returned with a snaggle-toothed grin that made Ron slightly queasy---"we can at least look at the hills.

"So that settles that, then," said Harry. "We'll head south and at least have a look at this Cirith Ungol."

Suddenly, Ron felt a rush of fear, and looking at his friends, he could see that they felt the same way. Crouching on the ground under his elven-cloak, Ron peered up cautiously into the sky, looking for the source of his terror. Far, far up in the sky, he could see something flying, something that looked to be huge and very far away. As he watched, another thing like it joined the first one, and then another.

Harry yanked out the Invisibility Cloak, and spread it out as far as it would go. "Get in, get under here!" It was crowded under the Cloak, but Ron found it comforting to be so near his friends; the blast of fear that the Black Riders inspired was enough to strip him of much of his adolescent cool and turn him back into a little boy, huddling with his brothers against imaginary dementors in the closet, late at night.

Gollum couldn't figure out where they had gone; he squeaked and hissed, scampering about, sniffing the ground to see where they had gone, until the fear smote him too. Looking up, he gave one long wailing gasp, and fell flat on the ground, lying very still.

Finally, the winged shapes flew back into Mordor, and the fear subsided. When Ron and his friends came out from under the Invisibility Cloak, Gollum was startled at first, and then surprisingly happy. He capered about, all but wagging his tail. "Ach, sss, nice masster and pretty girl---and their friendses---are back, back they are! Where did nice masster go?" he asked. Harry merely grinned at him, rolling up the Cloak unobtrusively.

"We've got more tricks up our sleeves than you ever heard of, Smeagol," said Harry. "You might want to keep that in mind, if you ever start thinking about pulling a fast one. What you've seen is a tiny fraction of what we're able to do."

"He's right, you know," leered Draco. "Don't you think he'd be comfortable on his very own lily pad?" he asked Ron. "Or, maybe, with a pair of big long ears, hippity-hopping through the grass, with not a care in the world?"

Gollum looked from one of them to the other, and what he saw didn't much reassure him. He whimpered, and Hermione took pity on him. "Oh, leave him alone, you---you *men*! He hasn't done anything too bad to us---yet."

A blare of trumpets and horns from the Gate startled all of them, and they ducked instinctively, hands going for wands and sword-hilts. "What in bloody blue blazes was that?" gasped Ron, feeling his heart thundering in his chest. Being so close to the main gates of Mordor had told badly on his nerves, and he saw that his friends were in little better shape.

Draco cautiously got up to the top of the hill they were hiding behind, and took a look. "Soldiers, going into Mordor. Lots and lots and lots of soldiers. They look like they're from the southlands. Dark, wearing lots of red clothes. Some of them even have red face-paint on."

"Let me see," said Hermione. She wriggled up beside Draco, the hood of her elven-cloak pulled up to make her harder to see. She whistled, low and long. "You're right, Draco. Those symbols say that they're from far south of here, deep in the Harad. I can't tell more than that, though---the Rivendell library wasn't well-stocked with books on that part of Middle-Earth."

When Draco and Hermione came scrambling down, Ron crept up to take a look for himself. He could see why Hermione had been so impressed; he had never seen such an army in all his life. As far as the eye could see, a long, long line of dark-faced men in armor were marching into Mordor. Some of them were mounted, while the majority paced along on foot. Their spearpoints glittered over their heads, shining in the dim, watery light that filtered through the cloud cover. Their banners were black and red, with red predominating, as it did in their armor and clothing. Draco had been right, noted Ron---many of them did seem to have red face-paint. A line Ron had heard from a Muggle street preacher at Speaker's Corner in London once floated through his mind, and he murmured "As terrible as an army with banners."

Hermione squirmed up beside him. "Well, this tells us things we didn't know." At Ron's questioning look, she went on: "Firstly, there has to be food and water inside Mordor of a sort we can eat. Secondly, the Dark Lord's concentrating his forces for a big strike against somebody; my guess is Gondor. If he's worried about that, he won't be keeping a sharp eye on Mordor itself, if we can just get in without alerting the guards."

When they were all together again on the ground behind the hill, Hermione got out her map. "Let me see, we're here, and Cirith Ungol is here, so to get there, we'll have to go this far..." she was murmuring, lost in concentration. "It looks to be about thirty leagues to the cross-roads. That should take us three or four days; travelling by night."

"Yess, yess, travelling by night! When the Yellow Face is out of the sky, nice masster and pretty girl can travel, nice and safe!" Gollum crouched down. "Right now, we rests, rests, doesn't we? Musst store up strength for dreadful journeys!"

Chapter 14---On the Borderlands of Mordor

The five rested quietly for the rest of the day, waiting for night to fall so that they could move with greater safety. Toward evening, they ate sparingly, and drank from their water bottles. Gollum wouldn't touch the lembas, but accepted a drink of water. "Yess," he crooned, "good water where we're going, yess, good water, running in streams down to the great river. Smeagol will get food there too---he's very hungry." Ron watched him closely out of the corner of his eyes; there was something about that statement that made him nervous. I doubt he's any too good to find out what we would taste like, he thought. Several times, he had caught Gollum eyeing them speculatively, in a way that reminded Ron of a butcher sizing up an animal he intended to prepare.

When it was dark, they set out. Ron could see a red light burning in the tower high above the Gate, but otherwise there was no sign that anybody was there. He knew better, though, and did not feel comfortable as long as they were in sight of that ruddy glow. To him, it was all too much like the descriptions of Sauron he had heard, with his red-glowing Lidless Eye.

For a long time, they stumbled through the barren countryside, not daring to use the road, but keeping it always to their left as a guide. The stony, gravelly soil underneath their feet was sometimes quite treacherous, and more than once, Ron or one of his friends would have fallen but for their Earth-made boots with their gripping soles. Although Ron was very weary, as long as the red light was visible he did not want to stop and rest, and none of the others seemed to want to, either. On and on they pressed, until, as a grim, gray dawn was breaking, they rounded a mountain-shoulder and got out of sight of the red light.

As one, the four Hogwarts students threw themselves down on the ground for a breather. Ron lay on his back, looking up at the dark, starless sky; the cloud cover hid the stars and moon, and he missed them. Hermione took off her boot, muttering; she had somehow or other got a stone in her boot, and she had to turn the boot over and shake it several times before it came out and rattled on the ground. Harry kneaded the muscles of his calves and wiped sweat from his forehead, and Draco somehow looked offensively unruffled.

Gollum wasn't pleased. "Musst make hasste, make hasste! This place issn't safe!" he hissed, peering around with his lambent eyes. He came over to Hermione, and pawed at her arm as she pulled her boot back on. "Pretty girl---pretty girl musst make hasste! We've got mileses to go, yess, mileses to go!"

At last, urged on by Gollum, the four got to their feet and wearily followed along the path that he pointed out. Ron never remembered much about that march; he was unspeakably tired and concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other one. His body screamed for rest, for sleep, for ease, but he knew that his life depended on keeping up with the others.

Finally, when they were paused for a second, Ron managed to croak: "Harry---I hate to ask it--but could you put the Ennervate charm on me?" Harry looked at him in surprise. "I---I'm sorry, but I don't think I can go on much longer."

"The Ennervate charm? I'm an idiot!" Harry's green eyes went wide behind his battered spectacles. "Why didn't I think of that?" He whirled to confront Draco. "And the first person to answer that question with 'Because you are an idiot' is sucking around for a life on a lily pad---got me, Draco?"

Draco smiled a big cheery smile; Ron didn't trust it for a second. "Why, Harry, I'd never even think such a thing! Saying that you're an idiot? The gods forbid! Nooo, I'd never, ever say that you're an idiot! Nobody would ever call you an idiot!" His smile twisted into a snarky grin. "Moron, fool, chowderhead, and thickie---all those would apply, but not idiot." Hermione dissolved in a fit of giggles.

Despite himself, Harry grinned, and Ron found himself following suit. "In any case, Draco--- if I'm an idiot for not thinking of that myself, what are you for not thinking of it?"

Draco's smile broadened. "Where d'you think I got all those neat words? The second the Weasel here mentioned the Ennervate charm, I began wishing I had three legs, to run for a few miles on two while kicking myself with the third for not thinking of that myself." Hermione giggled even harder. Draco preened, straightening. "After all, one of the obligations of a person of my genius is to think of things for the---shall we say---less intellectually overdeveloped among us, isn't it?" Ron spoiled his moment by making a very rude noise. Gollum watched this byplay in utter incomprehension.

Harry turned to Hermione. "Would you do the honors, Hermione? I'm not sure I quite trust myself with spellcasting; this Ring's beginning to get to me. I remember how much more powerful my spell was, when I cast it on poor Boromir back there while wearing the thing."

Hermione stepped forward, her eyes alight with humor and curiosity. "I've never cast this one for real, you know," she said, just before pointing her wand at Ron and crying "Ennervate!" As the charm hit Ron, he felt a flood of well-being and energy roaring through him; his aches, pains and weariness disappeared, and he felt fit and full of mischief, ready to march another thirty miles before stopping.

"Wow! This is great!" Ron looked at his friends, noticing how weary and worn-down they looked. "Why don't you do this to yourselves? We've got a long way to go, as our Dear Little Fiend---er, Friend---keeps telling us, and every little bit of edge helps!"

"Because we hadn't thought of it, Weasel. Still, it's a good idea. 'Even a stopped clock's right---twice a day,'" commented Draco. He spread his arms. "Cast away, Hermione. I trust you to do this, you notice."

Hermione's expression went sober and serious. "I do notice, Draco---and thank you for your trust. I know it doesn't come easy to you." She leveled her wand. As she did so, Draco closed his eyes, as though she were about to perform the Killing Curse. Ron felt a stab of unwilling pity---what must it be like to be Draco Malfoy, nearly unable to trust even his closest friends? Not pleasant, came the answer from his mind.

Once they were all Ennervated, the miles went by much faster, and even Gollum couldn't complain about their slowness. If anything, their guide sometimes had trouble keeping up, but he never complained of that; he was delighted with their pace. "Yess, yess, masster and his friends and pretty girl makes good speed, yess, they do, don't they? Marches faster than Men on horses, yess, they does! Good, good, good!"

When the Ennervate charms finally wore off, the dawn was upon them. The cloud cover was thick and they couldn't see the sun actually rise, but the light level grew gradually as night gave way to a grey day. Ron could see that they had come a good distance; there were trees

and bushes growing, in stark contrast to the barren, bleak country right by the Gate.. The road stretched out to the south, with the ominous mountains off to their left. Even so, it was a welcome contrast to the blasted land they had left.

When the charms wore off, the four from Hogwarts fell almost like puppets whose strings had been cut. They had just enough strength to crawl in under the heather to stay out of sight. Just before weariness claimed him and he dropped off, Ron heard Hermione murmur: "We can't do that too often---it takes a toll on the body, like amphetamines. We'd burn ourselves out." Gollum curled up nearby, snoring a whistling snore.

When Ron awoke, as day wore down to a bleak evening, he felt rested and ready for the road, but mostly he felt hungry. He gave Gollum, who was still curled up asleep nearby, a resentful look; without him, Ron thought that the wanderers would have been well enough supplied to allow him something to break his fast. As it was...

"Wakey, wakey, all," he carolled. "Night's falling, and we'd best get a move on!" Draco snapped instantly awake, his hand flicking toward his wand instinctively before he saw who it was. Hermione yawned, rolled over, and sat up, running her fingers through her hair and smiling rather ruefully. Ron knew enough about women, what with having a sister, to know that she wished she didn't look so bedraggled.

Harry came awake, crying out. "The wheel! The wheel of fire!" Hermione went over to see what was wrong.

"Harry---what's wrong?" Harry looked at her unseeingly for a second, before realizing where he was. When he came back to himself, he shook his head like a dog trying to get dry, fished his glasses out of his pack, and put them on.

"Nothing, Hermione. Just a bad dream." Hermione gave him a look of mingled affection and exasperation. Standing over him, she folded her arms and managed to look very like what Ron thought Professor McGonagall might have, at her age.

"Don't give me that, Harry James Potter," she snapped. "Something's bothering you. Out with it---what's wrong?"

Harry looked at her, his eyes haunted. "More and more, lately, I've been dreaming the same dream. I'm standing---somewhere---naked, in front of a huge wheel of fire. It speaks to me---tells me that the world could be mine, I could have anything---or anyone---I want." He looked away, his face twisting in shame. "All I have to do is to accept the bargain the wheel offers, and I can be the most powerful person in Middle-Earth." He buried his face in his hands. "I won't do it! I won't do it! I won't!" Hermione patted his shoulder awkwardly.

"No need to explain further, Harry," said Draco quietly. "We can figure out what that means. We'd better get a move on. We've got miles to cover yet."

After a few more miles, the five travellers felt that it was safe to use the road. Not having to go across country, they made better time than they had, although Hermione said that using the Ennervate Charm again would be dangerous and could damage them. Ron thought the road was like Roman roads he had seen in Britain and Egypt; it was made of carved stones set in the ground over a prepared surface. As they travelled, it became more and more ruinous and neglected. They listened intently as they went along, ready to dive for cover at the first sound

of a hoof or a footstep other than their own, but nobody else seemed to be stirring in all that country.

At least the countryside itself was less unpleasant, thought Ron. Instead of the sulfur-reek of the areas near the Gate, the air became sweet, smelling of flowers and trees, and Ron breathed it deeply, relishing it. He was amused to see that Gollum didn't seem to like it, but that in itself recommended it to him; anything Gollum liked had to have something very, very wrong with it, as far as Ron was concerned.

The countryside seemed to also be doing his friends good, Ron noted. They seemed cheerier than they had in front of the Great Gates of Mordor, and smiled more frequently. As dawn broke, they got to the top of a ridge and looked around. The mountains on the borders of Mordor were some distance away, curving down to hide behind the horizon.

The country they were now in put Ron rather in mind of the West Country; rolling hills covered with green growth, and patches of woods scattered about. Many of the herbs and shrubs he saw were unfamiliar, and with a stab of homesickness, he thought of how interested Professor Sprout would have been, if she could have been there. For the first time, he realized just how far south they had come in their weary death-march; even though he knew it was still deep winter up around Rivendell, it felt like spring here. He breathed the sweet-smelling air, enjoying the smell of plants and flowers.

The four from Hogwarts left the road behind, heading downhill to a stream through a meadow thick with flowers. Gollum was obviously disgusted by the smell, which amused Ron hugely. Hermione stopped, picked a flower, and put it in her hair. Not to be outdone, Harry picked a bouquet of flowers and presented them to her with a flourish, to be rewarded with a giggle--- Ron wondered how long it had been since she had giggled like that, unafraid and amused by her friends' antics. After a bit, they came to the stream, and following it, they found a small pond.

At the pond, they washed themselves off and refilled their wizard canteens; and then by mutual unspoken consent looked for a place to rest up. Draco and Ron went off together in one direction, while Hermione and Harry went in another; Gollum stayed behind beside the pond, looking for fish.

"This place sure is pleasant, isn't it, Weasel?" asked Draco. He looked around, running a hand through his long silver-blond hair; Ron could see easily why the elves in Lorien and Rivendell had claimed him as kin. In the growing daylight, Draco Malfoy looked graceful and elegant---slim and deadly, with his elven-cloak billowing around him in the breeze. His hand was unconsciously set on the hilt of his short sword, and Ron thought that his Malfoy ancestors, back in the days of the Norman Conquest, would have been proud to claim him as one of their own.

"Sure is, Draco." Ron peered around. "It's hard to believe that we're so close to Mordor, isn't it?" Draco began to nod, and then his expression changed. He held up a hand, his eyes narrowing, and began to stalk off to one side, drawing his wand. He poked through some bushes, and beckoned Ron over.

When Ron found what Draco had sensed, he rather wished he hadn't. Near where they had been standing, there was a place where the Orcs had been camping. A large spot, hidden from view by bushes, had been burnt, and in the middle there was a pile of burnt bones and skulls.

Draco knelt by the pile, gently picking up a skull and examining it, like a Druid doing divination, as described in Professor Binns' dreary lectures. "No, Weasel, in answer to your question---it isn't hard to believe that we're so close to Mordor," said Draco quietly, putting the skull back where he had found it. "Let's not tell the others about this---it would upset Harry and Hermione, and Gollum would be up here looking for something to eat." Ron nodded agreement, not trusting himself to speak. He had noticed, and knew Draco had noticed, that the bones were human---and that many of them had been split lengthwise, to get the marrow out, and had been gnawed.

When the four were back together, they stretched out for a long nap; they knew that Gollum would not travel by day.. Harry was already asleep. Hermione went through her pack to see what food they had, and gave Ron and Draco a worried look as she gently took Harry's glasses off.

"We're low on food. Smeagol---or Gollum---has been a lifesaver sometimes, but he does eat. We have enough lembas for a while, but I want to save that for emergencies. The meat and dried fruit we were given in Lorien is almost gone. I don't know how long it'll take to get into Mordor, or how easy it will be to stay out of sight when we're there." She looked deeply worried, and Ron felt a stirring of unease---Hermione Granger was not one to hit the panic button before it was time to.

"Come to it---we do have a real wilderness survival expert with us. Why not call on him?" Draco turned toward Gollum, who was beginning to creep off. "Hey, Smeagol! Come here!"

"What does you want? What can poor Smeagol do for mighty lords?" Gollum came sidling over, looking to Ron like a dog that expected a kicking---not that Ron didn't long to give him one. Hermione gave Gollum a smile that Ron thought would have had Professors Snape and Binns blushing and stammering and digging their toes in the dirt. How, he wondered, did a sweet, innocent girl learn how to give off such smoldering promise?

"Would you like to do me a big favor, Smeagol?" said Hermione, her velvet cheek displaying no sign of the tongue Ron knew was firmly in it. "We're low on food, Smeagol, and you're so very good at finding food. Can you find us some fish, or some rabbits, or something like that? We can't eat everything you do, but some small animals like that would be such a nice treat." She leaned closer to him. "Ron and Draco aren't sure that you can do this---but I am. I've told them that you can find enough rabbits for us all to have a really good meal. Can you do this for me, Smeagol?"

Gollum nodded so hard that Ron wondered if his neck would snap, then turned and ducked off into the bushes. Draco gave Hermione a very strange look. "You know, Hermione---you would have fit right into Slytherin. I don't think any of my house mates could have done that any better."

"It's not a Slytherin thing, Drakie-wakie," purred Hermione, patting Draco's cheek mockingly. "It's a girl thing. Growing up learning how to wrap our daddies around our little fingers, it gets to be second nature." She gave Ron a mocking look. "Or are you going to tell me that Ginny can't do the same sort of thing to your dad when she wants her own way?"

Ron opened his mouth, thought about her question, and shut it again. He grinned reluctantly at Hermione, who smiled triumphantly. "You fight dirty, Hermione."

"I fight to win, Ron." With that, they settled down to wait for Gollum. After a bit, Draco and Hermione both drifted off to sleep, but Ron was more keyed-up and stayed awake for a while. Looking at his companions, he thought that Harry looked far more peaceful when he was asleep; it looked almost like a light was shining through him, and Ron thought he could see the man Harry was becoming. A stern, wise man, with lines of care and worry that he shouldn't have had---and, of course, that accursed scar, the legacy of Voldemort.

Draco had also changed for the better, as Ron had noticed earlier. He showed his putative elven ancestry more clearly when he was asleep; all he needed was upswept eyebrows and graceful pointed ears, and Ron thought that he could have taken his place among the warriors of Lorien with no trouble. In sleep, his expression was less guarded than when awake; Ron wondered what he would've been like, if his father had not been evil. He was now a friend Ron was proud to claim, even though he'd rather have undergone torture than say it aloud.

Turning to Hermione, a swell of affection nearly overwhelmed him. She was curled on her side, her head pillowed on her arm, her windburned, tanned face slack with sleep, her thick eyelashes curved down over her smooth cheeks. Ron fought with temptation, lost, and leaned over to kiss Hermione. He did so as gently as he could, not wanting to wake her; he knew she needed rest, as they all did. His lips just barely brushed her cheek, and he was startled when she smiled in her sleep. Lying down and closing his eyes, Ron smiled to himself.

When Gollum came back, he had four rabbits, and Ron's mouth began to water. Stewed rabbit was one of his mother's specialities, and he knew they had some spices in the supplies they had brought from Lothlorien. He poked Draco. "Hey, Draco, wake up! Gollum's brought us some dinner!"

Draco sat up, yawning. "Rabbits? Excellent! Get Hermione up, and I'll clean them while she gets a fire going." When Hermione awoke, she sent Gollum off for some more water, while she started a magical fire. By the time Gollum came back, the fire was going merrily, while Draco finished skinning and cleaning the rabbits. Gollum squealed with horror when he saw the fire. He nearly spilled the water, and only a quick grab by Ron saved it.

"Ach! Sss! The nasty red tongues! Fire is dangerous, yes it is, gollum! And it will bring enemies, many enemies!" Hermione gave him a slightly exasperated look.

"This kind of fire doesn't make smoke, Smeagol. Even if it does, we're willing to take the risk. We've got to cook these rabbits---we can't eat them raw."

Gollum capered with rage, hissing. "You'll spoil them---spoil them, yess, nice rabbits I caught for you! Why scorch them with nasty red tongues? They are young, they are tender, they are nice! Eat them, eat them!" He grabbed at the rabbits, only to stop as Draco raised his wand, staring at him icily.

"Hermione said it already, Smeagol. We can't eat raw rabbit---it'll make us sick. You gave us these rabbits, and we're going to eat them our way. Nobody's going to stop you from going and getting some more, and eating them raw, or however you want. Now leave us be!"

Gollum slunk away into the bush, hissing, and Hermione and Draco worked together, Draco doing most of the work, on putting together a rabbit stew. Hermione gave Draco an appraising look. "I wish I could cook as effortlessly as you do." She shook her head. "My mum and I used to cook, but I have to think out everything in advance. You just do it."

Draco smiled. "Stick with me, and you'll pick it up. You're already improving---I notice you're handling those spices just right. Too much is as bad as too little."

When the stew was ready, they roused Harry. By unspoken agreement, they had let him sleep as long as he could, since he was showing more and more strain. Hermione crept close to him, and roused him by murmuring in his ear: "Oh, Harry---you're late for Potions, and Professor Snape is taking ten points off Gryffindor for every minute you're late!"

Harry snapped awake, grabbing for his glasses. "Where are my books? Where is my bag---oh. Hermione, I'll get you for that!" Then he smelled the stew. "Yum! Fresh food for a change? How did you do that?"

"Hermione sweet-talked Gollum into catching us some rabbits, and we still had some spices and salt and stuff," said Draco. "I've got to say, she got around Gollum handily---she says it's easy after years of twisting her pater around her finger."

Hermione began ladling out portions of stew, and filled everybody's cups with water. "Personally, he gives me the shuddering creeps---I'd rather drink one of Professor Snape's potions without knowing what it was than let him near me. Still, he likes me, and that's got to count for something."

Ron heard a slight rustle in the bushes, and motioned Hermione to silence. Turning, he drew his wand and looked around. He couldn't see anything, but the back of his neck was prickling, and he sensed that they were being watched. "I'd suggest a change of subject, people. Something tells me that we're being listened to."

When they were done, Ron volunteered to go get some more water to clean out their pots and eating gear. Slipping down to the water, he heard some bird calls he didn't like---they didn't sound quite like real birdcalls. He filled his canteens fast and got back to his friends, only to feel his blood freeze as a quiet voice came from nearby.

"All right, whoever you are. Don't think about drawing that sword. My friends have you covered with their bows." Ron froze instinctively, his eyes flickering around at the undergrowth to see who had discovered him. Unobtrusively, he shook his arm, to get his wand loose from its arm-sheath, if it came to a fight. He didn't really fancy his chances with a sword---he had used one in Moria, but only as a last-ditch self-defensive measure. Spells were far more his weapon of choice.

Several green-clad men, with their faces hidden behind green veils, rose out of the bushes. Two of them had bows trained on him and bent to the ear. "Whatever you are, you're not an orc," one of the men in green said. "And you're no elf---elves are beautiful to see, or so it is said."

"Meaning I'm not," said Ron, carefully working his wand down into his hand and trusting to its non-threatening appearance to fool these men, if he had to. He didn't think they were evil, but he knew perfectly well that this area had been taken by the Enemy some time before, and that many of Sauron's servants were men, not orcs. "Now, can you tell me what you think you're about, threatening me with those bows? Are you trying to rob me?"

"No, we are not robbers." The foremost of the men stepped forward. "We smelled food cooking, and knew that somebody had to be cooking it, so we set out to see who it was---and I think we now know. How is it that a mere boy is wandering in Ithilien, where none but the servants of the Dark Tower, or of the White, may be found?"

Ron tightened his lips at being dismissed as a mere child. Underestimate me, please, he thought, keep on underestimating me. "I'm a peaceful traveller. I'm no servant of the Dark Tower, or of anybody else. Why don't you go on about your business and leave me in peace?"

"Because this is our business." The foremost green man seemed to be the spokesman. "I am Faramir, Captain of Gondor. Where are the rest of your company?"

"The rest of my company?" asked Ron, striving to look innocent. His wand was loose, and he let it gently fall into his hand, keeping it down by his side and hoping that they wouldn't notice it or think it was the threat it was. Faramir lowered his veil, revealing a grim, noble face very like Boromir's.

"Yes. The rest of your company. We've been tracking you for a while; we saw your footprints. From those, we can tell there are five of you---four wearing those odd boots with the patterned soles, and one barefoot."

"Well, if you want to meet my friends, far be it from me to stop you," purred Ron, smiling in a way that would have made anybody from Hogwarts think uneasily of his brothers Fred and George and their taste for pranks. "Let me lead you to them. We aren't hostile." As they relaxed slightly, he whipped up his wand. "Expelliarmus!" he shouted, and the archers' bows and arrows flew from their hands. Faramir gasped, and grabbed for his sword, as did his friends.

"Petrificus Totalus!" The Gondorians toppled, as stiff as so many boards. Ron leaned over them, making sure that they were all right. "You'll be fine---I'll go get my friends. That was partly for calling me a 'mere boy'---Muggles."

Draco and Hermione were startled to see Ron burst in among them. "Men---from Gondor. They jumped me down below, but I got the drop on them with my wand and Petrified them. They wanted to see you."

"Underestimated you, did they, Weasel?" drawled Draco, getting to his feet with his usual easy grace. "Stupid, stupid thing to do. Still and all, noblesse oblige and all that---I suppose we'd better go and haul their hot-chestnuts out of the fire they've thrown them into."

When Ron brought Harry, Hermione and Draco back to where he had left the Gondorians, a quick Finite Incantatem restored them. Angry and resentful-looking, the men of Gondor sat on the ground and looked up at their captors.

"How do you do? My name is Harry Potter, and these are my friends Hermione Granger," Hermione nodded, "Draco Malfoy, and Ronald Weasley. You've met Ron already, I think. He says you ambushed him."

"We stopped him and asked what he was about, wandering around in Ithilien when none but the servants of Mordor or Gondor go here." Faramir rubbed his shoulder where he had landed

on it awkwardly when Ron's Petrification spell had struck him. "We mistook your friend for a lost child. Apparently we were wrong. What are you?"

"We are mages from another world," said Hermione. "We are students of magic at a great school of wizardry, and were called to this world to complete a dangerous task. We are going to Mordor, but we are not friends of the Dark Lord. Gandalf the Grey, if he were here, would vouch for us. Unfortunately, he's dead."

"Gandalf? Who is Gandalf?" Faramir looked puzzled. "You cannot mean the Grey Pilgrim, Mithrandir---or can you? 'Many are my names in many lands,' he used to say, 'Mithrandir among the elves, Tharkun to the dwarves, Olorin I was in my youth in the West that is forgotten, in the South, Incanus, in the North Gandalf, to the East I go not.'" Faramir gave them a searching look. "Is that the one to whom you refer?"

"Yes. He was our guide and our friend. Unfortunately, he was lost in Moria." At this, the Gondorians paled and gasped. Faramir looked slightly dazed at the news.

"Mithrandir was killed?" He shook his head. "An evil fate must have pursued your quest. Truly, it is difficult to believe that one such as he could have died, and so much lore could have gone out of the world. Who else went with you on this journey?"

"Other than ourselves, we had Gimli, a Dwarf of the Lonely Mountain, and Legolas Greenleaf, an Elf of Mirkwood. Then there were Aragorn son of Arathorn, and Boromir, from Minas Tirith. That's in Gondor, I think," said Hermione. At her statement, the Gondorians cried out.

"Boromir! The son of the Lord Denethor?" asked Faramir eagerly. "This is great news indeed--if it is true! Know that Boromir was my brother, our captain, and High Warden of the White Tower---we miss him sorely! Tell your tale quickly, for the sun is rising!"

Hermione cocked her head on one side. "Do you know the rhyme that goes:

'Seek for the Sword that was Broken/In Imladris it dwells?' I learned that in Rivendell," she added over her shoulder to Ron, Harry and Draco. "Boromir taught it to me."

"Yes, I do! It's proof of your truth that you know them. Are you the 'halflings' the rhyme spoke of?" Hermione quirked a smile, one that Ron seldom saw any more. It flashed across her face in a second, gone almost before you knew it was there.

"No, we aren't. They were dragged into our world by an evil wizard who wanted something they had. We were sent to complete their task by a great wizard of our own world---he was in contact with Gandalf, or Mithrandir. It was predicted that we would do this."

"Indeed." Faramir stretched, watching the Hogwarts students carefully. "We seem to be on the same side. If you are truly enemies of the Dark Lord of Mordor, then let us go. There's trouble afoot, and you wouldn't have gotten far, whether you had met us or not. There's going to be fighting today. The Men of Umbar and the South are sending reinforcements to Mordor, and we're going to give them a little surprise."

Chapter 15---The Battle With the Southrons

Drawing his friends aside, Harry muttered: "I think that we may have stumbled into something we weren't meant to. If Gandalf were only here, he'd be able to sort this situation out quickly. What do you think we should do?"

Hermione tilted her head to one side, considering Faramir as though he were some new problem in a book. "He sounds like he's telling the truth---his accent's a lot like Boromir's, and I can see the family resemblance."

Draco snickered. "Are you sure that's *all* you see, Hermione?" Hermione swatted at him playfully as Draco continued: "I also think he's trustworthy. How he plans to attack a whole column of enemy soldiers with so few men of his own is beyond me, but he may have a few tricks up his sleeve." He grinned at Ron. "After all, Weasel, *you* did!"

"So I did." Ron rubbed his chin. He, himself, was of two minds. On the one hand, he could see that Faramir was kin to Boromir, and that argued for him actually being a friend. On the other hand, Ron could remember Boromir's treason all too clearly. The terror of the fight with a man he had counted as a friend and comrade had left its own mark.

After a few minutes' visible wrestling with his own fears, Harry came to a decision. Raising his wand, he pointed it at the Gondorians, and released them with a quick "*Finite Incantatem*." Faramir stood up, rubbing himself. "I'm going to take you at your word, Lord Faramir. Boromir was a friend of mine, up till we parted company, and if you're his brother, I think I can trust you."

Faramir looked down at Harry, smiling rather ruefully. "In any case, I'd be mad to try conclusions with you. Wizards and witches are rare; the only one I ever met was Mithrandir, and I would no more have tried to challenge him than I would have challenged Morgoth, the Black Enemy." Ron did not reveal that the name of Morgoth meant nothing to him, but he made a mental note to ask Hermione as soon as they could.

Faramir turned, beckoning. "In any case, we've got an ambush to set. Come and meet my men!" The other Gondorians went along after him, single-file and noiselessly, and after them came the four from Hogwarts; not as silently as the Gondorians, but very quietly.

As they passed through the woods, they began to accrete more and more green-clad Gondorian warriors. Ron was suddenly very glad that he hadn't tried to seriously harm Faramir; although he could have done it easily enough, he hadn't known that they were so outnumbered, and most of the Gondorians carried big bows and looked as though they knew how to use them. These weren't the fairly-inept orcs that Harry and his friends were now used to facing.

Walking just ahead of Ron, Hermione murmured: "I'd love to get my hands on one of those bows. I wonder if I could pull one?"

Ron looked at her, slightly startled. "I didn't know you were an archer, Hermione."

Hermione nodded emphatically. "I was one of the best girls at archery in my old school, before I went to Hogwarts. When I go home over the summer, I still keep up. If you'd

ever *visited* me at home, Ron---" an edge of impatience came into her voice for a second---
"you'd have seen my prizes and trophies."

"Well, I wish you had brought your bow---or had picked one up in Rivendell or Lorien," grumbled Ron. Hermione looked slightly abashed.

"I considered it at Rivendell. However, I didn't know whether they'd just *give* me one, and I didn't know how to ask without possibly giving offense. In Lorien, you may remember, I had other things on my mind." Hermione brushed a lock of hair back out of her face irritably. "I didn't have my bow at Hogwarts---as far as I've ever known, the only sport they do there is Quidditch."

* * * * *

By the time they got to where they were going, a place where the main road cut through a deep, forested valley, Ron was glad of a chance to sit down and rest for a few minutes. Although he and his companions were hardened to marching by now, the Gondorians set a pace that was faster than they were used to.

Faramir sat down beside them, looking obnoxiously fresh and unruffled. "You said that Boromir was your friend up until you parted ways with him. Where was that?" He looked at Harry anxiously. "I have reasons for wanting to know."

"That was up above the Rauros Falls," supplied Hermione. "We last saw him there." She gave Faramir a searching look. "Is he all right?"

At her question, a shadow of sorrow passed across Faramir's face. "No. He's dead. I heard his horn blowing, some days off, far and faint. The horn itself was recovered, cut in two pieces, floating in the Anduin River. Our father Denethor now has the pieces."

"That doesn't mean that he's dead, Lord Faramir," pointed out Hermione, relentlessly logical. Faramir shook his head, covering his face with his hands.

"I saw him. He was dead---lying in a strange boat floating down the River. All his gear was there, save his sword and horn, and he also had a strange cloak and belt, like the ones you have." He went on, in a choked voice: "I called out to him: 'Boromir! Where is thy horn? Whither goest thou? O Boromir!' But there was no answer, and he floated on past." His face worked as he struggled with remembered grief. Ron felt a stab of pity for him, and suppressed a shudder at the thought of how he would have felt, seeing one of his own brothers---even Percy---lying dead. *And he only has the one brother*, thought Ron, with a rush of compassion for Faramir's sorrow.

"Yes, that would be Boromir," said Harry quietly. "The cloak and belt he got in Lorien, from the Lady of the Wood herself."

"The Lady of the Wood?" Alarm and fear chased each other across Faramir's face. "How did he happen to go into the wood of Laurelindorenan? Was the boat from there? No mortal boat could have traversed the rapids from where you say you left him. The Lady who dies not has many strange powers, and very few things go into that land and come out unchanged." At this, he looked up, nonplused, as Ron, Harry and Draco grinned.

"You never said a truer word, Lord Faramir," said Draco. Hermione giggled. Faramir looked very puzzled, but visibly decided to let the question lie.

Below them, on the road, they heard horn-calls, of the sort that Ron had heard before, outside the Great Gates of Mordor. "The Southrons!" snapped Faramir. "Lie here, still and quiet, while we deal with them---the filth! They think the mere shadow of their master's mountains will protect them, do they? They shall be surprised!"

At Harry's nod, the four from Hogwarts took cover under some brush, where they could see the road below them. Looking around, Ron could see no sign of the waiting ambush; the men of Gondor were very good at concealing themselves. The horn-calls sounded again, and Ron could hear the tramp of many marching feet.

Up the road came the men of the Southlands, ahorse and afoot, brilliantly garbed in gold and red. Ron thought, rather irrelevantly, that they were wearing Gryffindor colors, and wondered what Professor McGonagall would have said. Each company of them marched behind a banner borne proudly before them, and they sounded their horns every so often. Ron wondered if the horn-calls meant anything in particular, and if the Gondorians could tell him what they meant. *I bet even Hermione doesn't know that*, he thought, wondering when the Gondorians would make their move, or if this was too large a group of enemy soldiers for them to deal with.

A loud whistle sounded, and arrows began arcing through the air, landing among the surprised Southrons. Ron knew little of warfare as Muggles practiced it, but the shouts of horror that came to his ears told him that the Gondorians had achieved the surprise they had sought. At first, the men of Gondor seemed to have things very much their own way, with their arrows throwing the Southron marching formations into dismay. Horses reared and plunged, maddened by the pain of the arrows that knifed out of nowhere to stick in their vulnerable flanks and hindquarters, defying their riders' attempts to bring them under control. Men milled around, unable to fight back against foes they could not see.

On the one hand, Ron was pleased to see that this formation of Southrons would not be swelling the armies of the Dark Lord. On the other, he could not but feel for them, in their panic, as they were lashed by the Gondorians' archery. *After all*, he thought to himself, *how do I know whether or not they wanted to come? For all I know, they would have been perfectly happy to stay where they were, at their homes*. Shouts and screams drifted up to his ears, and he shuddered. The distance was a little too great for him to see the details of the ambush, and for that he was thankful.

Down on the road, some of the Southrons' officers seemed to have regained control of their men. As Ron watched, they went into a different formation, and charged off the road, having apparently located where the main body of the Gondorians was hidden. Meanwhile, the other Southrons had brought up something that made Ron gasp and stare. Several war-elephants, or what seemed to be elephants, only much larger, armored and bearing Southron warriors in fortified howdahs on their backs, came up the road, and turned into the bush toward where Ron knew the Gondorians were waiting.

"Ware! Ware! They have *mumakil!* May the Valar turn them aside!" Keeping their formation, the war-elephants led the Southrons through the Gondorians' positions, driving them back in terror. Soon the elephants were getting very close to where the Hogwarts

students were hidden. Behind them, the Southrons roared a battle-cry, eager to avenge the loss of their fallen comrades.

"We'd better take a hand here," said Harry quietly. "I don't know if our friend Faramir had anticipated this, but it looks like this was more than he bargained for." White-faced, Hermione and Draco nodded their agreement, and Ron found himself nodding, for all that he wanted nothing more than to hug the earth and hope the Southrons missed him. He was terrified at the thought of facing the Southrons and their elephants, but even more fearful of letting his friends down---or of being seen as a coward by them.

At Harry's signal, the four stood up, wands ready. The Southrons shouted and let loose a hail of arrows, which Hermione Summoned and then Repelled, sending them back to land among their senders. Draco screamed "*Serpensortia Maxima!*" and a huge snake appeared, much bigger than the one he had summoned at the only meeting of Gilderoy Lockhart's abortive Duelling Club; rearing up, it regarded the nearest war-elephant with cold impassive eyes, before lunging forward and grabbing the mahout from his perch on the beast's neck. Startled, the elephant panicked, turning and trumpeting as it fled through the oncoming Southrons, sending them running in terror to avoid being trampled.

Ron concentrated on disarming the Southrons, pointing his wand at them and chanting "*Expelliarmus!*" to send their weapons flying from their hands. Finding themselves defenseless, the Southrons he Disarmed turned and fled as well, knowing that weaponlessness on a battlefield was a death sentence. Seeing the Hogwarts students' magic, the Gondorians took heart, shouting "Gondor! Gondor! Gondor!" and feathering the fleeing Southrons with arrow-shafts.

Not all the Southrons were running, though, and neither were their elephants. Draco's huge serpent was in trouble; two of the elephants were manouvering to bring their riders' weapons to bear on it, and it was unable to figure out which was the greater danger. As Ron watched, the Southrons in the elephants' howdahs began to pepper the great snake with arrows, most of which bounced off its scales.

"*Expelliarmus!*" cried Hermione, pointing her wand at the Southrons mounted on the elephants, and their bows flew from their hands. Relieved of the danger of the arrows, Draco's snake reared back, opened its jaws, and snapped up another Southron, hauling him into the air, screaming. The other Southrons turned their beasts toward where the Hogwarts students were waiting, and urged them forward, eager to come to grips with their spell-wielding tormentors.

As the elephants got closer, Ron could feel the earth itself shaking under their tread. The pachyderms raised their trunks, trumpeting defiance, as their riders shouted, waving swords and axes. Closer, and yet closer, they came. Behind them, the Southron soldiers charged up, ignoring the Gondorian arrows that rained down on them,

Harry began shouting in a strange, hissing language that Ron suddenly remembered him using before, in Gilderoy Lockhart's duelling club and when they were faced with the problem of how to get into the Chamber of Secrets. Draco's snake apparently heard him, since it nodded its head, threw the dead Southron aside with a flick of its neck, and squirmed after the elephants. When it caught up to the rearmost elephant, it raised its head and sank its fangs into the great beast's leg. The elephant trumpeted yet again, its flesh seeming to sag as the

serpent's venom entered its bloodstream. It slowed down, despite its mahout's frantic efforts to urge it back to speed.

Hermione pointed her wand at the nearest elephant and shrieked "*Tarantallegra!*" At this, the elephant began to do a clumsy dance, shaking the soldiers on its back about as its feet moved in a shuffling parody of a human quickstep. This still left one, whose approach was beginning to seriously worry Ron. On and on it came, looking more and more like the inexorable approach of doom.

Harry Potter raised his wand and pointed it at the remaining elephant. "*Reducto!*" A hole appeared in the elephant's head, big enough, Ron thought, for him to put his whole head into. Dead on its feet, the last elephant slumped, spilling its riders onto the ground as its legs collapsed under it. Blood fountained from the hole and soaked the ground, steaming as it hit the cooler outside air.

At this, the heart seemed to go out of the remaining Southron soldiers. They turned and fled, abandoning their weapons and stripping off their armor to flee the faster. When the riders of the elephant that Hermione had hexed managed to get their animal under control, it was clear that they, too, had had enough of the fight. They turned the beast, which seemed extremely glad to go itself, and headed back down the road to their distant homeland.

Faramir came up to the four, his eyes wide with admiration. "Mithrandir sent you?" he asked, his voice low and filled with awe. "He chose very well! I would not have believed what I saw, had I not seen it!"

Ron managed to smile, having forced his heart back down out of his throat. "We're not even fully-trained wizards, either. Real wizards and witches from our world would be able to do much, much more." At this, Faramir gave them an even more awed look.

"I hate to ask even more of you---but could you help us deal with our wounded comrades?" Cries and moans of pain could be heard, as the Gondorians looked for their comrades and put their wounded enemies out of their misery. Faramir noticed the look of distaste that crossed Hermione's face when she noticed. "We do not do that out of cruelty, but necessity---we can't take prisoners." Hermione nodded, her face a grim mask. She had accepted that it was necessary, but Ron knew that it went against her deepest beliefs. And his, he decided.

Quite a few of the Gondorians were wounded, and there was a great deal of work to do. Some of the Gondorians themselves were good at battlefield first aid, and the Hogwarts students pitched in, using their magic to make things easier. With Stunning Spells to provide a sort of anesthesia, it was much easier to sew up sword cuts and extract arrows. For things that had gotten stuck in wounds, the Summoning Charm worked miracles. Harry smiled in triumph as he Summoned an arrowhead out of a wound. Under the direction of Draco Malfoy, some of the Gondorians boiled water to sterilize things in; Ron thought that Madam Pomfrey would have been proud of them

Ron felt rather queasy, but much less than he would have done before he came to Arda. *This place is changing all of us*, he thought once, when he was able to pause for a second. He looked at Hermione, her sleeves rolled back and her hands soaked with blood up to her elbows, speaking soothingly to a horribly wounded Gondorian while Ron held him in place and Harry carefully Summoned the pieces of an arrow that had gone into the man's side and

broken. Before this journey, he had merely thought she was pretty and pleasant and a reliable friend. Now, he saw a truly great sorceress, despite grime and circles under her eyes. He wondered what she'd be like when---if---she got to be as old as Professor McGonagall.

Draco Malfoy worked steadily, his face a set, grim mask, over the most severely wounded Gondorians. One of the patients they brought to him had had his arm shattered by a war-elephant, and he shook his head slightly. "Bring me my pack," he said, "I've some potions in there that might help out on this."

When Ron handed Draco his pack, Draco rooted around in it until he came up with a brown bottle labeled "*Skele-Gro*." He unstopped the bottle, and sniffed it, nodding his head in satisfaction. "Good," he muttered, "the stuff hasn't gone off yet. This potion wants careful keeping, and I wasn't sure about bringing it."

Under Draco's direction, Ron and Faramir splinted the man's arm, making sure that the shattered bits of bone inside his arm were properly aligned. "Without that Stunning Spell, we'd never be able to do this," murmured Draco. "The pain would be too much for this poor chap. It could be worse, though."

"How could it be worse?" asked Faramir. He was obviously very impressed with the Hogwarts students' skills; he had watched them Summon arrowheads from the bodies of Gondorian soldiers with wide eyes.

"This man could have sustained a compound fracture---with bone sticking through his skin," Draco explained. "As it is, I think that between this splint and this dose of *Skele-Gro*," he dropped a few drops from his precious bottle into the man's mouth, and then massaged his throat to make sure that he got the drops down, "he's got a decentish chance of keeping that arm, and even using it again."

Finally, the wounded were all seen to. The Gondorians, their wounded borne upon litters, led the four Hogwarts students off into the woods, away from the place of slaughter. Hermione was marching alongside Ron. "I feel sick," she murmured to Ron, making sure that none of the Gondorians could hear her. "I was all keyed-up during the fighting, but when we had to go in and succor those wounded soldiers, it was all I could do to keep from throwing up." She covered her face. "Not to mention what happened to those poor wounded Southrons."

"Don't feel bad about yourself," said Draco, who was close enough to hear her. "Not feeling anything about that sort of thing's a really bad sign, as I ought to know." He gave them a slightly haunted grin; for a second the old Draco Malfoy could be seen, leering out at them. "My dad and his chums could have done everything we've done, and thought nothing of it."

"Even healing afterward?" asked Hermione.

"Even that, Hermione." Draco looked very grim. "Face it---a lot of the Death Eaters' victims were not easy targets, and it was common for Death Eaters to be wounded. Can you imagine one of them going to St. Mungo's after an attack, not knowing if the Aurors had been warned to be on the lookout for someone with his particular injuries?"

"Was that all the Death Eaters used healing magic for, Draco?" asked Harry quietly. Draco looked very shamefaced, and would not meet Harry's gaze.

"No. Quite often they would use it to heal up people they'd tortured, to make it possible to torture them again." He raised his eyes, and gave his friends a haunted look. "I saw things---I saw things in that house---things you can't begin to imagine. Sometimes they'd catch Muggles, and just torment them for sport. They'd place bets on how long a Muggle would last, and which spell would be the one to do him most injury." Hermione looked sick, and Harry went pale under his tan. He gestured them to silence as Faramir came up.

"Would you do us the honor of guesting with us tonight? We have a secret base near here, and we'd be delighted to have you as our guests. We're comrades-in-arms, after all." He looked at them eagerly; Ron was reminded of Colin Creevey looking at Harry Potter.

"Let us confer on this---privately," said Harry. Gathering his companions with a gesture, he led them off to one side. "Well? What do you think? Should we trust him that far?" he asked in a low tone.

Draco looked very thoughtful. "I don't know for sure, myself. He seems to be all right, and he doesn't know about---your burden. Still, he could be up to something, and I haven't forgotten Boromir." Draco rubbed the side of his neck; an arrow had grazed him there, leaving a nasty scratch. "He also doesn't seem to have too good an opinion of the Lady of Lorien, and we know she's on our side."

