

# Beren One Hand

## Volume 1: Speaks with Birds

**John D McKellar**

Version 1.0

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### **Acknowledgements**

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<sup>1</sup> Except the Bromfietzers. You know who you are.

# Background

This story, *Beren One Hand*, is an elaboration of a legend conceived by J R R Tolkien. Its outline can be found in *The Silmarillion*; earlier versions of the tale in prose, together with an alternative treatment of the theme in the form of a long bardic poem of great beauty, have been published by Tolkien's son Christopher in various volumes of a series called *The History of Middle-earth*. It has not been my intention to replace these sources, which supply in addition a great deal of background material concerning the setting of the tale, with which I have assumed the reader to be familiar. In the present introduction, however, I have tried to sketch enough of Tolkien's framework to allay the most immediate pangs of curiosity. Readers who remain unsated are strongly advised to consult the canonical sources for the full picture.

## Peoples

Beren's universe is conceived to have been created by Ilúvatar, known as the One, who was all-father, and presumably also all-mother. Ilúvatar first made other spirits, who joined with the One in the creation of the World, a process likened to the weaving of a vast musical tapestry.

The subsidiary spirits came in many ranks or orders, of whom the most mighty were known as the Powers or Valar, and the second in ranking as Maiar. It was chiefly spirits from these two orders who helped to shape the World, after the pattern first laid out in the primal Music, and who descended into it to rule it afterwards.

Among the Valar were Manwë, their chief; Varda, his Queen, who kindled the stars;<sup>2</sup> Ulmo, lord of waters; Yavannah or Ivon, lady of the forests; Aulë the Maker; Oromë the Hunter; Mandos the Judge; convivial Tulkas, lover of all manly deeds; Irmo or Lórien, master of dreams; and Melkor, who rebelled against the rule of the One. Maiar who play a role in the present tale include Melian the enchantress; Huan, who was working out a time of penance while confined to the body of a dog; and Mairon (known to the Elves as Gorthaur the Cruel, and later as Sauron the Despicable), chief lieutenant of Melkor.

The lowest order of speaking peoples created by Ilúvatar were of two kinds: the Firstborn and the Aftercomers. The Firstborn, who named themselves Quendi (= 'Speakers'), but who were more generally known as Elves, or Eldar (= 'People of the Stars') did not grow old and die. Although their bodies could be killed, their spirits did not thereafter depart the World, but could, after a time of reflection and penance, become reborn into new bodies. The Firstborn had many divisions, but the three which are of principal concern in our tale are the Noldor (sometimes known as the Deep- or Sword-elves), the Sindar or Grey-elves, and the wild Nandor or Green-elves. The original speech of the Elves was called Quenya. At the time of our tale this dialect was in use in Middle-earth only among the Noldor, and then only in private among themselves. For everyday commerce the Noldor, along with most of the other peoples in the land, spoke Sindarin, which had diverged much from its origins during the long years since the first Elves awoke.

The Aftercomers were mortal Men, whose spirits after they died departed the world, vanishing indeed out of all knowledge, even that of the Valar. Those Men who came west into Beleriand before our tale begins were known as the Atani (Q) or Edain (S). They were divided into three Houses: the dark-haired House of Bëor, the fair-haired House of Marach (later of Hador), and a people of slightly smaller stature known as the Haladin. Separate from these Houses were the wild men of the woods, known to the Elves as Drúedain, elsewhere Drûg or Druug.

The Dwarves were not originally created nor conceived by Ilúvatar, but were rather conceptions of that Vala known as Aulë. Only afterwards were the Dwarves granted agency and mind by Ilúvatar.

Of the Little People or Hairfeet the Wise have taken small account, but it seems likely that they were related to Men.

The origin of the Orcs or goblins is uncertain. It is said that only the One had power to breathe life into beings, therefore the rebel Melkor must rather have twisted the Orcs from some already-existent source; but

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2 Often invoked with reverence among the Eldar as 'Star-queen Kindler' (S: Elbereth Gilthoniel).

what that source had been is not now known with certainty.

## Lands

The created universe was named Arda. The lands in which Elves, Men and the other lesser creatures of the world made their homes were known as Middle-earth. The Valar (except, at the time of our telling, Melkor) and most of the Maiar resided in a land known as Valinor, located on a great island called Aman, which lay to the West of Middle-earth, being separated from it by a great sea. The narrowest part of the strait, to the North, was covered by ice.

All the action in our tale takes part in the west-most part of Middle-earth, named Beleriand.

## Events

In the beginning there was the Music, during which the Valar and Maiar, working at the direction of Ilúvatar, conceived the universe. It is said that Melkor, in seeking ever to impose his own designs on those of the One, distorted and besmirched the entire creation of Arda. Only in small parts of the world and for limited periods have the Valar and, on occasion, and according to their powers, others of the children of the One, managed to cleanse the evils of Melkor from their stubborn lodging in its fabric.

The history of Middle-earth up until our tale can be divided into three phases. In the first phase, the Valar set up two mighty Lamps to give light to the world. After Melkor destroyed these, the Valar retreated to their realm of Valinor in Aman and brought the Two Trees into being, which gave forth a holy Light, to the illumination if not of the world, then at least of Valinor. The third phase began after Melkor destroyed the Trees, upon which the Valar created the sun and moon from their last, blighted fruits. It is after this event that the counting of time by years began.

The Firstborn awoke during the time of the Trees, under the stars, far in the East of Middle-earth. The Valar desired these new Children of the One to live beside them in Valinor, but in this design the Powers had but imperfect success. It is true that the entirety of the Noldor, together with another division of the Elves known as the Vanyar, who do not come into this tale, departed from Middle-earth and took up residence in Valinor; but of the many-peopled remainder, whose tribal name was Teleri, came only a part. Some of the Teleri refused the summons altogether; others obeyed in the beginning, but for one reason or another gave up the trek along the way. It is these tarriers who make up the Grey- and Green-elves of my tale. Ruler over these Elves of Darkness (Q. *Moriquendi*), i.e. those who never saw the Light in Aman, was the Telero named Elu Thingol<sup>3</sup> (Q. *Elwë Singollo*). Thingol fell in love with the Maia Melian and settled in the realm of Doriath, which was thereafter cleansed and guarded by Melian's power. Thingol alone of all his subjects had seen with his own eyes the holy Light of the Trees, having visited Aman before returning.

In Valinor, the Noldo Fëanor (which name means Spirit of Fire), the most renowned Maker in the entire history of the Firstborn, captured light from the Trees in the three Silmarils of his devising. Melkor stole these jewels at the time of his final rebellion, killing in the process Finwë, King of the Noldor and father of Fëanor. Melkor then slaughtered the Trees and in the ensuing darkness made his escape to Middle-earth, where he took up his abode in Angband, the Hells of Iron, at the northerly edge of Beleriand.

Fëanor and his seven sons swore a dreadful and unholy Oath to recover the Silmarils and to revenge the murder of their sire. The greater part of the Noldor, disturbed by the sudden dreadful onset of darkness in Valinor and stirred to red wrath by powerful words of defiance from Fëanor, rebelled against the tutelage of the Valar and determined to return to Middle-earth. In this they succeeded, burdened however by deeds of murder and treachery. Fëanor had no boats with which to cross the sea, and the Teleri (makers of boats) would not give him any; therefore he took vessels by force, shedding Telerian blood to do so. (King Thingol of Doriath was a Telero, which is the source of the feud between him and the Fëanorians.) Since there were still not enough boats for all of the Noldor, Fëanor abandoned the other rebels and made the crossing just with his sons and adherents. Once on the far side, the boats were burned in an act of spite that added to the

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3 'Thingol' is a Sindarin word meaning 'Grey-cloak'.

sting of this treachery. The remaining Noldor had no recourse but to trek north to where the Ice allowed (in theory at least) a passage to Middle-earth by foot. Although the dangerous Ice took a toll of their lives, they succeeded in crossing it at last; but few of them had much love thereafter for Fëanor and his sons.

The High King of the returned Noldor was Fingolfin. With his son Fingon, he ruled the realm of Hithlum in the North-west of Beleriand. The second House of the Edain, the fair-haired Men of Marach, were their particular vassals. Fingolfin's brother Finarfin remained in Valinor, but all of Finarfin's children returned to Middle-earth: his sons Finrod, Orodreth, Angrod and Aegnor, and his daughter Artanis (later known as Galadriel). Finrod, latterly known as Felagund (meaning 'hall-delver'), ruled the underground city and fastness of Nargothrond, in the South-west of Beleriand. He also built an island fortress (Minas Tirith<sup>4</sup> – the Tower of Guard) in the strategic valley separating Dorthonion and Hithlum, through which the river Sirion flowed, but gave this tower into the rule of his brother Orodreth. The First House of the Edain occupied the northern highlands of Dorthonion under vassalage to Finrod. Angrod and Aegnor ruled fortifications on the northern border of that land.

Fëanor was killed in one of the early battles against Melkor (whom the Eldar usually named Morgoth, the Black Enemy). His sons were of varying temper and took varying roles in the fight against the Enemy, but the best and most active of them was the eldest, Maedhros. Most of the Sons guarded positions in the wide gap between Dorthonion and the long, north-south running chain of the Blue Mountains which formed the eastern border of Beleriand (and in subsequent ages, the westernmost extent of Eriador). Central to this region was the hill called Himring.

The early history of Men is uncertain. It is known that they woke at the time of the first rising of the sun. There are indications that Melkor was able to capture and enslave many Men early in their history, which left a shadow on their natures; some who have considered deeply into the matter suspect that this rebel Vala was able to mar Men in many of their particulars even before they awoke.

Some bands of Men were eventually able to break away from evil servitude. Drawn by yearnings they themselves were not able to fathom, they began to journey towards the West. Three distinct tribes or Houses, as mentioned above, crossed the Blue Mountains into Beleriand in about the 300<sup>th</sup> year of the sun. The leader of the first House at that time was named Balan. He and his people were met in Beleriand by the noble Elf Finrod and became fast adherents of that Elda<sup>5</sup>. Balan took the title of Bëor, which means Vassal. Under the fourth Bëor, Boromir, the first House moved north to occupy Dorthonion in the year 380. Upon arrival in Dorthonion, Boromir's daughter Andreth met and fell in love with Finrod's brother Aegnor. The sad outcome of that affair is told in the tale known as 'Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth'.<sup>6</sup>

Beren was born in the 436<sup>th</sup> year since the first rising of the sun.<sup>7</sup> At this time the Eldar were holding Morgoth in check via a partial siege or leaguer of Angband. Although punctuated by occasional sallies by the Enemy, this military situation had remained largely static for nearly four centuries. The Leaguer held until the Battle of Sudden Flame in 455.

Hinted at in the present story is the disastrous, irrecoverable defeat, known as the Battle of Unnumbered Tears, suffered in sun-year 472 by the Free Peoples; also of the dismal fates of Húrin and Morwen, and of their son Túrin and daughter Nienor.

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4 Not to be confused with the fortress in Gondor of the same name, built thousands of years later by the Dúnedain.

5 In the tale as the Silmarillion has it, Balan and his household were sleeping around their camp fire when they were woken by Finrod singing and playing on his harp.

6 Volume 10 of the History of Middle-earth.

7 See discussion of this date in <http://www.beren-one-hand.com/commentary.php#genealogy>

*Once there was a baby who was stolen by the fairies. But, as doesn't often happen, they brought him back after. But as his mother, her madness of grief swept away by joy, gathered him laughing into her arms, he spoke to her in the tongues of birds.*

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Beren's earliest memories were of father. Not of his father as a person, neither the merry hero of his childhood years, nor the grizzled, weary figure he made at the end, after six years of living rough and secret, dodging Sauron's marauders; but a general effusion of fatherness: a melange of elements from the tickle of his father's beard, and the vibration of his voice, felt through the head, resting against the warmth of his father's neck; to the strong mix of odours in the nose of smoke, sweat, leather, blood, wool, and soil acquired by those who live and work close to the earth, and distant from the luxuries of pampered leisure.

From the first, Beren loved the evenings best. He would sit on his father's lap, his father's strong arms about him. A flicker of firelight filled the large kitchen. All around the table were lively faces, touched by the dancing red light. Many voices filled the air: the deep voices of the men, the clear ones of the women, and the high, excited laughter of children running at some game between the benches. The plank of the table felt pleasantly rough beneath Beren's hand. Savoury odours from the stew filled the air, mixing with the father smell. Sometimes the people would talk; at other times there would be a story or a song.

Nobody stayed up too late, because the firewood that was used had to be cut by someone, and lamp oil was expensive. Beren often went to sleep curled up in his father's arms, but on such evenings it would not be long before he was carried up to the sleeping platform. He would snuggle up next to Hiril, who was proud that she was old enough to climb the ladder on her own. They had fleeces and furs that smelled strong and nice. Everyone went to bed soon after. Father and mother slept behind a partition, and there were other hangings and screens up there in the dark, woodsmoke-smelling loft.

Daytime was mother time. His mother was not always about: sometimes she was out, helping father with the business of the farm. But many a time she would be in the house, working at one of the innumerable jobs. But sometimes his mother would play with him, or sing him a song. She was still happy in those days, and often sang about the house. With Beren, she liked to tickle his nose with the end of her thick plait of red hair. When Beren hurt himself, she would take him on her lap, rub the sore place, and bounce the tears away with some nonsense rhyme, laughing and kissing him. About his mother too there was an essence, in which rough woollen cloth, a warm smell of herbs, and hot blue eyes which could dance with laughter or blaze with fury, depending on circumstances, formed a great part.

Hiril was always there. They fought sometimes, or Hiril would be in a temper; other times she would play games with him, or take him to peep at the lambs; or enlist him as lookout, distraction, or simple beast of burden on raids to the larder for raisins and honey-cakes. Sometimes Hiril would scold him, but she would always be there to lead him past the enclosure where the mountainous, fierce bull was kept. She would soothe his hurt when Mother was not there and the other women too busy. There were plenty of children on the farm, big and small, with whom he and Hiril spent most of their time. But she was different, she was his. The two of them slept together, they did everything together.

Beren remembered a time of rain. There didn't seem to be hot days any more; instead it always seemed to be raining. It wasn't pleasant in the cold. The kids stayed inside, he and Hiril did, and Mal and Kiri. They didn't see much of the others any more, who mostly stayed in their own homes, rather than brave the cold mud between houses. There was often trouble about that mud. Evenings were longer though, and it was pleasant around the fire.

There was the time of the feast. Beren vaguely remembered that his mother was dressed up somehow – there were corn stalks, and pumpkins – and carried, laughing, around the big table, the firelight very warm on her face and white dress. The other memories of that time were just a confused mixture of loud singing, and firelight, and full of the incomprehensible talk of grown-ups. Beren and Hiril had some sips of a warm, nice-smelling drink, a warm-tasting drink. They didn't have it in a cow horn like the men, they just had little cups. It was nice, but it made everything fuzzy.

One thing he did remember about that time: there were some wonderful people present, people he didn't know at all. Neither Beren nor Hiril could keep their eyes off them. There were two men, and two ladies, laughing and gay. Beren thought they were the most beautiful people he had ever seen. You couldn't stop looking at them. They stood out, somehow.

After the rainy time came what they called snow – white, cold stuff. This started one morning when an excited Hiril tugged him to come and look. Tumbling off the sleeping platform, he peeped with her out of a hatch in the harness room. The chill air was full of soft white bits just sort of floating down. It looked pretty, falling. There were patches of the stuff already on the ground. Hiril said she had seen it before, but it was strange to Beren. It wasn't rain, but it would melt to water if you could bear to hold it in your hand a while. She showed him how to run around and try to catch the flakes with your tongue. They tasted cold and fresh. Well, he fell over of course, and then there was trouble about mud again. They were scolded indoors and not allowed out again that day.

Later, Beren got used to the snow and its ways. Indeed, after a while, the snow seemed to be always there, to have always *been* there. He didn't remember a time really when there was no snow. Snow outside – it was just the way things were. You could have fun with it, but it made you cold.

There were times when people would go hunting. Sometimes they turned up at dusk tired and empty-handed – not disappointed exactly, but not disposed to talk much, nor do much except pull sodden clothes off and huddle by the fire with a horn of hot mead. Sometimes, though, if they had had a good hunt, the return would be really exciting. There'd be the sound of horns, and dogs carrying on like mad. The dogs would be boasting about how they had helped, and how big a bit they were going to get. The boar or deer would be carried on a spear. People would be laughing and joking. They'd hang the beast up in an alcove near the smoke house and cut it up for meat: a messy business which left blood all over the snow. Later would come the hard work of dressing the skin. Everyone was happy though, because a successful hunt meant good eating for a while. It wasn't that there was ever not enough to eat, but a good roast joint made a nice change from stored biscuits, or even from soup. Beren loved the soups they made in the snow-time. His favourite was made from lentils, smoked ham, onions, and dried peas.

The snow got really deep. Father and the other men had a job keeping the paths clear. Long icicles hung around the rim of all the roofs.

Hiril told him that the birds had a hard time in winter, because they couldn't find enough food. She showed him how to throw them little bits of fat. The birds loved it, and they came and sat on his head and shoulders, and piped their thanks at him. They couldn't say much though, because they were only birds. It was like, "Food good food good! Man good man good! Good good good!" Something like that.

Hiril was funny about that though, she didn't have any birds that sat on her, and she couldn't understand them, and wouldn't believe Beren when he told her what they were saying. She went inside in a bit of a huff.

One morning Beren woke to a strange sound. It was like water trickling. He peeked out the hatch, but couldn't see much. It wasn't snowing, in fact it seemed almost mild outside. As the day went on, the trickling increased. The icicles grew longer and longer, but after a while the water wasn't freezing at the end any more. Snow was pattering off the trees all around. Things froze up again that night, but next day it was really thawing. There was snow sliding off the roofs, and all around you could hear the sound of water: from all kinds of rills and trickles close by, to a distant booming which they told him was the stream.

They still had a bit of snow-fall now and then but mostly this was a new time, which everybody called Spring. Beren wasn't sure he liked it. For one thing, food at this time got a bit, well, sparse and dull. And mud! Beren was never free of the stuff. Sometimes his mother got really angry. Well all the women did really, you could see that, but the others would always sort of hold back a bit, not give him a wallop like they would do with the other kids.

Slowly the realization grew on Beren, without him ever really thinking about it, that his father seemed to be the boss around the place. His father worked as hard as anybody else, but the others always gave him first

and last say, and mostly did what he suggested. And it was the same with his mother in the house.

Eventually Beren decided that Spring was a good time. He and Hiril had a lot of fun, playing around the yard with the other kids. It was good to be able to get out of the house. It became warmer, too, and pretty often the sun was out.

What intruded more and more, though, was chores. Hiril often was called away to do something or other. Most of the older kids had chores. Beren got one, too: he had to feed the chickens. He didn't like this, because the chickens were big, and not very nice. He was a bit scared of them, to tell the truth. They weren't friendly or grateful like the little birds. There was a boss bird, and she 'tried it on' with Beren in his mother's phrase, tried to bully him into giving her all the corn at once. But Beren shouted and stamped at her, and after that she was like all the rest, just sort of cowardly and stupid. They weren't any fun, chickens. Not like the farm dogs, who would always say hello, and be good for a bit of banter, or a friendly tussle.

Then came a time which stood out in Beren's memory. It started with a big fuss, in which things were sorted and packed. They got a lot of horses out in the yard. Beren was hoisted onto a horse's back for the first time. He rode in front of his mother; Hiril was with their father. The horse's back was *huge*, and bristly, and everything smelled of horse, and leather. It was waaay high up, so Beren held on pretty tight. But he was all right there between his mother's arms. She had a way of flicking her head when Beren wasn't ready for it, and the thick, red plait that she always had would curve round and whack him gently. He'd try to grab it, but he'd usually miss. Then he would grin up at her, leaning back into her warmth, and she would smile back and tousle his hair gently. She had nice even white teeth, and a few freckles, and she always smelled nice. Beren loved his mother.

As soon as everything was ready, the horses started walking, with all the people sitting on them. The party went out of the gate and left the farm. Soon Beren couldn't see the buildings at all any more. Instead there was a track for a little while, then they came to the road beside the river. It was a bit of a boring time, that, because the journey went on for a long time, and you had to sit there, high up on the moving horse. There was not much to do, but when his mother wasn't talking with the others, she would sing with him, or tell him a story.

There were four or five other people riding along. There was Mari, and Mari's husband Orm, and big hairy Dagnir; and Papa of course with Hiril. The last of the party was a man Beren liked, even though he spoke funny, called Arthad.

One exciting part was when a wagon came from the other direction. A handful of people were riding on it. But such people! They all had loong beards, for one thing: some grey, but some yellow, or blue. Not even Hrotha's beard at home was that long, and his was just grey, like usual old people. These fellows on the wagon were really short, and they all seemed to be about as broad as they were high. They had big noses, and great, knotty hands. Beren's party went off the path to let the wagon go by. The short, bearded people nodded curtly to them, but didn't seem particularly friendly. They didn't stop to talk.

Later, Hiril told him the bearded folk were called 'Dwarves.' She told him a lot about them, how they ate stones, and lived inside the mountains. She tried to whisper to him something about lady Dwarves, but kept convulsing into giggles. Beren eventually left her in disgust and went and did something else. Seemed to be girl stuff.

Once or twice on the road they encountered other horsemen, but only normal people. Most of them would pause for a bit of a chat.

Then a thing occurred which rang in Beren's inner being as if one had struck a great bell. One could not say that the event changed his life, since his nature was already formed so as to take him in certain directions; but it was the first harbinger of what was to come.

Beren had been dozing between his mother's arms, jogging easily along on his high, bristly seat. He woke suddenly to find that it had become much darker. Looking around, the boy found that the path was winding

now between great trees. These were trees such as he had never seen, nor imagined; they dwarfed those of the farm. They reached their thick, straight stems up, and up, and up, until high, high above they branched out into a continuous, moving mass of mottled dark green. All that could be seen of the sky was a sprinkle of bright specks that came and went as the leaves moved. On every side, as far as the eye could see, brown and grey trunks stood like mighty pillars in a giant's hall.

But the sight alone was nothing. It wasn't anything he saw, but what he could *feel*, which was so overwhelming. Beren was used to animals, to connecting with their little lives, but this here felt like the biggest animal there could possibly be – the whole forest, as one huge animal. It went on for *miles*. And here was the thing: *he himself was part of it*. As if he *belonged* here.

It was cool in the forest, and quiet. The air was different. There were a thousand subtle scents in it, seeming like messages, just out of reach.

The forest seemed to go on for a long time. Beren had stopped his fidgeting inside this dark hall of living trees and was quiet and attentive to the surroundings the whole time. His mother bent over him at one point and pulled his ear gently. "Somebody still in there, warrior?" He looked up at her, nodded and smiled; then went back to feeling the great forest.

When they emerged again into the light, the sun was low behind them. They stopped briefly while the men unstrung their bows.

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They stopped that night at a great building filled with light and noise. They must have a lot of beer there. Beren knew the smell, and it was strong here everywhere.

The boy was tired and fretful. He had not wanted to leave the forest, but now he just wanted his bed. They put him in one after some loud conversation above his head. It wasn't his bed, and it smelled funny, but he was asleep before he could protest.

Things weren't much better in the morning. There were too many strange people, and strange smells. Breakfast was not what he was used to.

Hiril led him out after a while and they had a look around the yard. They saw more Dwarves, and there were men with horses and carts, and women about too. It was confusing, but interesting at the same time. He held tight to Hiril's hand.

At last Father and Mother came out, and Mari and Orm and Dag and Thad, and they were all together again. They climbed aboard the patient horses and continued the journey. It was a dull day and a cold one. Beren huddled in a blanket and nodded sleepily with the motion of the horse. He was with Papa today, and his father would tell him this and that story, sometimes connected with the places they were passing, sometimes not. They were not riding through the forest any more, although it lay like a secret, dark blanket over the hills, not too far away. Beren wished to begin with that they would go back in under the trees. However, as the day went on, he dozed more and more. He was sore and tired, and after a while he stopped thinking about the trees. He just wished it would all stop.

The boy was woken by voices, and by the thump of wood on wood. He jerked out of his doze and looked around sleepily. It was almost dark; only some deep blue left in the sky. They had come to a wide gate in a high wooden stockade. Gruff voices sounded, and torches glittered redly off the mail and arms of men, some of whom had grabbed the horses by the bridles and were leading them through the gate. Their party seemed to be expected.

The gate opened onto a wider space, with a well in the centre, and a big fire off to one side. People were sitting around the fire on benches, and others were going to and fro with trays. Some of the sitters held up horns and cups and shouted greetings to the newcomers. Beren's party clopped slowly uphill along a steep



way packed on both sides with wooden halls and dwellings. Beren had never seen so many houses – never imagined that there could *be* so many! And people everywhere – more than sparrows, or ants even. Yellow and red light glowed behind narrow windows, which were mostly covered with horn, or waxed paper, like they had at home; but here and there the boy saw little openings spanned by knobbly, greenish glass, which broke the dancing firelight into multiple repeated flames.

At the top, the party stopped in front of a great hall. Men came to hold the horses and help them dismount. There was much slapping on backs, by strange men with loud voices. Beren's mother lifted him up, and he wrapped his arms around her and hid his sleepy face in her neck. After that he remembered no more about it.

When he woke in the morning, everything smelled different, everything looked different. Beren panicked for a moment, until he saw that Hiril was beside him as always, still asleep. He turned and burrowed into the familiar warmth of her back. Disturbed by this, she squirmed in an irritated fashion and lifted a face still rosy and blind with sleep. “Urgh – Beren! What're y' doing!”

“Ril,” he whispered urgently, “where is everything? It's all gone away!”

“What?” Sleepily.

He shook her. “It's all different! Where's it all gone?”

“Oh, Ber, don't you remember?” she said. “We've come to visit Grandfather. Don't you remember the last two days, on the horses?” She turned over and buried her face again in the fleece.

It all came back to Beren. The horses, the strange bearded people, the beer smell – and the forest. He lay next to Hiril's warmth, remembering, getting his mental bearings, and looking around at the strange sleeping place. There were woven hangings about them, and some low voices were coming from elsewhere on the platform. A greenish light was filtering through two small windows. It still seemed to be early morning, but people were stirring about below in the main building.

He was hungry. He turned back to Hiril, nudged her gently, and told her so. Crossly, she lifted up her face again, swiping hair out of her eyes. “Beri, you are the biggest nuisance there ever was. If you hadn't gone to sleep so early, you'd have got something to eat last night.”

“Aw come on, Ril, let's go find something to eat now.”

“Go yourself!” And she plumped back down in the pillow.

But he didn't dare. He stayed there, sighing and fidgeting, and eventually of course Hiril had to get up. By that time she was getting hungry herself. The two of them peeped out between the heavy hangings. The last of the late sleepers, two bearded men who were strangers to them, had finished pulling on their fur boots and were just climbing heavily down the ladder. Luckily for the hungry children, a moment after the creaking tread of these last risers left the rungs, the familiar ruddy head of their mother popped up above the edge of the hatch.

“Both awake? Come on then, I know what you want.”

They sat in the strange kitchen, eating porridge and listening to the talk. It was mostly just women there, although once a man came in with a load of wood. Some older kids sauntered in and out, seemingly as an excuse to goggle at the newcomers. There were a couple of old ladies there who appeared to be aunties. Beren had to sit on their laps and have them fuss over him – yuk. After he finished his meal, he wanted to be out and looking around.

It turned into a frustrating and confusing morning. He and Hiril never had much chance to play or explore. After breakfast, they got collared by the aunties and they had to have a bath, then have their hair brushed (ouch), then dress in stiff, scratchy clothes. There were terrifying threats, with shaken fists and bared teeth, of

what would happen if they got a speck of dirt on those clothes. Beren was scornful of the threats, he knew all about that kind of play-acting; but they didn't anyway get a chance to run that particular gauntlet. They never got to go outside; instead they had to endure a succession of boring times when they met new people and had to sit there while the adult talk went on around them. The adults seemed to find a never-ending supply of things to talk about. There was nothing to do or see.

There was one time that stuck in Beren's mind though. They were taken into a sizeable and gloomy room. A single sunbeam angled down from above, lighting up a patch of floor. The rest of the room lay in deep shadow. There were tapestries on all the walls, although it was hard to see what was on them, because of the poor light.

His father took him by the hand. Beren looked up into his kindly, familiar face. "Come, my son, come and meet your grandfather," his father said, and led him slowly down the long room. They passed through the sunbeam, and Beren was briefly blinded. When he came through, he saw that there were people at the other end of the room. There was a high, carved wooden seat; and on that seat sat hunched an old, old man. Sitting on the left side of the old man, but a bit lower, was a lady who seemed equally ancient, but alert and straight. Standing to the right of the carved chair was a big man, not so old as the other two.

The old man in the chair was bent, and had knobby hands which clasped the head of a stick, which he rested on the dais in front of him. His hair, what there was of it, was pure white, and he had immense, spiky eyebrows over fierce, pale eyes.

The old man glared at Beren as the latter approached with his father. "So!" he began in a scratchy voice, "this is the young shaver eh? How do you do, boy? I am your grandfather. Hum, eh? Your father's father."

Beren stood there dumb, but his father shook his hand gently. "Say 'how do you do' to your grandfather, Beren."

"How do you do, Grandfather," echoed Beren dutifully.

"Come up here," commanded the old man. Released by his father, Beren climbed the steps to the foot of the chair and stood there uncertainly. He wasn't sure he liked this grandfather. He smelled of pee.

The old man lifted the child's chin with one gnarled hand, while the pale eyes examined his face. "He has his mother's eyes," said the ancient, "but he is a Bëoring all right. You can see that in the way he holds himself. He'll do, I think; yes, hum." He turned to the man on his right. "What do you think, son?"

Beren turned to look at the other man, whom he afterwards came to know as his uncle Bregolas. He saw a big, strong man, dressed in a leather kilt, with a brown woollen tunic. The man wore a great belt with silver studs on it, and a strap with more studs crossing his broad chest; and there was silver binding the well-tended braids of his hair, which was dark like Beren's father's, although streaked with grey. The sun-browned face was well-proportioned, with a broad forehead, but the eyes were the same pale colour as the grandfather's.

All this he took in in an instant, before the big man boomed, "Without a doubt, Father. He's one of the old blood, all right."

Beren thought the man looked bored, and a bit irritated too. His glance at Beren had been cursory; after that the big man's eyes returned to contemplation of Beren's father.

"Hah! Yes, good enough," snorted the old man, "hum, yes!" There was a slight pause, in which the old man looked from left to right, seemingly irritable and at something of a loss.

"Come over here to me now, Beren, and let me look at you," came a woman's voice from his right. He saw the old lady beckoning to him. As he climbed down the dais on her side, he took her in. Hers was a handsome, lined face; stern, but very calm. She had shining white hair in long braids, and dark eyes like his father. But whereas in his father's eyes Beren found only warmth, these eyes were cool and piercing. He saw

no enmity in them, but you wouldn't say they were overflowing with kindness either.

He liked the lady's voice though. It was firm, but its tones were not unfriendly.

She took his hand. "My name is Andreth," she said to him, "but you may call me Aunt."

"How do you do, Aunt," said Beren, improving the moment. His aunt smiled a little, pleased at this.

"Thank you, Nephew, quite well. But I don't need to ask how you do, because I know. Bored and hungry, is it?"

He squirmed, embarrassed. "Yes, Aunt, a bit."

Another wintry smile. "Then I think you should go and eat, and play. We'll see each other again."

And they let him do exactly that! He found Hiril outside, they changed clothes, ate at a table with lots of other children, and then! They could go outside and run around. It was a big place, there was lots to see.

In the evening they had a feast in the hall. The big man and Aunt Andreth were there, but he didn't see his grandfather. Hiril and Beren didn't pay the adults much mind though, because they were sitting with new friends they had met in the yard – Hath and Britha and Oll, and others. The kids had some of the warm drink again, and they all got very silly.

The visit lasted about a week. On the journey home, Beren sat up the whole way through the forest, trying his hardest to hear what it was whispering to him; but he could never quite make it out.

\* \* \* \* \*

Now began the best time of all. The sun shone, and the long, joy-filled days were hot. Nobody wore many clothes, and everybody got very brown. Hiril's face simply swarmed with freckles, and her teeth were very white whenever she grinned.

The farm was called Sightfoot, but Beren didn't find out why until he was much older. Not that he cared. There was always something interesting to see and do around the farm buildings, which offered an intriguing maze of corners and play spots. Everything was built around the central yard. The main house was a big building made of logs. You could only get out the back through the kitchen: the main entrance faced the yard. You came out from that onto a sort of roofed board-walk which extended the whole width of the yard to left and right, and which was about half filled with stacked firewood. On the left of the yard was a tall, friendly tree with big green leaves, and funny wingy, seedy things. Behind the tree was the shed where the cows came to be milked, and where they lived all the time in winter. The dairy was between that and the house, and behind that was the kitchen and then the food store. If you went all the way out the back you came to the pigs, the hen-house, and the kitchen garden. There was a yard back there for the big black bull as well. At the other, right-hand, end of the house was the harness room, which led to the stables, then outside through the big gate to some pens for horses. Behind the harness room was a workshop with a small forge.

The right flank of the yard was occupied by the big barn. There was the wagon there, and a threshing floor; but most of the space above was given over to hay. There were great places to hide in the hay, which smelled good, even though it made you sneeze.

The crappery was tucked in behind the barn, near the main gate. Beren wasn't fond of the crappery – it stunk, and it was dark in there: you couldn't see what might lurk at the bottom of the holes. But it was just one of those things. Everyone had to crap. He did his business when he had to, and got out of there fast.

The front of the yard was almost closed off by another building, the lower floor of which was mostly used for splitting and sawing up logs. The single people of the farm, men and women, slept above: women to the left, men to the right. There was only Hrotha and Methemel's youngest Sola on the left just now, but there

were four men on the men's side: Hrotha's sons Dagnir and Ragnor, and Arthad the foreigner, and young Gramlach, who had been a soldier with the Elves. There was a smoke-house on one end of the saw room, and the other end of it was not too far from the midden near the end of the cow shed: so it was bracketed by smells – a nice one at one end and a nasty one at the other, with the smell of sawn wood in the middle.

There weren't many gaps between the buildings, but in places where there were, there was a stout fence or wall made of tree trunks set upright in the ground, with a ditch and a nest of thorns in front of it. There were places at the corners where you could climb to a sort of platform thing, with holes where you could peep out. Hiril said that a long time ago, there had been a big raid by goblins. They'd burnt a farm near by, but the men here had kept them off, because of the fence. Hiril said that didn't happen any more nowadays though.

Sometimes in the evening somebody would sing about the old times, of the wars, when the first men came to Ladros. That's what the valley was called. There were goblins and Orcs and all sorts then apparently. But the men (helped by the Elves) had killed them all long ago. Hiril really let her imagination go telling him what goblins were like, and he had one or two bad dreams about them, until his father took him on his knee and told him they had pretty much cleaned out the goblins from this part of the world; that nobody had seen one locally for quite a while, and that anyway, no goblin could or would get past the men of Sightfoot. His father showed him his big steely-grey sword, let him feel its keen edge, and told him how he personally had killed four goblins with that sword.

And then he told Beren something which made his mouth drop open. He said that Beren's own mother had killed seven, in the same fight! With a bow. His mother, who was there with them, blushed and dropped her head. But nothing would content Beren but that she must show him the bow. It was a stout, long bow, but she strung it with ease, and showed him how one drew the string, the whole length of her arm back, back, back to her ear. It struck Beren, looking at her, how tall she was – why, she was as tall as Papa, maybe even a little taller; just not anything like so wide across the shoulders. Beren tried to pull the string back himself, and he got it a bit of the way, but it was really hard. He was vastly impressed. Seven goblins!

The only other kids actually on the farm were Mari's three: Mal, Kiri and little Kamorod. Kam was still just a baby really, and you couldn't do much with him, he stayed mostly indoors with the womenfolk. He didn't talk properly yet, just baby talk. Kiri was all right, she was about Beren's age. Mal was a couple of years older. Although there were often other kids from neighbouring farms about, Mal and Kiri were always there. Hiril and he played together with them most of the time. Mal was always trying to be the boss, even though Hiril was the eldest; so sometimes, if Mal was being a bit of a pain, Hiril and Beren and Kiri would run off and do something on their own. That always made Mal really mad.

Besides old Hrotha and Methemel, who had a little room to themselves, in the house itself there was only Mari and Orm. Mari was Hrotha and Methemel's elder daughter, so in the farm they were almost just like two families all together. Hrotha told Beren his father Garaf had been the first to clear land in the district. It seemed funny to think of old Hrotha being a boy once, and having a father.

Beren sometimes heard Hrotha called 'father' by his own father, and everyone seemed to call Methemel 'grandmother'. One day it occurred to him to wonder about it. Wasn't his father's father the old man they had visited in the big town that time? He asked Hiril.

"Hrotha is Papa's foster-father<sup>8</sup>," she told him. "They're not really related. People often move about in that way."

As if to demonstrate the point, that summer the families on the farm were joined by Eilinel, who came from a farm near by. Neli was older than a kid, but she wasn't quite grown-up. She was a quiet, hard-working girl, and she was nice, nicer than Sola; she would slip Beren a bit of honey-soaked bread if he ventured into the kitchen, or a chewy strip of the smoked pork that he loved. Sola or Mari would never give him anything, they'd just chase him out. Neli was a curvy, dark-haired girl with fine, clear eyes and a shy smile. Hiril,

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8 The institution of fostering, widespread among the people of Dorthonion, was reminiscent of that practised among medieval Icelanders.

