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Every fellowship needs an unlikely leader-or, in this case, two. Sitting in a hotel suite so vast, it includes a ping-pong table, showrunners J.D. Payne and Patrick McKay barely notice the noisy throng of Princess Leias and Spider-Men clamoring to get their hands on bright green She-Hulk-themed cocktails on the streets of San Diego below. They're too engrossed in a dialogue about poetic meter in Tolkien: for the show, they wrote different rhythmic structures for each of the different peoples of Middle-earth.

Both men, 41, are tall, blond-ish, and a bit gangly. They first met on the debate team and drama club at a Northern Virginia high school. "We rode the same bus and got beat up by the same bullies," says Payne. After three years in Hollywood, they started working for Bad Robot, J.J. Abrams' production company. The duo punched up scripts and labored over several projects, including a script about a silent robot they describe as a cross between Citizen Kane and Iron Giant, and a fourth Star Trek film; none of those movies saw the light of day.

Bryan Huynh for TIME

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For the second quarter of 2022, Amazon reported a \$2 billion loss, but its stock nonetheless shot up: the company had cited revenue gains specifically in advertising and brand partnerships for The Rings of Power and Thursday Night Football, which Amazon Prime will stream exclusively this fall. (The Rings of Power, Salk) Tj T\* BT /F1

ffset the show's massive cost. The current level of streaming spending across the industry is not sustainable: Netflix and Warner Bros. Discovery both recently announced cuts.

But an information vacuum breeds nervousness. Some fan concerns are reasonable, like the fact that the show must compress thousands of years of Middle-earth history so that mortal human characters can have full story arcs alongside the immortal ones, like Galadriel. ("You can't have half your cast die every two) Tj T\* BT /F1

s, treat any deviation-like featuring elves with short hair when Jackson's supported flowing locks-as sacrilege. A few weeks after Comic-Con, Jackson would tell the Hollywood Reporter that Amazon Studios promised to send him scripts and never did. Amazon responded that it had to keep the show thematically (and legally) Tj T\* BT /

C#243;rdova always knew something was missing from the Jackson films he adored.

He grew up in a small mountain town in Puerto Rico and harbored a childhood dream of playing an elf. "I didn't see myself represented. And when I said