"Keep in mind, everybody, that not everybody on our side likes each other; Boromir didn't trust the Lady until he met her, either. When I was in Rivendell, I read that the Galadrim don't leave their wood much, which makes rumors about them easy to start and hard to stop," murmured Hermione. "While Gondor and Lorien are both enemies of Sauron, that doesn't mean they understand or like each other much. Rather like Professor Snape and your godfather, Harry."

"Your godfather? You don't have a godfather---do you, Harry?" asked Draco.

"It's quite a long story, Draco. I say we go with Faramir for now. I don't think he'd dare try anything too stupid, and we haven't shown him all we can do, have we?" opined Ron. "I'd rather fancy a night spent under cover. This sleeping in the open is not much fun."

"Then we trust Faramir---for now. If nothing else, I think he's too much in awe of what we can do to try anything underhanded---and, as you say, he doesn't know about It." Having made his decision, Harry turned to Faramir, who was waiting patiently to hear what they would say. "We'll go with you, Lord Faramir. As you say, we're comrades-in-arms."

As they walked along, Faramir stayed with them; he seemed to be full of questions about them. At first, he was very interested in the world they had come from. Before Ron quite knew it, he found himself telling Faramir about his family. "There's seven of us children---I'm next-to-youngest, just above Virginia, who's the youngest and the only girl. Virginia---Ginny, as we call her---is a year or so younger than I am, and goes to the same school we do."

"What fun you must have!" exclaimed Faramir. "Boromir is---was---my only brother. Now I'm the only one---the only son our father has left." His face twisted with grief; Ron

thought again about Faramir's loss, and imagined how he'd feel, being the only Weasley child left. Imagining the Burrow without Fred and George making everybody laugh with their endless antics, or Percy with his pompous exterior and kindly, loyal heart, or Charlie or Bill dropping in for a visit, ever again---not to mention no more Ginny---filled him with horror. He could just see his parents, sitting in their lonely, empty house, their faces haunted, listening to the silence. The thought of their pain made him shudder. He felt a stab of guilt at having put himself into such a dangerous situation.

To take his mind off that thought, Ron told Faramir about Bill, Charlie and Percy and described some of the stunts Fred and George had pulled off. Faramir laughed and laughed at the description of the Ton-Tongue Toffee Incident, and admitted that he knew a few people that could have done with the twins' acquaintance. He told them an improbable story about his own younger years, when he and Boromir and several of their young friends had abstracted the favorite charger of a pompous nobleman, and led it to the topmost floor of that nobleman's mansion. "Getting him down again---that was the tricky part!" Faramir grinned, reminiscently. Ron made a mental note to tell Fred and George that story sometime. Or, on second thought, not to---it wasn't as though they needed more ideas.

Draco told a tale, which Ron noticed had been edited, of life at Malfoy Manor. "I was the only child of our house; it was a large, ancient mansion, with endless nooks and crannies. I was mainly raised by servants, although my mother and I were as close as we were allowed to be. My father was mainly interested in advancing our family's interests, and everything else had to take second place to that. He mainly spoke to me if I hadn't come up to his expectations."

Faramir looked long and searchingly at Draco, who returned his gaze unafraid. "Your life sounds like those of many noble scions in Minas Tirith. They seldom see their fathers, and few of them have many sibs." A shadow passed over his face. "Some of them envied me, that I had Boromir." With a slight shudder, he visibly controlled his sorrow over his brother, and turned to Harry. "You've been very quiet. Have you no stories of your home?"

Ron gave Faramir a searching look. In the Gondorian's face, he only saw friendliness and curiosity; a curiosity that he had to admit was not unjustified. "I lived with my aunt---my mother's sister, my Aunt Petunia---and her husband, my Uncle Vernon Dursley, and their son, Dudley, my first cousin. My parents died when I was a year old." He smiled rather grimly. "To put it bluntly, Lord Faramir, it wasn't a good life. My uncle and aunt treated me as an unwanted guest, while spoiling their son. I don't have good memories of my time at their home, and I'd just as soon not discuss it."

Hermione jumped in: "My parents are both dentists---healers who specialize in broken or infected teeth. We live in the outskirts of London, the capital of our home kingdom, and I'm their only child. Finding out that I was able to do magic was quite a surprise; there's no other magical people in our family. Instead of Roedean---a school my parents had planned to send me to---I got sent to Hogwarts, where we all met."

"So not everybody in your world can do magic?" asked Faramir. The four nodded in unison.

"My uncle and aunt not only can't do it---my parents both could---but they hated it and anything to do with it," explained Harry, the evening sunlight flashing off his glasses as he turned his head. "Draco and Ron both came from families where everybody's been magical

for a long way back. Hermione, as she says, didn't know about magic until she was notified that she had been accepted at our school."

As they marched along among the Gondorians, up into the hills, Ron wished that they could have an opportunity to talk in private. He wondered what the men of Gondor knew of the One Ring, and how they would react if they knew that Harry bore it. He remembered Boromir's half-witted idea of using it and its power against the Dark Lord all too well, and didn't fancy fighting off another attempt to steal the Ring, particularly since they were so far outnumbered.

Leaving the subject of their homes, Faramir began another line of questioning, one that sent a chill down Ron's spine. "The rhyme you quoted---the one about 'Seek for the Sword that is Broken,'---that rhyme mentions Isildur's Bane. What do you know about it?"

"Isildur's Bane?" answered Draco; the others had fallen silent. "Isildur died---how long ago was it?" He cocked his head on one side, pondering. "Near to a thousand years or more. And Isildur, or so I have heard, died of an orc-arrow. Perhaps an orcish archer is what is mentioned."

"Perhaps." Faramir looked at them skeptically. "But orc-arrows and orcish archers there are in plenty---well I know it! Isildur's Bane would have to be something else entirely---something less common." He gave them a searching look.

Hermione, behind Faramir's back, looked very cunning for a second, before piping up: "But, Lord Faramir, I have read that orcs, like elves, do not die naturally as men do. Instead, they live until they are killed." She sounded puzzled, and went on: "So isn't it possible, at least, that the archer that killed Isildur is still alive today, somewhere?"

Ron and Draco exchanged glances; Draco looked slightly gobsmacked, and mouthed soundlessly *I never would have known she was capable of that!* Ron nodded, feeling new respect for Hermione. He was so used to thinking of her as bookish and rather unworldly, he tended to forget that she had a streak of real deviousness. He shook his head, angry at himself--hadn't Hermione done most of the work, including sneaking into Professor Snape's office and purloining the things they couldn't get out of the students' stores, when they were brewing their illicit Polyjuice Potion? *I'm just glad she's on my side!* thought Ron.

"Yes, it is true---orcs do live a long time, or would, if they did not hate each other as fiercely as they do everybody else," answered Faramir. "I suppose it could happen; an orc could conceivably have lived so long, but it is most unlikely. Orcs breed fast, and if they did not kill each other so readily, they would have overrun Middle-earth long ago through sheer force of numbers."

He gave the Hogwarts students a long, searching look. "Still, I think there is more to this story than you are telling me. What concerned Boromir concerns me, and I do not think that he would be particularly excited at the sight of an orcish archer." Harry gave him back the same sort of blank look Ron had seen him use often before, when Professor Snape would accuse him of some venial wrongdoing.

By this time, the Gondorians had brought them to a place where the woods thinned out, and they could see down and a long way away. In the distance, Ron could make out a

gleam of sunlight on the waters of the great Anduin, as it rolled on toward the sea. Faramir gave them an apologetic look.

"I have already violated my orders, by not killing or capturing you. To bring you to where we're going, I must ask that you allow me to blindfold you. We will lead you carefully, and not let harm come to you, but even one of the men of Rohan, though they are our allies, would be allowed to walk this path un-blindfolded."

"Sounds reasonable," said Draco. He quirked a sardonic smile. "You and the elves of Lorien have that much in common---they wanted to blindfold us before they let us into the heart of the Golden Wood." Some of the Gondorians looked nonplused at being compared to and equated with the elves of Lorien.

Muttering apologies, the Gondorians blindfolded the Hogwarts students; Harry went first, then Draco, and Ron. Hermione was last, and Ron heard her say, in tones of mingled impatience and understanding: "I forgive everything in advance, Mablung---is your name Mablung? Just get on with it; I'm not so fragile that the first touch will shatter me." Once the blindfolds were in place, the Gondorians raised the hoods of the Hogwarts students' cloaks and pulled them over their faces. Then, Ron felt his hand being gently placed on a shoulder, and they set off again, slowly and carefully.

It seemed to Ron that they were going down an incline. To his right, he thought he could hear water. Sometimes it was louder than the other times, but it was always there. After a bit, he thought that they were passing through a narrow place; at least, if he deviated from the straight path even by a little, his shoulders brushed what felt like smooth stone walls. The Gondorians guided him along with a firm hand on his shoulder and his own hand on the shoulder of the Gondorian ahead of him.

Suddenly, he felt himself lifted into the air, and carried forward for a little way, and set on his feet again. Behind him, he heard a startled squeak and recognized it as Hermione. Before he could think, his hand snaked for his wand. "No!" said the Gondorian behind him. "She's come to no harm."

"He's telling the truth," came Hermione's voice. "I was just startled a little, that's all." She chuckled. "Whichever of you moved to defend me, though---thanks. That was very gallant of you."

"All three of them did." That voice sounded like Mablung. "I must say, their reaction was remarkably swift." Ron smiled slightly behind his blindfold. Shared hardship and shared peril had forged a team from the disparate foursome that had set out from Hogwarts. He knew that if he, or Harry---or Draco---had been the one to be audibly startled, Hermione would have gone for her wand as quickly as he had. *All for one and one for all*, he thought, remembering a Muggle "movie" Harry had described to him once---the "Three Moustaches," or something like that.

Suddenly Ron felt himself being spun round and round, so that he lost track of which direction he had come. Then he was climbing what felt like a flight of stairs, as the sound of water became faint, before being picked up and carried what felt like a long way down. Then he heard the water again, close and loud. He couldn't tell which direction it was; the noise was all around him. Then he felt water, as though he were outside in the rain.

When he was set back on his feet, he wondered if they were where they were going, or if there was more walking blindfold to be done. Faramir's voice rang out: "Let them see!" The blindfold was removed from Ron's eyes, and he gave a gasp of wonder, for before him, with the sun shining through it in a thousand and one hues at once, was a curtain of water. He was standing with his friends on a floor of stone behind it, looking out over the lands below through a waterfall. The light playing through the ever-changing water made beauty such as Ron had never seen.

Chapter 16

After wondering at the play of light through the waterfall, with its endless combinations of colors as the setting sun's rays passed through the liquid prisms to make an ever-changing rainbow, Ron turned to see what else there was to see.

Rather to his disappointment, the rest of the Gondorians' hideout didn't live up to the glorious beauty of their window. Most of it was a natural cave, but there were places where he could see that the cave had been enlarged by its inhabitants. There were piles of what looked like trail food, and stores of weapons; he could see thousands of arrowheads, swords in waxed-leather sheaths, and helmets, cloaks, brigandines, arrow shafts, and things he couldn't have put a name to.

"Well, here we are," said Faramir. "It is no great palace, but we can at least pass the night in shelter here. There are only two ways out---one of them is the path by which we came in, and the other is out through the Window on the West, which leads to a pool filled with sharp stone knives. There were other ways in, but we've blocked them and concealed them well. We'll eat shortly."

He left them together, for the first time since Ron had led his friends to the Gondorians who had tried to capture him. The other Gondorians seemed to accept their presence without comment. Harry gathered his friends around him with a gesture, and Ron went over to join him.

"This isn't a bad hideout, at all," said Draco. He looked around with an appraising, professional air. "That window being concealed by the waterfall makes sure that there's always fresh air. I'd bet my wand that the path we went up would puzzle even Gollum."

"You know, they seem to have forgotten him," murmured Ron. "They knew that there were *five* of us, and that one was barefoot. I think that our being quite a bit more than they were expecting to find threw him clean out of their minds." He shuddered, remembering how he had felt with Gollum's lambent eyes on him, sizing him up like a turkey a week before Christmas. "The gods willing, we've seen the last of him."

"From your mouth, to the gods' ears, Ron!" said Hermione fervently. "The way he looked at me---and the way he always referred to me as 'pretty girl'---gave me the shuddering creeps. If I ever see him again, it'll be about a hundred billion years too soon!" She shut her eyes, a look of revulsion crossing her face. "The only reason I put up with him is because he might be useful. He's been through this country before. He's a real expert on wilderness survival---remember those rabbits?"

"Real well, Hermione," said Harry, speaking for the first time. He put his arm around her shoulders, and she leaned into him. "I remember something that Gandalf told me at Rivendell, before we set out. He talked to me at length, alone, since I'm the---bearer of the burden, shall we say?" He quirked a rather Draco-Malfoy-ish grin. "He told me a lot about Gollum. Although I loathe Gollum, I also understand him---and I pity him, from the bottom of my heart." The grin grew wider, and even less cheery. "If nothing else, he's what Professor Binns would call a *memento mori*, at least for me."

"A *memento mori*?" Hermione gave Harry a puzzled look, echoing Ron's own bafflement. "A *memento mori* was something the Romans did at their banquets---bringing in an effigy of a skeleton in a coffin to remind the banqueters that even at the height of their fun, death was never far away. That's where the expression 'a skeleton at the feast' came from." She grinned, her old flashing grin that one could miss if you weren't looking at her at just the right time. "If there's something I'd think was redundant, here and now, it would be a reminder that death's not far away. Right now, I wouldn't exactly bet my Gringotts' account on any of us surviving."

"For me, he's a living example of what I'd probably turn into, if I accepted the bargain the Wheel of Fire offers me, every night in my dreams," murmured Harry. "He was once a hobbit, not too different from Bilbo, but he had the---burden---for centuries, and it altered him into what you see."

Harry shut his eyes, shaking his head. "No matter what---even if I go into the Cracks of Doom myself---I don't want to turn into another Gollum." He gave his friends a haunted look. "They call me 'The Boy Who Lived,' but there's worse things than dying, I think. I think that Voldemort's learning that, back where we came from. If he had ever met Gollum, he'd have a better idea of what he's trying to do to himself." Harry sighed. "I can't hate Gollum. I pity him, and I care far too much about all of you to wish that you understood why I pity him."

With that, there seemed to be nothing more to say. The four broke up; Ron was quite conscious that they were in the power of the Gondorians, and he didn't want to fight them. He feared that if they knew what Harry had on him, they'd go mad and try to take it from him. Not arousing their new companions' suspicion of them more than necessary struck him as eminently sensible.

Faramir came over. "We've got some bunks for you to lie up on, till dinner's ready. Our scouts are still reporting in." As Ron sat back on the bed they offered him, the men went around the cave, working in wordless coordination that reminded Ron of the house-elves in the kitchens of Hogwarts, cooperating to put together a huge feast for the school.

By ones and twos, the scouts came in. From what Ron could catch of what they were saying, the Southron forces had been destroyed or had retreated, believing the Gondorians to be present in much greater strength than they were. The elephants---or *mumakil*, to give them their local name---were dead or had fled.

"Good riddance," muttered Draco. Harry had lain down on one of the bunks and was drifting off to sleep. "I've got to say, that ambush was well-laid, even without us helping."

Hermione was circulating among the Gondorians. Ron watched her carefully; she seemed to be enjoying being the only female in a male crowd. Some of the Gondorians were apparently competing for her attention, the younger ones in particular, and she was subtly encouraging them. Ron kept a sharp eye on things, but she seemed to have the situation well under control. He wondered where she had learned how to flirt so effectively while actually promising nothing.

Glancing over at Draco Malfoy, Ron noticed that he was watching Hermione too. "Growing up the way I did made me suspicious of my own shadow, Weasel," murmured Draco. "Even if I'd never attended a Death Eaters' party, five years among the Slytherins would turn anybody

into an intriguer." He gave Ron a rather haunted grin. "Sometime, you'll have to tell me--- what's it like, having a family you can actually trust?"

After a while, Hermione came back over and rejoined her friends. "From what I can tell, things are on the up-and-up," she muttered. "Still and all, although a night under shelter in a safe place will be wonderful, I won't really feel secure while we're here." She looked around. "If things turned ugly, I wouldn't fancy having to fight my way out of this place."

"Let's try to keep the scene serene." Draco motioned the others to silence as one last scout came in.

He went up to Faramir, and reported. "All seems quiet, Lord Faramir. No sign of the enemy. Not even an orc-scout. I did see something odd, though---something I haven't seen before."

"What was it that you saw?" asked Faramir. Ron strained to hear without seeming to eavesdrop; he had a sickly feeling that he knew what the scout was going to say. "If it wasn't an orc, or a Southron, what was it, Mablung?"

Mablung looked rather puzzled. "To be honest, I don't know. Of course, it was getting on toward evening, and it may have been something harmless. It was small, and when it saw me coming, it went up a tree as fast as a squirrel. You don't want us shooting animals for no reason, and I couldn't get a clear shot, so I didn't try to shoot it. It hissed at me, or so I thought. I thought it might be one of the black squirrels of Mirkwood."

"If that's so, it's a bad sign. We don't want the strays of Mirkwood here," said Faramir. Ron thought that he gave the Hogwarts students a fishy look. Ron gave him back the sort of blank look he had once used to convince his mother that he hadn't done the things he actually had done. *Bloody, bloody Gollum*, he thought bitterly. *I hope they never find him!* Beside him, Harry and Draco had fallen asleep. Their faces were wiped free of the care and strain that had become their usual expressions on their terrible journey, and Ron envied them this moment of peace.

Hermione leaned over the sleepers. Her touch as gentle as the mother Harry had never known, she took his glasses off and slipped them into the pocket where he kept them. Feeling Ron's eyes on her, she looked up and smiled.

"You know, Ron, I thought I knew everything important there was to know about you, and Harry---but this trip has shown me that I've only just scratched the surface. I didn't know that Harry fell asleep sometimes without taking off his glasses." A soft snore came from Harry, and she looked at him, profound tenderness in her face. "I also didn't know that you and Harry both snore." At a moan from Harry, she gently stroked his cheek, soothing him. "Or that he has nightmares."

"His nightmares have always been pretty bad, Hermione," murmured Ron. "I've heard him--- the gods know how often---crying out, cursing the Dursleys, or begging them to be good to him, pleading that he's a good boy, he didn't mean it, he's sorry." At the memory, a spasm of impotent rage twisted Ron's gut, and he felt his lips peel back in a snarl. "I swear, Hermione---I swear, by my life and my love of it---as the gods are my witnesses, the second Harry's eighteen and of age, I'm going to give those Dursleys such Hell that they'll wish You-Know-Who had taken out after them!"

He braced himself, expecting Hermione to disapprove. Instead, she reached out and covered his hands with her own. "Name the day, Ron, and I'll be right there. I'd relish the chance to teach those swine a lesson they'd never, ever forget."

At Hermione's reaction, Ron's rage passed, leaving a deep, deep sadness. "What sticks in my throat the most about it is that Harry doesn't *deserve* such treatment. He's sweet-natured, polite, and a good kid. If he was as awful as---oh, say, his cousin, Dudley---I could see mistreating him, even if I couldn't excuse it."

"You've met Dudley?" Curiosity lit Hermione's face. "Is he really as awful as Harry says he is? I've never met him myself. Harry doesn't like talking about him much, at least not to me. Fred and George were telling some boys and girls in their year about the Ton-Tongue Toffee Incident---" she giggled---"and from what they say, he's horrible."

"I only met him once. He's this repulsive, fat boy, with blonde hair and a stupid expression." Ron grinned at Hermione. "Harry told me that he always thought that Dudley looked like a pig in a wig. To my mind, that's slander---and if I were a pig in a wig, I'd demand an apology." Hermione dissolved in giggles. Ron continued: "And, from what Harry's said, he's not as nice as he looks. He's a bully---he bullied Harry for years, and every other kid he could. His parents make excuses for everything he does, and never punish him. In a way, I almost feel sorry for the poor stupid lump." At Hermione's questioning expression, Ron explained: "Sooner or later, he's going to have to face the big outside world without Daddy and Mummy there to make it all better, and he's going to have the shock of his life. I can't see any employer, wizard or Muggle, putting up with his fake tears when he doesn't get his own way."

One of the Gondorians came over, and cleared his throat. Ron and Hermione looked up. "Forgive me, but our meal is ready. If you could let your friends know that it's time to eat?" He held out a bowl of water. Ron gently shook Harry and Draco, and when they had awakened, the Hogwarts students plunged their hands into the water, scrubbing days of grime away and then splashing cold water on their faces. When that was done, Ron felt wonderfully refreshed, and realized just how hungry he was. Hunger had become so normal that he didn't notice it any more.

The Gondorians showed their guests to seats on benches, on two sides of a table laden with food and drink. Before they ate, the Gondorians stood and looked west for a minute in silence, and the four wanderers followed their example.

When they sat down, Faramir saw a questioning look on Hermione's face. "That is our custom. We look west, to Numenor that was, and beyond that, to Elvenhome that is, and beyond that, to that which is beyond Elvenhome and shall ever be. Do you have any such custom in your home?"

Hermione looked thoughtful. "Some of us pray before meals, but that custom is going out of use. Other than that, we have many, many customs. Our home is composed of many nations and peoples, and each has its own customs. Some of them will not eat meat at all, others will eat some meats but not others, and those must be butchered and prepared in specific ways."

"How strange!" said Faramir. He leaned forward, eyes alight with curiosity. "I know the ways of most of the peoples of Middle-earth, but you are something new and never seen before. How our scholars in Minas Tirith would love to question you!"

Hermione smiled broadly. "I'd love the chance, some day, as long as I get to ask questions in my turn. Of us four, I love learning the most." She gave her friends a slightly sardonic smile. "My friends here love many things, but learning for its own sake is not one of them. They'd rather be out playing games, or getting up to mischief."

"Now, Hermione," interjected Draco, his tone dripping false innocence, "I *resemble* that remark! Are you saying that I'd rather play Quidditch than---than go to a History of Magic class?" At Faramir's questioning look, he supplied "Quidditch is a game wizards and witches can play---it involves flying by magic, and several balls. The rules are a bit complicated."

Faramir looked like he would have liked to know more, but visibly mastered himself. "Tell me more about your journey here. Where did you start from?"

Hermione did the talking, and the others concentrated on their eating. Ron enjoyed every bit of the meal. By Hogwarts standards, or those of his mother, it was basic stuff---salted meats, red cheese, bread and butter, and dried fruits, washed down with a yellow wine that Ron had never had before, but quite liked. Compared to their diet since leaving Lorien, it was a Lucellan feast, and it was all he could do to not wolf down everything in sight and look around for more. He managed, with a great amount of self-control, to eat politely.

While she talked, Hermione did justice to the food, too. "We were summoned into this world---Arda, or Middle-Earth---at Rivendell. We met Gandalf, or Mithrandir, there, and also the others that were with us for a way---Legolas Greenleaf, of the elves of Mirkwood, and Gimli son of Gloin, of the dwarves of the Lonely Mountain, were two of them. At first, they were at each other's throats---verbally, of course---but by the time we saw them last, they'd become firm friends." She paused for a big bite at her improvised sandwich, which she had constructed from two slices of the Gondorians' bread, with slices of meats and cheese between them.

"Truly, this is a sign that great times are upon us," murmured one of the Gondorians. "Elves and dwarves have been at odds since the First Age. No dwarf, under most circumstances, would willingly associate with an elf."

"Enough about dwarves and elves," snapped Faramir, as Hermione turned to face him. "Tell me of my brother. Tell me of Boromir."

This rather worried Ron, and he looked up, to see Harry looking at him, his face a careful blank. Beside Harry, Draco was also hiding behind a poker face. Hermione's expression became guarded, and Ron hoped that Faramir wouldn't pick up on it. Hermione began telling Faramir about what Boromir had done. "In Moria---that's the old dwarven city of Khazad-Dum---he fought for us and faced up to orcs, trolls, and even a horror from the First Age---a Balrog of Morgoth." Faramir looked quite impressed. "He was a key member of our group, up till the day we parted company. Several times we wouldn't have been able to get through without him."

And we'd still be with the Company but for him---not to mention stirring up the Watcher in the Water with that stupid stone! thought Ron, keeping his face as blank as he could---years of practice at trying to keep his mum in the dark about who was responsible for the latest pranks served him well.

"It would have grieved Boromir, to run from orcs," said Faramir. He shook his head. "Or even that awful thing you name---the Balrog of Moria." Hermione shrugged.

"Even the mightiest man can be slain by one arrow---as Isildur found out, to his cost. We were not there to fight orcs, or the Balrog. If they had not attacked us, we'd have let them be." She closed her eyes, remembering reluctantly. "When the Balrog came upon us, I had been hurt badly---a severe blow to the head. I don't remember as much about it as my friends probably do." She looked straight at Faramir, her expression grave and serious. "What I remember, I wish I could forget. That creature could have fought a dragon easily, from what I know of dragons."

"And how---how could you have faced off with such a monster?" asked Mablung. Hermione smiled slightly.

"The same way we did against the Southrons, Mablung. With our spells. We threw every spell we knew at it, again and again and again. The spells we used would have done far more damage, some of them, than the ones we used against the Southrons. It wasn't stopped completely, but it knew we were there."

"Where was Mithrandir?" asked Faramir. "Was he casting spells?"

"No, he wasn't." Harry spoke up, as eyes turned to him. "He was standing there, alone, in the middle of a narrow foot-bridge over a bottomless chasm, with his sword, Glamdring the Foe-Cleaver, in one hand, and his wizard's staff in the other. Merely seeing him gave the Balrog pause, I think---but it came on, and the rest of us began to cast spells at it." Harry looked haunted, and Ron couldn't blame him---the memory of the fight with the Balrog was something that could still give *him* the shuddering horrors.

"And then what happened?" Faramir's voice was kindly and gentle and understanding. He had been in combat himself, and Ron knew that that experience changed people. He wondered for a second what Fred and George would think of him if---no, *when*, damn it!---he got back to Hogwarts.

Harry closed his eyes, remembering. "The Balrog---it had a sword, which we took out of its hands the same way we did yours---it wasn't expecting that, and couldn't get its sword back--it had a whip, a whip of fire. It swung the whip, and Gandalf broke the bridge---it was standing on the bridge, and it fell---but Gandalf---excuse me, Mithrandir---"

:"We know what you mean," said Faramir. "You knew him as Gandalf, and we understand you when you speak of him so."

"Gandalf---" Harry gulped, visibly took a grip on himself, and plunged onward---"Gandalf couldn't get out of the way of the whip in time---it tangled him, and he fell!" His voice broke for a second, and then he went on, every word strained: "His last thoughts were of us---he told us to run for it!"

Ron could feel Harry's grief, still fresh, in every word of his tale, and his own grief for the loss of the wise Gandalf responded to it. Beside him, Hermione shut her eyes, an expression of pain and loss on her face, and even Draco, the coolest of cool hands, looked stricken.

Faramir didn't miss a thing. "I understand if you don't want to talk about it. Still, it sounds as though Mithrandir died as he would have wanted to---facing off against a great evil, to protect those in his charge." Numbly, Ron nodded. Faramir was exactly right. Gandalf had done what he knew he had to do, and when the price had been his own life, he had paid it, and paid it willingly.

Just as we are probably going to pay, before this is over, a voice in his head jeered. Ron shut his eyes, willing that voice to go away. He had been tempted before to abandon their quest---at Rivendell, he had been given the opportunity to go back, and he wouldn't have minded staying in Lorien, not one bit---but he had meant what he had told Gandalf. If he abandoned the quest, if he turned his back on his friends---strange, to think of Draco Malfoy as a friend, but he had never really known Draco as a human being before this journey---somebody would survive, wearing his body, answering to his name. Somebody that Ron didn't think he'd much like.

"I still would not mind knowing just what your errand is, that it would lure Mithrandir into the black pits of Moria to his doom," mused Faramir. "It seems to have something to do with Isildur's Bane, even though you are not 'halflings.' And, before you say anything, Miss Granger---" he gave Hermione a slantendicular look, and she blushed slightly---"I do not think for one second that the references to 'Isildur's Bane' have anything to do with an orcish archer."

Ron glanced at Draco; Draco mouthed *cornered at last*, and Ron unobtrusively loosened his wand in its sleeve-sheath, so that he could reach it in a hurry. They had managed to con the Gondorians for quite a while, as well as dazzling them with magical pyrotechnics, but Faramir was on the scent of the truth. He thought that Faramir honestly believed himself to be trustworthy, but the Ring represented temptation beyond many men's strength.

Faramir went on: "Now, I am interested in the legends and tales of Gondor, as you seem to be, Miss Granger. We have records of the war---the Last Alliance of Elves and Men, and the overthrow of the Dark Lord in Mordor. I took an interest, the last time Mithrandir was in Minas Tirith, looking through old records. There's only one thing so important that they would go to the trouble of summoning people from another world---a whole other world, think of the power that must have involved!---and it's not an orcish archer or arrow. It's the Ring---the great Ring of Power that Isildur took from Sauron, isn't it?"

Ron felt the bottom of his stomach fall out, and he hoped he didn't look quite as sick as he felt. He could sense his companions getting ready to fight their way out, although he frankly didn't much fancy their chances, in the middle of the Gondorians' hideout, and not familiar with the way out.

Chapter 17---Nasty Bony Fish

Faramir watched them quietly, not making a single move that even Ron, as keyed up as he was, could interpret as threatening. "So---I seem to have stumbled across the truth. I was, I admit, taking a wild shot in the dark, but your reactions have told me all I needed to know. I now think I know what happened with Boromir, to make you leave him."

He sighed deeply. "Poor Boromir! I knew him, better than anybody, and I know what a temptation the Great Ring would have been to him. To see it, in the hands of somebody else, would have been a terrible strain on him. He always was ambitious---he never understood, when we were young, why our father was not called a king. 'How many years,' he would ask, 'does it take for a steward to become a king, if the king returns not?' He was never really satisfied with our father Denethor's answer: 'Few years, in lands of less royalty. In Gondor, ten thousand years would not suffice.'"

"Yes, that was Boromir---proud and ambitious," murmured Harry. Ron could see that he had his wand in his hand, but he was keeping his hand below the table.

"For all warnings, all he could think of was the good of Minas Tirith---and he would have taken the Ring's reappearance as a signal to use it, to free our people from the Nameless One's terror forever." Faramir quirked a smile at the Hogwarts students' astonished looks. "You need not be quite so startled. Did I not say I knew Boromir better than anybody? But be not afraid! I would not take this Thing, if it were lying in the road."

"That's reassuring," said Harry shakily. Ron was still quivering with readiness to fight, but he could see Harry relaxing very slightly. "Believe me, this Thing is nothing you---or I, for that matter---could master. I can carry it, but if I were to hold it for too long, it would master even me. If you took it to Minas Tirith, this Thing that drove your brother mad with desire, you'd end up with two Minas Morguls, grinning at each other across a barren valley."

"I wouldn't want that," murmured Faramir. "But what are you going to do with It?"

Harry looked unutterably weary. In a low voice, he said: "I was going to find a way into Mordor with it. The only way to destroy it for all time is to throw it into the Cracks of Doom, on the slopes of Mount Doom---Oroduin, deep in Mordor itself." Faramir's eyes went wide with shock.

"Oroduin! At least I now have an explanation as to why you were travelling through Ithilien! I must say that I do not envy you your task---and if you took it upon yourself unwilling, at the behest of others, you have pity from me, from the bottom of my heart." The Gondorian had gone pale under his outdoorsman's tan. "In your land, wizards---and witches," with a glance at Hermione's upraised eyebrow---"must be people who are greatly honored."

"Not as much as you might think, Lord Faramir," said Hermione, with a rather bitter smile. "Harry's uncle and aunt loathe magic, and mages---remember? He mentioned it." Faramir nodded thoughtfully. "They mistreated him---not beating him or physically abusing him, but making him live under their stairs, and making him wear his horrible fat cousin's cast-off clothes, and never saying a kind word to him. Meanwhile, they spoiled their own son---Harry's cousin---horribly, to the point where I pity the poor stupid lump."

"Now *that* would not be acceptable in Minas Tirith," said Faramir, sitting up and looking very stern. "Our training is stern, and our parents often distant, at least in the noble houses, the houses of the Numenor-descended...but to *deliberately mistreat* a child is beyond the pale. The Steward's Law, and the old kings' law, are very strict on *that* subject." Faramir shook his head in disgust at the antics of Harry's relations. "But, other than such folk, how are wizards seen?"

"Usually, we aren't. We take good care to not be seen, and the Muggles---that's non-magical folk---don't mostly believe we even exist. This way, we get left alone, and are not blamed for everything that goes wrong. Part of my father's job is to keep Muggles from finding out that we're there," said Ron. "By now it's traditional that it should be so, and I think that a Gondorian nobleman should know all about tradition."

Faramir grinned rather ruefully. "Yes, we and tradition are old, old friends. We have kept up such traditions of Numenor, our homeland, as we could---although we have learned much from our allies, particularly the Men of Rohan, the horse-warriors." He yawned. "But now, I think we all need to sleep for a while. Sleep well, wizards---and witch. You need not fear us."

Ron suddenly realized just how bone-weary he really was. He had hardly enough energy left to get to the bed they had set up for him and his companions, and he was asleep as soon as he was lying down.

* * * * *

An unguessable time later, Ron felt a hand shaking his shoulder. Before he quite knew what he was doing, he had snapped awake, his wand in his hand and his heart racing. Hermione put her hand over his mouth. "Shhh! It's just me! There's something going on!" As Ron came fully awake, he heard the Gondorians snoring. Near him, Harry was rubbing his eyes and putting on his glasses, and Draco was stowing his wand in a sheath under his clothes. "Faramir came and woke Harry---he says there's something we need to see outside somewhere." Ron could see Faramir standing at a respectful distance.

Once the four from Hogwarts were awake, Faramir led them out of the cave, through a long, damp narrow tunnel. After climbing up a narrow, twisting flight of stairs, Ron found himself standing under the familiar night sky, on a flat rock. A silent sentry stood beside him and his friends and Faramir. Below them, the waterfall that formed the window in the cave that he had so admired foamed over the rocks and away. The moon gleamed off the everlasting snows in the mountains. Ron wrapped his cloak closer around himself, shivering in the cold breeze. He judged that it was close to dawn, but by how much, he couldn't have said.

"So what's going on?" muttered Draco, echoing the resentful thought that had filled Ron's mind. "It's cold out here, and although the scenery's beautiful, it's not as though I needed to see it."

"You weren't brought out here to see scenery, Mr. Malfoy," muttered Faramir. "Look down below us, where the water forms a pool!" Harry dropped, first to his knees and then to his belly, peering over the edge of the rock into the darkness. Hermione joined him, and then Ron and Draco did the same. At first, Ron's eyes were not able to penetrate the gloom, but then they adjusted from the brighter light the moon shed over the surrounding wilderness, he

saw a small shape moving around. He drew in his breath and expelled it in a long, long, weary sigh. *And here I thought we'd finally managed to lose the little wretch*, he thought bitterly.

"Well? What is it? You did have another with you, one we had forgotten in all the excitement," came Faramir's voice. "Shall we shoot it? Even being near this pool is death by the laws of Gondor!"

"No! Absolutely not!" Harry's response was very fast, and carried the snap of command; Ron blinked slightly at that---he would never have dared command Faramir so cavalierly. "He's under my protection, and I don't think he even knows you're here. He doesn't know much about men. He probably doesn't know you're within a hundred miles of this place."

Faramir looked at Harry, puzzled. "Then why would he come here?"

Hermione smiled. "Fish. He loves fish." Below them, the small shape dove into the water, leaving hardly a ripple. After a minute, it surfaced, and swam for the shore, a small, flopping thing in what had to be its mouth. It pulled itself up onto the shore and hunkered down.

Faramir shook his head. "Fish! It is a less perilous thing to seek here---but even looking on this pool's an offense that brings death." He raised his hand as if to signal to the sentry, who drew his bow.

Harry pulled out his wand, not pointing it at anybody, but letting both Gondorians see that it was there. He rolled away from the edge of the rock, and his friends followed him, spreading out to either side of him, with Hermione on his right side, Ron on his left, and Draco to Ron's left. Harry jerked up his head slightly, in a gesture that reminded Ron achingly of their lost friend Aragorn; the moonlight glittered on his glasses.

At the sight of the Hogwarts students' reaction, Faramir shrank back slightly, raising his hands in sign of peace. The sentry unbent his bow, looking uncertain; Ron remembered him from the fight with the Southrons, and knew that he knew what Harry and his companions could do, if sufficiently roused. "Did---did we offend you, Mr. Potter? If so, we didn't mean to..." Faramir's voice trailed off under Harry's icy stare.

"No, I don't want him killed, or hurt if it can be avoided. I said that he's under my protection, Lord Faramir---and I would not *like* it if you broke *my* word, without my having so much as a *voice* in the matter." Harry's voice was soft, and his manner was mild---and as he smiled at Faramir under the setting moon, Ron shivered with fear. What had happened to the old, mild-mannered Harry Potter, quiet and deferential to authority figures? This Harry Potter would have told Professor Snape where to get off!

"We can capture him, Lord Faramir. We've done it before." Hermione looked at Faramir, her dark eyes unfathomable in the moonlight. "I don't think he realizes his danger, and I'd rather not shoot him in the back." Her mouth twisted. "He seems to like me---the gods only know why." After a minute, she added: "He's been our guide through great danger---the Dead Marshes---and I don't think that Gandalf, or Mithrandir, as you call him, would want him hurt. He forbade the Elves of Mirkwood to hurt him."

Faramir nodded. "Very well. There's a path down to the water to your right. Good luck, Miss Granger."

"Go with her, Ron," said Harry. "Draco and I will keep watch on things from up here." At Harry's command, Ron moved off, following Hermione down the path to the water.

As they slowly clambered down, they began to be able to hear Gollum's voice over the burble and hiss of the waters. "Ach, sss, nice fissh, good fissh, makes us sstrong, makes eyeses bright and fingerses tight! White Face is gone, we hates it, *gollum!* Curse them! They took our Preciouss! Throttle them all, if we gets chances! Fissh, good fissh..." and on and on it went.

Ron fingered the hilt of his sword. Gollum didn't seem to know they were there, and they were close enough that he could have had the miserable creature's head off his shoulders before anybody could stop him. But---at seventh and last, he knew he couldn't do such a thing. Gollum was unaware of his danger, and although Ron hated to admit it, Hermione had been right. They'd never have been able to figure a way through the Dead Marshes without him. *There are times I wish I were a Slytherin*, he thought rather ruefully.

"Smeagol," called Hermione, softly. At first, Gollum didn't seem to hear her, crouching over his fish and mauling to himself about how he would find his Precious, but when she repeated his name a little louder, he stopped, raising his head and looking around. "Smeagol, come to me. You're in danger here, and I have to get you out of it, but you must trust me! I won't let anybody hurt you! Come to me!"

"Ach, sss, pretty girl finds us! Pretty girl knows we's losst, losst without our Preciouss! Pretty girl helps us find our Preciouss!" Gollum came fawning up to Hermione, a fish in either hand. He had obviously been eating more fish, and he looked even less appetizing than he usually did. He had fish scales and fish-goo smeared around his mouth; Gollum was ever a messy eater. Hermione allowed him to fawn on her for a minute, as Ron watched from the shadows. Ron knew that they needed Gollum, and that it would be wrong to kill him---and Ron wanted to blast Gollum into a million pieces for daring to touch or look at Hermione. He mastered himself with an effort, as Hermione led Gollum toward the path.

When Gollum spotted Ron, his eyes gleamed in the darkness. "Ach, sss, the nasty bad-tempered mage! What is he doing here?"

As Gollum made as if to get away, Ron leveled his wand. "*Stupefy!*" Gollum toppled, limp and boneless, to the ground. Ron snapped "*Mobilicorpus!*" and the creature lurched to his feet, walking along unsteadily, rather like the zombies that Ron remembered from his Defense Against the Dark Arts textbooks. He still clutched a fish in one long-fingered hand...*trust Gollum*, thought Ron with an inner chuckle.

Between the Mobilicorpus Charm and several Levitating Charms, Ron and Hermione got Gollum up to the top where Faramir and the archer---Anborn, if Ron remembered his name right---were waiting with Harry and Draco. The Gondorians' eyes widened at the sight of Gollum shambling along under the Mobilicorpus Charm. "We could use that in Minas Tirith, to deal with lawbreakers," muttered Anborn. "When you get back, would you be interested in talking to our Chief of Constables about working for him?"

"You were a constable?" asked Hermione. "How are they organized? Do you have much of a crime problem in Minas Tirith?" Ron hid a smile---some things really, truly, never did change. *The day she quits being eager for new facts, we'll probably be burying her*, he thought. Anborn began telling her all about his exploits fighting crime in Minas Tirith---exploits, Ron noticed with some concern, that always seemed to end up with him starring as the hero of the day. Hermione lapped up every word, nodding at the right times, while Faramir stuffed the unconscious Gollum into a large leather bag.

When they were back in the Gondorians' hideout, Ron took out his wand and cast a quick Ennervate Charm, to bring Gollum back to consciousness. When Gollum came to, he squeaked with terror to find himself in a strange, candle-lit place, among so many tall, stern-looking men. "Where are we? Where are we, precious?" he gibbered. "How did we get here?" He whirled, dropping the fish, and grabbed Hermione. "Help us! Nasty men wants to kill us, kill us, *gollum, gollum, gollum!*" Hermione unloosened his hands from her clothes, with a shudder of revulsion. Ron hoped Gollum wouldn't pick up on it---he loathed the creature, but knew that they still needed his help.

"She is not the person you need to talk to, creature," said Faramir, leaning close and looming over Gollum. "I am. Taking fish from the pond where you were taking them is death by the laws of Gondor."

"Don't want fish," muttered Gollum, dropping the fish he had taken onto the floor.

"It is not the fish, but even looking on the pool, that entails death," said Faramir sternly. "I have spared you because your companions have asked me to. But you must satisfy me about your purposes. What is your name? Where do you come from? Why are you near here?"

"No name, no name," whimpered Gollum. "Losst, losst and empty. We are hungry, *gollum*, hungry, and big strong men say they will kill us, just for a few nasty bony fishes. So wise they are, so very just."

"Come here," said Faramir. He bent down and looked Gollum straight in his eyes. "Have you ever been here before? Have you ever seen this place before?" Gollum could not meet his stare at first, but finally returned Faramir's stare, the strange light going out of his pale eyes. He said nothing, but slowly shrank down and squatted on the floor of the cave.

"Never came here, never come here again," he muttered. "Never, never, never!" Faramir looked at Harry, his expression rather troubled, then turned back to Gollum.

"There are locked doors, closed windows and dark rooms in your mind, creature, but I think that in this, you speak true. What oath will you give, never to come here again, and never to lead anybody here or tell where this place is?" Ron quite admired the phrase about locked doors and closed windows, and stored it away in his memory. He thought that in some ways, it fit several people he knew at Hogwarts remarkably well, particularly Professor Snape in one of his evil moods.

"Masster knows," whispered Gollum. He crawled over to Harry, who stared at him bleakly. "Nice masster knows, yes he does." Grovelling at Harry's feet, he whined: "Save uss, nice Masster! Save uss! We swears, swears to It, that we never, never comes here again!"

Smeagol promises Precious, yes, he does, *gollum!*" Harry gently detached Gollum's fingers from his tunic, an unreadable look on his face.

"Will he keep this oath?" asked Faramir. "I would not trust him to keep any promise he made."

"Yes, he would. You must either accept his oath, or kill him. And you know that killing him would...*displease*...me." Harry looked at Faramir, cold command radiating from every inch of him.

"If nothing else, *I* promised that no harm would come to him, and that I'd protect him." Hermione chimed in, raising her chin and giving Faramir a Look that put Ron in mind of Professor McGonagall at her most strict. "What you got from him is the best he can do, I think."

"Very well. Will you accept responsibility for this creature?" Faramir asked. He looked quite doubtful about the wisdom of letting Gollum go, and Ron couldn't blame him for a second.

Harry shrugged. "Well, you haven't quite decided what to do with us. We've been comrades-in-arms, but you wanted originally to arrest us. What do you say about us, first?"

Faramir smiled. "For your services to Gondor, I declare all four of you free to travel in all Gondorian territory, with the sole proviso that coming here to this outpost without permission is forbidden. This will last for a year, and then lapse, unless you present yourselves at Minas Tirith to apply for an extension---and I promise to speak for you in that case, and to urge that this freedom be granted you for all of your lives. And it applies to anybody you take under your protection."

Harry bowed. "On behalf of my comrades, I thank you, Lord Faramir."

"And do you take this creature, this 'Smeagol,' under your protection?" asked Faramir. To Ron, the exchanges had a rather ritual quality, and he sensed that this was a standard ritual indulged in by the men of Gondor.

"I do take Smeagol under my protection," said Harry, with a small sigh. Ron had known him a long time, and knew that he was rather reluctant to have anything more to do with Gollum, but that if he abandoned Gollum, Harry would never, ever forgive himself. *Conscience is a harder master than Professor Snape ever thought of being*, he thought to himself rather ruefully.

Draco nudged Ron in the ribs. "Well, Weasel, it looks like we're stuck with him for the long haul," Draco murmured. "Between us, I'd rather kiss a dementor than have him anywhere near us, but Harry's right---we do owe him, if only for getting us past the Marshes." Ron hushed him absently; at least the Gondorians hadn't noticed their little byplay, being concentrated on Harry, Faramir and Gollum.

Faramir looked at Gollum very sternly, and the gangrel creature quailed under his stare. "Then, Smeagol, I say to you that you are under doom of death, but that while you are with Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, Draco Malfoy and Ron Weasley you are under their protection, for our part. But if you are found in lands of Gondor without them, you will be

killed---and may death find you swiftly, in any land, if you betray them!" He leaned down and looked closely at Gollum. "Now, tell me: Where were you leading them?"

"It's a place called Cirith Ungol," volunteered Hermione, seeing that Gollum wasn't going to answer. At that, the Gondorians muttered among themselves; Ron gathered that this wasn't an idea that they liked at all. "It's up by Minas Ithil."

"Minas Morgul," corrected Faramir absently, his eyes intent on Gollum. "Tell me, creature! Have you ever heard that name before---Cirith Ungol?"

Gollum cowered. "No! Yes, maybe, once, long ago! But what does nameses mean? Nice masster, pretty girl and their friends wants to go into Mordor, so we shows them an open path, yess, we shows them the only open path into the Black Land!" Faramir looked very skeptical at this.

"The only path?" He cocked his head on one side, and rubbed his chin. "And how do you know this path? Does anybody at all know all the ways of that dark land?" He came to a decision. "We will speak of this later. Go with Anborn---" as that worthy appeared to escort Gollum away---"and do not try leaping through the water-curtain. There are rocks below there that would cut you off in the prime of your years. Go now, Smeagol---" he cast a martyred look at the cavern floor, where Gollum's fish lay, "and *take your fish!*" Anborn led Gollum away, and Faramir turned to Harry, his face troubled.