Beren and Kiri once caught her kissing Gorlim, the blacksmith's son. They didn't mean to surprise them that way, and Beren was sorry for it, because he liked them both; but it *was* so funny to see them both blush, and start apart from each other like scalded rabbits. Old Grol went red as a beetroot that time. He was an awkward lad, skinny in spite of the work he did, and he had spots.

Beren thought of that again at the time after the shearing, when some of the young men went away with the sheep, and the girls went away with the cows. His mother told him this happened every year – they took the animals high into the hills, where the grass was sweet. The young women milked the cows every day and spent their time making butter, curds and cheese. Fewer men went with the sheep because, even though there were a lot more sheep, there was less for them to do.

Anyway they had a big feast in the house before the young people left. The people from the neighbouring farms were all there too. There were a lot of jokes that Beren didn't understand. Someone said something about the sheep needing horse-shoes because of the rough road, maybe, and asked whether it wouldn't perhaps be a good idea to send Gorlim along with them. Everybody roared with laughter, and Gorlim didn't know where to hide his head. Neli too. But what was it all about?

When he asked Hiril about it later, Hiril sighed breathily, rolled her eyes, and explained to him with exaggerated sisterly patience that Eilinel was going with the cows, and even though the girls and the boys weren't supposed to be in the same place, everyone knew that the boys would sometimes sneak over the hill by night; so that sometimes there would have to be a wedding pretty quick after they all got back in the autumn. Beren still didn't get it, so Hiril said Gorlim wanted to play bulls and cows with Neli, and that's how you got babies. Beren at least knew *that*.

He thought he understood then how all the bits of the puzzle went together, but he still couldn't understand what was so funny about it all. Nor quite how kissing came into it.

The shearing-time was something to see. The sheep were all gathered into pens behind the barn. The shearing itself took place in the barn itself. The walls on the yard side, the west side, were folded up and tied to let in air and light, but the shearers stayed on the east side in the shade. The summer sunlight glared hotly in patches on the floor, almost too bright to look at, and poked glowing, dusty fingers through all sorts of cracks in the walls.

The people were all as busy as bees. The men, stripped to the waist, sweating, were each bent over a sheep; the shears in their hands flashed in time with the crisp snick-snick-snick of the blades. As each fleece fell, it was whipped away by a damsel as the man scooted the strangely white and naked sheep into the exit run, before bending sideways to grab, then twist to the floor, the next hapless victim. Other women were busy cleaning and arranging the fleeces, while the children were sent running here and there to gather up the odd scraps of wool. Now and then a shearer would straighten his back achingly and sluice the dust down his throat with a draught of cider served to him by one of the women. The air was full of the sharp smell of fleece.

Arthad worked at the sharpening wheel, which sweating youngsters had to turn. Beren didn't mind, because he loved to watch the shower of sparks and sniff the burned flinty smell.

Old grandma Methemel kept an eye on the whole business from her high chair at the end of the room: bidding someone to pick up some dropped tailings perhaps, or someone else to top up the sheep numbers in the waiting pens. She regulated the supply of shears, swapping used ones for new after the proper length of time, and making sure that Arthad kept up. She also kept a tally against each man's name on a whitewashed board beside her.

As the day went on, a contest developed. Leading the tally was Methemel's husband Hrotha, closely followed by Barahir on the one hand, and a man named Bremund on the other. Beren knew Bremund as a relation of his mother's. He was a big, good-looking man with tawny hair which he kept cropped at shoulder length. People said he looked like one of the warrior folk out of the North; and indeed, Beren's mother's family was supposed to have connections that way.

It was a puzzle to see how Hrotha managed to stay ahead. He never seemed to work hard at it, for one thing; and how he kept his beard out of the way of the shears was a marvel. But each casual, almost leisurely pass of the shears was just so. And the next was just so, and the next. In an unbelievably short time, the sheep was done, whisked out of the way, and in the same movement the next one was on the floor, with the bright shears already deep in its wool. It was all done seemingly without thought or effort; just the shine on the old man's bald head suggesting otherwise. And gradually he pulled even further ahead of the younger, stronger men.

The sun was low when Methemel finally called time on the day's work. Old Hrotha, who had just finished his last sheep, straightened up slowly, gave his shears to a boy, and wiped his head and face with a cloth. The supply of sheep had been cut off some time before, but the slower workers still had a sheep or two to finish. Barahir and Bremund were both on their last sheep, and were each racing to finish before the other – all the time remaining zealous to avoid the shame of cutting their sheep.

All eyes were on the two men. Bremund managed it first with just seconds to spare, raising his shears in the air as his sheep, galvanized into activity by its sudden release, scrambled onto its legs. A moment later Barahir made his last stroke and stood away, gasping, from his own animal. He leaned over and shook Bremund by the hand. "Fairly won, well done!"

Bremund grinned at him, breathing hard, hands on hips, sweat outlining the muscles on his sun-browned torso. "Hah, that's what a life of lordly luxury does for you. You're out of condition, man. Look at the flab on your ribs there!" Although truth to tell, there was as little evidence of flab on Barahir's ribs as on Bremund's own.

Barahir laughed, and jerked a thumb over at the oldest among them. "Hrotha here puts us both to shame! Hey, Father, here are Bremund and I, fairly melting in our own grease, while you just go coolly about the business. Why, I'll wager you haven't even worked up a thirst."

Hrotha grinned gap-toothed at him in his turn. "No thirst?" he said. "Me? Young master, I's suspicioned you never made a worse wager in your life."

There was laughter.

"Now it's very true, Hrotha," replied Barahir, "I'd forgotten to take past form into account."

The men laughed all the harder at that, because Hrotha was well known to be fond of his cup.

Barahir turned to the few laggards. "Come on, you lot, finish up! Come and help Hrotha and Bremund drink some of my lordly beer." A chorus of manly voices growled wordless approbation.

They were happy times. Plenty of sun, plenty to eat, and always something new and interesting happening.

One day some Dwarves came to buy cloth. There were five of them, in a big wagon, pulled by two oxen. They arrived about mid-morning. Men of the farm opened the gate to let them into the yard; then there was conversation and activity around the halted wagon. The Dwarves climbed down and stretched themselves while talking with Ragnor and Ormorod and the others. They seemed to be expected.

Beren stood there on the edge of the yard, mouth open. He was fascinated by the beards. Four of the Dwarves had mostly brownish or reddish beards, but the one who was plainly the eldest had a great long beard like a silver torrent. The beards were cast into thick plaits and thrust into wide belts. The Dwarves had deep voices and deep-set, dark eyes. But they never seemed to smile; indeed they did not seem very much at ease, standing there, looking up at the taller men.

The Dwarves went first to look over the bolts of cloth. Several other children had arrived now, and all were peeping in at the door to the barn. There was some muttered discussion among the Dwarves as they fingered the thick woven wool; words Beren couldn't understand. Black eyes flicked over the men standing there, and

once at the children.

Then it was time for the noon meal. The Dwarves ate theirs outside, sitting on rounds of wood in the pleasant green shade under the lime. Hiril, who had been kept busy with the women, came out then to fetch Beren and Mal and Kiri to their own meal in the kitchen. “Come *on* Beri, don’t keep staring at them so!” she hissed in his ear, while pulling at his shirt. But Hiril had trouble tearing her own gaze from the unusual sight of the strange, broad, gruff people with their suspicious dark eyes and their spectacular rivers of facial hair.

The process of bargaining, and then loading the wagon, took up most of the afternoon. Beren became bored after a while and went to play farmers with Mal and Kiri. They had miniature buildings and stalls made out of wood chips, and broken shingles, and all sorts. Arthad had carved them some wooden animals – he was good at that sort of thing.

Of course there was a feast in the evening, in the main hall. Beer seemed to make the Dwarves friendlier; perhaps the fact that everybody was now sitting down, and so all appeared now to be about the same height, had also something to do with it.

After the food, it was time for entertainment. Everybody was eager to hear what the visitors would contribute. After some whispered consultation among themselves, two of them got up and fetched from their bundles what turned out to be small harps. There was a general intake of breath, because the instruments glittered so wonderfully in the torch light. “Gold!” whispered Hiril to Beren. Truth to tell, few sitting there had seen so much of the famous metal.

The first song was slow and rather solemn. It seemed to be mostly about earth. Only the chorus stayed with Beren:

*From Earth I came, of Earth my beard and bone,  
My life and soul belong to Earth alone.*

That, and the sight of the broad, serious faces of the Dwarves, red in the firelight; and their deep voices singing in harmony.

There was muttered approval at the end, and some polite thumping of drinking vessels on the table. But clearly the song was not exactly to the taste of the men and women of the farm. After a short whispered discussion among themselves, ending in nodding agreement, the Dwarves stood up and moved away from the table. One of them went again to the packs, and returned carrying all their helmets. As the gleaming iron caught the firelight, there was dead silence in the hall. The Dwarves all solemnly donned their headgear while people looked at one another in puzzlement and doubt. Then the eldest Dwarf sat himself down on a baulk of timber a short distance from the fire. He was helmetless, but held a fiddle in his hands. The others arranged themselves in two pairs, in front of him, facing each other. Beren saw that they had picked up spoons and metal flagons from the table.

After a short pause, the silver-bearded Dwarf nodded to the facing pairs, and they launched into a vigorous song about mining, to the lively music of the fiddle. The stamp of the old Dwarf’s boot kept time with the movements of the others as, in a rapid unison, they struck the flagons with the spoons: sometimes their own, sometimes the person to the side, sometimes across. At a pause in the music, they each struck their clockwise neighbour three times on the helmet, which excited a roar of laughter. The fiddle, the voices, and the rhythmic flash and clatter of the spoons blended with the laughter and chorus of thumps on the board by all listeners. Beren and Hiril laughed and thumped with the others. It was wonderful! When at last the puffing Dwarves came to the end, they were toasted on all sides with shouts of acclaim. They nodded their thanks; it was the first time Beren had seen them looking pleased.

Eventually it was time for bed. When Beren got up next morning, the Dwarves and their wagon had gone.

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It was harvest-time, and it was hot. It was empty at the farm – everybody was out in the fields, except for the youngest and oldest. The five farm children were left in the care of grey-haired Methemel, but she was busy in the kitchen, where the fires of the baking range made it even hotter. The children lolled out in the shade of the lime tree, bickering and bored. The leaves of the tree hung limp, and all the goodness seemed to have been squeezed out of the torpid air.

Mal stood up. “I’m going to ask grandma if we can have the bath out here.” The others bounced up with him and they poured into the kitchen in a gaggle.

Methemel was kneading dough, sweat pouring off her broad brow. She was sceptical and impatient. “I know you childer are hot. But I got to finish these loaves, now. Yer mams and dads are out gettin’ the harvest in and they’ll be wantin’ to eat when they get back, now, won’t they? How’m I going to get a meal on the table for ’em if I’m luggin’ bathwater for you tykes?”

Seven-year-old Mal puffed out his chest. “I can lug water. I’m strong.”

Methemel turned to face them, floury hands on her hips. “Look. If youse can get the bath outside, and if youse can fill it with water yerselves, then good enough. Just stay out of me hair, see? I can’t be helpin’ youse at yer play, I got things to do.”

Mal’s boasts fell somewhat short of reality. In fact filling the bath turned out to be a considerable struggle. The children managed to drag the tub out the back door, all working together. There were more trees there. Chickens were already in possession of the shade, but they were chased squawking away. Fetching the water was the hardest part. Beren and Mal and Hiril laboured together at the handle of the well. Mal and Hiril took turns carrying the buckets out. They could only manage a bucket which was less than half full. There was some inevitable spillage, and they had to give up with aching arms after six or so staggering passages. But at the end of that, there was a certain amount of cool well water in the tub. Mal began rapidly to strip off his clothes, and although the others quickly followed suit, he was the first in. “Ahhhhh – that’s good!” he said. He held out his hand to baby Kam, who was already naked, and helped him clamber in. By then Kiri was also ready, and climbed in as well. The three sat there, giggling and splashing water over each other.

There was not a lot of room left over in the bath. Hiril and Beren stood there without their clothes, uncertain. Gingerly Hiril went to insert a leg between the bodies occupying the bath tub.

“Hi-ril,” said Mal, “there’s no room!”

“*Make* room!” she answered. “It’s supposed to be for all of us!”

“It was my idea,” said Mal. “Go find your own bath!”

“That’s not fair,” said Hiril. “I carried just as much water as you.” Again she attempted with her leg to lever a space between the wriggling small bodies.

Mal grabbed a handful of mud and threw it at her. That was the signal for a general conflagration. Hiril jumped on him and the two began scratching and hair-pulling, while Beren clawed up some mud himself and tried to find chances to sling it at Mal without hitting his sister. Kam, splashed, began to howl; he was joined in this by Kiri as she copped an elbow to the head. Methemel stormed out of the kitchen just as Beren landed a satisfying splodge of mud in the centre of Mal’s back. She grabbed his ear with one hand, and Hiril’s by the other. “You two! Upstairs! And stay there til I say!”

It was hot upstairs. The two pulled on some clothes as they listened to baby Kam being soothed. “It’s not fair, we didn’t even get a dip,” said Beren. “I’m not staying up here though, I don’t care what she says.” After a moment of reflection, he giggled. “I got Mal a good one, did you see?”

Hiril sat looking pensive, then looked at Beren. “Never mind,” she said. “Listen, I’ve got an idea.” She lowered her voice, moved closer to Beren and glanced warily towards the hatch to the lower floor. “Why



don't we sneak off and bathe in the dam? Parth took me last summer, it was really nice."

"What's a dam?"

"It's down the hill a little way. I'll show you."

Beren was not sure. "Won't we get into trouble?"

"They won't see us," said Hiril. "We'll slide out past the crappery and then behind the hedge. Come on, I'll show you."

They snuck down the ladder and out the front door and then past the end of the barn to the crappery. There was a palisade there with a small gate in it. Once outside the gate, Beren was in unfamiliar surroundings. He couldn't remember having been out before, not just like that, on his own; or at least, almost on his own.

Once through the postern, they were on the drive to the main gate, just where it entered a larger track. Hiril led him down the track. It was burning hot in the full sunlight, and the road was parched and dusty. They passed between hedges of tired, crackly leaves. There were people sweating in the fields to either side, but the two kept their heads low.

The way led over a shallow hill. As they passed over the gentle curve, the dark tops of trees appeared before Beren's gaze. He stopped, then went on down at a slower pace. The trees became nearer and higher, until the track passed into their ranks. The little boy stopped again, and craned his neck, with open mouth, to look up and around at the sloping trunks, up to the tracery of branches and leaves in the heights. In the shade of the trees there was a different air: not exactly cooler, because no part of the air was cool on that hot afternoon; but fresher and more fragrant. All of a sudden he remembered the trip on horseback to the big town, earlier in the year. He had a vivid recollection of the quiet of the forest at that time; of the sense of connection with it, the feeling of belonging. Now it was as if no time at all had passed since then. Again he was surrounded by the forest, and it was as if he had simply returned, after the briefest of pauses, to the timeless embrace of this great, quiet being.

The hedges had ended at the wood, so there was nothing to stop him walking into it but some sparse twiggy growth which lined the road. He pushed through a thin patch of this, and found himself in an airy space, with the living trees rising up on every side. Beren held himself very still. He thought if he listened hard, he might hear the sap flow. There was no sound but the sleepy stridulation of insects in the shimmering heat behind him.

There was a rustling noise, and Hiril's head appeared in the gap he had come through. "What are you doing?" she hissed.

"It's so *nice* in here, Ril," he said. "Come in and see."

She pushed through the straggly growth until she was free, and standing beside him in the dead leaves which littered the forest floor. "Tickly," she remarked. "Don't you want a swim, then?"

"Shh!" he said. "Can't you feel it?"

She looked at him curiously. "Feel what? I don't know what you're talking about."

But he had no words. He shrugged. "It's just, sort of... I don't know, all of it. Dunno how to say it. It's nice. It's quiet, and sort of alive."

She looked around in puzzlement, then back at her brother. "Well you can't stay here forever. The wood won't run away, we can come back again some other day. But don't you want a dip? Aren't you hot?"

He sighed. "I suppose."

They crunched their way back through the thin growth and onto the track. Hiril turned left and led the way through the grateful shade, down the hill. The lower growth was thicker up ahead, and they started to hear the inviting trickle of water. Somewhere ahead they could hear childish voices.

At the bottom of the small valley, a thin stream of water trickled over a fall, perhaps not quite two men high. The water wandered downhill to the left, and it was from that direction that they could hear shouts and splashes. The rock wall stretched away, curving around from the right. Just opposite where they had come out was a somewhat larger dip in the wall which had been blocked by a high, solid construction of boulders. It was clear that the water had once flowed through this channel. To the right of this, a path led steeply up the slope between the bushes.

The sight of that dark wall filled Beren with a sudden nameless dread. "I don't like this place," he muttered, but Hiril paid no attention. She was listening to the shouts from down the valley. "They're all playing down at the spring," she said. "But the big pool is cooler. Come on!" And she began to scramble up the path. Beren followed. At the top, they emerged into a long, shallow valley which was filled by a pool. It was wide at this end, with open sky overhead. But a little way further down, the pool narrowed and was roofed by branches. "Come on!" cried Hiril again, and ran down the path beside the lake. As soon as she reached the shade, she pulled off her shift without stopping, threw it to the ground, and dived into the water with a shout of glee. Surfacing, she raised her streaming head and grinned at Beren. "Cool at last!" she crowed. The fine gold necklace from which she was never parted made a gleaming loop around her neck.

Beren was cautious, and he still felt uneasy – almost as if he had eaten something bad. The pool looked awfully big. He took his own grubby tunic off, but stood there, hesitant. "How deep is it?" he called.

"It's fine here, you'll be all right. I'll hold you," she said, moving nearer the bank and holding out an arm.

The first touch of the water sent a shock clear through him. He recoiled as if stung.

Hiril looked impatient. "Come *on* Beri, it's not *that* cold, don't be such a big baby!"

It wasn't actually cold at all. But something wasn't right. The bad feeling was growing in him. Mouth open, confused, he staggered unwillingly towards Hiril and collapsed beside her in the water.

"See, isn't it nice? Much better than that mouldy old bath. Hold on to me, and I'll take you a bit deeper."

Beren had no volition to say yea or nay. Something was pressing in his head, and his tongue felt like it was sticking to the inside of his mouth. Wordlessly, he put his arms around Hiril's neck as she moved slowly out until she was standing, her arms supporting him. The quiet water lapped at their necks. "Mmmmm," she said, luxuriating.

But his head was mixed up. There was such a sick feeling in his stomach. Suddenly he found his voice. "Take me back, Hiril, please!" he pleaded.

"Oh, well," she said equably, "if you don't like it. All right. You can sit in the shallows."

But it was no better in the shallows. The outline of the trees against the sky looked as if cut out of steel, and the pressure gathered in his head. Things were turning, round and round; he thought he heard voices, someone crying out. "What, what?" he cried out. Confused, he turned to Hiril. "Was that you yelling?" he mumbled to her.

She looked curiously at the white-faced and stricken boy. "I never said a word. There's no-one here, Beren, no-one shouted." She waded back and put a hand on his arm. "Are you all right?"

He didn't answer. Somehow he could not think, could not speak. Someone crying out. A choking in his throat. He thrashed around, trying to escape the approach of some nameless horror. The voices and the colours rose to a shouting crescendo which became a wave of pure grief, crashing over his head. Caught up

and embraced by his alarmed sister, the sobbing, struggling boy was washed by an overwhelming sense of loss which her warm arms were utterly unable to soothe.

\* \* \* \* \*

The horror at the pool faded rapidly from Beren's mind. But he began to dream of the Forest, of walking its wide spaces. It was never far from his mind. Sometimes during the hot days he would go to the palisade around the farm buildings and find a crack to peep through, so he could contemplate the dark shapes of the trees, which stood not far distant across the fields on every side.

The harvest was in, and the year drew to its climax. After the young men and woman came back with the kine from the hills, singing, a great feast began to be spoken of. There was preparation for it for days before – baking and brewing, sewing and laughter. All the children were excited. There was to be a play, and Hiril and Beren both had parts. Beren was to be dressed as a shock of corn, and was supposed to run in when they called 'corn!' They practised, and he got in trouble, because he was giggling so much that he tripped and messed up his costume.

The day of the feast dawned. Everybody was up even earlier than usual. The children were running about, getting under foot and being scolded for it. People had come early from the neighbouring farms. There were lots of kids about of all ages. Hiril and Beren knew most of them, but the little ones didn't have the chance to meet too often, so there was a lot of news of the summer's escapades to exchange.

Towards mid-morning, the clear note of a horn sounded outside the gates. Dag and Gram ran to the gates and threw them wide open. The children all scampered up to see who had come. As the gates swung wide, they revealed four tall people, mounted on glossy and prancing horses. The visitors rode slowly into the yard, then gracefully alighted, one after another. But such people they were! Beren had never seen anyone like them. They were so bright! They seemed to concentrate all the sunlight into a gracefully moving centre of colours and light, behind which the farmyard seemed dirty and dull.

"Elves!" people in the gathering crowd were murmuring. "The Fair Folk!"

Beren's father and mother had come out of the house now, and made haste to welcome the visitors. The two tall Elf-men placed hands on hearts in greeting, and the women made short curtsies. Father and mother bowed their heads low in answer. People were crowding around now. There was laughter, and everyone seemed to be moving around and talking at once.

Suddenly in the confusing press of people one of the new ladies was in front of Beren, crouching down and smiling at him. Somehow she had taken his hand. Her keen grey eyes, full of light, seemed to look right inside him. The lady had a long, oval face, around which flowed a river of dark hair, glossy as a raven's wing; hair which, although unbound, never seemed to tangle or to fall in her way. Her dress was the deep, heart-piercingly blue colour of the last of the evening, and it was sewn with stars at the collar. These gems flashed so brightly, they seemed almost like real stars.

All this he took in in a flash. The beautiful blue lady said "Well met, Beren. I am named Domélunë. Come and sing with me later!" Then she smiled again, let go his hand, and was away. Now she was lifting baby Kam up and was laughing with him.

Beren sighed a sigh of pure contentment. He thought he had never seen anybody so beautiful, so joyous, and so quick and graceful.

Then his mother was at his side, her own eyes dancing with excitement. "Come and greet the lord Aegnor!" She led him by the hand to where his father was talking with the tallest of the four visitors. This was a man, or an Elf he supposed he should say, with curiously arranged red-gold hair. Whether through art or nature, the locks of hair twisted upward over the man's head like flames.

Hiril was already part of the group there, shyly clutching her father's waist. Their father turned to Beren, and

put his other hand on his shoulder. "And here," he said proudly to the tall Elf, "my son!"

Deep eyes swept through Beren like a cool wind. Again he felt an exhilaration he could not explain. The flame-haired man held out his hands to him. Beren released his father's hold, and went into the embrace of the other, who lifted him up.

Elf-lord and mortal boy examined each other across a space of a few inches. The elder beheld a small, freckled, human boy; blue-eyed, somewhat grubby, with a mop of sun-bleached hair. Superficially he seemed like a thousand other small boys. But as he held the child, Aegnor was smitten by a sudden vision. He saw dark armies massed on a hill, and a warrior shining like a star, slicing through their ranks as a scythe fells ripe corn. The vision changed: a nightmare wolf's face loomed over him, with a hand thrust up before it, brandishing the sun.

Aegnor blinked at the sudden vision, which swept away as abruptly as it had come, leaving him back among the rustic folk, holding the small son of their petty chieftain. What had that been?

The boy, gazing back, received a deep impression of the Elf. He saw a beautiful face, with strong bones and a proud nose. It seemed to contain worlds of experience and feeling, although the skin was fresh and unlined. The deep grey eyes that held his own sparkled on the surface with the cheerful mischief of a young lad; but beneath that surface lay a sadness of centuries.

"I greet you, Beren son of Barahir," said the man with grave courtesy. "Shall we be friends?"

"Why yes, sir, of course," stammered Beren.

"That is well," said Aegnor with a smile. "Now I must beg your leave. We older ones must talk for a while. But later there will be time for fun." He put Beren down, laid a hand briefly again on his shoulder, then turned away.

Beren felt a strong desire to follow the flame-haired lord. He wished with all his heart to do something for him, or even just to stay beside him. It seemed to him worth quite an amount of boring older-person talk simply to be in the company of this glorious person.

Alas, the youngsters had to fill their own time, shut out from the bright Elf-people. Normally their days were packed with interest, but this one seemed to drag on forever. Beren spent it with the smaller children; the older ones all had chores to do. In fact he had never seen the farm so busy. The feast was to be in the barn. People were going to and fro, carrying everything from tables to barrels. An enticing smell of cooking began to waft from the kitchen. The young ones dodged the curses of the workers to have a peep in the barn, before being chased out again. There were tables and benches set up, and sheaves of wheat were arranged with pumpkins and all kinds of fruit at the end, where the dais was.

A few days before, a long fire pit had been dug in the yard. Wood had been laid ready, and supports for several spits erected. Only this morning, two men had staggered out of the cool room next to the kitchen with the carcass of a great deer on a spit between them, which had been laid with some difficulty, and considerable swearing, onto its supports. Others had followed with the smaller shapes of swine and sheep. Beren had watched entranced as Arthad knelt with his tinderbox to light the kindling. A few strikes, and a thread of smoke rose out of the ball of bog-cotton and shavings. The man bent over to blow gently on the glow. Soon a tiny flame appeared, almost invisible in the early daylight. They fed it with dry twigs, and it wasn't long until the flames spread under the wood, which soon commenced to crackle and pop.

That was this morning. Now, as the sun sank in the sky, the browning carcasses began to hiss, and the delicious savour of roasting meat rose to join the smell of wood-smoke in the air. Arthad and a woman called Lorinis from a neighbouring farm had spent most of the day busy about the roasts: keeping them basted, turning them at intervals, and shepherding the fire.

The sun lowered, sending long golden rays across the yard. The flickering flames began to glow in the

gathering shadow. It was time to get ready for the play. Eilinel helped Beren into his tickly costume. There was a crowd of giggling children there, dressed as various grains and fruits, hopping from one foot to the other and chattering excitedly. Laughing women led the gaggle of youngsters out of the house at last and to the side door of the barn. The sound of many voices came from inside. Neli nudged him gently to his proper place in the line behind a curtain, smiled at him, and gave him a pat on the rear. "Now don't forget! Trot up there and stand behind your sister when you're called, just as we practised!"

He could see Hiril up on the dais, only a few steps in front. The sun had set, but the barn was brightly lit by many torches. Hiril was in a white robe and was wearing a golden crown on her head, and held a golden sceptre. She was already saying her lines about the produce of the farm. At last the tally started. "Milk!" and Mal, first in line, walked out in his cow suit to stand behind her. "Wool!" A boy called Camlaf skipped out, baa-ing madly, to the answering laughter of the hidden spectators. Kiri was next in line, as "Hay!" was called. Then it was Beren's turn. "Corn!" He marched out from behind the curtain. Now he could see everything. Down the length of the barn, people were seated at long tables, lit by the torches. Others were standing at the side. All eyes were fixed on him. He halted, momentarily paralysed, finger in his mouth. He searched frantically for mother or father, but saw neither. But there was the tall lord with the strange bright hair – Aegnor, Papa had called him. As soon as the Elf caught Beren's eye, he nodded slightly at the boy, winked, and twitched his head towards the stage. Oops. Beren turned and ran onto the dais, stumbled at the step, but picked himself straight up and stood stiffly in the line with the others, ignoring the roars of laughter rolling up from the hall. Hiril turned her head and rolled her eyes at him, then went back to calling out names.

It was over before long, and the chortling children were free to run back and scramble out of their itchy costumes. As soon as they were changed, they scampered back to the hall. The meal had begun in their absence. They were shepherded to a table at the side, and served with soup and bread. Sitting at one end of the table were Bremund's twin boys, Frohar and Tahar. They were the eldest, and charged with keeping the younger ones in some sort of order. Their younger sister Parth, a slim blond girl with a slightly bony but nevertheless pleasant face, sat at the other end. She was already talking and laughing with Hiril, now minus crown, but still in her robe.

The youngsters finished before the adults, and became restive. After a while, the second of the Elf-ladies came over and joined their table. She had dark eyes and a sensitive, slender face. She was so small she seemed at first glance hardly more than a child herself; but she was no child. Her fine hair, bound back from her head, was silvery, like moonlight. The Elf-woman wore a grey dress of simple cut which nevertheless shimmered like water in the torchlight.

"Come around me, children," she bade. She smiled at them, and they felt as if bathed in a wonderful warmth. All the same, no-one thought of doing other than obeying that voice. So they all jostled down around the silvery girl and gave her their rapt attention.

"I am called Silmenen," the child-woman said to her gathered listeners. "That is 'starlight on water' in our old tongue. Now, will you tell me all your names? Or," and she tilted her head and smiled at them slyly, "shall I tell them to you?" And she looked at each in turn, said their name, and some words about them. The children listened, open-mouthed. How did she *know*? When Beren's turn came, Silmenen paused, and seemed to sit up straighter, and to regard him with extra attention. "Ah! Now you are Beren, son of Barahir and Emeldir; a pair of true hearts. Be you as true as they, at the time of your test!"

When Silmenen reached Hiril, there was again the tiniest catch, hardly to be noticed. But the Elf-girl said her name, added a few suitable words, then moved on to the remaining children.

Silmenen told them a story about a frog who had lost his friend, the moon-moth. She unfolded her slender hands, and lo! there was a tiny frog, no larger than the end of your thumb, gulping rhythmically. He was a comical, emerald green frog, bright and slick like a lolly, and he had anxious speckled eyes. After a little bit of the story, Silmenen's hands closed briefly, and when they opened again, the frog was gone! But there was a high-pitched 'trreep!' and he appeared on Mal's head. Mal clutched wildly, but the frog was gone again; but immediately Camlaf began to wriggle, the 'trreep!' was heard again, and the frog sprang out of the neck

of his tunic. The children were beside themselves with laughter as they sought the elusive frog, following the ‘trreep’ on each other, over the table, and under the benches. Beren followed the chase hesitantly, craning to see. He was worried the frog would get squashed by the excited pack of children. Suddenly he felt a cool tickle in his closed hand. He brought his hand up close to his face, opened his fingers slightly, and peeped in. There was the tiny animal. It whispered “Hello!” to him shyly in a tiny silver voice. “Will you pass me back to mistress?” So he leaned over to the Elf-maid and stretched his hand out to her.

Silmenen accepted the frog from him, her dark eyes on his, a quizzical smile on her face. “Thank you, Elf-friend,” she said softly. Then the frog was held up, and the attention of the excited and panting children was gathered without seeming effort for the last phase of the story. At last, the moon-moth was found, and the two creatures danced on Silmenen’s outstretched palms.

There was a change in the note of the hubbub then. Something was happening. All eyes were on the end of the barn, and the quantity of talk fell away into expectation. Suddenly the twin doors at that end were thrown open, allowing the entry of a double column of men and women, walking slowly and holding torches high. Two giggling young girls pranced in front, throwing rose petals from baskets. After the columns came swaying a confusing, tall arrangement, glinting with gold leaf, which revealed itself to be a high golden throne, carried on poles by eight sweating men. On the throne sat a goddess or queen, robed in torch-lit white, and crowned with gold. The queen smiled at the company and seemed a little embarrassed by the fuss. She had a long red braid which gleamed in the flickering light. Suddenly Beren recognized his mother! The dim memory of last year’s similar occasion came now also to his mind.

The Queen of the Harvest was deposited carefully, throne and all, onto the dais, where she was surrounded by the rich produce of the farm. She made a short speech, welcoming the company to the feast. She asked for silence and bowed heads, as she praised the Powers, who arrange all things in the world; in particular the lady Yavanna, the ruler and mover of all things which grow and come to fruitfulness; and finally the One, the Maker, the Father and Mother of all; and the source from which all things come.

The Queen then called on Oromar the bard, and commanded him to sing. Oromar was a man of middle age, a thoughtful-looking man with a sun-browned face and dark hair bound back by leather thongs. He turned up at the farm from time to time, but Beren did not know where he lived. Oromar brought forth his harp and sang a song of the past year’s happenings in the district. It had a pleasant lilt to it, and the people listened with enjoyment and recognition; sometimes chuckling, sometimes shaking their heads gravely, as the bard recounted the year’s accidents and fortunes. There had been new births, and some sad losses. Sly mention was made of one or two incidents which excited guffaws in some quarters, red faces in others.

It was the turn then of white-haired Fréagond, who was Bremund’s father, and the oldest of the company. He also was a harper. Fréagond sang of the times of his boyhood: of the herds of cattle in the dusty plains of the South; of the wars against the Orcs, and the cleansing of the fair valley of Ladros. Lastly he sang of Boromir, the mighty Bëoring, whose sword Frostfire had cut through the monsters like a hot knife through butter. Dreamy pictures passed through Beren’s head, as he sat there, sleepy and full of food, listening to the tale. He seemed to see the tall, raven-haired Boromir, astride a great, prancing war-horse, brandishing his bright sword. Frostfire! Nothing like that seemed to happen nowadays.

At the end of the fair song, the Queen looked toward Aegnor, who was sitting silent on a bench to one side, a cup of untouched mead in front of him. “Do you choose to sing for us, my lord?” she asked with some shyness. The voices in the hall diminished, and all eyes turned to the tall Elf. Aegnor hesitated, but then smiled his acceptance. He got up, and walked to the side of the barn, where some packs were stowed. People, eyeing him, passed quiet remarks to one another. Clearly, Aegnor was known to them. The atmosphere was one of pleased anticipation; but there was more than that in the bending of heads together with quick whispers, and in the looks people gave him.

Aegnor undid some bindings, and as he carefully unfolded cloth from his bundle, a tall harp was revealed, whose many strings glistened like polished gossamer in the light. A collective sigh came from the watching farmers. The harp seemed as sensitive as a living thing. The fine strings trembled to Aegnor’s gentle touch as he lifted the elegant device and carried it to the wool-sack on the dais which was the seat of the singers.

There was perfect quiet as he settled himself and paused his long hands over the strings.

The Elf-lord began with a gentle melody which wandered slowly from sky to earth and back again. As the strings of the harp glimmered in the light, so did the soft music seem to glimmer in the ear. Now his voice entered the stream of music – a low, pure voice, singing in a language which was strange to the folk. But no, not strange; unintelligible, but somehow familiar, as if it was a speech once known, but long out of mind. As the song slowly gathered substance, the listeners gradually ceased to pay attention to either voice or tune as separate things. To each listener, it seemed ever more that the music sounded in his own heart, was welling up *from* the heart itself, not from anywhere outside. Each became filled with a poignant sense of the great world, with the size and the space of it; and it was as if they could feel the very shape of its foundations. Visions of the deep places of the ocean came into their minds, and of the airy spaces high above. Glimpses of mighty movements and purposes they saw, and the unfolding of the world flowed before and around their senses as a great, slow symphony; infinitely beautiful, infinitely sad.

The song ended. People were openly weeping. Aegnor let his hands fall to his sides, and all sat there for a moment, collecting themselves. Then people blew their noses and wiped their eyes, laughing to each other. Big men harrumphed, blowing through their damp moustaches, and looked about themselves with a glint in the eye, as if daring any to comment or raise an eyebrow.

Aegnor suddenly stood up, and clapped his hands. “Come!” he cried. “Who is for dancing?” Answered by a roar of approval, he seized a torch and strode down the hall. “Come then! Tables to one side!” All stood up, and the barn echoed with heavings and scrapings as the benches were thrust to the sides. “Lakar! Are you with me?” called Aegnor across the crush to his companion. “Aye!” that one answered, springing up to fetch his instrument. Aegnor seemed to be everywhere in the hall at once. “Someone, anyone, of your kindness, lend me a fiddle!” he called, and one was thrust into his hands, appearing as if by magic. Now Aegnor had reached Hrotha, who was sitting in a beery haze. The old man goggled up at the Elf with his mouth wide open. “Come, father, leave your cups!” shouted Aegnor, grasping his shoulder and urging him up. “I *know* you play the pipes. I know you *must* play your pipes. Lest Elf-spells steal the savour hence from your every cup of ale!” and before the amazed Hrotha rightly knew what was happening, he had been lifted out of his cosy corner, his bag-pipes had been fetched, and he was sat on the sack of wool on the dais. The Elves jumped up beside him. Quick as lightning, Aegnor snatched a flagon from a passing maid and stood it by Hrotha’s side. “For emergencies,” he winked. He grasped his fiddle, nodded to his companion, tapped his foot thrice, and they were away.

The wildness of the tune, as the two Elves sawed at their fiddles, with Hrotha between them blowing himself red in the face, is impossible to describe. All but the very old and very young had taken to the wide floor in the centre of the torch-lit space, and the noise and the heat were deafening. Somehow it all coordinated itself – the dancers fell into the right pattern, and Hrotha’s fingers seemed to know of themselves what to play. The children were dancing with the Elf-women, warded from chaos by the lightest of touches. Beren found himself prancing in a loop, passing through ranks, grabbing a partner by the hand and twirling around – at one moment an excited Hiril, eyes gleaming; then Parth, grinning across at him in the whirl; then the blue lady, Domélunë. The skirl of the pipes and the wild shrill of the fiddles lit a fever in the blood. The two Elves, eyes flashing fire, were plying their bows like madmen; between them, Hrotha was piping and tapping his foot like one possessed.

But human flesh can sustain such a pace only so long. The tune came to an end at last, and the crowd of happy dancers collapsed onto benches, or anywhere they could, panting and fanning themselves. Hrotha, beet red and puffing, mopped the sweat dripping from his brow and his beard, and took a long pull at the flagon. Only the Elves seemed unaffected.

