

Chapter Three

A 'SH'



'Sh', said Gandef.

They had been travelling for three days, sorrowfully at first in memory of the four fallen comrades, then wearily, and finally in a crotchety fashion. They did not tell tales, or sing songs. Neither did they sing tales or tell songs. The mountains grew on the horizon, but grew very slowly.

'Is that *the* mountain?' asked Bingo. 'The one to which our quest is directed?'

'I wish,' said Mori dismissively.

'Phumf,' said Tori, a sort of nasal equivalent of the same sentiment. 'Look you,' he added, with his mouth rather than his nostrils.

They walked on for a while.

'I'm terribly sorry,' Bingo hazarded, 'for the loss of your – um, comrades. Comrades? Brothers?'

Tori looked grumpy. Bingo felt dopey for having asked.

'We dwarfs,' said Mori, 'do not like to parade our grief, look you. We're a secretive folk, a tough, stout, thrawn people.'

‘Right,’ said Bingo. ‘I understand. What’s “thrawn” mean?’

‘Thrawn,’ repeated Mori. ‘Well it’s sort of . . . it’s a word that refers to the dwarfish, to the dwarfish, um. Well. Hmm. Wombl,’ he called. ‘Boyo, what’s “thrawn” mean?’

Wombl was trudging along on the far side of the group. ‘Thrawn,’ he grumbled. ‘Is that, you see, a word for slave?’

‘No,’ interjected Frili. ‘You’re thinking of “thrall”.’

‘Oh, so I am, so I am.’

‘Is it that, kind of, sea creature?’ piped Gofur. ‘Looks a little like an insect. Lives on the ocean floor.’

‘No, no,’ said Mori. ‘It’s a *dwarf* word, isn’t it? It’s got something to do with dwarfs, see.’

It was at this point that Gandef said, ‘Sh!’

Everybody stopped.

‘Elves!’ said the wizard. ‘See them, in the trees?’

The party stopped at the edge of a great forest, glorious in silver birch, golden-green leaves like sequins, fragrant and expansive. Gandef pointed, and Bingo could just make out thin, sharp, clever-looking faces looking back at them from boughs in the wood.

‘Elves!’ he gasped.

‘Elves,’ grumbled the dwarfs.¹

⁰ As is well known, there is no love lost between elves and dwarfs. By *no love lost* I mean that they do not love one another. Now that I come to think of it, I suppose the phrase *no love lost* might be taken to mean that the two peoples loved one another so completely and with such zealous stewardship of their love that all of it was directed at the

‘Do we have to go through this damn elf-infested forest?’ demanded Mori. ‘Wizard? Can’t we go round?’

‘Well,’ said the wizard, apparently in reply to some completely different question. ‘There are two different races of elf, you see. I’ll tell you. There are the Star Elves – or the “In The Gutter Looking At The Star Elves” as they are more properly known – and there are the Tree Elves, the *Herbertbeerbohmtree* Elves. I won’t attempt to translate the elvish epithet. Of these two great people, the former likes the plants of the world, particularly the carnations, and especially the purple carnations, which they like to pluck from the places of greatest danger and to set in the front of their clothing to display to all the world. This delight in the dangers of carnation-plucking has led to them being called the Wild Elves – but do not call them so to their face, for the phrase was not meant kindly. The Tree Elves, however, avoid all such danger. Elves are immortal provided no external force kills them, and the Tree Elves take the understandable view that they should do all they can to avoid being killed by some external circumstance. The Wild Elves despise them for this reason, and call them the Coward Elves – but do not use the name yourself, or call them so to their

loved party, and none of it went astray, none of it was wasted on ants or milkmaids or fine clothes or things like that. But that wasn’t the sense I intended to convey. I meant the other sense. Perhaps I should have said something like *dwarfs and elves hated one another*. That would have been less ambiguous. But it’s too late now. Oh dear. Too late! Too late!

face, for the phrase was not meant kindly. And it is true to this day that the Wild Elves are often truly Wild. I have known a Wild Elf wear bright purple breeches with a lime-green and orange-checked tunic. No Coward Elf would have the courage for such attire. Tweed is about as courageous as they can be.'

Mori smiled warmly at the old wizard. 'The fact that you can't comprehend a single word I'm saying,' he said, clasping the wizard's old hand in his, 'encourages me to call you, to your face, the most tedious old codger in all of Upper Middle Earth.'

'Thank you, my dear dwarf friend,' said Gandef, his eyes moist with emotion. 'Thank you indeed.'

'So,' said Bingo, who had actually been quite interested by Gandef's little exposition. 'So – these elves in the Last Homo House; are they Wild Elves or are they Coward Elves?'

'I've no cladding idea,' said Mori, utilising a mild dwarfish stone-based expletive.

'The answer to your question,' said Gandef booming, 'is no. On the other hand, you're probably wondering whether these elves of Bluewaterdel are *Wild* Elves or *Coward* Elves. It's a complex matter, but I think I can explain it.'

Mori sighed.