"I don't think you should follow that creature, Harry Potter," he said. "He is evil, and has plans of his own. I think he knows far more of Cirith Ungol---a name we know, and know nothing good of---than he's told you."

Harry looked suddenly utterly weary. "I know he's got his own little plans. But what would you have me do?" He spread his hands. "Would you have me go to Minas Tirith, bearing this Thing? It drove your brother literally mad with desire!"

"Even if you, or somebody in your city, mastered the Ring, in the end it would master you," murmured Draco, his expression somber and resigned. "Would you like that? Would you like for there to be two twin Minas Morguls, grinning at each other like twin skulls?"

"No," said Faramir, his voice and face both troubled, "I would not have it so." He looked at all four of the Hogwarts students, his expression one of deep concern. "But I would not have you follow this creature. If you wish, we would escort him to any point on the borders of Gondor that he names."

"It would do no good, Lord Faramir," sighed Harry. "He would follow us, as he has done for many weary days and miles."

"That may be," said Faramir. "Still, I do not think you are bound to go to Cirith Ungol. It is a place with a dreadful reputation---something lives there, something evil. If you mention Cirith Ungol to the wise men of Gondor, they blanch and fall silent. There is a dark terror that lives there, in the passes above Minas Morgul---and Minas Morgul itself is an evil place, full of lidless eyes. Don't go there!"

"Then where can I go?" asked Harry. "You say not to go there, but I'm bound into Mordor, one way or another. Every other way is worse---this Thing I bear is evil, evil beyond your

dreams. No matter where else I take it, it'll be the source of more evils than you can imagine. If I turn from my path, where could I go? Minas Tirith?" He gave a short, bitter laugh. "You said yourself you didn't want there to be two twin Minas Morguls!"

"No, I don't. If this is the only path there is, then you must take it. We won't be together much longer, Harry Potter, but you and your companions have my blessing, for what it may be worth. This Smeagol---does he know the nature of the Thing you bear?"

"He does. He bore it himself, for centuries---and it made him what he now is." At Harry's response, Faramir paled, and his hand twisted in an apotropaic gesture, warding off evil.

"We'll at least fill your packs with food, and set you on your way," said Faramir, pale under his tan. "That, I think, is the least we can do. Also, if you will heed my advice, do not trust this guide, this Smeagol! He's done murder before now. I can see it in his eyes." Faramir looked haunted. "Beware of him! Someday, maybe, when all this is over, we can sit and tell old tales, and maybe you can tell me how you came into this world, and how you came to take up this quest. Your people are blessed, that you came from them."

There didn't seem to be anything more to say, so they all went and turned in; Ron in particular was glad to see his bed, and dropped off into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter 18

The next morning, the four friends awoke to find Faramir still awake; he had not slept since they had come to the Gondorians' hideout. After washing, they ate breakfast with Faramir. "We've stocked you with food; you were running low. While you're in Ithilien, you should have no trouble finding streams to drink from, but on no account drink from any stream that flows from Imlad Morgul---we call it the Valley of Living Death," warned Faramir. Hermione pulled out her precious map, and Faramir and the wanderers examined it together, as Faramir pointed out the road they would be going.

To Ron, it looked fairly straightforward---down the road, turn at the crossroads, sneak past Minas Morgul, and up through Cirith Ungol, and they would be in Mordor itself. Next to Moria---a memory that could still make him shudder---it looked fairly easy, or at least, as easy as things could be expected to be here, on the borderlands of Mordor.

He noted, uneasily, that the Gondorians themselves did not seem to think their road would be easy. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw several of the Gondorians give them pitying looks when they didn't think Harry or any of his companions could see them. He remembered Faramir's warning about an evil thing that seemed to live in the passes above Minas Morgul, and shivered. *What are you getting into this time, Ronald Arthur Weasley?* he asked himself. Something evil was up there---something that could scare even these tough Gondorian soldiers, men who were by no means unused to danger.

Hermione folded her map, stowing it carefully in her pack next to the strange weightless book the Lady of the Golden Wood had given her. She ran her fingers over it longingly, then closed her pack with a sigh. "I wonder when I'll be able to read that?" At Faramir's questioning look, she explained: "It's a comprehensive history of Middle-Earth, from the First Age onward, given to me by the Lady of Lorien---Laurelindorenan, as you call it. It doesn't weigh anything, and takes up no room in my pack." She smiled, and Ron saw that Faramir couldn't help smiling back---her happiness was incandescent, shining off her. "The Lady healed my injuries, that I took in Moria, and spent quite some time talking with me."

"That would mean that you were greatly honored, Miss Granger," said Faramir. "But anybody who would take on the task you and your friends have taken is worthy of the highest honor. In Minas Tirith, bards and minstrels would fight to sing your praises." Hermione blushed. Draco watched this byplay with a quizzical smile, while Ron felt himself beginning to steam. Harry looked on impassively; Ron couldn't figure out what, if anything, he thought.

Faramir held out four staves. "Take these, as our parting gift." The staves were the right length---about six feet apiece, shod with iron at both ends. "They are made of *lebethron*, a wood we use in Gondor, and they have a virtue of finding and returning. May that virtue not wholly fail in the Shadow you must enter!"

The four from Hogwarts examined the staves. "Yes," murmured Draco, "I can see how the spell---a weak spell, but difficult to disperse---was put on. Rather like the Summoning Charm, I think---if we get out of this alive, Professor Flitwick will want to look at these." He bowed to Faramir. "Your hospitality and generosity to four strangers exceeds my capacity to praise, but know that we thank you from the bottoms of our hearts." Faramir was visibly quite pleased at Draco's old-style courtesy, and Ron envied him his fluent tongue.

"Bring Smeagol," commanded Faramir. Two tall Gondorian soldiers appeared, with Gollum cowering between them. He grovelled to Harry, all but wagging his nonexistent tail, as Ron suppressed an urge to smack him a good one.

"Ach, sss, nice masster and his friendses! Smeagol is glad, glad to see masster!" Harry accepted Gollum's cringing as his rightful due with lordly unconcern. Draco caught Ron's eye for a second, and they both shook their heads slightly. Ron made a mental note to keep a sharp eye on Harry. He did not always like the changes he saw in his friend. When he got the chance, Ron decided, he wanted a long heart-to-heart talk with Draco; Draco had seen far more evil and corruption up close than he ever had himself, and would be better-placed to recognize ominous signs.

When the Gondorians made as if to blindfold Gollum, he squealed and whined so much that Harry finally drew his wand, and with an exasperated sigh, snapped "*Stupefy!*" Gollum went as limp as overcooked spaghetti, and a Gondorian stuffed him into the same leather sack he had ridden into the hideout. Ron thought wistfully about getting the soldier to add a few big rocks, tie it shut tightly, and throw it into the deep pool--but knew that he would never be able to live with himself if he did any such thing. *The curse of an active conscience*, he told himself.

Once the perennial Gollum problem was dealt with, the Hogwarts students suffered themselves to be blindfolded, and they were led out along what felt to Ron like the same route they had taken into the Gondorian hideout. When the blindfolds were removed, Ron found himself standing with his friends in the woods. He couldn't hear the waterfall, and figured they had come some distance from it. To the west, the light seemed to shine more strongly through the trees, as though the woods came to an end there.

"Well, this is good-bye," said Faramir. "You shouldn't go east just yet; keep straight on; you'll have the forest to cover you. To your west is the edge of the forest, where the land drops off into valleys. Keep close to this edge, and you should be able to travel by daylight, at least at first. It's very quiet out there--nothing evil is stirring." He shook hands with Harry, Ron and Draco, and after a moment's hesitation, accepted an embrace from Hermione. Then he and his men turned and vanished into the forest, and Ron couldn't see where they had gone.

Ron found himself swallowing a lump in his throat, and he could see that Harry, Draco and Hermione were sorry to see the last of Faramir. "Well, I suppose it was too good to last," murmured Draco. "Back to our weary road, people. *Floreat* Hogwarts!"

Harry cast an Ennervate charm, and Gollum came out of his coma. "Are nasty wicked men gone?" he muttered. "Smeagol's neck still hurts him, where they grabbed him, yess, it does!" He squatted down and began scrabbling in the roots of a nearby tree, obviously looking for something to eat.

Draco's expression went very grim, and he reached down and hauled Gollum up by his throat. Gollum squealed and hissed in protest, but the look in Draco's eyes stopped him, and he dangled there, shaking in terror, as Draco snarled: "They spared your life when they could have killed you, as easily as *this!*" with a good solid shake for emphasis. "*You*---will keep a civil tongue in your head, do you hear me?" Shivering, Gollum nodded his head as hard as he could. Draco threw him aside, tight-lipped and eyes blazing, as though he were so

much trash, and ostentatiously wiped his hand on his cloak. Gollum cringed away, hiding behind Harry and peering fearfully at Draco. Ron understood just how Draco felt.

"Enough of this nonsense!" snapped Harry. He gathered them to him with a cold glance. "Let's get on with this!" He stepped out, heading south, and the others followed, with Gollum bringing up the rear. Ron was very uncomfortable with Gollum behind him, but he knew that he and his friends were more than able to handle anything Gollum might do, at least while they were fully conscious.

For the rest of that day, they marched along. The forest was strangely quiet; Ron couldn't hear any birds, or see any, and they didn't see any small animals. When they halted for a breather, they ate of the food that Faramir had provided, concentrating on the bread, since it would soon go stale. Gollum wouldn't touch any of the food, which suited Ron fine; as he tore into a strip of delicately-spiced dried meat, he decided that any of this going to somebody like Gollum would constitute a criminal waste.

That evening, they settled down to rest as night fell; they had found a good spot sheltered by an ancient tree. Harry slept the night away, but the other three, without needing to say anything to each other or Harry, took turns keeping a watch. Gollum disappeared as soon as they were settled, only to return with the dawn. Ron wondered idly whether he had been rootling through the forest for something he liked to eat, or had crawled off to sleep by himself. In either case, he had returned, hissing: "Get up! Wake up, sleepies!"

The next day was much like the previous one, except that it was hotter and felt closer. Ron thought that a thunderstorm was brewing. Gollum was uneasy; he sniffed the air repeatedly. "Must make haste, make haste!" he hissed. "These places aren't safe, not safe for master and pretty girl and their friends!" They tried several times to get him to tell them what had spooked him, but all they got was hissing and muttering that they couldn't understand; Ron caught a few syllables here and there that sounded very like what he had heard the orcs using to speak to each other in the depths of Moria.

Draco also recognized what he heard. "Here---do you speak the orcs' language?" he asked. Gollum looked up, his face a mask of cunning. They had stopped for a quick breather, despite Gollum's urging to speed.

"O yes, O yes, we speak the orcs' language---and so do you, and so does master. Orcs speak many many languages, and some are almost like what master and his friends speak, but others---others are very very different, with different words. Before we met the Baggins---" a spasm of rage crossed Gollum's face for a second, to be wiped away before they could react to it---"we lived under a big mountain, with orcs not very far away. Sometimes we caught little goblin-imps to eat. They spoke this language."

"So you can't necessarily understand orcs?" Ron asked, feeling a bit of disappointment. Draco Malfoy's unexpected ability to speak the elvish tongues had smoothed the foursome's way several times, in Rivendell and Lorien, and since the land they were travelling to was known for its orc population, Ron had hoped that Gollum might justify his presence by being able to translate.

"O no, O no!" Gollum shook his head violently. "The orcs of the Black Land, they speak a very very different language. In it, 'orc' is 'uruk.'" Gollum covered his face for a second, peering at them through his long prehensile fingers. "We couldn't understand them at

all, O no we couldn't---and we could just barely understand what orcs were saying in the Black Pit, the one the dwarves dug."

"He means Moria," explained Draco with a sigh. "I suppose it makes a good deal of sense; orcs live tribe-by-tribe, and don't like orcs from other tribes much. Still and all, I had hoped that our Dear Little Fiend---er, Friend, here---" Hermione let out an involuntary giggle---"would be able to tell us what orcs were saying among themselves, if we got the chance."

Hermione looked at her map, which she had fished out of her pack. Ron, Draco and Harry came to look over her shoulder. "Now, let me see," she muttered. "We were here when we met those Gondorians. Now, where are we?"

Gollum pointed off into the distance. The daylight was fading as they sat under the shelter of the edge of the forest, overlooking a valley. The mountains of Gondor were lit with a reddish glow from the setting sun, off to the right, while to the left the mountains of Mordor were already wrapped in darkness. Off in the distance, Ron could see what looked like the tops of the towers of a city, and he could hear water flowing below them. Beside the stream, he could see a road winding along, right past where they were.

"These are dangerous places, dangerous places, pretty girl," said Gollum. "We've gone far, far from the paths we should have taken. This road below us---it goes from the ruined city to the Tower of the Moon. We must go east---east. We mustn't use the road---cruel, bad, wicked people uses it." Hermione nodded, and put her map away.

"I can't really see it anyway, but I think I know where we are now. That off there should be Minas Morgul. That stream's the one that Faramir warned us about drinking. I'm glad we're well-found for food and water." She sniffed the air. "I can't smell anything wrong with that water, but I'd as soon not take chances. Faramir's been working in this part of the world for a long time, and I would bet he knows what he's talking about."

At that time, nothing was moving on the road, at least as far as Ron could see. Harry, Draco and Hermione all looked down on it, and none of them were able to see anything. Still, that didn't mean it was safe; Ron had to reluctantly admit that Gollum had a good point about the road---it would be dangerous, particularly by day.

When he said so, Gollum agreed quickly, having apparently forgotten his mistrust of Ron. "O yes, you must hide by day now, hide by day and travel by night."

"So be it," said Harry. "We'll have to rest up for a few hours now---I don't know about you, but I'm knackered---and we'll still have hours of dark left to travel in." At his command, they got away from the side of the road, and finally found themselves a place where they could lie up. Ron threw himself onto the ground, but although he was tired and knew he should sleep if he could, he couldn't manage to drop off. Perhaps it was knowing that they were so close to Mordor, or perhaps it was because Gollum was nearby, although Gollum was dead to the world, breathing deeply and evenly in his sleep. None of the other three were asleep, either.

Around midnight, by Ron's estimate, Gollum awoke. His eyes snapped open and he sniffed the air, as though he could tell the time from the smell of the air. Ron wondered if he really could, or if he were sniffing for enemies.

"Are we rested? Have we had beautiful sleep? Let's go!" whispered Gollum. Draco got up, stretching until his joints cracked audibly. Beside him, Harry and Hermione tried to work the stiffness out of their muscles.

"No, we aren't, and no we didn't, but you're right---we've got miles to make," grumbled Draco. He began to do some exercises to limber himself up that Ron had seen his brothers doing before Quidditch matches, and Harry and Ron joined him.

"Ah, yes, must keep in hard training for Quidditch---mustn't let the side down, old bean, old top, old chap," drawled Harry, in such a perfect "upper-class twit" accent that Ron had to suppress a snicker. Hermione did a few deep knee-bends to get her circulation going.

When they had limbered up, they followed Gollum, across country. The path they took led them through trees, where it was so dark that more than once Ron only saw a tree barely in time to keep from ramming into it. The country tended to rise in the direction they were going---although they went downhill again and again, they always ended up climbing much farther than they had descended. When they stopped for a breather, Ron looked back the way they had come, to see the forest they had been in spread out below them. Above them, it looked as though a huge cloud-bank was bulging out of Mordor, blotting out the stars themselves. When the moon appeared, it was sickly and yellow-looking, far to the west.

Gollum didn't like the moonlight. "Must make haste, make haste! These places aren't safe!" They followed on, up onto a large hog-back of land. It was covered with gorse-bushes and other thorny plants, with charred patches here and there. As they moved on, the bushes grew taller and taller, until they were tall enough to walk under easily. The bushes were putting out yellow flowers, and Ron inhaled, enjoying the smell while he could.

When they stopped, they found a place to rest under a large gorse-bush, in a sort of hollow formed by the thornbushes. Exhausted, too weary even to eat, they peered out, looking for the dawn.

No dawn seemed to come; instead, there was a dull red glare under the clouds to their east. The mountains themselves seemed to lower at them, resenting their presence in this haunted land. Gradually, the red glare died away, and Ron felt himself drifting off to sleep.

When he awoke, from a dream of home, it was hours later. He checked his watch, to see that it was mid-morning, but it looked a lot darker than he'd have expected at such a time. "Blimey! Why's it so dark?"

"I don't know. Gollum's gone---I fancy he's looking for food," said Harry. He looked up at the sky. "I don't like the look of that weather, but it doesn't quite look like a regular storm, somehow."

"I'm not so sure that it is a storm," said Draco, yawning. "I can feel the earth itself rumbling, and feel a deep rumble in the air. What with that red light we saw earlier, I think Mount Doom is warming up to a right old eruption." He scratched his ribs. "Bloody, bloody gorsebushes! I detest them!"

"You and me both, Draco. Guess great minds think alike," grumbled Hermione. "I wonder where Gollum got to? Maybe he won't come back."

"We still need him, I think," said Harry sternly, and the others subsided. "You all forget the Marshes. I hope he hasn't come to any harm." The rumbling began again, audible to all of them and making the ground itself shake beneath their feet. "That's all I need to cheer me up," said Harry, "a reminder that we're going to be visiting an active volcano."

"Some active volcanoes are safe enough," Hermione remarked. "From what they told me at Rivendell and Lorien, Oroduin's a cinder cone, though, and those aren't as predictable as, say, Mauna Kea or Mauna Loa in Hawaii on Earth."

The hours passed slowly, and Ron dozed off and on until Gollum came back. Ron didn't hear him coming, but suddenly he was there, his eyes aglow. Harry, Hermione and Draco were asleep, and Gollum pawed at Harry's arm, startling him awake. "Wake up, sleepies! No time to lose!"

"Oh, Lor'lumme," groaned Ron. "What's the big hurry? What's got your knickers in a twist?"

"Silly! We doesn't wear knickers, no we doesn't!" hissed Gollum. "Wake up, masster! Wake up, pretty girl!" He pawed at Harry, and Harry snapped awake, grabbing Gollum before he could get away. It would have gone ill with the gangrel creature if Harry had been a millisecond slower in coming fully awake. As it was, his sword was out and he was beginning to slash with it when he stopped himself just in time. Gollum cringed, whimpering.

"Easy, Harry, it's just our Dear Little Fiend---er, Friend," said Draco. Reaching out to the cowering Gollum, Draco said gently: "Sorry, Smeagol. You just startled Harry. He won't hurt you---he promised not to." Ron stared at this apparition. Draco Malfoy, being gentle, and kind? He'd have been less startled by Ginny announcing that she was in love with Professor Snape---and was expecting his twins.

When he said as much to Hermione, she giggled, shuddering theatrically. "I can just imagine how you'd like knowing that your new little nephew and niece would be 'Snapelets.'" At this, Ron, Draco and Harry all laughed, as they got ready to go. "Imagine---Severus Snape as your brother-in-law! A fate worse than death!"

When they were moving again, the light had dimmed enough that they would have been difficult to see even without their elven-cloaks. They crossed another ridge, and then they found themselves standing beside the road, winding along the foot of the mountains until it disappeared into the forest.

"Yess, the South-road!" whispered Gollum. "We musst follow it, follow it! No paths beyond, but we musst make hasste! Be silent!" *Awww, and I was planning to have a brass band playing and let off some Filibusters' Fireworks,* thought Ron sarcastically. They got out onto the road, and slipped along it, quietly as though they were sneaking out of their dorms at Hogwarts after curfew.

When they got in among the trees, they found themselves in a huge round clearing, where the crossroads was. Behind them was the road to the Morannon, before them the road to the distant southlands, while to their right was the road to the sea, and the road they would have to take stretched out to the left, up into the darkness. As they stood there, light suddenly came to illuminate the scene, as the westering sun finally peered through the edges of the cloudy pall overhead.

Before them, Ron saw a huge stone statue of a seated king, which reminded him of the great stone king-images he had seen on the River Anduin, back when the Fellowship was still almost whole. But this king had fallen on hard times, it seemed. The head of the statue had been hacked off long ago, to be replaced by a rough-hewn round stone, painted with a grinning Jack O'Lantern mouth and a red eye where the forehead would be. The statue itself was covered with foul symbols that Ron recognized from his briefings in Rivendell, as well as crudely-carved and ill-spelled inscriptions in several tongues---mostly names and boasts, from what Ron could make out.

Harry stared at the statue, his lips a thin line. Ron could see that he was angry. He gripped his wand, and raised it, just as Hermione called: "Oh, look! The king has a crown again!" Curious, Harry lowered his wand, and came to see what she was on about. She pointed to the fallen head of the king, and Ron could see that a trailing plant with white flowers had bound itself around the stone brows, and that golden mosses were growing in the crevices of his hair.

Harry smiled grimly. "Well, let's put things to rights here, shall we?" He raised his wand, and pointed it at the grinning orc-carved head, shouting "Reducto!" The head shattered, crumbling into rubble around the base of the statue. Ron, Draco and Hermione got into the spirit of the moment, casting spells to cleanse the statue of its defiling graffiti, and then all four of them collaborated to Levitate the rightful head back into its place. When it was in place, Harry shouted "Reparo," and the statue looked as good as new, as though it had just come from the sculptor's hands. "I just purely can't stand vandals," muttered Harry, as he looked with satisfaction on their handiwork. "Let this be an omen to Sauron, that he cannot conquer forever!" As he said the words, the sun finally set, and darkness spread across the land.

Chapter 19 -- Up the Dark Staircase

After they left the clearing behind, the four friends, and Gollum, followed the road eastwards. They marched along wearily, too tired to be worried about their danger. To Ron, the world seemed to consist of an endless weary death-march to nowhere; he put his feet in front of each other automatically, not really thinking much about anything.

When he looked at the others, he began to worry about Harry. His friend was walking along, his head held low, as though he were one of the zombies they had learned of from Professor Lupin, in their Defense Against the Dark Arts classes in their third year at Hogwarts. All of them looked bad, but Harry looked the worst of all. Looking up for a minute, his eyes met Ron's, and Ron shuddered; there seemed to be no intelligence there, no life.

When they paused for a moment, Ron went over to Harry and took his pack off his back, opening it up. "Let's divide this stuff up among ourselves, Draco, Hermione. I think Harry's in a bad way."

Draco seemed to come back to himself, coming out of the fog he'd been in. "Not a bad idea, Weasel," he commented with a trace of his old sarcastic style. "Here, Harry, let's have a look at you." Harry submitted, unresisting, to Draco's examination, turning his head this way and that as Draco peered at him. Draco's brow furrowed in worry. "Harry---Harry, are you all right? Can you hear me?"

At this, Harry seemed to remember where he was; all of a sudden he was more like his old self than he had been. "Ron," he whispered, his voice sounding raw and unused. "Draco---Hermione." He shook his head, and took off his glasses to wipe them with a rag from his pockets. "How long---how long have we been marching?" He looked around himself as though he were just waking up.

"Quite a few hours, Harry," said Hermione. "I don't think we're too far from Minas Morgul, but you looked like you were having trouble. Ron got us to stop. We're going to take your pack for a while."

"Thanks, Hermione. This...thing...I'm carrying feels heavier and heavier. For quite a while, I didn't even know where I was; I was staring into the wheel of fire again." Draco raised an eyebrow, and looked quite worried.

"Er, Harry---I've been wondering whether I should bring this up, but it seems to me that you've been changing. Are you sure that you're still in command of yourself?" Ron looked at Draco in some surprise, as Draco went on: "No offense, but you've been putting me in mind of my dad, more and more. The way you treat Gollum, for instance."

"And what's wrong with the way I treat him, Draco Malfoy?" snarled Harry. He straightened, giving Draco a piercing green-eyed stare. "He's sworn to serve me, and if this job requires that I allow him to do it, I will, do you hear me?"

Ron wouldn't have been much more surprised to see Professor Dumbledore kiss Professor McGonagall. This didn't sound a bit like the Harry Potter he'd known for a long time. Draco looked at Harry, his eyes wide, and Hermione turned pale, exchanging a quick glance with Ron. *We have got to have a long talk about Harry, and soon!* thought Ron.

Draco was worried, but not cowed by Harry's anger. "If you want to know, Harry, you're changing, and I don't like the way you're changing. Cast your mind back to Hogwarts--remember Hogwarts? Dobby did a lot worse things to you, back at the beginning of your second year at school, but I'd have been shocked to see you treating him like dirt!"

Harry sneered at Draco. "Oh? Says the pot to the kettle! *Who* was it shook Gollum silly for speaking disrespectfully of Faramir and his men?"

Draco smiled his old, sarcastic smile. "Me. Tell me, Harry Potter---*do you want to be like me?*" His smile grew broader, and more mirthless. "You were nearly sorted into Slytherin, you know. Have you been getting---*ambitious* lately?"

Harry's face twisted into a mirthless grin very like Draco's. "Draco Malfoy, until you've borne this---this Hell-forged burden---that I bear, you don't know the meaning of the word 'ambition,' and you'd best pray that you never find out! I see the wheel of fire before me, if I'm not trying hard to think of something else, and it offers me anything I want."

"We could take turns with the Ring, you know, Harry," offered Hermione. "Remember? We discussed it, back at Hogwarts." Harry whirled on her, his green eyes ablaze with madness.

"NO! Nobody touches the Ring but me, nobody, do you hear me?" he snarled, in a harsh voice totally unlike his usual tones. Before Ron or Draco could make a move, he slapped Hermione with every ounce of strength in his body, sending her flying backwards. She landed on her side, and rolled over to look up at him, shock and fear written on her face, which was reddening where Harry had hit her.

As one, Ron and Draco pulled out their wands. "*Petrificus Totalus!*" The spells hit Harry simultaneously, and he fell like a poleaxed steer, his eyes wide with shock. Ron ran over to Hermione's side, nearly weeping, and knelt to see if she was all right. She was rubbing her cheek, and the look in her eyes combined shock and a bit of wonder.

"I'd have sooner expected Hagrid to make a pass at me than---than this," she murmured. "Gods above and below, what's gotten into Harry?" She shook her head rather ruefully. "He's a lot stronger than I realized." She grinned rather tremulously at Ron, who felt tears prickling at the corners of his eyes. Probing her teeth experimentally with her tongue, she nodded to herself. "Okay, at least none of them are loose, thank all the gods---what my parents would do if I came home minus half my teeth, I hate to think!"

Once he was sure Hermione would be all right, a blazing rage against Harry overwhelmed Ron; this was to his anger over what he had seen as Harry's duplicity in entering the Triwizard Tournament as Hogwarts Castle was to the Burrow. Two swift strides, and Ron was by Harry's side, snarling "*Finite Incantatem!*" As Harry came out from under the Petrification charm, Ron grabbed him by the front of his tunic, yanking him to his feet with strength he hadn't known he had.

"Have you gone mad, Harry? Look what you just did!" raged Ron. "What has gotten into you, Harry Potter?" A sudden evil thought came into Ron's mind. "Or---should I start calling you Harry *Dursley*? You're acting a lot like a Dursley! Guess bad blood will out in the end, won't it?" He sneered. "Even *Dudley* never did anything that low, from what you've told

me!" He shook Harry with every ounce of force he had in him, making his head rock on his shoulders and his teeth rattle. His glasses nearly went flying.

Ron's harsh words and actions seemed to pierce the fog that had engulfed Harry's mind. He stared at Ron as though he were coming awake out of a nightmare. When he registered what Ron was saying, he looked past Ron at Hermione, and burst into wracking sobs. Tearing himself free from Ron's grasp, he knelt by Hermione's side. "Forgive me, Hermione! Oh, please forgive me! I couldn't help myself!"

Hermione looked at him, consideringly, before asking: "What made you do that, anyway, Harry? Was it the Ring?"

Harry nodded, not quite daring to speak at first, then choking out: "When you mentioned taking It away from me, I---I think I went mad for a second or two. It was like you had turned into a little, creeping, twisted thing, slobbering and reaching out with your patty-paws for It---and I couldn't bear the thought of anybody else touching It." He looked at his friends, his green eyes wide with fear. "If---if I can't control myself---can I count on you to do---what'll need to be done?"

Hermione patted his cheek. "Count on us, Harry. You've been a wonderful friend to have, and I understand about not being able to help yourself sometimes." She looked grim for a second. "At the same time, try to keep yourself under better control. You don't know how close I came to pulling my wand out and hexing you a good one---I'd probably have done it, if Ron and Draco hadn't beaten me to it." Numbly, Harry nodded. She got to her feet, and pulled him up. "Come on, we've got miles to make. Where is Gollum, anyway?"

Gollum had been at the edge of their little colloquy, and when things had gone bad, he had run and hidden himself. It took Hermione several minutes of gentle coaxing to lure him from his hidey-hole, and he capered with joy to see that things had calmed down. "Are we nicce again? Are we all friendses? Are thingss going well?" he asked, his lambent eyes going from one of the four friends to another. "Let'ss get going, nicce mageses and pretty girl, we've got mileses to go before we sleepss, yess, mileses to go before we sleepss!"

As they started off again, with Hermione in the lead, followed by a very hangdog Harry, and Ron and Draco in the back, Draco murmured: "I guess Robert Frost truly is a great poet---if even Gollum quotes him, he must be good!" Ron looked at Draco in weary wonder. Who but Draco Malfoy would think of poetry on the borderlands of Mordor? It was all Ron could do to even remember anything before their endless, weary death-march---the Burrow, his family, and Hogwarts were like dreams he had once had, dreams that dissolved into nothingness upon waking into the reality of their endless trek.

Some time later, they came around a bend and found themselves staring up at the city of Minas Morgul itself. It was the first man-built city that Ron had seen since leaving their own world---Moria had been built by dwarves---and it was not a pretty sight. It was glowing white, as Ron had expected, but not a nice, healthy white. It was the pale, phosphorescent white of decay, the white of a fish's belly. There were endless windows in it, and Ron felt as though they were being watched from on high, although they heard no sound from the defiled city. He felt almost paralyzed, and it took great mental effort to lift one foot up and put it down, then the other, and continue moving forward. The others, he noticed with one corner of his mind, were having trouble as well, and even Gollum wasn't finding it easy to go on. But, in the end, they had to do it.

They came to a bridge that over-arched a strange stream, that seemed to give off icy vapors that almost looked like steam in the light from the city. The bridge was carved with horrible shapes, human and animal, all twisted as though they had sprung from the mind of Voldemort himself, or of somebody much darker. On both sides of the stream there were meadows where strange flowers grew, luminescent and smelling slightly of decay. For a second, Ron wondered what Professor Sprout would have made of them.

Harry started stumbling forward, as though he planned to cross the bridge and enter the city. Ron and Draco leaped forward suddenly, and grabbed him. "No! Not that way!"

Gollum gibbered, hissing: "No, not that way, preciouss! Mussn't go there, mussn't go into the cccity! Bad, wicked, cruel peoples lives there, doesn't they, *gollum*?" He pointed to a path that led up, through a gap in a stone wall, up toward the dark mountains. Harry struggled for an instant, then submitted to his friends' hustling him along.

On and on they went, desperate to get out of eyeshot of the horrible city. Ron pushed himself onward with strength he hadn't known he had. Every second they were in eyeshot of Minas Morgul, he expected something horrible to happen---some awful Thing or other to come out of the city after them.

Finally, some distance above the city, Harry flung himself to the ground. "I---I can't go on any more," he gasped, his breath coming in sobs. "Forgive me, my friends, but I just can't go on any farther!"

Ron glanced around. They were sheltered from eyeshot of Minas Morgul by a large outcropping of rock and some bushes. "It's all right, Harry," he said, awkwardly patting his friend. "You can rest here for a while. We can all rest here; I'm not sure that any of us wouldn't be better with a rest." At his words, the four from Hogwarts, along with Gollum, dropped to the ground, gasping for breath. Ron had not realized just how weary he was; every fiber of his body ached with weariness, and his feet hurt more than he would have believed possible.

Some unguessable time later, Ron felt the very rock shaking beneath him. Instantly, he was alert, his wand in his hand, and he noted that Hermione and Draco were just as on-edge as he was; both of them had their wands out and their free hands near their swords. Harry stirred, and rose, his eyes blank.

From behind the mountains to the east came a red light, illuminating the whole valley with a ghastly rubeous glow. The rumbling in the earth that they had heard for some time grew incredibly loud. "Eruption!" snarled Draco, peering around. "That's Mount Doom, or I'm Neville Longbottom!"

"That you certainly aren't, Draco," answered Hermione, managing to grin even in the circumstances. "But look down at Minas Morgul, everybody!" Ron pulled himself up to the top of the sheltering outcrop, and stared down at Minas Morgul in horror. He felt, rather than saw, Draco and Hermione pulling themselves up beside him.

Below them, Minas Morgul seemed to be answering a call from Mordor. Lightning leaped up from the central tower, its blue flame spattering against the sullen, low-hanging clouds above. More bolts of lightning came from the hills surrounding the city, and then there was a horrible screeching sound that made all four Hogwarts students, and Gollum, clap their

hands over their ears. It was like the scream of a dying horse, thought Ron, only a thousand times magnified and worse. Instinctively, the watchers ducked their heads.

As the terrible cry finally ended, Ron dared to raise his head, staring down at the horrible city. Minas Morgul's gate, shaped like an awful mouth with gleaming teeth, was wide open, and an army was pouring out from it.

They came on in endless waves, all in black. First, Ron could see cavalry, hundreds upon hundreds of them, led by One far greater than the rest. He gasped. That looked very like the descriptions of the Black Riders, and he had heard, at Rivendell and elsewhere, that the very leader of the Nazgul, the Witch-King of Angmar, ruled in Minas Morgul. That had to be him---he fit the descriptions Ron had heard perfectly.

Suddenly, the Witch-King, if that was what he was, stopped and seemed to peer around. Ron could all but feel the fell rider's regard, like the beam of a mighty searchlight such as Harry had described---Harry had seen such things, in a school field-trip to the Imperial War Museum, in exhibits that covered what Ron still thought of as the Grindelwald War.

Oh, gods, Harry! Ron slid down the outcrop, to see how Harry was. He found his friend shaking, holding his head. Looking up as Ron arrived, he ground out: "He's---looking for me. I think...I think he senses the Ring!"

"Let's try the Invisibility Cloak," said Ron. He had put it in his pack when they had divided their burden, and he now yanked it out and pulled it over himself and Harry. It did seem to help. As they crouched together under it, clutching tightly to each other for such comfort as it could give, Ron felt fear such as he had never known. Even the presence of the Balrog had not frightened him so, since Gandalf had been there and he had had enormous faith in Gandalf.

"Where are you? Where are you, Ron, Harry?" came Hermione's voice. "Are you under the Invisibility Cloak?"

"Yeah, we are. It seems to help. Harry thinks that the Witch-King---that big guy down there---can sense the Ring," Ron answered. "Get in under here with us!" Hermione came on in, huddling close, and Draco followed in a few minutes. It was terribly crowded with all four of them under the Cloak, but it was just big enough to conceal them.

Whether it was the Cloak counteracting the Ring's call, or time constraints, the Witch-King quit looking around, spurring his horse on ahead to war. Ron could feel the terrible pressure inside his head abate, and he cautiously peered out from under the Cloak.

Below them, the armies still poured forth from Minas Morgul, and Ron trembled inside, fearing for the safety of their friends in the Fellowship, and for all the free peoples of Middle-earth. He knew little of how Muggles waged war, here or at home, but he couldn't see how such an army as he had seen could be stopped by anything short of mighty magicks---and with Gandalf gone, he knew of almost nobody save Galadriel and Elrond who could wield magic and was not a thrall of Mordor. *We've got to be successful, we've just got to!* he thought.

That thought brought him back to Harry. Harry was sitting up, trembling uncontrollably. Draco was kneeling beside him, taking his pulse with a worried expression. "Mild shock, I think," he murmured. "If I had only completed mediwizard training! Still, we can do a little for you, Harry. Lie down!" Obediently, Harry lay down, and Draco spread his elven-cloak over him. Wordlessly, Hermione held out her cloak, and Draco accepted it with a nod, spreading it over Harry as well. "There. That should do for now, I think."

Harry drifted off to sleep, and Ron gathered Draco and Hermione to his side, a little way away. They could easily see Harry, and could keep watch from where they were, but they also were able to speak privately, at least if they kept their voices low. *Unless there's an Animagus nearby*, thought Ron---but there seemed to be few animals of any sort there, even insects.

"Have you been noticing changes in Harry?" asked Draco, his narrow, clever face twisting with worry. "I've got to say, I don't care for a lot of what I've been seeing. This little incident just now was only the icing on the cake; I'm not sure that he can be trusted with the Ring."

"I've been noticing things, too," murmured Hermione. Of itself, her hand rose to her cheek. "Even before---what happened---happened, he's been changing, and not all the changes are for the better. The old Harry Potter, the one I knew back at Hogwarts, would never have let Gollum abase himself so totally. This one accepts it as his rightful due, and I think he enjoys it."

"Yes, that's one of the things that reminded me of my father at his worst," nodded Draco. "My father used to take out his anger on the house-elves at Malfoy Manor, to the point where it actually broke some of their conditioning to serve masters. You all know Dobby, I take it---well, before Father got his claws on him, Dobby was a house-elf's house-elf---proud to serve and willing to do anything for his masters. Now, he's become one of the few free elves in history, simply because my father abused him past his breaking point."

"Harry's not generally been abusive to Gollum," Ron had to admit. "If anything, Draco, you and I've been harder on the little wretch than he has." A ghost of a grin flitted across his face. "Kind of like the Auror trick that I read about in a book about the Grindelwald War, 'Good Auror, Bad Auror.' With us to be fierce and mean to him, and Harry and Hermione being nice---usually, at least---Gollum's bonded to Harry and Hermione."

"Don't I know it!" giggled Hermione. "Remember those rabbits?" They all three shared a long, quiet laugh at the way Hermione had played Gollum like a violin. Hermione went on, her dark eyes flicking around to make sure Gollum was not within earshot: "I don't trust Gollum an inch, though. He has plans, plans of his own, and somehow I don't think they were made with our welfare in mind---or with anything in his so-called mind but 'the Precious for poor little Smeagol,' if you know what I mean. I think that if we all caught our deaths from Purple Spotted Brainpox, he'd be perfectly happy."

"I think we can trust him not to betray us to the Enemy, at least," murmured Draco. "He knows just as well as we do that if the Enemy gets hold of the Ring, it's curtains---for the free peoples, for everybody else, and especially for the one who dared to hold it for so long. At least, that's how You-Know-Who would see it, and I don't think that Sauron's too different." Ron thought about it, and had to agree. Since the Triwizard Tournament, he had read up on the Dark Lord's reign of terror in the Hogwarts library, and he knew that

Voldemort was not one to react with tolerance to anybody else trying to keep something from him that he regarded as rightfully his.

"I think that if we have to, we can keep Harry under control with spells," said Hermione, giving Harry a worried look as he stirred under the cloaks. "The Ring soups-up his own magic, but only when he wears it. If we absolutely have to, we can overpower him and take it."

"That, Hermione, had better be an absolutely last resort," responded Draco solemnly. "The Ring does not treat those who take it with violence well. Fancy becoming Gollum---or Mrs. Gollum?" Hermione paled, and shook her head. Ron thought about being like Gollum, and felt sick inside. *There are worse things than dying, and if You-Know-Who ever saw Gollum, he'd know it!* he thought.

Harry stirred, and his eyes opened. "I feel a lot better now," he said rather muzzily, as his friends hurried to his side. "All I needed was rest, I think. I felt like putting the Ring on, but I knew that I mustn't---I'm not nearly wizard enough yet, even with the Ring, to stand up against the Witch-King of Angmar."

"That makes sense, Harry," said Hermione, taking his wrist and timing his pulse as she had learned in Girl Scouts. "You're getting better. This isn't quite like normal shock; I think it was just a combination of being tired out and the proximity of that awful Black Rider." She cocked her head on one side, thinking. "Let me see---at Rivendell, I read about the Black Riders, and one of the side-effects of their proximity is fear. Get too close, and you come down with 'Black Breath,' which leeches the very life from you, slowly." She shook her head. "You know---I wonder if they're somehow or other related to dementors? They do sound like dementors-times-a-hundred, don't they?"

At last, when the armies had finally finished pouring out of Minas Morgul below them, the four friends rose and staggered on. Harry did look better for having rested; his color was better than Ron remembered seeing it in a long time. He thrust his hand into his tunic at one point, clutching something, but Ron didn't think it was the Ring; he saw light escaping from within Harry's clothes.

After a while, they found a set of stairs that wound up, up deep into the mountains. The stairs were steep, but manageable; Ron spared a thought for how much more trouble the hobbits would have had, with their shorter legs.

At first, the stairs seemed to have walls on either side, but gradually it widened out. Ron could not quite believe how high they went; on and on and on into the heights they toiled, and still there were more steps in front of them. Although it was getting dark, what with the mountains shutting off what light the sky offered, none of them tried a torch or a *Lumos* charm; they all knew that just because they hadn't seen anybody watching didn't mean that nobody was watching.

When the stairs came to an end, the travellers threw themselves down for another breather. "I wonder how high up we are? The air feels thin, somehow," murmured Hermione.

Ron had no idea how high up they were. All he knew was that if he never saw another staircase again in all his life, he'd be perfectly happy. The air did seem rather thin, now that Hermione had mentioned it. At least, his laboring lungs seemed to have to work harder than

he would have expected after putting out the same amount of effort back in Britain. He wriggled his toes in his boots---*thank the gods*, he thought, *for Hermione insisting that we buy and wear the best boots available!* Bad boots, or other foot trouble, would have slowed them down considerably, and would have made the long trek agony after a while.

Draco muttered to himself, "I don't know how high up we are. It feels higher than I ever remember going back in Britain, but that doesn't mean much. Britain's not exactly known for mountains, not compared to, say, Switzerland. I was there once, but didn't get near an Alp---dear pater was attending some sort of Death Eaters' meeting there, and took me along as camouflage. Even the Aurors wouldn't quite believe that he'd drag his thirteen-year-old son to a Death Eaters' meeting---more fools they!"

After a bit of rest, they got to their feet, doing deep knee-bends to get the kinks out of their leg muscles. Gollum seemed very pleased to see that they still intended to go on. "Good, good! Masster and his friendses have now climbed the Straight Stair! Now comes the Winding Stair, yess, that comes next!" The four friends groaned in unison.

"*How* many bloody stairs have they got in this place, anyway?" moaned Draco, speaking for all his friends. "Who built them, anyway?"

"I'd bet that the Men of the West built them, long ago, after Sauron was overthrown temporarily. I don't think Sauron would have bothered," murmured Hermione. Addressing Gollum, she went on: "How much farther is it to the top of this bloody pass?"

"Winding Stairses are longer, yess, but not sso ssteep," cackled Gollum. "Pretty girl and masster and their friendses will then get to a tunnel." He hissed softly to himself, in a language Ron couldn't understand. "Once through the tunnel, we're nearly at the top, O yes we are!"

Leaning on his staff, for all the world like an old, old man, Ron got to his feet. He felt as decrepit as though he were older than Professor Dumbledore---not that he expected to get to that age, or even to survive the trip. On one level, he had come to terms with his certainty that the quest they were on would end in their deaths, and, although he was at peace as regarded himself, he felt a brief rush of terrible sorrow for Harry, and Hermione---and even Draco Malfoy. "Onwards," he muttered, glad of the darkness so that his friends could not see his unmanly tears, "Let's go! This is no place to linger!"

Up and up and up the four from Hogwarts climbed. Ron wondered, wearily, what Gollum ran on; the creature never seemed to truly tire, and he almost never seemed to eat. After clambering along a path at the edge of a cliff, they came to the Winding Stairs, which were on the side of the hill, and did not have walls on both sides. At one point, Ron looked back, and he could see the road to the city of Minas Morgul, stretching out far below them, shining with an unhealthy phosphorescence. He shuddered, and turned away, to continue with his friends.

When the stairs ended, Ron found himself standing on a level again, and for a second, he staggered; he had gotten so used to climbing the stairs that standing and walking on level ground felt slightly odd. Around them, Ron could see tall crags of stone, spearing into the sky like the fingers of a great deformed hand. To the east, he could see a cleft in the mountains, narrow and high-walled, with a finger of stone pointing skyward against the reddish haze.

He took another look. Was that a tower he saw, off on one side of that cleft? He wished bitterly for the Omnisciences he had left behind at Hogwarts. "Look, you! Is that a tower I see?" He took Draco by the arm and pointed. Hermione peered along his arm, her big dark eyes narrowed with the effort to see. Harry took off his glasses, wiped them with a sigh, and put them back on, before he looked. When he saw what Ron had seen, Harry turned to Gollum with a very stern look on his face.

"That *is* a tower, or I'm my cousin Dudley Dursley!" he snapped. Making a long arm, he grabbed Gollum by the shoulder, drawing him close. "Answer me! Have you led us into a trap?" The others gathered around; Ron could see Draco fingering his wand, and Hermione looked, for a moment, remarkably like Professor McGonagall confronted with one of his brothers' less-well-thought-out pranks.

"Yess, it is a tower," muttered Gollum. He could not quite look Harry in the eye. "No places not watched, not here they aren't. But this may be least watched. Remember what we told you? He is worried, yess, but worried about armies, about huge armies, not four mages."

Harry sighed. "Well, what can't be cured must be endured, as I would think Professor Dumbledore would say. It's a long way off, and if they're watching for full-scale armies, they might well not notice us. Besides," he smiled for a second, the smile that Ron dimly remembered from before their terrible journey, "we have the Cloak. We might well be able to sneak past them without them even seeing us." He shrugged his shoulders, a resigned look on his face. "In any case, let's sit down for a bit and rest our legs. I, for one, am well and truly knackered."

They got out some food from their packs, and drank some water from their canteens, but went easy on it. Ron remembered what he had heard at Rivendell, that Mordor was a desert, and he didn't much fancy being caught in such a place without water. An idea struck him.

"Hermione?" Hermione paused in her gnawing at a square of hard-baked bread to look at him questioningly. "Do you know of any spells for locating water in dry places?"

Hermione considered the question, putting her head on one side. "Not as such, although I'm sure such a thing exists. Perhaps a Location Charm might do the trick. If Hogwarts wasn't in Britain, but somewhere in the desert, we'd probably have had to learn any such charms right off." She gave Ron a smile. "Professor Flitwick would know, of course--- but we can't ask him, can we?" Ron shook his head.

Harry looked around. "Gollum might know how to find water. Come to it, where is he?" He looked around, a worried expression on his face. "Smeagol! Where are you?"

"He's off to find himself something to eat---he wouldn't touch our food, and I'm not too sorry about that. We need every mouthful we've got, and if he can feed himself off things we can't eat, more power to him!" murmured Draco. He yawned. "Gods, but I'm tired! I'd give my right arm for my bed at Hogwarts!"

Ron could see that Harry and Hermione were also sleepy. He, himself, was too keyed-up to sleep. "Why don't you three take forty winks? I'll put on the Cloak and keep guard over

you. That way, if our Dear Little Friend comes back, I'll be able to keep an eye on him. He's up to something, if I'm any judge."

"Yes, he is," murmured Harry, as he lay back on the softer earth nearby. His voice muzzy with sleep, Harry went on: "He's got some plan of his own. When we get to the border of Mordor itself, I rather expect him to try some trick or other. Till then, though, we've got to trust him. Gods, I wish Gandalf were here!"