Domélunë came around and gathered together some of the younger children – Beren, Kirimel, Camlaf, and one or two others. “Come, small ones,” she said, “it is time for a little quiet song, and then perhaps bed.” She led them across the yard, where the coals in the fire pits still glowed, to the main house. She was holding a lit taper, and carrying a small mandolin. They sat down around her on some furs in a corner. The Elf-lady had got hold of a lamp from somewhere, and as she lit it, the growing glow reflected in her eyes, glistened in her

hair, and brought out the deep blue of her dress.

Beren laid his head against Domélunë's hip. She was warm, and had a faint spicy odour, like wild honey, or orange peel. Kiri was on her other side, and the other small ones nestled around tiredly.

When everybody was settled, the beautiful lady began to play. The shimmering notes of the mandolin were very soothing. Domélunë sang softly of the sunrise, the freshness and the little birds; and of the clean dew on the morning grass. She sang of the promise of the morning, of the dawning warmth, and of the expectation of the coming day. She sang of the heat at noon, when nothing stirred but the drowsy crickets. She sang then of the lowering of the sun, the lengthening of shadows, the weary back that looks forward to the ending of the day. At last the evening comes, and the cool shadows, with glad company at the table for the day-meal. The dim blue time outside, talk and tales by the fire inside. Finally, she sang of the softness of the night, and of sleepily nodding heads. And all the time she sang, the white jewels at her collar glinted in the lamplight.

Through his sleepiness, Beren felt a touch that he knew. "Come on, old soldier," came the gruff voice of his father in his ear. He felt himself lifted up. Arms about the familiar neck, wreathed peacefully in the familiar father-scent, the tired boy was carried to bed.

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The spell of hot weather broke with a thunderstorm. There were still warm days afterwards, but summer was over.

The cooler and wetter weather brought a lull in the farm work. At that time, Beren's father called a weapontake. He gathered the children around him the day before, and explained what was going to happen. They shouldn't be alarmed, he said, it was just an exercise, a practice. They did this so that, if there was ever a real emergency, people would know what to do.

It was just as well Barahir had warned them what to expect, because even knowing, it was still an alarming occasion. The children were fast asleep in the middle of the night when they were woken by a hubbub. There was the sound of a horn, and voices were raised; the farm dogs began wildly to bark. The children poked their sleepy heads out of the narrow window in the loft. They saw torchlight in the yard, which revealed a rider. Without dismounting, the man shouted some words to Beren's father, who had come out of the house to meet him. His message delivered, the rider urged his horse around and rode quickly out of the yard again. People were running everywhere by that time and pulling on clothes. Someone went to the steel triangle hung up by the corner of the barn and began to ring it lustily. Mal and Kiri, joining Beren and Hiril, jostled to peep out of the window.

Just as the children went to scramble down the ladder, Eilinel appeared at its head, wrapped in a thick gown. She made them put on their own robes, and told them they could come and watch, but to stay out of the way.

When they came down, they found the lower floor lamp-lit. Their father and mother were there, as well as Ormorod. All three were strapping on gear. Hrotha was helping, but it was apparent that, whatever was afoot, he was not going to be part of it. Barahir was wearing his long sword; the other two had bows and light spears. Mari, Sola and Methemel were busy fetching things. In no time at all, everything was ready. Everything seemed already to hand, even food had been pre-packed. Many years later, Beren would come to realize and appreciate the constant care his father had exercised to be always prepared for the worst eventuality; but at the moment it was just an excitement.

There was a knock on the door at this point, and Dagnir and Gramlach came in, wearing leather war-shirts and carrying their weapons. "Thad's just getting the horses," said Dagnir.

"Right then, let's get this stuff loaded up," said Barahir. The bags were carried out. Arthad had several horses ready by this time. The animals were nervous, eyes rolling in the light of the torches, but Arthad went from one to the other, stroking and soothing them, and making the curious hissing between his teeth which seems to be the universal practice of horsemen everywhere. There was a mount for everybody, and two pack-horses



extra. As the tableau moved and rearranged itself, the flame-light glinted off harness and from the hilts and edges of weapons.

Everything was ready. Men were mounting. Hiril and Beren's mother, strangely clad in rough leather, came over to her children and embraced them both quickly. "Behave yourselves while we're away! We'll be back tomorrow night, I expect." She smiled at them and turned away. With a graceful movement, she swung up onto her own horse, a tall dappled-grey gelding called Foam. The riders gathered their mounts, waved to the children and onlookers, and were away out the gate with a clatter of hooves.

In the sudden calm, Mari put her hands on her hips. "Well! I'm sure I do wish them fun with their games. Although a decent hour of the day might have sat better with all concerned."

Hrotha, who was just dropping the heavy bar in the gate, looked at her scornfully. "Daughter, better you hold yer clapper, and for why? Coz you don't know nothin' about it," he wheezed. "You'd have a different look on yer dial if them goblins came a-knockin', I can tell you that for free. *They* don't care none about night-times, or lettin' folks sleep."

Mari just sniffed. She turned to the yawning children. "Off to bed with you now!" she ordered, and chivvied them back into the house. Not that they needed much persuading, now that the excitement was over.

\* \* \* \* \*

Although the weather was still mild, the year was on the turn. Leaves began to yellow, and birds were on the move. It was the time of nuts, and berries, and of mushrooms. The older children made expeditions into the woods for these things. Hiril was allowed to go, but Beren, to his frustration, was judged to be still too young. He felt in his dreams the pull of the remembered woods; but during the daylight hours he was mostly still content within the small compass of the farmyard and the adjoining buildings.

And so the busy, carefree days of childhood passed; each full of events, each intensely lived, but each also quickly fading in importance once over. The day was everything for the children. Tomorrow was unthought of; yesterday almost forgotten.

The weather became cooler and wetter, but Beren, like most children, didn't much care what the weather was doing so long as he was out in it. However, as the nights drew in, evenings by the fire again became a part of the day to be especially looked forward to. Sometimes there would be song, at other times just talk. Beren loved to lean against the warm bulk of his father and listen to the voices, while sleepily blinking at the fire. There would often be visitors, mostly people he knew from some neighbouring settlement, but sometimes also a stranger would pass through. Then there might be gossip from other districts, or even tales from far lands. Most of the exchanges went over Beren's head, but he enjoyed hearing the interplay of voices. Vague, dreamy thoughts would well up like slow bubbles in his drowsy head, seemingly woven together with the voices, and with the play of the firelight on the faces around the table.

On occasion though, things were said which made him sit up and listen. One evening there was a woodsman staying, a hunter and trapper, who came past the farm at intervals to exchange skins for flour and beer. He was a large, wild-looking man named Radhruin, whose sharp green eyes flicked to and fro above a lush river of chestnut-coloured beard. As he began to tell of things he had seen in the forest, Beren pricked up his ears. The older people were also listening with an interest touched with apprehension. They lived surrounded by the forest, but rarely ventured far into it, and knew little about it; indeed they were rather afraid of it.

What Radhruin told them did little to calm such fears. He told of strange people who lived deep in the woods: a stunted, brown-skinned folk with dark hair and eyes. It was best to stay out of their way, he said. They were not actively hostile, but they made bad enemies; no man could best them in woodcraft, and they hunted with poison darts. Other small folk there were who were more elusive. And Tree-men: huge gnarly creatures who could tear you in half if they had a mind to. And they did say that in the deepest parts of the wood, where the trees were a thousand years old and as high as hills, the trees themselves could move about, and would hold solemn dances in secret glades at the full of the moon. He told of stealthy animals, and

enchanted caves, and of water-sprites who would tempt a man to his death in the fast-running burns of the mountains.

Beren listened to all this with open mouth and shining eyes. Every word the hunter said rang within him like a bell. His yearning for the forest sprang to life among the humdrum everyday like a blaze woken from cold ashes. He longed to ask the man questions, but was shy of standing forward in the company.

The attentiveness of this section of his audience had not escaped the big trapper's sharp eyes. He came to the end of his account and took a pull at his beer, foxy green eyes glancing over the rim at Beren. Thirst satisfied, he lowered the mug, then raised it toward the boy. "What say you, lad? Wouldst become a hunter, wild and free? Or dost prefer to live small like the mild farmer in his bounded fields?" This last with a sly sideways look at his hosts.

These of course all stirred in reaction. Barahir sat up taller on his seat and leaned forward with his arms on the table. "There might be a word or two the mild farmers could say to you there, friend," he said firmly.

Radhruin guffawed. "Well spoken!" he said. "Might we think to exchange that friendly word in the wrestling ring some time? You look like a fellow likely to raise a light sweat on a man."

Barahir laughed in his turn and shrugged. "Always happy to help a friend to some exercise. We have games at midsummer."

"I know," said Radhruin. "Getting in practice already, I hope, are ye?" He laughed again, then took a pull at his beer. After wiping his mouth, he said, "Jests to one side, I did mark the light in your lad's eye there as I was spinning out my woodsman's yarn. Have you thought he might like to try the life?"

Barahir looked surprised. "What – trapping?"

"Aye," said Radhruin. "Why not?"

Beren's father scratched his head. "Well – I don't know. He's a bit young yet to be thinking what he's going to make of himself." He smiled down at Beren and shook him gently. "What do you say, Son? Too much mildness hereabouts for you?" Beren wriggled with embarrassment as the others around the table laughed. His father turned back to the hunter. "He'll decide his own way when he comes to it," he said, at which it was the other's turn to shrug. The talk then turned to other matters.

Hiril and he talked about it when they snuggled up together under the firs. "Is that what you want to do, Beri? Go and hunt animals? You always did like the forest."

Beren in his heart wasn't sure. But he said stoutly, "Nah – reckon I'll be a farmer, like Papa."

"Papa's more than just a farmer," said Hiril proudly. "He's a Bëoring, and he's master of this whole western end of the valley."

"What's a Bëoring?" Beren wanted to know.

Hiril rolled her eyes – a frequent response to Beren's remarks. "Do *not* tell me you do not know what a Bëoring is. Honestly, Beren, sometimes I wonder you have enough brains to pull your pants up. *You're* a Bëoring! And so am I." And she told him about the original Bëor, whose name was Balan, who had led his people west, ages before; how he had met, and become friends with, the great Elf-lord Finrod, whose brother Aegnor Beren had met that summer; and how Balan the Bëor was Beren's great-great-great-something grandfather; which made *him*, Beren, a Bëoring. "Grandfather is the present Bëor, that means the Landholder, and uncle Bregolas will be the next."

"Oh," said Beren, and they lay quiet for a while.

"That big man looked half-way like a big animal himself," Hiril giggled after a while. "Like a big bear." She

growled in her throat and made to bite Beren. “Arrrr I smell little boy, yum yum!”

“Get off!” he giggled, struggling. They carried on for a while until there was a thumping on the floor from the room below. The two fell apart and lay quietly, suppressing chortles. After they calmed down, Beren said, “Anyway, Bëoring or not, I suppose I have to follow Papa in the farm. Just as you’ve got to marry somebody and be a farmer’s wife.”

“No I don’t!” replied Hiril indignantly. “Aunty Andreth says she’s going to teach me to read next spring. I’d like to study all the stories, just like her.”

Beren thought about that. He remembered Aunty Andreth: the old lady with the calm voice. “But she’s such a long way away,” he protested.

“It’s not that far,” said Hiril. “Anyway, she said she was going to arrange it, if I wanted it.”

“What do you want to learn to read for?” He couldn’t see the point.

She rolled on her stomach and looked at him with a light in her eyes. “Because of stories! You like stories don’t you? Well books are full of stories, about all kinds of things. And because I want to *know*.” She pulled out of the neck of her dress the fine gold chain she wore always, which had a tiny shell threaded through it. Fingering the shell she said dreamily, “Stories about the sea maybe. I’ve often wondered what the sea was like.”

“Huh. Just a lot of water.” He lay for a while, getting sleepy. At last he said, “Ril?”

“Mmm?” came from her mound of furs.

“I don’t know what I want to be. It’s all mixed up in my head.”

She reached out an arm and patted him. “It’ll be all right. Sleep now.” So he did.

\* \* \* \* \*

The first snowfall came as last year, with the same excitement. Beren knew what to expect now. He was a year older, and a year bigger; and suddenly a new world opened out to him – a world of sledding, and skating, and snow fights. His mother taught him to ski, and he picked it up in no time, and loved it. He would have spent all day on skis if he could.

Hiril was not so keen on skiing, so he spent more time in the company of Mal and Cam and a handful of other children of a like age and mind. The new mobility opened out his world to him. He discovered the neighbouring farms, and the mill, and the brewery, and the blacksmith. All the latter were in a small cluster of houses, an embryonic village, which lay on the main road beside the river.

The boy was often aware of the forest, which lay everywhere near at hand. Although more land was being cleared all the time, doing so was slow work; and the size of the settlement, the amount of cleared land, was as yet fairly small.

The woods did not seem so inviting in winter. Everything was quiet, and empty, and so open and bare. The spirit in them was sleeping. Beren made a few excursions a short way into it, but could not lay hold of anything. The feeling of connection he had felt so strongly before was elusive, as if reluctant to be disturbed. After that he restricted his journeys to the tilled lands; but the black tree shapes would often tug at his gaze.

He learned too to be wary of the winter. Snow was beautiful, but hidden in that soft, clean beauty was danger as stark as a knife blade. He found that out on a trip to a neighbouring farm in company with Camlaf. Beren liked the older boy well enough, if only in moderate doses. Camlaf could never resist the urge to clown; and a chap got a bit tired of that after a while.

Snow was falling when they set out: a gentle drift of pretty flakes out of a grey sky, the kind it was fun to catch with your tongue, or blow, feather-light, off the end of your nose. Gramlach stopped them at the gate. “Oi, where you two off to? Better stop here for a bit, the way the weather be lookin’.”

Beren was impatient. “It’s only a bit of snow!”

Cam, of course, took his cue to clown. He dodged an oncoming snowflake wildly, then fell as if struck to the ground, wailing “Aaaagh it got me! The snowflake got me!”

Gram directed his remarks to Beren. “I’m not sure your Dad would be too keen on you going out just now, young ’un. It’s like to come on pretty thick in a short while. Why don’t you go and ask him, eh? Oh get up, thou great loon!” This in a disgusted voice to Camlaf, who was rolling in the snow at the man’s feet, thrashing his arms and making gargling noises.

Beren was jumping up and down with impatience. “We’re only going to Cam’s place, he has to get back anyway, doesn’t he? It’s just across the field, you can see it from here! Cam, get up – get *up*, will you, come on, let’s go!” He could sense that Gramlach, young and junior at the farm as he was, was not secure in his authority.

“Look,” protested Gramlach. But the boys dodged past on either side of him. “Bye!” Beren called back cheekily.

Muttering and shaking his head, the young man turned back to his work.

They didn’t go direct to Cam’s farm, but first took a detour down the hill to where there was a pond. They had a kind of a den there made out of sticks and old rubbish. They had chipped a hole the day before in the ice covering the pond, and had tried ice-fishing; but getting tired of this, with no result, they had propped the fishing pole up and left it overnight. There was only a thin skin of new ice on the open water, but the bait was gone, with no fish on the hook. They re-baited it and sat down for a while with their best attempt at patience.

Giving it up at last in disgust, they went outside again. They found that conditions had changed. A wind had got up, and the snowfall had increased greatly in density. The soft flakes from before had changed to hard icy particles which stung the eyes and found their way into your collar. The boys shivered, but set off doggedly back up the hill.

The wind was growing in power all the time, and the light was becoming dim. They seemed to be at the top of the slope, but the air was so full of flying snow-grit that they could no longer tell exactly where they were. It hurt even to raise the face to try to look around. The icy wind reached fingers into every crevice of their clothing, and they were growing cold, and rather frightened.

They set out in what they thought was the right way, but after a short while the slope, which should have picked up again, began instead to fall away. Suddenly Cam, who was slightly in front, fell into what seemed like a hole. He cried out in pain. Beren stopped, shielded his face from the howling wind with his gloved hand, and tried to make out what had happened. The snow was so thick in the air, he could hardly tell. By the vague shapes, it looked like Cam had fallen down a sort of rocky ledge – not more than a foot or so high, but rough. Beren couldn’t remember seeing anything like it near the farm. Gingerly he manoeuvred his skis down over the rocks til he was squatting at Cam’s side. The boy was rocking back and forth, hugging his shin, and tears of pain were freezing on his face. “I want my Dad!” he cried.

Beren didn’t know what to do. He put an arm round the other boy’s shoulders. “We’ve got to get out of here!” he yelled against the noise of the gale. “How bad is your leg? Can you stand up?”

But the other boy just shook his head and sobbed.

Beren shook him fiercely. “Cam! Your Dad’s not here! We’ve got to do it by ourselves!”

“We don’t know where we are, we don’t know which way to go,” the other moaned.

Beren stood up, thinking. It was getting dark. He was shivering hard, but he ignored it. He *knew* this place. It was his *own place*. So *where was the farm?* And suddenly, he was sure.

He knelt again by Camlaf. “It’s that way! Now get up! *Get up!*” The other looked at him, open mouthed; but obediently he struggled to his feet, wincing. “Good man!” encouraged Beren. “Now trust me! It’s not far.” And he held his friend’s arm as the two struggled up the ledge into the wind. Beren kept the gale on the left of his face as he forced his skis through the soft new fall. Cam, pulled along by the strength of his younger friend’s will, battled slowly after him. After a short while, the slope began to rise. And after five minutes of uphill struggle, a ragged dark band appeared in the gloom: it was the hedge at the edge of the cart track!

Hearts brimming with relief, they struggled through the hedge and onto the track. They had hardly done so when they saw lights in front of them. Out of the snow swept a party with flaming brands – Beren’s parents, Gramlach, and the other young men of the farm. Spotting him, Beren’s mother skied just about full at him, and as they met together with a shock, her arms wrapped around him in a fierce hug. After a moment she held him back at arm’s length, anxiety written over her white face. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, but Cam’s hurt his leg.”

Someone gathered up Cam. They went to take Beren’s skis off, preparatory to doing the same with him, but he fended them off. “It’s all right, I can ski!” So his mother wrapped him in an extra fur, and away they went. Of course it was no distance at all. In the house they were set shivering in front of the fire, wrapped in furs, as water was heated. His mother was laving Cam’s scraped shin. At this moment, there were urgent voices at the door: Cam’s father and uncles. All was a confusion of figures and voices. When Beren’s mother came back to him, he put his arms around her neck and burst into tears.

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The name they learned for their people was Rrrk-khaish, but usually they called themselves Lice – the Lice of God. None of them had ever seen God, and for sure, none of them had the least desire to, but they all knew he was there, in his inner fortress, somewhere in the bowels of Central<sup>9</sup>; around which the Rrrk swarmed, and quarrelled, and killed one another betimes. ‘Lice’ seemed a grimly appropriate name.

Choker-with-shit was fast, cunning and vicious, even for a Rrrk. That meant he might survive for quite a while, with luck. He’d got his name from the way he had trashed a birth-mate when fresh from the brood. Trashed him, then ate him of course. Brother, rival, tormentor, what did it matter? Choker rarely thought about it any more.

It was just a nick-name. Nobody was given a name, you just had a number, branded onto your left buttock after you were birthed. There were lots of jokes about that.

Choker did think about other things, quite a lot of things in fact. That wasn’t so usual, maybe. Early on he started to wonder what it was all about. He remembered the brood: jammed in with a lot of other youngsters of his sort. There was a lot of fighting, even some killing, as he’d experienced himself, from the favourable end as it were. There seemed to be a lot of killing, with one thing and another. Anyway, his bunch were thrown out pretty soon to make way for the next brood. Then there was training: some schooling, some practice with swords and bows.

The bigger Rrrk called the beginners New Scum, and day-long cursed their hides from one end to the other. In classes the New Scum learned that the place they were in was called Central. They learned how God had made Central, had made everything in it, had made the whole world in fact – the vastness of which Choker found hard to grasp – but was shut away from most of it just now by a whole crowd of renegades. These rebels were Outlanders, and they were of different sorts to the Rrrk. There were three types of Outlander. You had the fat hairy ones who dug in the ground: they were tough, made good slaves for the mines and forges.

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9 The Orcs’ name for Angband.

The second sort were big soft ones who weren't a lot of use for anything but breeding. And then there were the Star-eyes, Elves as some called them. They were the real bastards. Nobody knew where they came from, if God had made them or what. There were all kinds of bad stories about the Star-eyes, how they could flay a fellow with one look, and so forth. Choker privately felt that, if God had made the Star-eyes along with supposedly everything else in the world, then it had been a mistake on God's part, to say the least.

Among other things, the New Scum were taught Outlander lingo. It might have been boring, but in fact learning was no trouble when every month the dullest in the class was declared fair game. A fine chase, followed by a pleasant snack. You just made damn sure it wasn't you.

Eating was the thing, if you wanted to get on. Rrrk were born small, which wasn't good, because size was what kept you alive. The strong pushed the weak around – of course they did. And if you wanted to get strong, you ate. But you'd never get strong on the official rations. A smart Louse kept his eye out for ways to supplement it. Choker had started early on this track via the good offices of his trashed and eaten brood-mate. As he learned the ropes of that place, Central, he found opportunities to sneak extra. A theft here, a throttling there – it added up. If they caught you, there was usually no worse than a whipping – well, whipping was fairly bad actually, it left you a mess, and vulnerable under the hungry eyes of your mess-mates. Choker was whipped once or twice, but he survived, and learned from the experience.

After a while, he managed to work his way up to being the boss of the class. They snatched him out of it then and put him in a squad. That was tough again, because he went from the largest in his group to the smallest, had to study eating all over again. But hey, that was life.

The squad was a military unit. Choker hadn't expected to end up in the army, although he maybe should have done. He'd been aiming for a cushy billet in Central. Well, he'd been a little too good at sword-practice maybe. He'd attracted attention. That was the problem, right enough: how to ease your position in the system without catching the eye of higher-ups.

There were ten Lice in a squad, under a squad-leader. Five squads to a troop. Five troops to a cohort. And eight cohorts to a legion. And who knew how many legions in Central!

The army, now. The legions were all lounging about in Central at the moment, but people did get sent out on raids now and then. There had been big battles in the past, and rumour was that a breakout was being planned, a big operation to push back the Rebels; although quite when that would happen, nobody seemed to know. Choker thought a lot about this as he was establishing his position in the squad. Those battles in the past had not been very successful – the official story was otherwise of course, but here they all still were, hemmed in by rebels. It wasn't hard to join the dots. That meant a lot of Lice had got chopped up. What was the risk of that happening again, if it came to another fight? There didn't seem much to look forward to in this life; but Choker was pretty clear on one thing, and that was that it would be better not to be chopped into quivering bits by Star-eye swords. Avoiding that would be a flying start.

He thought a lot about the Outside. The lessons on it he had been given as New Scum had been cursory, and Choker's present ideas on it were hazy. He thought it might be a clever plan to find out a bit more; but he met no Lice who had been out there, and nobody he talked to seemed to have much clearer notions about Outside than he had himself.

There were Outlanders in Central: slaves in the mines, and breeders. They would know things of value. Choker thought about the possibilities. He had no reasonable excuse to get to the mines, and greatly feared that if he once got in there, he would never get out again. That left the breeders.

He managed after a while to work up an errand in the breeder department of his section – a package to pick up. When he got there though, at first there was no chance to sneak off on his own. He was told sharply to wait for his delivery in the corridor. So he stood there, being scowled at by the big guards, wondering what to do next. The breeders were in chambers off this very passage: indeed, he could glimpse the head of the nearest one. But under the glares of the guards, he dared not take a step in her direction. And as soon as he got his package, they'd chase him out again.

While he was trying to think of a plan, luck came to his aid. There came a sudden commotion towards the end of the passage – somebody screaming: some breeder, he guessed. The guards were called down there, and all hurried away. Choker was left alone and contemplating the woman in the nearest cell.

He walked over to the doorway and lounged there, inspecting her. There was no light in the room, only what came in through the doorway, and the further details of her huge, naked heap of a body, stretching away towards the far side of the chamber, were shadowy and hard to make out. About all that Choker could see were bunches of swollen tits crowding each other for space along the sides. The gross form heaved intermittently, and he guessed she wasn't far off her time for another batch.

The body-choppers had mostly left her head alone. The hair had been killed, so she was bald, and all the teeth had been taken out as a precautionary measure. Breeders had bitten themselves down to an artery before now. They'd taken her arms too for the same reason, there were just stumps left. The front part of her body was supported on a filthy canvas sling, and a fat feeding tube heaving full of God knows what muck was stuck into the base of the throat.

The woman had high cheek bones and eyes of a blue which reminded Choker unpleasantly of the open sky. The eyes glared at him now. "What are you gawping at?" the breeder snarled at him. "You shit-faced cockroach."

She spoke in the Outlander lingo of course. But Choker could get by in that pretty well. He'd paid attention in school; obviously he had, because he hadn't been et.

"Now, now," he replied in the same speech, "is that manners? Better you shut your gob, Breeder, before someone comes and shuts it for you."

She sneered at him. "You don't dare lay a finger on me, you stinking turd, and you know it." It came out more like 'ftinking' due to the lack of teeth.

He glanced carefully down the corridor to check that the guards were still busy, then came in and sat companionably at her side. The dirty face was within arms reach, and he could keep his voice down. "Nah, I don't mean me," he said, "I'm the peaceable type. Live and let live, that's me. But it might be a bit different with some of the others, that's all I'm saying. Just a bit of friendly advice, like."

"'Friendly'," she repeated, baring her toothless gums at him in a horrible mirthless grin. "Well this is a day of wonders, to be sure. Friendly advice? From a stinking Orc."

"Well, why shouldn't I be? Don't cost me nothing. Anyway, it's not as if you're exactly on a rest cure here, Sister, is it? Even s'posing I did want to do you a mischief, I don't actually need to. I don't need to lay a hand on yer. Reckon you've got a pretty full plateful as it is. I'm sorry for yer, actually."

"You piece of shit," the girl snarled. "You twisted monster. Stick your false sympathy, and your 'advice'. Go fuck yourself, maggot. Don't you 'sister' me. If your words cost you nothing, it's because they're worth nothing. They still wouldn't be, even if you meant them. What possible use could I have for your sympathy, feigned or otherwise?"

Choker shrugged. "Can't do much else for you, can I?"

"You could do plenty," she said. "As if you would. Evil maggot. Scum."

"Come on now," said Choker. "Don't be like that. What could I do for you? What? Nothin'!"

"You could wipe the sweat out of my face for a start, *Brother*," she sneered. "Only I know you won't. Words are cheap, and yours are as empty as my heart is of hope."

Now Choker, for no reason that he could fathom, actually did as she asked. He took a reasonably clean

corner of his rough tunic and carefully wiped it over her forehead, then over the fine skin around and under the eyes. He left smears behind, but the bitter moisture was removed for the time.

The girl opened her blue eyes again and looked at him wonderingly. "I never thought you'd do it," she said.

Choker shrugged again, feeling uncomfortable.

The blue eyes regarded him pensively. "That does actually feel better. Well now. Ho, now. Let me think about this. This opens some possibilities. Brother cockroach, if you're in a mood for doing favours, there's another you could do for me."

"Oh yeah?" He grinned. "Favours, yeah. Sure. Hey, I'm mister favours, me. What favour?"

The breeder girl winced as another crescendo of caterwauling came from down the corridor. The horrible howls echoed through the whole building. She closed her eyes, then opened them again and looked at Choker. "Cut my throat," she said.

He leaned way back and looked over her face for a long moment, then shook his head. "Sorry. Can't do it. Like you said, it'd be more than my own life's worth, interfering with a Breeder. Anyway," he glanced again at the heaving mound of her body that almost filled the back of the tiny room, "don't worry, you won't last long. Four, maybe five broods, and you'll be done. We probably won't even eat you, with all the crap they pump into you."

The bald woman closed her eyes wearily. "Thanks for the consolation, I don't think," she said. "Just tell me what do you want, will you. I know you want something. In return for your 'favours'. Tell me, then leave me in peace."

He hitched himself a little closer. "I want to know what it's like outside."

She looked at him blankly. "Outside?"

"Yeah, you know. Your country. You from the West or South?"

"West." She eyed him uncertainly. "You want me to tell you about my homeland?"

Choker nodded. He wiped with his tunic over her forehead again, where the drops were beading anew. The choppers had left her no eyebrows, and the sweat ran straight down into her eyes.

The ruined creature was silent for a while. "Home," she murmured at last, in a voice so low that Choker had to strain to catch it. "I knew a girl there once... A long time ago. A happy girl. She had a man, a good man. They hoped for children..." The gross body heaved again in the dark behind her, and a spasm pulled at her face, as if she was stabbed by a shaft of pain. She gasped once or twice, then went on. "Children. On a farm it was, not far from the mountains: the high blue mountains, where nobody goes.

"It's hard to remember, it's all so long ago. But I know there was water that shimmered under the moon, and there was a way the snow lay white on the hills, but so blue in the shadows; and I know there was whispering green coolness under the trees in the heat of the summer day."

Choker was impatient. "I don't want to know that kind of shit," he growled.

"Shut up." The girl grimaced again from some internal churning in the swollen body behind her. After the spasm was past, and she had breath again to talk, she said tartly, "If you want to hear it, then you have to hear it my way.

"Now, that girl. Well that girl, you see, she's dead and gone. Dead and gone. Long long ago. And between me and her, between me and the woods, and the hills, and the flowers of the meadow, there is a great, gaping gulf. There was an ocean in the gulf, an ocean of tears; all the tears there are. All the tears there are." She



closed her eyes and shivered, before opening them and going on. “But now the tears are all dried up and gone. Dried up into the dust. There’s no tears any more. There’s just the gulf, and the dust. And all the things the girl once knew, all the beauties, all the laughter, are far away on the other side. Far, far away.”

Choker was fidgeting with exasperation. Why was she wasting precious time! “I don’t want to hear about any flowers, any of this Elvish rubbish. Tell me where the strong points are! I want to know where a fellow can sneak in and out again, without getting caught.”

The girl’s face slowly turned purple as she twisted her features into an inhuman knot of fury. “You filth,” she hissed, “you unholy creature of slime. Motherless worm! Poxed maggot, gnawing in the bowels of evil! I should have known it. You want advantage, don’t you, so you can steal more helpless girls, to condemn to this living nightmare. You muncher of festering turds. I have just one thing to say to you: never! Never, never, never, never. Not one word that helps you to that will you get from me.”

Choker was not fazed by the insults but he was a bit surprised at her vehemence. “Eh? What? I can’t see what difference it makes to you,” he said. “What’s it to you if we catch a few more? You’re never going to see your people again anyway. Won’t hurt if you just tell me a few things. Tell you what, I’ll come times and mop your face again, how about that?”

“Piss off, Orc.”

Choker was genuinely puzzled. “Don’t really understand your attitude, old girl. It’s just a few words. You’ve got nothing to lose, and maybe something to gain.”

The toothless mouth sneered at him again. “You don’t understand anything, do you,” the girl said. “Just tell me one thing, filth. I want to know. Aren’t you afraid of judgement?”

He glanced uneasily at the doorway. The sounds down the corridor had died down, it was time to go. “Judgement? How do you mean?”

“After you die.”

He scoffed. “That’s a good one. Who’s going to judge me? God? Don’t make me laugh. He’s got better things to spend his time on.”

“ ‘God’ ,” she said, “which god? You mean Melkor, don’t you. The Traitor, the Smasher. The one who rules in this frightful place.”

“He rules everywhere!” replied the Rrrk, suddenly furious, although he would have been hard put to say why. “He made the world, and everything, and rules it all!”

“Hah,” she sneered, “listen to it! Made the world? Tell me then why he is obeyed only in this hellish corner of it. Tell me why all the free creatures of the world are leagued against him. Tell me why it is that you, Orc, hate the sun and the moon and stars, yet you can’t see in the dark. Tell me why you have to eat and drink things which make you gag. If your Master is the Creator, then he made the trees, and my flowers, he made rainbows, and waterfalls in the moonlight. Why would he make things he hates?”

“Just shut up!” he shouted. “Stop talking about it. I don’t want to hear about that!”

“There *is* a God,” the breeder said to him relentlessly, “but it isn’t your runagate master. The true God, the One, he *made* your master, and he made *you*. Better you start thinking what you’re going to say to him.”

“Shut up, shut up!” he hissed, his face twisted into a savage mask, arm raised to strike. But before Choker could commit himself further, the returning guard surged in through the doorway and grabbed him. The brute hauled Choker up by his collar, feet dangling off the ground, and shouted at him, face jammed into face. “Just what the fuck are *you* doing in here, you slimy maggot?” Spittle speckled Choker’s face. “Scurry back

where you belong, filth!” The guard cast him in a heap against the corridor wall. Choker scuttled out of there then before they could serve him out any harder.

It was a long time before he found an excuse to visit the breeding centre again. When he looked in the same door, there was a different body there. But somehow he found that he couldn't forget the blue-eyed girl, or the words she had said. All nonsense, of course... but he couldn't forget.

### Year 442

Beren found it hard to feed the birds nowadays. He was sorry for it, because he knew that many of them starved in winter.

He had done so a few times that winter without exciting much notice. Everybody around the farm always had such a lot to do, there was little time for idle observation. But Hiril knew about it, and Hiril must have said something.

What he usually did was stand in the front yard and call. The different sorts of birds had different calls. Birds weren't just birds: those of one race wouldn't talk to those of another; they wouldn't have seen the point in trying. But Beren knew all the calls. So the birds would flock to him and sit on his head and shoulders, with a colourful overflow onto the bare branches of the lime tree. They would take the bits of fat and grain and chirp their happiness. It wouldn't take long, because the amount of food he could carry was limited, and there were many birds.

But there came the day when the birds, suddenly alarmed, all flew away before the finish. In the ensuing silence, Beren turned to find that his mother was standing in the doorway, staring at him with a strange, strained look on her face. Hiril was beside her, looking frightened; and most of the farm people seemed to be craning their necks, either behind the pair, or peeping out of the narrow windows on the sleeping floor.

Nobody said anything, until Beren's mother beckoned to him and said quietly, “Beren. Come inside now.”

All that day, the people behaved to him in a funny way – they looked at him funny, almost as if they were scared. They got over it eventually of course, but somehow it was never quite the same afterwards.

Dinner that evening was a quiet affair. Nobody seemed to feel much like talking. Afterwards, his mother and father took him to one side in the hall. They went and sat down together in a room at the end, where there were looms and benches. This was the room where the women span and weaved, and where the men carved and worked leather. Tonight however it was empty, and of the several lamps which usually brightened the space, only one was lit. There were two braziers for warmth.

Beren's father sat Beren on his lap. His mother, looking anxious, elbows on her knees, was sitting just across from them. Beren looked from one to the other, uncertain whether he was in trouble or not. But there was no anger in their eyes, only worry – worry, and perhaps just a little of the white-cornered look which had been in the others' eyes all day.

“Son,” said his father gently, “we want to talk about this business with the birds.”

Beren fidgeted, but could think of nothing to say.

“Can you... understand them?” asked his father. “Or is it all just pretend?”

“Well, yes, Papa,” said Beren. “I really do.”

His father digested that. “Is it just birds?” he asked after a time.

“Uh, no, Papa, I can understand the dogs and chickens too. And the horses. And – well I guess just about everything.” He looked at his mother. “I didn't know it was wrong.”

His father rubbed his son hard on his back. “No! No, it isn’t *wrong*. Never think that. It’s just – well, do you know that we *can’t*?”

“Talk to animals?”

His father nodded.

Beren had never thought much about it. He didn’t know what to say, and looked in confusion again at his mother. She reached over and took his hand.

“Dear,” she said, “don’t worry. It’s *all right*. We just have to think what’s best to do. You have this – power, and that is no bad thing. But the world is full of strange things, and people can get frightened of strange things. We are worried that people could get frightened of *you*.”

“Why me?” asked Beren. “I’m not special.”

“No,” agreed his father, “I wouldn’t like you to think that you were. But different people are good at different things. You’ve seen how Arthad can mend things, and how good he is at carving wood. *I can’t do that*. Your mother here is the best shot in the district,” at which she smiled wryly, “and I defy any man to beat Hrotha at the shearing, or at any number of other things, come to that. So now we find out that you are a good man with the bird-talk, that’s all. It would be a strange thing if you weren’t good at something.”

His mother looked him in the eye. “This is a gift to you from the Powers, Beren. It is a *wonderful* thing. I don’t know, no-one does, why it was given to you. But I am sure of this: it wasn’t for nothing. *Everything* has a purpose in this world. And the reasons will become clear to you at the proper time.”

His father stirred uneasily beneath him. “It’s just...,” and he looked helplessly at his wife.

Emeldir glanced at him, then continued to Beren. “The people here are just simple folk. We all are, really, except your father and I have perhaps had wider experiences than most. They’re scared of things they don’t know. So it would be better if you... if you could somehow...”

“We think you had better try not to talk to animals where the people can see you,” said Barahir. “It doesn’t mean it is wrong, it is just a question of being careful. People are silly to fear such things, but people *are* pretty silly, there is no getting around it. We won’t make them otherwise just by wishing it.”

“Do you understand, Son?” said Emeldir. “We are as proud of you as anything – and maybe a little scared too. None of us has ever heard of anything like this, and we don’t know what it means, and what it will come to. But we are both sure from our experience of people that the best thing would be if you took some care not to wave it in their faces. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mama, I think so. I won’t talk to the birds in front of people any more.”

The couple glanced at each other, then Barahir ruffled his son’s hair. “All right then, lad, good enough. Just do your best. Now, time you were in bed, eh? Give’s a kiss, and off you go.” Beren hugged his father and kissed his rough cheek, then reached to his mother and buried his nose likewise in her good-smelling softness: arms around her neck, the ruddy braid of her hair filling all his view. Then he skipped out of the room.