'Elsqare himself is a Wild Elf. But he took as his partner a Coward Elf, the beautiful Olthfunov, and accordingly groups of both races cohabit here. But their time is not our time. The days pass differently for them, as a fleeting flicker; they do not rise until

noon, and they often nap. Alas!' he cried suddenly, 'For the tragedy of this forest is that the two races do not cohabit contentedly.'

They were walking between the trees of the beautiful forest now, and an elf sauntered from the shade to stand in the path before them. He was tall and elegant and his garb was of green velvet and silk, and he stood leaning his torso at a slight angle to the vertical, supporting it by placing a hand upon his own hip. His eyes glittered; or one of them did, for in front of it he wore a circle of purest glass.

'Gandef the wizard,' he said languidly. 'And companions. I *do* declare.'

'Ah!' said Gandef. 'Sunblest, the Elf of the Morning, is it?'

'I am Elstree the Tree Elf,' said the elf in a hurt voice. 'Surprised I am, O wizard, that you did not recognise me. Did we not once share a small lakeside cottage for a fortnight of relaxation and occasional swimming? Nevertheless, I greet you, and shall take you and your companions to Lord Elsqare himself.'

'Oh, well, I suppose that's a fair question,' said Gandef, beaming. 'I'd say the answer was bread, except in the winter months when it's probably a meal of chaff.'

Elstree's eye shield of glass twinkled in the sunlight. His head leaned five degrees to the left. The wind moved in the trees behind him.

There was silence for the space of several minutes.

Eventually, Elstree beckoned to them all to follow him through the woodland.

Lord Elsquire himself was seated in a throne made of boughs and carved branches, high in a tree. He was an elf of indeterminate age, dressed in purple and blue, and he wore the carnation and the polished crystal eyepiece of the Wild Elves. Mori whispered to Bingo that all the elves lived in trees, odd though that seemed to the rest of the world. And, truly, Elsquire was surrounded by elves in amongst the leaves, all of them peering haughtily down at the travellers.

‘Gandef the wizard,’ said Elsquire. ‘How good it is to see you again. Fares your quest well?’

‘About half past four, I’d say,’ returned Gandef. ‘Hard to tell precisely,’ he added, ‘without a watch.’

‘And *you* are Thorri, King of the Dwarfs, or I am mistaken,’ continued Elsquire, unfazed.

Thorri bowed so low his beard inched along the ground before him like a caterpillar. ‘I am honoured to be in thith thelebrated palath of elvithneth,’ he said.

‘I’m sorry?’ asked Elsquire. ‘Didn’t quite catch . . .’

‘Our noble King,’ struck in Mori, ‘declares himself at your service, Lord Elsquire.’

‘Thorri,’ said Thorri, in a miniature voice, casting his face to the ground.

‘We have suffered on our travels,’ Mori continued. ‘We have lost some of our company – brothers, comrades, glorious in death.’

‘Really?’ said Elsquire, perking up. ‘How so?’

‘Trollps,’ said Mori severely. ‘They took four of

our comrades before we were able to destroy them. Qwalin, Orni, Ston and Pilfur, may their names be writ in glory.'

'Dear me,' said Elsqare. 'To lose one dwarf might be regarded a misfortune. To lose four looks like carelessness.'

The elves twittered their twittery laughter.

'What did you say, look you?' said Mori, his face reddening.

'To lose one dwarf,' Elsqare repeated, 'might be regarded a misfortune. To lose four looks like carelessness. It's a witticism.'

'A joke?'

'A witticism.'

'You mean,' said Mori, 'that you regard the death of four individuals as the occasion for humour? In what way is it *careless* to have your friends killed? Where's the carelessness in that? Surely that's tragic, not funny.'

Elsqare looked marginally perturbed. 'The good end happily,' he said, 'the bad unhappily, that is what dwarfishness means.'

'Wait a minute,' said Mori. 'Have you ever had four friends die on you all at once? How would you like it if somebody accused you of carelessness, when—'

'I think,' said Elstree the Tree Elf stepping forward, 'that there has been a misunderstanding. Let us not, elf and dwarf, become enemies.'

'Indeed not,' said Elsqare languidly. 'After all a man cannot be too careful in the choice of his enemies.'

A few elves in the tree behind him tittered and chattered at this.

‘The choice of your enemies?’ said Bingo. ‘How do you mean? People don’t *choose* their enemies. That’s not how it goes. Your statement doesn’t really mean anything.’

Nobody spoke.

Gandef broke the silence with a single percussive cough. But then he too fell silent.

Bingo became conscious of the fact that everybody was looking at him. He cast around for a topic of non-contentious conversation. ‘Must be hard living in a tree,’ he said eventually. ‘Couldn’t you dig a nice, modern little ditch and live under the soil as God intended? If it’s good enough for dead people, surely it’s good enough for you? There’s quite a lot of soil over there, for instance.’

‘We’re with the soddit on this one,’ said Mori. ‘Living in trees? I ask you.’ He looked around. ‘I don’t *actually* ask you, bach, you see, look you, it’s only a figure of speech, isn’t it?’

‘Tis true, life is hard,’ stated Elsqare. ‘There is only one thing worse than being an elf, and that is *not* being an elf.’

