



# Total Immersion The road goes ever on

By Brutha of Crickpollott

## Book 3 – a Company of Diaryes

## Chapter 21

### ā Penny Short – 25 Botmact, 1417 SR

'My letter found you then?' said the tall Man with flowing golden hair in a manner and tone that instantly made Theodoras think of Eoleof. 'Excellent news, and even more excellent that you are here. I am Éogar, master of horses here at Hengstacer Farms.'

'Your letter arrived nearly a fortnight ago,' laughed the hobbit. 'Though it has taken me a week or more to make the journey here from the Shire. But here I am! All that is needed now is to settle my debt to you for the stabling and I can begin the journey home...with Clover of course!'

Theodoras absentmindedly brushed the dust from his cape and trousers with one hand. He then tilted his head to one side and looked up at Éogar with an inquisitive glance as the tall Man spoke. 'Forgive me. I must be much more tired from the journey than I thought because I half-imagined you said five hundred silver...'



Éogar swatted at a large black fly that seemed to swarm over the entire stable area and nodded slightly. For a moment the hobbit was speechless, beside himself with astonishment.

'You can't be serious!' cried the hobbit in dismay, his eyes growing as large as saucers. 'But I do not have that sort of coin. Why, I could purchase a new pony for that sum! Horse trader indeed!'

No matter how hard the hobbit pleaded, the horse trader only frowned and shook his head at any of the hobbit's many offers for a smaller amount. Finally, Theodoras turned, now quite crushed by this latest turn of events, and stomped away. Passing the line of stables, the hobbit stopped and sat down dismally in the green grass beside the road.

There he sat in silence gazing down the road that led away from the farm and back towards the Greenway and, for a brief moment, the thought to set out after his companions came into his mind. But just as the notion sprang into his mind; it was pushed aside by Theodoras' more hobbit-like sense. For it had been more than an hour since his companions had said their goodbyes and bid the hobbit farewell, leaving him alone at the farm.

Theodoras bent his legs as he sat and propped his head in his hands, then sighed unhappily aloud. 'Let me see now...no good setting off after them. They have been gone quite awhile already and you have no hope in catching them now.'

For a time, Theodoras sat there pondering this new predicament as the early morning slowly passed away and noon soon approached. Several times, the hobbit reached to draw out his small purse from his pocket and counted the silver and copper coins within.

'As I see it, I am nearly ninety-five silver short!' he muttered. 'These horse-traders are shrewder than a dwarf at market!'

He had been sitting lost in thought for more than an hour when Theodoras noticed a short man some paces off near the stables was looking at him with interest. The stableman had paused in his work spreading fresh hay into the stables, and now leaned upon the long haft of the pitchfork he held with both hands, keenly watching the hobbit in silence.

Theodoras rose from the grass and strode over to the man, bowing low with a wave of his cap. 'Good morning sir! I am Theodoras Took, of the Shire. And a fine morning it is!' he said, for despite his sour mood, the morning had indeed awoken to a pleasant day. The sun shone from a gently-cloudy sky and the air was warm (but not too hot) and heavy with the scent of flowers.

The man smiled warmly at the hobbit then wiped the sweat from his damp brow. 'I am Cam Applewood,' he replied still smiling down at the hobbit. 'A dwarf came to the farm and requested some horses. Not sure what he intended to do with them, but by the looks of him he needed some pack animals. I told him that our horses weren't for hire, and he left in a huff. Seemed a bit peculiar, he did not seem quite right in the head. If it's not out of your way, can you make sure that old dwarf isn't in trouble? He seemed a bit...queer in the head. I saw him wander off to the ruins south-east of here.'

Theodoras looked up thoughtfully at the stable-hand as a plan sprang to mind. 'Perhaps there is a way to help one another out?' he said finally, a glimmer of hope creeping into his voice. 'You see, I am in a bit of a bind, so to speak...monetarily, if you understand. I could seek out this dwarf for you, and perhaps he could aid me with my money problem?'

Cam said nothing but looked down at the hobbit for a moment before turning back to his work. For a moment, Theodoras was at a loss for words. Then he spoke with some hesitation. 'Well... I shall be off then. I will find this dwarf and return with news!' he said, trying to sound confident.

Theodoras began to make his way through the stables to the opposite side from the road. He munched on a handful of juicy blueberries (that last of them he thought miserably) and not a person seemed to take notice of the hobbit as he passed.

On reaching the eastern side of the farm, he went along a dusty lane that followed a wide field behind the farm buildings and stables. The lane wound to the right, round the east side of the farm, and then run downwards into a gentle rolling meadow surrounded by a low wooden fence.

On the far side of the meadow, away to the east and south, Theodoras could see ancient and crumbling line of ruined wall and there soon came a break in the fence along the lane. Here, Theodoras turned from the lane and began to cross the meadow towards the ruins, looking about uneasily as he went.



Suddenly, a voice rang out from the line of crumbling ruins ahead. 'Who's that there?' said a deep voice and Theodoras froze mid-step and looked about nervously. Just then he spotted a very old looking dwarf standing in the shadows of the ruins, his eyes almost slits as he squinted at the hobbit, a long dagger clutched in a gnarled hand.

'Oh, hello,' said the dwarf apologetically as he lowered his blade. 'Sorry about that. These old eyes aren't what they used to be. Do you have time to talk? I could use some help.'

Theodoras laughed despite himself and strode over to the dwarf. 'I did not mean to frighten you,' he said with an added chuckle.

'My name's Oddvarr of the Blue Mountains,' said the dwarf with a low bow. 'And I'm here in Bree-land on very important business. The only problem is I misplaced my pack. Now, I'm to investigate the old dwarf-ruins that are rumoured to exist here. I'm sure there are important discoveries to be made, and I'm the one to do it! I'm a famous explorer, you see.'

'I am sure!' replied Theodoras, trying to hide his wide grin with one hand.

'But I digress!' continued the dwarf with an air of importance. 'If you could help me find that pack, I would be indebted to you. You start looking over yonder north, and I'll search this area and to the south. If you find anything, meet me

back here!

'Sounds simple enough,' answered Theodoras as he took his cap in one hand and smoothed out his curly brown hair. 'Possibly you could reward me with a finder's fee upon my return...'

Theodoras tipped his cap to the dwarf and turned to cross the field once more. Not far from the dwarf's camp, the hobbit stumbled upon a faded path, plain to see, along the eastern edge of the field. It wound northwards for some distance, and then began to run upwards.

Theodoras paused and looked about, first towards the looming hill ahead, and then away to the west where could be seen the Hengstacer Farm, and wisps of rising smoke climbed gently into the calm air. The sun now was shining bright and clear, and the grass was long and full of colour, and all seemed to the young hobbit peaceful, clean and wholesome.

Soon, the low but wide hill came full into view ahead. It was shaded by several leafy and tall elm trees and the remains of crumbling ruins, much weathered, crowned its height. Dug into the steep slope that led up from the fields he spotted stairs of stone, very cracked and worn, to a floor of broken and pitted stonework. Tall pillars of stone rose from the floor that once held a magnificent stone roof overhead, but many were broken and the roof long ago fallen.



Theodoras stood for a moment to gaze upon the hill before hurrying along to scramble up the rocky slope until at last he had reached the top. He had only just set one foot upon the stone floor when he blinked in astonishment and then choked back a cry. For standing amidst the ruins were two Orcs, each nearly as tall as a Man, swart and slant-eyed.


Much to the hobbit's luck (and yet growing fear), the Orcs did not seem to notice the poor hobbit at first, but instead stood near the center talking loudly to one another in their foul tongue. Theodoras could not understand

any of the words, but it sounded very horrible and cruel to him. Nearer to where the hobbit crouched in the shadow of one of the tall crumbling pillars, stood a large section of rock. And atop the rock there was placed a well-worn leather pack.

For several long moments, Theodoras was overwhelmed with paralyzing fear. He dared not turn to flee back down the hill, lest they Orcs become aware of his presence. And he was more than certain that he had no desire to move closer. He tried to swallow but a lump caught in his throat and Theodoras stifled back a cough with fright and alarm.

Theodoras knew that he ought to do something at once. Part of himself (a very large part I might add) told him to turn and creep back as carefully as he might back down the hill. Oddvarr had said nothing of Orcs, he thought, and what is Orc-hunting to do with him at all? Better to flee now before the foul creatures spotted him, pack or no pack.

But another, deeper part of him now began to whisper softly. His thoughts quickly turned to Hemni, Dyre and Eoeleof and the bravery they displayed at the heights against the brigands. Too came the memory of the valiant dwarf as



Theodoras fell to the wild boar in the hollow. He suddenly had the great desire to feel heroic in his own right. Before he even had the chance to think about it, Theodoras held his breath and crept forward from the pillar until he was crouching beside the rock and pack.

For several long and agonizing moments, the hobbit hesitated beside the rock, the desire to turn and run growing stronger in his belly. Then, he swallowed hard and plucked up his courage. Glancing towards the Orcs, he at once snatched up the pack with both hands, and turned to swiftly spring away down the slope. But for the briefest of moments, the pack caught on a spur of the rock, and Theodoras nearly dropped it in surprise as he let out a sharp cry.

This the Orcs heard, of course, and they turned to the cry and their cruel dark eyes fell upon him. With a horrible cry, they drew forth wicked-looking blades and leapt down towards him. Great fear now swallowed the poor hobbit's heart, and he strained and pulled at the pack feverishly. No cry came from him now. Theodoras shut his eyes tightly and tugged vainly at the straps of the pack held firm by the rock. He gave a great heave and shout and the straps snapped, nearly sending him sprawling into the dirt.

For half a moment, he looked with surprise at the pack now in his hands. But the rush of feet across the broken stone came loud and immediate. 'Run!' Theodoras said to himself. His heart leapt in his chest and he sprang back, just as one of the Orcs came round the rock, bearing its yellow fangs at him. The Orc drew back his sword and stabbed forward, but Theodoras ducked beneath the clumsy blow with a frightened cry.