Draco and Hermione were both asleep already. Hermione was curled up under her cloak, her head resting on her arm. Draco was tossing and turning, murmuring in his sleep. Ron slipped on the Invisibility Cloak and watched over his three friends. Harry and Draco had one thing more in common, he mused---they both seemed to have awful nightmares. Some of the things he could catch from Draco's disjointed mumblings chilled him to the bone. Retreating up to the top of a nearby rock, Ron set himself to watch and wait. For some reason, he felt as keyed-up as if he'd been Ennervated, or drunk a glassful of Pepperup Potion.

Some time later, Gollum came slinking back. He seemed slightly startled to find the others asleep. Ron watched, not trusting him an inch, as he came closer. A shudder ran through the creature's skinny body as he looked up toward the pass where they were to go, and Ron suddenly seemed to see him in a different way---an old, old hobbit, bowed and broken by a burden too great for him to bear, cursed to live on and on long past his time. He shook his head angrily. *Feeling sorry for Gollum? What next, Ron, finding excuses for the Dark Lord?* he thought.

Gollum came closer, and leaned down to look at Harry more closely, careful not to touch him---he apparently remembered what might happen if you startled Harry Potter out of his nightmares. A sudden wild urge to give Gollum a surprise hit Ron, and he crept off his perch, sneaking up behind Gollum.

When Ron goosed him, Gollum leaped into the air, squealing. He landed on his feet, whirling around to see Ron standing there grinning at him as he discreetly rolled up the Invisibility Cloak. "Ach, sss, you ssurprised us!" His unlovely features twisted in anger. "You ssneaked up on us ssomehow, nasty ssneak!"

This byplay awoke the others; they snapped awake, clutching for their wands. "What's going on now?" grumbled Harry. "For once I wasn't dreaming of the Wheel of Fire, and somebody has to awaken me!"

"Nassty mage ssneakss up on uss, yess, he sneakss up on uss and pokes us," whined Gollum. Draco gave Ron a quizzical look.

"Really? You goosed Gollum?" At Ron's nod, Draco chuckled reluctantly. "Not a bad one, Weasel. You are Gred-and-Forge's brother, though---and you've been remarkably good about that sort of thing. I suppose one prank after all this time isn't too bad."

"In any case, we're probably to the point where we can find our own way," said Harry. "Smeagol! I think you've kept your promise. If we can go on from here on our own, you can go where you want to, as long as it's not to the servants of the Enemy."

"No, no, musst keep on guiding, guiding nice masster and pretty girl, and their friendses," hissed Gollum, giving Ron a very dirty look with his lambent eyes. "No resst, no food for poor Smeagol. Smeagol must go on farther with you, yess, he musst."

"So be it, then. Next stop, Torech Ungol!" With that, Harry moved off up the pass, and the others followed in his wake.

Chapter 20

Hermione Granger looked carefully at the opening of the tunnel. It seemed to stretch for a long, long way back into the mountain, and from it came a horrid, carrion stench; her stomach twisted and knotted as she inhaled, and she breathed through her mouth, very shallowly.

She wondered how it had come to be there. It did not look like the work of men, or of any other race; no dwarf or elf would have left it looking so unfinished. But if it were merely a natural cave, then why, she wondered, had Sauron not either guarded it or destroyed it, so that nobody could use it to come into his lands? Leaving it unguarded did not sound like the Sauron that she had learned so much about, digging through records at Rivendell and Lorien. One of her main assets in her eternal quest to satiate her curiosity was a near-perfect photographic memory for anything she read, and she had studied every bit of information she could find about Mordor and the Dark Lord, Sauron.

"Phew, what an awful pong!" exclaimed Ron, wrinkling his nose. "I'd bet there's orcs in there---that smell's worse than anything I've smelled since Moria!" He turned a suspicious gaze on Gollum, who stared back sulkily. "You were in Moria, weren't you, Smeagol?"

"Yess, we was in the great pitses, the mineses the dwarvess dug," muttered Gollum, not meeting Ron's eyes. "We ssaw you there, didn't we, *gollum*? We ssaw your big fight with the orcses."

"From a nice safe place, I daresay," sneered Draco. "Not," he added, "that I can blame you for that lot. If I could have watched that fight from somewhere safe, I'd have been delighted."

Hermione shuddered. She couldn't remember much of the big fight in Moria---her memory fuzzed out sometime after she had found the Book of Mazarbul---but what she did remember gave her dreadful nightmares sometimes. She sometimes dreamed that she, or worse, one of the others, was standing on King Durin's Bridge instead of Gandalf, facing the Balrog alone, with no spell they could cast having enough of an effect on the creature to do more than slow it down.

Tearing her mind away from thoughts of the Balrog, and of Moria, she concentrated on Gollum. The skinny creature was watching them, not meeting any of their eyes. When he thought nobody was looking at him, he gave Ron an *Avada Kedavra* look. Hermione had thought Ron's prank was pretty funny, but apparently Gollum Was Not Amused. "You've been through this, have you? Tell me, did it smell that bad when you were there before---or do you mind bad smells?"

Gollum gave Hermione an unreadable look. "Pretty girl doesn't know what we minds, does she, preciouss? No, she doessn't know what we minds. But that'ss the only way into the Black Land. If masster and pretty girl and their friendses wants to go into the Black Land, they has to go through the tunnel." More than that he would not say, muttering to himself in a language none of them could follow. Hermione wondered for a second if it was his native tongue.

"At least we'll have light, if we want it," said Harry. Pulling out his Everlight torch, he switched it on experimentally, smiling for a second at the pool of light it cast into the mouth of the tunnel. "And, if these things give out---we used them pretty heavily in Moria---we do have our wands, and we all know how to do the Light charm."

Hermione pulled out her own torch and shone it into the tunnel. It stretched out for a long way, farther than the beams reached, and did not show any sign of anybody inhabiting it. "I don't think that orcs live here. They'd have littered the place with their trash, I think. Also, that smell doesn't smell much like Moria."

"We've got no choice, anyway," sighed Ron. "If we want to go to Mordor, this is the only way that's open. I remember those Black Gates, and don't fancy trying to bang them open with anything less than Gandalf, and the entire armies of the West, and a whole herd of those huge elephants, behind me."

That summed up the situation pretty well, Hermione thought. She shone her torch around, and couldn't see any sign of danger. No orcs or other creatures could be seen, and no sign of them was visible. The dust on the floor was thick, and unmarked. With a small mental shrug, she went inside. Nothing happened, so she turned to her companions and said: "Well, come on, you lot. This tunnel won't get any shorter for us standing around gawping here, will it?"

"You're right, I suppose," sighed Draco. With a martyred look, he followed Hermione, and behind him came Harry and Ron. Behind all of them crept Gollum, shielding his eyes from the beams of their torches.

As they travelled deeper and deeper into the mountain, side-tunnels began opening up on either side of the main tunnel. None of them looked anything like ways through the mountains; when Ron, Harry, Draco or Hermione would shine their torches into the side tunnels, they usually were shown to be too narrow to pass through. In the few cases where there was doubt, they asked Gollum, who always pointed down the biggest tunnel, snuffling and whispering to himself.

As they marched, they separated into two groups, slowly but surely. Draco and Harry ended up taking the lead; Harry seemed to be feeling better than he had for quite a while, and he moved on ahead with Draco, the two of them chatting in low voices about their lives in England.

Behind them, Ron and Hermione looked at each other speculatively. Hermione felt a huge rush of affection for Ron as she looked carefully at him. His sunburnt skin made her long to rub ointment into it to soothe it, and the stoic way in which he bore that torment filled her with pride that he was her friend. She had never expected to feel so close to anybody as she did to her companions, but after all the dangers and hardships they had shared, and the times they had saved each others' lives, she didn't think that she could be closer to anybody, even if she were married to them. The thought that her friends would likely not all survive their journey wrenched her heart with sorrow; she didn't care that much about herself, but cared more deeply than she would have believed possible about the others.

Ron looked at her narrowly. She wondered if he wanted to kiss her, and what she should do if he did---Harry and Draco were far enough ahead up the tunnel that they had a little privacy, for about the first time since they'd come to Arda. But instead of leaning toward

her for a kiss---a kiss she had decided to cooperate with---he asked: "Is it my imagination, or do you feel like something's watching us?"

Startled out of her reverie, Hermione thought about it. Now that Ron mentioned it, she did have the feeling of something watching them. A feeling of poised malice, gathering itself to pounce. Flashing her torch around, she gasped at the sight of dried and mummified orcish corpses, tangled up in some sort of cords. Some of them were hanging from the tunnel's ceiling, far above them, while others were lying along the sides of the tunnel.

"Smeagol? What are those doing here, Smeagol? Smeagol, where are you?" she called. Just then, a stone flew out of the darkness and caught Ron in the back of the head, knocking him flat forward on his face. A second later, she was knocked off her feet, and a pair of clammy hands were running all over her body, with a familiar, hateful voice hissing in her ear.

"Ach, sss, we has you, we has you now, pretty girl! We wants you, yess, we does! *We* won't hurt masster, not at all! We promised that we wouldn't hurt masster, didn't we? When She gets done with him, we'll have the Precious again, a nice little reward for poor Smeagol! Nassty elf-looking mage and masster are for Her, and pretty girl and nassty ssneaky red-haired mage are for uss!" Gollum's breath was in her face, foul-smelling as anything she had ever encountered, and his grip was incredibly strong.

Hermione felt rage such as she had never known in her life. To be betrayed, after all this time and all those weary miles, by this wretched creature whose life she had saved several times over---it was too much! The thought of him eating Ron, and abandoning Harry and Draco to some awful fate or other, kindled a fury in her. The indignity of him pawing and slaving over her body merely added kindling to the fire.

Instinctively, Hermione lashed out with her knee, catching Gollum just where she wanted to. With a whistling shriek, he flopped off her, curling around his belly where her knee had caught him. She yanked him to his feet and slapped him, back and forth, wondering in some distant part of her mind what had happened to her that she could do such things. Mostly, though, she was preoccupied with rage at Gollum for his betrayal. "Damn you, Gollum, you filthy little wretch! What have you done to us?" she shrieked.

Gollum twisted and writhed in her grip, and managed to tear free. Before she could stop him, he leaped to the ground and ran away up the tunnel. Hermione yanked out her wand, but he was out of sight before she could get a spell off. At that moment, Ron groaned, and Hermione forgot all about Gollum. Kneeling over Ron, she peered at him closely. He was semi-conscious, but when she pulled his eyelids open and looked, his pupils were the same size. That, at least, was a relief; she hadn't forgotten how much trouble she'd had after her head injury in Moria.

Ron stirred and groaned. Raising a hand to the back of his head, he muttered: "What in Hades hit me? The last thing I remember was walking down this tunnel, and now I find myself here." He looked at Hermione. Suspicion was written across his face as he asked: "Where is Our Dear Little Friend? My head hurts, and I knew he wasn't too happy with me. Did he try something?"

"Yeah, he did." By this time, Harry and Draco had come back to see what was wrong. Concern on his face, Draco bent and examined Ron's head, turning it one way and another, letting the light from Hermione's torch play over the spot Gollum had hit.

Looking up, Draco caught Hermione's eye for a second, and she thought that she had never seen him look so grim before. "We were lucky that the little wretch didn't pick a bigger stone---or that Ron has a good hard head. You've got an ugly cut on the back of your head, Weasel, but I don't think you're concussed. You'll probably have a nasty headache for quite a bit, but other than that, you'll be all right." Draco scowled. "Damn it, I knew I should have insisted that Gollum stay where I could keep an eye on him, I just knew it! What kind of Slytherin am I, to trust him or relax near him for a second?"

"A preoccupied Slytherin, Draco," murmured Harry. He gently patted Draco's shoulder to pull him out of his fit of self-reproach. "We all were overconfident, and I thought that he wouldn't try anything till we were in Mordor. Guess I was wrong. Can you forgive me, Ron?"

Ron nodded. "Right now, the sooner we're out of this bloody tunnel, the happier I'll be. I don't know about you, but I think there's something in here. I feel like we're being watched. I don't think it's orcs---orcs are not the subtle, waiting type, at least that I've seen. This is something else, or I'm a Squib!"

Hermione thought about it. Now that Ron had mentioned it, she did feel a brooding presence in the tunnel, more strongly than she had before. From their expressions, Harry and Draco could feel it too. "Come on," groaned Ron, tottering to his feet. "Give me an Ennervate charm if you need to, but let's get out of this place! Even bloody Mordor couldn't be worse!"

As it happened, Ron didn't need to be Ennervated. The four friends stumbled forward, using only one torch at a time to conserve the magical energies in them. Harry had pointed out that the Everlight torches were getting suspiciously dim, and ordered that all but one be put out. "After all, if we stay together, one at a time will do us, and we don't know how long this bloody tunnel is, do we?"

Hermione felt even more uneasy as they went on their way, and kept her wand in her hand, ready for use at an instant's notice. Again and again, they saw corpses, long-dried and covered with dust, many of them wrapped in the same sort of cords as the ones Hermione had noticed earlier. The four friends looked at them uneasily.

"I don't know what killed those orcs, but whatever it is, it can stay away from me and I'll be perfectly happy," muttered Draco.

"I keep thinking I've seen cords like those before. And when I say 'before,' I mean 'before we came to Middle-Earth,' answered Harry. "It's on the tip of my tongue, but I just can't place it." Ron didn't say anything, but his eyes grew wider and wider, until Hermione started worrying about his mental state. Had Gollum's treacherously thrown rock done more damage than Draco could identify? Draco was good at first aid, as Hermione could testify, but he was still no mediwizard. Hermione wondered what Madam Pomfrey would have said about his injuries.

After a while, the four passed in front of the biggest side-passage of all. Shining the light down it showed no sign of life, and they paused. "Do you think that it's a shorter way out of this place?" whispered Hermione. The feeling that they were being watched was stronger

than it had ever been, and she trembled with fear and eagerness to get out of where they were. She had remembered what "Cirith Ungol" meant, and hoped desperately that she had come to the wrong conclusion.

Harry leaned forward, sniffing the air. "Remember what Gandalf said, back in Moria?" The other three shook their heads. "He said 'The left-hand way smells like there's bad air down there.' In tunnels like these, gasses and such can build up over centuries, and they can asphyxiate you quicker than you could imagine." He pointed up the main tunnel. "I think this is still the main path, here. We'll follow it."

Hermione was very glad to leave the side-tunnel behind. She had fought the urge to scream while they stopped and peered down the side-tunnel, since the feeling that something was watching them had become overwhelmingly strong---strong enough that she wished that she was back in Moria, instead of where they were. After they left the side-tunnel, though, the feeling abated for a while, but did not completely go away.

Some time later, Hermione thought she heard a low scraping sound behind them. At first, she ignored it, thinking it was just her imagination, but it got louder and louder. The others heard it too; halting in the middle of the tunnel, they turned slowly, and Harry shone the torch down in the direction they had come, as they readied their wands.

At first, they could see nothing, but then a cluster of reflecting lights appeared, seemingly far away at first, but coming closer and closer. At this sight, Ron gasped, and Hermione saw him start to shudder convulsively. He whimpered something, low down in his throat, that Hermione couldn't understand.

:"What is it, Ron?" asked Harry tensely. He raised his wand and roared "*Lumos!*" flooding the tunnel with light as bright as an arc-light. After so long in the dark, Hermione found it slightly painful, and she shaded her eyes to look down the tunnel and see whatever it was that was pursuing them.

At the sudden blaze of light, whatever it was seemed daunted. Hermione remembered that Sauron's creatures generally hated bright light; most of them had been originated by Morgoth in the dark fortresses he had built, ages and ages ago, and light was painful to them at best and fatal at worst. In any case, the answering lights shrank and went away. Then the Everlight torch and Harry's wand went out together.

"What happened, Harry?" asked Draco, his voice shaky with fear. "Damn it, we need light in here! This place is bloody well dangerous!"

"Don't bleeding well ask me! Try your wands! All of them at once!" But the *Lumos* spell did no good, and the Everlight torches would not light. "May the gods damn that bloody Gollum to the hottest pits in Tartarus! After we spared his life, again and again and again!" Harry's voice was bitter. "I wish Gandalf was here---or the Lady of Lorien!"

An idea struck Hermione. "The Lady of Lorien! Didn't she give you a gift when we left Lorien, Harry?" As if in a dream, she remembered the scene---Harry protesting that with friends and companions such as he had, he needed no gifts, and the Lady praising his courtesy and modesty, and pressing something on him nonetheless. "She said it was light---a bit of Earendil's light! Why didn't we think of that before?"

"We haven't been anywhere this dark before, Hermione, and we also could use our magic everywhere else. Let's see, it was down my shirt-front..." As Harry fished for the phial the Lady had given him, Hermione saw it begin to give off light, a sweet, pure light very different from the sickly phosphorescent glow of their usual *Lumos* charms, or the yellowish light cast by their Everlight torches. It felt almost like a bit of warm English sunlight, and she felt as though she had never really seen light before. It illuminated the tunnel nearly as brightly as day, but did not dazzle the travellers.

In the new light, which Harry held aloft in his hand, Hermione saw something more horrible than almost anything she had ever seen. It looked like a spider, and reminded her of Harry's description of Hagrid's former pet, Aragog, but it was even bigger than Aragog, at least as Harry had described him. She had never felt fear of spiders before, but this was to any ordinary spider what Hogwarts Castle was to Hagrid's hut. Terror slashed through her mind, freezing her to the spot for what seemed like an eternity, as the loathsome beast moved closer and closer on its eight claw-ended legs. The lights they had seen earlier turned out to be reflections from its constellation of eyes, mounted on all sides of its be-fanged head. She could hear Ron beside her, all but sobbing, but it was as though he were a hundred miles away. Her mind was consumed by fear and loathing of the awful apparition that was coming toward them.

But the sight of the light given off by the Lady's gift seemed to daunt the creature. As the light grew brighter and brighter, it slowed its approach, and then began to backtrack. Slowly, so slowly, it came to a halt, then began to retreat, moving backward up the tunnel away from the terrible brightness of Harry's phial.

"Oh, gods, so that was his little plan," murmured Draco. Poor Ron seemed to be all but paralyzed; Hermione could hear him as his teeth chattered convulsively. "Gollum, if we get out of this alive, and I get my hands on you, you are *dead!*" screamed Draco, his face a mask of rage. "Do you hear me, Gollum? You are dead, dead, dead! I'm going to kill you myself until you're sorry!" Pointing his wand at the spider-thing, he shrieked "*Serpensortia Maxima!*"

At Draco's words, a huge serpent appeared, coiled up in the tunnel right in front of the spider. Rearing its head up, it regarded the spider with cold, disdainful eyes, and hissed a long, low hiss. Harry called out to the snake, his Parseltongue incomprehensible to Hermione, but the snake seemed to understand. Lashing out with its head, it struck at the spider, sinking its fangs into the spider's body just behind its head.

At this, the spider stopped its retreat. Rearing up on its back four legs, it wrapped the front four around Draco's snake, and sank its poison-dripping fangs into the sides of the great reptile. The snake let out a sound like nothing Hermione had ever heard, a high-pitched whistling cry of agony, as it reared its head back and struck, again and again.

"It can't get through the spider's skin! We've got to help it!" yelled Harry. His words startled Hermione into action; yelling something she herself didn't understand, she charged down the tunnel, aiming her wand at the spider's body and shrieking a Reductor Charm, blasting a hole in the spider's loathsome integument. The spider jerked in agony, and one of its legs reached out, yanking Hermione into the air. Draco and Harry shouted in rage and terror as they ran down the tunnel to help her.

"Hermione! Oh, Hermione!" came Ron's voice, as he snapped out of his state of terror-induced paralysis. To Hermione, he sounded as though he was on the verge of hysteria,

screaming: "Die, you horrible thing! Die! Die!" With that, Ron leaped into the fray, hitting the spider with a fire spell. As its outer shell began to burn, it released Draco's snake, which lay dying on the floor of the tunnel, to concentrate on the four friends.

As the agonized creature lifted her high, bringing her closer and closer to its poisonous fangs, Hermione grasped her wand carefully, readying her next spell. She had always been good at lighting magical fires, and she had never needed one more before in her whole life. When she cast her spell, it went just where she had wanted it to; the spider's whole head burst into flames, and it forgot her completely, throwing her to the tunnel floor to beat its head with its front two legs and try to extinguish the flames. Hermione hit the ground hard, and for a second or two, all she could do was gasp and try to get her breath back, as Ron hauled her back up the tunnel out of the way.

As the spider was reeling, distracted by the agonies of Hermione's fire and Ron's magical blasts, Harry and Draco went on the attack in their turn. Leveling his wand, Draco shrieked "Crucio!" as Harry cast a Patronus. The spells both worked; the horrid creature began convulsing uncontrollably under the lash of the Cruciatus Curse, as Harry's stag-like Patronus lowered its antlers and charged.

Despite the Cruciatus and Patronus, the spider was far from out of the fight. It managed to beat Hermione's fire out against the wall, and advanced again to the attack as the Patronus faded. Rearing up on its forelegs, it aimed its spinnerets at the four friends. Hermione pointed her wand and yelled another fire-spell as the spider took aim, hitting it just at the right moment and in the right place. The rear of the spider began to burn, and when it shot out silk, the silk burned too, falling to the ground harmlessly between the four from Hogwarts and the spider.

"Good job, Hermione!" yelled Draco, patting her on the shoulder as he knelt down beside her. "Can you stand?" At her nod, he hauled her roughly to her feet. "We've got to coordinate our fire! I think that thing's not as tough as the Balrog was, and I think we can beat it!"

Nodding numbly, Hermione took her place beside her friends. Ron looked gray and shaky, but very determined. Harry, still holding aloft the phial of Galadriel, was grimly ready to see this through. Draco had a strange, fey smile twisting his face as they readied their next spells.

Draco tried another Cruciatus Curse, as Harry, Ron and Hermione simultaneously cast Reductor Charms. All their spells hit the target, which would have been hard to miss in any event; Hermione could see more holes appearing in the spider's thick, horny outer integument, dripping a horrible gooey liquid over the floor, as the spider began to writhe under the lash of the Cruciatus.

That seemed to be about as much as their enemy could take. Suddenly, it began to retreat, heading down the tunnel as fast as it could. They saw it squeeze into a crack in the wall that Hermione would not have believed it could enter, and disappear. As soon as it was out of sight, their wands began giving off light again.

Draco stared after the spider, his fine-featured face twisted by pure hate. "So, Gollum, you thought you'd feed me to a spider?" he murmured, his voice low and even, as it only was when he was in a real rage. "And you, spider---you dared to think you could eat a Malfoy, did

you? Did you, you misborn creature?" As he spoke, his rage grew and grew, palpable as something solid.

"I've an idea, people!" said Harry. "Follow me!" He led them down the tunnel, keeping a sharp eye out for more enemies, holding the phial of Galadriel up high. When he got to the crack the spider had entered, he peered in carefully, ready to leap back in a second. "Yes! I can see it!" He turned to his friends, his normal smile seeming to twist into an evil leer. "Watch!" He set down the phial of Galadriel, which went out, reached into his shirt---and disappeared.

"Harry! Are you mad? Don't you know that thing's dangerous?" yelled Hermione as she ran down to where he had to be. "What in Tartarus do you think you're doing?" Beside her, Ron and Draco ran down to the crack, holding their wands aloft to provide light.

As they got to the edge of the crack, they heard Harry's voice. "*Engorgio! Engorgio! Engorgio!*" Hermione looked into the crack, and saw the spider begin to swell and swell, its wounds bleeding more and more freely as it became hopelessly jammed inside its hidey-hole. New splits and wounds opened in its hideous hide as it began to be crushed by the unyielding rock. Its legs twitched convulsively as it grew, and grew, and grew some more. From its burnt abdomen, goo came spewing out of its fire-ruined spinnerets.

Harry became visible again, shaking. "If I ever try putting that thing on again, for the gods' sake knock me out right then!" he muttered. "I feel all in, like I'd run a hundred miles or played Quidditch for seven days straight!" He glanced down the crack, smiling grimly. "That should take care of our friend, I think---I used the Ring to soup up my own spell, and you know what the Engorgement Charm does!"

"Even if it does wear off, it won't be soon, and we'll be miles away with any luck," said Draco. He bowed to Harry, only slightly mockingly. "You're a worthy Ringbearer, Harry Potter, and I don't mind saying so." He looked around. "In any case, why don't we get out of here? The scenery here doesn't appeal to me at all---it makes Moria look like the Costa Brava!"

Ron was in a very bad way. Once the fight was over, he went to his knees, breathing hard and staring at nothing in particular, his face working convulsively. Hermione knelt beside him, trying to get him to acknowledge her presence, but he was off in some realm of his own mind, beyond where she could reach him. Harry and Draco looked at him in concern.

"I don't fancy the way he looks, Harry," muttered Draco. "Doesn't he have some sort of fear of spiders?"

"He does," answered Harry, "and we had a very bad run-in with giant spiders our second year---the year the Chamber of Secrets was opened. It wasn't fun for either of us, but it was far worse for him, I think." He turned to Hermione. "Can you conjure him up a stretcher, the way Snape did after we were in the Shrieking Shack?"

"Yeah, I think so," answered Hermione. She raised her wand and made a few passes, and a stretcher appeared, floating in the air. Gently, she urged Ron to lie down on it, and it followed them as they turned and headed out, back to the light. Behind them, the great spider continued to twitch and bleed, unable to extricate itself from the crack it had thought would provide it with a refuge.

Chapter 21 -- Where the Shadows Lie

After a while, the four friends came out to a ledge overlooking a desolate plain. As far as the eye could see, it stretched out in front of the mountains, under a sky filled with cloud as dark as any Hermione had ever seen. In the distance, they could see Mount Oroduin, a black triangle rearing up from the grey flatlands below, silhouetted against the sky.

"It's so dark," muttered Hermione. Her wristwatch had somehow or other survived all she had been through; it was a fine Swiss diver's watch, a gift from her uncle on her last birthday. She peered at it in slight disbelief. "I can't believe it's noon." The watch was still going, and pointed almost straight to noon, but it was as dark as a cloudy late winter afternoon. *If it had been this dark in Muggle Britain, the street lights would have been coming on*, thought Hermione.

"At least I won't get sunburnt any more," observed Ron. He had managed to shake off the effects of his arachnophobia, and was back on his feet. "That's about the best thing I can say for this place. Did you ever smell such a pong of sulfur in the air in your lives?"

Hermione had to agree. The air had a distinct tang of sulfur, reminding her of Professor Snape's potions laboratory. It was warm, but not uncomfortably so, and there was a bit of breeze. She had seldom or never been anywhere where the air was drier, though.

"Welcome to exciting, exotic Mordor," intoned Draco. "Travel to different, wonderful places, meet new, strange people---and hope to Hades they don't decide to play Show-and-Tell with your innards!" He shook his head. "I've been in some very bad places, people, but this has to take the cake."

"Oh, it's not that bad," commented Harry. He looked around, taking in the desolate view as though it was the Cotswolds. "At least this should be the last part of this trip, and the gods know I'll be glad to have this over!"

Hermione muttered: "Damn that bloody Gollum's soul to the hottest pits in Niflheim! He said this way wasn't guarded." She snorted contemptuously. "If that awful city, and---what we found in the tunnel---didn't constitute 'guarding,' I'd hate to see what would!"

"We did," said Ron. "At the Black Gate, remember?"

"He said that Sauron *wasn't expecting trouble*, up this way," corrected Draco. "If he was right about Sauron expecting whole armies, I can actually see his point. An army would have had to fight its way past Minas Morgul, and then slog up those stairs, and then---there was that gods-awful spider." He shuddered for a second. "I'm no orc-lover, the gods know, but I wouldn't wish what must have happened to those dead orcs in there on He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named himself!"

Ron paled at the thought. "Can we discuss something else?" he asked in a strained voice. "Anything else? Please?"

"Okay, Ron. I'm sorry." Hermione would once have been less surprised to see Neville Longbottom getting points for Gryffindor from Professor Snape than to see Draco Malfoy apologizing to anybody, especially Ron Weasley. However, this new Draco had been through a lot of changes. Hermione had seen such changes before; a neighbor at home had come home

much improved from a stint in the Army. She, herself, was greatly altered from the insecure little girl who had first gone to Hogwarts. *If he'd always acted this way, we'd have probably always been friends*, she thought.

She peered down the path again. Something was moving, and moving purposefully. "What's that?" she muttered, pointing down to where it was. Sure enough, it was trouble. As it got closer, she could see that it was an orc-patrol, heading in their direction.

"Bloody hell!" hissed Ron. "We're caught!" He pulled out his wand. "We're going to have to fight!"

"Easy, Ron," cautioned Draco. "They probably don't have any idea we're here. They don't act like they're actively trying to catch us. That's probably a routine patrol."

"How do you know so much about military matters?" asked Harry. He was squinting at the distant orcs, rubbing his glasses with a dirty handkerchief in an attempt to clean them. Hermione was quite grateful that her own vision was so good. She didn't know how well Harry could see without his glasses, and didn't like to think about how much they'd be hampered if he managed to break the silly things. *Unless somebody put an Unbreakable Charm on them---I wonder if anybody thought of it?* she mused. *If only we'd covered those in Charms!* But they hadn't, and unless a teacher or older student had done it, it wouldn't be done until they got back to Hogwarts.

"I have an idea, people," muttered Draco. "You know I know the Unforgivable Curses--"

"Yes, you do. I guess growing up to be the next right-hand man of the Dark Lord has its uses," commented Ron. Draco looked narrowly at him, obviously wondering if that was a dig, as Ron went on: "I was wondering---why didn't you use the Killing Curse on that...that...that spider?" Hermione was pleased that he'd gotten the word out without too much trouble.

Draco shrugged. "Of all three of the Unforgivables, it's the most tiring to cast. When we were in Moria, I was in better condition. By the time we saw---that nasty thing with eight legs---I was fairly well knackered." He looked haunted. "In Moria, and before---I had never cast the Killing Curse before, not for real I hadn't. I was surprised at how much it took out of me. I'd have mentioned it then, but we were busy."

"In any case, you do know the Unforgivables," snapped Harry, impatient with this digression. "What of it?"

"I was thinking that if you hid, and I took the Invisibility Cloak and put these orcs, or at least their leaders, under Imperius, we could pump them for information." Draco shrugged. "It's probably a stupid idea, though..."

"No, it's brilliant! I wish I had thought of it!" gasped Harry. He rooted in his pack, producing the silvery Invisibility Cloak. "Here! Put it on! The rest of us can hide, and keep an eye on things."

Suiting her actions to Harry's words, Hermione took cover, pulling her elven-cloak up over her head to disguise it. Their elven-cloaks blended enough with the rocks that even when

you knew where to look and what to look for, the eye slid right past without noticing anything amiss. Hermione could see down onto the main path, and as the orcs got closer, she could hear them. They appeared to be from different tribes, which was a relief, since she could understand their speech.

These orcs had, plainly, been through the wars. They kept a close formation, moving up warily, their weapons at the ready. The two leaders, one with Sauron's own Lidless-Eye emblem on his helmet, the other with a sort of moon-with-skull, were out in the lead, discussing the situation.

"Garn, Shagrat, this is a fool's errand! Nothing, and I mean nothing, could get past Shelob! That Shrieker's just having nightmares, and they expect us poor Uruks to rout our boys out and march them all over to quiet their fears down."

"Hush, Gorbag! They've got eyes-and-ears everywhere---in my lot, and in yours, too, like as not. We've got our orders---'*Nazgul uneasy. Spies feared on Stairs. Double vigilance. Patrol to top of Stairs.*' And when Lugburz calls, we obey."

Gorbag spat. "Likely as not, somebody spotted Her Ladyship's Sneak---you know, that starved-looking thing?" Shagrat nodded, and Gorbag continued: "He went out this way years ago, and we had orders from Lugburz to let him pass. He was on some errand for Lugburz. He's been back this way a time or two---seems to have some sort of arrangement with Her Ladyship. Guess he's no good to eat; she wouldn't care about orders from Lugburz."

"That she wouldn't!" The two orc-captains laughed rather ruefully. "She's eaten enough of my boys, over the years!"

She? Her Ladyship? Hermione puzzled for a minute, before it came to her. *Of course! The spider!* Apparently the orcs knew perfectly well that she was there, and didn't like her either. *Never thought I'd be agreeing with orcs!* she thought.

Shagrat was going on: "In any case, I wish we had some of those snufflers---you know, the scent-trackers. These rocks don't show any footprints. A thousand spies could've come this way, and we'd never see a sign of them, would we?" The ordinary soldier-orcs were a little way away, and he lowered his voice. "Me, I'd like to get off, away from all the big bosses---the Shriekers, and Her Ladyship, and even Lugburz. What do you say?"

"Once the war's over, there should be a lot more room," agreed Gorbag. "We can set up somewhere quiet, with a few good boys. Like old times!"

"Ay, like old times," growled Shagrat. By this time, the two orc-captains were very close, and Hermione wondered when Draco would make his move.

"*Imperio!*" Draco's voice startled Hermione, coming out of nowhere close beside her; she hadn't realized he was anything like that near. The two orc-captains' faces went slack as the Imperius Curse hit them, robbing them of their free will. First one, and then the other, began spitting out orders in a harsh language. Hermione had heard that language before, in Moria, when they were fighting the orcs, and the sound of it made her shudder.

When their captains began giving them orders, the ordinary orcs hurried off, up the path past where the four friends were hiding. Once they were out of sight, Draco came out from under the Cloak. At his gesture, the two captains approached him, their faces blank and expressionless.

"Okay, people, you can show yourselves. I just told these two to send their troops off up toward the mountains, to make sure that nobody had managed to climb over those mountains. That'll keep them well out of the way for quite a while. I don't think I could control all of them, although orcs are easier to keep under Imperius than humans are." Draco quirked a grin. "They're already optimised to be controlled from outside---I just have to keep overriding Sauron's commands."

"Is that going to be a problem?" asked Harry, as he rose and came forward. "Sauron's incredibly powerful. Remember? He 'makes Voldemort, and all the Death Eaters that ever lived, look like Squibs.' I've got nothing but admiration for your skill---" Draco preened, as Hermione smiled to herself at his vanity---"but I don't think even Professor Dumbledore and Voldemort together could stand up to Sauron."

Draco looked slightly troubled. "I know. If Sauron were to bend all his will toward taking them back over, I wouldn't stand a chance of resisting him. However, Sauron's mind---I can sense it, vaguely, through theirs---is mainly occupied far away. He's fighting a big war in the west. From what I can pick up, he's concentrating heavily on attacking a big city in Gondor."

"Too bad for Gondor," muttered Harry. "Right now, though, I'm concerned with you perceiving Sauron's mind. What is it like for you?"

"Like being a mouse at a cat show," muttered Draco. "When I perceive him, I make myself very small and hope that he doesn't notice me there." He shuddered. "Sauron's mind is unbelievably powerful and ancient, and evil beyond anything I've ever experienced."

"Which, people, is why we're here," said Harry. "Can you get these orcs to tell us about their home?"

Draco narrowed his eyes slightly, and the orc wearing the moon-and-skull motif spoke up. "My name's Gorbag. I'm Captain of the Tower of Cirith Ungol. This---" pointing to the other orc---"is Shagrat. He's from Lugburz---the Dark Tower, as you call it." Despite the Imperius Curse, the two orcs gave each other a glower; Hermione thought that Gorbag hadn't liked having Shagrat sent to him, and Shagrat looked down on Gorbag. "We've got a few hundred of our boys---both the Tower garrison and the ones Shagrat brought here from Lugburz---back at the tower."

"Can you order them all out to patrol the hills?" asked Ron. He looked at the orcs narrowly, rubbing his chin. Gorbag nodded.

"They're not like us. We are the fighting Uruk-hai, the creations of the Dark Lord himself. They're common orcs---Snaga-hai, or slave-folk, we mostly call them. We order---they obey. Or else." Both captains gave the four friends very predatory grins, showing lots of sharp teeth. Hermione decided she really didn't need to know what "or else" entailed---she thought she had a pretty good idea.

"Good. Draco, put the Cloak back on and follow them back to their tower, and make sure that they clear all the orcs out of there. Once they're gone, we can use the tower to rest up in for a little while." Harry had made a decision, and Hermione couldn't find any fault in it. As long as Sauron remained ignorant of the subversion of the tower's commanders, there was a chance that they could sneak far into Mordor before anybody was the wiser.

While they were waiting for Draco to come back, the three Gryffindors sat down on the ground. *Harry is awfully twitchy*, Hermione thought. *Ever since we've come in sight of Mount Doom, he's been acting odd. Or*, she corrected herself, touching her cheek where he had slapped her earlier, *more oddly than before*.

"This place kind of puts me in mind of Egypt," muttered Ron. "I remember how dry the air was there, and it feels a lot like that here. Egypt didn't smell of sulfur, though; I imagine that bloody volcano off in the distance has something to do with that."

"It does," said Harry. His face looked haunted and haggard. "I can also sense the Lord of Mordor, through---the burden I carry. Orodruin's under his control, to some extent. He uses it to create a lot of this cloud cover we're under here," pointing skyward, "so that the servants he inherited from his old master, Morgoth, can move about freely most of the time. Trolls can't stand daylight at all---they turn to stone---and common orcs really, really dislike it."

A crunching noise on the path alerted them, and they looked up, wary as so many wild animals, as Draco Malfoy pulled off the Invisibility Cloak. "The orcs have all been given their marching orders---to disperse through the mountains and look for intruders---but we've got a problem, people."

"What's up?"

"Over in front of the castle, there's---something---I don't know what it is, but it radiates evil and magic. I was afraid to get too close to it. I want you to have a good look at it, because it puts me very much in mind of my late pater's collection of Dark artifacts." Draco wiped sweat from his brow.

"We're coming." With that, Harry got to his feet, sighing wearily, and Ron and Hermione followed him as he trudged down the path toward the main gate of the castle.

Hermione looked up at the castle curiously; she hadn't seen much that had been built by men since coming to Middle-earth. Moria, of course, had been built and designed by the dwarves, and Rivendell and Lorien were examples of elven architecture. It was obvious that this castle had not been constructed to defend Mordor from outside threats; its defenses were oriented inward, toward the plain of Mordor. Built against a sheer cliff, it frowned down upon the flatlands.

"This place isn't to keep people out of Mordor, but to keep them in," Hermione muttered. Ron nodded; they were walking side-by-side, with Draco and Harry up ahead, as they had in the tunnel. "It doesn't look like orc-work to me. Notice how carefully it was built?"

"You're right, as usual, Hermione," said Ron. "I'd bet it wasn't built by Sauron. Probably the men of Gondor built it."

"That, on the other hand, *is* the handiwork of Sauron," said Hermione, as they rounded a path and came in sight of the things that Draco had seen. They stood, or rather, sat, on either side of the path, guarding the gate into the old castle. At first, Hermione was reminded of the statue of the seated king they had repaired, in Ithilien, which now seemed like an unimaginably good and pleasant country. She took a second look, and shuddered at the sight of them; they radiated Dark Magic powerfully enough that she could have pointed unerringly to them with her eyes closed, as she could have pointed to the sun on a sunny day.

The two statues had tripartite bodies, and three horrible, vulture-like heads apiece. The heads were pointing in different directions, and watched in all directions at once. She knew, in an instant, that these were not the work of men. Everything about them screamed "Sauron!" in her mind.

"I--I think those things are watching the path," choked out Harry. "They're there to set off an alarm."

"So how do we disarm them?" asked Ron. *At least this problem took his mind off giant spiders*, thought Hermione. "Hermione," Ron went on, "do you know any good trap-disarming charms?"

Hermione gave it careful thought. "I can't think of anything I know of powerful enough to disarm *those* things. Magic here doesn't work quite the way it does at home---our Disarming Charms are a lot more powerful than they should be, at our level of experience---but I can't think of anything that would work on those."

"Maybe the Invisibility Cloak, if we all got under it, would do the trick?" ventured Ron. He could also sense the magic coming off the horrid statues, from the expression on his face. Hermione privately thought that even a Muggle, had one been present, would have been able to tell that the statues were evil.

"We can give that a try," said Harry, uncertainly. "I do not want to put on the Ring again, whether it makes me invisible or not. Here, in Mordor, if I were idiot enough to put it on, He would sense me in a second, and know just where I was. If he couldn't take over my mind, he would send those Black Riders after me, and even with the Ring souping up my magic, and you behind me helping out, that sort of fight could have only one end."

Hermione pictured it in her mind. She could see it all too clearly---the four friends, back-to-back on a hilltop here in Mordor, with the Nine Riders swooping in on them, their spells not enough to hold off the terrible servants of Sauron. The thought made her shiver---and then she thought about what would happen to them, to any of them, were they fools enough to allow themselves to be captured alive.

"Uh---Draco?" she asked. Draco turned and looked at her, slightly puzzled. Had she let her fear make her voice tremble? Angrily shaking her head, she tried again. "Draco---if, by some chance, we're cornered and we can't escape---"

"Yes?"

"If we're certain to be captured, I'd rather not be taken alive. You know the Unforgivable Curses. If there's no hope at all---I'd rather go quickly." As Draco's eyes

widened---he had understood her instantly---she plunged on: "I'd rather go out by the Killing Curse than face Sauron's questioners. Can I count on you to do that, if there's no other way?"

Ron and Harry looked slightly green. Apparently they hadn't quite thought things through that far ahead---*typical males*, she thought with a mixture of affection and exasperation. Draco, obviously, had. He nodded solemnly, with no flicker of humor or malice dancing in his eyes, for once. "I'll do that, Hermione. I wouldn't let *He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named* face Sauron's inquisition." He looked at them all, his expression haunted. "I'll do it for all of you, if you want."

"But--what about you?" asked Ron. "You can't let yourself be captured, either!"

Draco nodded. "I know. I'll figure something out." He sighed, looking inexpressibly weary. "I don't know what, but I'll figure something out. I'll have to---and the gods know I'll have incentive to think, won't I?"

Ron looked up at the statues. "I wonder--how do those things work?" He turned to Draco. "Can you get our new friends here to tell me how they work?"

Gorbag nodded. "Yes. We can---turn them off---by informing them that you have a right to be here." He grinned a fanged grin suddenly. "I had to do that when Shagrat, here, arrived."

"Make it so." Draco's command spurred the two orcs into motion, and they lumbered forward, into the castle, past the terrible statues. After a while, Gorbag came out and motioned them on in.

As Hermione passed them, she took a long, hard look at them. She thought she could puzzle out how the various charms and spells on them worked, but she knew she didn't have the time---or the skill at dealing with unknown and dangerous enchantments---to do much about it. *If Professor Flitwick or Professor Dumbledore were here*, she thought rather wistfully, with a stab of sudden homesickness, *they might be equal to disarming those things*.

The inner courtyard had the usual signs of orcish tenancy. It was thickly strewn with litter and piles of dung and spoiled food. "These creatures keep house worse than anybody I've ever seen," commented Ron in an undertone. "If my Mum were here, she'd have the dark blue horrors that I'd even consider staying here."

"Needs must when the devil vomits into your kettle, Ron," murmured Hermione, earning herself a startled giggle from Ron. *Of course*, she thought, *he hasn't seen Muggle telly and never saw Blackadder!*

The interior of the castle, when they reached it, was even worse. "This place is a rubbish tip," commented Harry. "However, it is out of sight and under cover---as long as you can keep those orcs under Imperius, Draco."

Draco considered it. "Imperius usually needs to be specifically taken off, but can sometimes wear off on its own, or be fought off by a strong-minded subject. I don't think we have too much to worry about here. At the strength I used, it would take weeks or months for Imperius to begin wearing off, and orcs are not exactly creatures of strong mind, if you know what I mean."

"Good. Let's check this place out and settle on in." With that, Harry began ascending the stairs to the first floor, with his friends behind him. Despite the control Draco had over the orc-captains, they were taking no chances---their wands were out and ready for a fight. The stairs themselves were treacherous; ill-kept-up and scattered with all sorts of trash and orc-goo, they demanded careful climbing if one did not want to fall.

Even with careful climbing, though, things could happen. As Harry put his weight on one riser, it suddenly gave way, and Harry was pitched off-balance. With a howl, he fell off to one side, down to the ground floor of the castle, a storey below.

Ron, Draco and Hermione all swiftly cast charms to catch Harry and cushion his fall, but they had been caught unawares, and although they did manage to slow his fall somewhat, Harry landed very hard, lying still and silent on the ground floor. His friends rushed down to his aid.

When Draco reached Harry's side, he gently felt for broken bones, before lifting Harry's eyelids and peering at his eyes. He looked up at Ron and Hermione, his face grave. "He's alive---I think he'll be all right---but he's slightly concussed, and he'll be out for a while. I don't know how strong he'll be when he wakes up."

"Would an Ennervate Charm help?" asked Ron. Hermione shook her head.

"They told me in Lothlorien that only the fact that you got me there quickly prevented those from doing long-term damage. They said I should have had rest instead of having to run and fight and hike. We've got a safe hidey-hole here, at least for a while. I vote that we don't monkey with this more than we can help."

"Good idea, Hermione." Draco conjured a stretcher and loaded Harry aboard it, and they found a side-room to settle into. Once Harry was tucked up in the least-verminous orc-bunk they could find, Draco turned to his friends, and gathered them aside, a little way away.

"You know, I wonder if this isn't the time to do what we discussed, back in Hogwarts?" At their questioning looks, he went on: "We talked about sharing the Ring among ourselves, so that no one of us would fall too far under its influence. We forgot about that for quite a while, and Harry was---or seemed to be---holding up under it pretty well, so it slipped our minds. I don't like what I've seen lately, though, not one bit I don't. I say we should take the Ring off him for a while, while he's out and unaware of it."

"Who should take it?" asked Hermione.

"And what do we do when Harry wakes up?" Ron wanted to know.

Draco rubbed his chin. "I'd say we draw cards for it---you do have your Tarot deck with you, Hermione; I've seen you playing solitaire-Tarrochia with it now and then. If Harry really raises a fuss when he wakes up, we give him the Ring back. But right now, I think it's fuzzing his judgement and making him do stupid things."

"Okay. I'll go along with this plan." With that, Hermione began delving into her pack, coming up with her battered Tarot deck.

Chapter 22 -- The Dark Night of the Soul

The two boys watched Hermione with wide eyes as she handled the cards. While she was no Diviner, as she had found out to her chagrin, Hermione did enjoy a friendly game of cards of an evening, and had skinned her dorm-mates at Tarocchia more than once. The cards were old familiar friends, and she had been slightly sorry to find that nobody in Middle-Earth seemed to know about card games.

First, Hermione separated out the Major Arcana. While they had values, they were also the most magical of the cards, and she didn't want them disrupting the drawing. Then she shuffled again, her hands working automatically. Finally, she held out the deck. "Here. Pick a card. Just like Hogwarts---high card gets the Ring, at least till Harry's back on his feet."

Ron picked first, and raised his eyebrows at what he had drawn---the Six of Wands. "Not so good as it could be, not so bad as it might have been," he murmured, almost too low for Hermione to hear. Beneath his sunburn, his face was pale with fear; Hermione knew that he feared what the Ring could do, having seen what it had already done to Harry since he had acquired it.

