

A scream interrupted Radagast's investigation of a spring bud. He stood still and listened. The scream turned into a cry. An infant's cry. He turned and looked back in the direction of his house. It had been a long time since he had heard the cry of an infant, but there it was. Loud, clear and coming from the direction of his home. Wearily he moved through the long grass, around the tree trunks, peaking through the branches as his house came into view. There was no one there.

Breathing heavily, eyes wide, Radagast searched the perimeters from his hiding position. The cries softened for a moment before erupting. Birds flew from the tree above Radagast's head.

'What in the world,' he murmured to himself. He took a deep breath and gripped his staff with both hands. Lifting his left leg, he took a large step forward. He stopped. He listened. The crying was incessant. There was nothing for it. He took large steps, brandishing his staff, until he reached his front door. He licked his dry lips, his hands trembling and making his staff shudder.

There was no one there.

'Hel-hello?' He called out, mindful of every noise. When there came no reply, Radagast looked down and saw a thick woven basket. Inside the basket was a blanket and peaking out from underneath the blanket was the head of an infant. The head was red faced, eyes crunched up, cheeks wet and mouth screwed as it screamed and screamed. 'Oh.' Radagast bent to get a closer look. Straightening, he looked around. He and the baby were very much alone. 'Well then, who left you here?'

The baby's crying ceased and two large blue eyes gazed up at him. After moments of Radagast doing nothing, the baby promptly screamed and wailed.

'Alright, ok, hush now.' Radagast leapt into action. He bent and picked up the basket, nudging open his front door and carried the baby inside. Placing the basket softly on his table, he stopped and stared once more. What did one do with a baby?

'I'm terribly sorry about this,' he told it as he gently manouvered one hand into the basket. He felt around the baby's shape looking for a note or a clue of the child's parentage. 'Aha!' He pulled out a circular object. A ring. A ring of thick iron. He flicked his fingernail against it and listened, holding it close to his ear.

'Are you a dwarf?' He asked the baby. The infant heaved in deep breaths, tiring from screaming. 'My, my. Why all the crying?' Radagast asked. 'Maybe you're hungry.' He turned towards his kitchen and stopped. What did babies eat? He turned back to the child. 'No note?' He asked.

He gingerly lifted the baby and searched the basket.

'No note.' He placed the baby back. The infant watched him and Radagast was held momentarily by those large eyes. 'Well now, let's see. What do newborns eat.' He trundled into his kitchen, shooing away a mouse from the worktop, nibbling on a piece of bread. Radagast picked up the bread and looked back to the baby.

'Milk. Newborns have milk.'

He turned back, passing the bread back to the mouse who took it with a squeak. Finding a bottle half filled with milk, he made his way back to the basket.

‘Milk. Fresh today.’ Placing a drop of milk on his finger, he offered it to the baby. The child made a small noise and Radagast took it to be approval. He didn’t have a bottle from which the baby could suckle, so took to using a clean cloth, soaking it in milk and squeezing gently into its mouth.

Once fed, the baby pulled a face.

‘What is it?’ Radagast leaned over the baby as it began to splutter and give a small cry. ‘Oh, no no no. No more crying.’ He picked the baby up and gave it a small bounce. The baby burped and then gurgled triumphantly. ‘Ah. I see.’ Radagast grinned at the newborn.

Well that was the first problem dealt with. Now, what to do with the child.

In the absence of a note, Radagast placed the baby back in the basket and sat in a chair to watch and think.

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Three days passed before there was a knock on Radagast’s door. He opened it and looked up at the shrouded figure.

‘Gandalf!’ Radagast’s smile dropped immediately. Gandalf narrowed his eyes.

‘Yes. Good morning Radagast.’

Radagast managed to glance behind him without turning his head. Gandalf peered over Radagast’s shoulder and spotted the basket on the table. ‘May I come in?’

‘I’m very busy, Gandalf. Very busy.’

‘What is that, Radagast?’

‘What?’

‘On your table. It looks like a basket. And do I hear a gurgling?’

‘I can’t hear anything.’ Then, as babies are not born with a sense of appropriateness, the house was filled with the sound of crying. Radagast cringed and stepped aside. ‘Come in.’

Gandalf strolled into the house and propped up his staff by the door. Tentatively, he approached the basket. It was empty. Head cocked to one side, Gandalf followed the crying through the house until he came to a bed of crumpled sheets. In a make-shift cot of pillows there lay a baby wrapped in white cloth. A hedgehog sat on one of the pillows, gazing lovingly down at the screaming infant.

‘Radagast?’

‘Hmm?’

‘There appears to be a baby dwarf on your bed.’

Radagast’s head appeared from behind Gandalf and looked down at the infant.

‘A baby dwarf you say?’