Without another glance, Theodoras turned and fled down the slope, so swiftly that he slid partially downwards nearly falling over several times. The Orcs did not pause, but immediately gave chase, cursing loudly and shouting as they pursued him.

Theodoras clutched the pack tightly to his chest as he reached the bottom of the hill, and he could feel the hot foetid breath of the Orcs on his back even as he fled across the field. All thoughts were instantly driven from his mind as he sprinted away as fast as his tiny furry feet could carry him. He did not dare chance a look over his shoulder but he envisioned the hideous orc-faces behind and hideous arms grasping for him.

He ran and ran, until his breath came in great gasps and his chest burned like a hot furnace. All the way across the field and down the lane towards the farm he ran without pause. Only as the outlying farm buildings came into view did Theodoras dared to glance over one shoulder. Much to his surprise, he did not see the Orcs. But he did not stop his head-long rush until he had passed round the main building and into the wide courtyard of the stables.



## CHAPTER 22

### A Company of Dwarves – 26 B.O.C.M., 1417

#### SR

With a start, Theodoras sat up in bed, letting out a hoarse cry, and raised his hands as if to ward off a blow. 'Orcs!' he shouted frightfully. He threw his head about in confusion until slowly the hideous visions of the orc-faces went distant in his mind and he could no longer imagine their hot, stank breath on his neck.

The sun was shining through an open window in the room, letting in a warm winter breeze. Theodoras chuckled despite his fright and rolled his legs off the bed, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He was at the Prancing Pony, in Bree, of course, and slowly, the memory of the horse fields came unbidden to his mind. He had found the pack that old Oddvarr had forgetfully left behind. But foul orcs had occupied the ruins by then and it was sheer luck that Theodoras was able to escape their clutches with the pack held tightly in his hands. Even now, the terrible memory of the frightful chase all the way back to the Hengstacer farm echoed back at him and he shuddered slightly.

The old dwarf was quite thankful for the return of his pack, and much to the hobbit's delight, offered up a small reward for the task. It was not a princely sum, in fact, added to the meager amount of coins already in his purse, it was barely enough to cover the stabling expenses for Clover. But in the end, Theodoras fared well enough, and he happily counted out the monies, took the pony's reins and began the long journey back to Bree.

Theodoras chuckled softly and stretched his arms high above his head. 'It shall be a slim and slender trip back home,' he thought aloud. 'But it will be most pleasant to return there!' Just then, there came a soft rap upon the door as the hobbit servant, Nob, stuck his head inside.

'A bit of breakfast and perhaps a spot of tea would be quite nice,' answered Theodoras with a warm smile. 'But there is one thing I must do before that. I should very much like to pay a visit to see my pony. I have only just recovered her, and it would wonderful news to my aunt if I return Clover home in better shape than when she left!'

Theodoras stood up and hastily dressed, throwing his cape about his shoulders then setting his cap upon his furry head. He wandered down from his room and out to the stables between the two wings of the inn. There he found a fair enough barn, housing a number of horses, well-tended and cared for.


From a small stall near the back of the barn there came a familiar whinny as Theodoras entered. He turned his head to spot Clover looking happily at him. 'Good morning to you too!' said Theodoras. 'I see that you are well despite your recent and harrowing ordeal.'

Clover said nothing but swished her tail and nuzzled her head into the hobbit's shoulder. 'But do not worry,' he added as he stroked her thick mane. 'We shall be leaving soon for home girl.' He then glanced down at the feed trough, eying the ample pile of hay and grasses. 'Farwell for now, Clover I must be off. You have plenty to graze on but I must now turn my attention to some bit of breakfast for myself!'

Bidding Clover goodbye, Theodoras returned to the inn and took a seat near the fireplace at a small round table with three chairs. The inn was quiet and nearly empty as he sat down; a few hobbits or Bree-Men sat here or there in the large room but none paid Theodoras any mind as the hobbit took a seat. From out of nowhere, the hobbit Nob appeared, hovering over the table. Theodoras flashed an uncomfortable smile, trying to hide his embarrassment, and turned slightly to open his purse to count the few remaining coins inside. Nob nodded and turned round and before Theodoras could scarcely take a dozen breaths, the hobbit returned with a half-loaf of fresh bread and butter, and cheese, and a small flagon of new-drawn beer.

Theodoras ate and drank in silence, until the plate was (rather regretfully, he thought) cleared and the flagon drained. For a time, he sat quietly, listening to the hushed conversations about the room. Slowly, his eyelids began to droop and he settled into a light sleep.

Perhaps a half-an-hour had gone by when the door to the inn was flung open and a figure, shadowed by the brilliant



light from outside, appeared in the doorway. It was a dwarf, with a short brown beard falling down upon his chest, and clad in green and tan leathers. A bursting pack, crossbow and tools were slung across his back.

Holding the door open with one hand, the dwarf glanced about the wide room before striding forward. He gazed curiously at the sleeping form of the hobbit and then turned to walk towards the table. There he paused, looking down at the hobbit with a smile and then spoke.

'Hail and well-met, Master Hobbit,' he said with a bow. Theodoras did not stir, but let out a gentle snore in reply. The dwarf crossed his arms and smiled ever wider, then tapped his foot upon the floor. Finally, he cleared his throat very loud and spoke again.

'Ahem! Young hobbit master!'

Theodoras' eyes fluttered open and he stared up at the strange dwarf, at once far too surprised to say anything. He blinked once or twice then stood up from the chair rather abruptly, knocking it over with a crash.

'My word!'

The dwarf, his armed still crossed over his wide chest, said nothing at first, still smiling down at the surprised and speechless hobbit. 'Rulf, at your service!' he said finally with another low bow.

'Oh, bless me!' stuttered the hobbit. 'You must forgive my manners, but it has been a trying week for a hobbit such as me! And your unexpected appearance caught by surprise.'

The dwarf slid his heavy pack from his shoulders and set it down beside the table before sitting down upon one of the chairs. Theodoras looked about with a flustered stare then reached down to right the fallen chair before he too sat down.

'You have the look that one of my kinsmen described to me, and you fit it well enough, if I may say so,' said the dwarf cryptically. 'What is your name, young hobbit?'

'I am Mister Theodoras Took, of Budgeford, if you must know,' answered the hobbit sharply and suspiciously. 'But you say kinsman? Do you mean a fellow dwarf?'

'Yes,' answered Rulf as he reached for a foaming mug of ale before him. 'His name is Hemni, from the Blue Mountains.'

'Hemni!' cried Theodoras despite himself, now very much relieved. 'Why did you not say that before? Forgive me but your questioning left me quite uncomfortable...'

'Hobbits all look alike to my folk,' laughed the dwarf. 'I could not sure you were the one Hemni spoke of, and there are many hobbits in Bree. So you are the one then...he named you Theodoras Took, and you have said that. A mouthful of a name, if you pardon the expression.'

'Really?' replied the hobbit. 'Well, my mother always called me Theo for short, if that is better for you.'

The dwarf smiled slightly. 'Much better, and it suits you Master Theo.'

'I have a distant cousin, on my father's side, of course...' said Theodoras thoughtfully. 'His name was Isenbold, but everyone called him Isen, if you know what I mean. But what has brought you here?'


'I have come here for ale...I have out in the wilds about Bree for some time.'

'What do you mean?' answered the hobbit with interest and curiosity.

'I brought some hides to trade with the merchants of Bree. And I made myself a tidy sum at that. I can tell you, young master, there is always coin to be made doing jobs that no one else wishes to do. Curing hides is not pretty work!'

'I do not doubt that!' laughed Theodoras.

'But hides alone are not the only reason I have come here to Bree,' said Rulf in a low ominous voice.



'Then what else?' asked Theodoras, leaning into the table, not very much liking the sound of Rulf's tone.

'It would be best to wait for the others to arrive before I answer that, Master Theo,' said the dwarf slowly.

'The others?' said Theodoras with a surprised gasp.

'Yes. Some of my kinsmen from Ered Luin, the Blue Mountains, but it seems that I have arrived first.'

Just then there came the sound of the front door being flung open and a deep voice called out.

'Greetings Master Rulf!'

Theodoras turned to watch as a second dwarf, with a short forked beard, heavy leather boots and tan cloak and hood, strode up towards the table. He was clad in a long tunic of stout mail and across his back hung a long-hafted axe.

Rulf stood up from the table to bow low then grasped the other dwarf's hand firmly. 'You have arrived Hergof, my friend. Excellent!'

'Rulf, do you know one another?' asked the hobbit.

'Indeed,' answered Rulf as he turned back to the hobbit. 'This is my kinsman, Hergof.'

With that, the second dwarf bowed low before the hobbit and swept back his hood. 'Hergof, at your service.'

'And you and your family!' replied Theodoras flushing brightly. But before the hobbit could say another word, there came a hearty deep-throated laugh from the direction of the door. Theodoras spun round to find Hemni standing just a few feet away, his familiar wide smile beaming brightly.

'Ah, there is out truant minstrel,' said Rulf with a grin. 'How are you brother Hemni!'

Hemni stopped to bow very low before his companions. 'Hail kinsmen! And hail to you too Master Theodoras!' Hemni strode up and sat down heavily upon a chair at the table. 'Ah, but my throat is parched from riding around in the fields of Bree all day!'

The other dwarves sat down at the table as well, followed finally by Theodoras, his astonished gaze going from one dwarf to the other in rapid succession. 'I must say! This is a strange gathering indeed! But whatever would bring three dwarves to gather in Bree!'

'We all have our reasons...' answered Rulf as he turned to shout for a round of ales to be brought over. 'For myself, these woods and fields are thick with game, money to be made for the meat and hides, but I have come for another reason.'

'I have come to town to sell some of my crafted weapons, but yes another reason entirely...' replied Hergof quietly.

Only Hemni did not speak, but sat back in his chair, and lit his long wooden pipe then let out a gentle cloud of dim smoke.


For a moment, the dwarves fell silent and then Rulf leaned in close and began to speak in a low whisper. 'I have had an offer made to me, for a good price, I might add, to gather some relics from a strange and dangerous place.' Rulf paused to rub his beard thoughtfully. 'I have asked my kinsmen to offer their assistance in this task.'