Left alone, Emeldir stared at her husband with a hand held to her face, the tears she dared not show til now shining in her eyes. He held out his arms, and she came to him. “I’m scared for him, Bari,” she whispered. But he had no words to comfort her, all he could do was hold her tight and stroke her shining hair.

On the sleeping loft, Hiril was still awake. As Beren scrambled over, she turned over and looked at him straight, a little flushed in the cheeks. “Beren, I am very sorry – you know I am not a tale-bearer! But this just seemed different, somehow.”

“It’s all right Ril, I wasn’t in trouble. We just talked a bit, ’s all.” He reached over an arm and gave her a rough embrace. “It’s all right Sis, don’t get in a state,” he repeated.

As they snuggled down in the furs she whispered to him, “It’s really true? You can talk to birds? I always thought you were making it up.”

“I guess,” he said. “But I never thought nobody else could.”

“Elves can,” she said.

Beren sat up. “They can?”

He saw her nod in the half-light.

He thought about this for a bit. “But I’m a boy, not an Elf,” he said at last. “I don’t want to be different, Ril. Why me?” The thought upset him, and he caught his breath suddenly in a half-sob.

Hiril turned straight back over and took him in her arms. “Shh, hush my little bub. I’ll look after you,” she whispered. The two children lay there in their tiny corner of space and time; in a fragile, fleeting bubble of warmth and safety, while the great world rushed past them like a torrent around a rock.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was a difficult spring. The new season simply didn’t want to get started. The snow thawed, froze again, thawed, froze; then there was more snow. After the snow finally gave up, rain set in, and never seemed to end. The ground was soaked, and there was deep mud everywhere. Nobody could go out with any pleasure; and what was much more important, they could not get on with the sowing. Wood at the farm was also getting low. Tempers became short; the adults were anxious, the children fretful.

But at last the sun came out. Everywhere the spring flowers carpeted the ground in joyous confusion, and the ground began to dry.

Beren went with Arthad and Dagnir to fetch back some logs to cut up. They took the team of work horses: great stout beasts with broad hooves for traction in the mud. Arthad tended the beasts, but Dagnir knew best how to rope up the tree trunks. It was a thick day, with grey clouds hurrying overhead, and a chilly wind which now and then flung a scatter of rain in their faces. They went to a place not far inside the forest where logs had been stacked up the previous year. Arthad told Beren they axed better when fresh, but sawed (and carried) easier when dry.

The trees of the forest were still bare, but crocus were thick on the ground everywhere – purple, white and gold, like the rich carpet in a King’s palace. Buds on the smaller bushes were swelling. Birds were busy high and low, and telling the world about it. Beren listened, but was careful not to join the commentary.

They reached the place, and the horses were turned loose to pick up what green stuff they could scavenge. The two men sat on a stump to consider the problem. All around them, great, dark trunks reared into the sky. The trees creaked uneasily as the wind overhead swayed at their upper branchwork. The leafless forest was still open on every hand, and the swell and shape of the ground was apparent for some distance.

Dagnir turned to Beren. He was a strongly-built man, with a shock of dark hair, and deep-set eyes in a broad face full of bony curves and hollows. “Now see here, youngster. Like I told you before: this ain’t no picnic. You’re too young to be much help yet, but you’re not too young to learn. Pay attention, and stay out of the way when you’re told, or we’ll leave you at home next time, unnerstand?”

“Yes, Dag,” said Beren meekly.

“And no foolin’ around on any account, you hear me?”

“No, Dag.”

“Tomorrow we’ll take young Mal out, and you’ll have to stop at home then, any road. No good takin’ the pair of youse at once, you’d just be fightin’ again.”

“All right, Dag.”

“Only takin’ yer to get you out of your mother’s hair, really.”

Gradually the job got done. They picked out a trunk, and hitched it behind the patient horses. Dagnir showed Beren where to place the ropes, how to avoid chafing, and how to tie the knots. He made Beren practise these, and gave him first turn at hauling the ropes tight. The wet ropes were harsh and slippery, and the work was painful to the hands in the cold air. When everything was ready, Dagnir took Beren to one side while Arthad urged the horses forward. Puffing noisily and straining against the harness, the team slid the great trunk off the pile and began to drag it down the forest path. The track was muddy, and more than once the cursing men had to work to lever the log free and so help the sweating horses.

They managed several logs in the day. At the end of it, Beren was as dirty, scraped and tired as the two grown men. They set up two baths in the lodge at the far end of the yard, where the single men lived. The men – Ragnor, Dagnir, Arthad and Gramlach – were to have one, Beren and Mal the other. Mal had been helping Ragnor and Gramlach with the business of sawing the logs up.

Water was heated in a big cauldron which was set over the fire. Sola and Neli helped the men to carry water from the well in the corner of the yard by the kitchen door. The men teased them of course, casting doubt on their motives; according to them, the women were unhappy with their own choices in men, and hoped to catch a glimpse of some alternatives. They held back a bit with Neli though, they knew she was shy. Sola however had a tongue which could skin a boar alive, as they said in those parts, and some of her retorts made the men wince, one after the other, as she singled them out one by one for her particular scorn. At last, laughing, the men thanked the two women, ushered them out and closed the door. The men’s bath was filled with steaming water, and the refilled cauldron was back on the fire for the boys’. The men drew lots for who would get first go, and Arthad won. The other three sat on benches and sang over a mug of beer. Gramlach had learned harping when he was with the Elves, and could carry a tune pretty well. The boys joined in, and Arthad as well, beating time on the side of the bath with the long brush.

The next day it was Beren’s turn to stay at home and help with the sawing and splitting. Gramlach roused him early out of his warm bed. It was still not quite fully light outside. All the other adults of the farm were up and about already of course; the milking had already been finished (Hiril helped with this now), and breakfast was laid on the table, with a mug of mulled small beer for each. There was fragrant new bread, and cream, and the cherry jam that Methemel was famous for. The whole company – maybe fourteen in total – sat at the board in the annex to the kitchen: women on one side, men on the other. After Hrotha took the head at one end and Methemel at the other, the whole table joined hands while Hrotha muttered thanks for the meal into his beard.

Beren and Mal were separated so they would not surreptitiously kick each other under the table. They stuffed bread and jam in their mouths and glared at one another while the adults planned the work of the day. Kirimel and baby Kam were still sleeping, and truth to tell, Mal and Beren were both secretly wishing they could have stayed in bed too. Both were nursing scrapes and aches and were regretting being so eager to join the men in the heavy work.

Sawing was dull work. Beren was too small to pull on one end of the long two-man saw, although they let him have a brief feel of the work. And working with the wedges or the splitting axe was also out of the question. Mostly he had to carry the split wood across the yard to the long stacks beside the main house. It was cold work, made painful by splinters. The only interest came when the saw needed to be touched up. Ragnor did this, although he said that Arthad was the best of them at it. He showed Beren how to work carefully with a stone at the correct angle to the saw teeth. It was patient work.

Ragnor was taller than his brother Dagnir, and not so broad, nor so rugged in the face. He had measuring, slightly cynical eyes, with lines at their corners, and a jagged scar on his jaw and neck, where he said an Orc spear had just missed taking his life. There were other white scars on his body. Despite their difference in age as well as temperament, he and Gramlach got on well. They were both men who knew how to handle spear and sword, and (as Beren later found out) both served as captains at those times when the men of the upper valley were organized to fight. Gramlach was only still in his early twenties, and often appeared diffident around the farm, but he became a different man when in charge of soldiers. Then he knew exactly what to do, knew exactly his own value, and was altogether in his element.

It was several days before the work was finished and Beren could slip away on his own again. For no reason he could pin down, he went back to the clearing where the logs had been. The ground was a muddy mess where they had been dragged, but elsewhere the carpet of early flowers was undisturbed. The day was mild, with warm sunlight slanting down through the bare branches. A wind still blew, and the surrounding trees creaked accusingly.

As before, there were birds all around, busy with their new life in the spring. In the quiet of the lonely day, Beren could also hear the rustlings of mice busy in the dead leaves all around. He had brought a scrap of bread with him; kneeling, he took this out of his satchel now and crumbled some for the grateful mice. Their neat brown bodies gathered around his hands, some steadying his finger with a tiny paw as they whiffled and nibbled at the crumbs. The birds began to notice, and some, outraged, came down and demanded their share. Laughing, the boy divided the crumbs and held some in the other hand up at shoulder height. The small birds gathered thickly around this – robins and finches and tits, in a colourful and quarrelsome carpet. Between grabs and squabbles, both birds and mice told him of the sun, and the new growth, of their mates and nests, and of their hopes for young. When the crumbs were finished, he twittered and squeaked at them to go to it; then he stood up, smiling at them as he shook them gently off.

Left now in peace, he listened. All around were sounds, but these were just the surface. Underneath, so to speak, there was another layer: another voice, another call. It was this that Beren was straining to hear. As always in the forest, he was unable to take it lightly, in the way of the men and women he knew: casually, as a place where one found wood, or bears, or mushrooms; a backdrop, an otherness, a place where one did not live; a place that fundamentally did not concern them. Beren had rather the sensation of a man who had never been home, but hadn't been aware of its absence, never felt the lack of a home particularly, until one day he opened the door of a strange house, and suddenly *knew*: this was his home, the place where he belonged.

So now he felt the mighty wood in his blood and his bones. He did not want to leave it; which he knew was silly – he was a small boy, he didn't know how to live in that vast sea of trees. He didn't know anything about his newly discovered home, anything at all. He just knew that he belonged to it.

\* \* \* \* \*

One day, not long after they were finished with the spring ploughing and sowing, Beren's mother told him they were all going in a few days to visit her parents, who lived near the head of the valley. It was planned that her sister, Beren's Auntie Cal, would come back with them to stay for a while. Beren couldn't remember these people, although his mother told him they had taken him there to visit two years before. He was surprised to find out that his mother visited her parents on a fairly regular basis, two or three times a year in fact. It was true that she sometimes had to go away for a few days, as did his father, but the boy had never wondered at where or why.

The procedure was similar to that of last year's journey to Newfort, except that the party was smaller: only Ragnor and Gramlach came with them. Hiril also had her own pony now. Beren sat in front of his mother still, although it seemed a bit more cramped there than he remembered.

The pathway turned to the left over the river ford, joining the main track. This was a broad and muddy way, woven with wagon ruts. The horsemen mostly avoided the track for the firmer going to one side. The river paralleled the road, sometimes purring in the distance, hidden by willows and other vigorous growth,

sometimes close. At the latter times the water could be seen foaming along, milky-green with new snow-melt. For a while the party travelled through open, farmed land, but the further slopes on every side were uniformly covered with a dense, primeval forest, whose dark spires of trees marched in a parade through Beren's awareness.

Eventually the riders came to the end of the tilled lands. They pulled up to a halt then and strung their bows. Beren wanted to know what they were guarding against. "Wolves, and other things," said his mother shortly. "There's not so many left in the woods at home; but nobody hunts them up here." She patted his leg. "Don't worry! It's not at all likely that we'll have any trouble, not in daylight. But it's better to be prepared without need than needy and not prepared."

But they saw nothing, and met nobody. After a couple of hours they again emerged into ploughed lands. It was lonely country, with no sign of inhabitants beyond the occasional bored urchin stationed to chase scavenging rooks away from the seeded furrows.

Eventually the party turned away from the river. As they climbed, so the sky-line opened out ahead and to the left. Bluer, more distant lines of higher hills appeared; and finally, rising above these like a spirit, the ragged white-and-dark patchwork of a massive mountain wall. His mother pointed. "They call that the Crissaegrim," she told Beren. "That was the view I had out of my bedroom window when I was a girl!"

Little of the actual visit stayed in Beren's memory. The farm was larger than their own, but the buildings and their arrangement held small interest for him; his mind still dwelled on the woods. The few children of his own age at the place were reclusive and unrewarding, and the parade of new relatives was simply confusing. Head of this numerous clan was an old, white-haired couple who were introduced to him as his grandparents. Beren was puzzled. He already had a grandfather, so who was this old chap? To add to the confusion, Beren was told that his new grandfather had the same name as himself.

The only person he paid much attention to, seeing as she was to come and live with them, was the woman indicated as Auntie Cal. Studying her, Beren took in a rather curvy, short woman, neither young nor old, with rosy cheeks and a snub nose. This Auntie Cal had fine, reddish-blond hair with the same generous wave as her sister's. Her plump face seemed at first rather undistinguished, until you noticed her eyes. These were a speckled green in colour, but it was the spirit behind them which excited notice: this suggested, somewhat in contrast to the rest of her features, both intelligence and a considerable power of character.

Hiril and he had been served something called wine. The dark juice smelled fragrant, so he sipped at it gingerly, but he wrinkled his nose then at the sour pucker. No thanks, he thought, give him honest beer any day! He was disconcerted at that point to notice Cal observing him with ironic amusement.

Beren remembered two conversations at dinner. The first came after the adults had been maundering on about a variety of dull topics. This talk lapsed into silent and general contemplation, but after some moments of this, Beren's father sighed. "I can't get used to Adanel<sup>10</sup> not being here," he said.

The old man at the head of the table, the older Beren, nodded slowly. "Mother thought a lot of you," he said.

"I'm sure I can't think why," said Barahir. "I was a gangling young fool with spots when I first came here. You'll remember. I blush now, still, when I think of some of the stupid things I said to Adanel. But she was endlessly patient with me, never said a word of the amusement she must have felt. She would just listen while I bumbled out my callow opinions, then with a few quiet words she would show me where I was wrong, without bruising my tender feelings by telling me so to my face."

The old man smiled wryly. "We're all of us the same when we're young, son. Nobody is born wise. Not even Mother herself."

"Yes, you're much too hard on yourself," protested Beren's grandmother. "I always thought you were a nice

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<sup>10</sup> The daughter of Malach the Noble of the fair-haired Second House of the Edain, Adanel was widely respected as a wise-woman and lore master.

boy.”

Emeldir laughed. “Hah!” she said. “I didn’t. I thought you were the most awful oik, when you first started coming here. I remember that like it was yesterday.”

“What made you change your mind?” asked Barahir, smiling. “I’m assuming that you did.”

“Well, I don’t know,” said Emeldir. “You were always over here, but you spent a lot of time with Grandmother. I was out of the house a lot, riding or hunting with my friends. I never thought of you much at all. But I remember one day I sort of noticed you, noticed that you were well-built, and actually not too bad looking – provided one squinted. And there was something in your eyes. I started talking with you, and I liked the things you said, and the way you said them. I liked them a lot.” And then she halted, blushing.

Barahir reached for her hand and clasped it briefly. “I’m pretty sure I’d be that oik yet without Adanel,” he said soberly. “That’s the truth of it – we’ve her to thank.”

The talk moved on then to other topics, but Beren stayed thinking about what had been said. Listening to his parents talk, the revelation had come to him that they too had once been young. Why, they must even have been babies to begin with. And they had parents of their own. At last he understood the dual grandfathers, indeed he understood for the first time clearly what a grandparent was. So, this old man here was his mother’s father; the one in Newfort was his father’s father. And this Adanel: old Beren, his grandfather, had called her ‘mother’. The boy looked at his grand-parents’ weathered faces and white hair with a sense of wonder. Had these, too, once been children?

The second conversation the boy remembered afterwards was also begun by his father. Barahir had asked the old man, “And how are things in the North? Have you heard?”

The older Beren sat up straight, and a light came into his face. “Thriving!” He said. “My kinsman Hador has gathered many swords to his standard since Fingolfin the High King gave him Dor-lómin as his fief, under Fingon his son. A power of swords they are now. It would do your heart good to see the Elves and Men standing together, Barahir. There never was such a host.

“And now his son Galdor is come to stout manhood. They’re calling him Galdor the Tall. I’ve not seen him since his youth, but they say he is a greater man even than his father, the Goldenhead of Dor-lómin. Well, maybe so, but I’ve known Hador in his might, and I say it takes a lot of believing. There never lived a man gentler to the weak, nor more fearsome to the foe. A quiet-spoken, mild man he is, Hador, for all his great stature. But I have seen him in the fury of battle, and I tell you, there were none who could stand before him in his might. None.

“Ah well, he’s getting old too I suppose. Galdor was a promising lad, to be sure. And I hear now he is newly wed. They say he could find no maid of his own people to his taste, but sought a dark-haired wood-wench to his wife.”

“My nephews serve with Fingon still,” remarked Barahir. A light of humour came into his eye. “I heard some rumours that they may not share Galdor’s south-looking tastes in the matter of fair companions.”

“Ah?” said the elder Beren. “Taken up with local maids, have they? Well, they could do worse than find themselves some shining-haired beauties of the North, that’s truth.”

The women present reacting to this incautious remark with some indignation, the talk then degenerated into chaffing; but a vision of grandeur stayed with Beren, of bright-haired heads and serried swords; of a wild northern people, fierce at need, but merry in peace.

The weather was still clear the next morning. As the visitors stood with their horses, ready to depart, they could again see the snows of the Crissaegrim glimmering at them through the miles of crystal air in between.



Emeldir embraced her own mother for a long moment, then her father. She mounted; then, as Beren stood on a fence, steadied by the hands of one of the farm men, she hoisted him up in front of her. “Oof!” she puffed, “I won’t be able to do that much longer. You’re getting heavy!”

Aunt Cal was with them on a brown pony which seemed a bit too frisky for her liking. She had two pack-horses roped behind, piled high with boxes and bags. After Hiril was helped onto her own mount, they were all seated and ready. The riders waved goodbye to the two figures they left standing beside the path. The old man raised his hand in farewell, his cropped head gleaming silver in the sun. Then he and grandmother disappeared behind trees as the riders turned a curve in the path.

As soon as the party was well under way, the grown-ups began to discuss affairs in the household they had just left. Such matters would usually be of small interest to Beren, but he paid more attention whenever his aunt said something. She was new, and he was curious about her. What sort of person was this who was coming to live with them?

“It was difficult for Mother, after Belegon died,” Cal was saying now. “I stayed til now because Father needed me, or so I thought anyway. But the children are big now; they’ll be taking over the show, more and more. Father himself told me I ought to go.”

They rode a bit further, watching spring colts prancing in a field. Beren had no idea at the time who this Belegon was – only much later did he find out that the man had been his mother and Cal’s older brother, who had died in a hunting accident.

“Things change so, all the time,” said Barahir slowly. “It just takes one person to die and it’s suddenly all different. Things that used to work don’t work any more. Your father should have been Master of the upper valley; he was the obvious choice. You know I’ve always thought so. But it wouldn’t be so good now, maybe.”

“He never liked to run things anyway,” said Emeldir.

“Well, neither do I,” said Barahir. “It makes me uncomfortable, telling people to do things.”

His wife smiled at him. “Maybe that’s why you do it so well.”

Barahir huffed with embarrassment. Eager to change the subject, he turned to Caladis. “We can certainly use you at home, Wed-sister,” he said. “These children need some education, and neither Mel or I are the ones to give it to them. I just hope you won’t have your hands too full with the pair of them.”

Aunty Cal grinned at both of the youngsters. “I guess we’ll have to see, won’t we?”

Beren sat up with a jerk. “Hey, wait a minute – what ‘pair’?” he said. “I thought this was just for Hiril! I don’t want to learn that book stuff!”

Cal considered that. “I can’t teach someone who doesn’t want to learn. But maybe I can find ways to change your mind. How about we make this bargain: we give it a try, then if you find you like it, we keep on; but if you don’t, well, that’s the end of it. What do you say?”

“That’s fair, son,” put in his father.

Beren felt hemmed in. “How long a try?” he asked suspiciously.

“Three weeks?” suggested Cal.

“Three *weeks*?”

“Do it, you,” said his mother firmly, shaking him. “Three weeks won’t kill you. You’ll need to know how to read if you’re ever to be Master yourself one day.”

That was a new thought. Him, Master? He felt he needed to mull that over a bit. But *three weeks*. He writhed and groaned like a man having his blood sucked out. “Aaagh ooo urgh gosh. Oh all right then.”

His mother squeezed him. “That’s my good lad,” she said proudly.

Lessons weren’t too bad as it turned out – certainly a great deal better than carrying firewood. Cal was a seemingly endless storehouse of songs and tales. Of course the children were not permitted simply to listen: they had to learn them as well. But singing together was always fun, and learning the tales was all right too. Cal would get you into it bit by bit. She wasn’t strict, and would always answer questions; but somehow you always found that you had learned a bit after all, and could recall it on the next occasion.

The stories varied. Histories were mostly about the Elves, who had, it seemed, been around much longer than Men. Beren began to get inklings of a vast struggle across centuries between the forces of Creation and Destruction, and heard for the first time of the Rape of the Trees, of the flight of the Elves of Noldorin race, and of the wondrous Silmarils. Of Men there seemed less to tell; but Cal told them the tale of the Houses who had fled evil servitude<sup>11</sup> to come into the West, and of the friendship between Bëor and their lord Finrod, and later with Finrod’s brothers Angrod and Aegnor. The latest chapter in the story was the recent move of their own House, the people of Bëor, from the Southlands to join the ring of guard around the evil that lurked in the North. They were now at home here, in the Land of the Pine, Dorthonion as it was called in the Elvish tongue.

Beren realized for the first time that he spoke two languages – the tongue of the Grey Elves as they were called, as well as the old language that the people of Bëor had carried with them out of the East. It had not occurred to him before that there was anything unusual in having two words for most things. He switched freely and without thought between the two forms himself, as did his parents; but he became aware that many of the older people spoke almost exclusively in the older language.

Every day with Cal they devoted a short period to learning letters. Previously unknown to Beren, his first sight of these objects was as peculiar marks arrayed in a neat table. Beren admired the neatness of the table, but could not at first for the life of him work out what it was all meant to be about. Cal wanted them to ‘learn’ all the letters, by which she meant, to be able to copy them, and to associate each mark with a sound. True, there weren’t so very many of the marks, but it all seemed so pointless that Beren made heavy weather of it until Cal showed him how each word spoken was made up of sounds which the marks could represent. She wrote out his own name,

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and showed him how it was sounded out. After that she made him dictate a short message which she transcribed before his eyes as a row of marks on a waxed tablet, and which he then carried to his mother. His wonder when Emeldir reconstructed the message from the marks was considerable. His rate of progress increased significantly from that point on. Cal made it fun, too – they had contests, which alas Hiril usually won; and it was fun for the children to make up simple messages to send secretly to one another. They would sit at table passing a wax tablet between them, each giggling betimes at what the other wrote.

The children were quick to realize that Cal had sharp eyes and an even sharper tongue. She would jump on any nonsense with the speed and much of the shock of lightning, but for the teaching itself she had an endless supply of patience and ingenuity. The children soon adjusted to her ways and flourished in the tolerant learning environment. Hiril loved it all, and would willingly have worked for longer each day; but Cal’s eye was also on Beren, and she was careful not to strain too far his ability to stay patiently indoors. Before long she was giving Hiril additional time on her own after Beren had been released.

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11 More information about the dark origins of Men can be found in *The Silmarillion*, and also in the chapter named ‘Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth’ of the tenth volume of *The History of Middle-Earth*.

The three weeks passed quicker than Beren realized. One day his father mentioned it. "Your trial time with Caladis is up, Beren. What's your decision? Can you stand to keep going with it?" He knew his mother and father were proud of him for knuckling down to the lessons, and the schooling wasn't after all so bad. So he shrugged and assented.

\* \* \* \* \*

The horse shied at a hysterical chicken, catching Gramlach by surprise. It was some seconds before the man, cursing, could free his hand from between rope and log. He stood there then with it dripping blood, trying to see how bad the damage was.

Dagnir secured the horse and came over to join him. "Done a proper job there, boy," he commented, looking at the mess.

Gramlach grunted. "Could 'a been worse. Still got all me fingers," he said, wiggling these items carefully, as if he half feared one might drop off. He sent a furious glance at the horse, which was nibbling quietly at grass shoots as if nothing had happened. "Cross-eyed get of a poxed donkey! I hates them beasts. Either too smart or not smart enough. Give me a dog any day."

"Can't haul logs with no dog, boy," said Dagnir. The two of them contemplated the bloody hand for a moment. "You need a leech to that one," Dagnir continued. "She d'look to be a bit drastic for the old liniment. Lost an amount of skin there, you have."

"Aye, well, happen you're right," said Gramlach ruefully. "And no leech nearer than Forgar's. There goes the day."

Dagnir scratched his shaggy head. "I did hear how Caladis, mistress's sister that's come, d'know a thing or two in the leeching way," he said.

Gramlach was doubtful. "Her?" he said. "She be more likely to take off the rest o' my skin, the tongue she has on her. Fain I 'druther take me chances with the liniment."

"Look," said Dagnir. "I got to get on with this. Wood won't haul itself. Just you take yourself off to mistress, boy. She'll tell you the right of it. Come on now, shift yerself. We ain't out here for our health."

The women yelled at him in chorus as he tried to enter the kitchen, hand held out. "Don't you drip that in here!" They came out then in a body to inspect the damage.

"Here! You've hurt yer hand," was Methemel's contribution.

Mari said, "Ooh! Look at that blood. Makes me come over all faint."

"Hush," said Emeldir. "Mari, go and call Cal, will you? And Ma-Mel, can you just fetch me one of those cloths she boiled up? In that small basket behind the potatoes."

The old woman shuffled grumbling to the place indicated and came back clutching a cloth. Emeldir unfolded it, exposing a side which had not been in contact with Methemel's paw, and used this to try to stop the bleeding by compression. A moment later Caladis came out. She surveyed the situation with her cool green eyes.

"Someone hurt?" she asked.

"Gramlach's hurt his hand," said Emeldir. "How did it happen, Gram?"

"Horse caught me up," he mumbled.

"Let me look," said Caladis. She took off the cloth and inspected the hand. "I need some water that's been

boiled,” she said. She glanced at Gramlach, seeming to take him in for the first time as a person. “Come, sit at the table so I can look at it properly. Hold the cloth under it so you don’t bleed on things.”

They sat sideways on the bench under the narrow window while the others ran around fetching the items Caladis asked for. When the water came, she cleaned the hand with an impersonal tenderness. Gramlach watched the woman as she concentrated on her work. He found himself enjoying the sight of the burnished waves of her hair and the rounded curve of her downturned face. She had five faint freckles which made a wavy parade over her forehead. He was acutely conscious of the warm grasp of her left hand, which held his own steady while she wiped with her other. When she glanced up, he looked down in confusion; but not before he had registered the clear patterned green of her eyes.

“You’ve lost quite a bit of skin, but there seems to be no deeper damage,” she said. “The main thing will be to keep the dirt out of it. What work do you do?”

“Oh, well, anything that’s going, really,” he stammered. “About the farm, like. Always something that needs doing.”

She stared at him, taking him in. Good shoulders. Pleasant, slightly bony face, mop of brown hair. Strong, work-hardened arms and hands. Not over-clean, but then one would not expect that. Probably not very clever; but it was a strong, honest face.

Gramlach looked up, and she found herself looking into his grey eyes. Caught in her own scrutiny, she flushed slightly. She took another cloth and bound the hand loosely. She could feel her own heartbeat. Damn the man – he had unsettled her somehow.

“I’ll make you some salve,” she said briskly to cover her disturbance. “Come to me a bit before the Day-meal and I’ll bandage this properly. Until then, keep the cloth on it and don’t use it – lie down for preference. Do you want me to tell Barahir to let you off work?”

His eyes rested on hers, with what expression she was not sure. “No need, mistress, thankee,” he said politely. “Master don’t run things that way. Dag’ll let ’em all know I be poorly, if’n they ask.”

He got up with a last nod to her and went out the door, holding his injured hand with the other. She could not forbear from taking a quick glance at his fine figure, from shoulders to neat posterior. She looked away hastily but became aware of Emeldir observing her with a sardonic eye. Caladis poked her tongue out at her sister, but Emeldir’s only response was to raise her eyebrows and grin the more.

When Gramlach came for his salve in the evening, Caladis was impersonal efficiency itself. Conscious of the other women in the kitchen behind her, she kept her speech with Gramlach to a few short words and salved and bound him as quickly as proper treatment practice would allow. He was bundled out again then with instructions to appear again in a few days time for a renewal. Caladis retreated to her own room then and breathed out in relief as she leaned against the wall. She felt hot, and peeved by it. What was this nonsense? Perhaps she was ill herself.

A few evenings later, after a further salving session, she was sitting in the end room along with Barahir and Hrotha, together with some of the young people. Beren and Hiril were playing a game with basket-weave figures in front of the fire. The older women, including Emeldir, happened to be all in the kitchen making jam.

Hrotha and Barahir had been talking over some of the tasks to be done. Caladis, not raising her eyes from her scroll, remarked that there did not seem to be many people available to do all the work.

Hrotha and Barahir looked over to her with mild interest – they had never before heard her express any opinion on the work of the farm.

“Never enough, no,” said Hrotha. “Never known a time when there was.”

“How many men do you have?” asked Caladis.

“Men? Five, more or less,” said Barahir.

“That many?” said Caladis casually. “I have to confess, I have not counted them. Well, who are they, what do they do, and where do they come from?”

Hrotha and Barahir looked at each other in surprise.

“Well,” began Barahir uncertainly, “there’s Ormorod, I’m sure you know him, he’s married to Mari.”

“She’m my dottir,” put in Hrotha helpfully.

“Orm’s the House-major, mostly sees to things about the house. Er, then there’s Ragnor and Dagnir...”

“My sons!” interjected Hrotha triumphantly.

Barahir nodded to him. “Yes... they, well they do all sorts of things. Ragnor’s often away, but Dag lives with the others in the timber room at the end of the yard. Then there’s Arthad: he’s a Southerner, been with us a long time though...”

“Rumour has it he don’t dare go back,” said Hrotha gleefully.

“Yes, well, we won’t go into that, Hrotha. That’s Thad’s affair and nobody else’s. Anyway, Arthad, well he’s a good man with horses, good with his hands too. Last of all, there’s Gramlach, him with the hand you bound up. Gram’s from a bit further up the valley.”

Caladis squinted intently at her page. “And what does Gramlach do?” she asked without raising her eyes.

“Anything and everything,” said Barahir. “Funny chap. Nothing special around the farmyard; but he has, well hidden depths you might say.”

“Oh?” said Cal with almost elaborate casualness.

“Yes... you know we do these exercises, war training and so forth. Some people say I have a bit of a bee in my bonnet about it, but that’s as may be. Anyway some people among us – not enough perhaps – go off and soldier for a bit with the Fair Folk, learn sword work and so forth. Gramlach was one, although you would not think it to speak to him generally. But when it comes to this soldiering business, why, he’s one of the best war-leaders in the valley. Really knows his stuff. He’s just an ordinary chap around the yard, but in the force, such as it is, he runs a whole century, and could do more. He’d be a valuable man if it ever came to a fight, Powers keep us from it.”

There was something of a pause then, as each ruminated on their own thoughts.

“I suppose they’re all married then, like Ormorod, or have girls somewhere?” said Caladis at last, still in the same casual tones.

Hrotha guffawed, and Barahir looked a little embarrassed. “Ah. Well, there have been one or two, er well, incidents I suppose you might call them,” he said, scratching the back of his neck.

“Girls somewhere?” repeated Hrotha, shaking his head. “Girls somewhere? Girls everywhere! He didn’t ought to do it, but he don’t mean no harm by it. He’m just afflicted by an over-powerful liking for the womenfolk, and that’s all there is about it. Nothing to do, lessen you cut his tonker off, and it’d be a brave man that’d try that remedy.”

Beren giggled, looked up. “‘Cut his tonker off,’” he echoed.

“Cut yours off an’ all, young scrouger,” said Hrotha with mock severity, “if’n you can’t keep your nose out of other people’s conversayshuns.” The old man turned back to Caladis. “O’ course the women like him too. Takes two to make that partickeler sort of trouble, always has. Anyhow, ’taint down to me, no matter what folk say. I don’t encourage him in it, and I can’t do nothing about what the maids want, nohow.”

“You’re talking of Gramlach,” said Cal faintly.

“Ragnor,” corrected Barahir. “He’s more trouble that way than all the rest put together. As for the rest, Arthad has a girl he is sweet on. Dag makes his own regular arrangements, prefers not to get entangled. Gram appears to be not of that sort of disposition, but then again, he’s not got his eye on anyone local either, so far as I know.”

“Keeps too busy to be frisky, maybe,” added Hrotha, eyeing Caladis with waking curiosity.

That night, as he was undressing in the chamber with Emeldir, Barahir mentioned to her, “Funny thing – Cal was asking all these questions about the men tonight.”

Emeldir stopped what she was doing and straightened up. “Not about Gramlach?”

“Well, among the others,” he said. He looked at her and saw that she was smiling. “What? What is it?”

“Oh, probably nothing,” she said, grinning at him mischievously. “Just a little hint I may have sniffed out of the air.”

“What hint?” he demanded. “You know something, woman. Tell me!” He grabbed at her, but she slipped out of his arms.

“Uh-uh,” she said, shaking her finger at him. “You know what you always say about spreading gossip.”

“Gossip?” he said, then he stopped. “Wait. You can’t be serious. Cal and Gramlach?”

She nodded.

“Oh come,” he protested. “You’re not sniffing, this is spinning out of thin air.”

“Tell me this, then,” she said. “Did she ask if Gram had a girlfriend?”

“Well, she asked if they... well, not in so many... well, yes, I suppose she did in a way.”

“Hah!” she said. “Thin air, eh?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head, “I don’t believe it. Cal and Gram? Never in a million years.”

She shrugged, and grinned at him again. “Time will tell. You keep your eyes open. You never know what you might see if you look around you for once.”

A day or two later, when Gramlach came to have his bandages renewed, the kitchen was in a state, with the furniture upended along the walls and the floor wet with suds. Sola and Neli were scrubbing things. They sang out to Gramlach not to come in. It seemed to be cleaning day.

“You’d better come to my study,” said Caladis. She led the way into a room Gram had not been in since her arrival at Sightfoot. He found that it now had Caladis’s mark on it, chiefly in the form of shelves along every wall, bursting with more scrolls and papers than he had seen in his life. More papers lay strewn on a broad table in the middle, along with several lamps, and a messy scatter of pens and ink and knives for trimming and other objects. Daylight streamed in now through a large skylight which had been cut in the roof.

Caladis was acutely conscious of his male presence in her room. The tall figure seemed to leave her nowhere

to look. She fancied she could even feel the heat radiating from his body. Her own pulse was throbbing in her ears, and her knees felt uncertain. She addressed herself savagely and silently: get a grip, woman!

She sat the big man down and began to unbind the hand. Gramlach looked around the room so as to have somewhere else to turn his eyes.

“Gaw, will you look at all them papers!” he said in marvelling tones. “It’s past me to guess what you do with them all, mistress.”

She looked up at him sharply. “All the knowledge we have of the world, its makers, and its peoples is in those papers,” she said. “It is the work of the scholar to study and interpret them. There’s more to life than grubbing out pig sties, you know.” Straight away she was sorry she had spoken in such a manner. Listen to yourself, she thought; you snobby, stuck-up cow. All the same, pig sties is probably not so far off the mark...

“*Geril henio edhellen?*”<sup>12</sup> she asked him suddenly. “And can you read?”

His answer surprised her. “*No thand, A heryn. Anim fargolanner o ta in Edhil.*”<sup>13</sup> Don’t have much call to practise either, though.”

His hand was unwrapped now, so she could distract herself with it. Gram took the opportunity to look her over anew in furtive admiration. She be far above you, boy, he thought; and she surely do have a tongue on her. But by gaw, she’m a pretty lass.

Caladis was concentrating on his hand and trying to ignore the dizzy feeling in her head and the heat in her middle. What are you *thinking* of, she thought. All right, he can read, but he’s a *clod*. What could you *talk* about together?

“That’s looking all right,” she said of the hand. “Healing well.” She looked up then, and their eyes met for a second. Caladis flushed slightly and turned away to reach for the salve. She bent over his hand again as she smeared on a fresh layer.

“Does it sting?” she asked him with more diffidence.

He smiled. “At first, a little,” he said. “Not so bad now.”

Caladis continued a little while in silence. Even more tentatively, she said, “They tell me you know a lot about fighting?”

“Swords and that?” he said. “Aye, a bit I suppose.”

“I wouldn’t know which end of a sword to hold,” she said.

His mouth twitched. “Don’t lay hold o’ the sharp bit, and you’re off to a flying start,” he said. She looked up and caught the flash of humour in his pleasant grey eyes. She smiled quickly in answer, then bent over her work again.

“Do you... do you think the Enemy will ever attack?” she asked after a while.

“Don’t it tell in them papers o’ yourn?” said Gramlach.

“No,” she said, her voice tinged with regret.

Gram considered. “Don’t think about it, really,” he said. “If’n he does, then he does I suppose. No use fretting about it.”

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<sup>12</sup> “Can you understand Sindarin?”

<sup>13</sup> “In truth, O mistress. The Elves taught me sufficient of that.”

She reached for a new bandage and began binding the hand carefully.

“What would you do if he did?” she said.

“Go with Master, and the armed folk,” replied Gramlach promptly. “We’d give ’em a good fight, I know that for sure.”

“I don’t know what I should do,” she said. “I don’t know what I *could* do. All my books and knowledge would be pretty useless then. It would come down to men like you.”

He didn’t know what to answer.

The hand was finished. She looked up and once again looked into his eyes. “I’m sorry I spoke as I did,” she said in a trembling voice. “What I said about pig sties. Everybody has value.”

Her eyes were so beautiful, he could hardly take his own off them. He shrugged awkwardly, flushing. “’Tweren’t no matter,” he stammered. Thou great loon, he said to himself, get thyself out o’ this! He stood up at the same time Caladis did.