Then Draco's long, slender hand flicked out, and pulled out a card. He had the Seven of Cups. Ron sighed with relief. Draco raised his eyebrows. "Interesting! But there's still twelve cards higher, aren't there, Hermione?" Was it her imagination, or was that hope in his voice?

Hermione nodded. Suddenly, she didn't want to pick a card. Her throat felt dry and parched, more than it had from the sulfur-laden air, and despite the warmth, she felt a cold chill down her back. When she reached for the cards, her hand trembled. *Stop it, woman!* she told herself sternly. When she was in full control, she pulled out a card and held it up. The Ten of Swords.

Ron had gone even paler, if that were possible. "Hermione---want a do-over?" Draco's eyes were as wide as saucers.

"No. I pulled the high card, so I'll have to take the Ring. Harry lived up to his part, and now it is my turn." Hermione's calm voice belied the terror she felt. She still remembered the slap Harry had given her on the stairs outside Cirith Ungol---and the madness that had twisted his face when she had suggested sharing the burden of the Ring. *What will he do when he awakes?* she asked herself. Then, unwillingly: *But what if he never does awake?* They were far from help, and Harry would have to get better, or die, on his own. Until he was fit to bear his burden, she and the others would have to substitute, as best they could.

Leaning low over Harry, she paused for a second. Even in a trauma-induced coma, Harry did not sleep peacefully; he stirred, mumbling something that she couldn't quite catch, then a low curse. *Is he addressing the Dursleys, or Voldemort---or Sauron?* she wondered. Ever since she had learned how horrible his home life was, she had been deeply indignant about the fact that no matter what, Harry had to stay with the Dursleys. She knew that Molly Weasley would have taken him in a heartbeat, and when she had told her own parents about Harry's home life, the Doctors Granger had been just as outraged as she was. It had taken an increasingly sharp exchange of owl-post between her mother and the relevant offices of the Ministry of Magic to make her mother give up the idea of snagging Harry away from Privet Drive for the summers.

Her touch as gentle as Harry's own mother would have wished, she ran her fingers down around his neck to find the chain that held the Ring. When she found the chain, she slowly pulled it up and over Harry's head, hoping not to disturb him. Once it was free, she sat back and slowly pulled it off him. Then she stopped, terror of the Ring and fear for what losing it might do to Harry conquering her resolve for a second. Inside her, a scared little girl wailed for her Mum and Dad, until she firmly shoved that little girl into the back part of her mind and locked the door on her.

To her eye, there wasn't much change in Harry when the Ring was no longer around his neck. He still seemed to be caught in a nightmare, mumbling things that she was just glad she couldn't catch. Before her nerve failed her, Hermione stood up, looping the chain around her own neck and letting the Ring fall to hang between her breasts. She was surprised at how heavy it felt---much heavier than she'd have expected from anything its size. When she had held it up, it had felt rather like an eye looking at her, malevolent and hungry and biding its own time.

"How---how do you feel?" asked Draco. To Hermione, he looked really frightened. "I remember how a lot of my dear late pater's Dark Arts artifacts worked. Quite a few of them had minds of their own, and we know the Ring does. Can you tell if you feel any different?"

At Draco's question, Hermione thought long and hard. With one part of her, she was unnaturally aware of the Ring. She could sense Sauron's mind, far away; it was a force of pure evil will, of malevolence and ambition and rage beyond anything she had words to describe. At the moment, he didn't particularly seem to notice her; he was concentrating, and she closed her eyes to find out what he was thinking about.

"I can sense Sauron. He's thinking about a war right now. It feels like he's planning to march against Gondor. I can see something about a rider wearing white robes, on a white horse. I wonder who that could be?"

"Beats me," said Draco. "If he'd been wearing gray, I'd have guessed Gandalf. But Gandalf's gone." Even after so long and so much, a spasm of grief passed over his face, as it did over Ron's, when the wise old wizard was mentioned. Hermione herself felt a twist of sadness; one of the things she could remember from the fight against the Balrog was seeing Gandalf, pulled into the abyss by the demon's fiery whip, shouting to her and her friends to save themselves with his last breath.

"Yes, Gandalf's gone," murmured Ron. "Pity he isn't here. But we've got to go on. He'd have wanted it that way, I think." Hermione couldn't disagree. In the end, Gandalf had seen all of them, himself included, as expendable in the cause of the quest's success. While he had obviously cared for them all, very deeply, he had been overwhelmingly concerned with the overthrow of Sauron.

Outside, the dim light of Mordor was getting steadily dimmer. "I think it's time we all turned in," said Draco. "I, for one, am well and truly knackered. I've already got those orcs to sleep, and they'll stay that way until I call them. Kind of like house-elves, but a lot uglier and stupider." Hermione giggled at the thought of Shagrat and Gorbag, bowing and scraping, wearing towel-togas and grunting "Malfoys is good and kind masters, yes they is!" Ron grinned, and Hermione knew that he was thinking the same thing. On that note, they got out their bedrolls and spread them out on the cleaner orc-nests, after Draco cast a quick spell to rid the place of vermin.

* * * * *

While her two friends dropped off rapidly, and Harry stayed unconscious, Hermione found that she couldn't sleep. The Ring, warmed by her skin, was like a huge weight although she knew that it wasn't anything like as heavy as it felt in her mind. She tossed and turned, her weariness fighting unsuccessfully with her insomnia. From a distance, she could hear the orcs' grunting snores, sounding like nothing so much as pigs in a trough.

Finally, she gave up. She sat up, and looked at the luminous dial on her watch. It was about one in the morning. *Gods, will I get any sleep at all?* she thought. *Perhaps a walk will help, if I'm careful where I put my feet.* The thought was mother to the deed; she sat up and pulled on her boots. Like her friends, she had long since gotten used to sleeping in her clothes; even had modesty not been a factor, it had been too cold to think of doing otherwise outside Mordor. She scowled to herself at the thought of how itchy and stinky she was, and thought longingly for a second about the well-appointed bathrooms at Hogwarts.

A soft "Lumos" brought light from her wand, and Hermione walked out of the chamber, up to the upper battlements. She thought that a little fresher air might do her good, although "fresh air" was a relative term at best in Mordor. When she came out onto the battlements, she extinguished the wand-light so as not to alert anybody that her friends had subverted the garrison of the castle.

The east wind blew, sighing softly as it passed over the dead lands, bringing the stench of sulfur to Hermione's nostrils. In the distance, Orodruin was erupting again, and she could hear its rumbling through her bones more than her ears; the volcano's fires reflected off the low-hanging clouds to give a little sickly light to the desolate scene. Resting her hands on the battlements, and her chin on her hands, Hermione gazed out over the Land of Mordor, thinking about the soldiers of Gondor that had once stood where she stood, keeping watch over the dark land.

So now I have the Ring, she thought. *I never thought that I'd get a ring from Harry--- and certainly not this way!* The thought cheered her with its incongruous humor, and she was glad. Even small smiles seemed like a victory over Sauron.

At the thought of Sauron, Hermione's mind turned to him, and she realized that she could still sense him. The Lord of Mordor was preparing a huge stroke, one that he reckoned would rid him of the menace of the West for all time. At least, that was what occupied most of his mind. Armies, and logistics, and supplies, and strategies consumed most of his thoughts. He did not seem to be paying attention to the back ways into his domain, thinking them securely garrisoned and, in the case of Cirith Ungol, warded as well by the giant she-spider that she and her friends had defeated. Even Sauron couldn't be everywhere at once, and the terrible riders that she had seen before, the ones enslaved by their Nine Rings, were all in the west, spreading havoc and ruin and doing the will of their Lord.

The sheer power of Sauron dazzled Hermione's mind, and she mentally shrank away from him before he could become aware of her. With one part of her mind, as she resolutely turned from him, she thought: *To have such power! What couldn't I do with it if it were truly mine?* She began to daydream---wild visions of herself, wielding the Ring and truly mistress of its powers, leading an army of men and elves and dwarves to throw Sauron from his throne. In her thoughts, she could see herself, reigning from a huge castle, like Hogwarts but more

spectacular, mistress of all arcane knowledge, able to cast any spells she desired, beautiful, terrible and worshipped by all men and women.

The thought of knowing more than Dumbledore, or even Gandalf, was incredibly tempting, as was being so far above Ron, Harry and Draco that they would be her love-sick puppets, willing to die for a smile. She had never thought much of the sort of girls who spent all their time working on pulling boys, but she was still female enough to want them to find her attractive. To have the power to make any male worship at her feet would be so wonderful...

"No!" she said, and startled herself by speaking aloud; the loudest sound she'd heard for a long time had been the sigh of the wind. *It's a trick, a trap. If I try claiming the Ring, here in Mordor, He'll see me and squash me before I can even begin to master it.* She shook her head, to try to free herself of the daydreams of domination and power that had entranced her. *And, she thought, if I managed to make myself mistress of the Ring, how long would it be before I was corrupted, and as evil as Sauron? Look what it did to Harry!* She rubbed her cheek again, thinking of the changes she had seen in Harry Potter's behavior since he had come into possession of the One Ring.

He had become far more assertive and masterful, which Hermione thought was not a bad thing, but he had also become more callous and proud than she had ever thought to see in him. The old Harry Potter would have been horribly embarrassed at the way Gollum had fawned all over him, but this new Harry Potter---Harry-plus-ring---not only had enjoyed it, but accepted it very much as though it were no more than his rightful due. She thought about herself becoming like that, and shuddered. *In Ron's words, someone might survive, if I took the Ring, she thought. Someone wearing my skin, answering to my name. But I don't think I'd like that person, or even want to know her.* It would be a betrayal of all they had done, and all her friends' bitter efforts, for her to take the Ring for her own, and to enslave them...she shuddered.

When she had firmly decided against claiming the Ring for herself, she turned and went back down into the castle, lighting her wand to show herself the way once she was indoors again. The orcs were still sleeping, and she opened the door to the room where she and her friends were camping quietly, but not quite quietly enough.

"Have a nice walk, Hermione?" asked Draco. She gasped and whirled, seeing him sitting up, watching her with wary cold eyes. While he didn't have his wand in his hand, it was very close by, where he could grab it in a second. "I heard you get up. I could hear you going up to the battlements."

"I--I was just thinking," stammered Hermione. Draco seemed to be looking into her soul, his light blue eyes expressionless.

"Wrestling with temptation?" Draco's voice was light, and soft enough to not wake Harry or Ron, but Hermione knew him well enough to know that he meant it seriously. Hermione nodded.

"Best two falls out of three, Draco. However, temptation's still there, waiting its chance." Hermione sat down and shook her head. "You know, I never really realized just what Harry was going through until now. This...this thing is incredibly tempting, you know." She grinned, knowing that she looked rather haunted. "I could see myself as mistress of all

knowledge, and so dazzlingly beautiful that you three would be panting after me like so many love-struck groupies."

"Groupies?" Draco looked slightly puzzled, and Hermione reminded herself that to a lifelong resident of the wizards' sheltered society, a lot of references that she understood would seem incomprehensible. "What in the gods' name are 'groupies?'"

"Think about Professor Lockhart, and how the girls reacted to him, and then put me in Lockhart's position and you acting like we girls did," explained Hermione. "Or think about how most men react to veela---times about a hundred or so." As Draco's eyes widened with comprehension, Hermione went on: "Among Muggles, very popular musical groups have women who behave that way, called groupies."

Draco whistled soundlessly. "And they say Gryffindors aren't ambitious! I'd have had a hard time turning away from things like that myself!" He grinned his old snarky grin. "Not that I have any lack of lovesick women throwing themselves at my feet, mind you!" Hermione suppressed a giggle. *Some things never really change*, she thought. For Draco to not be Draco's biggest fan would be like the Weasley twins giving up pranks, or Professor Snape being gentle with his students---a major change in the proper order of things.

"Well, I wonder if you'd really want to have to deal with being the new Gollum?" murmured Hermione. All of a sudden, she crouched over, peering around and blinking, her clever hands going everywhere at once as she muttered: "Ach, sss, where is it, where is it, we wants it, doesn't we, my preciouss, *gollum!* The nasty mageses has it, and we wantss it!" The imitation was so close to the reality that Draco snorted with laughter.

When he had stopped laughing, Draco shook his head. "No, I see your point. The Ring's too much for any of us to handle. I just hope that getting it away from Harry will do him some good." He shook his head. "I didn't like the way he was changing, for the most part." A noise from below caught his attention, and he rose, wary as a deer in daylight. "I'd better check on those orcs. I'm sure I heard something moving down there, and I left them orders that they were to stay quiet till morning."

When Draco had left, Hermione thought about it. Now that she noticed, the orcs' snores had cut off while she was talking to Draco. She shivered, wrapping herself in her cloak. Gollum was almost certainly still alive, and she knew that as long as the creature lived, he would be after the Ring. The thought of his hands running all over her body made her shudder in revulsion. She got up and closed the oaken door, feeling very glad that the only window was too narrow for even Gollum to slip through. When a soft knock came on the door, Hermione nearly jumped out of her skin. "Who is it?" she called.

"The Slytherin Superman. Can I come in? Are you decent?" Hermione let Draco in, noticing how grim he looked. "Shagrath and Gorbag are both dead. They were strangled in their sleep, as nearly as I can tell. That little wretch is back on our trail."

"How did he get past the statues?" asked Hermione. "And what do we have to do to get rid of him?"

"How he did it, I don't know. He might have found another way into this castle; it's built against that mountainside, and we know he can climb like a spider." Draco pulled out his wand and put a charm on the door to make sure it stayed closed. "Also, without its garrison, it

wouldn't be too hard to sneak into here. Most castles depended on their watchmen to keep sneaks like him out; the battlements and such were more to ward off full-scale attacks." He turned to face Hermione. "As for how to get rid of him, the only suggestion I have is to kill him."

Hermione considered that statement quietly. Although she certainly understood how much danger Gollum presented, her old principles still ruled her. In addition, now that she bore the Ring herself, she could understand how it had twisted Gollum's body and mind so far out of true that he would never know peace or happiness again. Even though she had firmly rejected the Ring's temptations, it continued to niggle at the back of her mind, telling her how much better off she'd be without having to worry about Ron's impulsiveness, or Draco's past history, or Harry's muddleheadedness.

"No, Draco. Only if there's really no other choice. As long as we can do something about him other than killing him, I don't want to kill him. I really can understand him now. Do you remember when Harry said that he understood Gollum, and that he cared about us too much to want us to know how he understood?" Draco nodded. "Well---I now know just what he was talking about. This Thing is incredibly insidious. It makes Tom Riddle's diary look completely harmless, just as Sauron makes Lord Voldemort look pretty small and petty."

Draco looked resigned, and rather haunted. "Very well, Hermione. It's your call. However, we do need to get some sleep; I, for one, am knackered, even with all the healthy outdoor living we've been doing." He rooted in his pack. "You want some sleeping infusion?" At her raised eyebrow, he went on: "It's just an infusion of mild herbs, steeped in water. I got it in Rivendell." He held out the bottle, and Hermione could see that it did bear Elrond's sigil, which she recognized from her time at his home.

"Thank you, Draco. I've wished that Madam Pomfrey and the healers of this world could compare notes sometime, haven't you?" Draco nodded as Hermione carefully poured out some of the precious stuff into her canteen's cup and knocked it back. *It tasted of good things*, thought Hermione---*starlight on the elven forests, the feeling of contentment that came with a good meal among good friends, the joy of finding out and knowing new facts*. As she replaced her canteen cup and handed Draco back the bottle, her eyelids grew heavy all of a sudden, and she barely managed to make it over to her bedroll before her legs gave out under her. With the last sparks of consciousness before sleep claimed her, Hermione felt Draco pulling her bedroll up around her, and she thought she felt a gentle pat on her head.

Hermione dreamed that she was floating, naked, in a place she couldn't identify. At first, it was dark, but gradually a spark appeared before her, and grew into a terrible Eye of fire, filling her entire field of vision no matter which way she turned her head. The Eye seemed to be searching, for many things, but for her in particular, and she curled into a little ball, moaning.

Would you have power? asked a Voice. Would you have knowledge? Would you have revenge---revenge on all who have ever wronged you? With Me, you could taste of all these things, and have life eternal into the bargain. Just claim Me, and I can give you all of these things!

No! I won't! I know what you want, and I don't want any part of it! Hermione thought she shouted those words, but her voice came out as a frightened squeak. The Eye turned into a huge, fiery ring, as big as a tractor's back wheel, and flared up more brightly.

Foolish, foolish little girl! the Voice rumbled. *I can give you things you could never have attained on your own. I could give you this "Voldemort" person---I can see into your mind, and I know that he concerns you. His power, next to Mine, is as nothing! You could annihilate him, and be a heroine!*

I could annihilate him? Hermione snorted, contemptuously. *You might do so, but for Your own reasons, not mine! There are some things that come at too high a price! Begone and trouble me no more!*

You will eventually accept My bargain, Hermione Jessica Granger. The Voice sounded almost amused. *I have had centuries to plan, and My plans will not be balked by a stubborn little girl; a girl of no wizard ancestry, a "Mudblood" in your home's quaint phrase.* The wheel of fire grew larger and brighter. *Eventually, you will succumb.*

"No! No, I won't! I'll never give in to you! Never, do you hear me?" Hermione hadn't realized that she had awakened until she noticed that she was clothed, sitting up in her bedroll, gasping out her denials. Ron and Draco were sitting by her side, looks of concern on their faces.

"What do you want?" The terror of the dream was still on her, and she thought, irrationally, that they were planning to steal the Ring from her; she grabbed for it through her shirt before she realized what she was doing and released it. "Was I talking in my sleep?"

"Yeah," said Ron. Fear edged his voice as he went on: "You were talking to someone. You kept saying 'No' and telling him that you didn't want any part of it---whatever 'it' is." His mouth twisted in what might have been a smile. "I guess that the Ring's already trying to get to you."

"Got it in one, Ron." Hermione reached out and took Ron's and Draco's hands. "Now that I've experienced what it can do, I can tell you that it's got to be destroyed. I think, given enough time, it could corrupt Professor Dumbledore."

"I'm not surprised. At least it looks like dawn's breaking. You got some sleep, which is all to the good; we'll need every bit of rest we can get here." Draco held out some food, mostly jerked meat and a bit of dried fruit. "I'll scout around in here and see if I can find anything more that's fit to eat, as well as find the wells and hope the orcs didn't use them as latrines. I don't really fancy staying here much longer. We've managed to sneak into Mordor without setting off alarms, but I'd like to get farther in as fast as we can."

"Not a bad idea. The longer we're here, the greater chance of someone coming around and finding the place deserted." With that, Hermione tucked into her breakfast, although she didn't really feel hungry. Just as she finished, a shuddering moan from across the room startled all three of the friends.

"It's Harry! He's waking up!" Ron ran over to Harry's side, kneeling beside him, only to let out a shout of terror when Harry erupted out of his bed, his hands going for Ron's throat. Before Ron could stop him, he was being nearly strangled.

"Where is it? Where did you put it?" hissed Harry, his face a mask of madness. "You took it! I want it back! Give me the Ring, now!" Ron gurgled and clawed at Harry's hands, as Hermione and Draco looked on in horror.

Chapter 23 -- Provisions and Premonitions

Harry's green eyes blazed as he snarled: "Give me the Ring! I know one of you has it! Where is it?" His eyes flickered around from one of his friends to the other. His fingers twisted and clenched, as though they were around the throat of whoever held the Ring.

Ron and Draco both had their wands out; Harry's wand lay, forgotten, in his pack. Hermione wasn't too worried, since she knew that both of her other friends were well able to handle Harry with spells. "I've got it, Harry. When you were out, we weren't sure when or if you'd recover. I took it for safekeeping."

Harry screamed wordlessly and threw himself at Hermione, who ducked back. For a few seconds, she saw Harry with other eyes; instead of the familiar friend she had known for so long, he seemed to be a skinny, grasping creature not unlike Gollum, his eyes blinking and his fingers twitching with greed. She raised her wand and nearly blasted him before Ron and Draco got him under control with a Leg-Locker Curse, sending him sprawling as his legs froze under him.

Even when he was on the ground, Harry snarled: "The Ring! Give me the Ring, you filthy little Mudblood thief! It's mine, do you hear? It's my---my *precious!*" At this, Ron's eyes widened, and Draco drew in air in a hiss of surprise.

"Harry! Listen to yourself! This isn't you!" begged Ron. "It's the Ring! The Ring's got you!" He knelt by Harry's side and held him, heedless of Harry's struggles and snarling. "For the gods' sake, Harry, get yourself under control!"

Hermione felt her mouth set into a tight line, as she made a decision. She raised her wand and snapped "*Finite Incantatem!*" As the Leg-Locker Curse was removed, Harry sprang to his feet, only to find himself staring down Hermione's wand. Even in his madness, that startled him; for a second, he paused.

The second of hesitation was all Hermione needed to conjure up ropes. Before Harry could move again, he was bound hand and foot, just as Gollum had been repeatedly when they caught him, back near the Eryn Muil, so long ago. He twisted and writhed and struggled, but he couldn't break free; the ropes their spells produced were extremely tough. Once he was well immobilized, Hermione knelt beside him. She pitied him, knowing how deeply the Ring had sunk its claws into his mind. With a small part of her mind, one she resolutely ignored, she felt a sudden wild temptation to whip out her short sword and make an end of Harry, and claim the Ring for herself. *After all*, this thought went, *I'm a far better witch than he is a wizard. I could do the Ring justice!* Firmly banishing that temptation, she fished in her shirt and brought out the Ring, holding it in her hand meditatively. For something so small, it felt oddly heavy, she noticed. Even being made of pure gold didn't account for the feeling of weight in her hand.

At the sight of the Ring, Harry convulsed, snarling as he tried to break free. "Give it to me! *Give it to me!*" Hermione's eyes widened as Harry began to literally foam at the mouth. *I always thought that was a figure of speech!* she thought. She held up the Ring.

"Harry? Harry! Listen to me!" Harry quit snarling and gibbering, his eyes following the Ring. "The Ring's gotten to you. Will you quiet down, if we give it back?"

Harry seemed to be struggling with himself. He curled up, as far as he could go with the ropes on him, his face twisted with the effort. When he looked up again, the madness was gone and he looked like the old Harry Potter. "Hermione? What's happened? Why am I tied up?" He went pale under his tan and the dirt of their many days' travel. "Last thing I can remember, I was walking up some stairs in this place, and then...then the next thing is I'm here, tied up with you covering me with your wands." He shook his head, as if to clear it. "Did the Ring get to me?"

"You fell, Harry. The stairs crumbled out from under you and you fell. We were able to cushion you a little with spells, but you were out. We didn't know if you'd recover, so we drew cards, and Hermione drew the Ten of Swords, which was the highest, so she took the Ring for safekeeping."

"The Ten of Swords?" A ghostly grin flitted across Harry's face. For a second, he looked like he had before their terrible journey had begun. "That was the same card I drew, back at dear old Hogwarts, when we all drew cards to see who'd have to be stuck with the Ring!"

Hermione thought back, and gasped: "You're absolutely right! I had forgotten all about that!" Ron's and Draco's eyes widened. "I wonder if the Ring's somehow influencing things? Could it have decided it wanted to go with me instead of you? Or could it have even chosen you, somehow, back at Hogwarts?"

"I don't know, Hermione. I don't think that I'm anything particularly special in and of myself---no matter *what* Professor Snape seems to think," Harry mused, as Draco smothered a grin. "Why would the Ring want me, instead of you, and then decide it wanted you?" He gave Hermione a keen look; she felt as though he was looking into her soul. "How long have you had it?"

"A few hours." Hermione blushed at the intensity of Harry's stare. "I couldn't sleep at first, and went up onto the battlements to look around. I finally had to take some of Draco's sleeping infusion to knock myself out."

"Did you dream of the wheel of fire?" asked Harry. Hermione nodded.

"Yeah, I did. I found myself thinking about all the things I could do with the Ring, and I've got to say that it did tempt me. Later on, when I was asleep, the wheel of fire kept goading me about that; it said it could make everything I wanted happen."

"Well, now you *know* why I didn't want to let anybody else near it," murmured Harry. "The thing's already got its claws into me, and I was hoping against hope that you three wouldn't have to face it down the way I've had to." He gave them all a haunted grin. "I don't mind telling you what it's been dangling in front of my eyes. Rulership, both here and at home, freedom and exoneration for Sirius Black, and a cure for Professor Lupin's disease."

"Sirius Black?" Draco's eyes opened wide. "My gods! You mean the mass murderer?"

"He's innocent, Draco," put in Ron, who had been watching the whole conversation. "We've all seen the wizard he's supposed to have murdered, Peter Pettigrew, alive and well. He was an unregistered Animagus, and you've seen him in his animal form---he was my pet rat, Scabbers."

Draco blanched as this hit home. "You mean to tell me that Goyle got his finger bitten to the bone by *Peter Pettigrew*?" His voice hardened as he went on: "I *hope* you don't have too many more such things to tell me---like, say, Professor Dumbledore's really working for He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, or Professor Snape's secretly lusting after Hermione here! I don't know how many more shocks I can handle!"

At the thought of Professor Snape lusting after her, Hermione broke down and giggled. "Professor Snape? Gods! The only way to get him interested would be to dress up as a potion recipe!" At that, all four laughed, long and loud. Hermione thought that no such laughter had been heard in the tower of Cirith Ungol since the forces of Mordor had taken it.

Harry went on: "Oh, mustn't forget; the Ring also offers me the chance to get back at the Dursleys." He grinned rather nastily. "I won't say for a second that I'm not tempted, but I know better than to listen to the filthy thing. It's got its own priorities, and my happiness---our happiness---is not on the list." He looked up at Hermione. "That said, can I have it back? I'd far rather keep the burden to myself. I wish it had never been found, or hadn't been sought by Voldemort, but now that it has, it's my responsibility."

Hermione considered that statement carefully. She wanted to believe Harry, but she was still dreadfully reluctant to let the Ring go. She could feel its power, and the temptation to use it was terribly strong. When she decided to give it back, she couldn't quite make herself let go of it at first. It took a great effort of will to slip the Ring's chain back around Harry's neck, and relinquish it. Deep inside her, something cried out for the Ring, and she knew that it always would. *Like cutting off a hand*, she thought, and then firmly stamped on the thought; it put her too much in mind of Peter Pettigrew's dreadful sacrifice.

Once the Ring was back around his neck, Harry closed his eyes for a second, as a blissful expression appeared on his face. "Oh, if you only knew how good it feels to have this Thing back again!" he murmured. "I don't feel right without It, by now. Waking up without It was like waking up to find my right hand gone." Hermione shuddered at the words he had chosen; they were too close to her own thoughts for her comfort.

Ron smiled rather shakily. "Harry, I'm glad you're back. If we let you out of those ropes, can you control yourself?" At Harry's nod, Ron raised his wand and murmured: "*Finite Incantatem!*" The ropes vanished, and Harry rolled over on the floor, getting up slowly. Draco went over and took a careful look into his eyes, using his wand's light to get a good view. Meanwhile, Ron unobtrusively covered Harry with his wand, just in case Harry went mad again.

"Good job your eyes are as light-colored as they are," muttered Draco. "This would be the dickens to do with Hermione, or Hagrid. At least your pupils are the same size. I'm just glad you don't have a concussion."

Harry rubbed his head, for all the world like he'd been through nothing worse than a fall off his broom at Quidditch practice. Then he scratched himself vigorously. "Oh, does that ever feel good!" he said. "What I'd give for a nice long soak in the tubs at Hogwarts, right about now!"

"Did you have to mention that?" asked Hermione peevishly. On top of the shock of having given up the Ring, however voluntarily she had done so, she was now aware again of just how dirty and smelly and itchy she was. She fought down the urge to scratch herself in

some very indelicate places, and wished rather resentfully that the others on the quest had been female, so that she could do that sort of thing without feeling self-conscious. "We're all filthy, and I don't know how we'll ever get clean again."

"Step One toward a hot bath, I think, is getting rid of the Ring once and for all," said Ron. He peered out the slit-like window. "In any case, it's getting on to dawn, as far as I can tell. We've all had some sleep. Do you think you can travel all right, Harry?"

Harry visibly took stock of himself. "I've got a bit of a headache, and what feels like the beginnings of some spectacular bruises and pulled muscles and the like, but I can move if I have to." He looked at Draco. "Do you have any potions or treatments for that?"

Draco spread his hands, looking rueful. "Sorry, Harry. I would that I did. There's only so much I can carry."

"Then I'll just have to take things slow and carefully until I'm back up to speed," Harry muttered. "I wonder if this castle has wells, or food stores? I'd bet it probably does!" He gave the door a calculating look. "Did anybody think to look around for that sort of thing?"

Ron shook his head. "We were mainly worried about you. By the way---Draco says that Shagrat and Gorbag are both dead. Strangled. Does that suggest anything to you?"

"Gollum!" Harry's green eyes narrowed, and for a second, he reminded Hermione of Professor Snape, on the trail of malefaction. The thought of how Harry or Professor Snape would have reacted to her involuntary thought gave Hermione a terrible urge to giggle, and she only resisted for a second before giving in to it. Her friends looked at her in astonishment.

"Hermione? Have you finally flipped?" Ron's voice was edged with concern. "What's so funny about Gollum?"

"Nothing...nothing..." With an effort, Hermione got herself under control. "It was just that Harry looked so much like Professor Snape when he said Gollum's name that I couldn't help laughing!" She broke down laughing again. "I'm sorry, Harry!"

Harry looked at her for a second as though she'd grown another head, and then he broke down laughing in his turn. "Oh, Hermione, that's rich!" he snickered. "If the Ring turns me into Professor Snape, that's another reason to get rid of it! I wouldn't wish such a fate on Voldemort himself!" He drew himself up and sneered: "Your chances of mastering this subject, Mr. Potter, are about as good as Mr. Longbottom's chances of becoming Headmaster of Hogwarts! Ten points from Gryffindor because---because the sky is blue and the grass is green!" Harry's imitation was so uncannily on-target, all four friends laughed and laughed.

When they'd calmed down, Draco and Hermione volunteered to go looking for the castle's food stores and wells. Ron's offer to go along was firmly squashed by both of them, Hermione explaining: "Ron, we need you to protect Harry if Gollum shows up when we're gone. Staying in pairs makes it likelier that we'll be safe; four eyes are better than two. We'll take your packs as well as ours, so we can carry as much food as possible; same goes for canteens. Keep the door shut and locked while we're gone, and we'll let you know it's us when we get back."

The castle was a filthy mess, which didn't surprise Hermione any; she knew that orcs were horrid housekeepers one and all. Draco had been in real castles before, both Malfoy Manor itself and the homes of some of his father's friends, and he knew about where the food stores would be. As they penetrated deeper and deeper into the bowels of Cirith Ungol, they moved more and more quietly, and Hermione strained her ears to try to catch the sound of flapping feet, or indrawn breath hissing past snaggle teeth.

Draco was just about as nervous as she was, which spooked Hermione; she expected Draco Malfoy to remain unruffled and insouciant no matter what. They kept their backs to solid stone walls as much as they could while exploring, and signalled to each other with their hands as they rooted through piles of orc-refuse, looking for food or water they could use on their journey.

"Not much here," muttered Draco, turning from one pile of filthy rubbish to the next. "Those orcs can eat the most awful rubbish, but we'd get really sick if we tried eating this."

"No argument here, Draco." Hermione wrinkled her nose at some of the things they'd turned up. Much of the food was rotten, stinking and putrescence, and crawling with insects. The thought of eating it, even to avert absolute starvation, turned her stomach. "I can see why Sauron uses orcs as soldiers, though. They must be a lot cheaper and easier to feed than men are, much less elves or dwarves."

"About their only drawbacks, as soldiers, are their fractious natures and their allergy to bright sunlight. Other than that, they're nearly perfect warriors, if they've got somebody to tell them what to do." As Draco spoke, he was levering up the lid of a box. "Ah! Look at this!" Inside the box was a supply of twice-baked biscuit, hard as rock but edible. "Fill your pack with this, Hermione. It might just keep us alive."

Nothing loath, Hermione began stuffing her backpack with biscuits. They apparently hadn't been there too long, and the orcs, from what she could see, preferred meat. A lot of the trash they had had to wade through had consisted of well-gnawed bones, some of them suspiciously humanoid. "I wonder how these came here?" she asked.

"For the wonders of bureaucracy, let us give thanks, Hermione," Draco commented, filling his own backpack and pockets. "Also, Sauron does have soldiers other than orcs. These might have been originally intended for his human allies from the South and East---the men of Harad, Khand and Rhun." Hermione raised her eyebrows, surprised at Draco's knowledge, and Draco caught her expression. "While you were on the mend in Lorien, and, before that, in Rivendell, I got genned up on this place, just like you did."

"We should keep in mind that Sauron does have human servants," Hermione said, as they left the foul-smelling cellars behind. "Since he does---we saw a lot of them going into Mordor, back at the Black Gates, remember---there will be water and food available. Finding it, and getting it for ourselves, will be a problem, but it does exist out there."

As they climbed back to the ground floor, Hermione listened carefully. She hadn't forgotten that Gollum was probably slinking around the castle somewhere, and she now knew something of his obsession with his "precious." While she still pitied him, she feared him far more, and did not want to take any chances of letting him get his fingers around her throat.

"I've always said that all things are relative, Hermione," Draco muttered. "After those cellars, even Mordor's air smells almost sweet and fresh." Hermione took a deep breath, and had to agree. Despite its sulfurous tang, it was at least dry, unlike the festering stench of the bowels of the castle. And, speaking of dry---

"Draco? Where do you think the water wells are here? Orcs have to drink, too, don't they?" Draco's eyes widened, and he smacked his forehead with the heel of his hand.

"I'm an idiot! I'd forgotten all about that!" He looked at Hermione, and grinned his snarkest grin. "I know you'll say you always knew I was an idiot, but how often have you heard me say so?"

"If you'd been able to admit that you were wrong earlier, Draco, we could have been good friends for years. I really regret that we took against each other so hard, back in the day." Hermione looked out into the courtyard, where the sickly daylight of Mordor was trickling in through the low-hanging clouds. "But do you have any ideas about where to look?"

Draco cogitated. "Well, for obvious reasons, the water supply of any castle had to be well-defended. There might be wells, or cisterns, down in the cellars---but from the smells down there, I don't think I'd trust any water I found there. There's usually a well out in the main courtyard, to boot---shall we go and check?"

Cautiously, the two friends opened the main door of the keep and peered out into the courtyard, which was littered with trash. "Is that a well?" whispered Hermione, pointing.

Draco shrugged. "Looks like one to me. Let's go and see." Sure enough, it was, and the water inside looked to be fairly healthy.

Hermione peered suspiciously at the water. It looked all right to her, but she knew perfectly well that that meant nothing. Experimentally, she wet her finger and stuck it in her mouth, checking the taste. "Tastes all right---a bit of sulfur, but this is volcanic country." She turned back to the keep. "Come on. Let's get back to Ron and Harry." When they had finished filling the canteens, they went back inside.

When they got back to where their friends were, they found Ron very worried. "While you were gone, we heard---something---outside," Ron reported. Harry was lying back down, his face slightly gray. "We knew it wasn't you. You'd have let us know you were there. It was moving around, sniffing, and then it went away. That was about half an hour or so ago."

"Gollum!" Hermione shuddered. She could imagine him, so easily, creeping up to the warded door, trying it with his long, prehensile fingers, sniffing around for the scents of her friends. Uneasily, she looked around, up and down and all about her, half-expecting to see the little horror clinging to a wall or even the ceiling, leering down at her before leaping to the attack.

Ron looked deeply worried; Hermione thought that he had never looked more like his serious older brother, Percy Weasley. "When we got here, this castle was almost like a refuge. Now, I'm afraid it's more like a trap. No matter how good we are, Gollum's got centuries of experience at creeping around and ambushing people in just this sort of place, or so Bilbo told me back at Rivendell." As he spoke, he was lacing up his boots and swinging his backpack

over his shoulders. "I say we'd best get on the road out of here, and quickly! How do you feel, Harry?" Harry had awakened, and was sitting up, holding his head. "Do you feel up to travelling?"

Cautiously, Harry stood. When he was on his feet, he pulled out his wand, and pointed it at the corner where their staves were. "*Accio* staff!" The staff that Faramir had given him flew across the room into his hand, and Hermione smiled to herself. "I think so. My one leg's not feeling great, but that can't be helped, much. I think I can walk, and I agree that getting out of here while the getting's good is a splendid idea."

Once they were ready, the four friends crept down to the main door. Although she couldn't hear anything wrong, Hermione sensed something watching them, something evil, malevolent, waiting its time to pounce. She was a little surprised that they made it out into the open, and even then, she still felt very edgy.

Ron pointed off to one side of the keep. "There! I bet that's how the little wretch got in!" Part of the wall had crumbled, and there was a gap where it met the mountainside. Had the castle been fully garrisoned, it would have been a trivial matter to keep that place covered, but as it was, even Harry, with his bad leg, could climb up and through the wall, and down out of the castle with little trouble. To Gollum, it would have been no barrier at all. Once they were all through the gap, they hurried down the hillside to the plains of Gorgoroth, leaving the empty castle behind as they fled.

As they scrambled down the hillside, they found themselves hampered, again and again, by nasty thorn-bushes. While she detested them, Hermione thought they were not all bad--their existence proved that there was water here, somewhere. Also, she didn't think that Gollum would like them any more than she did, and his rags would be less protection, if anything, from them than her stout elven-made clothing. Underfoot, the soil was a mixture of gravel and sand, ranging from gray to dull black.

After an hour or so, by unspoken mutual consent, the friends stopped, hunkering down in a small hollow, for a breather. Hermione peered back at the castle of Cirith Ungol, halfway expecting to see a familiar stooped, gangrel figure on their trail. The castle seemed utterly deserted, though, and she couldn't see any sign of intelligent life other than herself and her friends. *It says a lot about Mordor*, she thought mordantly, *that I'm very glad not to see anybody else around at all!*

Chapter 24 -- Run Rabbits Run

After a breather, the four friends went on their way. Single file, they threaded their way through the bushes, always heading downward. By unspoken mutual consent, they didn't speak; they needed to save their breath, and the knowledge that they were now in the Enemy's own heartland tended to dry up conversation. They strained their ears, but all they heard was the endless sigh of the wind. Hermione fancied that it sounded like the lost souls of the millions Sauron had killed. Above them, the sky lightened, until it was as bright as it had been when they had first looked upon this hateful land.

They were several miles from Cirith Ungol when they heard a cry from overhead. Instinctively, they froze, knowing that movement would betray them to any eyes above them. The cry was like a howl of anguish and loss, echoing out over the desolation; to Hermione, it sounded like a wail of grief.

When it had stopped, the four friends did not move on for a few minutes. "I wonder what that was all about?" muttered Ron. "That had to be a Nazgul, unless something else that flies is working for Sauron. I wonder if something went wrong for Sauron?"

"I can sense Sauron, and I do think something went badly for him." Harry looked grim. "More than that, I couldn't say---I don't dare concentrate on Sauron's mind for very long, or he'll become aware of me. Whenever I perceive him, I feel like a mouse at a cat show---or a cat at a dog show." Hermione had to agree with him about that. Sauron's sheer power had been overwhelming, when she had perceived it through the Ring.

"Well," sighed Draco, "at least when Sauron's concentrating on his wars, he'll probably not be worrying too much about his home front." He looked around at Mordor, and Hermione did the same. She wasn't pleased at what she saw. The land grew more and more desolate and barren the farther they went from the mountain ranges that bordered the dark lands. The soil was a mixture of gravel, sand and volcanic ash, mostly a very dark gray. In the distance, Mount Doom sent forth a plume of smoke to join the thick dark clouds that cut off most of the Sun's light.

Harry looked out over Mordor, sighing. "Well, it won't get any shorter for us staring at it, people," he muttered, his eyes fixed on Mount Doom. "How far do you think it is to that bloody mountain, anyway?"

"That I can't say, Harry." Draco narrowed his eyes, trying to estimate the distance. "I've got nothing to help me figure out how high Mount Doom is, and without knowing its height, I can't estimate the distance at all." He shouldered his pack. "In any case, you're right. It won't get any shorter. Let's march, people. *Floreat Hogwarts!*"

There seemed to be nothing else to say, and no more excuse to linger where they were; the place certainly wasn't pleasant enough to attract anybody to it on its merits. With a sigh, Hermione stepped out, on the next leg of their weary journey. The sulfury tang in the air made her thirsty, but she knew she could go a while yet without water, and since they didn't know where they could find fresh water in Mordor, she knew that saving it for as long as they could was essential.

Single-file, they wound their way through the thorn-thickets, always going downward to the plains. The thorns were as tough and nasty as Earthly barbed wire, Hermione thought; more than once, they had to stop and retrace their steps to get around a particularly thick tangle. They used their Japanese short swords to hack their way sometimes, and occasionally they could burn or blast a path with a spell, but the thorn-bushes were difficult to burn and resistant to most of the spells they knew.

As they traveled, they found that Mordor was not as dead as they had believed. They passed streams of dark, oily water, and clouds of biting insects rose to torment them, swarming around them in clouds until Draco, in desperation, cast a spell to drive them off.

"Did you notice that the bigger ones were marked with the Red Eye?" Hermione asked; her voice came out croaky and hoarse, and she paused for a grudging sip of water. "Even the insects here serve Sauron." Ron gave her a strange look.

"You know, Hermione, I don't think anybody else in our situation would even think to look at those insects that closely." He grinned a slightly haunted grin. "It's good to see that some things never will change." With that, he turned and moved away, and Hermione followed.

After many hours, they found a road running north along the mountains. Harry signaled for a halt, and they gathered behind a large rock, out of sight, to consider options.

"I think we'll have to use this road. I don't fancy trying to make a beeline across those plains," said Harry, waving his hand toward Gorgoroth far below them. "We'll need every bit of speed we can work up. Draco here's the only one of us with experience in mountain country, and those bloody thornbushes are slowing us down dreadfully."

"If you say so, Harry," said Ron. "You know that I'll follow you anywhere you choose to lead. We can make better time on this road. On the other hand, there's a risk of running into enemies there, and we don't dare let word get out that we're here."

"This Thing---" Harry patted his chest, where the Ring rode on its chain---"is getting heavier and heavier, and it's beginning to really get to me. Did you know that from one point of view, Mordor's not such a bad place?" At his friends' horrified looks, he went on: "Look, even back on our world, a lot of people like deserts. They do. It's also warmer here than it was outside, which is a nice change." Harry rubbed his chin; Hermione could hear his new-grown whiskers scraping under his dirty hand. "The longer I keep this Thing, the more chance of it taking me over. We've got to get to Mount Doom fast, and climbing straight down will take longer, I think."

"So be it," said Draco, giving Harry a very worried look. "Do you want us to take your pack?" They had given Harry back his pack when they had left the fortress, and, like their own, it bulged with the hard ration-biscuits they had liberated from the storage rooms.

Harry shook his head. "No. The weight I feel from the Ring isn't like a real weight---is it, Hermione?" He looked at her, and Hermione knew that when she had taken the Ring, even for the few hours that she had held it, she had forged a bond with Harry that nobody else could ever understand. She ran her hand through her hair, feeling how filthy she was.

"Harry's right, Draco. The Ring's weight isn't really weight, but you do feel it. At the same time, Harry, if you do need to lighten yourself, you can always ask us to take your stuff." Hermione looked at her friends, and noticed how badly their clothes had suffered in the thorn-bushes. "One thing we can do to lighten ourselves, I think, would be to use some of these rolls of duct tape to patch our clothes." Suiting action to words, she put down her pack and rooted in it, coming up with a thick roll of gray duct tape. "We can put patches on both the inside and outside of a torn place, so as to keep the tears from getting worse, at least. They'll hold for a while." *And we won't need them for much longer than that*, was the thought that hung unspoken, but understood by all four friends.

"Not a bad idea, Hermione," said Harry. "If you'd prefer, you can go off behind that rock over there, and patch your clothes without worrying about us looking at you." Hermione hadn't thought about it much, but she appreciated the thought. She had gotten used to living in the very close company of her friends, and they had few secrets from each other any more. Harry's thoughtfulness and courtesy showed that even here, even with the Ring getting its hooks into him, the old Harry Potter was still a long way from dead. She handed the boys one of the two rolls she had left, and took the other for herself.

"What happened to the rest of the tape, Hermione?" asked Ron curiously.

"When we were in Lorien, the elves found them, and were very impressed at how useful it is. I gave them most of what I had, since they had done such a wonderful job healing me up." With that, Hermione went behind the rock to work on fixing her clothes up.

She was soon glad of the idea; her trousers were torn and ripped from the thorns, and she could also see damage that had been done by the spider they had fought high in the pass of Torech Ungol. Carefully, she applied duct tape to the outside of each tear, then turned her trousers inside-out to do the same from the inside. It would be harsher against her skin than the cloth had been, but she knew that she had to make these clothes last until Mount Doom, at least, and how she did it mattered little. It wasn't as though she was planning to go to a Yule Ball at Hogwarts, after all.

A pebble falling alerted her as she was getting back into her trousers, and she looked up, wary as a wild creature when the hunt is up. A little ways away, she saw a small, familiar, hateful shape slinking behind a rock. Buckling her belt with one hand, Hermione drew her wand with the other. She then crouched down, holding very still and making no noise.

After a while, a familiar head poked cautiously around the rock, and Hermione narrowed her eyes, hate roaring through her mind, hot as fire. It was Gollum. She did not move, or even breathe, as Gollum slowly left his place of concealment. Her eyes widened in surprise as she saw that Gollum was wearing a coat of what looked very like orcish armor, mail made of interlocking rings. Inside, she smiled, remembering Gimli's contemptuous dismissal of orcish mail as trash---"where we dwarves rivet or solder every single ring shut, so that they don't pop open, most orcish so-called 'armorers' just butt the ends of each ring together! The stuff works, after a fashion, but no dwarf---or even elf, or man---would be caught wearing such rubbish unless there was no other choice!"

Her joints began complaining about her posture, so she shifted her weight. Although she did so very quietly, Gollum must have heard something, since he scuttled back to his hiding place. Once he was gone, Hermione went back and found her friends. She thought that

the duct-tape patches they had improvised to hold their clothes together looked horrid, but, as she reminded herself, this was a long way from anywhere that good clothes would matter.

The others lit up at the sight of her. Draco got up, and struck a pose. "This is the latest little thing from our 'Mordor' collection," he intoned, in the exact tones of a high-fashion clothing designer. Hermione had been agog to find out that Dior and Versace and Coco Chanel had had sidelines designing the new fashions for the magical world, but it did make sense---and between vast infusions of money and the threat of what the wizards would do if they were betrayed, the designers had had good reason to keep their silence about what they knew.

One look at her expression stifled any urge her companions had had to take the joke further. "Is something wrong, Hermione?" asked Ron tensely. All of them had their wands out, and were watching around themselves warily.

In a few short sentences, Hermione brought them up to speed. "Gollum's on our trail. I saw him behind us when I was working on my clothes. It looks like he's picked himself up a mail-shirt somewhere or other."

"Probably at Cirith Ungol. I saw quite a few orcish mail-shirts there, in all sorts of sizes, when I was snooping through things there." Draco looked very grim. "He could have picked up all sorts of gear there. Even though it was apparently only orcs there, the weapons and armor were all in good shape."