'As always, Master Rulf, I am at your service,' said Hergof with a grin.

'Ho, ho!' laughed Hemni. 'Adventure is always profitable and helping a kinsman is even better!'

The dwarves nodded collectively in agreement, their beards wagging in the dim light of the tavern. Then, Rulf cleared his throat and spoke anew.

'My fellow dwarves,' he continued in a whispered voice. 'This place I speak of is rumoured to have much treasure, left over from the men of Cardolan of long ago. I have been asked to seek pillars that are covered with ancient text and make charcoal rubbings of them.'



The other dwarves murmured quietly, nodding their heads slightly. Then Hemni spoke, his eyes gleaming in the dim light at the thought of gold and lost treasure. 'I have heard strange tales of forgotten treasure around here as well, most interesting.'

'Indeed, as have I,' added Hergof. 'But where would these pillars be found, Rulf? And what would the price be for such a strange treasure, may I ask?'

Rulf fell silent before answering, and he threw his gaze about the room before answering. 'They are found in a place called the Barrow Downs. And their return is quite profitable, not to mention anything we may find therein.'

Hergo's eyes widened at the mention of the place and set his mug down loudly upon the table. 'The Barrow Downs? I have heard of such a place and it is rumoured to be haunted by many an evil thing!'

Rulf nodded. 'They say it is a haunted and forsaken place that the Men and Hobbits here dare not venture into. But if there is treasure there to be found, I am just the dwarf to see it out!'

Hemni said nothing but blew a thick smoke ring into the air that hovered over the table for a moment before floating up the rafters overhead. But his eyes gleamed bright and clear as a wide smile crept across his face. Hergof lowered his head slightly as if in deep thought.

Just then, Theodoras, who had been listening to everything with alarm and (much to his surprise) growing curiosity, spoke up. 'You speak of treasure? Dwarves are a peculiar folk. But what would dwarves want with such treasure? And whatever does this have to do with me?'

'Treasure is a valuable thing,' answered Rulf sharply. 'We dwarves can make many things of surpassing quality, but we no longer possess the precious metals we once had. Are you so well off, young Master Took, that you have no need of some silver?'

'Me!' shrieked the hobbit. 'Dear me no!' But then his hand came to rest upon his purse on his belt and he frowned and fell silent. Finally he spoke again. 'Well, if you must know, those horse-traders charged me far more than I had anticipated. And now I am nearly spent! Almost all the monies my aunt and I had is now gone. I would very much not return home nearly bankrupt and penniless...but this sounds dangerous!'

'Well, if it involves treasure,' said Hergof with a grin. 'Count me in, brother Rulf!'

'I need little in the way of silver,' said Hemni, as he drew on his long pipe. 'But the adventure sounds promising!'

Rulf clasped his hand upon Hergof's shoulder and laughed aloud. 'I hoped that I could count on my kinsmen! And Hemni can pen a dozen songs upon our return!' Then he turned to gaze at the hobbit. 'And how about you, Theo? We could use someone like you. Dwarven axes aplenty we have but there might be something that you could offer that may very well come in handy.'

'Whatever could I offer?' squeaked the hobbit.

'You are a Took, are you not?' replied Rulf. 'I have heard several tales of some of your more adventurous Took relatives.'

'Quite so,' answered Theodoras hastily. 'But they are not me that I can assure you!'


'It is dangerous,' said Rulf grimly. 'I will not mislead you.'

'But do not worry, young Theo,' added Hergof with a wink. 'My axe will make sure that no harm befalls you.'

'Indeed,' replied Rulf. 'You will have three stout dwarves with you, my friend. I would not ask this of you, but we might very well need someone smaller and, well, sneakier, to get into places we cannot.'

To this Hemni laughed aloud with a cheer. 'And my tunes shall lighten our hearts in the deepest recesses of those foul barrows!'

Rulf smiled at the other dwarves then turned back to Theodoras with a curious gaze. 'So what do you say, Master Took?'



Theodoras glanced slowly at each dwarf in turn and swallowed hard. 'Well, I have begun to trust my luck far more than in the past,' he said trying to sound confident.

'Then it is settled!' laughed Rulf.

'Besides,' said Theodoras in a low uncertain voice. How much trouble can I find with three dwarves?'



## CHAPTER 23

### BARROW-SPIDERS – 27 BOCMATH, 1417 SR

In the dead of night, Theodoras awoke abruptly to the sound of noises outside the small round window of the room. A sudden fear came over him, so that he did not dare to speak but lay there listening breathlessly. He fancied he heard a sound like a strong breeze curling round the house and shaking it, and it filled him with a terrible fright.

'Barrow-wights,' thought Theodoras fearfully, though he truly did not even know what exactly a barrow-wight was. 'A great host of them!' He turned his head to glance about the darkened room just as there came a tap, tap, squeak, at the closed window. It was probably nothing more than branches fretting in the wind, twigs like fingers scraping wall and window; but to the young hobbit it was as if all manner of evil things and beasts were lurking just beyond the confines of the room. Theodoras drew the blanket close to his face and wondered if he would even have the courage in the morning to leave the safety of the inn's good stone walls.

Even as the hobbit stared at the window, not daring to scarcely breathe, there came a sharp rap upon the door. Theodoras sat up straight in the bed as the door opened slowly to reveal a darkened figure standing motionless in the gloom. A shrill and uncontrollable shout began to rise in his throat, and Theodoras looked helplessly about for his knife. Just then, and much to the hobbit's surprise, the darkened figure let forth a merry laugh. A darkened lamp was uncovered, and its light shone on the smiling face of Hemni.

'Good morning, young Master Took, said the dwarf, as he strode inside to open the window wide. A cool night air flowed in, and Theodoras shivered slightly. 'Or good evening, I should say, for it not yet Late Watches and the sun is still lost somewhere in the East. But it should grow warmer when the day is older.'

Almost in an instant, the fear fled from the hobbit as he leapt from bed. 'Hemni, you rascal! You gave me quite a start. It is still dark outside. Whatever is going on?'

'True, there are several hours before dawn. But we dwarves like the dark. Come, the others have gathered downstairs.'

The dwarf then produced a ripe apple, a biscuit or two, some cheese and a pitcher of water, which the hobbit sat swiftly down and began to eat on.

When Theodoras was dressed, and had flung his travel-stained blue cloak about his shoulders, he followed the dwarf downstairs to the darkened and silent room of the inn. The innkeeper was still fast asleep in his bed, and the dying coals of last night's fire cast a reddish-orange hue all around. Nearer the door stood to the other two dwarves, their hoods pulled up over their heads so that, in the dim light, their faces were lost in deep shadow.

'Good morning Master Took,' said Rulf in a low voice from under his deep hood. His pack and tools were already strapped across his pack, and was even now slinging his crossbow over one shoulder. Hergof stood silent and motionless next to him, his long cloak cast over mail and axe.

'Now my friends,' continued Rulf as he motioned the others round. 'This quest must be kept secret...I do not want others to discover we are seeking a treasure. Bree is full of sinister folk lately.'


'Yes, whispered Hemni as he glanced about the darkened room warily. 'There have been many ears about. Perhaps some of them have overheard our plans?'

'Indeed,' nodded Rulf in a low voice. 'That is precisely why I think we should slip out under the cover of darkness, without being seen.'

'Agreed,' said Hergof, finally breaking his silence. 'We should leave Bree in the most discreet of ways.'

'Discreet?' murmured Theodoras. 'Like thieves in the night?'

'Just like a burglar,' said Rulf with a grin.



'A burglar!' said Theodoras with indignation. 'Dear me, no. I don't like the sound of that one bit.' Despite himself, Theodoras was eager to at least put forth the semblance of determination, but he was still all rather confused by all of this and a bit shaky inside as well. 'I believe I shall leave Clover behind, however. I don't dare risking her safety on such a perilous journey. I just pray nothing unforetold befalls her before our return.'

Rulf looked down at the hobbit, a smile hidden in the deep folds of his hood. 'Then, Theo, are you ready? We should be off...and just remember to keep quiet.'

'I still do not know what barrow-treasure and barrow-wights have to do with anything. Or what service I could provide to a trio of dwarves. But yes, I suppose I am as ready as I shall ever be!'

One by one, the dwarves filed out of the inn and into the courtyard outside, with Theodoras coming up last. Then, with a raised arm, Rulf began to lead them down the narrow and darkened lanes towards the West Gate of Bree. The watchmen barely stirred in his sleep as the company stole quietly through the gate and down the road until they were standing at the crossroads of the Greenway and Great Road. There the companions paused in the darkness.

Theodoras stepped towards the crossroads and peered both ways. Visions of brigands and unwholesome things crept into his mind and he shivered slightly. He then glanced anxiously at the dwarves and then far off to the east. The sun was still far below the horizon in the distance and the road ahead looked dark and empty before them.

'Do you think...' he began hesitatingly. 'Do you think we have been - er, well, spotted?'

Rulf looked from under his deep hood before answering. 'I don't believe so, but we should remain alert.' The dwarf then turned to look down at the hobbit with a wink. 'A nice evening for a walk though, eh, Master Took?'

'As much as one could enjoy such a walk into a foul place like the Barrow-downs, if even a small part of the tales are true!'

With that, the company tramped off down the Great Road in silence and soon the darkened gate and hedge of Bree dwindled in the gloom behind them. Rulf walked in front, one hand resting on his slung crossbow; next came Hemni and the hobbit; and last came Hergof, who threw a glance every now and then over one shoulder.

After a time, Bree was lost behind them and they passed over the stone bridge spanning the swift-flowing stream and then kept on along the Road for some time. It was not long when they came upon a faded path that bent to the left from the road, curving back in a southerly line as it began to climb up a steep slope. Further up beyond the darkened path they could see the beginnings of tall hills rising out of the curling sea of darkness.

Here, Rulf paused quietly as his companions gathered round in the gloom. 'Now, here is where we must leave the road,' he said in a low voice. 'This path will lead us into the Downs, if I am not mistaken.'