“Thankee, mistress,” he said, looking down into Caladis’s face. “For the hand and that. I’m main grateful.” She moved to show him out of the room at the same time as he lurched for the door. Their bodies bumped awkwardly in the doorway. Red in the face, he muttered something inaudible and ducked out.

Caladis remained standing in the room, flushed in the face herself and breathing deeply. “Stupid, stupid!” she said to herself, and it would have been clear to anybody listening that she did not mean Gramlach.

\* \* \* \* \*

Three Elf-maids walked in a forest of long ago. The hair, eyes and robe of the eldest were as dark as sweet sleep at the end of the weary day; dark as the velvet spaces between the stars. A fair and queenly face she had, glimmering pale between ebon tresses of dreamlike weave. A walking shadow – but a shadow of wholesome warmth; no evil followed in the dimness of her train, only shelter and repose.

The tallest was clothed in a simple white dress which left her forearms bare. Her hair was a glory – a river of flowing gold, like sunlight in the first hour of a May morning: fresh and bright, with a promise of heat to come. Although lissom of figure, the woman was well-knit, with strength in her shoulders and grace in her arms and in her long hands. Restless blue eyes were set in a face both strong and fair.

The youngest? No, I will not sully her with words. Such a creation as she! How should I cramp her beauty in my scribbler’s blotted cage of ink? Should I parcel out her glory in mean periods and syllables, like a grocer? I refuse. As well try to capture in words the summer midnight’s noble blue, or the sparkling of dewdrops in the first morning of the dawning of the world. So much only will I say: wild dark hair she had, tumbling over laughing grey eyes. And on such a nose, men’s hearts should break like ships.

Picture the forest as some vast, airy hall, shaded as much as lit by the occasional slanted finger of sunlit air. Great grey living pillars reached up through the dimness as far as the eye could see on every side. Despite the gloom, the air was fresh and living. From high, high overhead filtered down the sweet sounds of birds, faintly twittering in the canopy.

The three women followed a well-trodden path among drifts of last year’s curled brown leaves. After walking for some time, they came to a hollow place, a quoit’s-cast across, garlanded by ferns.

The dark-haired Queen, the eldest, turned and smiled. “Let us rest here,” she said.

The place was a green glade, ringed by mighty trees. Their trunks, massive and rotund, skinned in smooth swells of bark, led the eye up and up until they disappeared from sight into a green roof speckled with a million many-shaded leaves. Like limbs of giant goddesses these living columns seemed, muscular but



graceful. About each grey trunk, ten people might stretch in vain, laughing, to join their hands.

A tiny runnel tinkled and whispered among the mosses; a dim greenish light filtered down from high above.

The two dark-haired beauties – easy to see they were mother and daughter – sat themselves on one of the roots which writhed through the mosses like pythons. They began separately to busy themselves in their satchels. Soon both were working at needlecraft. She of the golden hair stayed standing, looking around, taking in everything, high and low. She seemed wondering, almost dazed.

“It is so dim here,” complained the younger of the seated women. “Mother, just once in a while, might we not sew in this brilliant sun we have now?”

“What need?” replied the other. “Eyes do not need sun that were bred beneath the stars.”

“I don’t *need* it,” said her daughter, “but I like it. I can enjoy bright as well as dark.”

“Sun or shade regardless,” remarked the golden-haired beauty quietly, “there is a Light in this country of yours that cannot be denied. I never knew there was so pure and high a beauty in the outer world, as I have found anew in this land. It is... wonderful.”

Queen Melian – for the senior was she – glanced shrewdly at the golden woman. “I could read the hunger for the woods in your eyes, Artanis,” she said. “Stronger it was, I deemed, than the undoubted joys of greeting long-sundered kin over the King’s fine wine.”

“Hunger!” replied Artanis in a voice in which a hint of strain seemed to show. “Aye, well you might name it so.”

Lúthien, daughter of the Queen, glanced up with curiosity at their guest. “You were born in Aman<sup>14</sup>, Cousin, where I have never been,” she said. “I wonder that you seem so to enjoy it here, in my little home of Doriath, when you have the land of the Gods to compare it to.”

“But that is exactly why,” replied the sun-haired woman. “Elsewhere, away from my home, I have found only darkness and death; so that I thought I might die of it too, at last, like a lily stricken in the black frost. It was the mere chance of kinship that led my feet hither, in dutiful company with my brothers. I had not dreamed to find here that living glory which I thought I had lost, far behind me. Had I but known...!” Her voice took on a slight tremor. “I have not words for my relief and joy.”

The younger woman looked at her in some surprise. She said, “I will own that I find Outland a little dull and sad, those few times I have ventured into it, and that I am always glad to return home. But surely, Cousin! Do you not exaggerate a little? Perhaps you are weary, perhaps your travails weigh upon your spirits. You may see Middle-earth in a less severe light after you are somewhat recovered.”

Artanis looked at her darkly, but made no reply.

“Anyway, glory or no glory,” said Lúthien, “the fact remains that I find it over-dim here for sewing. I pray you come sit by me, dear cousin and guest. Your hair should be light enough for both of us.”

After a moment’s hesitation, the other complied.

“As for your weariness: it is often so with heroes,” said Lúthien lightly, returning to her theme, “or so the

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14 The names ‘Aman’ and ‘Valinor’ bear the same approximate relation to one another as the phrases ‘British Isles’ and ‘United Kingdom’. The first is a geographic designation, the second political. Thus Aman was the island on which the Valar lived; Valinor was the name of their realm. For further information regarding the nature of the Valar, the geography of Middle-earth, the descents of Elves and Men, and the circumstances of the flight of the Noldor (to which division of Elves Artanis belonged) from Valinor, the reader is encouraged to consult *The Silmarillion*.

songs say. After mighty deeds comes a time of rest.”

Artanis flushed. “I do not know of any here who may wear the name of hero,” she said.

“Come now, Cousin, that won’t do,” said Lúthien in teasing tones. “Have we not newly heard from your brothers a stirring tale of ardour among fire and ice? No false modesty, please!”

“Lúthien,” chided her mother mildly, intent on her needlework.

“I have passed through travails, as you say,” said Artanis slowly. “But I did not seek them. Nor did I master them, as a hero ought; and I certainly had neither satisfaction nor glory from them. No, newly met Cousin, heroes exist only in songs. Living folk enjoy no such glamour, they reap from trials only bitterness and grief. And if you had suffered such in my place you would not willingly hear them twittered over in unthinking words of lightness.”

Lúthien started back at first in surprise, but then she flushed, and quickly laid an apologetic hand on the golden woman’s arm. “I am sorry,” she said. “My tongue always runs away with me, and I become pert, if not worse. I mean no harm by it. Forgive me, Artanis, please. I speak of what I do not know. I did not mean to stir up painful memories.” She turned to Melian, her cheeks still a little pink. “Come, Mother, distract us. What piece have you brought to work on? Something dark and dismal, I’ll be bound.”

Melian held up the length of silken cloth under her hands. Taking shape was a picture in the varied deep blues of dusk. It seemed that mist drifted between darkling tree branches. In the background, a pale figure wandered. Dominating the work was a squat foreground figure as yet only mostly present in outline. Only the face and hands were finished. Deep-set eyes gleamed out at the viewer under shaggy black brows; wild, perilous eyes. The hands held a glowing red cup.

“Well that is new,” said Lúthien. “What is it?”

“It is itself,” said Melian, smiling.

“Tsk, mother, none of your mysteries. Come! Is it out of your own head, or something real? I mean is it something that is, or has been, or may yet be?”

“Perhaps all of them at once,” said her mother, the gentle smile still curving her mouth. “I do not know! Ask my hands: they do the work while my thoughts are elsewhere. Better yet, cease your importuning and show us what you have brought yourself.”

Lúthien held up her own needlework. The cloth unfolded as a breath of colour and light in that shaded place. It was a simple piece, small, as yet very incomplete. Ladybirds, red as drops of blood, danced among small white flowers, attended by butterflies of honest blue. Holding this in her hands, the maid looked to Artanis. “Cousin, do you enliven your leisure at home with work such as this?”

Artanis blushed and shook her head. “Alas no,” she said, “I have no skill with such things. My hands are too clumsy.” She turned her hands over in her lap and looked at them. “Indeed I do not know what I am good for.”

For a while nobody said anything. Melian sat sewing between the arms of her great, grey tree, enthroned in living wood. The Queen’s serene face was bowed, half-lidded eyes directed at her work. Her pale hands wove slow patterns over the cloth, glimmering like moonbeams against the folds of her sable dress. The weave of the thread seemed almost to be part of a greater weaving in the world of the forest; one could fancy that the birds gently piping in the branches overhead were flitting to and fro in the same rhythm.

Both Artanis and Lúthien were watching her now, drawn into the enchantment.

After some time the dark Queen said quietly, “Few words have we yet heard from you Noldor concerning

your flight from Valinor; yet from that little I have heard, I can well understand your reticence, Artanis, to speak further of the journey.” She kept her eyes fixed on her needlework. “Nevertheless, I fancy it must be a striking story. I look forward to hearing more of it, after time has leached some pain from the memories.” With that, she raised her glance to the newcomer’s face. The penetration in her gaze was unmistakeable.

Artanis looked troubled, met the Queen’s glance with her own, then looked down again.

Finding no immediate answers, the Queen returned to her sewing. “And what will you do now, Artanis?” she asked softly, keeping her eyes on her work. “Once this present visit is concluded?” It was a question seemingly without art; but nothing the Queen did or said was unconsidered.

Artanis stood abruptly, breaking the spell. She commenced to walk restlessly to and fro, trailing her hands between the lacy ferns. “The path of duty leads outward,” she said dully, “into the dark. There is a war to fight. Already my brothers concert resistance with the others. I suppose I must join my power to theirs. Although I know not rightly what I can do, since I have no skill at arms, nor training as a captain.”

“Time will reveal your purpose,” said Melian.

“Time? Say rather, barren years poured out in a waste of ugliness,” replied the other with a grim look. “Time spent in the darkness you call Outland can be nothing but a burden to the heart. I cannot see how clarity of purpose can arise from such a desert of the spirit, nor anything else that is good.”

“Arda<sup>15</sup> Marred,” observed the Queen, “is like a graceful woman with a scar. At first, the glance of horror can see nothing but the scar; in time, one learns to recognize the beauty beneath. So may it be with you.”

Artanis looked at her, in doubt. It was her nature to recognize truth when she heard it, and she was hearing the ring of it now.

“Do not dismiss the future before you know it,” said Melian. “Times change. People change. Your sight will grow keener. The beauty in the world is there; I bear it witness. Trust that a time will come when you too will perceive it.”

“Maybe,” conceded the tall, white-clad woman. “In time. At present, I do not know where I shall find courage to face it. Truly, I do not.” A tremor found its way into her voice.

“Then stay,” said the Queen, looking up. “Why not? You have no call to this war; that is clear even to yourself. So why go to it? Live not in barren oppression, but joyfully. Stay here with us in Doriath, after your brothers depart. Stay as long as you need to.”

Artanis swung to face her, joy flooding over her fair face. “Might I do that?” she asked. “Might I?”

“Of course!” said Melian. “The King will join me in bidding you most hearty welcome.”

Artanis looked down in the confusion of her gratitude, lip trembling. “I would... I do very much wish to stay,” she said. Trouble of spirit showed still in her blue eyes. “But only for a time. I cannot rest here. I do not know where I shall find rest. I think the place may not exist.”

“It is decided then,” said the Queen, passing over the Nolda’s last words without remark. “Stay as long as you like, and house and go as you please.”

“I thank you,” said Artanis, bowing her head, “honoured lady Queen, from my heart. I need not say further what a balm to my spirit your realm is, for I think that you know. I would ask one more favour – that I might converse with you betimes. For there is wisdom in your words, and I am sore in need of guidance, and of

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15 Arda was the whole world, of which Middle-earth was only a part. During its making, Melkor had marred what he could; only in Valinor, under the Powers, and in Doriath, the realm of Melian and Thingol, had this stain been erased.

companionship as well.”

“Of course you may,” replied Melian. “Come to us whenever you like! But you will not often hear earnest words among us; oftener song and laughter. But we offer it all to share with you.”

“Perhaps we could even teach you to sew, Artanis,” added the irrepressible Lúthien.

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It was the season of the peak of the year’s new growth. Throughout the northern forest, the dense screens of leaves had reached their point of maximum thickness; each of the uncountable multitude had a bloom on it as fine and fresh as a young woman’s skin. The entire wooded landscape sang with a single wordless note, whose message was youth. Green was its celebration and its power. Greens of all sorts, dark and bright. All pulsed with new juice, with the glad renewal of vegetable life.

Beren had taken to sneaking off to the forest. Wandering in the cool shade under the trees, Beren saw little in the way of animal life in the present season: the occasional shy deer, and once a fox, who grinned at him sardonically before going on its way. The birds too were busy in the tree tops at this time of year, and left him alone. But he didn’t want company. To wander among the tall pillars, to breathe the scented air, to feel the quiet pulse all around him: these things were enough.

The sharp fact that, however strong a connection he felt to the forest, he was nevertheless an interloper in it, was brought home to him one day in an unexpected, sudden, and alarming fashion. There was nothing that day to indicate that things were any different – no alarm, no forewarning. It was quiet as always as he made his slow way through the dim screens of undergrowth. There was nothing to hear but the faint twitter of birds in the treetops and the sleepy zitheration of insects closer to hand.

His shock was huge when the peace was broken by the thrashing motion of a large black object that reared up through the leaves in front of him. Beren stopped stock-still, shivering with sudden fright. Heart bumping, mouth open, his gaze travelled up the dark bulk; up, much higher than he was, until it found a pair of suspicious black eyes.

It was a she-bear, and a large one, and it was snuffing and weaving its head from side to side while it glared at him suspiciously. For some absurd reason a vision of his aunt Andreth flashed through his head; and perhaps this was why his next action was to say as politely as he could, “How do you do, madam Bear?” And then he bowed low from the waist, as he had seen the Dwarves do. Upon which he felt instantly silly.

“Hrmp! A man-cub,” said the bear to itself. “Probably harmless. Hey! Just a minute! *What* did you just say to me?”

“I asked you how you did,” said Beren, trying to keep the tremor out of his voice.

“But man-cubs can’t speak Bear!” the beast protested.

Beren shrugged. “I can.”

The bear scratched its sides while it contemplated him. It stretched forward to sniff him thoroughly, then settled back on its haunches. “Mmph. A man-cub for certain. But it knows bear-speech. Bear-speech, yes it does. How did you come to learn it, man-cub?”

“I don’t know,” said Beren. “It just happened, Ma’am. I can talk with birds too; dogs, horses, everything I think.”

“Hmm. Can you now! Well! Well I never!” The bear thought again for a while. “Can all the man-cubs hereabouts do it? Hereabouts, hey? New country for me, hereabouts. Can they, hey?”

“No Ma’am, I think it’s only me.”

“You’re not a Speaker, are you?” the bear asked with a touch of apprehension. It meant Elves. “You don’t smell at all like one.”

“I don’t think so, Ma’am, just a boy,” replied Beren.

“Hrmpf,” grunted the bear. “Bear-speech. Not a Speaker. Hmm. Well now. Let me see. The question would seem to be, young man-cub, whether I should eat you or not. Yes, that’s it. Should we eat ’im? Is he liable to be edible? We don’t eat the Fair Folk, the Speakers, oh dear me no. As for man-cubs, well I don’t know. Never had the pleasure meself. Don’t get many where I was raised. But man-cubs that know bear-speech? That’s a head-breaker, than one, and no mistake. Nobody to ask advice of, hereabouts, either. No bear-folk, can’t smell any here at all. Odd, that.”

“I *think* there’s probably no bears because my father hunts them,” said Beren carefully, remembering the bear skins which saw good use at home. “And I’d much rather you didn’t eat me, please, if it’s all the same to you.” His hands were behind his back, and he wrapped one now around the haft of his knife and carefully loosened it in its sheath.

“Hunts bears? Your father? Does he, now?” The animal reared up like a dark hairy pillar, eyes glittering. “Well I call that unfriendly.”

Beren was trembling at the knees now, although he forced his voice to stay calm. “I’m sorry for it, Ma’am, truly. But I can’t help what my father does, for one thing. I don’t hunt bears myself – wouldn’t think of it. And p’raps you won’t think me so unfriendly when you remember that I gave you warning of it, when I didn’t have to. And lastly,” and now he brought the knife around in plain sight, “you’re a great big bear, and I’m only a little boy. If you plan to eat me, I suppose there’s not much I can do to stop you. But what I can do, I will.”

The she-bear slowly sat back down again. It was regarding Beren now with what seemed almost a hint of amusement. “That is a sharp tooth,” it agreed, “but I have many such.” She bared her long white teeth momentarily. Beren shivered at the sight. “But hmm. Hmm now. You speak well, boy. Have to admit it. Almost like one of the Fair Folk. And I had good feeding yesterday. Warning? Yes, I do thank you for it. Seems this is no good place for bears. Hmmpf, that’s a nuisance. I suppose I had better make myself scarce. Before your father comes after me, hey? With his spear. Hey?”

“Well boy, I’m not going to eat you – this time. But if you’ll take my advice, you’ll stay away from the woods. It is no good place for lone man-cubs. Something will snap you up, else. *I* might snap you up, on a different occasion. Tooth or no tooth, speech or no speech. And there’s worse things than us bears about, oh my goodness yes. So stay away, eh? Best for everybody really.”

“I don’t think I can,” said Beren.

“What?” said the bear, jerked loose from its slow train of thought.

“I can’t stay away,” said Beren. “This is my place. The more I come here, the more I need to come.”

The she-bear stared at him for a long while. “I don’t know,” it said at last. “It’s too strong a puzzle for a simple bear. Well, I wish you good fortune, boy.” And with that, it turned and lumbered off into the undergrowth.

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It was of course Hiril who caught him first. He had fetched firewood for the kitchen, and finished a list of other morning chores. Temporarily unnoticed in the busy routine of the farm, he was sidling towards the postern gate, when he heard his name called. He turned and saw Hiril standing in the niche between the corner of the house and the close-set piles of the stockade.

“You’re going to the woods again, aren’t you,” she said.

“Are you sneaking on me?” he asked hotly.

“I was waiting for you, yes. But there’s no need to be angry. I’m just worried.”

“I don’t see why you need to be,” he said. “I’m just going for a walk.”

“Can’t I come with you for a bit then, and talk?” she pleaded.

“Oh all right. Come along then.”

The two of them crossed quickly to the small gate and eased their way through it. There were people here and there to be seen, but Hiril and Beren were familiar sights about the farm and were not paid any special attention. They in their turn took no particular pains to keep out of view, since jobs were dealt out mostly only in the vicinity of the house.

As Beren stumped along, head low, Hiril at his side turned to him in appeal. “Beren. Please won’t you talk to me about it. I won’t sneak on you, I promise. But it’s dangerous in the woods: there are wolves, and wild cattle, and big cats. Even the grown-ups don’t go in there on their own.”

Silently glad that she hadn’t mentioned bears, he said, “I’ve never met any of those things. Most of the animals only come out at night, anyway.”

“Oh come on. Just saying you’ve had luck so far doesn’t in the least mean you always will have. You know that’s silly. You know I’m right, Beri, I can tell you do.” She stopped him with a hand on the arm. “Beren, *please*. Just tell me *why*.”

He looked up at her soberly. “Ril, I can’t explain. It’s like, that’s my place. That’s where I belong. I know it’s stupid. But I couldn’t stand to stay away.”

She stood silent, taking this in. “You have to tell Mama and Papa.”

“They wouldn’t understand.”

“They might understand more than you think,” she said. “We all know you’re – unusual. The birds, and everything. Anyway I think they probably know about the woods already, they just haven’t let themselves think about it maybe. But one thing I’m sure of: if you keep going off into the forest on your own, one day you’re not going to come back.”

“You’re a fine one to talk,” he scoffed. “You and your swims.”

“Lots of kids go swimming on the hot days,” she said defensively. “It’s perfectly safe. It isn’t the same thing at all. Stop trying to wriggle out of it.”

“There’s something wrong with that top pool,” he said darkly. “Wild ponies wouldn’t get me near *that* place again.”

“Look, forget the pool! What are you going to do about your forest trips?”

The boy put his head down, glowering. “I’m not going to stop.”

“That’s not what I meant,” said his sister. “I’d kind of thought that already. But if you’re going off into the woods, you have to work out some way to do it safely.”

He shrugged. “How? I don’t see how. I can’t get Gram or any of the others to come with me; they’ve got too much to do.”

“You won’t know until you ask. Ask Mama and Papa. They might have ideas you never thought of. For instance, maybe you could go and stay with the Elves; lots of people do that. The Elves would look after you, they’re always going into the woods.”

He thought about it. Elves! Memories of the bright people came surging into his mind. Already in his young life he had met his ideal – a shining picture of how vivid, valorous, wise, and noble a people could be. He yearned to see more of them. But would it answer? Was that quite what he needed? “I don’t know, Ril. I just don’t know. I guess I will have to tell Mama and Papa about it some time. Just let me work it out a bit.”

She looked at him helplessly, fear for him in her eyes. He reached out awkwardly to take her hands, and said in a rough voice, “Don’t worry, Sis. I can look after myself. And don’t forget, I can talk to things! To the animals, I mean! Those I can’t fight off, I can argue out of it.”

Beren really did mean to confess to his parents, but the issue came to a head before he could screw himself up to it. One day not long after the indecisive encounter with Hiril he snuck off as he had several times before. But this time as he came out of the sun into the shade of the first trunks he saw a familiar figure leaning against a trunk. It was Ragnor.

“Morning, youngster,” said the man, straightening up. “Where you off to?”

“Just for a walk,” Beren said defensively.

“Can you stop a minute? Because I want to tell you something.”

Reluctantly the boy halted and stood, head down, digging his foot into the mould. Ragnor squatted in front of him and looked at him sympathetically. “Lad, a week or so ago, your aunt came to me and said, that boy is always going off. I’m worried about him. Can you keep an eye out and work out just where he gets to?”

Beren lifted his head, a glint in his eye. “You’ve been spying on me.”

“Yep,” said Ragnor. “Three times I followed you now. It’s got to stop, young feller.”

The big man took him back to the farm, where the boy spent an awkward half-hour with his parents. Cal was also present, observing with a sardonic eye, although she took small part in the talk.

Beren had flashed Cal a look as he came in the door.

“Don’t you dare glare at me like that!” she responded hotly. “What was I supposed to do, eh? How do you think I would feel if you didn’t come back one day, eh? After one of your fool jaunts?”

His father had cut this short, in his mild but firm way, and commenced then to quiz Beren about the whole business. He and Emeldir chewed it around and around, but no obvious solution occurred to either of them. It was as Hiril had also realized; they understood that the boy laboured under the sway of a powerful compulsion.

They thought he was a bit young to take service with the Elves.

“Well then,” said his father at last, putting his hands on his knees, “there’s only one thing to be done. If you must go betimes, then I’ll come with you.”

“I would have a part of that too, if I might,” added his mother quietly.

Beren looked from one to the other. Go in company? He had no objection, but felt in his heart that it wasn’t really practical. His mother and father worked from dawn to dusk, every day. But there was nothing he could do but acquiesce.

His parents certainly tried, as did Beren himself. But, just as he feared, taking several hours out of a day to

walk with him in the shade of the woods put them under an unsustainable strain. There were just too many other things which needed to be done about the house and farm. He also found no savour in the walks when one of them came along. His parents didn't *belong* in the forest. They would lumber along, looking about them warily, but they were deaf and blind to all the messages which Beren could at least receive hints of. The birds stayed away too. These were joyless occasions, and once again the temptation to sneak off on his own began to grow in Beren.

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It was high summer, and Beren could hear the far, faint shrieks of swifts as they hunted and squabbled far above the treetops. A restless wind teased at the highest branches; the air was filled with its constant susurrations, and the light that filtered to the forest floor made a shimmering carpet, moving and uncertain. The forest seemed elsewhere, out of itself, distracted; its deeper life hidden beneath a surface layer of sound and movement. The overlay of surface action made Beren impatient, because it got in the way of the sense of connection. But he chanced to rest his hand against a tree-trunk, and with that contact, the familiar signal came through clearly.

The boy leaned his head against the tree and closed his eyes tightly. There it was, the living thing. He tried, as he always did, to *feel* the forest; to extend his senses into all its furthest ramifications. Eyes shut, concentrating, he could more and more gain a dim sense of vague movements and connections across a wide extent of mountain and quiet valley. Always he had the feeling that there were vast spaces and structures beyond the straining edges of his senses. The feeling was a little like standing in a great hall, such as he remembered seeing at Newfort: a room filled with carven beams and tapestries. Yet he felt himself like someone poor of sight, seeing only the vague loom of shapes, only able to catch hints of the wonder; missing the thousand knife-sharp details which only clear senses could capture.

Beren went from tree to tree, trying to see, trying to find the way in.

Something was wrong. Startled, he pulled his head back to look around and listen. Nothing seemed to be altered, only he couldn't hear the swifts any more. So he put his forehead back against the tree, and the wrongness leapt out at him again, stronger than ever. Somewhere, something lurked like a moving cancer, like a jagged black rock grinning just under the surface of the stream. He could almost feel where it was...

A sudden racket made him jerk his head back. It was a blackbird shrieking alarm, not far off. "Howhowhowhow how how *dare* you come into my wood. Howhowhow *dare* you. Fly fly! Intruder intruder!" Another one joined in, shrieking its head off. A thrush rocketed out of the undergrowth. Its eye flashed at him and it shrieked, "Fly, you fool!" The speckled bird disappeared overhead in a flurry of leaves.

Fly! But where to? He couldn't join the yelling birds up in the branches. He looked around in confusion, then turned quickly to go back the way he came.

But before Beren could take another step, the low growth he was facing parted to reveal a face which would return to haunt his nightmares for years to come. It was a coarse face, round and dirty, topped by a string of greasy hair. The bloodshot yellow eyes that met those of the shocked boy were filled with the cruelty and cunning of an ape.

The thing grinned horribly at him, revealing crooked yellow fangs. In the intense alertness of fear, Beren took in the claw-scars across the side of the thing's face. Most of the ear on that side was gone. The tip of the left upper canine was missing.

"Well, well, well. What have we here?" said the goblin (which was clearly what it was). Its voice grated in the woodland quiet like a saw scraping on bone. Beren turned to run, only to find his escape cut off as two more of the creatures pushed their way out of the undergrowth. They stood not much taller than he, but looked immeasurably tougher. The largest of this pair sauntered forward, hands on hips. The creature appeared to be clothed in aged, grease-blackened leather. A stinking waft of sweat and ordure came to Beren's nostrils. A bone-handled knife was stuck in the creature's waistband and a scimitar handle protruded



over one shoulder. The hands, which were large and knotted, had black talons in place of nails.

The goblin looked Beren up and down carefully. "It's a little boy, Slapper," it scolded the first speaker over Beren's shoulder. "Don't you know nuthin'?"

"Ohhh," said the first goblin, Slapper, pretending surprise, "a *boy*. Well I call that just peachy. We likes little boys, don't we mates?"

"Yer we likes to play wiv 'em," croaked the third, cackling like a sick chicken.

"He he he," chortled the big one. "Games, yer, that's the go. Would you like to play a little game, boy?"

Beren, despite the pounding of his heart, drew his knife and brandished it. The big goblin danced back, but the chicken-cackler said "Boo!" so the boy turned there. The instant his head was turned, the big one reached in and tapped him on the shoulder, then pulled back in time to avoid Beren's answering slash. After a bit of similar to-and-fro the big leader stepped back a pace or two, let himself down on a fallen tree and simply held his sides with laughter. "Oh my," he gasped at last, "I can see we're going to have ourselves some fun here. Pull his teeth though will you Tubbs, we don't want no accidents."

Quick as thought, the third goblin flipped Beren's wrist with the flat of its sword. The knife flew out of the boy's grasp and was caught by the one named Slapper. Beren turned wildly from one to the other, holding his stinging wrist to his body with his other hand.

The standing goblins regarded him, grinning. Then one of them turned and ripped off a long, supple branch from a bush, then nodded to the other, who did the same. They moved out to stand on opposite sides of the frightened boy and began, hooting the while with laughter, to flick him across the calves from behind as he turned frantically from one to the other. The one sitting on the stump chortled at the sport with horrid glee.

After a bit Beren's tormentors grew tired of this particular game and stood back, panting and grinning. All three were clearly considering what to do next. Tubbs slapped at a fly on his neck.

"Can't really have this racket," said the leader, "and we got to get on." Still sitting at the edge of the clearing, he slapped irritably at his calf. "What say we – *ach mug shashgag!*" This last exclamation burst out of him as he saw the goblin Tubbs toppling over senseless and stretching his length on the ground. Slapper on the far side looked suddenly horrified, shouted a single word at his leader, then howled with fear as he raised his hand to his own neck and felt the tiny dart which was sticking into it. The leader's eyes crossed, and with a bubbling sound he too collapsed sideways to the ground where he lay twitching. Slapper turned to run, but the thrashing noise of his flight didn't progress far before he, too, fell victim to the strange assault.

Beren stood frozen in shock, trying to take in what had just happened. Before he could move or think, a strange figure slid out of the surrounding growth into the tiny clearing. The boy stepped back uncertainly, but a closer look at the newcomer allayed any concerns. The new arrival was a short, stout, brown-skinned man with a keen and kindly eye. Beren saw that the brown man's leathery face was covered in fine wrinkles and his straight black hair was generously streaked with grey. But what dominated the man's whole appearance was his nose. Hooked in shape like the beak of some great eagle, this was a giant among noses. It reared out of the man's face like the prow of a ship. This was not a nose to be trifled with. It was a nose to be deferred to; a nose of gravity and consequence.

The man wore little save a simple clout of greasy leather. A glossy dark holly leaf clasped to his greying locks was the only frivolous touch about him. The brown man carried a light bow, a long embroidered pouch, and what looked like a length of pipe, not much shorter than he stood himself.

This man approached the insensate goblins, one after the other, and stirred each warily with his foot. He stooped and retrieved the tiny darts, handling them with caution. He turned then back to Beren and addressed the boy in a strange language. Wondering, Beren found that he could in some measure understand it – that is to say, although the sounds were quite unfamiliar to him, somehow he knew what the man *intended* to say.

The man with the nose was saying something like, I must take you home now. To underline this, the man gestured in the direction in which the farm lay, pointed to himself and back to Beren. He said a single guttural word in Grey-elven: "Go." Nodding the while and pointing with his other hand, he gently nudged the shocked and shaking boy in that direction with the end of his bow. They had gone only a few steps when the man stopped Beren with a hand on the chest. He slipped off to the side then, to the place where the third goblin had ended. Part of the boy's mind wondered at the silent speed of the brown man's passage through the messy growth: in the space of a breath he had vanished altogether from sight and hearing. But only for a moment; the man was quickly back, pocketing the third dart. The strange pair then resumed their walk to the farm.

Man and boy emerged from the trees and turned shortly onto the back road to the farm. People could be seen here and there about their business in the fields and the various buildings, and the pair were soon noticed in their turn. Folk came to hedges to goggle after the strange figure of the brown man.

Dagnir was repairing the horse corral near the gate. He stood up when he saw Beren and his companion approaching. Obviously puzzled, he looked from one to the other. "Who's this you've found, youngster?"

But Beren found he could say nothing. He still had the shakes, and his tongue didn't seem to want to work. He just shook his head dazedly. Dagnir, perceiving his distress, became alarmed. He took Beren by the hand and pulled him behind him, sheltering him with his own body. Squinting in suspicion at the short, almost naked man in front of him, he said, "Here, you! What have you been about with this boy?"

The man with the great nose replied with some calm words of his own speech, which of course meant nothing to Dagnir. Dag looked the little man over, scratching his head. Why, he looked to be one of them savages! With their poison darts and all! But there was something in the brown man's confident, peaceable manner which Dagnir found reassuring.

Others had come up to the gate by now, including Gramlach. Dagnir glanced at the younger man. "Where's the Master?" he asked. "Can you fetch him, Gram? Here, young Beren, you come inside and sit down a spell. You look fair worn out." He led Beren inside the gate. There they were met by Emeldir, running out of the house. "What's happened?"

"Blessed if I know," answered Dagnir. "Beren just turned up with this chap here. He's one o' them wild men, I reckon. Powers know what's been going on. The youngster seems a bit lost for words; and the other one don't seem to know none what you or I would call talking."

Emeldir knelt in front of Beren and looked closely in his face. "Are you all right, Beri?" Beren could only nod shakily. Emeldir tore her anxious eyes from him and looked the brown man up and down. "Who are you? Can you understand me?" The man gestured at Beren and said words which meant: boy's mother, I found him in difficulties in the woods. He is not hurt, but he has had a fright, which has put a bond on his tongue. He will be all right.

But of course Beren's mother could make nothing of that.

"He's a Druug," said someone in the crowd. "Didn't know there was any this far north."

"Arthad speaks Druug," said Dagnir. At this moment, Beren's father ran through the gate, with Arthad and Gramlach following close on his heels. Barahir skidded to a halt by the little group and tried to take in the situation. Before Emeldir could say anything, the brown man nodded his head to Barahir, indicated Beren with his hand, and said, "*Gorgûn*. Orc."

"Orcs? Where?"

"*Kadl'ûn*." The meaning indicated with a finger across the throat.

Barahir turned to Arthad, who was eyeing the man in astonishment. "Can you speak with him?"

Arthad scratched his head. "Can try, sir," he said. "He Druug sure 'nough, but that wonders me, wonders me much. Never knew Druug came here, never heard drum here in Northlands." He bowed then to the brown man, and spoke some words in the language. Greetings, Wise-older-one. Can you tell me what has happened here? Is the boy all right?

Without showing the slightest surprise at finally finding someone who could understand him, the weathered Druug poured out his tale, which Arthad relayed piecemeal to Beren's parents. As soon as he had understood the essentials, Barahir sought just as quickly as he could to take his son away from the open-mouthed crowd and into a place of peace where he could recover. He said to Arthad, "Thad, can you – I don't know how to thank him. Can you find some suitable words for now? I want to take the boy inside, away from this."

Later, when Beren was settled, Barahir and Emeldir went out again to the courtyard. Somewhat to their surprise they found the old Druug sitting composedly, legs crossed, in the dust of the yard. Arthad was sitting nearby on a sawn log, and the number of curious onlookers had grown further.

"Didn't you offer him anything to eat or drink?" Barahir asked Arthad in a low voice.

"Yes, sir, of course." Arthad looked a little hurt. "He want nothing. Say he want talk with you."

Barahir turned to the stumpy man, who now stood up, facing him. "What is it you want of me?" he asked. "Anything I have is yours for the asking. You've saved the life of my son."

When this was translated, the Druug shook his head. He pointed inside the house, fixed Barahir with his eye and addressed a sentence to him in the strange speech.

Barahir tore his eyes from the man, and looked at Arthad. "What does he say?"

Arthad looked uneasy. "He talk about young Beren, sir. He say, er, well he say, 'We know his sort. He is one of us, one spirit with wild man. If he cannot live in woods, he die.'"

"What?" said Barahir, astonished.

The Druug nodded. "*Kedle*," he affirmed. "Die." He turned to Arthad and spoke some more.

Arthad relayed it: "He say, best if boy live in forest with us."

Emeldir gasped. Barahir appeared as if he couldn't quite believe what he was hearing. "What?" he said again.

Arthad shrugged. "Is what he say, sir. 'Boy should live with us.'"

"You mean he's offering to... to, well, take Beren under his protection? Living in the woods?"

"Yes, sir, just so," said Arthad.

"But that's..." Barahir couldn't think what to reply. "He can't be serious. It's just politeness, isn't it?"

Arthad shook his head firmly from side to side. "No, sir. Druug never throw word away. Mean what say, always."

Emeldir closed her mouth, which had hung open with astonishment during this exchange. "Well that's just nonsense," she said. "Beren can't go off and live with wild men!"

Barahir's head was buzzing, he found it hard to think straight. "I don't understand this. How can he – what makes him so certain? How can he just *know* all this if he only chanced upon the boy today? I don't understand. He can't just up and *say* such a thing, out of nowhere."

Arthad interrogated the stubby brown man further, who seemed faintly surprised at the questions. Eventually the Southerner turned to Barahir again. “Sir, he tell me, he watch Beren now for long time. Many times, in woods. First time, he is wondering what boy is doing, alone in woods. But then it again, and again. He say, boy speak with birds, animals. No Druug can do. Boy can feel forest, not so good as Druug yet maybe, but he young. All other house-men – he mean us, sir – blind and deaf as rocks. Never feel forest. Boy is different. Boy is special. Old Druug man here, he see. He know.”

The Druug then reached his knotted brown arm out towards Barahir and laid his hand first on Barahir’s chest, then his own. He spoke some more. Arthad translated: “He say, sir, he say, I understand. Understand pain in heart, hard choice. I too am father.”

Barahir stood silent, remembering some of things which had been said in Beren’s case last winter, and other thoughts which had passed through his mind since. This met too neatly with his fears for his son for his peace of mind. Finally he said, “We must think on this. We cannot decide now. Ask him if he will meet with us again.”

The old Druug assented without hesitation. They had then to settle on a time and place of rendezvous. This required an extended exchange of words between the Wild Man and Arthad, part of which sounded like a long and picturesque description. Finally Arthad turned back to the parents. “He say, well, for place he talking about dam, sir, that one just here. He have reasons for that I think, but not so clear to me. Something bad somewhere. For time, he say, meet at next waxing half moon, hour when she just peeps over hill.”