"Well, it makes sense, doesn't it?" asked Ron. "Look---except for Hermione, we're all Quidditch fanatics. Even if other things got neglected---like, say, Potions, to pick an example *completely* at random---" he looked so innocent that Hermione was torn between wanting to smack him one and wanting to giggle---"we'd keep our brooms, Quaffles, Bludgers, and Golden Snitches in tip-top order, wouldn't we?" Hermione thought about it, and had to admit that Ron was making excellent sense. He continued: "To orcs, from what I've heard, fighting is what life's all about---they've obviously never been exposed to the higher things in life, namely, Quidditch." While his friends snickered, he got to his point: "So, they would keep their arms and armor in good shape, even though their usual habits make pigs in sties look neat and tidy. Also, a battle's the last place I'd want to find out that my armor's in bad shape."

"Ron, are you sick?" asked Hermione solicitously. "That's the longest sensible speech I've ever heard out of you!" At the look Ron gave her, she had to smother a laugh. "Well---it is!"

"Thanks tons, Hermione," said Ron; after a second or two, he quirked a grin. "I love you too." Hermione felt herself blushing, and was glad of the grime on her skin and her dark tan; she hoped it was enough to keep her friends from seeing it.

"Well, if Gollum's on our trail, we'd best get moving and keep on moving. I want to put some miles between us and that little wretch, and if we can lose him, that'll be a bonus, if anything," said Harry, sighing as he stood up and put his pack back on. "Let's get moving, people. Miles to go before we sleep---as you said before, Draco."

"At least a little culture and refinement's rubbing off on you, Harry," answered Draco, as he shouldered his own pack and prepared to resume their march. "Who knows? Under my

influence, you might even learn to not eat peas with your knife, and in---oh, ten years or so---I might have you fit to introduce into decent society."

Harry gave Draco a Look, and Hermione smiled to herself, as they set back out. Unlike at Hogwarts, this was more like banter between two old friends whose friendship, tested and true, was strong enough to stand up under any amount of wordplay and verbal one-up-manship. While Draco was still a snarky, sarcastic person, these days he didn't seem to want to wound with words, the way he had back at Hogwarts, before his parents' death---and before the Ring had come into all their lives, throwing them together in this terrible task.

For hours, the four friends followed the road cautiously. When they came to a curve, they took cover while one of them peered around the cliffs to see if there was anybody else there, and they looked behind them frequently. For all that they could see, they were the only sapient beings in Mordor. The only sound was the crunch of their boot-soles on the rough road surface, and the endless sighing of the sulfury-smelling wind. Above them, the lowering sky oppressed Hermione, and she sometimes fancied that it was a solid ceiling, one that would come down and crush them.

After hours of marching, they came to yet another curve in the road. Harry, Ron and Draco huddled against the cliffside while Ron peered slowly and cautiously around the curve. Ron hissed "Come here!" and gestured for his friends to come up closer. When they did, he pointed off across the tumbled hills. Sighting along his pointing finger, Hermione could make out an orc-hold; there were some crudely-built houses and what looked like the entrance to a cave. A few thin plumes of smoke showed that it was occupied.

"What do you think we should do?" asked Ron. "We can't just go ambling along the road---that nest of orcs is sited so that they have a good view of the road. I'd bet that they're there so that they can keep an eye on what goes up and down this road."

"As usual, Weasel, you have a keen grasp of the obvious," muttered Draco, looking around them nervously. "However, the countryside here isn't completely impassible---see?" He pointed off toward the side of the road that faced away from the cliffs, overlooking the plain of Gorgoroth below them. "I think, if we're careful and watch where we put our feet, we can scramble down there and go around."

Hermione looked at it suspiciously. Next to the road, it looked difficult going---the hillside was steep, and clumps of thornbushes, patches of loose gravel, and other difficult spots were easy to see. Still and all, there wasn't any choice, and they were taking a chance just staying on the road. On the road, they were terribly easy to spot, and some orcs did have very keen vision.

"So decided, so done," said Harry decisively. Suiting actions to words, he scrambled down the hillside, sliding and slipping sometimes, and keeping himself on his feet with judicious use of the staff Faramir had given him in Ithilien. With a mental shrug, Hermione followed him, and Ron and Draco came climbing down after.

The going was, as Hermione had feared, difficult. The footing was treacherous, and the hillside was steep enough to make going very slow. Once they were down about twenty feet or so, they began moving horizontally, picking their way very carefully, sometimes having to almost jump from one foothold to the next. Again and again, one of them came close to losing balance and tumbling down the hillside. At one point, Ron did go falling

down, but a bush stopped his fall in time. He scrambled slowly back up to where his friends were waiting, swearing under his breath and favoring one leg.

In that fashion, they managed to go about two miles or so, by Hermione's estimate. The time they used could have taken them six miles on the road, but as long as they were in danger of being spotted, the road was useless to them. The day was shading on into the deep night of Mordor when, at Draco's signal, they began climbing up again, their boots scrambling for purchase in the friable ground as they moved upwards. At Draco's direction, they tied themselves together with rope.

When they reached a level with the road, Draco went on up first, peering around cautiously. Only at his signal did the others come up, one at a time. Hermione's muscles, strained from the hours of climbing, ached with relief when she stood at last on the flat surface of the road. She did a couple of knee-bends, to try to get the kinks out of her legs. Beside her, Harry sprawled, gasping and panting like a gaffed fish, and Ron squatted, staring into space.

Draco, on the other hand, looked offensively unruffled. *Apparently he was telling the truth about his climbing experiences*, thought Hermione, looking at him resentfully. Draco looked at them, with unaccustomed compassion on his face. "Look, I know how you lot feel, but we've got to keep moving! Every minute's precious!"

"We know, Draco. We know." With that, Harry heaved himself to his feet, and Ron and Hermione followed suit. Wearily, moving slowly at first, they set back off down the road.

Only their long habit of caution saved them at the next curve; when Hermione, who was in the lead, took her turn to peer around the edge of the hill to see the next stretch of road before they entrusted themselves to it. To her horror, she saw two orcs coming along the road toward them.

"Orcs!" she muttered, ducking back before they could see her. At Harry's questioning look, she elaborated: "Two of them---one bigger than the other. They're coming this way, on the road!"

"Take cover!" snapped Harry. Pulling out the Invisibility Cloak, he donned it. "I'll take care of them!" At Draco's questioning look, he deigned to continue: "If possible, I'll let them go on past. If they begin to look like they're on to us, I'll hit them with a Petrification Charm or something like that. I may not know the Unforgivable Curses, but I do know a good deal of magic that can be used in this sort of situation." He patted Draco's shoulder. "We've been leaning on you a lot, old friend, and I appreciate everything you've done, but it's time I took more of a hand in things."

Draco and Ron slid back down below the level of the road on the hillside, Draco still looking slightly gobsmacked at being called "old friend" by Harry Potter. Hermione, on the other hand, slipped uphill, hiding behind a thornbush and trusting to her elven-cloak to conceal her.

Closer and closer the orcs came, and Hermione could hear them speaking to each other. To her relief, they were not speaking the incomprehensible tongues she vaguely remembered them using in Moria---they were apparently of different breeds and tribes, and she knew that orcs varied widely in their speech.

The smaller orc led the way, hunched over and snuffling like a dog on a scent. He was wearing brown clothes, and carried a bow that Hermione immediately lusted to possess. It was a recurve model, and looked like it was just about the right size for her. Behind the scent-tracking orc came another, this one equipped and dressed like Shagrat's company back at the tower of Cirith Ungol.

"Garn!" the smaller orc said. "That gobbler's slipped us again! If he hadn't had that mail-shirt on, I'd have nailed him---I got him, neat as neat, in the small of the back, but he ran right on!"

"Good thing for you, too!" sneered the big orc. "Word from Upstairs is that he's wanted---alive. Bring him in dead, and it's your skin! Those Shriekers want to talk to him. Better him than us, I say!"

"You're right. The Shriekers give me the creeps. I've heard that the enemy's knocked off Number One, but Khamul's easily bad enough to be going on with. However, Lugburz likes them, so we poor orcs have to put up with them---hold up!" The small orc bent over, sniffing, for all the world like a bloodhound. "I'm picking something up---it isn't an orc, or that gobbler---"

At that second, Harry's voice rang out, cold with command: "*Petrificus Totalus!*" Both orcs froze in place as Ron, Draco and Hermione came out of hiding, and Harry took off the Invisibility Cloak. Hermione immediately confiscated the smaller orc's bow. Looking the bow over, she smiled.

"Harad-made, or I miss my guess," she muttered. At Ron's questioning look, she went on: "When we were watching the battle, back in Ithilien, I noticed that the Southrons used recurve bows, a lot like this one. The men of Gondor, and the elves, used straight bows, more like English longbows. This looks to have been an archer's bow---it's short." She pulled it experimentally, and smiled even more broadly. "It feels like it was made for me!"

"Obviously, our orcish friends knew your tastes." Ron relieved the paralyzed orc of his quiver of arrows, and Hermione strapped it on. "I'm rather surprised you didn't pick up a bow and arrows back at the battlefield, but we were all busy then, weren't we?"

"Yeah, we were." Hermione shuddered at the memory of the screams of the wounded of both sides. "Also, we weren't on that close terms with the Rangers, and I didn't know how they'd feel about me looting the battlefield. I don't remember them taking much, if anything." She took out the arrows, one after another, and examined them critically. They met her criteria---all of them were straight and in good condition, with black feathers, wickedly barbed heads and excellent balance.

"Now, what do we do with these orcs?" asked Harry. "Draco, can you put one or both of them under the Imperius Curse? We could certainly use a native guide here, and I'd prefer one more reliable than Gollum turned out to be."

"I know what you're saying. I can't believe I was so damned trusting to let him go flapping around without putting him under Imperius." Draco's narrow, clever face twisted in self-disgust. "How could I---I, Draco Malfoy, the star of Slytherin, be so confoundedly thick? Crabbe and Goyle would have known better!" A shadow passed over his face. "Right now, I wouldn't mind having them here." He gave his friends a haunted grin. "Look---I know how

you feel about them. I know their faults, no one better. Still and all, they're loyal, to me if to nobody else. After Gollum, you really learn to *appreciate* loyalty."

"Tell me about it, Draco," muttered Ron, fingering the lump on the back of his head where Gollum's rock had struck him. "We all underestimated Gollum---and he's still out there, remember?"

"I can put one of these orcs under Imperius, but holding them both at once will be difficult. I'm getting more and more knackered. I'd rather Obliviate our big friend here, and keep the smaller one. If I lose control of him, he'll be easier to deal with, I think." At Harry's nod, Draco raised his wand. "*Obliviate!*" The larger orc's face went blank, reminding Hermione of Gilderoy Lockhart after the affair of the Chamber of Secrets.

As the big orc shambled off, his face a mask of stupidity, Draco turned to the smaller tracking orc and raised his wand again. "*Imperio!*" When the spell was in place, Draco asked: "What's your name, and what do you do?"

The orc muttered: "My name is Burzghash---Dark Fire in your language. I'm a tracker."

"How well do you know Mordor?" asked Harry. Burzghash gave him a contemptuous look.

"I've lived here for centuries, human. I know Mordor very well." Harry grinned. No, he showed his teeth, Hermione decided, arranging the quiver so that it rode more easily--- what Harry had on his face could not be called a smile.

"Excellent. You're our new guide." With that, Harry gestured, and the orc led them off down the road.

Chapter 25 -- Death-March in Gorgoroth

Under Burzghash's guidance, the four friends moved off, on a path they hadn't really noticed before. The orc was quite clever at finding his way, leading them through the bush, always heading down toward the main plain of Gorgoroth below. Just behind Burzghash, Draco paced along, graceful as a cat, with Harry just behind him. From her vantage point at the rear of their little procession, Hermione kept turning and looking back. She never saw anything, but she couldn't shake the feeling that Gollum was there; she had a prickling, uneasy sensation all over her back, and any unusual noise all but had her jumping out of her boots. Just ahead of her, Ron peered left and right, keeping an eye open for any more nasty surprises.

At first, Burzghash set a fairly fast pace, but once they had gone a little way away from the main road, he slowed down somewhat, in deference to their lesser stamina. When they paused to rest, Hermione examined him in wonderment; she had not really realized just *how* tough and hardy orcs were. While she had gotten much tougher since coming to Middle-Earth, she, and her friends, were slightly winded and breathing hard. Burzghash looked fit and eager, ready for another long trek.

"They are awfully tough, aren't they, Hermione?" murmured Draco; he had come up behind her. "I can see why the Dark Lord loves using them as soldiers. If they were just smarter, they'd be a real threat---as things stand, I'm having a bit of a time keeping our friend under control, even with the Imperius Curse." He rubbed his forehead. "Keeping the Imperius up takes effort."

"What if Sauron takes over control?" asked Ron. "You've mentioned that he seems to be able to directly control some of his creatures."

Draco nodded. "He can. However, he'd have to have twigged *just* where we were to bother bending all his will to taking Burzghash back, and if he had done that, he's got a lot better ways to deal with the situation." Draco's face clouded for a second, and Hermione shuddered again at the thought of herself and her friends, cornered, facing off the hordes of the Dark Lord.

"That's right," Harry confirmed. "He could take Burzghash back in a second---if he knew what was going on. Right now, stealth and quiet are our best friends---those and sheer audacity. From what I can gather, Sauron's mainly concerned with an attack from, or on, Gondor---I don't dare get too close to his mind lest he figure out where I am and what I'm doing."

"Stealth, quiet, sheer audacity---and speed. The sooner we get to Mount Doom, the better." Ron peered off into the distance, through the murky air of Mordor. "So, let's get the lead out and let's get cracking!" With that, he got up and began marching again, and the others followed in his wake.

Hermione never could remember, afterward, how long it was that they marched. She had fallen almost into a trance state, her mind ranging over her past life, hardly aware of the weary miles she tramped. On one level, she knew that her legs and feet were aching, that the duct-tape patches she had improvised to hold her clothes together a little longer were chafing her skin, and that she was thirsty; the sulfur-laden air of Mordor dried her mouth so badly that the tissues clung together. Most of her consciousness, though, was far away; she went over

the principles of Transfiguration, ran down lists of magical herbs and fungi, and reviewed the basics of casting charms.

An arrow zeeping past startled her out of her fog. She was throwing herself onto the ashy ground before she was even aware of what she was doing, noting in passing that her friends were doing the same thing. From around them, shouts of "Ya hoy! Ya hoy! Ya herry hoy!" echoed and re-echoed. Arrow after arrow zinged overhead.

"Bloody hell! It's a trap!" snarled Harry. He rolled over to Draco, grabbing him by the shoulder. "I thought you had that bloody Burzghash under control!" Raising up slightly, Harry raised his wand, aimed at several oncoming orcs, and shouted "*Petrificus Totalus!*" The orcs went over, stiff as boards.

"I did! I do!" screamed Draco, his face pale beneath the tan he'd picked up on their trip. "Burzghash didn't know these orcs were here! They're a colony of stragglers, it seems--- they got out from under the control of their bosses, and holed up here!" As a large orc, braver than its friends, began to charge up close, Draco pointed his wand and yelled "*Avada Kedavra!*" In a flash of green light, the orc fell over dead, along with two others that had been getting ready to follow.

To Hermione, the fight was a replay of the big fight in the Chamber of Mazarbul; a confused, terrifying chaos where she fired off spells left and right, as arrows whizzed uncomfortably close and ugly, leering, snarling faces loomed up to strike at her. More than once, she had to fight with her short sword in one hand and her wand in the other, alternating tricks like Summoning and then Repelling arrows with slashing at wounded orcs who had managed to crawl close enough to try to grab her.

Finally, after a time that could have been minutes but that had seemed like hours, the fight was over; the last orcs were running off, shrieking in fear, or lying on the ground bleeding to death. Hermione absently squatted down and took a dead orc's cloak to clean her sword with, wiping the black blood off the blade as coolly as if she were cleaning her cauldron after nothing worse than Double Potions. Then it hit her. *What in the world's happened to me? How can I be so calm about this?*

"You all right, Hermione?" asked Ron. He had finished cleaning off his sword---he had gotten to close quarters as well---and had come over to see how she was doing.

Hermione gave Ron a rather shaky-feeling smile. "I don't know, Ron...it just struck me how much I've changed since I got here. Back home, I'd probably have been throwing up after something like this. Now, it's all part of the day's work." She suddenly grabbed Ron, heedless of his start of surprise. "Has the Ring gotten to me? Am I going evil? Am I a monster?" She clutched him convulsively, burying her face in his chest. She didn't dare to look into his face; she was terrified of what she thought she'd see there---rejection, disgust, horror.

"No, Hermione, you're not a monster. None of us are. We've just had to adjust to what we found here. We knew the trip would be dangerous when we started out." Ron put a finger under Hermione's chin and gently tilted her head up, so that she had to look him in the eye. Instead of rejection and disgust, she saw trust, and total acceptance---and a wave of relief washed through her. "If you hadn't learned to kill, you'd be dead now. We all would be. I don't know about you, but I want to live. I want all of us to live, and live long lives. If the orcs had

let us be, we'd have let them be as well, but they made the choice to attack us, and if we turned out to be tougher than they expected, it's their hard luck."

"That's two sensible speeches in a row from you, Ron," commented Harry, with a crooked grin that would have looked more at home on Draco. Behind him, Draco nodded. "All right, out with it. Where's the real Ron Weasley, and what did you do with him, you impostor?" At this, Hermione began to snicker, and soon all of them were laughing; relief at being alive and joy that their friends were also alive was like a tonic to them.

"I can't say the news was all good, though," said Draco, when they had calmed down. "Burzghash got it in the fighting---I lost control of him for a minute, he tried to join the other orcs, and they put four arrows into his throat and chest before I could stop them. We've lost our guide."

"Uh, I think we may have lost something worse," said Harry, in a low voice. "Check your water bottles, everybody. I know I landed on mine, and while they're flexible, they aren't completely invulnerable. I landed flat on mine when I hit the dirt, and the stopper came out." Harry pointed to the front of his clothes, which were soaked with mud.

"Oh, bugger," muttered Draco. "Mine stopped an arrow, I think." He held up the bottle, which had a hole right through it from one end to the other. Hermione checked her own water bottle, and was relieved to find that it was unharmed. So was Ron's, but they now only had half as much water as they'd set out with, and much of it had gone to waste.

"So now we're a lot lower on water than we had anticipated, and don't have a guide to where water can be found," muttered Harry. He looked off into the distance. Mount Doom loomed on the horizon, a black cone against the dark-gray skies of Mordor; its top was dimly lit from within as the fires within seethed. "I'll tell you all what. I'll take the water, and make a dash for it. I think I should be able to get to the Mountain in a couple of days. You all can turn back here. Get back to the tower of Cirith Ungol, and back up through the pass. Tell them---" his voice broke for a moment, and then became firm again---"tell them at Hogwarts, when you get back, that my time there was the best times of my life."

"What are you babbling about?" asked Hermione. Down inside, she knew just what he had said, but she was hoping against hope that she had misheard him, or misconstrued his words. "Do you want us to let you go on alone?"

Harry nodded, not looking at any of them. Hermione felt a fury grow inside her, a fury like nothing she had felt since Gollum's betrayal of them high in the passes of Torech Ungol. Striding forward, she grabbed Harry by the front of his tunic.

"Harry James Potter, if you think we're splitting up, here in Mordor of all places, you're barking mad! Do you hear me? I don't know about the boys, but I for one am not going to let you go on alone in this awful place!" She shoved her face up close to his, close enough that she could see her own eyes reflected in Harry's glasses. "You are not going on---we are going on! Do you understand me?"

"I see you remembered what I said earlier, when we split off from the Fellowship," commented Draco. "I'm flattered that you chose to borrow my phrasing. Of course, it's worth borrowing---and as true now as it was then." His voice acquired a very hard edge; Hermione was uncomfortably reminded of Professor Snape confronted with a bungled potion. "I said we

had an errand, Harry. An errand in Mordor. I don't know about the others, but I'm not turning back until that errand is done."

"And if you think I'd abandon you, you've forgotten a few things, Harry," snarled Ron. "We've been best friends since we were eleven years old, and before our first school year was out, we'd faced up to the Dark Lord together. Remember that chess game?" His eyes blazed. "Hermione and I have faced danger with you again and again and again. I'd have gone on into the Chamber of Secrets with you, but for that rockfall. I haven't forgotten that I was the thing you'd most miss, back during the Triwizard Tournament." His expression suddenly went somber. "And, maybe---maybe I think I owe you for not believing you when you first told me you hadn't put your name into the Goblet of Fire. If nothing else, this can serve as penance."

Harry turned away, wiping at his face. When he turned back, his expression was haunted, and desperately unhappy. "You all don't know what this means to me. Can you please hear me out, though?" He looked from one of his companions to the other, not able to meet their eyes. "Hermione, you've held this---this burden I bear, even if just for a little while. You know just how magical it is." At Hermione's nod, he went on: "Okay, think about this. I've got to get close enough to throw this ring into that damned volcano. What do you think will happen then, when all that magical energy is released at once?" Ron and Draco's eyes widened, and Hermione felt an icy stab of fear down her back. Harry saw that he had made his point.

"My own guess is that the Ring's destruction is going to set off a magical backlash and explosion like nothing I've ever heard of. If it doesn't set off a volcanic eruption as well, I'll eat my boots." Harry looked off toward the Mountain again. "Can you now see why I don't want you to come along? I have a right to risk my own life---I've already had more life than I should have, by all rights---but you have the right to live your lives out. That includes not tossing them away on a suicide mission."

"Remember Trelawney's prophecy?" asked Draco. "It said we all were necessary for this to end successfully. 'The clayworker, the farmer, the dragon and the mustelid,' if I remember right. This hasn't ended yet. Besides"---Draco quirked his old snarky grin--- "as I said back in Rivendell, you need me. I said you were Gryffindors, which meant you were gallant fools. I was guilty of understatement, if anything. You need me, anyway. You don't know the Unforgivable Curses, or a lot of the other Dark Magic my father made sure I was taught. What do you think will happen to you if you get jumped again?"

"Not to mention, Gollum's still around. You may be able to handle the little creep, but I wouldn't feel right about leaving you to do it." Hermione reached out, and gently took Harry's glasses off. As softly as the touch of a butterfly, she patted his cheek with her right hand. "That's payback for slapping me, back outside Torech Ungol." As Harry's eyebrows lifted in surprise, Hermione swung her left hand, slapping Harry hard enough to rock his head back on the hinges. With a grunt of surprise, he stumbled backward and sat down. Bending down, Hermione replaced his glasses on his face, and hissed: "And *that* was for being idiotic enough, and thinking ill enough of us, to even suggest that we'd leave you! I ought to shake you good, to see if you've completely lost your mind, or if a tiny little piece of it is still rattling around somewhere in your skull!"

Harry shook his head, wiping up a little blood that dripped from the corner of his mouth. Hermione turned to face Ron and Draco, who were staring at her, eyes round with surprise---and, she noted with satisfaction, reluctant respect. She felt a rather nasty grin

spreading across her face. "Like I said, that was payback. Come on, Harry, I didn't hit you that hard. On your feet, boy---we've got miles to make!"

Looking slightly dizzy, Harry got to his feet, using his staff to help himself up. When he had gotten back up, Hermione turned toward the Mountain, and they set out again. Hermione had caught Ron and Draco looking at each other in surprise at this new side of her personality, and one part of her felt a guilty thrill of satisfaction.

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The last leg of their journey to the Mountain was harder than any part of their trip so far, Hermione thought. If they'd been able to travel openly, they could have done it in a couple of days. As it was, though, they had to creep from one sheltered place to another, always on the alert for orcs, or Gollum. If they slept at all, it was fitfully, and never all at once; one of them always had to be awake and on watch under the Invisibility Cloak, ready to awaken the others if enemies drew near.

More than once, they had to lie doggo for hours, hiding as huge forces of orcs, or sometimes men, marched by. From their vantage-points, they could hear the cracks of the orc-drivers' whips, and hear the shouts of the commanders driving and leading their soldiers to war for the glory of Mordor and the power of its Dark Lord.

Their water didn't last too long, although they were deliberately stretching it as far as they could. Hermione found herself dreaming of water, thinking longingly of the well-appointed baths of Hogwarts, or the flowing rivers and streams of her English home. *If I ever get back out of this, she promised herself silently, I'll never, never take water for granted again!*

The others were suffering, too. They stumbled forward, eyes glazed, and unless they sensed danger, seemed to be almost running on autopilot. She could hear Draco murmuring the words of a poem she remembered from her time in Muggle primary school; she wondered absently where he had heard it:

"Here there is no water but only rock

Rock and no water and the sandy road

The road winding above among the mountains

Which are mountains of rock without water"

He paused for a moment, gasping in the fetid air, then went on:

"This is the dead land

This is cactus land

Here the stone images are raised,

Here they receive the supplication

Of a dead man's hand

Under the twinkle of a fading star..."

Even through her own haze of suffering, Hermione shook her head in wonder. *First Dante, she thought, now T.S. Eliot! Do we ever really know another person? At least the poems---The Waste Land and The Hollow Men---couldn't be more appropriate!* She smiled to herself, heedless of the pain from her dried and chapped lips. It faded into the haze of pain from her legs and feet, after all---she hadn't had her boots off in days, and even though her socks and boots fit her quite well, she knew that her feet were masses of blisters.

Ahead of her and Draco, Harry stumbled along dazedly, leaning on Ron and on his staff. His head was held low, and she could hear him panting for air, wheezing with every breath he took. In between wheezes, she heard him muttering, and could occasionally catch a word: "No, I won't...not even for that..." Even through her own pain, she pitied Harry. *Poor Harry, the world's weight does seem to descend on your shoulders, doesn't it?* At the same time, she was awed by his devotion. Even though she could see that the Ring was steadily sucking the vitality from him, he was never the first to suggest stopping, and he did his full share of keeping watch when they stopped.

One of the worst things about their water shortage was how it affected their eating. About all they had was *lembas* and the hard dry biscuit they had picked up at Cirith Ungol. The *lembas* went down well, needing very little water to wash it down with, but the biscuit proved to be a dreadful trial. Some of it proved to be infested with weevil larvae and had to be thrown out, while the uninfested portion was hard as rock and difficult to choke down.

"This isn't working, boys," said Hermione as they sat together, gnawing at the stony biscuit. "I don't care if it's dangerous. I am going to go looking for water." As she looked from face to face, she saw how weary and drained they all were. In the distance, the Mountain rumbled, deep and low like the snoring of a mad earth-god, the vibrations resounding through her bones. Overhead, the endless overcast of Mordor, dark as a thunderstorm's darkest cloud, cut the daylight down to a dimness like an English winter evening.

"Do you want us to come with you?" asked Ron. His sunburn, at least, was healing; without the sun burning his skin again and again, it had a chance to heal. In that, if in nothing else, Mordor was a good land, thought Hermione. She had long since become inured to her own suffering, but it still hurt her to think of her friends in pain.

"No, Ron. I think I can go alone. The way the land lies, I think there's water not too far off---and we're not far from one of Sauron's roads. There have to be cisterns along those, if only because a lot of his soldiers come through here," Hermione replied. The thought of her friends' pain drew her eyes to Harry. Harry was sitting there, staring at nothing. He had developed an odd tic in his mouth over the last couple of days, and did not usually respond the first time someone spoke to him. "Draco---you and Ron stay here. I think one of you should take the Invisibility Cloak and keep watch from up higher, and the other should stay with Harry. We need to let him sleep if he can."

"That sounds like an excellent plan, Hermione," Draco said. He gave Harry a long, appraising look, and then looked up, into Hermione's eyes. She could see that Draco was quite worried about their friend. "Let's let Harry sleep. Do you want to sleep, Harry?"

Harry slipped over to one side and flopped out on the ground, his eyes shut. As tenderly as his own mother, Ron lifted him enough to slip a cloak under him, to cushion him from the ground, and then let him lie back down, slipping his glasses off and pulling another cloak over him. Draco opened Harry's pack and took out the silvery Invisibility Cloak, pulling it over himself. A scattering of small stones rolling down the slope told Hermione that Draco was climbing up to the top of the hill, to watch for trouble. She took the surviving water-bottles and went toward the road, keeping in cover as best she could.

* * * * *

"Wakey, wakey." Ron stirred Harry with his foot, bringing him from sleep to a slightly confused awakening. At first he gasped and reached up to shield his face, but as comprehension of where he was dawned, he put his arm down and sat up. The loose soil they had been sleeping on was softer than rock, but not by a great deal. "You all right, Harry?" Ron leaned forward, concerned.

Harry put his hand on his chest, over where the Ring rode on a chain around his neck. "I--I was dreaming." He shook his head at Ron's expression. "No, not the wheel of fire again, although I rather think I'll be seeing it more and more, awake and asleep." He peered off through the gloom of Mordor, toward the distant glow that was the top of Mount Oroduin. "I was dreaming that I was back---back with the Dursleys." As if reluctant to let go, his hand slowly dropped to his side, and he took his glasses out of his battered pouch, wiped them on the front of his ragged tunic, and put them on.

"That bad, mate?" Concern edged Ron's voice.

"Yeah. You know, after dreams like *that*---" Harry gestured, indicating the Land of Mordor all around them, from the grim mountains they had had to pass to get in, on to the desert they had to cross---"this doesn't look half-bad." He brushed his hair back out of his eyes; it was a lot longer than it had ever been and Hermione had tied all the boys' hair into pony-tails to keep it out of the way.

"It was *that* bad for you?"

"Worse. Infinitely worse. When you're a little child, you accept the world pretty much as it is, even if it *is* pretty horrible. I do wish the Dursleys were here, suffering along with us, but I rather think they'd be on Sauron's side pretty quick. They were always awfully fast to suck up to anybody who had anything they wanted."

"Like---" Ron was cut off as Draco Malfoy slid down the slope in a shower of pebbles, ending up near them as he took off the Invisibility Cloak. Ron gazed carefully at his old rival. Like all of them, he had been changed greatly by their weeks of hard travel. Always thin, Malfoy was now almost emaciated; his formerly pale skin was tanned and roughened by the weather, and like them all, his clothes were in dreadful shape.

"Have a good rest, Potter?" he asked. "Nothing's stirring that I could see or hear, and I used a Keensense Charm---my mother taught me about them---to make certain. Granger's taken the water-bottles; she thinks there's water not far away."

"Good. We've got *lembas* aplenty. Still and all, without water, we can't go much farther." Ron rubbed his cheek; he still had skin peeling off from sunburn. If nothing else about Mordor agreed with him, the lack of sunshine did.

A crunching noise near them sent them all diving for cover, wands out and ready to fight. Ron peered out, wondering whether they had been discovered.

"Relax, boys, it's just me," came a familiar voice, and Hermione Granger came into view, flitting carefully from one sheltered spot to the next. Like all of them, she did not like the idea of being caught in the open in this place. She had the water-bottles festooned around her, carefully padded with cloth so that they wouldn't clink or rustle together and betray her. When she reached the others, she set down her burden with a sigh. "Gods and goddesses, that stuff's heavy, but I daresay we'll be wishing it was heavier before this trip's over." She peered off toward Mount Doom, and Ron took the opportunity to take a long look at her.

Like all of them, the trip had told on her. She had lost weight, as they all had, and her clothes were bedraggled and filthy. Her hair was what she called "a fright wig," and she was smeared with the volcanic-ash soil of Mordor. Ron didn't pay any of that any attention; he knew they were all filthy and ragged. What he noticed was changes that she probably wouldn't have even agreed existed. She was consumed with the determination to see this thing through, and get the Ring to Mount Doom. Behind the smudges and sunburned cheeks, her eyes reflected an unshakable resolve, her will subordinating her body and making it a mere instrument in the service of their terrible quest.

Ron thought that she had never been more truly beautiful. He knew that if he said any such thing, she'd loudly deny it and insist that she looked hideous. Still, she reminded him of a finely-crafted, honed, polished Japanese sword-blade, such as they all carried, made for one mission and one mission only.

Taking a water-bottle from her, he swigged deeply. The sulfur fumes from Mount Doom dried the mouth quickly. "At least it isn't as hot here as I'd expected it to be in a desert," Harry muttered, gulping water from his own bottle.

"Of course not, Harry," said Hermione, handing out the water bottles and bags so that everybody got to carry a roughly equal share. "We're behind the mountains here, and some way from the sea, according to those maps I saw in Lorien. Also, that cloud-cover over us keeps the worst of the sun off." She hunched, hissed, and snarled: "Ach, sss, the Yellow Face! We hates it, we does, doesn't we, my precious? *Gollum!*" She shivered. "His voice in my ear, and his hands all over me---gods, what a nightmare! At least we haven't seen him lately!"

Ron grinned rather crookedly. "He wasn't expecting you to be so strong, Hermione. Kicking him just where you did was perfect."

Hermione shook her head grimly. "He was useful enough, guiding us to that pass. I'd bet Hogwarts Castle that he always had something underhanded in mind, though---like getting his "precious" back after that creature was done with us. She didn't strike me as interested in rings."

"The only female I've ever met of whom *that* statement can be made,:" drawled Draco. Hermione aimed a playful punch at his bicep. "Ouch! Come and see the violence inherent in the system---help, help, I'm being repressed!"

"How much farther do you think it is, Draco?" asked Harry. The water had revived him considerably; Ron wondered how much of his troubles had just been from being dehydrated. He knew the water had perked him up considerably; his feet and legs were still sore and aching, and he could feel the biscuit he had been gnawing like a lump of cement in his stomach, but he felt better than he had for a while.

"I'd say about ten miles, Harry." Draco peered off toward the Mountain; as they had travelled, it had become larger and larger, a huge black humped triangle that swelled until it filled a large part of the horizon. Ever and anon it rumbled, deep and low enough that it was as much perceived as heard.

Harry seemed to come to a decision. "Very well. Let's get as much rest as we can while we're here, and tomorrow, try to make a dash for the Mountain. Does it look like there's any chance of running into soldiers of the Enemy on the way, Draco?"

Draco cogitated. "Highly unlikely. From where I was, I could see almost to the base of the Mountain, and there didn't look like anything alive. It's ash plain all the way, and the nearest roads I could see are a long ways to either side."

"Good. Before we go, though--I'm going to suggest that we shed any extra encumbrances. We'll keep our wands, the clothes we're wearing, our water-bottles, our swords, the Invisibility Cloak, and nothing more. If we have to, we'll use the Ennervate Charm." Harry grinned a haunted grin. "It won't burn us out before we get there, I'm thinking."

Chapter 26 -- Endgame in the Shadows

As Hermione watched, Ron and Draco dug a hole; all they had to dig with was their hands. Use of their swords to loosen the dirt had been rejected in horror when she brought it up; "Why," Draco had gasped, "that would be like serving cheap butterbeer in a fine crystal goblet!" Hermione decided that it was a male thing, and left her friends to it.

Harry was sitting off by himself, his knees tucked up under his chin, staring out at the Mountain. Hermione felt her heart go out to him---she had borne his terrible burden for a little while, and had faced the Wheel of Fire herself, in her dreams. She could easily imagine what was going through Harry's mind. "Harry?" At her voice, he looked up, startled out of his reveries. "Mind if I sit with you for a while?"

Harry nodded and smiled at her, the old sweet smile that she loved. Even here, even now, with the Ring getting its claws deeper and deeper into his mind, the old Harry Potter was still there. She wondered if he'd go back to normal once the Ring was destroyed---assuming they survived the magical backlash that its destruction would set off.

That thought turned Hermione's mind toward the last stages of their journey. Ahead of them, Gorgoroth stretched, bleak and barren, its blackened soil supporting no vegetation. While the ground was rough enough that they could find cover, she wasn't looking forward to the trip at all. And at the end of it loomed Oroduin itself. Draco's mountaineering skills, she feared, would have to come into play for them to get up the volcano's slopes.

"There," said Ron, behind her. "The hole's deep enough, Draco." Reminded of her friends' existence, Hermione turned to see what they were doing. Carefully, Draco unpacked his pack, taking out the ropes, the one remaining roll of duct tape, and other things they'd agreed they would certainly need, and put the rest into the hole. Ron then did the same with his own gear, sorting through to get the things he'd need, and putting his pack in on top of Draco's.

"Uh, may I ask a question, boys?" Hermione got up and came over to where Ron and Draco were working. "Wouldn't it be a lot simpler to just throw the stuff away?" Draco straightened, sweeping his hand across his forehead and leaving a grimy smudge to go with the layers of grime he'd accumulated already. He fixed Hermione with a piercing look, reminding her somehow of Professor Snape.

"First, Hermione, I'm not sure that we won't survive the Ring's destruction. If we do, we'll have a new problem, namely, getting out of Mordor alive. When and if that occurs, we'll need this stuff." He suddenly looked very, very weary, and much younger than he usually did. "Secondly---Professor Snape brewed up those potions himself, when he found out where I was going and what I was going to do---and I do *not* want to just throw them away or pour them out! He worked hard on them, and I don't want to waste them!"

Hermione was slightly startled. *Draco Malfoy, of all people, sentimental?* Well, she thought, *he is probably a lot closer to Professor Snape than we are.* She found herself warming to him. She knew it would just about tear out her heart to leave her own gear behind for the last push.

She suddenly remembered something. "One thing that we do not abandon, boys---and that's my gift from the Lady of Lorien." Fishing in her pack, she pulled it out. Even after riding in her pack for so long, along with increasingly-ripe used underwear and other things, it still had the smell of Lothlorien on it. "Remember this? A comprehensive history of Middle-Earth, enchanted so that it doesn't weigh anything." She clutched the book to her chest, staring defiantly at Ron and Draco. To her relief, Ron smiled, and Draco chuckled softly to himself.

"As you say, Hermione, it doesn't weigh anything." Reassured, Hermione sorted quickly through her things, separating them into things she knew they'd need---and her precious gift---and things she could spare for the last dash. With a sigh, she shoved the excess into the hole. Then she turned to Harry, who was still wearing his pack.

"Harry? We're getting rid of stuff we won't be needing. Can I have your pack?" Harry reflexively grasped at the Ring, gripping it through his shirt, before her words registered with him. Giving Hermione a rueful smile, he stripped off his pack.

"Sort away, Hermione. I won't need my spare clothes---they're all filthy. I could try throwing them in the faces of attackers, but orcs would probably think they were yummy orc-snacks, if your accounts of what they had available to eat back at Torech Ungol are right." He fished in his shirt, and brought out the phial the Lady had given him. "I heard what you said about the gift the Lady of Lorien gave you. I feel the same way about this, and it doesn't weigh more than a few ounces. Anybody trying to take it *will* get hexed---got me?" His green eyes flashed coldly behind his glasses.

"Nobody'll take that, Harry. We promise." Ron's words mollified Harry, and he permitted Ron and Hermione to go through his pack. Hermione giggled softly, not loud enough for the boys to hear, as she fished out Harry's old clothes. He hadn't been kidding or wrong about his old clothes. She pictured using them to distract orcs with, and the orcs breaking off their attack to chow down on Harry's stinky old socks.

When they had stripped themselves of everything but what they'd need on the last dash to the foot of the Mountain, they began filling up the hole. As the ashy soil of Mordor covered their possessions, Hermione shivered, seeing it as though it were a grave for one---or all---of them. "*Absit omen,*" she muttered, spitting very carefully so as to not waste any more moisture than absolutely necessary.

"May it not be an omen, indeed," said Ron, putting his arm around Hermione's shoulders as she leaned against him. She relished the feeling of being under his protection, even though she knew full well it was illusory; in a fight, they all had to pull their own weight, and she knew that if she had actually been the sort of shrinking-violet she had read of in Muggle-written adventure tales, she'd either have never been along or would have been dead a dozen times over already. Ron shook his head. "I just hope Gollum doesn't find it. I don't *think* there's anything there he could use." Hermione turned to face her friend as a ghostly grin flitted across his face. "And I don't think even he would want our old used clothes, do you, Hermione?"

Hermione wrinkled up her nose. "You think of the oddest things, Ron---not that that's a bad thing, in and of itself." She bent over, blinking and crouching, hissing "Ach, sss, nasty mageses leaves us their old clotheses! Nassty! Icky! We doesn't want them, does we, preciouss, *gollum*? They stinkses!"

Ron and Draco, who had come up to see what she was doing, laughed and laughed. Then an unexpected sound startled all of them. Whirling, they saw that Harry had been watching, and he was laughing as hard as any of them. As they watched, he took off his glasses to wipe tears of laughter from his eyes. "Oh, Hermione, that's hilarious!" he sputtered. "When you came to Hogwarts, the Muggles lost an incredible comedienne." Wiping his glasses absently, he slipped them back on, still chuckling. "Don't ever change, Hermione---I like you just the way you are." Hermione felt warm and comforted at his words. She had always felt slightly insecure, all her time at Hogwarts; she had never been able to shake a feeling that it was all too wonderful to be true, and that any minute Professor McGonagall or Professor Dumbledore would tell her that there'd been a mistake, and she'd have to leave. Being told that one of her favorite men in the world liked her just as she was made her feel wonderful.

Shaking her head, Hermione dragged herself back to present reality with an effort. They were an immeasurable distance from Hogwarts, and the only way back that offered any chance of safety and security once they were back stretched out ahead of them, across the barren, blasted plain of Gorgoroth---to the top of Mount Doom. "Well, boys, as Draco would say, it'll get no shorter for us looking at it. Shall we?" She stepped off, down the hillside toward Gorgoroth, not looking to see if the boys were following her.

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For several hours, they were able to make fair time. Hermione was grateful, in an odd way, for Mordor's very dryness; she knew that had it been as damp as England, the friable soil that crunched under her boot-soles would have been slippery, gooey mud, and they'd either have had to plough through the stuff with it up to their shins, or beyond---or they'd have been slipping and losing their footing. As it was, they were able to scramble up and down, over the low hills, for some time.

When they paused for a moment, Hermione noticed that Harry looked very bad. She thought she knew the symptoms of the Ring's influence, and it didn't look like that. It looked to her more like he was in dreadful pain. "Harry?" At her voice, Harry looked up warily. "Harry? Is there something wrong?" Harry nodded, his lips white with the effort of keeping his composure.

"My leg---I thought it was okay, but it's been getting worse and worse, these last few miles." He thrust out his leg, and Hermione hissed; she could see that it was swollen and red and angry, through the holes that Harry hadn't bothered mending.

Draco snapped: "Roll up your trouser leg, Harry. Let's have a look at that lot." When Harry had managed to get his leg bared, Draco looked it over, his face grim. Harry's leg was swollen and red, and Hermione didn't think that was a good sign. "I don't like the look of that, Harry. I don't like it at all. How long has it been bothering you?"

"Some time," Harry gasped, as Draco gently prodded the puffy flesh. "Several hours. I don't know just how long." Draco wordlessly began to take Harry's boot off, and when that was off, he rolled Harry's sock off, wrinkling his nose at the smell. Even through the sulfur-laden air of Mordor, Hermione could smell Harry's foot, but she paid the smell no mind. She was far more concerned for Harry.

Draco probed at Harry's leg, making him gasp in pain. "You shouldn't have been walking on this, Harry. I should have thought of that earlier." He looked up, eyes full of self-reproach. "I should have had you wrap up your leg before we left Torech Ungol. Damn it," he suddenly exploded, in a fury of frustration, "why, *why* couldn't this have waited till we finished Hogwarts? Madam Pomfrey could put you to rights with a few quick spells, or potions, but I only know a little of what she knew!"

"Don't blame yourself, Draco," Harry replied. Reaching out, he took Draco's hand in both of his. "If I wasn't a stubborn *ass*, I'd have said something earlier. Is it too late to do anything?" Draco's narrow, clever face twisted as he thought about Harry's question.

"We can wrap your ankle and lower leg tightly with duct tape---one of the great Muggle inventions, and thank you, Hermione, for insisting we bring it," Draco concluded, as Hermione smiled at his acknowledgement of her contribution. "I don't know if we can get your boot and sock back on, but maybe we can modify your boot." Suiting action to words, Draco took the remaining roll of tape and began systematically wrapping Harry's foot up, starting below the ankle and moving upward.

When Harry's ankle had been taped up tightly, the next step was seeing if his boot would still fit. As it turned out, it would, albeit with the laces removed to get it on over the tape, and then re-laced as tightly as they would go. "Thank the gods for small favors," muttered Harry. "I wasn't looking forward to doing without my boot, or to having to cut it about so it would fit." He stood up experimentally, swaying slightly as he tried to become accustomed to his bandages. "I may need help up ahead, but I think I can go on."

Ron stepped forward, and Harry leaned on his arm, using his staff to support his other side. "My oldest friend of all," muttered Harry, as Ron blushed scarlet. With Ron helping Harry along, they moved out again, Draco in the lead to watch for danger, and Hermione behind everybody else to keep an eye out for anything following them.

*

They now made slow progress; the ground was uneven and rough, and Harry could only get over it with a great deal of help. More than once, the other three had to come to his rescue, sometimes resorting to spells to get Harry over a particularly rough patch. Harry's endurance also wasn't what it had been; more than once, they had to pause while he lay there, gasping in the parched, sulfur-stinking air, his face pale and drawn under the deep tan he had acquired in their time on the road.

Hermione was worried. She hadn't seen any sign of Gollum, but she knew that the creature was a very good tracker. The soil was loose enough that they left footprints behind in many places, and even without that, she knew that Gollum could probably trail them by smell.

Even as slowly as they were travelling, forced to go no faster than Harry could limp along, and having to move from cover to cover, they did make progress. Ahead of them, Mount Doom loomed, larger and larger, a black cone rearing up against the eternally overcast skies of Mordor. As they approached, Hermione found that she could also see a great castle in the distance, perched on a tongue of mountain that extended out into the plains of Gorgoroth.

"Yeah, I see it too, Hermione," muttered Draco when, during one of their rests, she mentioned it. Ron nodded in agreement; Harry was lost in a haze of pain, thirst and

exhaustion, lying back with his eyes barely open, his breath coming in gasping sobs. "That has to be Barad-Dur itself---the Dark Tower, the home of Sauron." Draco managed to leer at Hermione. "Ever wonder what's in *there*, Miss Curiosity?"

"No!" Hermione shook her head emphatically, careless of how the motion made her head throb with pain. "The Muggle writer H.P. Lovecraft liked to talk about 'things Man was not meant to know,' and I think a lot of those things are probably in that *darned*---and I use the word in its theological sense---castle!"

"You and me both, Hermione," Ron mumbled, trying to get a bit of *lembas* down his throat without dipping into their precious water. "Besides, getting a look inside's probably synonymous with 'captured by Sauron,' and we all know what *that* would entail, don't we?" The three friends shared haunted, haggard grins. Hermione knew full well what sort of torments Sauron had in store for his enemies, and decided, yet again, that going out by Draco's *Avada Kedavra* would be infinitely preferable to capture by Sauron. *If I were captured, would that make me 'Miss Taken?'* she wondered, for a second, before dismissing such silliness with a shake of her head.