Theodoras shivered despite himself as his eyes gazed out onto the darkened hills to the south. Rulf turned and began striding down the path, and the others fell in behind silently. Soon, there appeared ahead an opening between steep shoulders through which the path wound through.

Cautiously and with not a sound, the company climbed the path and passed through the cleft in the ridge into a deep and narrow ravine. At once, it was as if a heavy door shut behind them and an oppressive heaviness choked the dim still air all about them. Suddenly, Rulf paused, casting his hood back to look into the darkness along the path ahead.

'Hmm, it seems someone has met their end,' he said in a low voice.

The other dwarves hurried forward to stand to either side of Rulf. Theodoras did not, but instead inched forward, glancing about in a nervous fear. There, lying upon the path at the feet of the dwarves was a man, his cloak and trousers torn to tatters. For a moment, the companions gazed down upon the unfortunate soul and said nothing.

'What has befallen this man?' said Hemni breaking the silence.

'I believe it was a wolf or barghest,' answered Rulf grimly.

'What is a barghest, Rulf?' squeaked the hobbit, as he peeked from behind the dwarves.

'The wild dogs that roam these haunted lands did this poor fellow in,' replied the dwarf.



'It is a sign then,' answered Hemni gravely. 'We should be on our guard or else we shall end up like him.'

'Rulf nodded his head slightly. 'I once encountered their kind in Ered Luin. These beasts are vicious and do not give warning when they attack.' Rulf then turned and began to draw the others away and further down the path ahead. 'Come, we cannot help him now. Let us go.'

With Rulf leading the way, they wound their way further on, along the floor of the narrow ravine, first west then south once more. Without warning, the sheer walls of the ravine sprang back on both sides and before them lay a wide expanse of undulating land.

Even in the dim light, neither tree nor brush could be seen, save for a short springy turf growing across shadowy landscape ahead. To the east rose tall ridges that fell away on the far side towards the lower Bree-lands. The ridges ran southwards until they vanished out of sight in the heavy gloom. Far to the west and south lay a glimpse of a deep shadowed forest, nearly lost in a dark haze. And over all there hung an unnatural mist that seemed to ebb and flow in the still air.

Theodoras stepped forward unwillingly, and then shrank back in fear as the sound of scrapping reached his ears. He stooped and squinted in the dim light to watch with alarm as a hideous, slithering creature, more like an enormous worm than anything else, emerged from behind a nearby rock.

The hobbit let out an uncontrollable shriek even as Rulf stepped forward, his crossbow held in one hand. The dwarf laid a steady reassuring hand on the hobbit's shoulder.

'You see that giant crawler?' he said quietly as he fitted an arrow to his crossbow. 'Some are passive but others can be quite aggressive, so tread carefully Theo.'

'I see it!' answered the hobbit nervously. 'Ugly foul thing is it not?'

'Indeed,' answered the dwarf softly. 'They feast on the dead.'

'Whatever do you mean?' said the hobbit his voice cracking. 'That does not sound inviting at all!'

Rulf did not answer, but watched the slimy thing slithered from the rock and off into the darkness. He then turned his gaze skywards to the thick billowing clouds of mist and fog that was even now beginning to roll in from the south.

'This mist is already blocking out moon and star,' he said quietly.

'True but we are dwarves,' answered Hemni, his gaze set upon the rolling ground ahead of them, . 'We often walk in the dark. Besides, there is rich deposits here in the barrows, if the tales be true, a good enough reason to continue.'

'But certainly not a good enough reason to remain, Hemni!' retorted the hobbit.

Rulf smiled and clasped his hand upon Hemni's shoulder. 'There are riches beyond deposits, my friend, buried deep within the barrows. That is what we seek here.'

Rulf then turned to his companions. 'Let us continue, but be wary!' With Rulf in the lead, the companions made their forward from the ravine and down a gentle slope into the gathering mist. As they went, the air began cold and clammy, and Theodoras instinctively drew his cloak tight about his body.

Theodoras could not tell how far they had gone, for the blowing mist concealed the land, making it hazy and deceptive to the eye. But soon, the ground began to fall away towards the ridges dimly visible through the tops of the

mist to the east. At once a low, shapeless hill loomed from out the mist ahead.

In the ground before them were placed flat and well-worn flag-stones set deep into the earth. They led forward until the mist seemed to part and a low hill, ringed by strange standing stones like stabbing fingers, came into view. The flag-stones wound up to a pair of standing stones set into the steep slope of the hill, and a third rested upon their top, like some great entrance of sorts. But what lay beyond could only be guessed for it was shrouded in a darkness that no light seemed to penetrate.

'Look!' sputtered the hobbit as he pointed towards the low hillock ahead.

'What is this foul place, brother Rulf?' said Hemni cautiously.

'A barrow,' muttered Rulf softly. 'The man in Bree said the ancient pillars we seek are in these barrows. We must enter.'

'We must?' replied Theodoras as an icy chill that froze his bones settled over him. 'Leave the dead to rest. They have nothing we desire!'

'We must, if we want the treasure,' answered Rulf glancing back at the hobbit.

Hergof, who had been unnaturally quiet since entering the Downs spoke up. 'There better be great riches as you promised, Master Rulf!' he said with a growl.

Rulf looked long and silent at Hergof then down at the hobbit. 'Would you rather wait out here?'

'Wait out here?' answered the hobbit as he glanced about fearfully.

'Perhaps that is not so safe for our Mr. Took,' said Hemni.

Rulf nodded then looked once more in silence at the hobbit. Theodoras shivered then swallowed hard, never taking his eyes off the barrow before them.

'Very well, but this is a fool's errand, and fools we have become!' moaned the hobbit with sorrow. But the dwarves were silent and his voice fell to a whisper. With Rulf leading, they passed one by one through the dark doorway gaping like a deep impenetrable shadow before them. As Theodoras passed the archway, what little from outside was swiftly swallowed and he found himself standing in a deep gloom, an utter enveloping darkness; the still and stagnant air felt oppressive and all sounds fell dead away. Theodoras reached out with one hand to an unseen wall; it felt, much to his surprise, smooth and the floor, save for a step or two, was straight and even.

They had gone far when the hobbit sensed a change in the darkness; ahead it seemed deeper and denser. Here also, the air seemed to move slightly, and there were echoes and a sense of space in the darkness.

A few paces ahead, Rulf produced a torch from his pack and within moments it sparked to life. The darkness sprang back to reveal a narrow chamber half-shrouded in places of deep shadows. The flickering light danced across the chamber revealing the thick darkness was made, in many places, by sinister-looking spider-webs all tangled with one another.

Solemn figures of carved stone loomed from the web-festooned and crumbling walls and each bore the likeness of kings of old. Here or there could also be seen strange signs and runes, but they were far too dim and faded to read. But more to Theodoras' rising fear was the horrible stench, the foulest of reeks, which emanated from the darkened chamber.

The hobbit's sense at once began to reel and his mind darkened; despite the torch held high in Rulf's hand, the darkness within the chamber seemed to close in about the company and the stench smote Theodoras more terribly than any blade.



Just then a sound unlike the frightened hobbit ever heard now began to creep from out of the shadows all about the chamber. The sound, much like that of rustling dry dead grass, seemed to come from unseen and deep crevices in the darkness. Suddenly, a thing appeared in the darkness ahead. It was a spider, but far larger than any common variety Theodoras had ever seen back in the Shire. The spider's dark body sat atop spindly legs and ichor dripped from its long mandibles. More to Theodoras' horror, it was not alone as the shadowy outlines of several more came into view behind the first.

Rulf let out a rousing shout lifted up his crossbow as the horrible spiders swarmed as one from out of the webs and shadows. The arrow struck the first spider in its many-clustered eyes and it shuddered uncontrollably with maddening jerks before flopping to the ground in a heap.

Hergof bellowed a curse and sprang past Theodoras and into the press of advancing spiders. 'Get behind me, little one!' he shouted as the dwarf laid all about with his axe, cleaving leg and limb with every stroke. Hemni's voice rang out sonorous and clear in the darkness behind. The words washed over the hobbit and the darkness seemed to melt from his heart.

Before he could even consider it, Theodoras leapt forward to deal a blow to one of spiders closing all round Hergof. He aimed a blow at the first but it only sprang away on its many legs like lightning. Desperately he whirled to hew at another, but his dagger rang, glancing aside, nearly falling from his shaken hand.



Choking back a cry, Theodoras stabbed again, sinking his knife into the monster's belly. The spider convulsed and shivered before collapsing to the stone floor. Black drops of foul ichor dripped from the blade as the hobbit staggered back with surprise. At once, the sound of battle ceased and the chamber went silent but for the heavy gasps of the dwarves. Theodoras lifted his head to look at the faces of his companions.

'Spiders!' said Rulf as he reached down to retrieve those arrows not broken or bent from the corpses of the spiders.

'Yes!' laughed Hemni with a wide grin. 'Not what I would have imagined here.' Hergof said nothing but glanced back at the hobbit, a smouldering fire gleaming in his bright eyes

as he stepped among the unmoving bodies of the spiders.

Just then, something caught the hobbit's eye and he turned to inch carefully towards the thick webs along one wall. Rising from out of the webs he found a short and very ancient pillar; indecipherable writing was carved on the front and adorning the slanted top could be seen seven bas-relief stars.

'Rulf! Hemni! Hergof! What is this! Come see what I've found!'

The dwarves hurried to gather round the hobbit and stared down at the strange obelisk. 'It is covered in strange writing,' said Theodoras as he glanced at the dwarves.

'Master Rulf, is this the pillar that we seek?' said Hergof as he knelt down to draw his hand over the stone.


Rulf stooped to gaze closely at the stone. 'These are the graves of the royalty of Cardolan,' he said quietly.

'What does the inscription mean?' asked Hemni peering over Rulf's shoulder with keen eyes.

'I do not know,' answered Rulf. 'But fetch the charcoal and parchments and rub the text.'

Hergof nodded silently and bent beside the obelisk, placing a sheet of parchment over its worn surface. 'Quickly, then,' muttered Theodoras, glancing about with apprehension. 'Get what you need and let us leave this place!'