A dozen elves laughed, twittering like swallows. The laughter died away.

‘I don’t get it,’ said Bingo. He became uncomfortably aware of dozens of elvish eyes, each pair focusing a cut-glass look down upon him.

‘You don’t *get it?*’ said Elsqare, sounding, for the

first time, peeved. 'What d'ye mean?' He fitted his cunningly worked elvish monocle back into his eye.

'Well, I only mean to say,' said Bingo cautiously, 'that I don't quite . . . I mean, when you say that. Don't you *like* being an elf?'

'Course I do,' snapped Elsqare. 'Absurd question!'

'Well,' said Bingo. 'It's just that if you say "there's only one thing worse than being an elf", you're implying that being an elf is a miserable thing, and that only "being anything else" is *more* miserable. In effect,' he went on, warming to his theme, 'you're saying that *any* existence is appalling, and that the only salient characteristic of an elvish existence is that it is marginally *less* appalling than any other existence. I suppose I can understand somebody expressing a position of such nihilistic absolutism, but it's difficult to construe it as a . . . as a joke, do you see? I don't see why that's funny. I mean, if existing is *so* terrible, wouldn't tears and lamentations be more appropriate?'

There was silence amongst the trees for the portion of several minutes. Finally Elsqare spoke. 'Anyway, you'd better come up and have some tea.'

They clambered into the trees up elegantly carved wooden ladders, and after much bouncing of boughs and unsteady steps, they were all arranged in a semi-circle about Elsqare's throne. Tea was brought. Everybody sipped, and nibbled at the scone-like Elvish weybread. Gandef smoked. Elsqare's face assumed a pinched, rather pained expression as if he expected more from his guests. At one point he announced, 'I

have always felt that work is the curse of the tea-drinking classes,' and smirked. But although a few of his followers hiccoughed briefly with laughter, the line was greeted with non-comprehension by the dwarfs and he fell silent again.

The tea was finished. The last crumbs of Elvish weybread consumed.

The silence grew longer, taller, and more oppressive.

'At last,' Elsqare said. 'Here comes my partner, Olthfunov the Fair. He'll liven proceedings up. Olthfunov! Coo-ee! Up here.'

A stouter elf in green, with a high forehead and a somewhat lumpish nose, was coming up the ladder. 'Guests?' he said. 'How delightful. How wonderful. Is that Gandef I see, snoozing against the trunk back there? And dwarfs, how marvellous. We must have a party.'

Introductions were made.

'So you're a soddit, are you?' Olthfunov enquired of Bingo. 'Where are you from, little man?'

'Soddlesex,' said Bingo. 'Do you know it?'

'Indeed,' the elf replied. 'Very flat, Soddlesex.'

'Oh,' said Bingo. 'Well, quite flat, I suppose. There are several hills, though, and—'

'You're off to the Minty Mountains?'

'In that direction, yes.'

'Very,' said Olthfunov, with a catch of suppressed glee in his voice, '*uppy-downy*, the mountains. Don't you think?'

Bingo could hear tittering behind him. 'I suppose so,' he said.

'Ol,' said Elsquire. 'I'm sorry to say that our friends have lost four of their companions.'

'Dear me,' said Olthfunov, sipping his tea. 'How so?'

'Eaten by trollps, it seems.'

'Ghastly creatures, trollps,' murmured Olthfunov.

'Indeed. And,' Elsquire added, in an aside, 'they're somewhat touchy on the topic, so have a care.'

'A care,' said the Coward Elf. 'Naturally. Sensitive area, I'm sure. But,' he added, bursting into song, or – to be strictly accurate – if not quite bursting, then certainly sidling into a sort of half-song, half-recital:

*Oh, don't let's be beastly to the trollps
When our Victory is finally won,
And when peace inevitably followps
We can give them a sugar-topped bun.*

He concluded with a rapidly murmured, 'Thank you, thank you, too kind,' and sat back.

The wind shuffled through the higher leaves of the trees. Away below them a fox barked.

'Lovely,' said Elsquire acidly.

'Followps?' queried Bingo.

'Obviously,' announced Mori, 'we'd love to stay, love to stay, look you, but we've a long journey ahead of us.'

The dwarfs stirred, as if rousing themselves to leave.

‘Of course,’ said Elsqare. ‘Off you go. Bon voyage. Please allow us to help you on your way with some supplies – salted goods and such. Where is it you’re off to?’

‘Over the mountains,’ said Mori. ‘Through the great forest.’

‘I say,’ Elsqare burred. ‘How exciting.’

‘To the Only Mountain.’

‘Really? Isn’t that the estate of Smug the Dragon?’

The dwarfs nodded, looking grim.²

‘Well, best of luck, best of luck. Do call in again on your way home, if you’re passing.’

‘Oh!’ said Gandef, who was helping himself to a fifth scone as he noticed that everybody else was on their feet and climbing down from the trees. ‘Are we off then?’

² Mind you, it’s easy to look grim with a great big beard. The tricky thing, with a great big beard, is *not* to look grim.