When Harry came to, groaning, they prepared to move on. Hermione bled inside at the sight of Harry's face when he stood---even with the help of his staff, and Ron's unstinting support, his face was set in a mask of pain, twisted and awful to see. There didn't seem to be anybody at home behind his green eyes, when Hermione took a close look; Harry stumbled forward like a drunk, or a zombie in a Muggle movie, and only Ron's guidance kept him from wandering off in a random direction.

Ahead of them, Mount Doom crouched, like some unimaginably huge beast of prey waiting for its dinner to come traipsing up. The mountain belched forth fresh clouds of sulfury-smelling smoke now and then, and ever and anon came the rumblings from deep underground, rumblings that Hermione could feel through the soles of her boots.

And not just vibrations---when Hermione touched the ground, she noticed that the soil was warmer than it had any business being. "Draco?" she called out softly. "Do you think the ground's warmer than it should be?"

Draco squatted down and touched the ground. "I think you're right---as usual, Hermione," he added, as Hermione felt a rush of gratification. She liked to think she had very few weaknesses, but pride in her intellect had always been one of the ones she did acknowledge. "I just hope that bloody volcano doesn't pick right now to erupt."

As they straightened up, a rock whistled past them, and they hit the dirt by pure instinct. The rock got Ron right in the head with a sickening *klok* sound, and Ron crumpled, as Gollum leaped from ambush and threw himself on Harry's throat, grabbing at his shirt-front over where the Ring was hidden.

"Nooo!" hissed Gollum, his eyes glowing with madness. "Wicked masster cheatss uss! Musstn't hurt Preciouss! Give it to uss! Give it to uss *now*!" Hermione was busy trying to see to Ron, but she gaped in horror at Gollum. Somehow or other, he'd grown! He was now nearly of a height with her, and apparently possessed of strength she'd never known he had. He overbore Harry and threw him to the ground on his back, hissing insanely.

Instinctively, Hermione grabbed for her wand, but Draco gripped her by her wrist. "No! They're too close together! You might hit Harry!" The two were rolling over and over each other on the ground, and then Harry was up on his feet, gripping the Ring through his shirt-front with one hand and pulling his wand with the other. He looked more lucid than he had in some time; Hermione figured that an attempt to grab the Ring from him would be the one thing that could get through the fog he'd been in.

"Get down! Get *away from me*, you filthy, creeping thing!" hissed Harry, his green eyes seeming to glow with rage. "You vile thing! You tried to kill my friends! I should kill you where you lie!" Cowering before him, Gollum raised a hand as though to shield himself from a terrible light. With a perception that she somehow knew had come from her brief time as a Ringbearer, Hermione suddenly saw them as they truly were.

With her Inner Eye, the same one, she now realized, as Professor Trelawney had been yattering about in her useless Divination class, she saw a mighty wizard who chose to hide his power, holding a wheel of fire before his chest. In front of the wizard, a creeping thing grovelled, whimpering like the whipped, starved dog it somehow resembled, as the wizard intoned: "Leave me! Never touch me again, or I will personally cast you into the Cracks of Doom!" Or had that voice come from the wheel of fire itself? Hermione shook herself, and the vision faded; now she just saw Harry, standing over Gollum and giving him a terrible glare.

With a final sneer, Harry turned his back on Gollum, as though daring the creature to attack him again, and began limping off toward Mount Doom. Gollum, though, had apparently had all he wanted from Harry. He turned, cowering and hissing---and found himself facing Draco, Hermione and a groggy, angry Ron.

At the expressions on their faces, Gollum broke completely. "Let uss live, O let uss live!" he whimpered, crumpling back onto the ground and stretching out his hands in appeal. "Losst, losst in thiss dreadful desert, we're losst! Thirssty, we are! The drinkses you buried didn't tasste good, did they, precious?"

"So that's it," Hermione heard Draco mutter. "There was some Skele-Gro left, and some Pepperup Potion. No wonder he grew!" He pointed his wand, looking very like the old Draco Malfoy at his very worst. Then he lowered it, sheathing it and drawing his sword. "No. I won't dishonor magic by using it on you, you treacherous piece of filth. Remember what I yelled at you, back where the spider was?"

At the mention of the spider, Ron moaned. His eyes weren't focussing, and he didn't seem oriented, but he did remember the spider, all too well. Hermione slipped over to his side, unobtrusively offering her shoulder to support him.

Draco was going on, his voice ominously calm, his eyes glittering with hatred: "I yelled 'You are dead, dead, dead! I'm going to kill you myself until you're sorry!' And a Malfoy always keeps his word---particularly when it's about doing someone harm!" Faster than a striking snake, he grabbed Gollum by the throat and brought back his sword for the killing blow. He towered over the cringing Gollum like an avenging angel.

Time seemed to go very slowly for Hermione, as she suddenly heard voices from the past. In particular, she heard Harry, saying that he couldn't hate Gollum, because he understood Gollum, all too well. She could also remember what it had been like for her, in the few hours

that she'd held the Ring herself. *How would I have been, she asked herself, if I had been burdened with It for five hundred years?*

All of that ran through her mind in less than a second, and before she quite knew what she was doing, she'd drawn her wand, and levelled it at Draco's head. "Put down that sword, Draco Malfoy!" she heard herself snarling, a snap of command in her voice that had seldom been there. "I forbid you to kill him!"

Draco whirled, his eyes blazing. At the sight of Hermione covering him with her wand, he gaped in pure amazement; his hand slackened and Gollum squirmed free, grovelling up to Hermione in almost the same way that Peter Pettigrew had in the Shrieking Shack, in a past that seemed as long ago as Professor Binns' goblin rebellions.

"Hermione?" Draco's voice was faint, suddenly, as he slowly, carefully sheathed his sword. "Are you barking mad?" He no longer looked like an avenging angel to Hermione, but like a lost little boy. The rage that had blazed through him like sunlight through a stained-glass window, and transformed him, was gone.

"What he is, the Ring's made him. He can't help himself. Besides, Harry didn't kill him---he just told him to go away." Hermione slowly lowered her wand, looking at Gollum with mingled pity and loathing. "I didn't want to kill him, back below the Eryn Mui---remember? Even now, I can't do it."

"Ach, sss, pretty girl savess uss," Gollum whimpered, wriggling like a dog whose owner has petted it. "Ssshe won't let nasty elf-looking wizard kill uss, will she?" He dared to peek at Ron. "Or nasty bad-tempered red-headed wizard?"

Hermione had forgotten Ron, even though she was still more-or-less holding him up. "Draco! Go catch up to Harry! He can't get far on his own!" Reminded suddenly of Harry's existence, Draco paled under his tan, nodded and headed down after Harry. Freed of worry about what Draco might do, Hermione concentrated on Gollum. "And you---you heard what Harry said! Get away from us and never bother us again! You're lucky I didn't let Draco kill you!" As Gollum whimpered, Hermione lashed out with her boot, catching him in the ribs and evoking a whistling shriek. "Get out of here! Sod the hell off!"

As Gollum scampered away---and Hermione made well sure that he was going in a different direction from Harry, who was being helped along by Draco---she turned her attention to Ron. Ron was rubbing his head, moaning "Twice! Twice in the same spot! What is it with his rocks and my head?" Hermione grabbed him by the sides of his head, peering into his eyes. To her relief, his pupils were the same size.

"Can you walk?" Ron nodded, but when he tried to walk, he nearly fell flat on his face. Hermione ran to him, and fitted herself under his armpit, using her staff to steady herself. With that, and his own staff, Ron was able to walk, and they set off after Harry and Draco.

When they caught up to their friends, Harry had paused for a rest, lying back on the ground as Draco squatted beside him. Draco looked up as they came up, and Hermione noticed, as if for the first time, how haggard and drawn he looked. He'd never been fat, but she thought he was almost like a skeleton covered with deeply-tanned skin, with bright grey eyes peering out from under a wild mop of dirty blonde hair.

"What a long, strange trip it's been, Hermione," he muttered. "But---do you notice anything?" Hermione looked around, and she suddenly saw that they were sitting right on the edge of the Mountain itself. Before them, it loomed up into the sky, dominating everything around them. "We made it this far. We made it across Gorgoroth. Now all that's left is the climb."

Chapter 27 -- The Doom That Came To Orodruin

After a few hours' worth of uneasy rest, always with one of them on the lookout for Gollum, orcs, or other enemies, they turned to the last obstacle in their terrible quest. The Mountain's slopes were very gentle at first, and they were able to make nearly as good time as they had in the plains, but as they went up, the going got steeper and steeper, with big boulders forming more of the mountainside.

At first, Harry's injury was a dreadful impediment; he could barely climb under the most favorable conditions, and as they got higher, it got worse and worse for him. Draco's past mountaineering experience came into real play for the first time on their trip, as he fashioned bowlines from the elven-rope they had been given in Lorien, and used them to haul Harry up the more precipitous spots. Ron was still a little fuzzy from the effects of Gollum's stone, but it didn't seem to affect his climbing much, for which small mercy Hermione was devoutly thankful.

To Hermione, the world seemed to shrink to their little struggle; all that mattered was to get up that next precipitous spot, or holding tightly to the rope with her heels dug into the crumbly black stone of Orodruin so that Ron or Draco could clamber quickly up. Her hands had become callused over their long trip, but even so, she was soon blistered and bleeding from times that the ropes chafed her hands.

For the first time, the bad air began to seriously bother Hermione; her lungs labored to extract what they could from the sulfur-laden atmosphere. The closer they got to the top, the harder it got to breathe. She noticed, through the haze that seemed to have taken over her mind, that the others were suffering, too. Ron had developed a racking cough that she really didn't care for, and Draco was wheezing like a bellows.

Oddly enough, Harry seemed to almost be thriving. He didn't seem to mind the bad air, and although he still needed help climbing, his eyes sparkled behind his glasses in a way that Hermione decided she didn't like at all---Harry looked like he was full of mischief, and had plans of some sort.

When they took a few minutes' breather, she plopped down on a flat spot, between Ron and Draco. Hearing Ron coughing, doubled over as he spat out phlegm, hurt Hermione almost as though she were the one suffering. When Ron got over his coughs, he collapsed beside her, his chest rising and falling as he struggled to get enough air in.

"Pity---I had to get rid---of those potions," gasped Draco, his face chalky-white under his tan. Hermione looked at him, noting the red of his eyes. "Some of them---would have helped." He shook his head. "Never---had---weak lungs---before."

"You couldn't have known, Draco," murmured Hermione. Draco nodded, wheezing. "I wonder how Harry's feeling?" Reminded of Harry, Hermione took the opportunity to give her old friend a long, considering look.

Harry was sitting on a rock near them, looking out over the Land of Mordor. His expression was not like the others'---no thousand-yard stare here! He turned to her as she watched. Stretching out his hand, in a gesture that reminded Hermione of the scene in

Paradise Lost where Satan offers the world to Adam. "Look at it, Hermione. You have to admit, it does have a certain grandeur, doesn't it?"

Hermione looked out in her turn. Below them, Gorgoroth stretched out, dimly visible through the smoky air. It faded into the murk some miles away, but she could see a good deal from where they were. There were camps here and there, laid out in a surprisingly orderly way, and she saw troops marching here and there, tinier than ants from her perspective. It was, she had to admit, an awe-inspiring sight.

Then she raised her eyes from the plain, and awe died, to be replaced by fear. Just at the edge of visibility loomed Barad-Dur, the Dark Tower, the stronghold of Sauron. It was an incredible fortress, far larger than Hogwarts or any Muggle-built castle she had ever heard of. Towers loomed into the gloomy sky, guarding walls made of some dark stone she couldn't identify, clustering around a single huge tower in the center of it all. From the centermost tower, a red light glowed, and what looked like a searchlight beam stabbed crimson through the clouds, off to the northeast.

"Can you sense Him?" whispered Hermione. "Can you tell what He's thinking?" Harry nodded, smiling a very unpleasant smile. In the dim light, his eyes almost seemed to glow, and Hermione shivered suddenly, pulling her cloak closer.

"Oh yes, I can sense Him. Right now, He's concentrating on a war He's waging---from what I can pick up, He's besieging Minas Tirith, and bringing armies up through somewhere called Rohan." Harry shook himself, and whatever had been in him seemed to go away, leaving a very tired and drawn Harry Potter, his face twisted in pain. "I hope Faramir and Anborn and all our friends from Gondor are all right, don't you?"

"Gods, you're right---I'd forgotten all about them!" Shamed at her forgetfulness, Hermione shook her head. "But I've been worrying about you, Harry. You've been acting strange. Is the Ring getting to you?"

Harry gave her a considering look. "Perceptive of you---but I shouldn't have expected otherwise. Yes, I've been tapping the Ring---*very carefully*---for the strength to go on. The Ring gives power, but power of a sort that the owner can use." He grinned at her conspiratorially. "If you'd kept the Ring, you'd probably have found your memory improving exponentially, and remembering every book you've ever read, even more than you now do."

"But the Ring's dangerous! If it gets control of you---" whispered Hermione, feeling a cold chill down her spine. "Do you remember when you slapped me, the other side of Torech Ungol?" Involuntarily, she remembered that moment, and felt sick all over again at the madness she had seen in Harry's eyes.

At that reminder, Harry lowered his eyes. "It was like I was taken over for a second, when you asked about sharing It. I think I'm in control now. Still, It tempts me, endlessly, dangling everything I've ever wanted before my eyes." He grinned mirthlessly. "Ron told me what Draco said you told him about dealing with the Ring: 'Wrestling with temptation, best two falls out of three,' and I've got to say you summed it up well."

"Which is why I've never wanted to be Ringbearer," Draco interjected. Startled, Hermione whirled to see that he had gotten back onto his feet while was talking to Harry. "In one way---and in one only---I resemble the Muggle playwright Oscar Wilde." Hermione

raised her eyebrows, and Draco condescended to explain: "I can resist anything but temptation."

Who'd have ever thought Oscar Wilde would be quoted here, in this hellish wasteland? thought Hermione. *Draco, you are an endless source of surprises!* Standing up in her turn, she heard her back creak as she looked up the side of the mountain. "Well, boys---it won't get any less steep for us sitting here looking at it, now will it?" She watched as Harry and Ron rose to their feet, slowly and stiffly, and began preparing for the next stage of the climb.

*

Some time later---Hermione was never sure just how long; she had other things to do than stare at her watch---she was busy scrambling up a particularly precipitous patch when she heard Draco, above her, call out: "Blimey! Who'd have believed this?"

"What is it?" she called back. Most of her attention was on belaying the rope so that Ron could help Harry up; Harry was having one of his bad spells and required a lot of assistance to climb at all. Once she and Ron had managed to get Harry to secure footing, she held onto him with one hand and pulled the ropes in with the other. "What have you found?"

"A road! A bloody *road!* Right up the side of the mountain!" Hermione and Ron looked at each other, wide-eyed. *Has Draco finally flipped?* thought Hermione. Ron shook his head, obviously as non-plussed as she was.

"Hold on to Harry," muttered Hermione, as she clambered up to see what had Draco's knickers in a knot. When she'd finally gotten up to where he was standing, she found that he'd been telling the truth. A road wound along the Mountain's side, heading inexorably up toward the top. "And here I thought you'd finally lost your mind, Draco," she whispered.

Draco turned toward her, looking as smug as a cat with canary feathers all over its face. "Come on, Hermione, help me get Ron and Harry up here. This'll make things a lot easier." Then his expression darkened. "That is, if this place isn't patrolled. At least we've still got the Invisibility Cloak and our wands."

*

The road did make things easier, although Hermione was uneasy about using it. Not having to literally climb rocks took a lot of strain off of the four friends. She noticed that Ron's coughing was less severe once they were able to use the road, and Harry was able to make better time, leaning on one of the others. Hermione and Draco both took turns, but in the end, it was usually Ron---Ron's shoulder that Harry clutched for support, Ron's strength that pulled Harry to his feet when they paused for a breather and Harry couldn't get back up by himself, Ron's unswerving determination and loyalty that helped Harry work up the courage to work through the pain, even when tears were making clean streaks down his grubby cheeks and his mouth was twisted with the effort not to cry out.

I'm glad Ron's along, thought Hermione, watching Ron gently help Harry over a rough spot in the road where Orodrain had apparently shaken, dislodging a bunch of rocks and gravel and all but blocking their path. *Harry's willing to accept his help, and even show that he's weak and in pain, where he wouldn't be able to do that with me---or Draco.* For all that Draco Malfoy was firmly their friend now, and an essential member of their team, there

would always be the shadow of the "old" Draco Malfoy standing behind his shoulder; Hermione trusted him implicitly herself, and knew that he'd throw himself in front of a wand, arrow or bullet for the others---just as she would for any of them---but the past could not be changed. *I'm sorry, Draco.*

Beside her, Draco paced along, not aware of the thoughts that were passing through her head. He peered suspiciously from one side of the road to the other, his body taut with alertness. He muttered to himself sometimes...Hermione couldn't catch most of the words, and from what little she did catch, she was quite grateful. He quivered, and reminded Hermione of a bowstring just before the arrow was released.

Reminded of her new bow, Hermione paused for a moment, winking at Draco when he gave her a quizzical look. Taking it out of its case, she strung it in one swift move, pulling the string back to her ear with a practiced motion. *The gods be thanked I'm not one of those bosomy girls*, she thought with an inner grin---she remembered how one of her Muggle neighbors had howled and howled when her breast had been whanged with a bowstring, when she'd been careless at an archery competition a few summers before. She looked down at herself. *I look an absolute fright, I'm filthy dirty, I must stink to high heaven, I've lost weight even since we were in Lorien---my clothes are all but hanging off me.* She swiped futilely at herself, only managing to rearrange the dirt.

"You know---Ron thinks you've never been more beautiful than you are now," Draco drawled. Hermione looked up, her heart thundering. *How in hell---* At her look, Draco went on, winking: "You sleep a little ways away from us, usually---and Ron talks in his sleep. I'm a light sleeper, and I find myself listening. I don't really mean to." His expression grew wistful. "I've sometimes envied other people---what it must be, to be able to select your life's partner. You know, of course, that I'm an engaged person, don't you?"

"Who?" Hermione's eyes went wide. "And how---?" As her mind wrestled with the concept of one of them being engaged to be married, she began walking up the road again, automatically, her eyes scanning for danger all around as she and Draco continued their conversation.

"Pansy Parkinson. I've known her since forever, and our families arranged it for us when we were both babies. Lots of the old wizard families do it that way---I'm surprised that Ron's mum and dad weren't in that sort of arrangement."

"But---isn't that illegal?" Hermione tried to grapple with the idea of one of her friends being engaged, and having been since before she had ever met him. She herself fully expected to marry someone some day, but the thought of having the whole thing planned out for her by her parents offended her on a fundamental level---like the enslavement and mistreatment of house-elves, so casually accepted by her friends who'd lived their lives entirely within the wizards' secluded society.

"No. Even by Muggle law it isn't, although enforcing the agreement against the wishes of the people most concerned would be all but impossible. Believe me," Draco gave her a bitter smile, "I've checked." He wiped sweat and grime from his brow, as they continued on up the hill. "Oh, it's not that I don't like Pansy. Like I said, we've known each other since the year dot. It's just that her heart's bestowed---elsewhere."

"Really?" Draco nodded. "Can't you---oh, I don't know---work around it?"

Draco gave Hermione an unreadable look. "Her heart's long been given to *Millicent Bulstrode*." Hermione felt like the world had been tilted sideways. "Around Slytherin House, they're accepted as a couple."

"But---your parents are dead, doesn't that make you your own master?" Draco shook his head.

"I honestly don't know. Things have changed considerably since last summer. I think that if Pansy and I explain things to the Parkinsons, they'll release us from the compact. However, until then, I'm bound to marry her." Draco looked ahead, and pointedly changed the subject. "Come on, we don't want to let those two idiots get too far ahead of us, do we? Without us, they'll wander off and get lost, or something."

*

When they reached what had to be the Cracks of Doom, they were all but at the end of their strength, even Harry. The fetid air and lack of water had worked on them for too long, and they were staggering with weariness from not being able to sleep peacefully; their last good sound sleep had been in the tower of Torech Ungol.

"Well, I guess this is, as they say, 'it,' said Harry. The Mountain rumbled around them, the sound vibrating their very bones and teeth, as they paused outside the entrance. The heat was greater than any they had felt since the fight with the Balrog in Moria, and sweat poured from them. Hermione felt dizzy, and the others also looked dazed.

Just as Harry turned to enter the Mountain, a familiar voice, shrieking from above, startled all of them. Instinctively, they snapped into defensive mode, ducking into cover with their wands at the ready. "Maaasster!" Above them, a Nazgul hovered on its flying steed, dangling a shrieking Gollum by one arm. "Maasster! Pretty girl! Sssave uss, please! Save us!"

"*Expelliarmus!*" roared Harry, and Gollum flew out of the Nazgul's grasp. With a Levitation Charm, Harry brought the gangrel creature safely to earth, where he scuttled behind Harry, cringing and whimpering for help.

Meanwhile, the others were also busy. Draco pointed his wand at the Nazgul and screamed "*Petrificus Totalus!*" The curse seemed to splash off the Nazgul, but hit its steed, which fell like a stone. The Nazgul itself fell, but hit the ground rolling and came up apparently unharmed. Its steed crashed down beside it, and slowly got to its feet, shaking its head and looking dazed. Ron fired a Reductor Curse at the Nazgul, but missed, shattering a rock.

Hermione unslung her bow, nocking an arrow automatically and drawing the string back to the ear. Taking careful aim at the Nazgul, she let the arrow fly, hardly noticing the pain in her un-shielded bow arm as the string whipped it; in the fog of pain she had moved in for so long, a little more pain was nothing to even notice.

To her surprise, the arrow seemed to disintegrate as soon as it struck the Ringwraith. Throwing back its head, the Nazgul emitted a cold, clear laugh. "Thou fool!" it said, in a voice

like a woman's---a beautiful, almost seductive voice. "Thou fool, to think that thy mere arrows could slay me! Know, fools, that I am Adunaphel, and since the death of the Witch-King of Angmar at the hands of Eowyn of Rohan, I am the greatest of all Nazgul!"

"If arrows won't hurt you, let's try spells!" Draco snarled, his face twisting in a rictus of hatred. Holding his wand in both hands like a Muggle policeman aiming a pistol, he shouted: "*Avada Kedavra!*" Green light erupted from the tip of his wand, speeding toward the Ringwraith.

Unlike the Balrog, the Nazgul visibly felt the Killing Curse. Although it didn't cause instant death, any more than it had against Durin's Bane, it did bring the Ringwraith to its knees, with a scream like a woman in agony. Ron let loose a Reductor Curse, which knocked the black-robed horror back on its back.

Draco ran up, pointing his wand down. "*Avad ---urk!*" The Ringwraith had grabbed him by the throat, flipping to its feet with a move that reminded Hermione, incongruously, of a tumbler. Draco struggled, his face working with pain, as the Nazgul gripped him, cutting off his air. Dragging Draco up so that they were face-to-face, the Ringwraith breathed out deeply. He kicked convulsively, as his face turned red, then bone-white, under his tan. Yanking out a dagger from a hidden sheath, the Ringwraith stabbed Draco, who convulsed as the blade struck home---his wriggling spoiled the creature's aim, so that a blow aimed for the heart ended up stabbing into his side, scoring a deep wound

"*Nooooo!*" screamed Hermione. Pulling her bowstring back, she sent another arrow winging at the Nazgul. "Get away from him, you *bitch!*" The arrow sang out, taking the wraith in the back of the head.

Although the arrow disintegrated, the Nazgul---*Adunaphel, that was its name*, the part of Hermione's mind that never slept noted in passing---felt it, throwing Draco aside contemptuously before turning to deal with Hermione. Behind the Ringwraith, the creature it had been riding lumbered up, shaking off the stiffness of the spell it had been hit with.

Hermione backed up, fumbling for an arrow. At this sight, the Nazgul laughed again. "How brave---a mere maid-child seeketh to stay me! Thou mindest me of myself at thy age---and for that, I shall spare thee to the last!" Turning contemptuously away, it continued: "How darest thou think that I, who was Queen in Umbar betimes, could be checked by such as *thee?* Why, my steed alone is more than a match for thee!" At its rider's signal, the winged beast spread its wings, lunging forward to try to seize Hermione in its jaws.

By this time, though, Hermione had nocked an arrow. Again, she let fly---*Artemis, Maiden Huntress, patroness of archers, guide my aim!*---and the arrow flew, straight and true, down the beast's throat. With a whistling shriek of agony, it flopped backward, writhing in agony as blood cascaded from its mouth.

This distracted Adunaphel, who had been advancing on Ron and Draco. As she turned, Ron let Draco fall---he seemed to be unconscious, which Hermione privately thought was a mercy---and pointed his wand. "Die, you horrible thing, die!" he screamed, his face a mask of pure, insane hatred. "*Reducto!*" The spell hit Adunaphel just as she was reaching out for Hermione, and she was knocked off her feet, hissing and snarling in a language Hermione didn't recognize.

"I can't hold her there for long!" yelled Ron, running to Hermione's side. "What's the matter with you? Did you forget you're a witch?"

Hermione put her hand on her face. "I---I guess I did, didn't I?" Unstringing the bow, she pulled out her wand, her eyes narrowing. "It's all down to Harry, now. All we can do is buy him enough time." She looked around. "Come to it---where *is* Harry?"

*

When the fighting had started, Harry had been right beside the entrance to the Cracks of Doom. The Nazgul's appearance had startled him, and he had instinctively ducked inside, finding himself in a long, high tunnel. At the far end of the tunnel, he could see what looked like fire---it reminded him of Moria, in some ways. Besides the flickering light of fire, he could feel the ground vibrating under his feet, and the heat was increasingly intense.

Well---this looks like the place, doesn't it? he thought, as he moved slowly down the tunnel. With one part of his mind, he knew his friends were fighting outside to buy him time, and he already grieved bitterly for their deaths---but he was consumed with his quest.

Concentrating on his goal, he was startled to hear a familiar voice---a voice he had hoped bitterly never to ever hear again. "Ach, sss, nice masster savess uss from nassty wraithses! Masster won't let anybody hurt preciouss, will he?" Whirling, he found himself staring into Gollum's lambent eyes.

"Gollum!" As much as anything else, Harry was startled by the creature's sheer nerve. "How dare you ask me for help? You tried to feed me, *and my friends*, to that awful spider! I can't believe that my friends let you live!"

Gollum cringed. "We were caught, yess, caught, by nassty wraith! It assked uss what we wass doing here, didn't it, *gollum*? We couldn't help it! Let uss help you, masster!" He seized Harry's hand and kissed it, and Harry yanked it back, shuddering with revulsion--- *Gollum-cooties, yuck!*

"Oh? What do you think you can do to help me? We're trapped in here, fool! Outside is that damned Ringwraith, and the Fires of Doom are just down that tunnel!" Outside, the fighting reached a new crescendo, and Harry retreated down the tunnel, with Gollum cringing along beside him, eyes wide with terror. Around them, Orodruin shook, and a deep rumbling made Harry's very bones vibrate.

*

Outside, the fight raged on. Adunaphel's steed's thrashing had subsided, and it lay on its back, blood drooling from its mouth, still twitching but clearly dying. Unfortunately, the Ringwraith herself was anything but incapacitated, and was getting the upper hand on Ron and Hermione, despite all they could do. A lot of their spells just didn't seem to work very well against a being of such power.

As Adunaphel whirled to face Ron, Hermione spared a second's attention for Draco. He was alive, but unable to fight any more---his face was gray with loss of blood, and there was something else wrong, something she didn't pretend to recognize. Seeing the Nazgul menacing Ron, she cast an *Incendio* charm; fire-charms were one of her strongest areas of

expertise, and she could make fire all but sit up and beg. *Burn, baby, burn!* she thought fiercely.

To her horror and delight, the fire charm worked, setting the Nazgul's robe alight. Instead of ignoring it, as she had feared, Adunaphel let out a piercing cry and broke off combat, batting frantically at the flames, which burned with an odd bluish-green light and gave off a sickly black smoke that revolted Hermione when she caught wind of it, even through the sulfury air of Mordor.

When the wraith was distracted, Ron took his turn, trying a *Tarantellagra*. Although it didn't work as it would have on a human opponent, the Nazgul did seem to be thrown off by it, at least somewhat. When she had finished extinguishing her robe, Adunaphel advanced on Hermione. "Thou hast dared to set me alight, little maid-child? Thou, with thy puny spells, against me who bears the Second Ring of Men?"

To her surprise, Hermione found that she could speak---she would have thought that the near presence of the Ringwraith would have paralyzed her speech center. "Yes! Let's rumble, you and I!" Putting everything she had into it, she cast another Reductor Charm. Unfortunately, this time Adunaphel was braced, and instead of being knocked backward, she was only shaken; she stayed on her feet. With a snarl, she cocked back her fist, punching Hermione in the center of her chest. Caught by surprise---she had not expected such an elementary attack from a being of such great power---Hermione was flung backward, landing on her back and knocking the wind out of her. For a few minutes, all she could do was struggle to breathe.

At this, Ron screamed "Die! Die! The gods damn you, you monster, die!" Leaping onto the Nazgul from behind, he yanked out his short sword, gripping it by the blade and hilt and pulling it back across Adunaphel's neck, trying to behead the Ringwraith. Unfortunately, as soon as the Japanese steel touched the Nazgul's flesh, it dissolved, just as Hermione's arrows had.

Reaching over her shoulder, Adunaphel flung Ron to the ground, cursing him in a language Hermione couldn't understand. Unable to speak, she struggled to her feet, determined to at least face her death upright, her wand in her hand and showing none of the fear that gripped her. Her face twisted into a snarl of rage as she stood astride Ron's prostrate body, fiercely defending her friend to the last. Her only hope was that she could goad Adunaphel into killing them outright; when she had asked Draco to use the Killing Curse on her if she was about to be captured, she hadn't thought of the possibility that Draco would be out of the fight before he could do it.

Just as Hermione was bracing herself for death---Adunaphel had drawn a wicked-looking broadsword, and was pulling it back to cleave her from crown to crutch---a miracle seemed to happen. Lowering the sword, Adunaphel turned from them, hurrying into the mouth of the nearby cave. For a second, Hermione couldn't quite comprehend that she'd been reprieved; sinking to her knees, she sobbed for breath, shaking with reaction. Then she realized what had happened. Only one thing could have distracted Adunaphel from the kill...

*

By that time, Harry and Gollum had retreated about as far as they could go into the Mountain. Behind himself, Harry could feel the Fires of Doom; the heat seemed to sear

through his clothes. He suspected that his skin was burning; it felt like it did when he got a sunburn. Beside him, Gollum whimpered.

Orodruin rumbled, as though the Mountain, itself, sensed the presence of the Great Ring. The ground shook and quivered, as heat licked at Harry's back. *Well, I guess this is, as I said outside, it...*Steeling himself, Harry made ready to jump down into the Fires. *I'm sorry, but this is the only way. Goodbye, everybody...*

Suddenly, Harry found himself paralyzed. Unable to twitch a muscle, he stared in horror as the Nazgul loomed into the chamber. With the tiny part of his mind not consumed by terror, he noticed that the Ringwraith looked to have been in a very bad fight; its robes were torn and charred, and it seemed to move awkwardly.

To his surprise, when the Nazgul spoke, it was a woman's voice, pleasant and seductive. "Come, now, what dost thou here, young wizard?" The creature stretched out a hand. "Come away from those flames, lest thou come to harm." At that, the paralysis ceased, and Harry could move again.

Leaping forward, Harry pointed his wand at the Ringwraith, as he concentrated on the happiest memories he could call up. "*Expecto Patronum!*" A silvery stag leaped from the end of his wand...and dissolved before it could reach the Nazgul. Throwing back its head, the Nazgul laughed, a warm, rich laugh.

"Thou fool! Knowest thou not, lackwit, that this is the heart of the Dark Lord's power here in Middle-Earth...that here, all other powers are quelled and humbled?" Stretching forth its hand, the wraith made an odd gesture, and Harry was paralyzed again, and felt himself squeezed as though he were in a vise. "Though thou art a worthy foe---thou and thy three companions---the Dark Lord will triumph! I will have the Ring for my Master, and there is nothing, little wizard, that thou mayest do to stay me!"

Through the haze of agony that threatened to consume him, Harry found himself noticing something. The Ringwraith had forgotten Gollum! Concentrating on what it had to see as the greater threat, it had ignored Gollum's presence, and the creature had crept out from where it had hidden, whimpering with fear but giving the Ringwraith a glare of pure hatred.

"Smeagol---" Even forcing the word out took all of Harry's strength. "Smeagol---take the Precious---don't let that creature get It---" Gollum's eyes lit with understanding, and what Harry would have sworn was malicious satisfaction. Before the Nazgul could react, Gollum was on Harry, scrabbling under his shirt. A flash of fresh pain across the back of his neck told Harry that the thin chain the Ring had ridden on for so long had snapped, and Gollum gave a scream of triumph, holding up the One Ring, dancing with joy.

"Precious, precious, precious!" Gollum was capering with glee. "We hass you back, Preciouss!" That had been the one thing that the Nazgul had never, ever expected Harry to do, and its sheer unexpectedness made the wraith's spell falter. Falling to his knees, Harry sobbed for breath, feeling his head clear as the Ring's influenced waned.

"Thou wretch, give me that Ring! Such things are not for the likes of thee---thou art a far less worthy bearer even than this wizardling here!" Striding forward, the Ringwraith advanced on Gollum, who backed up, and backed up some more, until he was standing just on the edge of the Cracks of Doom.

"Smeagol!" croaked Harry. "Smeagol---if the wraith gets the Precious, he'll hurt Hermione! You remember Hermione, don't you?"

Gollum's head nodded. "O yes, we remembers pretty girl---*she* was always *good* to us!" As the Nazgul got closer, Gollum looked up at the cloaked figure, his face a mask of malice and resentment. "*You* hurt us---hurt us both before, and when you had us this time! We won't let you hurt us, ever again!" Stepping back a little farther, Gollum fell backward, into the fires. Harry heard what sounded like a last shriek of "Preciouss!" Then a magical backlash whipped through every cell in his body, like nothing he had ever felt in his life. Somewhere, he could feel Sauron, screaming in agony as he was robbed of all his power, dwindling to a shadow that could never harm anybody again. The "sound" was like music to Harry's ears, and he exulted: *Fall into nothingness, Sauron---despair and die!*

As Harry watched, paralyzed by the shock of the Ring's destruction, the Nazgul turned toward him. Suddenly, instead of an invisible figure wrapped in a black cloak, he could see the face inside the hood. To his shock, he found himself staring at a woman---a handsome, mature-looking woman, with a faint resemblance to Aragorn in the shape of her face and her bone-structure. In seconds, she aged decades, her skin wrinkling and her black hair whitening, even as she reached out for him. As she crumbled, her flesh turning to dust and falling off her bones, Harry thought he heard her voice, whispering "Free---at last!" Had that been an expression of gratitude on her face? He would never know. Even her bones were crumbling to dust before his eyes.

Orodruin heaved under his feet like a ship in a storm, and Harry saw the flames rising higher and higher in the Cracks of Doom, where Gollum had immolated himself. He felt terribly weak, but his head was clearer than it had been for a long time. *Got to get out of here*, he thought, and, suiting deed to thought, tottered toward the exit as best he could.

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Hermione screamed as a wash of magical energy tore through her. Even though it was horribly painful, she exulted. *We did it! The Ring's destroyed! It's gone!* Somehow, she knew--knew for sure that the Ring was gone. Something that had been niggling at her since Torech Ungol was no longer in the back of her mind. She could sense Sauron, and his howl as he was reduced to something less than a ghost reverberated through her mind; no music she had ever heard was sweeter.

Oh, gods, Harry! Not really believing that Harry was still alive, Hermione staggered toward the entrance into the Mountain. Even with the Mountain shaking, she managed to keep her feet, although she couldn't have said how. To her surprise and joy, she saw Harry stumbling out, looking horribly weak and tired. She ran toward him, helping him away from the entrance just as flames licked out of it. It collapsed as she reached him.

Harry didn't seem to notice her. Gripping her, he stared over her shoulder. "Look!" Hermione turned, to see what he was seeing, and saw something that she would never be able to forget.

Over Mordor, the endless cloud-cover was receding, being blown away by a strong wind from the West, and the westering sun was shining through, far brighter than she was used to. Before her eyes, the mighty fortress of Barad-Dur quivered, shedding stones, and then collapsing as the sunlight hit it, silhouetted against clouds swirling around it as though

reluctant to let go and yield to the impetus of the wind. She could see more clearly than she had in some time, and she thought she could see into the fortress as its outer walls fell away; she caught glimpses of huge halls, deep pits and endless rooms, all lit by the sun as though it was happening on a stage. *For the first time*, she thought with a tiny part of her mind, *I understand what they mean when they refer to a "Wagnerian" spectacle!*

Behind them, Orodruin began to erupt, and Hermione turned from the ruin of Barad-Dur to deal with the situation. "Harry!" she screamed, hoping he'd hear her over the volcano's noise. "We've got to get out of here---and Ron and Draco are both hurt!"

Ron was on his hands and knees, shaking his head and trembling. Hermione felt a moment's pity for him, but there was no time to deal with that. She pointed her wand at Draco and cast a Mobilicorpus, bringing him to his feet in a stumbling parody of normality. "On your feet, Ronald Weasley!" she shrieked, yanking him up. "Get moving! We've got to get out of here---now-now-now!" Although he seemed not to be tracking very well, Ron followed meekly where she led, as she guided Draco along and lent her shoulder to Harry.

A huge flow of lava came out of Mount Doom, and Hermione cast about wildly for someplace that might be safe. The only thing that she could see was a small rise, which might preserve them from the lava. With the last of her strength, she hauled her friends up there, and once they were on the top, they collapsed in a heap, rather like marionettes whose strings had been cut.

"Hermione---" She turned, to see that Ron was looking at her. Mercifully, Harry and Draco were both out. "Hermione---could you hold---hold my hand?" Ron looked to be in a very bad way. "So---cold." When she had his hand between both of hers, she was shocked at how cold his flesh was. "Hermione---the magical world was blessed, when you joined it." She stared into Ron's eyes, tears blurring her vision. "Even this---to have known you makes everything worthwhile."

He gripped her hand weakly. Gripping it back, Hermione felt herself falling into unconsciousness. Her last thoughts were regretful, wishing that her friends could have survived.

Chapter 28 -- The Flight into Light

With an effort, Ron Weasley opened his gummy eyes. Although he was still racked with pain, something was different. For the first time in a long time, he was---he was cold, he realized. Bitterly cold. His head ached, and his mouth tasted indescribably foul, but something was different. The air itself was different---there was no reek of sulfur in it at all.

Peering around, he was startled to find himself high in the air, being carried along by what looked like a huge bird. To one side, he could see another bird, carrying Hermione; its wings flapped slowly as it soared over roiling clouds. On the bird's back, Ron could make out a familiar figure---it looked like Gandalf, but all in white.

So, this is death, Ron thought muzzily. *It isn't so bad. Maybe I'll wake up again in Paradise*---his eyelids were growing terribly heavy. His last thought before sliding back into unconsciousness was happiness that Hermione and he were still together.

*

At first, Hermione didn't know where she was. She felt as though she were floating---floating on her back, on a beautiful white cloud. *Am I dead?* she wondered. She realized that she could hear familiar voices...Professors Snape and Sprout, conferring about something.

"---Mr. Malfoy was in a very bad way, until the king came. I wouldn't have believed he could survive, Severus. I have *got* to get my hands on some of that '*athelas*' and grow it myself."

"I know, Salvia. The short while we've been here has been an incredible education for me, too. But then, I've been able to show them a few things with potions and alchemy that they'd never heard of."

Then came Madam Pomfrey's familiar voice: "Well, the state they were in when they arrived, even without those dreadful wounds---I never saw the like in all my born days!" She clucked disapproval. "I mean to say---malnutrition, dehydration, general debility, and the state of their feet---I can't describe it! And their clothes were absolutely stiff with grime, and falling off their backs!"

Oh. I'm back at Hogwarts, in the hospital wing. Hermione wondered at what she remembered, when she cast her mind back. *Dear gods, what dreams I've been having!* She opened her eyes, to find herself staring into a familiar face. A face she had never expected to see again, this side of the grave.

"**GANDALF!**"

The next thing she knew, she was laughing and sobbing with sheer joy, hugging Gandalf so tightly that she later wondered where she had mustered up the strength. Burying her face in his chest, she let her emotions flow freely for the first time in what seemed like forever, feeling a huge weight that she hadn't even been conscious of after bearing it for so

long roll off her shoulders and disappear. For a little while, she could be a little girl again, with her father's arms around her, feeling safe and secure from all threats.

After she regained some control of herself, she stared into Gandalf's face. Memories of an author she had loved stirred uneasily in the back of her mind. When she had been a bookish little girl trying to find clues to why she was different, why things *happened* around her, she had loved C.S. Lewis' *Narnia* series..."Does this mean that I'm dead?"

Of all the things she could have said, this had apparently been the last one Gandalf had expected. He sat her on his lap, looking deep into her eyes. "No, Miss Granger, you're not dead---and neither am I. You are in Minas Tirith, the capital of Gondor, in the Houses of Healing. You all walked close to the shadow of death, and if the King hadn't been close to hand, with a supply of the herb *athelas*, or kingsfoil, the Black Breath would have been the death of all of you."

At that, memories rushed back into Hermione's mind---memories of their last fight, with the Ringwraith on the slopes of Mount Doom itself. She shuddered, burying her face in Gandalf's robes---his *white* robes. Looking up, her vision blurred with tears, she asked: "But---the Balrog---how did you live?" Her mouth twisted with remembered grief. "We---we saw you fall!"

At this, a shadow seemed to pass across Gandalf's face, before he smiled at her. "Your thirst for knowledge will make you---has made you---great." He seemed to look into the distance. "Yes, I fell. The Balrog and I struggled for days, through the waters below Khazad-dum, and up through the abandoned dwarven city, until on the uttermost spire of Zirak-Zigil, in the observatory of the dwarven kings, we brought things to an end. I threw him down, and smashed him against the mountain---and I passed beyond. Where I went, I cannot say---but I was sent back, until my task was done. Then, in Lorien, I met some people you may remember." At this, Gandalf spoke up: "You may enter."

Hermione had never been the fanciful type, but she had a hard time accepting what she was seeing. Filing into the room were Professors Dumbledore, Snape, Sprout, and Madam Pomfrey, all of them smiling at her. On Professor Snape, in particular, it looked almost out of place, particularly directed at her. He was looking at her as though she were his favorite, beloved daughter who had exceeded his highest expectations.

"You needn't be so surprised, Miss Granger," said Professor Dumbledore gently. "While the balance between continua required that you be sent back in a group of four, to balance the four hobbits who were pulled into our continuum by Lord Voldemort, there are other ways to travel between continua that do not require balance---they are one of the greatest secrets of the Department of Mysteries; one, I am happy to say, that Lord Voldemort has never so much as suspected."

"Yes, your teachers came in after you, as soon as they could do so," continued Gandalf. "You thought that they wouldn't?" At her expression, he raised an eyebrow. "So young, to be so cynical..." he muttered, more to himself than to anybody else. "In any case, they arrived just outside Lorien, not long before I got there. I apparently missed you by a few days---had you been more severely injured, I might have arrived in time."

"The Lady Galadriel's forgotten more about Healing than all the Healers I've ever known ever knew," Madam Pomfrey burst out. "I haven't been this excited since I was interning at St. Mungo's!"

"I had a plan---to contact Treebeard, the leader of the Ents of Fangorn Forest," continued Gandalf. "I'll explain what Ents are later---they're sort of tree-men, very long-lived and wise, who are shepherds to the forests. We needed aid against Saruman in Isengard, and I thought that since Saruman had been allowing his Orcs to cut down many of his trees, he might be willing to help. He was." Gandalf smiled a twinkly smile. "You should have seen it---the Ents and their trees, marching out to war! As it happened, most of Saruman's garrison was out at war, and we caught him unawares. When all the fighting was over---you'll hear all about it later---there was Saruman, cornered in the Tower of Orthnac with his tame traitor, Grima Wormtongue, from Rohan."

"I remember how it was, when we rode up through the wreckage of what had been the parks around Orthnac---Saruman had turned it all into workshops, and the Ents had torn down dams and sent the Isen River flowing through, drowning out most of the garrison that was still there," Professor Snape put in. "My colleagues and I were all a-horseback, with Gandalf and the King of Rohan---that's a kingdom not far away that had had a great deal of trouble with Saruman's ambitions."

"Do you remember how Saruman behaved?" chuckled Professor Dumbledore. Professor Snape grinned a smug, pleased grin---it put Hermione in mind of a cat that had not only eaten the canary, but gotten it blamed on the dog. "At first, I thought he'd gone mad, or should I say, madder?"

"When he came out onto his balcony to speak to us, he first tried honeyed words. Then he saw young Professor Snape here, and went totally berserk. "Wormtongue, you've turned traitor!" he shrieked. "You were in with them all the time!" Then he turned, and there was Grima Wormtongue, looking right at him. At that sight, he lost control completely. He tried to curse us, but he'd lost all his power." Gandalf shook his head reminiscently.

Professor Dumbledore smiled mischievously. "Gandalf told him that his staff was broken---and it was! He finally gave up, and surrendered---I summoned some Aurors to take him into custody. He'll face judgement in Valinor."

"Grima Wormtongue was turned over to King Theoden, to face judgement at his hands," Gandalf continued. "Then we went to Minas Tirith---and found ourselves dealing with the father of our friend Boromir." He shook his head. "We ran into Aragorn, Gimli and Legolas on the way to Minas Tirith. After they---lost track of you, they decided that they could do the most good there. That was where we faced Sauron's onslaught, we and the men of Gondor and Rohan."

"We were literally fighting off the hordes of Sauron---the Witch-King of Angmar, the most powerful of the Nazgul, had been slain by Eowyn, a shield-maid of Rohan---when the Ring was destroyed. We saw, from Mordor, a huge shadow rising, shaped like a man, reaching out for us, and it dissipated in the wind from the West. Then Gandalf called for the Eagles, who had been fighting the Nazgul over Minas Tirith, and headed into Mordor to rescue you."

"Your friends are all in dreadful shape," Madam Pomfrey put in. "Apparently that awful thing, that Nazgul, gave them what they call 'Black Breath' here. On top of that, Mr. Malfoy was stabbed with a 'Morgul-knife,' which was sucking the life literally out of him. Professor Snape---he's a Healer himself, you know---and I worked day and night to save him. He's out of the worst danger now, but he---and your other friends---are still unconscious." She looked thoughtful. "You know, I wish I knew just what King Elessar did with that '*athelas*.'"

"You should be asleep as well, Miss Granger," added Gandalf. "I'm delighted that you were so happy to see me, but truly, you should sleep now."

"Before I go back to bed," Hermione said, surprising herself by how husky her voice was---how long *had* she been out, anyway?---"I want to see my friends." She gave Gandalf a determined look. "I want to see that they're all right."

Gandalf and Professor Dumbledore exchanged glances, and Professor Dumbledore nodded almost imperceptibly. "Very well, Miss Granger. You have that right." With that, he helped her to her feet---and she was surprised at how very wobbly she was---and led her around a screen, to where Ron, Harry and Draco lay asleep, all of them looking terribly drawn and worn, pale beneath their tans and Ron's layer of sunburn. Ron's skin glistened with ointments, and Hermione caught a scent of aloe, which made her nod quietly in approval.