Just then, Hemni called out with a hearty laugh from the other side of the chamber. Theodoras turned to watch as the



dwarf began to cut away at the webbing along one wall. 'Treasure!' he said with a merry chuckle. The other dwarves eagerly crowded around Hemni as he lifted up several coins and ancient trinkets of gold and silver to the torchlight with expert eyes. At once the dwarves forgot the fear and darkness as they gazed lovingly at each new item lifted from the dirt.

For a moment, the dwarves forgot even about the hobbit; Theodoras stood eyeing the far passage leading from the chamber with growing fear and nervousness. Finally he spoke.

'Leave it for the dead,' he said with barely a whisper. 'We must leave this place!'

Rulf glanced about and then back towards the hobbit, as if seeing him for the first time. 'Indeed,' he said finally. 'There may be other of these obelisks further in.'

'We have to go deeper?' groaned the hobbit with much worry and alarm.

'And perhaps more treasure!' laughed Hemni.



## Chapter 24

### Gwigon's Lair – 27 Bofmarch, 1417 SR

Rulf drew the company near and, in a hushed voice, spoke. 'Come, we must delve further, if we dare.'

Theodoras glanced uneasily at the distant and darkened passage on the far side of the wide chamber. He was altogether feeling quite wretched and cold as he glanced towards the archway that showed blackness in the heavy gloom of the unfriendly place. He now wished to be anywhere but there in that gloomy, spider-infested barrow and was wholly cursing himself for his rather rash decision back in Bree.

And yet, as much as he wished nothing more than to turn round and flee out as fast as his furry feet could carry him, Theodoras quickly pushed it away. He very much wanted to seem brave and competent in the eyes of the dwarves, and the feeling grew as he looked at the silent faces of his companions in the dim light. With a sigh, he straightened his pack and swallowed hard.

Under the low archway went Rulf, his torch one held aloft in one hand, followed shortly by Hemni and the hobbit, and behind came Hergof. The darkness of the far passage seemed to flow around them like a chilled mist and the still air fell all about at once. But the heavy dark veil receded from the flickering torch held in the dwarf's hand which shone in a globe of space enclosed with utter blackness.

The wall of the passage sprang out before them, and was swiftly engulfed in the inky blackness ahead. Without a word, Rulf strode forward, followed swiftly by Hemni. Theodoras peered ahead then stumbled after them; he could see little but for the dim flickering flame of the torch and the shadowed hoods of the dwarves some paces in front.

They had not gone far when, before them and within the radius of the torch-light, were two openings; here, the company halted for the right turned quickly away, while the one forward went straight on only a little narrower than the tunnel behind.

Rulf stood uncertain at the crossroads for a moment; he peered first forward and to the right shaking his head. 'Confound it!'

Theodoras shuddered as he passed his hand over his brow. Hemni took a step forward to stand beside Rulf and whispered in a low, guarded voice. 'Do you hear anything?'

Rulf turned slightly to his kinsman, his eyes glittering in the flickering light, but said nothing, and shook his head slowly. He motioned for his companions and stepped carefully into the side passage. Hemni looked down to smile at the hobbit before hastening forward. Theodoras took in a deep breath and hurried after them. Behind, Hergof stepped to the intersection, and paused to listen, his head tilted to one side; then he hastened to follow as well.

After a few moments, Theodoras felt a sudden void on one side as the wall of the passage fell away from his reach and into emptiness. Here was another opening in the passage, a bit wider but just as dark. He was about to pause and call for the dwarves, but he watched as Rulf strode past the archway and onwards ahead, followed closely by Hemni. For a moment, the hobbit froze with hesitation, glancing down the side passage with nervousness. Then he felt a heavy hand upon his shoulder. 'Do not worry little one,' said Hergof in a gentle tone. 'Rulf will not lead us blindly.'

Theodoras nodded slightly and skipped to catch up with the other dwarves, who were already vanishing in the deep gloom ahead. Presently, the company came to what could only have been yet another fork in the tunnel; at least in the deep darkness that is what could be seen.

Here, Theodoras froze once more, as a sense of evil so strong came upon him that he felt faint. He reached out grasp Hemni by the arm. 'There's something in there,' he whispered ominously, not liking the look of the right-hand tunnel one bit. Here too came a strange odour, a repellent taint in the air and there could be heard faint stirring in the darkness.

'Let us leave this foul place,' whispered the hobbit as he turned to step back from the tunnel. Then, not far down that

tunnel, he saw a gleam. He stopped to watch as it advanced from the darkness very slowly. Suddenly he cried out as the realization set in that they were eyes; two great clusters of eyes. Whether they shone of their own light or whether the radiance of the flickering torchlight was reflected in their thousand facets, Theodoras could not guess. And the first set were not alone, for much to the hobbit's rising horror he could clearly see a number of other awful spiders issuing out of the crevices and darkness of the tunnel, all hurrying forward like a sickening tide.

'More spiders!' cried the hobbit with horror even as the dwarves let forth a rousing cry. At once the spiders swarmed all about the dwarves and hobbit and in the dim flickering light of the torch there came the gleam of slashing axes and the stab of short blades.

Turning round to form a tight circle of steel and iron, the dwarves hewed at the sickly legs or stabbed at the fat bodies of the spiders if they drew too near. This was too much for the spiders and for a moment they fell away towards the darkness of the far tunnel, only to returning more fiercely than ever.

'So many spiders!' cried Rulf as he cleaved the head of one from its sickening and bloated body. Hergof, who stood beside him, said nothing, his eyes gleaming a fiery brightness. He brought back his axe and in a wide sweep shorn the legs of a fat disgusting spider from its corpulent body as it sprang up the wall.

Theodoras too did the best he could, although he was felling quite out of place at the moment. His one hope was that he would not be mistaken for one of those horrible spiders in the darkness to be cleaved by an axe. Once or twice he stabbed past a dwarf with his short knife when a spider drew too near.

To the poor hobbit, it seems a terrible unending business that had no end; but the venom and nimbleness of the spiders was no match for the dwarf blades and iron axes, and soon the darkened tunnel fell silent.

'Such a sinister and foul place!' groaned Hergof as he leaned wearily upon his axe. Rulf nodded silently as he reached down to brush off spider webs from his heavy leather boots. The dwarf then fitted an arrow to his crossbow and began creeping down the gloomy tunnel, motioning the others to follow.

They had not gone far when before them appeared a widening of the tunnel filled with a greyness, heavy and dull, which the light of the torch seemed not to penetrate. Casting their heads about, the dwarves stepped carefully into the chamber; all across the walls of the room were thick grey webs, orderly as the webs of house spiders, but far greater, each thread as thick as the hobbit's finger.



'A dead end it seems,' laughed Hergof grimly. Hemni poked at the spider's body lying on the stone floor, its legs curled above, and then gave it a swift kick. 'But thankfully no more of the foul creatures,' he said with a chuckle.

Rulf circled the chamber slowly before turning to his companions. 'Come, there are no pillars here.'

Again with Rulf in the front, the company turned back down the tunnel until they reached the round angle of the intersection. First looking down into the gloom to the left, Rulf stepped into the other passage quietly. He had gone no more than a dozen steps when the passage suddenly entered a narrow archway in the rock. Up and away

climbed stairs into darkness; some were well-worn and smooth, while others were cracked and broken.

After a short climb, they reached the top and found themselves in a deep dark passage once more. To the left another stairs fled down into darkness and to the right a tunnel, equally dark, went away along an even floor.

Again Rulf paused, first glancing at the steps and then down the darkened passage to the other side. 'Down is no good,' he said quietly with a whisper. Carefully the dwarf began to creep down into the darkness.

At once the tunnel ahead opened out and sprang high before them. Above their heads loomed a roof and wide pillars of stone rose from the floor of the wide chamber, and all about lay the thick grey shadows of deep webs.

Theodoras blanched as he raised a hand to his nose; out of the chamber that lay before them came a most unwholesome reek so foul that the hobbit nearly reeled. For a moment, the company stood in silence, mouths gaping wide as they peered fearfully into the chamber.

Then, from out of the darkness to the other side, there came the monstrous and loathsome form that any had ever witnessed. Spider-like it was in shape and form, but huge as any wild beast, and more terrible because of the malice and evil purpose that glinted in its eyes. These eyes were many, clustered atop its head, and each held a baleful light. Upon great legs it walked, the hairs stuck out like steel spines. Its round swollen body behind its narrow neck was bright blotched with pale livid marks and its bloated body was orange-pale and faintly luminous as its eyes. It stank to be sure, and moved with a sudden and horrible speed running on its long legs.

This was Gwicon, though the dwarves or hobbit could not name it, a great creature in spider form such as once lived in the Land of the Elves in the West of Beleriand that is now under the Sea. All light of this beast snared and wove into impenetrable and darkened webs. Pale-fleshed, many-eyed, venomous it was, older and more horrible than the black creatures of Mirkwood. And it was wholly wicked and no one, not even the Wise, knew its true intentions or nature.

Theodoras shrank back in mortal fear, even as the dwarves surged forward with a cry, but the great spider made off, springing nimbly backwards and out of reach. Theodoras let out a cry of triumph, but it quickly died in his throat as the horrible forms of smaller, more numerous of Gwicon's brood issued from out of the webs that clung to the walls.




At once, the dwarves found themselves in a sharp fight, as the children of the great spider swarmed about them. The dwarves lay about in all directions with their axes and blades, scattering the smaller spiders with a sudden fury. But it was then that Gwicon choose to strike. Gathering it's massively- repellant body, it sprang forward with a great leap, green venom dripping to hiss and sputter onto the stone, to fall among the surprised dwarves.

With a pale leg the width of a small tree, Gwicon lashed out, sending Rulf sprawling onto the floor, his axe clattering away and out of reach. Spinning round with amazing speed, the great spider struck at Hemni with its long fangs. Hemni kicked at the horrible head with a heavy boot before he

was borne backwards by the immense weight of the spider. Turning to face Rulf once more, Gwicon raised its blubbery body high up into the air even as the dwarf rose to one knee, glancing frantically about for his axe.