Barahir calculated. “Three weeks or so... all right. If we can’t sort some sense out of it by then, we never will. Tell him I’ll meet him.”

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The three of them – Barahir, Emeldir, Caladis – had been chewing the matter over for some hours without reaching any agreement. Caladis had scornfully dismissed the question out of hand. Barahir, on the other hand, was reluctantly admitting to himself that the idea might be worth pursuing, at least as a way to keep Beren safe in the woods; even though he hated some of the ramifications he could see. He had naturally hoped to see Beren take over leadership of the upper valley in time. How could that happen if the boy went to live with the Drúedain, learned their ways, grew up as one of them? But he found himself wondering tiredly if events had not all along been moving inexorably in this direction. He was not fool enough to think the world must always arrange itself to his satisfaction.

Emeldir could see the arguments, she just could not bring herself to accept the separation, let alone the primitive manner of existence being held out to her son. That old man had smelled, and he had been nearly naked. Was this really the only choice available to her boy? To live like a savage, with matted hair; dirty, furtive, creeping through the woods like a wild thing? Was this in any way a fitting role for a prince of the House of Bëor? How would he ever learn horsemanship, or the use of arms? Or the pride of his race? And she would hardly ever see him – her child, her baby! It wasn’t all that long ago that she used to sing him to sleep in her arms.

“We won’t settle this tonight,” she said finally, weary as the others. “Let’s go to bed.”

Barahir looked down gloomily at the table. “Aye, maybe that’s be best,” he said after a moment. “We’re just going around in circles.”

“Let’s sleep on it,” said his spouse. “We’ll hope to see our way clearer in the morning.”

Barahir sighed. “I just wish there was somebody we could talk with about it,” he said.

“What about the Elves?” suggested Caladis. “Or Father. If you must talk with someone.”

“I know exactly what your father would say,” said Barahir. “He wouldn’t think it was a fitting course at all

for Beren to go off and live with the Drúedain. No. There are a thousand matters I'd seek his advice on; but not this. He doesn't know Beren like we do, and I don't believe he would see all the issues.

"As for the Elves? I don't know... maybe. But I can't see it, somehow. I don't think something like this would interest them."

"What about Andreth?" suggested Emeldir.

Barahir smote his hands together. "Now that is a *good* plan," he said. "Why didn't I think of that? You're right. I don't know why, but you're right. I'm sure she would have words to say which would help us see more clearly what to do."

And so some days later they rode to Newfort. Just Emeldir and Barahir, with Beren, accompanied by two of the house-men.

"Advice? You want my *advice*?" said Andreth.

"Yes, Aunt."

"Well that's a first." The weather was damp, and Andreth was feeling her joints. "People do as I bid them here, most of the time, but they never ask my advice."

She took them to a small chamber warmed by a fire, and sat them down. After the young couple had related all the circumstances to her, she sat silent a while, thinking.

"You're right about the Elves," she said at last. "If you want to know the secrets of the universe, there's no-one better. But they would never stoop so low as this."

While she thought further, the old woman held lumpy hands to the fire, then rubbed them together irritably. "A Drúadan, eh? There used to be quite a few of them about when I was a girl. You know, down South. Didn't know there were any in Dorthonion. I have this to say of them. Three things. Firstly, I never met a bad one. Second, they're ferocious hunters of the Orcs; none better. Might be they have something useful to teach, there. And the last is, the Eldar think a lot of them. Strange, that last, I know. You'll never see anything more absurd than a stubby, brownish type with no clothes on talking to an Elf-lord in all his finery. But in an odd sort of way they go together."

There was another ruminative pause.

"I've been wondering if the boy might be the Heir," said Andreth at last. "Boromir's Heir<sup>16</sup>. You know. He's about the only one I've never tried."

"I never thought of that," said Barahir. He frowned. "It's possible, I suppose. Always supposing there *is* an heir. But I can't but think of that as a distraction just at the moment."

"Well, we'll leave testing it a while," his aunt said. "He's too young yet. But not too long, not at my age."

"Look," said Barahir, "let's keep to the issue. It's not the fostering as such; we'd planned to foster him anyway, in a few years time. You know it's the custom. But we were thinking of someone local, a neighbour; or at more of a stretch, possibly with Hador."

"Depends whether you want him to learn more of farming, or soldiering," remarked Andreth, cocking an eye at her nephew.

"Well, I don't know. He's got to make his living, same as the rest of us. And he could learn well enough of

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16 Boromir, Andreth's father, had captained the forces of the Bëorings during the conquest of Ladros from the Orcs in sun-year 384.

war-craft home in the valley, perhaps.”

“And Hador’s people are so far away,” put in Emeldir, with a grimace at the thought.

Barahir knew she didn’t see Beren’s future in quite the same way he did. He thought he and Andreth were more of a mind. The boy was from the line of Bëor, indeed was grandson of the Landholder<sup>17</sup>; that implied a certain inheritance, an assumption of duty. But then the business of the birds had come up, and now this fascination with the forest... He was uneasy in his mind, unsure what it all portended.

Andreth chewed over her own thoughts for a while, glancing at the anxious couple the while. “The boy went missing newly-born, didn’t he?” she said abruptly. “Twittered in bird-speech when he was returned?”

Emeldir shivered, remembering. “Yes, Aunt. We never could explain that.”

Andreth thought about it some more, then sighed. “Well, send the boy to me in the morning,” she said. “I’ll quiz him a little. Then perhaps we’ll be able to make our minds up.”

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When Beren came into the room he saw the lined face he remembered, the same white braids now reflecting the firelight. Andreth turned to him, smiled welcome, and held out her hand. “Well, boy,” she said in severe tones, belied by the twinkle at the back of her dark eyes, “I hear you’ve been causing everybody a lot of trouble.”

“I didn’t mean to, Aunt.” Beren looked shame-faced as he took her bony old hand.

“Come sit by me here. No, boys never do mean it. Trouble comes in the door with them all the same.”

“Don’t girls ever cause trouble, Aunt?”

“Eh?” The old lady allowed herself one of her wintry smiles. “Well, maybe. You’ll find that out yourself one of these years, no doubt.” The smile vanished as she addressed the matter in hand. “Now look!” she said. “We have to decide what to do with you. That’s what this is about. But it seems to me, more than to your parents perhaps, that maybe this matter’s a bit more important, goes a bit nearer the heart of things, than one silly boy running his head into goblins in the woods.” She looked searchingly at his face. “*Was* it only goblins?”

Beren hung his head. “No, Aunt,” he muttered, “there was a bear as well. Another time.”

“A bear!” His aunt raised her eyes and hands to the ceiling. “Holy Manwë bless the boy – just how did you get out of *that* encounter with your skin? No, don’t tell me, I don’t want to know.

“Look, Beren. How much do you know of the history of our House?”

The question surprised him. Weren’t they talking about the forest? “A little, Aunt. Cal’s been telling us.”

“Aye, Cal knows a lot about it. You may know then that it’s sixteen generations, no, seventeen with you, since we Men of the three Houses threw off our black chains and walked into the West, seeking that which we lost. That which we threw away. We had our chance for joy, my lad, and we threw it away. Because of impatience, because of folly, because of greed. We’ve been wandering in the dark ever since. Often and often, when I was younger, it has seemed to my thought that the chains were still tight about our limbs. Nowadays I understand somewhat better of the matter, or so I believe, or hope. I think now that every generation has a choice. The easy door is shut for us, but there is still a door. It’s a hard door, and a long road after it, but I’ve at last got it through my silly head that the One who made the world never shuts any of us out, never closes all the ways. We choose to shut ourselves out. Or not.” She turned to him suddenly and

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17 Bregor, Andreth’s brother, Boromir’s son, and 5<sup>th</sup> Bëor.

shook his arm. “Do you understand anything of what I’m telling you?”

“Uh – I’m not sure, Aunt.”

She sighed. “Sorry. I’m old. It becomes difficult to stick to the point. All right then. Your friend the Drúadan, the wild-man. The one who saved you. Did you know that he offered to foster you? To let you live with him and his folk, in the woods?”

His eyes widened. “No!”

“Well what do you think of the idea, now you know?”

He thought about it. To live in the woods... But then, what about his family? And the farm was his home. “Aunt, I don’t know what to say.”

His aunt had no children of her own, but people in every stage of their lives had been her long study. She knew that six-year-olds had not yet developed any powers of analysis. They had to be helped.

“See here, Beren. Every situation has its good points and its bad points. Sometimes it helps to make a sort of list of each. Then, when you have them all in front of you, so to speak, you can cast them into the pans of the balance, and see which way it tilts. But just remember: you can never, ever have it all good. There’s always things on both sides of the scale, because everything comes with a cost. What you have to decide is whether that cost is too high to pay. If not, then pay it, and never grumble.” And when will you learn to take your own advice, woman, she thought to herself. “Now. Can you tell me, do you think, what the good points and the bad points are, for you, of going off to live with your wild man in the woods.

“But before you do, let me tell you one or two things which might help you decide. Because I know something of the Drúedain. Some things even the Elves do not know. One bad point: don’t expect any comfort. You’ll lie hard and cold. You’ll never work harder for your living than with the Drúedain, and a precarious living it will be too. But now here’s something on the other side of the balance: a secret. Keep it to yourself.”

His aunt paused then, and when she continued, she seemed to pick her words with care. “You know what we are, we of the first House, we people of Bëor. Mostly dark-haired, grey-eyed folk; good with our hands and minds. At least some of us are. And you know the people of Marach, those ones people are starting to call the House of Hador: tall, strong, fair, great singers and greater fighters, but perhaps not too much up top when all’s said and done. When all’s said and done. Eh? And lastly, the folk of Haleth. Clever with wood-work and with beasts, not much to say for themselves, bitter fighters when they’re cornered.

“Now these two other peoples, the big fair ones and the small dark ones, we of the First House have known long. Known them before even we came west, long ago. We three Houses of Men, we differ one from another, but not so much as all that. We’ve been together a long time. Now the tales do not speak clearly, or with one voice. But we think that the others were with us in the darkness at the very beginning. We think they share our travail.

“But Beren: the wild men, they are different. All the lore we know says that we met them first on our journey west. We think that they were *not* fellow slaves with us under the black lash. And there are some among our Wise who hold that the Drúedain, strange though it may seem, are in fact the best of us Men. That their hearts are clean; free of stain. Why this should be, why innocence should be given to simple folk who have no interest in learning or craft, nobody knows. If indeed it is truth.

“Ach, I wander again. But the fact is, Beren, like I told your elders last night: They’re fine people. I never heard of anybody who met a bad-hearted Druug. You could do worse than spend some time in their company.

“There. I have spoken. I gave you two points, one on each side: hard living, set against true hearts. Now it is your turn. Good and bad points. Can you think of any?”

Beren had listened carefully to what his aunt said, and had absorbed quite a lot of it. In later years the conversation would often come back to him. Now he turned back to thinking about the offer. Hmm. “Well, a good point is the forest.” He thought some more. “And I’d be safer, which would make Mama and Papa happier, I know. And Hiril.” He scratched his head. “I can’t think of any more good points, Aunt.”

“Learning,” she said. “That’s one. Those Wood-woses can move through the woods like a shadow; they can track a three-day-old whisper. Not even the Elves know the woods so well. Mayhap they could teach you some of that.”

“Yes, I’d like that,” he said, then fell again to considering. “Bad points, um, well, the big one seems to be not seeing Mama and Papa again, or Hiril, any of the farm people.”

“Who said you never could?” she asked sharply. “Who said such a thing? I doubt that is part of the bargain.”

“Well,” said the boy, “I’d just thought that’s what it would mean.”

“No. You won’t go far away, or for long. A few months at most. There’s no sort of requirement to spend all your time with the wild folk. I make no doubt you can see your family whenever you please.”

He considered. “I think that would be all right,” he said at length. “A few months is all right.” A new thought struck him. “And I can always stop if I don’t like it, can’t I?”

“For the present,” she agreed. “Leave it long enough, though, and you’ll find there’s no more going back.”

He didn’t understand what she meant at the time, but later the words would return to him, to be tasted in bitterness.

“That seems to be all the points,” said Andreth. “For good, we had true hearts, woodcraft, safety, satisfaction. Bad points are hard living and missing your family. So how does the balance seem to you?”

Beren thought hard. “I think... I think,” he said hesitantly, “the good are better. If I don’t have to be away too long.”

“All right then,” said Andreth, “so it’s decided. Live with the Drúedain, eh? Provided you can come visit your family every few months.” The old woman put her hands to her back and moved gingerly from side to side, wincing. “Now we just have to persuade your elders. You had better leave that to me.”

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“Well, you wanted my advice,” said Andreth to the parents as soon as they came in again. “Here it is: I believe we should give it a try.”

Barahir looked down at his feet. He could see his dreams for his son evaporating like dew under the sun.

“You can’t be serious!” burst out Emeldir. “He’s only a baby!”

Andreth shook her head. “No, he is not,” she said. “He’s much older than his years. If I can see that, you must surely be able to.”

“But... with the wild folk? They’re just lawless savages! Who knows what they’d do to him!”

“You speak that way because you don’t know them,” said Andreth. “Talk with those that do, and you’ll hear a different story. Me for example.”

“What do you mean?” said Emeldir.

“Told you last night,” said Andreth. “They’re good hearts, the Drúedain. No bad apples – none that I ever



heard of. Boy'll be safer, maybe, with them than he would be almost anywhere else."

This made but little impression on Emeldir. "But... but... they don't wear any clothes! Only a few skins. Stone tools, dirt, no houses – it's not to be thought of!"

"When Bëor and his people first came out of the East," said Andreth ruminatively, "they knew nothing of spinning, or farming, or iron. They wore furs and lived in skin tents. My granny would often tell me about it."

Emeldir turned to Barahir. "Bari, tell her. Not our *son*. We *couldn't!*"

"Mel," he said slowly, "I don't like it any better than you. But I don't see any broad way out of this. I think it was meant to be, if you really want to know."

Emeldir burst into tears. "You can't ask me to give up my son," she cried through the tears. "It isn't fair!" He tried to comfort her, but she jerked away and faced the wall, shoulders shaking with sobs.

"Lass," said Andreth with unaccustomed tenderness in her voice, "you've got hold of the wrong end of the stick. Trust me. It's not as if you were handing him over forever. We wouldn't stand for that, and the boy doesn't want it, either – of course he doesn't." The sobbing continued unabated. Andreth shifted her limbs, exasperated at their constant twinging. Blast this weather! "What's under discussion," she went on, "is a part-time affair. He spends some weeks with them; some weeks at home. My dear, you're not losing him. You're keeping him safe, the best way that's open to you. By a long chalk."

Barahir said gently, "It's just another sort of fostering, Mel. It's not really much different. And it would solve our problem, ease our worries." This time she allowed him to put his hands on her shoulders.

Andreth limped over to the younger woman and joined her own hand to Barahir's. "Look, lassie. Why don't you go and see for yourself before you decide? Go talk to Goodwife Druug. Get a feeling for things."

Emeldir turned around and laid her head on her husband's shoulder, arms tight around his neck. "I'm just so scared for him. The birds, and now this. What is happening? What does it all mean? I just want us all to be able to live quietly at home, in peace, not... not be swept along like this."

Neither of the other two could think of anything to say to this.

Emeldir released her hold on her husband and wiped her eyes. "I'm sorry to be stupid. I know one can't have these things, I know there's no use fighting the world-wheel when it turns. I know. But he's my boy. It claws at my heart. I'm so proud of him, but I'm afraid for him too." She sniffled, wiped her nose. " 'Goodwife Druug'." She smiled tremulously. "Well, I'll visit them. Maybe it won't seem so bad."

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The old savage was already waiting when Barahir and Emeldir walked down to the dam at the first quarter of the moon. Arthad had been delayed, some urgent problem of livestock, but Barahir had not wanted to wait and miss the appointment. He wasn't all that sure just where the moon would be in relation to the hill until they got there.

The brown man with the beaked nose walked down from the opposite slope to meet them when they came. He nodded affably, then looked up at the dam wall towering above him, and indicated it with his bow. He spoke then to the two farmers in a long, apparently earnest passage while shaking his bow for emphasis.

Barahir exchanged a helpless glance with Emeldir, then shrugged his shoulders at the man. "I am sorry, we don't understand," he said. "Arthad will be here soon. Short time," he added, making a sign with his finger and thumb held close together. He made to sit on a boulder, but the brown man stopped him with a hand on his arm.

“*Derdz*,” he said, or something like, then some more words. He was tugging slightly at Barahir’s arm and indicating with his head. The meaning seemed to be clear: not here, higher up.

“Up there?” asked Barahir.

The Druug nodded. “*Derdz!*” Come! With beckoning.

Hesitantly, they followed him as he clambered fifteen or twenty yards back up the opposite slope. Once the stumpy old man reached a height which he seemed to find satisfactory, he sat down and made himself comfortable. He became quite still, the picture of patience. It seemed almost as if he would be content to wait forever. It was quite hard to make out his form among the dappled leaf shadows.

Feeling awkward, Barahir and Emeldir waited nearby, not speaking. The slow moments passed by, but before the shadows had perceptibly moved, the Druug looked up. He said something again, and pointed. A few moments later the two Bëorings could themselves hear someone approaching.

Barahir took a few steps back down the slope, called. “Arthad! Up here!”

The younger man climbed up to them, panting. “Sorry, sir. Damned cow, trouble all the time.” He nodded to the still seated Druug and spoke a greeting in that tongue.

Barahir was on edge, wanted to get to the point. “Can you ask him what his name is?” he said.

The necessary exchange went back and forth. “He say mostly people call him Big Nose, or just Nose, sir.” Barahir had to make an effort to keep his face straight, and to keep his eyes from straying to the organ in question. “Druug don’t have proper names like us, you know.”

“Will he want to know ours, then?”

Arthad grinned. “No need, sir, he already have one for you, sure. Can find out what, if you like.”

But Barahir waved his hand in demurrals. “Let’s get to the issue. I want to find out exactly what he has in mind.”

Between them, they slowly thrashed out a proposal. It seemed that the Drúedain only visited Dorthonion in the summer months; during the winter, they went back south, and spent the time with many others of their kind in the Forest of Brethil, or elsewhere. They had no fixed camp, but came and went as they pleased, following the game, or news of Orcs, or simply their inclination. Nose’s suggestion was that Beren should remain with them during the warm months, visiting his kin if the opportunity arose; and that, rather than following the People south, he should spend the winters with his family here in the North.

They all seemed finally to be in agreement, although Barahir had to fight the strong desire to pinch himself in order to wake from the strange and not altogether pleasant dream he seemed to be having.

“There’s just one thing,” said Emeldir firmly. “Before Beren moves a step, I want to visit the camp, and meet the women – his wife, if he has one. Tell him,” she said to Arthad. On hearing this translated, the Druug looked at her squarely, nodded once, and said a word in acceptance.

“He says, is fitting, Ma’am,” relayed Arthad.

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Choker had just fucked up, and more than likely was going to pay the price for it. You didn’t get many chances. Up til now he’d done well; he had kept out of the way of the powerful, and had sniffed out every chance to get ahead, to claw his way further up the heap. But he’d been just a bit too clever; managed a promotion just a bit too slickly, leaving too many unexplained corpses. It attracted attention.

He had been quietly grabbed in the middle of the night. Then the one thing happened which he had always dreaded: brought before a Mind-eater.

He was dragged to a place and thrown through a narrow door, which snapped shut after him. Choker, looking around warily, found the chamber all wrong. All the surfaces seemed to be made of purple-black glass – walls, floor, everything. It was hard to tell where the edges were. Just the ceiling glowed a sickly shade of greenish white. The chamber was long, the far end obscured in shadows or mist.

A thing indescribably unpleasant then occurred: Choker felt as if there were wires pulling at his bones. The invisible wires pulled, and his limbs and back yielded and straightened themselves out, til he was standing rigid like a puppet. Everything hurt, and he couldn't stir a muscle. There seemed no particular reason why the invisible wires could not, by pulling just a very little harder, begin to drag his joints from their sockets.

Something moved in the shadows at the far end of the chamber. It glided nearer – some tall thing, wreathed in a long, hooded gown the colour of dried shit. Choker forgot his mere physical discomfort when the thing approached near enough for him to get a good look at it, could see what was inside the hood.

This *thing* had no face. In its place was what looked (and stank) like maggots heaving in the burst belly of a weeks-old corpse. The sight of this nightmare visage flooded the Louse with horror. There *weren't* such things. His knees wanted badly to shake like jelly – but they could not; they could not.

Much, much worse than this was the feeling of helpless violation as the Mind-eater – he realized now, with added terror, what it was – rummaged through his mind.

The voice, when it came, was rasping and thin, unpleasant to the ear.

“771,” the apparition said to him, “I know about your recent machinations. I know all about your pitifully clumsy and transparent attempt to manipulate your organisation.” There was no anger in the wire-brush voice, nor emotion of any other kind. Choker, listening, watched with horrified fascination as the worm-ends squirmed. “In fact, to restrain our conversation to a manageable length, let me simply say that I know everything about you; everything. I know where you came from, what your plans are, and every detail of all the fellow Mobiles you have terminated in your campaign to advance yourself.”

The creature turned and began to pace slowly back and forth in front of him. “Ah, you are wondering right now how you will emerge the present encounter – or, perhaps better expressed, *if* you will emerge from it at all. However, it is not our design to subject you to unnecessary terror.” There was a slight emphasis on the word ‘unnecessary’. “So let me assure you that you *shall* emerge with your life, and with all your faculties intact.”

The Mind-eater stopped in front of the helpless Louse and turned its maggot-face towards him. In spite of the monster's assurances, Choker could not help but give way to mortal, bladder-loosing terror as he felt its cold thoughts play over his mind like the feelers of some gross insect. He felt exposed and violated at the same time. Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck, he moaned internally, make it go away! Oh fuck fuck fuck. With all his muscles locked as they were, he was unable to give way to collapse as he wanted; but warmth flooded down his leg.

The thing glanced down, and stepped back a little in distaste. “Tsk,” it reproached. “‘Make it go away’? Is that your best response in a time of test? Together with this lamentable collapse of sphincter control.” The monster appeared to consider. “So you desire me to ‘go away.’ Do you know, that is droll. Because it is, actually, *you* who will go away. Let me explain. We have, as you know, as you *now* know, been watching your progress closely. Do not disturb yourself unduly about the terminated Mobiles. Some wastage is inevitable, and we are prepared, in fact, for a very great deal of wastage of lower personage. The point is that we recognize some valuable qualities in you. Qualities we might possibly develop; qualities we can use.

“You have spent your entire life at Central, 771. And that is the problem. It is of no use to us if you rise to prominence among the armies of the Mobiles – as you seem likely, eventually, and supposing you survive, to

do – if your only experience is of Central. We must rectify this lack in you. You will be taken away now, and placed in charge of a new group, with a new purpose: to learn something of the world outside Central. After you gain this knowledge – supposing you survive to gain it – we will speak again.” The thing leaned in, carrying with it a waft of indescribable foulness. The maggots at mouth-level sprang apart, revealing a wet, red hole, which hissed a foul laughter at him. Choker fainted then, and had no memory of being carried out.

Well, he had wanted to find out about the outer world; and now he was set to do so in his own person. Great.

The ‘group’ turned out to be a squad of three scouts. He had their numbers of course, but they called themselves Scabs, Stinks-a-lot, and Torturer. A surly lot, and no wonder too. The squad had orders to sneak through the siege lines and head to the country to the West, sniff around, and if possible pick up a prisoner or two. Women for preference, there was always need for more breeders – Central ran through them at a terrible rate.

Actually, for his first mission to Outland, it could have been worse. West was the country of the Yellowheads, great huge creatures with long swords and loud voices. Choker wasn’t so worried by them, not for a sneak operation of this sort anyway. West was much better than South, because nobody came back from the South. Nobody knew what it was, but there was something there that ate Rrrk. Choker was relieved they weren’t sending him south.

These raids seemed to occur fairly often. What the point was to them was hard to say. Sure, the women were useful, but one or two breeders more or less wouldn’t make much difference in the scheme of things. But what the horror had said about experience rang a bell with Choker. Thing is, you couldn’t help but notice that something was building. The numbers of the Lice climbed and climbed, until they just about had to stack them three deep in every room at Central. Some Lice (those more foolhardy) joked that God had a couple of troops bivvied under his throne. As for the forges and armouries, you could never get away from the pounding and the fumes. Something was preparing, all right. So did they send potential leaders on all the raids? To get some experience of Outland before the big break-out?

Choker didn’t spend much time thinking about it to be honest. He had fucked up, and was probably about to become somebody’s dinner. Well, so it goes. It was a pity though, because he would have liked to have seen the big break-out. He knew it was coming. It wouldn’t be tomorrow, or this year, or even the next; but it would come.

\* \* \* \* \*

The old Druug led Emeldir a long way into the forest. They went parallel to the river first of all, upstream a ways, then headed into the higher country rising to the South. Riding Foam, she followed the silent figure of the wild man as he slipped in and out of sight between the growth. He chose ways along faint forest trails which seemed to start out of nowhere, winding then for a little way through the trees, before stopping again as mysteriously as they started.

Emeldir had never in her life ventured so deep into the forest. She found the musty gloom of it unsettling. Huge old trees towered up everywhere on mighty trunks, blocking out most of the light with their spreading crowns. Except in rare places where a forest giant had fallen and torn a gap in the canopy, undergrowth was thin and straggly, starved of light. Glimpses of the sun were infrequent. There was a sense of dark space extending out at ground level, punctuated by the great wooden columns which ranked away endlessly on every side. Their sheer numbers effectively hid all details of the further landscape. Emeldir soon lost all sense of where they were, or in which direction Nose was leading her; the only thing which seemed clear was the steady rise in the ground.

They came out at last to a shallow summit on which, due to a change in the soil or for some other reason, the trees were more sparsely sown. The cover overhead was thinner and the space opened out at ground level. Since it was clear from the old Druug’s gestures that their destination had been reached, Emeldir dismounted. While tying Foam to a spindly sapling, she looked around, slowly taking everything in. Dispersed about the half-wooded space – it could not truly be named a clearing – she noticed several constructions of skins and

leafy branches which puzzled her at first, until the appearance of shy heads peeping out from the sides revealed them to be crude shelters.

The people appeared slowly and silently and gathered one after another into a ragged group standing in front of Emeldir. There seemed to be about thirty of them, of mixed ages and sexes; but all were cut from the same brown, stumpy, black-haired pattern as the old Druug Nose. Every pair of black eyes, and some of the mouths as well, were wide open as the people took in the sight of the tall, fair-skinned woman with the red hair.

Clothing among the Druug seemed to be restricted to small pieces of animal skin which provided a scanty coverage of loins, and many of the children dispensed with clothing altogether. Camp and people alike smelled, not exactly unpleasantly, but very strongly of an amalgam in which smoke and animal fat were prominent components.

After allowing a space of time for Bëoring and Drúedain to inspect each other, the chief (as Nose appeared to be) shooed away those he deemed surplus to requirements with a word and a gesture. After the others had dispersed with seeming reluctance to their occupations, wondering eyes in many cases remaining glued on Emeldir over their shoulders, two figures remained: a small woman and a child. The woman, who was of about middle age, had a broad, pleasant face. The child looked to be six or so – a gleaming-eyed girl with dark braids. She clasped her mother's side shyly, face half-turned away, but still peeping from behind a hand at the tall House-woman.

Was this Goodwife Druug? wondered Emeldir. Plus daughter. Beren's age, but shyer.

The stumpy woman smiled diffidently at Emeldir and nodded her head in welcome. Emeldir bowed to her in return and held out her hand. Although feeling uncommonly silly about it, she said, "I'm honoured to meet you, ma'am."

The small brown woman said something in reply. She reached out a hand gentle as a leaf to quickly touch Emeldir's.

Emeldir knelt down. Trying to ignore the pendulous brown breasts wobbling on one side of her field of view, she smiled at the daughter; but the slender brown girl had jammed her face tightly into both hands against her mother's side.

"Won't you say hello?" said the northern woman gently, holding out her hand. "My name is Emeldir."

The mother said something quietly to her daughter and nudged her gently with her hip. But the little girl just shook her head and kept her face covered.

For a moment, Emeldir could not think what next to do. But in a moment of inspiration, she reached back and untied the cord in which she had clubbed up her plait for riding. As the thick rope of red hair tumbled down from her bonnet, a collective gasp rose from the covert watchers on all sides. A small crack opened between the tiny maid's fingers to reveal a liquid black eye. Emeldir took the end of the plait and tickled the girl's side with it, making her shrink back and giggle. Slowly the child opened her hands wider and gazed wonderingly in turn between the gleaming red plait and Emeldir's friendly blue eyes. Emeldir held out the end of the plait to her and smiled encouragingly.

The little girl reached out at last and, with a hand as gentle as her mother's, stroked the plait. "*Or-sar*," she whispered, "*Or-sar*."<sup>18</sup>

The mother spoke some more words to Emeldir. The little brown woman's voice was soft and low. Emeldir suddenly found that she liked Goodwife Druug, despite the forest woman's display of a large quantities of not over-clean skin. But the realization came to Emeldir also at that point that the grubbiness was not the grime of one too slovenly to wash, but rather the honest dirt of one who lived and worked close to the earth.

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18 Fire-head.

The woman was beckoning shyly towards one of the shelters, speaking the same phrase as before. Finding that she was not understood, she took Emeldir's hand in hers and urged the tall stranger gently in that direction. The old man, Nose, was saying something which sounded similar. An invitation to enter their home.

The two of them held back the skins and ushered Emeldir into the strong-smelling interior of the shelter. There was nowhere but bare earth to sit on, but the mother went quickly to a bundle and unrolled it to reveal a handsome wolf-skin, which she laid on the ground, ushering her guest towards it with motions of both hands. Nose in the meantime had plumped himself without ceremony onto the ground.

Sitting cross-legged on the soft but odorous fur, Emeldir looked around, taking everything in. There was not much room in the tent. On the other hand, there were not many things to take up the space: just a few bundles of skins and such like. A small fire flickered between three round stones in the middle. Most of the smoke made its way through a hole, but enough was left to catch in the lungs a little. Truth to say though, it was not much worse than at home. A blackened bark or skin pot was carefully balanced over the fire, and the water in it was already seething. Now and then a drip fell hissing into the flames.

The brown woman reached into a woven grass bag and brought out a handful of what looked like dried herbs of mixed kind which she then cast into the water. She sat down then herself next to her husband and smiled nervously at the strange great woman with the fire-coloured hair who was presently taking up so much room in her tent. The little girl had stayed close to her the whole time and now peeped out at the stranger from behind her mother's back.

"What should I call you, Ma'am?" asked Emeldir. The others looked at her blankly. She touched herself on the breast and said her own name, then she pointed to Nose and said that word. "Nose," she said again, touching her own.

They laughed, understanding. "*Pozhuzzd*," said the man, touching his great hooked nose.

"Poshud," tried Emeldir, and they laughed again. Via words and gestures it was conveyed to Emeldir that the woman and child had names that meant 'Sunshine' and 'Long Hair' respectively.

The soup, or tea, had in the meantime been poured into woven cups and set to one side to cool. Sunshine reached over now and passed a cup to Emeldir. Cautiously the tall woman sipped the brew, which was alas still too hot for her unhardened tongue, and hands too. The taste was bitter and pungent, but it had something: strangely refreshing, and under the powerful bitterness lay many interesting shades of flavour. Emeldir felt that she could possibly even get to like it, given much practice, and a plentiful supply of hand- and lip-balm.

Emeldir had chosen, out of an obscure impulse she had not herself understood, to refuse Arthad's offer to come along to interpret. She felt now more assured that it had been the right thing to do, despite the inconvenience. All the to-ing and fro-ing of translation would have simply got in the way. She wanted to see everything and to meet the people, but not necessarily to converse with them. Indeed, what should they talk about, whose lives were so very different?

Without a flock of words to fill up the time, there was not much for Emeldir to do but to look over the tent and its contents, smile at Nose and his family, and to think. Is this where my son, my angel, my pride, my hope, my baby, my boy; is this where he is to sleep from now on? In this dirty skin tent? The thought was a bleak one. It took a lot of accepting.

The little girl, Long Hair, sidled now over to one of the bundles and ferreted inside. She came then to Emeldir and shyly handed her what she had fetched. It was a pouch made from dried grass; misshapen and imperfectly woven, obviously a child's work. "Is this yours? Did you make this?" Emeldir asked, smiling at her.

There was something in the bag. Emeldir opened it carefully and tipped the object out in her palm. When she

saw what it was, she gasped, because it so closely matched her thought. It was a figure, carved from some blue-green stone, of a mother holding a laughing baby in her arms. The carving had been sparingly made, almost abstractly, and details were few; but the story was obvious from the postures of the figures, the curve of the mother's enclosing arms, and the way they both held their heads. It was a beautiful piece of work, superbly balanced, like a musical chord.

Emeldir held up the green stone and looked enquiringly at the man Nose. She made gestures as of one filing at the stone. Nose nodded and touched himself on the chest. His work. Neither pride nor modesty: it was just so.

She tried to return bag and figure to the little girl standing before her, black eyes gleaming in the firelight. Long Hair shook her head though and put her hands beside her back. She said something, and when Emeldir looked to the father again he nodded, and by gestures confirmed this: it was a gift.

A wave of emotion filled Emeldir. Her eyes filled with hot tears. She bowed her head, helpless and blind. "I'm sorry," she said, "I have nothing in... I have nothing to give..." The little girl came and put a warm arm around her shoulder. Emeldir hugged her back, wordless. She pulled a handkerchief out of her pouch and blew her nose, then wiped the tears away with a laugh.

The little girl was stroking the material of Emeldir's dress with her free hand. It was a new texture for her, and she could not quite make it out. What sort of fur was this?

"It's like your woven bag, only finer, because with thread," said Emeldir. "Here, I'll show you." She delved in her pouch again and brought out several items including a needle, a spool of fine woollen yarn and a small knife. The little girl touched each object in turn wonderingly. The gleaming needle was as strange to her as the woven cloth. Emeldir wound some yarn over a flat wooden box so the warps lay side by side, then passed another length through the needle. Nose, Sunshine and Long Hair were by now all crowded around her, watching with intense interest. Emeldir made ten or twelve quick passes with the needle between the warp threads, packing the weft down as she went. Then she released the small patch of woven cloth from the box. This was passed from hand to hand with expostulations as each felt the cloth in turn. Sunshine examined the yarn closely, then held up a loop between her fingers, looking enquiringly at Emeldir. So there was nothing for it but to baa like a sheep, which made them all smile and nod.

Struck by a sudden and relieving thought, she took the things, yarn, knife and needle, and put them carefully into Long Hair's small hands, then closed the hands over all. "Yours now!" she said, moving the joined hands firmly in Long Hair's direction.

Gradually everybody relaxed over their cups of tea. Nose was interested in Emeldir's bow. He could of course string and pull it with ease, but his arms were too short to use it with full effect. His own bow was a deeply curved affair backed with horn and reinforced by a lacquered layer of woven fibre on the outer curve.

Emeldir, curious about the contents of the tent, went to peer diffidently at some of the bundles, looking the while questioningly at her hosts. Sunshine came and started opening things to show her. There were skins and woven bags, a couple of reed baskets, and some intricately-carven wooden bowls. Some bundles which were clearly private were put to one side by Sunshine with a polite shake of her head. Emeldir admired the bowls, and asked questions to which Sunshine replied. Although they had not one word in common, the two women seemed to understand one another. Although she could not at all say how this came about, gradually Emeldir gained a sense of the difficulties of this life which the little brown woman had daily to overcome, and of the everyday annoyances of which some were different, some very similar to those which Emeldir had to deal with herself. The two women found themselves laughing ruefully together over a broken sieve.

Sunshine prepared a meal. Emeldir was not allowed to help, but she watched everything with great interest. The centrepiece was a stew, spicy and delicious, which was served on makeshift platters made from several layers of some large leaf. The quantities were not large but were eked out by hand-sized flat biscuits of what looked like hard, grey bread. There were dried berries too, and slices of strange fruits. The bread contained rather too much grit for complete comfort but it was toasty and delicious all the same. Emeldir wanted to

know how the bread was prepared, and was shown the mixture of seeds in a bag and the place on a flat rock outside the tent where it was ground. Some of the others of the people drifted closer while Sunshine demonstrated. Emeldir had a turn at grinding herself, which prompted general laughter and chatter from the onlookers. An old woman without many teeth corrected her technique, laying her wrinkled, leather-brown hands on Emeldir's and gently showing her the right movements. Emeldir laughed with the rest when the improved results were praised with nods and grins.

The whole tribe had by this time assembled again around the rock. The people had spent the time in dressing themselves in what was clearly their best finery. Torsos remained generally uncovered, but colourful necklaces and broad belts with intricate work of beads or feathers were everywhere at hand. Emeldir admired several of these, but as her interest was noted, there was an increase in the volume of comment, and people began to indicate Sunshine and say her name. The little woman, finding herself suddenly the centre of attention, blushed shyly and shook her head; but her fellows would brook no denial, and she was cajoled and encouraged to go back into her tent and bring forth her own work.

Sunshine returned carrying a bundle which she unfolded to reveal several heavy swathes of colourful material. Urged by the onlookers, she put these on. There was a skirt, a broad carcanet about the neck, and wrist bands; all of the same intricate, fine bead-work. The ensemble was crowned by a conical hat, densely shingled with short feathers that flashed iridescent blue and green by turns as they caught the light.