"Now that you've assured yourself that your friends are all right, may I please ask you to go back to sleep for a while?" Suddenly, that sounded absolutely wonderful, and Hermione allowed Gandalf to guide her back to her bed, where she fell into a deep, untroubled slumber almost as soon as her head hit the pillow. The last thing she perceived was Professor Dumbledore pulling the blankets up over her, tucking her in as though she were his own daughter. It was a good feeling.

When Hermione woke again, it felt like it was much later---the sun was in a different position, and things just felt different. This time, she mainly felt ravenously hungry. When she stirred, she heard Madam Pomfrey's voice---and smelled food!

She was always proud, later, of her self-control. She did *not* leap on Madam Pomfrey and wrest the tray of food out of her hands, but waited to be served. Of course, that could have been because when she sat up suddenly, the room began spinning around in a most diverting way. As she tried to get the spinning under control, Madam Pomfrey bustled over, setting up a bed-table and putting a big tray of delicious-smelling food in front of her. "Now, you eat hearty, Miss Granger. You never did have much spare flesh, and the state you were in when you arrived absolutely boggled my mind!" She shook her head as she sat down, watching Hermione carefully as she tore into the food. "At least, you weren't as starved as poor Mr. Potter---or Mr. Malfoy!"

A familiar voice came from around the screen: "Are you awake, Hermione?" Hermione's heart leaped with joy. Not only was she alive, but her friends were---and Ron was apparently awake, and asking after her! She bolted the rest of the food like a starving wolf, forgetting all semblance of good table manners, so that she could go to him. When she had finished licking the plates, she stumbled out of the bed---and how had she become so weak?--and scurried around to see her friends.

Ron was awake, and his face lit up like a jack-o-lantern at the sight of Hermione. She ran to him, and they hugged. Beside him, Harry and Draco slept on. When she could summon

up the willpower to pry herself away from Ron, she looked carefully at Harry and Draco. Harry looked peaceful, more peaceful than she had seen him since before their terrible task had begun, but Draco looked bad. Under his tan, he looked paler than she had ever seen him. *Oh, gods, don't let Draco die! Please, please let him live!*

"Mr. Malfoy will live, Miss Granger, but he will always bear the mark---and the pain--of his wound," came a familiar voice, one Hermione hadn't heard since the dreadful day when the Fellowship had finally broken. Turning, she gasped at what she saw. Before her stood Aragorn, wearing elegant clothes not unlike what Boromir had worn at the council at Rivendell. On his forehead was a diadem with a strange jewel in it, and around his neck was an elven gemstone.

"I---I heard Madam Pomfrey say that if King Elessar---I don't know who he is, I don't remember reading about him---hadn't been handy with *athelas*, we might have all died." Hermione looked carefully at Aragorn, who blushed slightly under her scrutiny. "When I see this King, I want to thank him. To thank him for my life---and for the lives of my friends."

"You're most welcome, Miss Granger," said Aragorn, with a smile. "It was my pleasure. Don't you remember when I used *athelas* on you, after we escaped from the mines of Moria?" Hermione felt her eyes go very very wide, and her jaw dropped as she finally put the pieces together. "Yes, Hermione. I am now called Elessar, and I am the rightful king of Gondor and Arnor."

"Your---Your Ma-majesty! Forgive my ignorance!" Hermione swept a deep curtsy, and Ron, no less startled by this news, bowed his head in respect. At this, Aragorn---Elessar---gaped in shock.

"No! Please, do not do this! By rights it is I who should kneel to you!" he said, and he did so, his eyes now on a level with Hermione's. Gently, reverently, he reached out and brushed a tear from her cheek. "Kneeling to such as *you* does not humble a man---or a king. Rather, it exalts him."

"Oh, please get up!" Hermione felt as though she would die of embarrassment. "We're old friends, old travelling companions---and I don't feel right, being knelt to." She gently urged Aragorn back to his feet. "And---we've been through so much together, I'd like to ask you a favor."

"Anything in my power, Miss Granger. Name it, and I'll grant it."

"Then---could you, and whoever else is left of our Fellowship, call me 'Hermione' from now on out?" Hermione wriggled with self-consciousness, as she tried to explain what she wanted. "Back when we first arrived, I told Nenandil, that to my friends, I'm 'Hermione.' And I'd like us to just be friends."

"That goes for me, too," said Ron, his voice hoarse with emotion. "My first name---the one my friends use---is 'Ron,' short for 'Ronald.'"

Aragorn bowed his head. "You---you do me too much honor---Hermione." Rising to his feet, he looked over at the bed. "I think that Mr. Potter will rise soon, but I still have work to do with Mr. Malfoy. How he survived, I'll never understand."

"It was because---because he was born to be hanged." This was from Harry, who had just opened his eyes. Hermione shrieked with delight and nearly jumped on him before remembering that they were all still convalescing. Harry held out his arms and Hermione ran into them, hugging him and Ron at once in a three-way hug.

Meanwhile, Aragorn, accompanied by Professor Snape, approached Draco, who tossed and turned, mumbling incoherent unpleasantries as he fought whatever demons populated his sleeping mind. Hermione saw this, and remembered what Draco had said to Ron once:

"Well, Weasel, it's like this: I lie there, caught up in the grip of a horrible nightmare. Then I awaken, and I remember who I am, and where I am, and what I am---and I wish I had the nightmare back." She shuddered, and felt a deep stab of pity for Draco. She also remembered the road south from the Black Gate to Ithilien, and how she had been the one to Ennervate Draco, because he trusted her. *What would it be like, she wondered, to be Draco Malfoy---almost unable to trust even his friends?* She figured that that one little datum told her all she needed to know about life in the Malfoy household.

Unheeding of this byplay, Aragorn produced a handful of a sweet-smelling herb, and crushed some of the leaves. "Awake, Mr. Malfoy! The Black Enemy has passed away!" He dropped the leaves into a pot of boiling water, and aromatic steam arose, which he directed to Draco's nostrils. To Hermione, the steam smelled wonderful, but she could never really describe it. Like mint, she thought sometimes; other times, it smelled like cinnamon. As Draco breathed the stuff in, he improved visibly---color came back to his cheeks, and his expression faded from the fearful rictus it had been to a relaxed smile.

Hermione, ever curious, was watching closely, hardly registering that Madam Pomfrey and Professor Sprout had also entered the room, and were peering at the process themselves. "The hands of the King are the hands of a Healer," muttered Madam Pomfrey, in the tones of one quoting a proverb. "I was told that by Ioreth, one of the wise-women of this city. She said that being able to do *that* was one of the marks of the true King." She chuckled. "And to think I wasted all those years on study and interning!"

"This seems to go with the territory, Poppy," murmured Professor Sprout. "Even so, I'm taking some seeds and cuttings of that plant---and a lot of others---back to Hogwarts with me. The *Journal of Herbology*'ll be getting some new articles, I think, once I learn all their properties."

Hermione paid little mind to the byplay; her attention was fixed on Aragorn and Draco. As Draco breathed the fragrant steam, he stirred, and then, his grey eyes opened. At first, they seemed to not be focussing. Then, Draco's mind appeared to return, and his eyes widened as he stared into Aragorn's face. "Aragorn?" asked Draco, his voice a husky croak. "How---where?"

"Drink this, Mr. Malfoy," said Professor Snape, and he helped Draco sit up so that he could drink the infusion. As he swallowed, color came back to his cheeks, and he revived visibly. "You're in Minas Tirith, in the Houses of Healing." Hermione was touched to see Professor Snape holding Draco up, for all the world like a father helping a sick son.

Draco looked around, wary and watchful as always, and his eyes widened when he saw Professor Sprout and Madam Pomfrey. As the infusion took effect, he smiled, and

Hermione thought that if Draco hadn't been twisted and nearly ruined by his father, he'd have smiled like that more---and half the girls at Hogwarts would have been swooning over him. Then Draco saw her.

"Hermione! I never thought I'd see you again!" After a second, his face twisted in his old snarky grin. "I never thought I'd say this, but---gods, it's *good* to see you!" He turned, and saw Ron and Harry smiling at him. "And that goes for both of you too, Gryffindors though you are!"

Hermione hugged Draco, as Ron and Harry pounded him gently on the back. "And I can say the same thing for you, you Slytherin," she murmured into his ear. "If nothing else, if we'd left you to die, I imagine Professor Snape would make us wish we'd never been born magical!" Professor Snape caught her eye, and nodded agreement.

"Ah---motives I understand!" Having explained things to his own satisfaction, Draco leaned back in his bed. "Hey, Aragorn---what's with the fancy clothes? Not that you don't look really good, but to me, you don't look like the old Aragorn any more."

"In some ways, he isn't the old Aragorn any more," said Gandalf, as Draco's eyes went very wide at the sight of him. "Nor am I the old Gandalf. There's much you need to hear---you and the other two young men..."

As Gandalf began filling Draco, Harry and Ron in, with help from the Hogwarts professors, Hermione suffered herself to be led back around the screen to her bed. She felt drained, and thought that a nice nap would be just the thing. Madam Pomfrey and a local woman whose name seemed to be Ioreth tucked her back in, and she found herself drifting off.

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Some days later, when they were more recovered from their ordeals in Mordor, Hermione was talking with the boys when Ioreth came in. "Miss Granger---could you come over here and get dressed? There's ever so many people here who want to meet you!"

Curious, but polite, Hermione let herself be led off, and she found the clothes she had worn into Mordor laid out for her. Although they were freshly laundered and sweet-smelling, they were still ragged, patched with duct tape and dreadfully worn. "Do I have to wear these?" asked Hermione. While she didn't think of herself as vain, she was still female enough to want to look her best.

"No robes of honor or kingly crown would be more honorable, Miss Granger," said a young woman Hermione hadn't met. At her raised eyebrow, she explained: "I am Eowyn---the niece of King Theoden of Rohan. At my hand, the Witch-King of Angmar met his doom. It had been given to him that no living man could slay him...but I am a woman, and was not covered by that prophecy." She smiled---she had a very nice smile, Hermione thought. "I was told of your response to Lord Boromir, back in Rivendell: 'Girls rule, boys drool,' and your demonstration that you were just as formidable as your friends. You were an inspiration to me in dark days, when all seemed lost."

Reassured on the clothes question, Hermione scrambled out of her nightgown and into her familiar clothes. When she was dressed, Gandalf came in, with her sword and sword-belt,

and her pack with the book that the Lady of Lorien had given her. "Will you allow me to belt this sword on you, Miss Granger?" he asked.

Hermione blushed. "Only if you call me 'Hermione' from now on out, Gandalf." Gandalf raised an eyebrow, but nodded, and knelt before Hermione, girding the Japanese short sword she had carried so far around her waist. Hermione felt hugely unworthy to be given such attention by anyone, and wished keenly that they'd just have let her get dressed in peace. When Gandalf was done with her, he went around the screen, and performed the same office for Harry and Draco---Ron's sword had been lost in the fight with Khamul the Ringwraith.

Once they were all arrayed in the clothes they had worn in Mordor, Hermione took Harry's arm, and Ron and Draco trailed along just behind them, and they were led out into a huge hall. When they arrived, a mighty cheer greeted them, and praise in many languages echoed off the curiously-carven roof. Smiling, the four advanced slowly down a carpet, while knights in mail bowed before them, and swords were raised in salute, to a dais where three high seats were, each with a banner behind it. In the midmost seat, before a banner with a white tree, sat Aragorn---King Elessar. To one side of the dais stood the remaining members of the Fellowship---Legolas and Gimli. To the other side, the contingent of Hogwarts faculty stood, eyes shining with pride and wonder. Hermione felt as though her heart would burst with happiness.

When they reached him, Aragorn stood, and took Harry and Hermione by the hands, turning them around to face the assemblage. "Behold, Free People! Behold Harry James Potter and Hermione Jessica Granger, Bearers of the Ring!" His voice rang out in the stillness. "*Praise them with great praise!*"

As the shout echoed, to be joined with a roar of approval that bid fair to shake the building, Harry and Hermione looked at each other, and moved slightly to ensure that Ron and Draco were included. Hermione put her arm around Ron's shoulders, and Harry put his hand on Draco's shoulder, making it clear that they were to be praised, too. Hermione stole a glance at Ron---and saw that he was blissfully happy to not be overshadowed. *We're a team*, thought Hermione fiercely, *and nobody had better forget it!*

Then a minstrel came forward, bowed, and asked leave to sing. "Lords and knights, men of valor unashamed, kings and princes, men of fair Gondor, Riders of Rohan, sons of Elrond, Elf, Dwarf, and guests from the other world, listen to my lay! For I will now sing the lay of Harry Potter and the Ring of Doom!"

As the minstrel began, Hermione thought: *So that's why they were so intent on getting our stories!* Then she lost herself in the beauty of the man's voice---he made all the singers she had heard in her own world sound like asthmatic crows, and the intricacy of his verses was a splendor and delight in itself. *I have got to get a copy of that*, she decided.

When the minstrel had ended his song, and more shouts of praise for them had echoed off the walls, Hermione came back to herself and found that she was ravenously hungry. They went into pavilions, where a feast was waiting that made the best she'd ever seen at Hogwarts look like what gets thrown to pigs. She tucked into the food that was brought in, and as she ate, a thought occurred to her. There was someone---someone who hadn't received the glory that, at the last, he deserved.

When she whispered her thought to Harry, his green eyes widened behind his battered spectacles, before he nodded. Later, she saw him talking quietly to Gandalf and Gimli, and nodded to herself. Things were well in hand. With that thought, she went off to bed---she was still convalescing.

Chapter 29 -- Many Farewells

The Anduin River

The boat moved slowly down the Anduin. Several men of Gondor worked the oars, driving it along. Seated near a gunwale, Hermione looked out at the landscape. It was not a bad land, although long abandoned. Her friends also looked out, each wrapped in his own secret thoughts; Hermione's idea had met with approval from all of them, although Ron had taken a little convincing, and finally, a one-on-one talk with Harry, before he was fully comfortable with what they were doing.

In the stern of the boat, Gandalf stood beside the man who was steering, directing him. "We're almost there. You can put in here." Obediently, the helmsman put the tiller about, directing the boat toward the overgrown shore. Hermione peered at the shore, and her keen eyes picked out signs of long-abandoned habitations---she could see a rubble wall meandering through the brush.

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The four from Hogwarts had fully recovered, and taken a prominent part in the celebrations that attended the end of the Great War of the Ring. Hermione had been flabbergasted to receive an invitation to serve as bridesmaid-of-honor at the wedding of King Elessar to his longtime love, Arwen Undomiel, the daughter of Elrond.

"But there must be people with a greater claim! Why do you want me?" she had asked. Arwen leaned close, her luminous eyes capturing Hermione's attention totally; she couldn't have looked away if she had wanted to.

"Miss Granger---Hermione," she amended hastily at Hermione's upraised eyebrow, "your example, and your heroism, make you an equal to my great ancestress, Luthien Tinuviel. If you and she ever meet in whatever world lies beyond the grave for you, I think she would be proud to be your friend." Hermione's eyes went wide at the comparison---she had read the *Lay of Beren and Luthien* while recovering, and had been utterly awed at the deeds that both of them had done. To find herself compared to such a heroine overwhelmed her. She felt herself blushing.

Arwen was going on: "I have taken the path Luthien did---when Elessar dies, I will follow him, taking the Gift of Men instead of living on as is the way of Elves. While I am not worthy of this, could you deign to serve me as my bridesmaid-of-honor? Luthien is long, long gone, and you could stand as a substitute for her."

Shocked to the core of her being, Hermione did not answer for a few seconds. Then she came out of her fog, to see Arwen looking at her, waiting intently for her answer. "Of course I will! I'm nothing like as heroic as Luthien was---and don't shake your head at me, Arwen, I *read* that tale---but I'd be honored beyond measure to do this!" She grinned impishly. "Mind you, I hope your customs don't involve me buying a dress I'll never be able to wear again!"

At Arwen's puzzled look, Hermione began explain the wedding customs of her native world, and soon the two were giggling together, thick as thieves and on their way to becoming

good friends. When Hermione found that Harry, Ron and Draco were also to be in the wedding party, she was delighted---and doubly delighted to see how good all three of her favorite men in any world looked, in their new clothes. She was amused at the appraising looks they were getting from other women, and the envious looks she received when she walked in among them.

Hermione and Harry, respectively, carried the rings that the bride and groom gave each other as tokens of their marriage and pledges of their love. Hermione had to smile, inwardly, at the appropriateness of this gesture---she and Harry were Ring-bearers once again, but this time, it was a joy and a pleasure! After the wedding itself, there were huge celebrations in Minas Tirith, and Hermione found herself greatly in demand as a dancing partner---she had dances with Faramir, King Eomer of Rohan, and other great and noble men, as well as with her three companions and Professors Dumbledore and Snape. Her last dance, though, was with Gandalf, and she almost laughed at the slightly non-plussed expression on the old wizard's face as she hauled him out on the floor, discreetly leading him so that he would look as though he was leading her.

"Do you mean to tell me, Gandalf, that in three hundred lives of men, no woman *ever* danced with you?" she asked impishly. At Gandalf's head-shake, Hermione chuckled softly, just loud enough for the two of them to hear. "Well, all I can say is that their loss is my gain. You're light on your feet, keep the rhythm well, and picked up on this very quickly indeed." She grinned at his expression, and held him a little closer---he made her feel safe, secure and happy. Scoring one off all the female population of Middle-Earth didn't feel bad, either.

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When she went ashore, Hermione looked around curiously. Now that she was closer, she could see many signs that there had been a village here at one time---there were foundations of buildings still visible in the overgrown brush, and here and there, the stump of a chimney still poked up. Some of the hillocks, now that she saw them more closely, looked as though they had once covered hobbit-holes of the sort Gandalf and Bilbo had described as typical of the Shire, but these holes had long since collapsed. The whole place had a forlorn look about it, and she was rather glad that Bilbo, who had wanted to come along when he heard what they had planned, had, in the end, been too frail to do so.

The men of Gondor who had manned the boat were wrestling a burden down and carrying it up the shore, under Ron's and Draco's direction---a large square object, covered with a cloth. "Over here!" called Harry, pointing to a place that was almost completely enclosed by a low rubble wall. Sweating, the men carried it on in, to the place Harry was pointing to, before leaving to go back to the boat.

Gandalf, Ron, Draco and Hermione watched in silence as Harry gently flicked off the cloth, revealing a simple stone stela. The quiet was so absolute that a bird-call in a nearby tree sounded loud to Hermione. Around them, she noticed crumbling gravestones with simple inscriptions, commemorating the lives of the Stoors whose home this had once been, five hundred years and more ago.

She examined the stela. It was made of stone from the Misty Mountains, as she and Gimli had planned, and bore the inscription she had composed with help from her friends.

IN MEMORIAM

Deagol

Finder of the One Ring of Power

Born and Lived Near This Spot

Murdered, ca. Third Age 2463

"For a golden ring

Friendship's bonds now are tested--

Alas! They have failed!"

Smeagol

Alias "Gollum"

Born and Lived Near This Spot

Bearer and Destroyer of the One Ring of Power

Died in the fires of Mount Doom, Third Age 3019

"Alone in the dark

Life is a weary journey

On a stony road"

Below the inscription was a cleverly-carved fish, a plump perch that seemed almost to be alive. At the top of the stone was a skinny, bony hand, tightly grasping a thorny branch, with drops of blood oozing out from between the fingers, and a ring on one finger.

"Draco did a beautiful job with those *haiku*, didn't he, Hermione?" asked Ron. Hermione nodded, annoyed at how tight her throat was feeling and how her vision was blurring.

Harry produced a small brazier, which he set at the foot of the stela. In the stillness, he pointed his wand at it, and with a word, he produced a fuelless flame which danced in the bowl. Then he produced a dagger, which he handed to Draco.

Draco had been to many, many wizarding funerals, and knew what to do. He used the dagger to hack off a lock of his hair, which he stepped forward and threw into the fire. "I was a friend of Smeagol," he said, his voice tight with emotion. "Smeagol guided us safely through the Dead Marshes." Then he handed the dagger to Ron.

Ron cut off a lock of his hair, his face unreadable, and threw it into the fire. "I was a friend of Smeagol," he husked. "Smeagol found food for us when we were hungry." Then the dagger came to Hermione.

As she sawed at her hair, Hermione felt tears welling up in her eyes, as she thought of Smeagol's life---five hundred years of lurking in a lightless cave, eating raw fish, was more punishment than even the most horrible murderer deserved, she felt---and she was not against capital punishment, either! Five hundred years of the life Smeagol had led after he had found the Ring would make the most cruel executioner look gentle and merciful, she considered. Even Azkaban was better than that!

She stepped forward, throwing a thick lock of her hair into the fire. "I---I was a friend of Smeagol," she whispered, her voice barely audible. "Smeagol---Smeagol guided us up, past the city of Minas Morgul, to the borders of Mordor, despite being endlessly tempted to betray us." As she stepped back, she wiped her eyes, and Ron put his arm around her shoulders, holding her close.

Finally, it was Harry's turn. With his face set, Harry cut off a lock of hair, which he threw into the fire. "I was a friend of Smeagol," he intoned. "At the end, and whatever his other sins, Smeagol was the one who truly destroyed the One Ring of Power when I could not." Hermione stared into the flames, her cheeks wet with tears. Whatever else Smeagol had been, he had been her travelling companion and, she had to admit, admirer, and she had not been able to mourn his passing properly before now. Nobody but those present would have ever understood.

Harry produced a basket he had carried ashore, and pulled some things out. First was a very fresh dead fish, which they had caught in the Anduin River before they landed. He put it onto the brazier. "Smeagol, may this fish sustain you---it was your favorite food for centuries." Then came the dagger---Hermione recognized it as the work of an Easterling smith, and remembered Harry asking for it from the huge piles of captured weapons. "May this dagger protect you, on the long road you have ahead, Smeagol." Then came some sweet-smelling herbs. "And may this smell make you forget the endless stinks of the places you were. Farewell and good journey, Smeagol." At a wave of Harry's wand, the gifts were consumed by flames, far fiercer than anything not magical could have been. When the fire died down, nothing of their offerings could be seen.

Before they returned to the boat, Ron produced his wand. "One last touch, I think." At a wave of his wand, wild roses burst out of the long-abandoned cemetery, twining up and around the memorial stela protectively. "There. Let those flowers, and their thorns, stand for Deagol and Smeagol's lives and death, and may they keep this stone safe from harm."

Once they were back aboard the boat, Gandalf spoke for the first time since they had landed. "So that is how wizards in your world say farewell to their own?" he asked. Hermione smiled rather sadly---he sounded just like her, when she was on the trail of knowledge.

Draco nodded. "There are differences---the body of the person being honored is there, and is ceremonially cremated, with the ashes buried or sunk at sea, because there are all sorts of horrible things a Dark wizard or witch can do with such an object. But, in outline, that's how it's done." A shadow passed over his face. "The next of kin usually lights the pyre---I had to do it for my parents."

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When they returned to Minas Tirith, Professor Dumbledore was waiting for them, with Professor Snape and, much to everybody's surprise, the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge.

They were smiling down at them in a room in the palace, with King Elessar and Queen Arwen standing by. The other surviving members of the Fellowship, Gimli and Legolas, were there too.

"It is normal, my dear friends, for honors here to be given by the King, or in his absence, the Steward," said King Elessar. "But these honors are from your own world, so we thought a slightly different ceremony was in order. Your compatriots wish to honor you."

"Harry James Potter," intoned Cornelius Fudge, "it is my great privilege and distinct pleasure to present to you, for unsurpassed bravery and endurance beyond the dreams of wizardkind, the Order of Merlin, First Class, with Crossed Wands, Stars and Holly Leaves." As Harry gaped like a gaffed fish, the Minister produced a medal on a red-and-yellow ribbon from a small box and ceremoniously draped it around his neck. "Hermione Jessica Granger, for courage and endurance as great as ever any witch showed, it is my distinct pleasure to present to you the Order of Merlin, First Class, with Crossed Wands and Holly Leaves." Before she quite knew what was happening, Hermione found herself being draped with a medal on a ribbon, which gleamed against the dark cloth of her robes. "Ronald Arthur Weasley, your heroism, devotion and loyalty are a shining example to all wizards. Accept, at my hands, the Order of Merlin, First Class, with Crossed Wands." As Ron struggled visibly to process the fact that he'd just received such an award, Cornelius Fudge stepped back.

Hermione suddenly thought of something. *Doesn't Draco get a medal?* Indignation ran through her mind, hot as fire. *If Draco doesn't get a medal, then they can take this bauble and stick it---* Then she noticed that Professor Snape was stepping forward, pride and pleasure shining from his face and making him look rather as Hermione imagined he might have always looked, if he had not been seduced into the Death Eaters. "Since I am your House head, Mr. Malfoy, I begged the privilege of presenting this to you. Please accept, as a small token of our admiration for your service, your unflinching courage in the face of dangers far beyond your strength, and your skill in magic, the Order of Merlin, First Class, with Crossed Wands." Draco's eyes shone as Professor Snape draped the Order of Merlin---*on a green-and-white ribbon, as opposed to the red-and-yellow ribbons on the others; trust Professor Snape to see to that little detail*, thought Hermione---around his neck.

When the four had received their medals, Cornelius Fudge cleared his throat. "It is seldom, if ever, that I have met any wizards or witches more deserving of honor. Your story is an epic of hardship, endurance, and bravery that is a shining light in the story of our people. I will always be proud, to my dying day, that I have had the honor of presenting you with these tokens of our appreciation. You have acted in the highest tradition of our kind, far above and beyond the call of duty."

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When it was all over, the four were left together for a few minutes. All of them were still digesting the concept of being members of the Order of Merlin. The Order of Merlin was something only a tiny handful of wizards and witches ever got, and many times, it was only awarded posthumously. Crossed Wands, Stars and Holly Leaves were additions that were even rarer---centuries could pass between one such award and the next.

"Much as I hate to remind you," said Professor Dumbledore, who had returned with the others from whatever place they had been, "it's now time to go back to Hogwarts. We'll be going back at the same time you are, but the spell that sent you here will have to be used to

send you back---otherwise, there would be highly undesirable feedback, and our world and Arda would begin to 'leak' into each other. I don't think that the Obliviation Squads would appreciate having to deal with, say, an orcish war-band that landed in Yorkshire."

"No, I don't think so." Hermione grinned to herself at the consternation that would cause. *Not that there weren't areas, like the Gorbals in Glasgow, where an orcish war-band or two could only improve things...* Firmly shutting off that line of thought, she asked: "Do you have the portkey we used to get here?"

"I certainly do. You left it at Rivendell, and Elrond took the opportunity of studying it. I don't grudge him the opportunity---he, Gandalf, and the other wizards of this world have been extremely interesting to meet, and I've been having more fun learning than I did since I was at Hogwarts---back when dinosaurs roamed the earth." He held the portkey out. When Harry took it, he raised his wand, and he, Professor Snape, and Cornelius Fudge disappeared in a cloud of golden sparks.

Harry gathered the others with a gesture. "Remember how this thing works?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "It's not likely that any of us would ever forget, Harry. Shall we?"

"Let's." All four of them reached out to grasp the Portkey. In chorus, they said the triggering word, "Portare!" Hermione felt the familiar feeling of being jerked, and then felt herself falling, endlessly...and then she was standing in the Great Hall of Hogwarts Castle.

They weren't alone. The entire school seemed to be there, and when they appeared, a roar of cheers and applause erupted like nothing Hermione had heard since they had been presented to the Free Peoples. Gryffindors were hugging Slytherins, Professor McGonagall was beaming as though she'd just been presented with her first grandchild, and the whole school seemed to be in a frenzy of joy.

Then Hermione found herself being swarmed by her parents. Laughing, sobbing, and talking all at once, she hugged them both as hard as she could. From what her parents were saying, they had been terrified for her all the time she was gone, but proud that she had been selected for this dreadfully dangerous mission.

A little way away, Harry and Ron were being fussed over by the whole Weasley clan; even Percy, whose relations with the rest of the family were strained according to the last report Hermione had heard, had forgotten all his dignity, dancing around with happiness as though he were five years old.

When her parents finally let go of her, her mother looked her over and clucked. "I can't believe it---the changes in you, darling! I sent away a teenager---I find myself now getting back a grown woman! And a beautiful one!" She grinned conspiratorially. "You'll have to tell me everything about this trip you've been on---me and your Dad!" Her father was wiping tears from his face, reaching out to touch her again and again as if to reassure himself that his little girl was back, safe and alive.

All of a sudden, Hermione thought of something, and her joy congealed into an icy feeling of desolation. "Mum---one of us didn't have anybody to welcome him home. You remember Draco Malfoy?" At her parents' puzzled nod, she went on quickly: "Draco's our

friend now---he went along on the trip because it was prophesied that we'd have to have him. He agreed to it because the Dark Lord killed his parents last summer." As her parents' eyes opened wide with shock, she went on: "I think, down deep, he was kind of, sort of hoping that he wouldn't make it back. Now he's back and unlike me, Ron and Harry---" Harry was being fussed over by Molly Weasley, who was vocally aghast at how thin he, and Ron, had both gotten---"there's nobody to be glad to see him."

"Oh, my god! Poor boy!" Dr. Granger looked over at where Hermione was pointing; Draco was sitting off a little ways away, watching with a detached air. "If nobody else is glad to see him, I'll do it---the poor motherless boy!" She started over to greet Draco and welcome him home, but before she got five feet, Draco was mobbed by the Slytherins; Pansy Parkinson was hugging him as both his hands were being shaken by Crabbe and Goyle. The other Slytherins were getting ready to carry him around the hall on their shoulders, or just crowding close to wonder at his medal.

Hermione looked up and caught Professor Snape's eye. Very deliberately, Snape winked at her. The wink said, as plain as words: "*I'm on your wavelength, Miss Granger--- and, as usual, I'm miles ahead of you.*" She winked back, wondering at how much things could change. Professor Snape wasn't so bad, after all; he certainly cared about his Slytherins. She had been deeply touched that Professor Snape had "begged the privilege" of giving Draco his medal, but she knew that it meant a great deal more to Draco that it had come from him.

After things calmed down, there was a feast at Hogwarts to beat all the feasts Hermione sat with her parents at the Gryffindor table, with Ron and Harry a little way away among the Weasley clan. As she was finishing off a piece of meringue pie, she felt a tap on her shoulder. Turning, she was startled to see Crabbe and Goyle standing behind her, smiling.

"What do you want?" Reflexive suspicion edged her voice slightly; Draco might be a (mostly) reformed character, but she had no history with these two other than mutual enmity. Her hand crept toward her wand.

"We wanted to thank you---and Ron, and Harry Potter." Crabbe's voice was gruff, but he didn't grunt the way she would have expected. "Draco Malfoy's our best friend. He's about our *only* friend---he's the only person we were allowed to play with, before we got to Hogwarts. He means an awful lot to us." Hermione found her hand engulfed in Crabbe's huge paw, and then Goyle's. "Thank you---thank you from the bottom of our hearts for bringing him back to us alive."

Well, this explains a lot! thought Hermione. She stood up, and took their hands in hers. "It was our pleasure, boys. We couldn't have made it back without Draco. You Slytherins should be proud that he's one of you."

They grinned rather conspiratorial grins. "Just don't tell him that," said Goyle, in a stage-whisper. "Do you know the difference between a god and Draco Malfoy?" At her headshake, he went on: "No god thinks he's Draco Malfoy!" At this, Hermione giggled, and Harry and Ron, who had come over to see what was up, snickered. With further handshakes and promises of friendship, Crabbe and Goyle went back to the Slytherin table, where Draco was holding court like a young Oriental potentate. *All he needs, thought Hermione, is a girl dropping grapes into his mouth!* That was an idea, she decided quickly, that she was *not* going to put into his head.

"Well, it's good to be back," Ron said. "Even though we'll have to do a lot of make-up here at Hogwarts over the summer, we got a lot of extra-credit from our teachers."

"Yes, it's good to be back," Harry agreed. "Imagine my sorrow---no stay at the Dursleys' this summer! Woe is me!" he said in tones of mocking grief as the others laughed. "We've defeated one Dark Lord---let's try for two!"

Epilogue

Over a century after they had returned, Hermione looked around the familiar circular room. She had worked there for nearly sixty years, and she was very proud of all she had done in her time as assistant headmistress and then headmistress of Hogwarts. From re-vamping the curriculum to encouraging more inter-House contacts, she had more than accomplished what she had set out to do. By now, her ways were as set in stone as the existence of the Four Houses, since only the oldest students' parents remembered any other way.

Dumbledore had fallen before the last battle with Voldemort, and Professor McGonagall had taken over a shocked, grieving school. In the last fight, she had been badly hurt, and she had never been quite the same. After the destruction of Voldemort, she had resigned, and Snape had assumed the Headmastership.

Reluctantly, Hermione gave her old Potions master and sparring-partner a mental salute. Knowing the dark side as he did, Snape had been just the person to make sure that evil influences would be rooted out of Hogwarts, once and for all. He had called in Bill Weasley to help Harry Potter open the Chamber of Secrets again, so that it could be neutralized for all time. His own status as a Slytherin Old Boy had meant that the Slytherins accepted his alterations in the way things worked, where they would have balked at the same changes instituted by a non-Slytherin.

And, Hermione thought with an inward smile, he had talked her into trying teaching at Hogwarts "just for a year or so, Miss Granger; we're terribly shorthanded." The year had somehow stretched to two, and then on and on. Most importantly of all, he had thrown her together with the man she married--and at her wedding, no one had danced more enthusiastically! *Of course, he was convinced that he had cunningly arranged it all...*

She looked with affection at a picture on the wall, showing a grinning young wizard with red hair; it was draped with black in token of mourning. Even so long after she had lost her husband, she still mourned him. "I miss you every day, darling..." she murmured.

"Talking to your husband again?" Ron Weasley's voice broke in on her reverie. He crossed the room, standing beside his sister-in-law as they looked at the portrait. "I miss him too." His voice shook slightly as he looked at the picture of his brother. "Not a day goes by but I see something that reminds me of him."

"At least, he's with Fred now," Hermione pointed out, her voice suspiciously thick. "After his twin died, it was like he didn't want to go on, no matter how much he loved me and our children."

"I know," Ron replied, turning from the portrait with a visible effort and sitting in the chair that had been in front of the Headmistress' desk since Dumbledore's day and before. "Fred and George were joined in ways the rest of us never understood, and without his 'other half,' I think something inside him was broken. He never was the same after Fred went." He sighed. "I wish that my grandchildren could have known their Great-Uncles Fred and George. Gabrielle's family is very nice, but very, very proper, and I often think that Fred and George would be just the thing to liven up a family gathering with them."

Hermione suddenly smiled, the old smile that flashed across her face so quickly that if you weren't looking just at the right moment, you'd miss it. "Remember when we got back from Arda?"

Ron grinned reminiscently. "Do I ever! We tried to make it work between us, Hermione, but we were too close. It felt like incest. When you and George got interested in each other, it was almost a relief, to me, at least."

"To me, too." Hermione reached out and touched her brother-in-law's hand. "Have you ever thought that, maybe, it's time?"

"Time for the Gateway?" Ron nodded. "I've been thinking that for some time; all of us have risen to the top of our professions, and there aren't any honors we don't have. Our children---heck, our *grandchildren*---are grown and successful. There isn't anything more for us to do."

"Then I'll contact them. I'll write the letters, while you look in on your great-grandchildren and other descendants." As Ron headed out of the room, Hermione took out a quill and some parchment and sat down at her desk.

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A few days later, they gathered in the headmistress' office. The Minister of Magic Emeritus, his hair long since gone snowy-white and his trademark scar still visible on his lined face, looked around at his closest friends. "I had managed to forget about the Gateway, but now that Hermione's brought it back to my attention, I honestly can't see why we shouldn't use it." His green eyes gleamed behind his glasses. "I agree with Ron---we've done everything there is to do. It's time for us to move aside, to let the next generations of wizards and witches accomplish things without having us there, inhibiting them just by having been and done so much."

"Well, this reward was part of what was promised us, after Sauron fell," observed Draco Malfoy, his narrow, clever face still hardly marked, even at the age of a hundred and thirty. "I'll miss a lot of things about this place, but, honestly, the young Aurors don't need me any more." He rubbed his side. "This old wound still pains me---and the wounds I've suffered since then aren't much better. The worst ones are up here." He pointed to his forehead, and they all knew what he meant. He still blamed himself for a lot of the deaths---Crabbe and Goyle, in particular, were ghosts that never left his side.

"And all of us have outlived our spouses, haven't we?" put in Hermione. "We're just rattling around, going through motions. Our children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren don't really need us any more." She paused as a shadow passed across Draco's face. "I'm sorry, Draco. I know your loss is most recent of all of us."

"Without you---without all of you---I'd have wanted to throw myself on the pyre when we cremated Susan," said Draco. His tone was light, but Hermione had known him for over a century, and she could tell he was deeply in earnest. Susan Bones Malfoy had been Draco's wife for many decades, giving him strapping sons and heartbreakingly beautiful daughters, before what had seemed like an inconsequential illness had blossomed into a raging disease that consumed her while she still lived. Draco had done all he could, but even the Malfoy fortune and St. Mungo's best hadn't been good enough. Hermione's eyes teared at the memory

of Draco, lighting his beloved wife's pyre with his wand, his eyes full of horror as at a nightmare he couldn't wake out of. She still vividly remembered how it had felt, lighting George Weasley's pyre, their children and grandchildren sobbing with her as she cast the charm.

"To put it bluntly, we don't have anything much keeping us here. Neville's a fine Assistant Headmaster, and he'll do wonderfully well as Headmaster." Harry began summing up. "Ron's got Gringott's in perfect order, and this new boy they've got as Minister of Magic in my room's doing wonderfully well. I agree---it's time we took our reward." He looked sad. "If Ginny were here, I'd want to stay on and give Valinor a miss, but..."

At that, Hermione got up and went to a hidden closet, pressing a spring to make it open out of the panelled wall it was hidden in. The hidden door opened, and she reached in, coming back to her friends with a familiar object.

"This brings back memories, doesn't it?" she murmured. It was the same Portkey they had used, so long ago, to travel to Middle-Earth and begin their greatest adventure. It was now inert, but it was still an object they all remembered very well. "I'd like to bring it along, just as a souvenir."

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As she packed up the things she was going to take along, Hermione thought about what they were about to do. Gandalf had told them about this, back in the Houses of Healing, when they were recovering from their ordeals in Mordor.

"So you see, as Ringbearers, you have been granted a unique privilege among Men--- to journey west to Valinor with the last of the elves to leave Middle-Earth. Their time is coming to an end, and they must either leave or dwindle and be forgotten."

"Let me see if I've got this straight," Harry had said, taking off his glasses to wipe them absently, a habit of his when he wanted to think. "We sail west with the elves, and in Valinor, we'll live on forever, in happiness. Is that it?" At Gandalf's nod, he put his glasses back on. "Tempting. Mighty tempting. Before we answer, though---*what about Ron and Draco?*" Hermione nodded vigorously; she was as concerned with that question as Harry was.

"Oh, they'd have to stay behind, either here in Middle-Earth or in your world. They never bore the One Ring, after all." As Hermione processed this, she felt anger kindling in her mind, and one glance at Harry told her that he was just as indignant.

"So, if I've got this straight, you're saying that Hermione and I can go off to this Valinor place---where you came from originally, if I understand correctly---but Ron and Draco would have to stay behind?" Harry's tone was light and conversational, but there was an edge to his voice that Hermione knew meant trouble ahead. While he was free of most of the nasty side-effects of the Ring, he had become far more commanding than he had been before he had borne it, and that effect showed no sign of lessening. "Tell me, Gandalf---*what sort of people do you think we are?*" The last bit came out in tones of icy rage that reminded Hermione of Professor Snape at his very worst. "Do you think, for one second, that we'll abandon our friends to death while we two skive off to some paradise where we can live forever?"

Hermione, for her part, was just as furious as Harry. "Gandalf, with all respect, unless Ron and Draco are included in this little offer---you can take that offer and shove it---" She subsided at a gesture from Harry, but she gave Gandalf a furious glare. How dare he suggest that she and Harry abandon their companions, their comrades-in-arms, their dearest friends in any world? She would have slapped anybody else who suggested any such thing, and only her residual respect for her elders held her back.

Gandalf seemed to be honestly shocked and surprised at their reaction to his revelation. "But, Hermione, Harry, you two bore the burden of the Ring, and they didn't. They---" At the expression on Harry's face, Gandalf trailed off.

"They stood beside us, again and again, in wastelands, in the dungeons of Moria, and in places that would scare even you," Harry snarled. "*They chose to come with us*; they had the option of turning back at any time. At the end, it was Ron's strength and devotion that got me to the Cracks of Doom---I was all but on my last legs! Either he goes---and Draco too---or I don't, and that's bloody well my final word!"

"And Draco's skills helped us, time and again," hissed Hermione, her fingers twisting as she mastered the urge she was feeling to grab Gandalf by the beard and slap him senseless. "He knew how to climb mountains; he knew how to deal with our hurts; he helped us deal with the Galadrim, and eased our passage into Lothlorien!" The *double-entendre* she had inadvertently used suddenly struck her, and she had to suppress an urge to giggle---this was serious! "And, unlike Ron, who's been Harry's and my dearest friend for years, he was originally our worst enemy! He put himself in deadly peril, again and again, for our sakes---even when we were going to leave him with the rest of the Fellowship, he insisted on accompanying us!"

"Only fate---and the luck of the card-draw---made Hermione and me Ringbearers, Gandalf," Harry stated, leaning back and fixing the old wizard with a piercing stare. "It could have easily been either of them. We have a saying in our home-world: 'Greater love hath no man, than that he lay down his life for his friend.' They didn't lay down their lives, but they came mighty close, just as we did for them. If we've earned rewards, *so have they*---and I, for one, am going to make damn-well sure that they aren't cheated!" He pointed a finger at Gandalf. "I wasn't too pleased that they weren't mentioned when King Elessar presented us to the Free Peoples, and when I got a chance I let him know about it!"

"Tell me, Gandalf," Hermione asked, her tone conversational, "do you really think that eternal life, even in a paradise, would be *anything* but an unending torment for us, if we knew that to get it, we'd abandoned our best friends? I'd go to Hell for them---I went through hell with them---and if *I've* earned paradise, *so have they*!" She quirked a smile. "I thought, back in Cirith Ungol, that if I claimed the Ring, someone would survive, wearing my skin, answering to my name. I don't know that person. I don't know that I'd like that person---or like being her. This is no different."

Gandalf looked from one of them to the other, and what he saw seemed to move him deeply. "I will communicate your wishes, Harry, Hermione. In the meantime, please forgive me. I honestly meant no disrespect to you, or to your friends. And---" he turned to go---"let me say that devotion such as yours to your friends is something I have almost never seen, not in all my time in Middle-Earth."

When he was gone, Harry looked at Hermione. "Tell me, Hermione---did we two just stand up to, and face down, Gandalf?" He looked as though he was just realizing what they had done. "Or am I dreaming?"

Later, Gandalf had quietly let them know that all four of them would be welcome in Valinor. When they had explained the whole situation to Ron and Draco, their friends had been utterly dumfounded. "Harry---mate---you mean to tell me that you turned down eternal life and happiness because it *wasn't* offered to us?" Ron's eyes were as wide as saucers, and Draco looked just as shocked. At Harry and Hermione's nods, Ron sat down, trying to assimilate this news.

For once, Draco was utterly speechless. Without a word, he turned and left the room, and when Hermione got up to go after him, Ron held out an arm. "Leave him, Hermione." He pulled her close, and said in a low tone: "I don't think he'd want you to see him cry."

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When they assembled in the Great Hall of Hogwarts, the student body was lined up in serried ranks to bid them farewell. Hermione's long-time assistant, now Headmaster of Hogwarts after her resignation, made a speech thanking Hermione for her services to Hogwarts and magical education in general, finishing with a flourish by unveiling a wizard portrait of the four friends; as she admired it, the Hermione in the picture winked at her. The Minister of Magic bid them all farewell, thanking Ron for his long service to Gringott's, Draco for his heroic years with the Aurors hunting down the remnants of Voldemort's followers, and Harry for his time as Minister of Magic after his defeat of Voldemort. Then the students gave them three rousing cheers. Hermione felt a lump form in her throat---she had never really realized how much the students revered her. Even in Paradise, she knew she'd always remember Hogwarts...and miss it.

With that over, they turned to go. The new Headmaster opened up the Gate spell, and ahead of them, they could see Middle-Earth. Shouldering their packs, they stepped through, and the Gate closed behind them. Hermione felt as though a burden she had long carried had finally fallen from her back, freeing her at last. She took a deep breath; she had forgotten how crisp and clean the air of Middle-Earth was.

Once again, they found themselves in a beautiful clearing. This time, though, there was a smell of salt in the air, and they could hear gulls crying; Hermione knew that they were near the western ocean.

"Welcome to the Grey Havens, Harry Potter, Hermione Granger Weasley, Ron Weasley, and Draco Malfoy," came a voice, and they turned to find themselves confronted by a tall elf. "I am Cirdan the Shipwright, and I have long wished to meet you. Gandalf is waiting, and we are just about ready to set sail."

He led them out of the clearing, to a harbor where a beautiful white ship was waiting, tied up alongside a wharf. Gandalf was standing nearby, along with Elrond, Galadriel, and some other elves. The breeze made the ship's flags flap, loud in the sudden silence.

"As we said, here we are. We're a *team*, remember?" said Harry. At this, Gandalf came forward, his face wreathed in a smile. As he and Harry embraced, Hermione found herself looking at him with different eyes than she had before. She was now over a hundred years old,

and she had to admit that Gandalf looked very attractive. *Stop it, woman!* she scolded herself. *You're a respectable widowed schoolteacher! Act your age! Didn't you learn your lesson with Gilderoy Lockhart?* In any case, she figured that Gandalf was well out of her reach---but she had to admit, hugging him felt very nice indeed, when it was her turn.

Cirdan led them aboard the ship, and at his command, the elvish sailors cast off and set the sails. With a slight lurch, the ship began its journey, and all the passengers crowded the rails, to look their very last on Middle-Earth. Hermione was crying, and she noticed that she wasn't the only one. As far as she could tell, there wasn't a dry eye on the ship. The ship sailed on, into the West, with a gentle breeze urging it through the sunlit waters.

A few days out, when the highest mountains of Middle-Earth had disappeared into the sea behind them, Hermione felt an indescribable sensation, as of passing through a barrier. It reminded her of going through the barrier between King's Cross Station and Platform 9 3/4 in London. Peering ahead, she saw impossibly tall mountains, and she knew that she was gazing on Valinor. Birds wheeled around the ship, their cries seeming to bring a message of welcome. Looking at herself and her friends, Hermione was startled to see them becoming youthful again. As she watched, their hair turned back to its original colors, and they felt such vigor and energy as they had not known in decades.

And so, Harry Potter, Ronald Weasley, Hermione Granger, and Draco Malfoy made their final journey to Valinor, the land of the Valar, to dwell among the Valar and elves in bliss and peace forever, held in the highest honor as the destroyers of Sauron.

THE END