At that moment, Hergof leapt forward, hewing at the flabby underside of the spider with his axe. But Gwicon was not as dragons are; no softer spot it had save for only its eyes. Its age-old hide was knotted and pitted with corruption but ever thickening with layer upon layer within. The axe sprang back with a resounding ring in the air, and Hergof faltered nearly off-balance.

With a rush, the spider came at him with a flurry of legs and fangs. Hergof cried out as he brought up his axe and hewed at the great cluster of glittering eyes. Gwicon stopped its rush to shudder wildly as if in great and awful pain before springing back and out of reach once more.



Rulf leapt to his feet, his axe now held tightly in both hands to stand beside Hergof; and he was swiftly joined by Hemni. The dwarves turned to gaze at the great spider with keen eyes as it stalked the far side of the wide chamber, the foul blood of its dimmed eyes mingling with the venomous dripping of its great fangs onto the stone beneath it.

In all of this, Theodoras cowered nearer the tunnel, too afraid to move or utter a sound. He watched in horror as the great spider shook its ruined head and from it came forth an almost overpowering sense of malice and hate. Hergof raised his axe above his head and cried aloud. 'Baruk Khazâd! Khazâd ai-mênu!'

As one, the dwarves rushed the great spider, turning aside leg and fang to hew at its great head and cluster of eyes. Again and again the axe and blade of the dwarves rose and fell. Suddenly all went silent and the dwarves slowly lowered their weapons.

Gwigon seemed to crumble like a vast bag, its legs sagged and slowly, painfully it backed from the dwarves. With a monstrous shuddering, the great spider crumbled to the floor, the baleful light of its shattered eyes growing dim and then went out altogether.

Hergof staggered backwards to clutch at a wound upon his arm; it was enflamed and foul venom welled from it. He waved away the worried look of the hobbit as he began to wrap it with a fresh strip of linen. Meanwhile, Rulf and Hemni had begun to walk about the walls of the chamber until Hemni called out in a low voice.

'Over here! Another pillar or I am an Elf!'

The others rushed forward to look on as Hemni deftly cut away at a dark alcove where a great and ancient-looking pillar of web-wrapped stone stood.

'Is this what we need?' squeaked the hobbit. Rulf knelt beside the pillar and traced his fingers over faded script chiseled into the stone and then nodded silently.

'Good heavens for that then!' gasped the hobbit. 'Quickly, get a rubbing and let us leave this place!'

The grey, mist-blanketed sky outside was still dark when the company emerged at last from the barrow. The air felt at once felt heavy and oppressive but they fell onto the wide stones that led up to the barrow with relief. There they lay for some time, puffing and panting and no one spoke for some time. It was Rulf that finally broke the silence.

He let out a cheerful laugh as he climbed to his feet and clasped his hand upon his companions' shoulders. 'Well...that was a trial to be sure!'

'We made it!' added Hemni with a grin. 'What monstrous evil to be found dwelling in there!'

Rulf lifted up his bulging purse; it jingled full of many gold and silver trinkets.

'Evil indeed, but profitable!' laughed Rulf.

'I have never seen such creatures in the Blue Mountains,' said Hemni in a low voice.

'You have not yet seen enough, my good minstrel,' answered Rulf. 'There are creatures such as these in the ancient elf-ruins east of Gondamon.'

'Ahh, the rewards are great, master Rulf,' added Hergof. 'Though I had expected much more riches than this, I must say.'

Rulf nodded knowingly. 'This is only the first of many barrows to be found here. We shall see what we make out of it...not to mention the payment to the rubbings themselves.'

Theodoras, who had said nothing until now and still lay on the ground, looked up at the dwarf with blinking eyes. 'Wait...what was that, Rulf? What do you mean more barrows!'

## Chapter 25

### ā Rng Wāndered āway – 28 Bōcmāth, 1417

SR

'The sky is beginning to clear at last,' murmured Hemni as he turned his gaze towards the sky. The night indeed was quite old and the East sky was grey with the coming sunrise. But thick blanket of mist still hung low over the downs and the spider-haunted barrow had already disappeared into the greyness behind the company.

'Indeed, dawn is close,' whispered Rulf as he peered into the flowing mists ahead.

'That is a good sign then!' laughed Hemni. 'Perhaps this place will seem less evil in the daylight.'

Theodoras frowned. The thought of the coming dawn did little to cheer the young hobbit's heart; the mist felt damp and chilled on his face and, for a moment, he imagined that he could feel the very hill-roots going down and down into the deep earth. He followed Hemni's gaze forward but the land seemed shapeless and formless in the gathering mists.

Rulf whistled softly and motioned for the others to gather round as he reached inside his pack and knelt to spread out a well-worn map onto the cool, dew-moistened grass.

'There is still one more barrow to find,' said Rulf as he passed his hand over the wrinkled map. The dwarf glanced up and pointed off to the south. 'That is where we must go.'

Theodoras looked out into the mists then cast his eyes downwards with disappointment. He had the hope that once they had exited the foul barrow, the company would leave that terrible place. And yet, the barrow treasure they had uncovered at once rekindled in their dwarvish hearts the lust for gold. They now stared eagerly at the map, needing no more urging to go onwards.

Hitching their packs about their shoulders, the company set off, winding up into the impenetrable mist. The ground was steadily climbing. Theodoras looked off to the far West where he could see the faint glimpses of the roof of a wide forest, lying like a huge dense shadow spread under the sky. The mists were thinning now as the sun rose over the distant ridges to the East, but the sun was cool and dim and little warmth did it shed.

As the mists moved and parted in great drifts and smoky wisps, there came suddenly into view a tall darkened hill before them; around its wide base ran a circle of worn and crumbling stones which vanished on the far side. At the top of the vast hill could be dimly glimpsed a tall standing stone of great height.

Rulf stood for a moment, balking at the sight that lay before them. Then he beckoned to his companions as he hurried forward. Following him warily, a new sense of unseen dread fell upon the others, even as they passed between two of the ancient circling stones. At once, the gloom about the hill seemed to thicken, blackened and drew together nearer the top.



After a short climb, they came upon a hollow at the top, and there rose into the air the single mighty stone like an

unwholesome finger, cold and ominous. Theodoras turned back to look out over the lip of the hollow, but he could see nothing but a muted grey land that quickly vanished into shadow and mist.

For long moments, the company stood silent, as if struck dumb in the deepening shadow of the somber standing stone. Theodoras tried to speak, but the dwarves turned to glare at him with dark eyes and his voice fell dead and away. Then, Theodoras caught the glimpse of a faint, distant shadow over the lip of the hill to the east.

At first it was shapeless, and seemed to writhe and swell and shrink. The hobbit fancied that he could make out an endless whisper, a murmur of words. As it drew nearer, the shadow became a mass of pale light that glimmered slightly, and the mists about the hill seemed to sunder and part as the pale spindle of light grew.

Within that dim light there now could be seen the form of a tall Man; his face was worn and sorrowful and full of sadness. A pair of clouded staring and unseeing eyes looked out from that grey and dim face. Mail it wore and atop its head was a helm of silver; in its haggard hand was a sword that shone with a pale light.



Hergof stepped forward and reached for his axe, but his hands fell and he let out a cry of dismay. The other dwarves shrank back before the advancing shade and covered their faces. Theodoras turned away, quaking as if he was bitter cold, and a great terror seized him.

Suddenly, the shade broke the deafening silence; a cold murmur rose from it, a dreary moan of cold words could now be heard:

'All was silence;  
now the sound of steel  
rings from battles past  
long beyond the laying of bones;  
stirred by evil's passage  
my brother walks again,

so too our foes.

'Duty-bound we stand as one,  
lost as he may be.  
A lord he rose and, solemn,  
buried me.


'My shield calls to my arm,  
my ring calls to my hand,  
my sight departed as my life,  
our oaths bind us still;  
protect and serve this land.'

'Long did I rest,  
now awake, as vengeance claims trinkets  
to call a curse upon our bones.  
'As it was in life,

so too in death.  
His curse on us still  
as we yearn for sleep.

'My ring, forgotten,  
may still be found.  
Speed along, living,  
to a tomb of ground'

Like the lifting of some heavy weight, the dread and terror that had gripped the young hobbit now vanished; he dared



a look from the deep folds of his hood and blinked. He felt a deep sense of misery and sadness as he gazed at the shade.

'What is it?' he squeaked softly. There was a pause of deep silence; Theodoras could feel his heart beating wildly.

Hemni began to stir, and he looked at the shade with amazement. 'A lost soul,' he said in a low mournful voice. 'He speaks in prose...lost he says...but what do his words mean, I wonder?'

'It looks horrible,' whispered Theodoras with hesitation. 'But I feel a great sadness about it.'

'He is lost,' said Rulf, turning to gaze at the now silent shade. 'Perhaps we need to find his resting place, his barrow?'

'It certainly isn't attacking us,' added Hergof. 'It must be needing something.'

Just then, there came a sound out of the fog, from over the lip of the hollow. Before Theodoras could call out, a shadowed figure loomed out of the mists. At once, the hobbit could see that it was a young dwarf, his short beard dark and damp with dew and a wooden shield strapped to one arm.

Out of breath and huffing great gasps of air, as if he just ran a great race, the dwarf collapsed to the ground. The dwarves rushed to gather round the newcomer as Rulf cried out. 'Master Vun!'

Vun coughed and climbed slowly and wearily to his feet, taking a few flustered breaths before speaking. 'Forgive my late arrive. I seemed to have arrived in Bree too late. When I got to the Prancing Pony, I discovered that you all had already departed! Thankfully that fat innkeeper, Butterbur, gave me your note detailing your plan and destination. So, I set out at once, running as fast as my legs could carry me.'

The dwarf took another deep breath and sighed. 'Thankfully, you march like a wild herd of mountain boars. It was simple enough to follow your trail here.'

No worries, Master Vun,' laughed Rulf as he clasped his friend on the shoulder. 'It is important that you arrived!'

Theodoras watched as the dwarves fell into talk in their deep secretive tongue for some time. He stood off near the lip of the hill, gazing warily down into the thickening mists. Finally, he called out in a low voice.