Emeldir knelt and examined the skirt. The beading was wonderfully fine. She saw amber, and jet, and turquoise; red jasper beads, pearly beads and glistening pale beads. The colours were arranged with an artist's eye in subtle patterns which zig-zagged back and forth across the expanse. It was a product of imagination, sensitivity and years of patience. Somehow, by means of extensive and inventive gestures, Sunshine was able to convey to her unusual guest that most of the work had been done by Sunshine's mother, now deceased.

Sunshine spoke then rapidly to the others. A question, a suggestion? In quick response, several of the women lined up and began to dance and sing.

The line of women in their finery moved their hands in unified, hypnotic curves as their feet made complicated small movements. The song was a lilting one, timeless, dreamy. Emeldir wished heartily that she could understand the words.

Some subtle message passed which Emeldir did not catch. Without discussion or fuss, the dance came to a sudden end and the people drifted away. Sunshine took off her adornments. Nose appeared at Emeldir's side holding her bow and pouch. Time to go.

Mother and daughter stood once more before Emeldir, this time in farewell. The tall woman knelt down and held her hand out to the little girl, Long Hair, who came now, all shyness gone like morning mist dispersed by the sun, and hugged Emeldir with both arms, cheek firmly to cheek. The child pulled away. She dimpled at Emeldir over her shoulder, murmuring "*Sedze'uzzd or-sar.*" Tall Lady with Fire on the Head.

Emeldir stood, and now it was Sunshine's turn to come to her and hold her hands. There was sympathy and understanding in the older woman's eyes. She made a long, earnest speech to Emeldir, shaking her hands gently from time to time in emphasis.

"I understand," said Emeldir, again with moisture in the eyes, "I understand. Thank you!" She squeezed the hands that held hers and turned quickly to go.

Nose led her all the way back to parts she knew. A brown hand lifted wordlessly in farewell, then he was gone. The woman rode quietly through the last of the trees and reached home in the long golden light of evening.

\* \* \* \* \*



Life with the Druug was like nothing Beren had experienced before. The sudden flood of novelties was exhilarating. Although physical discomforts were indeed as plentiful as Andreth had foretold, the boy found, against his expectation, that he was not homesick. In later times he would feel the loss of his old life like the ache of a missing tooth, but in the beginning he was simply too busy getting to know his new family to miss the old, or even to think of them much.

It helped too that for the first time he felt, on some deep inner level, settled and right. He felt that he was in his right place at last. Life with the Druug was hard, and there was scant time for mooning about in the woods as he had been wont to do; but now he did not need to. He could scrape and grind and carry, and all the time he was doing so he could enjoy the sense of immersion in the vast web of life around him. This feeling of oneness and completeness among the eternal, quiet life of the trees would remain a source of joy to Beren even to the last days of his life.

The boy picked up the Druug language with a speed which would have been held astonishing had there been anyone there to be astonished. However there were only the Druug; and to them it seemed natural to be able to speak. They were not a reflective people, and knew little of the other races of men. For them the surprise was not how quickly he learned to speak with them, but that at first he could not. The quicker Beren learned their tongue, the quicker their own astonishment subsided.

Even from the beginning he had been able to understand much of what the woodsmen said, although for some time he stumbled finding words with which to reply. He never wondered at this ability himself, because this way of quick understanding had always been part of him.

There were a handful of boys his own age in the group. At first these youngsters did not think much of Beren, because he had no skill in any category they valued: he could neither hunt nor track, he could not carve or sing, and the racket he made going through the woods was beyond belief. Despite his greater size and strength, at first he could not even best any of his peers at wrestling, a sport much cherished among the Druug. Later, after he had learned the tricks of it, this story altered. In the end he grew to become a formidable opponent in this pursuit, as in others.

It was some time before he achieved any sort of countenance among the tribe. They viewed him as a sport, a wonder, and something of a nuisance and a burden. The people named him Clumper at first because of the noise he made. Later, after he had learned better how to move quietly through the woods, he was called Blue Eyes, or sometimes Quick: the latter being something of a two-edged blade, because although his long limbs allowed him to run faster than any of the Druug, he also tired more quickly.

The single thing about Beren that the Druug found remarkable – even wonderful – was his ability to converse with the inhabitants of the forest. His sense of connection with the forest, like his rapid command of their language, excited no particular surprise, because both were viewed by the Druug as normal; but none of the tribespeople could communicate with the creatures they lived among. As soon as the boy had mastered the basic skills of their way of life, he won acceptance; but it was this talent of speaking which eventually won him respect. He began then at last to be known by the name he would keep longest among them: Speaks with Birds.

Beren did not forget Hiril, but Long Hair quickly also won a place in his heart. She took him without question or hesitation as a brother, and in the first days he learned an enormous amount from her. She taught him songs and games, but also how to manage the new food, where to dung and where to wash, where to lay the sleeping-skin that they now both shared, how to pack and unpack things from the light travois they used, and a thousand other things. In the dark at close of day her small warm body was a comfort behind his back.

The Druug used their tents only in wet weather; at other times they simply rolled themselves in skins in the open. They rarely lit a watch-fire, nor was there any fence or other means of protection from whatever perils might be roaming in the dark. Later Beren was to learn that the tribe slept not unguarded, strange and obscure as those guardians might be; nor were the camping places chosen without forethought, as it might seem to an outsider. But as a child and a newcomer, he was not aware of any of this.

Going to bed was a strange affair to him – one lay down not, as he was used to, on straw in a stuffy chamber smelling of leather and wood-smoke, with firelight filtering through the hatch in the floor to illuminate dimly the rough beams slanting low over one's head, but on hard grit and leaf-litter in the middle of an immense, black, whispering darkness. The forest at night was full of mysterious noises – rustlings near at hand, coughs and howls in the far distance, and everywhere the steady, stridulating chorus of innumerable insects. Night-blue sky was to be seen between the branches, with an occasional star peeping through, or a silver slip of moon. Beren found all of it strange, but somehow none of it alarming. He rarely lay awake long – tired in body after the day's exertions and bathed in an inner ocean of peace, he slipped quickly into sleep beside Long Hair. Then he knew nothing again until he woke in the first grey light of morning and pushed his tousled head out, blinking, to sniff the cold, earth-smelling mists which wove in silent skeins between the ghostly trees.

The woman Sunshine did not overwhelm him with affection, and in fact she was so constantly busy that she rarely had time to devote exclusively to Beren. But children are good judges of carers. Beren was never in any doubt that Sunshine would be there when he needed her. She did not fuss over him, but she fed him, doctored his scrapes, and quietly saw to his bedding and his minimal clothing. She was the centre that knitted the small family together; and she now, generous heart, extended that support to her new son.

If it was Long Hair who inducted him effortlessly into the culture of the People and the routine of the camp, it was Big Nose who commenced to teach him about the forest: how to explore it with his senses, how to move through it quietly, and how to find things to eat in it. The last of these was a constant activity, because peaceful though the forest might be, it did not abound in rich food. There were plants which supplied sustenance at certain times of the year, and others which could be eaten the year round; but the former were of course of no use out of season, whereas the latter tended to be sparsely distributed, and difficult to find. Many plant foods also needed to be processed by soaking or cooking before they were edible.

There were plenty of animals living quietly in the forest, but as human hunters have found since time began, the only advantage the human form possesses, when matched against other animals, is its brain. In all other respects – senses, speed, strength – the animal is usually superior. And even although the brain of a beast is smaller than that of a man, most of that brain is devoted at any one time to the single aim of not getting caught; whereas a human brain usually has multiple demands on its capacity.

Beren learned the hard lesson that the most essential virtue one can bring to a hunt is patience. Since a human hunter can rarely outrun his prey, he must contrive matters so that it will come to him. That means he has to deduce where the prey is likely to be at some point in the future. In principle, all that one has to do then is to wait at that place until the prey comes along. However, the wait may be long; the prey must remain unaware; and the hunter must be ready.

The Druug hunters had practised from childhood the art of patient waiting. They were superb at it. Nose for example could sit in a tree, as motionless as if he were part of it, for all the hours of a whole long day, or even longer at need. At no point in that period would his attention to the trail wander, and he remained at all times instantly ready to strike with bow, spear or pipe as the situation might require. Beren at first could not sit still for a single minute without fidgeting. He grew better slowly with practice, but at six years old he was starting late. All the others of his age were much better at this skill, indeed at all the skills. Even Long Hair could sit quietly for well over an hour, and she could drift through the forest like a wraith. This naturally chafed with Beren and acted as a powerful spur to greater efforts. He learned in fact rather quickly, although he himself did not feel this to be so.

The general sense Beren possessed of what was happening in the fabric of the forest was shared by Nose – shared in fact by all the Druug hunters – in intensified and sharpened form. But what in Beren was a pure gift was in them the result of, or at least very much strengthened by, years of practice. It was hard to say with them where instinct began and where the senses left off. Nose for example could detect things with his eyes which Beren could not see even when they were pointed out to him. Nose could distinguish a single faint sound from the forest background and from this meagre clue he could construct an accurate picture of the movement of animals five spear-casts away. And what Nose could do with the organ for which he was named

was nothing short of phenomenal. This activity was a constant source of fascination for Beren. Nose would choose a spot carefully, although on what basis Beren could never tell. The Druug would stand as tall as he could, tilt his great beak of a nose into the air and sniff deeply. His nostrils would flare out and the whole fleshy organ, already in its resting state of impressive size, would seem to dilate further and even to quiver. Nose would repeat this performance at other spots and would also crouch down to pick up scent layers nearer the ground. When he was finished he would silently point, giving additional information via a finger-sign language the Druug hunters used. Beren never knew the old man's conclusions to turn out wrong.

Beren had seen bow and spear used before, but the blowpipe was unfamiliar to him. Nose put him in the way of its use, and instructed him in the preparation of the poisons. The Druug used several such for hunting, but none of them was toxic in the exact sense of directly causing death; their action was rather to stupefy the prey, or more often simply to muddle it. As Nose explained to him, only a fool would shoot full of deadly poison something he planned to eat. The true poisons were reserved for hunting Orcs, but even there the Druug preferred to drug the prey before finishing them off with spear or knife.

Beren gradually came to realize that the Druug were fanatic hunters of the goblins. That goblins might also hunt Druug was not an idea which yet occurred to his mind. His baptism of fire in this respect would not occur until the following year.

The Druug changed camp often. How this happened was difficult to say. The tribe often gathered around a communal fire in the evenings, where there was much talk as well as tales, and singing or other merriment. They had no single leader, not even Nose, although it was obvious that his opinions were given weight. Decisions seemed rather to be arrived at by gradual community consensus. Nothing was proposed or debated; people just all seemed suddenly to be of the same mind.

The choice of camp-sites was equally obscure. A direction of march was chosen as if self-evident; but no single person, if asked, which Beren did from time to time, could say where exactly they were headed. "Oh, well, we might see what things are like at the Grey Rocks," the interviewee might say vaguely, scratching his or her head. "Depends what the wind says when we get over the ridge. But it could be that the Slopes with the Yellow Flowers is a better bet. Don't know, really. I guess we'll know where we're going when we get there." And so it would turn out to be.

Nose did not hunt every day while in camp. As with many of the Druug, he enjoyed spending time in making things. Some favoured the bead-work Emeldir had admired; others preferred to carve in wood or even stone. Nose specialized in small figures worked from jasper or other semi-precious stone. He had many examples similar to the figurine given to Emeldir, but he kept scant interest in the things once he had made them, and gave them freely away. Later Beren was to meet other craftsmen with the same attitude. The making was what they enjoyed; simple possession held for them but little attraction.

One day quite early in his first stay with the Druug, Beren received something of a surprise while exploring the forest around the current camp. He parted some growth and came face-to-face with a creature which at first he took to be a Druug, engaged in some sort of meditation. He was backing away respectfully when something made him hesitate and subject the figure to a closer inspection. It took him some minutes to be sure, but gradually he realized that what he had taken to be a living being was in fact a superb carving in stone. He examined the figure from all sides, and at last touched it with a tentative hand. His hand indeed reported stone, but a corner of his mind remained unconvinced. Later he became aware that such figures were to be found near most of the camp-sites. These shapes were, if not exactly hidden, certainly not on obvious display. When Beren asked Nose about them, "Watchstones," was the laconic reply he received. That was all that Beren learned about them that year.

In all summers there comes a day, a single day, when you realize the season is on the wane. There is a different feel to the wind on that day, a different sound in the leaves. Gradually thereafter the days draw in, the air becomes colder, and leaves begin to yellow.

It was a time of richness for the Druug. Everybody was busy gathering the harvest of the year. There was an immense amount to do – not only the gathering itself, but berries and fruits had to be sliced and dried, and

nuts had to be packed away in squirrel-proof storage.

There came a time when the weather turned rainy and the faded leaves began to fall in numbers. The Druug had been steadily moving toward lower ground for some time, and now at last they reached the river. There they made camp, and waited.

They were upstream of any habitation of the farming folk, and not far from the mountains. Pine-clad highlands loomed up darkly on both sides of the rushing water. There were natural meadows on either side at the place chosen by the Druug, ringed as if by a high wall by the sombre trees. Here the river was small and fast, a weave of torrents twisting between scattered rocks, with foam gathering and circling in calmer places. The power of the water streamed out from between boulders in muscular curves of almost solid-seeming glassy green. The twitch and shiver of ripples on the surfaces of these jets made them seem like the living thighs of strange, glassy giants. The roar of the waters made an unvarying background to everything done in that place.

One morning Beren woke in the half-light. As usual at that camp, he first became conscious of the voice of the river; but then he noticed people moving about. He propped himself on his elbows to see what was going on.

Nose loomed over him in the dimness. "Up, Clumper!" he said to Beren in a voice full of glee. "The salmon have come!"

Beren clambered out of his sleeping fur and followed Nose to the river, where a curious sight opened before him. Most of the Druug were busy on this side of the stream catching salmon with net and spear; the boy's eyes widened as he took in that the further bank was lined with bears, about similar work with tooth and claw. Each team ignored the other, concentrating solely on the fish.

And what fish! Great streamlined bodies filled the stream with flashes of silver. Every so often a fish would leap out, flipping its great body madly from side to side so as to make progress up a tight place in the torrent. The fish gleamed silver, but the curves of their backs were blushed with a fiery red. The fishers were kept constantly busy; nobody had to wait any time at all for the next catch. A fish would be caught, wrestled with, dragged flapping to the bank where it was handed over to a team of auxiliaries; immediately the fisher would take up spear or net again and turn back to the stream. Almost before they had a chance to draw breath, the next fish would be upon them. The shaggy brown beasts on the other side of the stream were enjoying similar success.

Although eyeing the bears with some apprehension, Beren joined the scatter of children and latecomers who were running down to the bank to help. Nose was already back in the water and was spearing fish almost without a pause.

Long Hair and Beren struggled to manage a fish between them. Some of the wildly flapping creatures were longer than they were. Sunshine had to help them drag. The three of them then held the slippery, struggling creature as best they could until Sunshine could beat it to shivering death with multiple blows on the head from a stone. An older couple who Beren knew as Black Snake and Rowan on the Mountain were also helping Nose's group, but Nose himself was catching fish faster than his helpers could drag them aside.

The work was relentless. Beren's back was aching, his hands were scratched, and everybody became more and more coated in scales, slime and blood. The piles of silver fish grew higher and higher. But midway through the morning, Nose stopped spearing and waded out of the stream. "I think that's as much as we can handle," he gasped. He laid his spear on the grass and stretched himself, twisting his torso from side to side, hands on his lower back, groaning softly to himself the while. One by one the other fishers halted too. The bears on the far bank had by this time eaten themselves into utter torpidity; in fact most of them bulged noticeably. They sat there and either eyed, with glassy, sated eyes, the undiminished numbers of fish swimming past, or watched the humans at their work.

That work was by no means concluded, although thankfully the pace was no longer frantic. The caught fish

were first skinned and gutted. Since the Druug had no use for fish guts in that quantity, these were mostly (with regret) thrown in the river, although the livers were saved. Lunch that day consisted of fresh salmon roe and livers. Beren thought he had never in his life tasted anything so delicious – it almost made up for the hard labour.

The next task was the carving of fish fillets away from the bones. This was skilled work and so was mostly performed by the small number of older people who knew best how a salmon was put together and thus how to separate the meat neatly from the bones. Everybody took a turn though, including Beren, because that was how one learned. The pink racks of bones were put to one side; some would be used to make soup, and the bones themselves had several uses.

Some of the younger children were set the task of cutting long saplings of a given length and number. After these had been dragged back to the clearing, older members of the clan began to tie them together to make what looked to Beren almost like the frame of a toy house – a very long one. When the rack was ready, other Druug busied themselves tying salmon fillets to hang against the outside of the frame. A small fire was kindled in the middle of the rack and encouraged to propagate into fuel laid in a row along the centre line. The judicious addition of leafy, still-green alder twigs produced clouds of aromatic smoke which began to waft among the fillets. Sunshine explained to Beren that the smoking process would take several days.

These were days and nights of some annoyance. Since the exposed salmon steaks were a tempting booty for all kinds of animals from raccoons up to wolves, everybody had to do duty guarding the racks. As well as the small, smudgy fires which performed the smoking, several watch-fires had to be maintained around the racks. The smoke got into everybody's eyes, and nobody got much sleep. And they ate salmon soup and salmon roes morning noon and night; Beren became heartily sick of the latter and could not think why he had thought so much of it at the start.

Finally the work was done and the tanned, leathery salmon steaks could be taken off the rack and stacked on travois. These were then covered with bull-hides and weighed down with great stones. The food still needed to be guarded, but nothing like so intensively.

After the autumn work finally tapered off it was time for a feast. Stone Bear and Talkative had found a rich hive and had managed to get most of the honey out of it without collecting too many stings along the way. Honey on one's bread certainly made a welcome change, but many felt that honey beer was even better. Everybody became rather silly from this brew, and Two Bags fell in the fire and burnt his arm. Beer was not often brewed and drunk among the Druug.

There was dancing next day, after the effects of the beer had worn off. It was the first time the boy had seen this. Nothing had been mentioned or planned; someone happened to mention dancing, and suddenly people all around had sprung up and were fetching bead dresses, drums and pipes.

There wasn't a program. Sometimes there were even two separate groups of dancers, each singing and moving to a different tune. The songs varied: sometimes sad, sometimes gay. Indeed there were pauses in which nobody was moved to sing.

As the evening became late, the sleepy boy drifted into a dreamy state, lulled by the hypnotic tapping of the drums, the wild and reedy piping, and the lilting movements of the dancers; their bodies, their necks, their hands, all moving in rhythm; never ceasing, never repeating. The words of the singers ran over his mind in a gentle stream, and visions came into his head of old loves, and of people now gone, and of great animals never seen in the North. Last of all, a great and wild vision blossomed in his mind of surging waters stretching to the horizon, running in foaming waves up onto a sparkling shore. He knew it was the Sea. Henceforth he would dream of it from time to time, although he was never to view it with living eyes.

After the dance was over, Sunshine covered the sleeping boy with a blanket where he lay. Her eyes gleaming in the waning firelight, she smiled at him with tenderness, and laid a hand, soft and weightless as a dried leaf, upon his tousled hair.

The people were taking their ease at this time. They spent most of their time under cover, busy with making and mending. Somehow there seemed to be a restless air in the wind. Brown leaves skirled between the tents, and Beren had the sense that everybody was waiting for something. Nose took to spending much of his time visiting the tents of other elders, where they squatted together in desultory and seemingly aimless discussion.

The decision point came, as always with the Druug, through a process of wordless consensus. Nothing was planned explicitly, but suddenly everybody seemed to stir themselves to set about the same thing. Southward! People began to pack things away and to prepare their travois. Most of these already carried a heavy load of winter provisions.

Nose came to Beren. "Son," he said kindly, "we're going south. But you must say goodbye to us for this year, because I must return you to your parents for the winter months, as I promised."

"But... but... but... can't I come too?" Beren was distressed. He had understood the conditions at the time they were mentioned, but, as with any six-year-old, no event more than a day or so ahead carried any sort of weight in his thinking. He had known he was to go back to the farm during winter in a theoretical way, but the actuality had never once risen up to disturb his thoughts. Now here it was, staring him in the face.

"Maybe some day you can," said Nose. "Not this time. Come, I'll take you."

Beren knew his foster-father now, and one of the things he knew was that Nose did not argue. In fact none of the Druug did. Their world was clear cut, sharp at the edges; either a thing was, or it was not. They did not avoid argument out of dislike for it, but because they had no very clear concept of what it was.

The boy had nothing to pack. Nose had made him a small bow and spear, but these could stay packed away til next year. There were no general goodbyes, just a quick hug with Sunshine and Long Hair. Then there was nothing for it but to follow Nose down the forest ways along the side of the valley.

He had not thought about the farm for months. To emerge from the woods and find the once-familiar buildings and landscape once more before his eyes was a strange experience. He seemed to see it in a new way. The broad paths seemed excessive and exposed, and the orderly rows of crops were something artificial, alien. The smells were strange.

It was a grey, wet day and few people were abroad. Nose and Beren were not noticed until they had come right into the yard. Dagnir's broad face poked out of the smoke-house then, open-mouthed with surprise. At about the same time Mari came to the kitchen door to throw out a basin of suds. The sight of the odd pair upset her action and most of the suds ended up on her dress. She gaped at the pair, then turned back into the building, calling excitedly as she went. "Mistress! Mistress! He's back!"

Dagnir came over and looked them up and down. "Well! Here's a turn up. Didn't expect to see you today, young feller, not especially anyway. And now here you are, and in tow with Granddad again!" He saluted the old Druug, who nodded back to him cheerfully. "I only hope the circumstances is something better this time. No Orcs involved?"

"No, Dag, no Orcs," laughed Beren. At this point his mother burst through the door, closely followed by Hiril and a steady stream of farm people. Arthad and Gramlach came out of the barn, and quickly the yard became filled with excited people, all talking at once.

Beren was in his mother's warm arms. He was overcome by powerful emotions. The familiar scent, woven into the deepest parts of his soul, was recalling a sheaf of demanding memories and associations. Emeldir at last released him and held him out at arms length. "You're bigger!" she said, then laughed and wiped her eyes. "Welcome home, Son. Welcome home."

She turned to Nose then and smiled radiantly at the old Druug. "Thank you," she said, "thank you for

keeping him safe. But won't you come in out of the rain and take something?" She turned back to her son. "Beren, can you ask him?"

Beren did, but the old man just smiled and shook his head. He put his hand on Beren's shoulder. "See you in the spring, hunter!" Then he slipped out through the gate and was gone.

Beren turned to find Hiril standing there. She was taller than he remembered. She smiled tremulously at him, and then suddenly they were embracing, both a little embarrassed in front of all the people. They pulled apart again. "Hello Sis," he grinned up at her.

"Pooh, Beren, you smell!" was her answer. "How on earth did your hair get into that state? And aren't you cold, standing there in the rain with nothing on?"

"Yes, let's all go inside," said their mother. In the kitchen it was warm and full of half-familiar, half-strange smells. The women fussed around, heating water and sorting through spare clothes. Beren found it easier just to go with the flow. They scrubbed as much of the smoky camp smell out of his skin as they could, chopped his tangled hair short, and dressed him in a scratchy, ill-fitting hose and tunic. He complained, but his mother was firm. "Each house has its ways," she said. "You can no more go around here wearing nothing but a strip of leather than you can wear your cloth and finery in the woods. I'm sorry, my lad, I know it will be uncomfortable for a while, but some discomfort is an inevitable part of life. You will just have to get used to it."

Beren had asked at the beginning where his father was, and had learned that he was visiting a neighbouring farm. Barahir arrived home that evening. He had not heard the news; the people had agreed that it should be a surprise for him. Beren stood peeping around the door at the familiar figure with its short, stiff beard and weather-browned features. While his father took off and hung up his cloak and began to struggle with his boots, Beren appraised him as if with new eyes. His father seemed tall compared to the Druug, but Beren knew that he was not especially tall for his race. Neither was his figure broad or conspicuously brawny; where his father excelled was rather in the unostentatious concentration of force. His body was superbly well-knit, and it was directed by a calm mind that was centred and at rest. All of his movements were economical and assured.

Suddenly the boy could wait no longer. He left the doorway and ran wordlessly to embrace his father where he sat on the stool, one muddy boot still held in his grasp.

"Oh sweet merciful Powers, is it you?" said Barahir, dropping the boot to catch his son. He could hardly believe his eyes or his arms. "You rascal. Nobody told me! Though I should have wondered about some of the funny looks. Stand up, lad, and let me look at you."

Barahir examined the boy carefully. Taller and harder, if a touch on the thin side perhaps; but the experience didn't seem to have done him any harm – indeed, rather the contrary. "How is it with you, Son, are you well?"

"Yes Papa, of course. Come in the kitchen, everybody's waiting!" So hand in hand, the pair entered the kitchen. There in the light and warmth there was laughter, and some more tears. There was much to talk about, and everybody stayed up late.

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Hiril was already up and about by the time Beren woke the next morning. It turned into a strange kind of day. The boy felt uncomfortable in the house, and especially in the clothes. For one thing, they were too hot. The household went on noisily around him, but he had no place in it any more. He missed the companionship with Long Hair, and he missed the quiet and the spaciousness of the forest. He didn't fit in here. He offered to help Mal with splitting kindling, but got a stiff answer and a brush-off for his trouble. Every overture to Kiri was met simply with giggles, and young Kam didn't even seem to remember who he was.

After the unhappy day was over, it was a relief to strip off the irritating fabric and snuggle down in the furs with Hiril in the old familiar way. Neither of them was sleepy and they had a lot to talk about. Beren told her all about life in the forest, and about his new family. Hiril drew in her breath when he told her about the row of bears at the salmon hunt. "Didn't they bother you?" she asked.

"No," he said. "Why should they go looking for trouble? There was fish enough for everybody."

Most of all she was interested in Long Hair. She asked Beren all sorts of things about the girl, some of which he had never even considered. He was slightly ashamed at his own revealed ignorance.

"I wish I could meet her," Hiril sighed at last.

"No reason why not," he said. "I'm sure we could arrange it, if you wanted to."

But Hiril turned a bit vague. "Let's see," she said. "I'm so busy here..." Then she told him some of the things she had been learning with Cal. "Wonderful things, Beri," came her voice in the dark. "It's just as I dreamed of. I'm learning the Old Speech of the Elves, and Cal was saying I ought to spend some time with them, the Elves I mean, when I'm a bit older. She and Aunty Andreth are going to arrange it."

She started to tell him all the gossip of the district, who was making eyes at whom, but after a time she perceived that Beren's breathing had become deep and even, and realized that he had fallen asleep. She tucked the fur around him and nestled gratefully down herself, happy to have her small brother again warm at her back. Beren could be a nuisance sometimes but it had been dreadfully lonely without him.

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It was again the time of the harvest festival. The same entertainments as every year followed in their chain; only they seemed a little duller on this occasion, because the Elves were not here.

Caladis and Gramlach found themselves seated together. Caladis had some dark suspicions as to how that had come about, and had spent much of the meal trying to catch her sister's eye, which proved rather conspicuously impossible to achieve.

Neither of the pair was enjoying themselves. Caladis was not a slender woman, and on the crowded bench she was helpless to prevent the broad swell of her hips from pressing into the man's. On top of that, she could not keep the scent of his maleness – definite, but somehow not unpleasant – out of her nose, and the corner of her vision was dominated by the loom of his rangy figure.

He for his part was acutely conscious of the warm pressure of her soft side against his own. His throat felt dry.

Neither could think what to say to the other. Each believed themselves alone in the prison of shyness, and held the other's silence for indifference. They sat for a long time listening to the loud flow of badinage and laughter between others at the table, both silently and separately cursing themselves for their tongue-tiedness.

"It's hot in here, isn't it?" asked Caladis at last. The moment she spoke, she wished she could take the words back. Oh, such a sparkling remark from the scholar! she sneered at herself in the instant.

"What?" said Gramlach, leaning his head towards her in the noise.

Oh Powers, thought Caladis desperately, now I have to say it again. "Hot in here!" she shouted against the hubbub.

"Oh, aye, it is that," said Gramlach. "Main hot, aye." After a pause he half-turned towards her again and said diffidently, "I, er, I were thinking of ducking out directly for a bit of air."



“That’s a good idea,” she said. They glanced sideways at each other in hesitation and embarrassment. Caladis felt herself flushing. “Go on, don’t worry about me,” she said. “I… I might even join you in a minute.”

Gramlach extracted his legs from beneath the table and went out without more ado, flicking just a final quick questioning glance at Caladis. She sat on for a moment, feeling even more flushed in the face, and hoping fervently that nobody would notice. She tucked in a wisp of hair and peeped furtively under her hand at the company while doing so to see if anybody was looking; but nobody seemed to be paying her special attention. Feeling like a complete fool, she stood as casually as she could and left the table, feeling as if all eyes were on her, although she dared not look to find out.

It was cool and quiet outside. Caladis breathed out in relief. She peered around, but her light-dazzled vision could make out nothing in the darkness. “Here,” came Gramlach’s gruff voice from a few yards away. She stepped uncertainly in that direction and soon made out his form as a darker shadow against the dim background of yard and moonlit sky which her rapidly dark-adapting eyes were now revealing.

“That’s better,” she said. “I couldn’t hear myself think in there.”

“Aye, sometimes a body d’need a bit of peace,” he agreed.

They stood there together, smelling the moist odours of the night. Both felt awkward standing there in each other’s company, and both sought for some way to break the silence. A sound came then which made Caladis start: it began far off as a low, mournful wail which rose to a crescendo, as if to entreat the moon itself, then fell away at last into a minor note of sadness and loss.

“Was that a wolf?” she said, moving closer to him.

Gramlach chuckled. “Aye, mistress,” he said. “Never heard one before?”

She felt a little flustered, foolish. “Well yes of course. But I suppose I don’t come outside at night, much.”

“Night can be a grand time,” he said. “Everything d’look different; and sound different, too, as tha has just found out. Look you now at how beautiful the moon be. ’Taint nothing much at all to look at when a body sees her in the day, but at night-time she’m a queen, just a regular queen, crowned in beauty; and that’s all there is to say about it.”

She looked at him wonderingly. “I’ve never heard you talk like that before.”

“Well, mistress,” he said a little awkwardly, “you and I don’t mix much, in the way of things. Don’t have much call to say much to one another, really.”

The two of them stood there a while, enduring another silence.

“How is your hand now?” she asked at last, somewhat at random, feeling again the desperate need to say something; anything.

“Oh, fine; ’tis practically healed,” said Gramlach.

“Let me look,” she said, and reached for his hand. It was warm. She could feel its size and strength. The palm was covered in the callouses of hard labour.

“You’ll be stretching to see any of it by moonlight, mistress,” he said, and there was a tone of humour in his voice.

She didn’t reply, just stayed holding his hand and looking up at him. He could see the gleam of her eyes under the moon. Her head was tilted back and he could see the curve of her lips. She was closer now. There was a giddy feeling in his head. Somehow he found himself bending down towards her face. A voice in his mind cried, What? What beest tha doing, thou great oaf? But his body knew better. Her head tilted up the

slightest fraction further, and their lips met, just the barest electric contact at first. He moved back a little, hesitated; he could sense the heat of her breath, taste its sweetness. They came together and kissed again, less tentatively. Oh, the trembling softness of her lips, and the feel of her back as it lay under his reaching hand! Her own warm arms found their way around his neck. The pair began now to kiss passionately, strongly, each of them drinking in the heady sensation. Her lips were as juicy and sweet as a peach to him. He smothered her face and neck with kisses, and in his brain waxed now a fire of desire. He couldn't stop. Their bodies were pressed desperately together now and both of them were breathing hard, almost panting. Caladis moaned as he pressed his lips into the warm corner under her chin, hand in her hair. The softness of her skin possessed his whole mind and being; that and the wonderful scent of her.

Without really knowing how they got there, Gramlach found they were in her room. He tore his clothes off impatiently and felt for her again in the darkness. Quickly he found the silky woman-shape of her and the pair collapsed in a soft tangle onto the bed. She cried out as he slipped inside her, and then the world swam away, leaving the pair of them in a lambent heaven of total touching and sharing; that pure glimpse of paradise which comes but at rare intervals, and then only to the fortunate.

Men hold that speech is an affair of the tongue alone. But in the warmth of closeness after sharing the very nectar of ecstasy, a gentle hand can speak as no tongue ever could. Caladis and Gramlach lay on the bed for a long time that evening. Once or twice more the fires of desire flared, and the pair swirled down then again into the need and the pleasure, the gasping union of passion; but for long times in between they luxuriated in nestled comfort while the sweat dried slowly off their bodies. During this whole time their hearts spoke slow volumes to each other, through hands, lips and glances, without ever a word being uttered. These two human beings who started miles away from each other, in this one night closed the whole distance between themselves and threw it away as a used-up nothing. They found each other, and each began to know the other for what they truly were; and each found in the other what they had lacked and needed, although they had not known it until this hour.

A long time after, Gramlach got out of the bed and sought for something. She sat up on the bed and listened to him fumbling in the dark. She heard the rustle of clothes; then the sound of flint striking steel came in synchrony with a blaze of sparks. The tinder caught. A flickering taper revealed the planes of Gramlach's face in its warm light. He found a candle on a table, and soon their nakedness was illuminated in its softly glowing sphere of light. Caladis found that she could make out the vague pale shape of her own naked body in the bronze mirror across the room just at the same time that Gramlach sat down again beside her, his weight tilting the bed and making her breasts jostle together. She grimaced at the reflected sight. He put an arm around her at the same time as she crossed her own arms to hide her breast.

She glowered at her foggy reflection. "I'm so *fat*," she said in despairing tones.

"Naww," he said, a long sound of absolute denial tinged with incredulity. "Th'art *beautiful*." He gently uncrossed her arms and ran his fingers slowly over the silky skin revealed. Her breasts were full, but well formed; faint nets of veins made pleasing blueish patterns under the milky skin. "Such curves as thou dost have," he went on in his deep voice. "Truly, Caladis, tha beest a woman in a thousand. Thy skin, it be like... be like... I don't know what it be like. So fine and soft. I could touch thee forever. Th'art a beautiful, beautiful woman, Caladis. I knew thee for so ever since I first clapped eyes on thee."

She turned to him, eyes shining, and nestled her head onto his shoulder, her hand around his strong back, feeling the ribs on the far side of him. Her gaze fell on the bed and took in its condition.

"Such a *mess*," she murmured. "Yet it felt so pure..."

He looked down himself at that and started slightly as he noticed the smeared blood, and realized what it implied. He turned back to Caladis. "I didn't hurt thee, love, did I?" he said gently. "I wouldn't hurt thee for the world."

She smiled up at him and shook her head. She had been thinking, amid her lambent joy: this is completely mad. This is not supposed to happen.

“What are we going to do?” she whispered into his neck.

He considered. “Just go on, I suppose. Dost tha not want to?”

She looked up at him again, and all the answer he needed was in her eyes.

She stroked his hand. “I love to have you touch me like that,” she murmured shyly. “No-one’s ever done it before...”

The candle stood there whitely, burning imperceptibly lower. Shortly it became witness again to the soft sounds of love: the deep breathing, the wordless sounds escaping their voices, and the whispered half-words of infinite tenderness.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beren’s life grew easier as he gradually fitted again into the routine of the household. Arthad, who wanted to know how he had got on with the Druug, sought him out early on. He was interested in everything Beren had to tell him, and gave him some interesting background in return. “My people, down South, we always live with Druug. Always. Not with them, you know, but along side. Druug help us, we help them. We like them, good people always.” Arthad had not been able to understand why he had not been aware of the Druug here in the North, but on hearing Beren’s account he nodded. “Ah,” he said, “small band only, that why.” He explained further: “Druug, he talk to Druug on other hill with drum. All time in south countries, we hear drum. But no need here. Here is no other Druug.”

Beren was suddenly driven to wonder what Arthad was doing here, far from his folk. So he asked him. Arthad looked embarrassed. “Ah,” he said, scratching his beard, “was mix-up over woman. How do you say, misunderstanding.” He shook his head dolefully. “All the time woman make trouble. You find that out yourself one of these days, master Beren.”

Beren objected, “But Aunty Andreth says it is boys who make the trouble.”

Arthad guffawed. “Maybe both right,” he said.

Beren took up his lessons again with Aunty Cal, although Hiril was now so far in advance of him that she could even take some of the teaching load off Cal’s hands. Cal seemed to want some time now and then to go off on mysterious errands; that is to say, she herself gave no explanations, but Hiril told Beren that everybody knew she was spending the time with Gramlach. Eyebrows were raised a little over the age difference, but most people were pleased for Caladis at least, that she had a shot at a man at last, and a half-way decent one at that.

Things improved with the snow. Nobody liked going out in the rain, but snow meant a marked improvement in everybody’s mobility. Beren took to his skis again with pleasure, and soon was again busily engaged with the neighbourhood boys in their old enthusiasms. His sojourn with the wild forest men seemed at least not to have dented his reputation among his peers; in fact, if anything, it lent him a slight but pleasant notoriety.

Beren was now at the age where children of both sexes were expected to commence a sort of military training. Every adult was expected to know how to behave in a fighting group: how to take orders, and if necessary to give them; how to handle a spear and shield; and most important of all, how to shoot. Arthad made a bow for Beren which the boy examined with interest, comparing it in his mind with his Druug bow. This one was longer and straighter and thinner, and at first he sniffed at it, because it did not appear likely to be powerful. His first trials with it revealed this to be a misapprehension. He quickly came to prefer this longer style of bow, which seemed better suited to his arm and frame. The muscles and eye won from practice with the Druug weapon stood him in good stead however, and very soon he was rising to the top of his age group in prowess.