‘Yes. You can tell by the ears and nose. Tell me, why is there is a dwarf baby on your bed?’

‘She was having trouble sleeping, I thought the bed would be more comfortable than her basket. She’s not a dog, after all.’ Radagast swept past Gandalf and picked up the baby, rocking her gently. The cries soothed.

‘Hmm.’ Gandalf studied Radagast. ‘And what is she doing with you?’

‘Oh, Gandalf. Tea?’

‘Please.’ The two wizards turned away from the bed. Radagast placed the baby in the basket. Gandalf made himself comfortable sat at the table while Radagast filled a kettle. ‘I found her on my doorstep. Can you imagine? No sign of anyone else. I searched around the woods but could find no trace.’

‘Indeed? Was there a note?’

‘No, no note. Only a ring.’ Radagast produced the iron band from his pocket and handed it to Gandalf.

‘An iron ring. Perhaps she is of the Iron Hills.’

‘That’s an awful long way away. How did she come to be here?’

Gandalf placed the ring on the table and mulled over it.

‘Oh, thank you,’ he said as Radagast placed a cup of hot, weak tea in front of him. ‘An iron ring does not necessarily denote the Iron Hills. This could have come from any dwarf family. There is no sigil present which suggests that she is not nobility.’

‘No.’

‘Which does suggest that her mother or father were either unable to care for her or...’ Gandalf looked up at Radagast. ‘Running from something. Tell me, have you heard anything strange?’

‘Other than a crying baby there have been no strange occurrences in these parts for a good long while, Gandalf. A century at least. I rather think her parents simply couldn’t care for her. Perhaps they had no way of bringing her up.’

‘Always on the move,’ Gandalf muttered, lighting his pipe.

Radagast's eyes widened and he looked up at Gandalf.

'You think she is an Erebor child?'

Gandalf puffed on his pipe sending a plume of smoke up to the roof rafters. He smiled kindly at Radagast.

'Perhaps. There are many. Although that still does not explain her being here. I shall ask around.'

'No!'

'No?'

'Well, what I mean is that she's perfectly welcome to stay here.'

Gandalf studied Radagast.

'Radagast, dear fellow. You're not to keep the child.'

'Why not?'

'She doesn't belong here.'

'Someone thought to leave her here, on my doorstep, outside my door. I've been thinking about this Gandalf, someone wanted me to have her.'

Gandalf looked from Radagast to his house, at the two mice sleeping on the table, back at the hedgehog, now asleep on the pillow. He looked down at the baby who gazed happily back with large round eyes. Radagast was odd, that was definitely true. Who wouldn't be odd, living alone in the middle of a wood? And just what would that do to a child?

'She should be with her kin,' Gandalf thought aloud.

'Her kin brought her to me,' Radagast said, looking lovingly down at the baby. Gandalf watched him.

'You don't know who brought her, Radagast. Does she have a name?'

'Not yet. I was thinking though. I was thinking, Rhiann.'

'Rhiann.' Gandalf chewed over the name. 'Not very dwarvish.'

'Well, no, I suppose.'

'Have you truly thought this through? It's very well looking after the creatures of the wood but a child needs educating.'

'I can do that.'

‘Maybe. With help.’

Radagast looked up hopefully at Gandalf.

‘Saruman would be against it, of course. He will not allow her to stay here.’

Radagast slumped back.

‘No. He won’t, will he.’

‘What will you do about that?’

‘He can’t just take her away,’ Radagast said slowly. ‘In fact, he has as much right to take her away as I have to keep her here. In fact, the only people who can take her away are her parents.’

‘Is that so?’

‘Yes. Because now I am her guardian. Someone has left her with me and she is now under my charge. Which means I have the right to say who can and cannot take her away from me.’

Gandalf smiled.

‘It’s not quite how I would put it but I think the right ideas are there. Ok. I will not tell Saruman, although he will find out and you had better be ready for that. But I will defend you Radagast but there are conditions.’

‘Yes?’

‘That I also have a hand in the upbringing of the child. She is a dwarf. If she is to be raised by wizards then she must learn of the world. I will have a hand in her education. And she must not be lied to. She will ask about where she came from and we must tell her the truth. I will have to mention her existence to the dwarvish kings of course and if any of them know of a missing child, she will have to be returned.’

Radagast stared hard at the baby. His gut twisted as he looked at those shining, smiling eyes. The three days had gone so fast, he’d barely had time to breathe, let alone sleep. So she needed constant care right now and she didn’t talk yet, but she would. One day they would have a conversation and in the meantime he would watch her grow and learn and smile. He couldn’t bear the thought of her living in the dark, under a mountain. She needed to be in the light, amongst the trees. But then what choice did he have?

‘Agreed,’ he muttered.

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