'What a company we make!' he said. 'Here we sit on the edge of rank and ruin, and you all sit about as if hosting a tea party! What about this shade fellow? And what of the riddle?'

For a moment, the dwarves turned their heads towards the hobbit in blinking silence. 'Quite right, master Theo,' answered Rulf finally. 'I have heard that hobbits are overly fond of riddles. Have you any clue to what the shade meant, or what he lost?'

'I have given it some thought,' said Theodoras as he scratched his head. 'What I can make of it that shade fellow wants us to find his brother, or perhaps his brother's resting place, and of its missing ring. But that could mean venturing back into one of those horrible barrows once more!'

'Well, the riddle does speak of his burial...' pondered Hemni thoughtfully.

'Let us examine each barrow in turn, there is one not far from here,' declared Rulf. 'Perhaps we can find a clue?'

Gathering their packs and axes and swords, the dwarves set out in silence. Theodoras walked beside Hergof nervously as they passed from the tall hill and into the gathering mists below. At once, the fog began to close in on all sides and thickened over the landscape, graying the light of the rising pale sun and blurring the world till Theodoras could scarcely see his hand stretched out before him.

Through the sifting mists there now loomed a deep shadow that seemed to creep out from a dark place under the world. And out of this darkness there stood the black outline of a barrow, steep and grim. The wind hissed around the standing stones that led up to the barrow and the mists seemed to draw and gather about the low mound.

Theodoras shuddered with a chill; he stamped his feet in hopes of bringing some warmth back into his cold limbs and his teeth chattered uncontrollably. His breath caught in his throat and a sickness came over him for a moment.

With hesitation, Rulf crept forward, scanning the ground before the barrow with a keen eye. Vun took a step forward.

'Should we...knock?' he said with uncertainty.

'The earth here has been disturbed,' whispered Rulf as he knelt to the ground then glanced back to his companions. 'The heavy stone door into the barrow has been opened recently.'

'Perhaps we should enter,' hissed Hemni with uneasiness.

For a moment, they stood silent in the deadly chilled shadow of the great barrow; just then Theodoras imagined that he could a voice, as if echoing a whispering through the ground about the barrow, a dry trembling, as if the earth itself had spoken.

There now appeared in the air before the door a shapeless patch of darkness, like a clot of black shadow. It wavered then coalesced until it bore the likeness of a Man; a very ancient thing, an old and horrible spirit and its eyes blazed with a terrible brightness.

'Fool of a shade!' railed the ancient spirit. 'My master the Bone Man has made a thrall of your shield-brother!' Then the barrow-wight turned its piercing gaze to the company. 'And you... a living fool soon to be dead... I will send you into the shadow world too! So come to me now, fools... Come and die!'

And the barrow-wight cackled horribly as it leapt forward, quick and hideous. Rulf gave a short, horrified and hoarse scream as he staggered back under the assault. The barrow-wight, cleaved and clung to the dwarf, tearing at breast and limb with terrible claws.

A rage of horror and despair overtook Hergof and he sprang forward to bring his axe down whistling onto the helm of the wight. But it passed through the figure as if there was nothing in its form but smoke and mist and yet the spirit writhed and shook as if in great pain.

Theodoras sobbed in horror and he was bound still, unable to move from a terrible fear. Rulf collapsed to the ground, his face blackened with blood and there were great dark stains upon his breast and limbs. Hergof struck out again with his heavy, smoking axe, forcing the ancient spirit back, but it came again.

At once, Vun leapt forward to stand beside his kinsman, and hewed at the wight with his axe that blazed and smouldering burning in his hands. The wight shook in awful convulsions and a terrible cry rent the air. Then the intolerable brightness of the wight's blazing eyes faded and slowly it drew back and shrank and blackened, as if drawn back into the void from whence it came.

As if a veil was drawn back, the pale flittering sunlight began to shine again, and the terrible fear fled from the hobbit. Hergof lowered his axe to the earth and leaned heavily upon it with a bowed head. The others knelt beside Rulf who climbed unsteadily to his feet, a deep fire burning in his bright eyes.



## CHAPTER 26

### SHIELD-BROTHER – 29 BOTMACH, 1417 SR

The company lit a small fire at the lowest point of the hollow and sat round it miserable and glum, their cloaks and hoods pulled tightly against the chill wind. The darkness closed in about the tall hill as the last dim light of the setting sun disappeared; off to the north a pale light went up over the rise of tall ridges and a wan moon climbed slowly above the standing stone that overshadowed them. The stars grew pale against the blackened canopy of night.



Theodoras sat altogether wretched in the dark, his hood pulled up over his head. The hobbit wished he could fall asleep, but he kept turning his head round to gaze towards the lip of the hollow with apprehension. He glanced up from under the folds of his hood to watch Hergof's face in the flickering light of the fire. The dwarf sat close to the fire, his knees draw up to his chest and his hands cupping the soft glow of his pipe in his gloved hands.

'That was one nasty business back there,' whispered Vun in a low voice, as he rubbed his hands together in the warmth of the fire.

'Indeed,' answered Rulf, his face almost invisible in the shadow of his hood. 'But what about this ring we found?'

'Do you think it is the ring the shade spoke of?'

questioned Hergof through a puff of dim smoke.

Rulf did not answer, stirring the fire with a stick.

'We should return it to the shade, perhaps it will put him to rest...' pondered Hemni quietly.

'Aye,' nodded Vun in agreement.

Rulf pulled back his hood and looked at the hobbit. 'What do you say, Master Took?'

Theodoras did not look up, and sat still for moment before shrugging slightly. There was a long pause of silence. Hergof dropped his head and hood and puffed on his pipe for some time. Theodoras gazed intently at the red embers of the fire and then reached into his pocket and drew out a small item.

It was a gold ring, ancient in appearance, and embossed with a white tree and seven crowning stars. They had found in discarded in the dirt at the barrow, but to its origin he could only guess. He turned it over in his hands, marveling at the craftsmanship of the ring. Finally, mercifully, his head began to nod and he soon drifted off into an uneasy sleep, the ring clasped tightly in one hand.

It was Hemni who roused the hobbit from sleep. Theodoras groaned and shook the dew from his dampened hood and glanced about. The hill was still darkened before the dawn, which was many hours still to come. The fire had died to a pile of glowing coals and he found the dwarves on their feet, their packs slung onto their backs.

'Come Master Theodoras,' Hemni said softly as the hobbit climbed to his feet wearily.

'Whatever is the matter?' asked the hobbit with curiosity. 'But more importantly, no breakfast?'

'We should seek for the wandering shade,' answered Rulf. 'We cannot wait for the first light.'

At once, the company set out, over the darkened lip of the wide hollow. They walked in single file down from the hill and into the darkness beyond. Nearly blind in the dark, Theodoras stumbled once or twice, reaching out to steady himself on Vun's arm. The dwarf turned slightly to smile at the hobbit, his bright eyes glittering in the dark but said nothing.

They had not gone far when Rulf, at the lead, halted and lifted up one hand. He peered into the gloom ahead and gestured everyone forward. For a moment, Theodoras thought he could make out a whispering from the darkness ahead. Then there was utter and dreadful silence. A chill wind blew up and through the gloom there could now been seen a pale glimmer in the shreds of graying mists moving slowly across the darkened ground.

The darkness seemed to part as the gaunt and ghostly form of the shade appeared before them. Hemni shivered and Vun fell back under the pale gaze of the shade as it approached. For a moment, Theodoras began to tremble and a desire seized him to turn and flee back into the darkness. But, plucking up his courage, he took a hesitant step forward and spoke.

'Ahem,' he said nervously as he drew out the small gold ring and held it out in an open hand. 'Excuse me, but we found this ring and...well...perhaps this is what you have sought?'

The shade gazed down at the shaking hobbit with sightless eyes in silence for a moment. Then it spoke in a low sorrowful voice.

'Help my hand, now to his arm, lost too, lost too.'

With a pale hand, the shade reached down to take the gold ring from the hobbit's outstretched hand. Then it began to speak once more in a mournful tone.

'Sundered and shattered,  
metal and bone,  
life bled onto the ground.

'In shade of stone,  
a south facing wall  
wherein the earth  
slept once the dead.

'On cold hallowed ground  
where dead lay asleep  
woke they to greet  
our treasure claimed.

'There, by our honoured,  
sleeping, and gone,  
my brother bid me farewell.


'Now, the dead rise,  
stirring the earth  
now cursed from where  
I fell.

'Our curse recalled;  
we shall walk  
until the dead  
are quelled.'

'Another riddle?' said Rulf, gazing at the shade as it retreated back into the darkness once more.

'Alost arm? Whatever does that mean?' asked Hemni.





'Sundered metal and shattered bone?' muddled Rulf, tugging at his beard thoughtfully. 'Do you think, perhaps a shield?'

There was a heavy silence. Theodoras made no answer. The others frowned. Then, Theodoras cried out with a laugh and a snap of his fingers.

'I have it!' he said finally with a smile. 'Rather simple enough once you put your thinking cap on, as my dear father used to say!'

Vun looked up hopefully at the hobbit; Hemni fidgeted then looked uncomfortably into the darkness. Still chuckling to himself, Theodoras continued.

'Not a shield, and not an arm, but a shield-arm...a brother!'

The dwarves pondered this for a moment and there was silence once more. At last, Rulf spoke. 'Ah, perhaps you are right, a shield-brother...'

'But where do we look for this lost brother, I wonder?' asked the hobbit hesitantly.

Rulf looked up as he answered. 'Did the shade not speak of a south-facing wall?'

'Why, yes he did, Master Rulf, if my memory serves me.' laughed the hobbit. "In shade of stone, a south facing wall wherein the earth slept once the dead..." recited the hobbit in a clear voice.

'Then we must head north,' answered Rulf grimly. 'There is a large cliff face as we passed into the downs; that faces south...'

'Well, you are riddle-master, young Took!' laughed Hergof with a smile. Theodoras blushed somewhat and turned his head downwards. He then gazed at Rulf with bright eyes.

'You have led us safely thus far, Rulf, lead on,' exclaimed Theodoras.

The company turned away from the tall hill and struck a path north. The thickening mist gathered about them at once; above them a few stars glimmered faintly through the graying veil but on all sides rose walls of impenetrable darkness and fog.

Just then, Rulf, who had taken the lead a few paces ahead of the rest, paused and turned his gaze to the west. Theodoras followed the dwarf's gaze and let out a sharp gasp. They forest that had seemed distant yesterday now loomed out of the darkness not far to their left.

A worn and faded path led down from the downs towards the grey and menacing wood that lay wrapped in darkness as if a deep shadow or mist was about them. For a moment, the young hobbit fancied he could hear the creaking and groaning of the boughs and far cries of strange animals in the distance.

'The Old Forest,' said Rulf grimly with a whisper.

'I do not forests and trees!' exclaimed Hergof with a shudder. 'I am a dwarf, stone and mountains are for me.'

'I have been to that place,' answered the hobbit quietly. 'And I never wish to return again! Let us hurry past!'

Glancing once or twice towards the darkened wood, the company hurried along until at last the wood passed from view and they now found that they had come to the top of a wide hollow that led down to the base of tall cliffs to the north and west.

It became very cold once more; the thinning mists blew in ragged tatters from a chill wind that sprang up from the East. At once the tops of tall cliffs came into view, climbing high into the darkened air. At the base of the cliffs rose tall stones of several ominous barrows, each casting deep shadows in the hollow.

Moss and ageless lichen crawled over the broken stone, surrounded by waving grey grass. The archways of the barrows stood mute and shrouded in shadow and darkness. Without a word, the dwarves descended down into the hollow, drawing the reluctant hobbit after them.

Theodoras shivered as the barrows and standing stones drew nearer. In the tense black shadows he could now made clearer the outlines of the narrow doorways and felt a sense of waiting, as if for untold centuries. No sound disturbed the stillness.

Then, there came a tremor among the shadows, and a paralysis of fear gripped Theodoras. There was movement, a slow twitching, a flexing and writhing of shadowy limbs. Then, something moved; it as if a black shadow detached itself from the gulf of shadows below, a vague, shapeless form in the darkness.

At once, there came into view a tall form of a Man, a fearful and unnatural semblance of unlife; dull eyes shimmered with cold darts of icy light and an unnatural radiance shone from the mailed form, a terrible beauty paling against the moonlight. In its hand it clutched a naked sword gleaming with an unwholesome light.

The fell spirit moved forward drunkenly, ageless dust falling from its mouldering and hideously ancient garb. From its mouth came a series of shapeless words and death was in its cold voice. With a rousing cry, the dwarves threw themselves at the barrow-wight, their axes tearing at the rotten cloth. The fell spirit reeled from the axe-strokes, then righted itself and came on with frightful speed.



The pale blade rose and then struck, and Vun let out a fearful cry as it pierced his side; an icy fear clutched him and froze his bones. Choking back cries, the dwarves watched in horror as Vun slip to the ground; then they came at the wight once more in a swarm, tearing at the ancient cloth and mail with each stroke.

Something cracked like a withered branch and the terrible wight rose up silent and still, its fell voice falling away. For a moment all went silent and the axes of the dwarves dipped towards the ground. The cold features of the spirit slowly began to fade like a disappearing mask and the armour fell away from its body to crumble to dust and mist as it fell.

There was a long pause of silent and no one spoke. Finally, it was Hergof that roused the others. 'We must go now,' he said grimly. 'It is not safe to remain here.' Prodding the others before him, the dwarf began to climb wearily back out the wide hollow and into the swirling mists and darkness beyond.

Perhaps a half-an-hour has passed when they saw rising from the deepening smoky greyness and vapour, the vast spire of stone at op the hill. As it climbed from the tall hill it caught the light of the pale moon with a shimmering glow.

The company slowly scrambled up the hill until they were standing once more in the hollow at the summit. Their fire was now darkened in the long shadows of the standing stone. At once, Theodoras threw himself to the hard chilled ground beside the quiet fire and remembered no more.



## CHAPTER 27

### Home at Last – 1 FOREYULE, 1417 SR

'Three cheers for Master Theodoras!' rose the cries of the dwarves as they lifted their mugs to toast the flustered and quite humbled young hobbit. And they patted him (and each other) on the back with heavy hands, in celebration of their great victory and safe return.

There was a tremendous excitement back at the Prancing Pony upon their return. The Bree-folk drew in a concentric crowd to look on with wonder as the dwarves told and re-told the tale of their fated journey into the dreaded Barrow-downs. Their table was thronged with people eager to hear the tale anew and never did the dwarves grow weary of telling it. Even old Butterbur came round the bar, wiping his hands on his apron, looking as bustling as ever, to hear the tale for the second time.

Only Theodoras remained silent during the lengthy tales and boasts of their dark journey and return. Once or twice, the dwarves turned to the little hobbit in their retelling, but he only blushed and stammered out a few words each time.

Poor Theodoras felt rather proud for the hand he had lent to the victory, though small it was in his mind; and yet he was beginning to feel quite weary of his little adventure and was sorely missing the Shire altogether. The fierce fire of his Tookish side was slowly diminishing and his older, sensible self was fast returning.

And his reflections on their ordeal in the downs seemed far more a dark memory than to the dwarves it seemed. Even now, in the safety of the warm hearth light, poor Theodoras shuddered as the tale reached its horrible and frightening conclusion.

Thrice the shade riddled a tale to the company and three times they set out to unravel each mystery. One last riddle was given to them as they stood in the deep shadows of that dreadful hill and tall silent stone.

'A Man of Bone, from 'neath Cardolan stone. Seek him now to lift this curse, e're we Brothers wander ever more.' With darkened hearts, they made their way carefully and with much dread until they at last stood on the edge of the decayed ruins of Ost Gorthad, which once stood proudly as the last bastion of the Dúnedain of Cardolan against the ravages of Angmar.

There, in the darkness of that forbidding place, they found the Bone Man, a terrible and fell spirit; and upon a low and darkened hill they gave battle and the fell spirit was laid low for all time.

And so the dwarves sang with much merriment and drank to Theodoras' health; their deep-throated singing filled the room as they sang on until darkness crept into the inn and the firelight of the hearth flickered up to cast deep shadows all about the room.


But at last the dwarves' voices fell silent, and the folk wandered away to bed and the inn grew quiet. It was then that Hemni stood up from the table, lifting his mug high over his head. 'I shall be departing soon,' he said in a somber clear voice. 'Have a cheer and a pint of ale in my name, my friends!'

The others raised their mugs in cheer, but Theodoras' face turned away, his hand passing over his eyes. 'So soon, Master Hemni?' he said in a choking voice. Though he was rather eager to begin the journey home, the thought of the departure of his friends now brought sadness to his kind hobbit heart.

'I must,' answered Hemni regretfully. 'I still have a shipment of ore to waiting for the merchants of Bree.'

'True,' added Rulf. 'On the morrow we too will also depart for the long journey home to Ered Luin.' Theodoras wiped away a tear from his downcast face and said nothing. 'But fear not, young Theodoras. We shall go with you as far as Budgeford; there our paths must turn aside as all paths must eventually do.'

A fair morning dawned, shimmering bright above gleaming mists, as the company gathered downstairs of the inn. The dwarves were clad once more in their faded and travel-stained hoods and cloaks, and packs strapped



round their shoulders.

Hemni stepped out the door into the clear morning light, where a stout pony stood waiting, laden with sacks and bags. 'Goodbye, my dear friends!' he said merrily.

Goodbye Master Hemni!' stammered the hobbit. 'And fare well on your journeys! If you should ever pass through the Shire, look in on me in Budgeford!'

Without another word, Hemni turned to lead his laden pony down the narrow lane until at last he disappeared from view. Theodoras stood silent, watching his friend depart, letting out a slight snuffle. 'Goodbye my dear friend,' he said softly.

'Are we ready?' said Rulf finally as Hergof came round with a cart drawn by a pair of ponies and little Clover close behind. 'The carts packed and loaded for the journey home?'

'Indeed,' answered Hergof. With that, they turned their faces homewards towards the West Gate of Bree. Soon, they came to the crossroads of the Great Road and the Greenway, and crossed over the low stone bridge into the Bree-fields beyond. They rode now slowly without hurry, and went along in leisure.

The morning passed and afternoon waned when the dwindling company came in sight of the great hedge of Buckland. 'Ah, Buckland,' sighed the hobbit as he glanced towards the nearby darkened shadows of the Old Forest. 'It seems like only yesterday when I found myself wandering that horrible wood in search of a pair of wayward hobbit! I wonder what ever came of Dyre?'

When they had passed over the Buckland Bridge, they rode down through Stock until at last they reached the ford of Budgeford. Very gladdening was the sight of his beloved home but now Theodoras was again sad at heart as he stood there looking out across the Water at the familiar and much-missed smiles of his home.

The dwarves slid down from their cart, each bowing low in turn to the hobbit. Theodoras did not bow in return, but hopped down from Clover to shake their hands one by one, laughing amidst his tears.

'Well, I certainly have a great deal to tell the folk back home! I wonder what they will think?'

The dwarves said their goodbyes and turned their cart back to the road. Theo stood a while, caressing Clover's muzzle against his shoulder, and watched the dwarves dwindle in the distance. Finally, he turned down the narrow lane, crossed the shallow ford and passed the mill and ovens on the far side.

Theodoras hailed Bingo Bolger as he climbed the hill and away from the Water; the farmer looked up from his garden with wide eyes to stare at the hobbit. Bungo said nothing but watched in surprise as Theodoras rode past.

At last Theodoras stood in front of the small round green door of his aunt's smile. A smile broke across his face as he led Clover round to the small stable in back, minding to make sure it was properly latched and secured. With one last look at the pony, he strode to the front once more, pushing open the round door and stepped inside. A familiar scent of pastries hit his nose and breathed in deeply.

He leaned his walking stick beside the door and unclasped his cloak then hung it on a peg. For a moment, his hand strayed on the worn and faded cloak; then he called out in a clear voice:

'Aunt Petunia...it's me, Theodoras. I'm home!'