Swords were scarce among the farm people because the Dwarves (Beren’s informants usually preceded the

appellation with some muttered pejorative) demanded such a high price for every metal item. Unworked steel stock was somewhat cheaper, but local smiths had not the knowledge to turn out good swords. A few of the leading men had swords, Beren's father for example, but most people made do just with spear and arrow heads. The latter were often made from bronze, partly because its extra weight was here an advantage, and partly because an arrow was often used no more than once in a fight. Steel would keep an edge far longer, but in the first cut a bronze blade went as deep as a steel one.

In place of sword drill there was stick fighting. The staffs, cut from ash saplings, were usually a little longer than the wielder was high. The sticks used in training were padded with straw and leather but they could still inflict a frightful clout. However, people in those days grew up used to knocks and bangs, and nobody minded too much when they were knocked down. One was expected to pick oneself and get on with it with no more than a wince and a grin.

Beren was told that a well-handled staff was a formidable weapon, and could be a deadly one. Duels with the staff were not encouraged, although they did occur from time to time. The least result of such a clash was usually some broken bones. Beren enjoyed the practice with the sticks and was soon rising in the rankings of this fighting art as well. Shortly he found himself, in the interests of a fair contest, matched against children older than himself.

The one winter activity which Beren was loth to take part in was ice skating. Since there were warm springs lower on the stream, the pools down that way rarely froze securely; by far the best ice was to be found on the long pool above the dam. On fine winter days this space was usually abuzz with skaters. Beren refused to join them. He had a horror of the place. He remembered very well his first experience there, years ago as it seemed, and nothing would induce him to go on it again, frozen or not. Hiril was a keen skater, but he would plead with her not to go.

"If you could just give me a reason," she would say. "I'm not so stubborn that I'd turn my head away from a reasoned argument. But all you have is a feeling. Nobody else has it. You've been going on about this pool for ages, winter and summer, and nothing ever happens."

He was miserable. "I don't have any reason," he admitted. "I just know it's a bad place. Nose says so too."

She would go off fuming then, intensely annoyed at him for giving her the shivers after all in spite of everything. Having constantly his collywobblers at the back of her mind, she found she couldn't enjoy the stupid pool any more. It was those blasted wild men who had got at him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Well, Choker and his Lice had survived their first raid; they'd even bagged a prisoner, a young wench. There'd been a boy too, but well... least said about that the better, maybe. Anyway, the woman should keep the higher-ups happy.

It hadn't been easy. Several times they had nearly been caught. Not so bad once they'd reached the mountains, but the damned Elves on the plain were hard to avoid. They'd managed it though, both going and coming back. They'd dodged the damned Elves and their dreadful eyes, which could cut a man like white-hot razors; or so they said. Choker had absolutely no desire to find out for himself.

On their return they had been debriefed by ordinary Lice commanders, not Mind-eaters as Choker had secretly feared. So it was all good, really.

Choker had been interested to see the captive woman close up. Such fine, clean skin and hair! He'd tried to talk with her, but they hadn't got anything much useful out of her to be honest. He doubted the higher-ups would do much better. Certainly not now, not at this end of things.

Choker had never taken much pleasure in simply hurting people for the sake of it. He couldn't really see the percentage. Life was tough enough for everybody already, what was the point in making it tougher? But his

lack of interest in this worried him slightly; it wasn't good to be different, to stand out. So he'd usually join in if there was anything going, and jeer and poke with the rest, hiding his disinclination.

Stinks-a-lot and Torturer were boasting to their messmates about their treatment of the woman. "So anyway, we all gave her one, you know," Stinks was saying. Choker had 'given her one' too. Well, why not? And it made a change from the random arse of some piece of scum snagged out of the corridors. "Then Torts and I gave her another one up the shit hole. Bust it up some, first time for her that way I guess." The listening Lice grinned and nudged one another. "She was an arse-virgin anyway, if not the other sort. Heh heh heh. Well anyway, all the time, all through it, this pig hadn't made a sound. Not squeak one. Inconsiderate, really. I likes it better when they squeal a bit." Laughter, sounds of agreement. "Well, we'd about given up on that. But then Torts here," he choked on his own laughter, "Torts here –"

"All right, all right, I can tell it myself, can't I?" broke in Torturer. "Well what happened was I kind of stretched meself, you know, looked a bit like I wasn't done; like I hadn't had me fill. An' I says, I says, cor you know, I says, I could really do with some more of that. Some really tight bum, know what I mean? Then I sort of looked, contemplative like, over at the kid. Inna contemplative sort of way, know what I mean? And once the pig caught me drift, *then* she cut loose, hah hah, started hollerin' like anything. That took the cork out of the bottle all right, hahahahaha!" The listeners dissolved with him into fits of harsh laughter, sounding like stones being poured into a bucket.

They probably should have left her alone, Choker thought glumly. Should have left them both alone. At the end of it all the woman just lay there, thrashing her head rhythmically from side to side. Back and forth, back and forth. Terrible look on her face. Didn't seem likely they'd get much use out of her now.

Probably shouldn't have eaten the kid, Choker admitted. But what was a fellow to do? Rations had been really tight.

\* \* \* \* \*

The smithy was one of Beren's favourite places. Not only was it a warm refuge from the snows, but the shaping of hot metal itself retained for him a lasting fascination. As for thawing frozen hands and face at the forge, it was either exquisitely painful or sublimely enjoyable; Beren could never decide which. In any case it was something not to be missed.

Angrim, the smith, was a sour man with a jaundiced outlook on life, but his wife Annag was cheerful and friendly. She always had a kind word and a smile for Beren. Their son Gorlim, an open-natured sort who took more after his mother than his father, had been friends with Beren from the earliest times. The couple had other, older children who were variously farming somewhere further up the valley; Gorlim, the youngest, had fallen fairly easily in with the expectation that he should follow his father. Smithing was perhaps not something he had a strong desire to do; on the other hand, he didn't particularly have anything against it either; and a fellow had to do something.

In fact Gorlim had an uphill battle trying to learn anything about smithing, because he was usually relegated to pumping the bellows, or other donkey work, while his father worked on the piece itself. By rights his father should have hired a boy to help out, and was always about to do it; but somehow this never seemed to happen. Gorlim was getting more and more frustrated by his father's attitude – becoming a smith was one thing, spending his life hauling coals and working a bellows was quite another.

On this particular day, Gorlim and Beren were alone in the smithy. Angrim had hurt his hand and was lying down sulking with it wrapped in a rag. Gorlim was worried, because they had an order for wagon wheel rims, and he kept having to skip over to work the bellows before returning to beat inexpertly at the glowing steel. He had ruined two pieces already, which had had to be cast into the scraps tub; now he was working on the third, cursing, with sweat running into his eyes.

As he left the anvil to run to the bellows, Beren said suddenly, "Here, I can do that, can't I?"

Gorlim straightened up and looked at him speculatively. "I'm thankful for the offer, indeed, but aren't you a suspicion on the small side yet matey? No offence meant."

Beren jumped up and came over to the bellows. "Let me try! I bet I can!"

Gorlim scratched his jaw, where a wispy new beard was competing for space with spots. "Well, all right. No harm in having a go I 'spose. You've seen how it goes, 'an yer? Just wait til I gives the word, then go to it. Eh?"

Beren manned the handles. "All right, ready!"

Gorlim smiled down at him, grabbed the now dark iron in the tongs, and placed it on the coals. "Right, go to it young 'un!"

It was hard work, but not too bad. Beren plied the handles manfully and soon blew up the coals to white heat. "That'll do!" cried Gorlim. He took the glowing piece to work on the anvil. When it had cooled and darkened to inflexibility he put it back on the coals, and again Beren pumped with energy. They continued that way while Gorlim finished two lengths of rim. He called a break then and gave the sweating but triumphant boy a drink of water out of a leather bottle kept for that purpose.

Gorlim tried the handles of the bellows as if he did not quite trust his memory of the difficulty. Then he shook his head admiringly. "My word, youngster, you've got some pull in those shoulders o' yourn," he said. "Keep it up and we'll make a smith of you yet!"

"I can do it some more," boasted Beren, although he was beginning to feel stiffness in his shoulders.

Gorlim sucked his teeth, thinking it over. "It'd be a powerful help to me, I won't hide it from you, with Pa laid up an' all," he admitted. "Listen: I got five more to go. Shall we make another one, and see how you do after that. Eh?"

Beren's arms were aching from one end to the other after the next two rims, but he wouldn't let on. "I'm all right! Let's finish the rest!" But after a further piece was done, Gorlim gently pushed him to the side. "It's a man's job you've done for me today, Beren," he said. "But you'm knocked up now. Take a rest. I got the swing of it now, I can manage the last two meself." Truth to tell, the boy was glad enough to sit down. His shoulders and arms were on fire.

Finally Gorlim was able to dunk the last finished rim in the water trough, where it kicked up a cloud of steam in a strangled hiss. He stretched his arms, then came over to join Beren. "Sore?" he asked. The boy nodded ruefully. The young man patted Beren's shoulder with rough affection. "I surely d'know how it feels! But you'll be right in a couple of days."

"Can I help you with things again some other time?" asked Beren.

Gorlim looked him over, considering. "Leave it a couple o' days, like, with your shoulders," he said. "And we'll have to ask Pa. But I reckon, if you've a mind to, he won't say no. But why do you want to come slaving for us here? Would ha' thought you'd have enough to keep you busy at home."

"Too right," said Beren disgustedly. "Fetch this, carry that, they never give you any peace. Nah, reckon I like it here better. Nice and warm. Besides," he added slyly, "your mum makes nice cakes."

Gorlim laughed. "Aye, she does that."

"And I like to watch you make stuff," said Beren.

"Might get more of a chance to with you pumping, that's for certain."

Beren stretched his shoulders, winced. "I'd better be off," he said. He stood up and fetched his skis from the

corner where he had leaned them. "They'll be looking for me, at home. See you next time, eh?"

"Righto, Ber, off you go then. Thanks again. And, er... if you happen to, er...if you see..."

"Sure, sure, I'll say hello to your Neli for you." He shook his head over the pair with a seven-year-old's superior disdain.

### Year 443

Slowly the land woke again from its winter sleep. With each day the sun climbed higher in the sky. The snowdrops germinated and pushed upwards through the white blanket; the trees woke, stretched themselves, and began to contemplate the season's movement of sap; secret beings moved deep inside the woods. But for the animals, it was a hungry, impatient time: winter was almost over, but it was not yet spring.

There was a brief thaw followed by hard frosts that glazed the remaining snow with a slippery coating, not thick enough to support the weight of man or sheep, but inflicting vicious scratches to the legs after one had broken through. Lambing was difficult that year, and several in the district were lost.

At last the true thaw arrived, and the air was soon full of the sounds of running water. After a brief, unpleasant slushy period the snow vanished entirely, and it was soon as if one had dreamed that the trees and ground were ever blanketed with white. Colours leapt out of the surroundings, subdued in themselves, but startling to an eye long accustomed to a monochrome palette: the dun green of pine needles, the brown of earth and mud, and the plum colour of the swelling birch twigs.

Arthad was woken early one morning by the soft clatter of a pebble against the shutter near his head. He opened it and peered warily out. It was almost completely dark still; only a faint blush of blue along the eastern horizon revealed the onset of day. The ground beneath him was a uniform field of gloom in which he could make out nothing. Before he could speak, a rumbling voice came out of the dark in the old speech he had learned as a child, learned in the tents of the laughing brown forest people: "Greetings, O Man of the South."

Without replying, Arthad closed the shutter, wrapped himself hastily in a woollen robe and fumbled his way downstairs in the dark. Outside, the dew was achingly cold on his bare feet, and his ears were filled with the din of the birds, near and far, as they greeted the morning. At this shorter distance he could make out the loom of the Druug against the first dim light which was now creeping over the sky and along the roof lines. He said, "Welcome again, old one. Has the eating been good?"

Big Nose, for it was he, shrugged at that. "Sometimes the beasts yield themselves, at other times not. But be the eating rich or poor, the woods are always good places." His teeth flashed palely in the gloom. "If we wanted to stuff ourselves all the time we would make the same bad bargain as you poor fools of house-men." Arthad smiled at the renewal of the old jibe. Nose went on, "You are the one called Horse-breaker, are you not?"

"Yes," replied Arthad a little warily, wondering what would come next. He had not heard that name in a good while.

"I bring you greetings from your brother," said Nose.

The word opened a door to many powerful memories for Arthad. He had been now many years in the North; it had become his home. He had seldom either leisure or inclination to muse over the scenes of his former life, among his own people; but Nose's words had taken him off guard.

"Is he... well?" he asked.

"Aye," said Nose, "he thrives, after the manner of house-men. A wife he has now, and two children."

Arthad said nothing.

“Your brother would dearly like to see you once more,” added Nose.

“I – cannot do that,” said Arthad. “He knows. He knows why.”

“Matters have changed,” said the old Druug. “He said to tell you. The affair wears a different face now.”

Arthad thought about it, hesitated. “Well,” he said, “all right. Perhaps it does. But sometimes there’s no going back, regardless.”

Nose accepted this with seeming indifference. He knew Arthad’s story, knew too that such things were otherwise arranged among his own folk; but different people had different ways, and that was all there was to it. He changed the subject. “These gabble-folk here in the North are a strange people. We have lately seen the ones who live in the big houses to the East<sup>19</sup> behaving in a most foolish way. At first we thought they were dancing, because they moved all together, and shouted together, and their gear was very fine: each wore many pieces of the water-stone which throws back the sunlight.” He meant metal, silver or steel. “But they had long knives, and spears and shields. We think it has not to do with dance, but with war. Well now. As a dance it might suffice, at least for you gabble-folk, although it lacks something of sweetness and variety; but as a war-party, well, I do not know what they would be about. Their leader is a big man, but he has the head of a small child.”

Arthad smiled slightly. He could make some guesses about the objects of Nose’s scornful description. “I think our master here is not so,” he said.

“Better,” admitted Nose. “He practises to be ready, and there is no foolery with water-stone or shouting. He is a good leader, a man of sense. One might talk to him, if he only knew how to. But as a hunter he is blind and deaf, like all house-men.”

“There are more ways to hunt Orcs than sneaking through the woods with a little bow,” protested Arthad.

“Aye, there are,” agreed Nose. “We have not numbers to meet the filthy folk if they will come in swarms like the summer blackfly in the marshes far to the North. When that day comes, only the ranked thousands of tall House-men and Speakers<sup>20</sup> with their long, shining knives will hold them back. If even they, indeed. But that time is not yet upon us. As matters stand, they try us not too severely, and we have had good sport with them. Five summers we have come here now, and our tally stands at two score and eight.”

“*Orcs?*”

“Yes, what else?”

“But... well, it’s been, let me see, it must be, when was that now? It must be four years at least since we had an alarm...” His voice trailed off. “Wait. Do you mean...? How many of you are here, Father?”

“A score and ten, and two or three. Or do you mean hunters? Perhaps ten, I do not know. I have not counted them. Those who wish to hunt, hunt.”

“You kept the whole of Dorthonion clear of Orcs with just ten hunters?” asked Arthad with incredulity. But Nose just tilted his head to one side in the grey early light and smiled at him.

There was a noise at the door then and they were joined by Dagnir. “What’s afoot?” the big man asked. “Oh, hello Granddad. We’ll have to make up a bunk for you, you visit us so often.”

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19 He meant Newfort.

20 Elves.



“What does the bear-man say?” asked Nose, looking up at the new arrival. Arthad translated. Nose grinned. “I would invite him to us, but we might mistake him for a blundering deaf old bear, and have him skinned and cut up before we found out our mistake.”

“Will you eat with us, old one?” asked Arthad, wishing to steer the conversation into a safer channel.

“Not this time, Horse-breaker. I am come for the boy.”

Dagnir looked uneasy when this message was passed to him. “Not my place to say, of course – but I don’t like this, never have. No offence to Granddad and his folk, but the young master doesn’t belong with them. He’s out of his place there, and no good can come of it.”

Arthad raised his hands in protest. “Well, what would you do, Dag? You know what boy is. Talk with bird, horse. He different, you know? Sure, sure, not too good live with Druug. But maybe *is* no good in this, nowhere, and this one way is least bad. That what I think.”

Dagnir rubbed his head and scowled. “Well, I don’t have to like it, and I don’t. That’s all I’m saying.”

The Southerner shrugged and turned back to Nose, changing back to the Druug speech. “The house will be afoot shortly, Wise-older-one. Then we will see. Until then – well, I know you will not want to come inside, fire or no fire. Will you sit with me here and tell me more of the South, and how it is with my folk?”

But Nose surprised him. “No, I will come in,” he said. “I am curious to see inside your house. Also my bones shame me with their clamour for warmth. *I* am as I ever was, but *they* grow old.”

It was an unusual breakfast. Gramlach was up too by this time and was busy with the fire, uncovering last night’s coals and stirring them into life. He gaped at the newcomer. Nose nodded affably at him, then settled himself down next to the hearth. He held out his hands to the blaze which crackled now into the heap of twigs Gramlach had laid on top. The fire picked out the wild man’s strong features in its flickering ruddy light and began also to touch dimly the wooden walls and ceiling of the room. “Ah!” Nose exclaimed with pleasure at the flaring warmth. He glanced around at the cabin. “Fire is the same anywhere,” he remarked, “but this is a strange tent you live in here, Comrade.” Arthad sat himself beside the old man and they conversed together while the other two busied themselves brewing tea and porridge, while listening with curiosity to the guttural language of the wild wood folk. Now and then Nose laughed, and Dagnir and Gramlach had then simply to stop what they were doing and listen, out of sheer pleasure and wonder. They would have been hard put to say why. Nose laughed like a child; but not like a child, because no child was ever so fresh or so free. It was a sound that seemed to open a chink to another world: a bright, clean world in which nobody had to suffer pain or meanness.

Each time, after it was over, they shook their heads and sighed as if at the fading of a vision.

It was soon full day. Dagnir and Gramlach went out about their business, but Arthad stayed long in conversation with the old Druug. He heard much news from the South. Not until the sun peeped over the rim of the sky did Barahir and Beren appear at the door.

Beren’s leave-taking from his parents and sister was unthinking and cursory. He was happy to see the wild man again and eager to get back to the woods and the free, open life he was learning to love. In spite of Nose’s mild protests he could not help prattling to him of the winter’s exploits as they made their way to the current camp site of the People. He was already nearly as proficient as Arthad in the speech.

The people greeted him as they arrived. “It’s young Clumper!” they called from all sides. “The fire-woman’s child! Welcome, Blue-Eyes, welcome!” They surrounded him in a laughing throng and kindly hands came from all sides to clap him on the shoulders. Beren was returning greetings and trying to listen to the animated stories of his more youthful comrades. As they reached Nose’s tent, Sunlight and Long Hair were there to greet him. Sunlight smiled at him with her whole face and held out her work-worn hands. “Welcome, Son. Welcome back to us.” Beren hugged her, taking in the familiar strong odour of smoke and herbs; and knew

that he was home.

\* \* \* \* \*

The boy grew into his land during that long summer like a young sapling whose roots extend and seek out nourishment and moisture, while its branches shoot up and out, stretching towards light and the sky. He soon learned the People's ways so thoroughly that they had to look twice at his stature and his skin and eyes to remind themselves that he had ever been other than one of them. He ran and laughed with Long Hair, Plays with Beetles and Noisy in camp, and after a short few weeks he was able to more than hold his own on small hunts with the older fellows, Matted Hair and Big Belly. He was often in company with Nose, drinking eagerly from the deep well of that one's lore and experience of the woods.

Since the People lived close to one another and had little concept of privacy, Beren quickly learned to know all the members of the group. He was not at first sure how many there were, because people came and went all the time; particularly, it seemed, the young unattached men, of whom there were several in the tribe. Nobody stayed away for long however, so it did not take many weeks before he knew them all.

It took him somewhat longer to work out the family connections. These were a more subtle affair. Relationships were not paraded or emphasized, but they had a deep influence on all kinds of matters – who might marry whom, obviously; but they also coloured the network of mutual cooperation which wove the People together.

He discovered for example that Nose had been married before, and that the clan included two of his children from that marriage: middle-aged wife and mother Smiles a Lot, and the younger, single man known as Chases Goats. Another discovery was that Nose and Rowan on the Mountain were cousins.

The shape of the land became also gradually known to him. The uninitiated person becomes quickly and helplessly lost in the forest. Straitly enclosed as it is by trees, the eye cannot anchor itself in distant prospects, and the nearer vistas are at the same time too similar and too different to offer any help in location. That is to say, no place in the forest looks exactly the same as any other; yet there are so very many places in the forest, and they are all so similar in type, that any suggestion of finding one's way around in it seems absurd. The Druug, however, were used to living among the trees, and although they had only frequented these northern regions for a few short years, they could already find their way around over the whole breadth of the country with assurance, even at night. Although Beren would ask them how they knew where to go, nobody could tell him; but they all could do it, even the children of his own age, without needing to think about it. The types and growth of the trees, the colour of the soil, the scent on the wind? Probably all of these, and more. After some time though, and helped by Nose, Beren began to pick up the skill. The various camping places became familiar to him, and he no longer saw all the parts of the forest as the same. In this he was greatly helped by his strong, constant sense of the forest as a living unity. He swam through the land with the simple joy of a fish in water, and the process of learning its details came to him not so much as a revelation of something new, but rather as a recollection, a raising into the daylight of reason of something already long known to the heart.

Stories and tales also helped to fill in and widen his picture, not just of the Forest, but of the greater world outside. The chief keeper of lore among the People was a short, greying man known among them, with Druug directness, as Story-Teller. Matted Hair's father, he was. Often as the People gathered around a common fire in the balmy summer evenings, Story-Teller would delve into his treasury and spin them a tale of far-off lands and strange woodland creatures. Beren could almost feel his own conception of the world stretching as he listened. Not so many months ago, his mental horizons had been bounded by the farm. Just now he was engaged in coming to grips with a vastly larger territory: Dorthonion, the Pine Mountain, the great dark Forest of the North. His land. But in listening to Teller he became aware firstly of the wider western lands of which Dorthonion was only a part, and not a large part at that. He heard stories of the willow-country lying long miles to the South, where nobody lived, and the only sound was the crying of the waterfowl. He heard about the cold marshes far to the North; the cool, hilly country bastioned by Elves and Men to the West; and the long mountains with their mighty Dwarf-cities to the East. But there was yet more: because even this, even the whole of Beleriand, as it was called, was, it seemed, nothing but a corner of the

larger world; a cramped arena in which Good and Evil were locked in struggle. Elsewhere the wild world dreamed on, indifferent. The boy heard of hills of fire, and of barren plains parched by the sun, and of people of all shapes and shades; and there were giant creatures that swam in the restless sea.

\* \* \* \* \*

One fine, warm morning when the first long fingers of sunlight slanted down from chinks in the young green, Nose nudged Beren as they sat all four together around their small fire, companionably drinking a cup of the tea universally known among the People as gorscht. "There's something I would show you, Son. Come with me today?"

"Of course, Father."

They had camped the previous day near the tall hill Beren recognized as lying not far distant from his other, winter home: Sightfoot Farm. The sight of the hill looming through the tree tops yesterday had caused Beren suddenly to wonder how everybody was at the farm. He had not thought of them for weeks. Now he was seized by a powerful desire to visit. He had been going to mention this to Nose; but it seemed his foster-father had other plans for the day.

Well, the visit would keep. Beren was well on the way to absorbing the wild men's approach to time: namely, that it would look after itself.

They set off, Beren attempting to glide as silently as Nose through the sea of trees. It seemed that their destination was towards the mountain itself. Soon it loomed large and dark ahead of them. Beren could see its masses of rounded, bald stone rearing their curves high above the forest. Rags of mist clung to its heights and exuberant growth filled its deep ravines.

They were soon climbing, ever more steeply as they went on. Beren had strong young legs, but had lately become wiser in the ways of hills. They demanded their own pace. You could not beat them; you had to be patient and slow. It was a hard lesson for fresh young energy to learn.

Nose, of course, had all the patience of his years. He never hurried. Step, breath, step, breath; steady and deliberate. His legs were as if made of iron, but Beren kept pace with him, and the pair climbed steadily higher and higher.

While the morning air was still fresh they took a rest by a tiny stream which splashed self-importantly down the rock. The water, icy cold, carried in its taste a zest of tender young herbs and clean air. After his drink, Beren sat on a handy boulder and turned to look out, directing his gaze away from the near objects of the slope. Vast spaces of air, all around them on that side, stretched off into immensity. He saw how the forest shrank below to a rugged green carpet, folded over the hills and valleys. The bumps and folds of it blued into the distance; and farthest away of all, a white line of mountains glimmered on the edge of sight.

"Come," said Nose to him, "a little higher."

They scrambled at last onto a great dome of rock which reared up into the emptiness. This was not the summit – a last mass beetled up behind them to an inaccessible eminence; but from where they stood, they could see around them through fully three quarters of a circle. Far beneath them the forested lands spread wide, all hazed and dim by the mass of air which lay between eye and distant object.

Nose sat himself down on the rough stone and breathed the cool air with obvious pleasure. "Ah!" he said, "it has been some time since I was here." Beren set himself down beside him. For some minutes the pair of them just sat still, in the stillness of the Druug, simply enjoying the sensation of being there, high above the world.

After Nose had looked and sniffed his fill of the freshness and the clarity, he began to speak, in the matter-of-fact way Beren was now used to. "We don't often come here," he said, "we People. There is game enough on

the lower ground. But my stomach tells me things. It told me of a need to bring you, to show you. My stomach tells me you need to see your land, to know it with your eyes. And it is your land, in a way that is strange to me.

“We free People of the woods are woven into the world like the coloured threads woven by Sunshine in her dancing dress. But all places are home to us; different in their ways, but all the same. All are home. Your people, herders and farmers, wander also over the earth, but it is as if no place is home to them. To build a box of wood, then hide in it at night, that is to be fearful in a strange place. A man does not behave so in his home.

“Yet you, O Blue Eyes, you child of farmers: my stomach tells me with strong words that for you it is different from either. *This* is your home. No other place. This,” he lifted his arm and swung it through a wide arc, “this bounded land in the cool North. Therefore it behoves me, your now Father among we free folk, to show it to you. The Speakers<sup>21</sup> call this place the Hill of Sight<sup>22</sup>. Therefore see; and see well. A lesson well learned need not be learned twice.”

Nose raised his arm again. He pointed up the rising slope which led to the rocky crown of the hill. That was East. “The hill blocks sight in that quarter,” he said. “We might see if we climbed higher. But the slopes are steep and far from cover. And what should we see? The wide valley yonder where most of you farmers live.<sup>23</sup> The land is open there to sight. We do not need to climb to see it. You have journeyed there, already you know it better than I. With time, you will know it better still.”

The Druug now swung his arm to point around the skirt of the summit, somewhat north of East. With his other hand, he clasped Beren by the shoulder and gently turned him until the boy faced in the same direction. The noonday sun thus stood high over Beren’s right temple. The pair gazed out, taking in the vista. The lands at the base of the hill were nearly everywhere cloaked with pines, but in the direction Nose pointed it was possible to make out where the forest eventually gave way to swells of moorland, lighter in colour than the sombre trees, patched in places with the slow shadows of clouds. This rolling country dipped and rose along the line of sight in long waves before vanishing at last into the blue distance.

“There you see the bare lands,” said Nose. “We don’t go there much. There are not many animals; then again, there are some – wild-beef<sup>24</sup>, and great deer. Good hunting maybe; but it’s not our sort of country. Too open.” The old man appeared to consider. “All the same, there is a place I must show you, some time. You can’t see it from here. It is a lake, nestled between the hills, hard to find. But no ordinary lake! The Lady was there, boy.<sup>25</sup> She walked and sang on its shores before anything began; before the sun or moon were in the sky. Think of that!”

Beren looked up at him. “What lady was that, Father?”

“Why, the Lady of the Nightingales!” Nose answered him in hushed, reverent tones. “Do your people tell no stories about her? They say she still walks the earth, in the Enchanted Forest<sup>26</sup>, away down to the South. That place is only for Elves; ordinary folk can’t get in. But at the Blue Lake there among the heather they say you can still hear her voice betimes in the waters. There are uncommon tales of that water.”

The old Wose’s words set strange thoughts moving in Beren’s head: formless ideas which seemed to turn like great, slow beasts beneath the waters of his mind. But Nose didn’t allow him time to examine them further. He turned the boy again until he faced South, right into the high sun. The land rose ever higher in that direction, the wooded folds rising at last to a sharp line of dark, jagged peaks. Somehow Beren didn’t like the look of these.

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21 Elves.

22 Foen.

23 Ladros.

24 Probably Aurochs.

25 Tarn Aeluin, and Melian.

26 Doriath.

“You see that ridge?” said Nose. “You will never cross that line but in peril of your life. Remember that.”

“But why, Father? What’s the danger?”

Nose laughed. “There is not time for all the stories in one day! Ask the old ones, if you want to find out more. Willow knows most among us of lore. But if you’ll take my advice, you’ll wait long before you ask. You won’t sleep so well nights, afterwards.”

Now he turned Beren again more to the right. The mountains in that direction became much higher.<sup>27</sup> It was hard to say how high they were. Nothing grew on their jagged heights. There was only the white of ice patched with black rock, the stark contrast much faded by the miles of intervening air.

“There you see the home of the Eagles,” said Nose. “No ordinary eagles; these are the Great Eagles of the God of the Air<sup>28</sup>. The least of them can pick up a grown wild-bull with each foot.” The old Wose now pointed to a notch in the line of hills, just before the white mountains began. “There’s a pass through to the South country,” he said. “It’s a hard road, and a risky one. The People don’t use it, we go the long way.” He turned Beren further, pointing now past the right-hand end of the wall of icy mountains. “That way,” he continued, “that’s the way we go. Nice wooded country. Just a little way, over the edge where the streams divide, you go down, down, follow the stream until it joins another. That water becomes a river which turns behind the mountains. That’s the road to the South. It goes past the great Elf-house on the island<sup>29</sup>, all made of stone.” He grinned. “Sometimes we stop and say hello to them.”

Now his pointing finger moved still further right, then down. It picked out a wisp of smoke in the nearer distance, and some tiny cleared fields. He looked shrewdly at Beren. “You can tell me what that is,” he said.

“Why – it’s our farm!” exclaimed the boy. And suddenly he realized: Sightfoot – at the foot of the Hill of Sight. Of course! He had never wondered.

“Aye,” said Nose. And that was all he said, because he had one more purpose yet to fulfil. “Look now, Blue Eyes. Look further. Look where I am pointing.” And his arm rose up, and swung around, to the far end of the arc of view, towards the North. The land in that direction rose in the foreground to a moderate height, cloaked thickly with pines.<sup>30</sup> Past that distant tree-roughened edge the boy could see a dimness of far plains. But the finger did not stop there. Beyond the plains, an immense distance away, yet at the same time all too near, the land rose to jagged heights, black and drear. Three mighty peaks reared their heads at the far crest; threatening shadows on the edge of sight.<sup>31</sup>

“There he is,” spoke Nose quietly in the boy’s ear. “The Enemy. He sends the Orcs, and the winter, and the sickness. All the long years of the sun he has loured there. Some think he will be content to do so for ever. But I would as soon trust a viper, or a hungry wolf. I think myself that he has been building his strength, over the slow years. When he is ready, he will come out; and when he does, he will sweep the Elves into the sea, and us with them. All we can hope for is that it will not happen during our little lives. That he will not disturb our time of dreaming in the woods.”

He let go his hold on Beren’s shoulder. “Come, lad, it is cold on the heights. Let’s go back down and see if that lazy son of mine can spare us some meat to roast.”

\* \* \* \* \*

One evening Beren returned from an excursion with the youngsters to find that Nose was absent. He threw himself down by the fire. “Where is Father?” he asked Sunshine, who was stirring something savoury-smelling in a bark pot. “Is he hunting?”

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27 The Echoriath, the range of mountains which hid Gondolin.

28 Manwë.

29 Minas Tirith, on Tol Sirion.

30 The heights known as Drûn.

31 Thangorodrim, the peaks towering above Angband, the fortress of Morgoth.

She smiled at him. "Hunting the Enemy's vermin," she said. "He'll be back in a few days."

Long Hair was stripping the fibrous parts from wild beans. "He said he was sick of leaving it to the young people," she said. "He said he was bored with staying at home. He said he felt he was not doing his share of the work." She flashed Beren a meaning glance from under her dark brows. "Wouldn't it be fine if all men – and boys – did *their* share of work!"

"Oh, give me some beans, then," he replied good-naturedly. He began inexpertly to husk the beans, but it wasn't long before Long Hair snatched them back from him with a click of her tongue.

"You're doing it wrong!" she said.

Sunshine glanced up at the two of them and smiled.

"There's no pleasing some people," said Beren. "What can I do then, Mother?"

"You could fetch some more wood," she said.

Later, when they were eating, Beren, who had in the meantime been thinking about the conversation, said, "I did not know the young men spent so much time hunting those creatures."

"Oh Blue Eyes, where do you keep your eyes and ears!" exclaimed Long Hair. But Sunshine made a calming movement with her hand.

"He has not been with us long, and truly, we do not speak of this much," she reproached her daughter mildly, who just sniffed in reply. Sunshine turned to Beren. "Yes. Those who go out to hunt watch all the time for these evil creatures. They look over all the paths, watch for tracks, sniff for smells. So far we, or they, have kept this northern land fairly well clean of the filth. For some few summers now, since we have come north. Thank the Powers, thank the Queen of the Trees and Beasts, and the Gods of Air and Water, these monsters of Night do not come often. But those who do come, do not return."

"Oh!" Beren absorbed this all for a while. "I didn't know," he said at last.

"Hah!" said Long Hair. "Your friends in their wooden hutches also have small idea of what we do. They scabble about, poking their seeds in the dirt and getting burnt by the sun, never realizing who it is that guards their store-boxes!"

"But, but," protested Beren, struggling still to absorb the new information, "you can't blame them for not knowing. They don't not know on purpose. They'd help if they knew, that's as certain as the sunrise! My Papa – my real Papa – if he knew there were Orcs around, he'd be at them with his sword as soon as you could blink. And Mama too. The people of Sightfoot are not cowards!"

The children continued to bicker for a couple of minutes until Sunshine shushed them. But Beren continued to turn over the topic in his mind. "I don't understand this," he said at last, slowly. "The Forest is very large, several days journey from one end to the other. And we are very few. How do the young men manage it?"

"It is not just the young *men*," put in Long Hair. "Morning Star and Broke the Pots have joined the hunt this moon, and Red Sash means to go next moon."

"Well yes, but still, that's not many, taken together," said Beren.

Sunshine sat back and looked at him soberly. "We have help. At the proper time this will be spoken of."

Beren looked at Long Hair, and she met his eyes, but she just shrugged slightly. For once she seemed to know no more than he.

Sunshine appeared to hesitate, but finally she spoke further. "Something else," she said. "It's as well that you

both know. The numbers of these vermin increase. We are not yet what one might call hard pressed; but still, the numbers always increase. That is another reason why Nose has joined the younger folk for this time, although the snow gathers on his head, and his bones begin to yearn for the fire. But next season,” and here she smiled happily, “next season, we think my cousin’s band will join us here, and perhaps one other. Then you will see and hear new things, Blue Eyes!”

The thought engaged Beren’s interest for a moment, but next season lay too far off in the misty future to be worth thinking about for long. He turned back to the matter at hand.

“I wish I could help too,” he said.

“Time enough for that when you are older,” said Sunshine.

“I bet there’s lots I could do right now,” boasted Beren. “I can shoot. I’m not afraid of Orcs!”

Long Hair licked the last juice off her leaf-plate, and cast it in fire. “I did hear your first encounter with them was not so successful,” she teased.

Beren flushed. “That was a long time ago. I was a baby then, and still a House-man, a farmer. I didn’t know anything. If I saw an Orc now, I’d know what to do, you bet I would!”

He was to get his chance to prove this sooner than anyone imagined.

\* \* \* \* \*

It came in the dark, gliding down noiseless on wings blacker than the night. The shape hovered a moment before landing on a rough ledge of rock. This movement could not be quite silent: there was a momentary muffled beat of wings, a faint scrabble of talons. The creature squatted then for a long moment, a dark blot against the rock wall, listening; but no alarm came.

The stars wheeled away the hours behind a thick blanket of clouds. The towered rocks kept their slow watch over the dark forest below. A keen-eyed watcher might have caught betimes doubtful sight of a shadow, slinking soundless among the crevices and crannies that centuries of weather had carved from between the stones. But there was no-one to keep watch.

Before the light came, the thing was away, flying back north as silently as it had come.

Nothing happened for two nights. On the third, seven came from the North.

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On a time Melian invited Artanis to journey with her to the East. Artanis did not ask the reason; the Queen’s company was ever joyful to her, and she was not tired of new scenes.

They journeyed under the starry night. They passed through the forest of Region like a whisper, but the Queen did not halt; she went on, and on, until Artanis found herself wading into a chill stream, with all the light and glory of Doriath behind her, and nothing but darkness ahead. She stopped.

“Where are we?” she asked the dimly-seen figure in front of her, who had also paused, sensing the hesitation of her follower.

“This is Aros,” came the soft voice of the Queen. “The border of my realm.”

“Must we go further?” pleaded Artanis.

“Of course you *must* not,” said Melian. “But fears need to be faced. You know that. Come, Artanis. It is time to grow.”

The Queen turned and continued to wade through the stream, without waiting to see what her companion would do. After a moment of indecision, Artanis followed. As she waded out of Aros into the dark beyond, she cried voiceless at the sudden loss of light, which racked her with an almost physical wrench.

On they went, across the drear outlands, spread grey and formless under the universal blight. The bright memory of Doriath, blazing in Artanis's mind like a jewel of desire, shrank now ever smaller behind her with each reluctant further step.

The sky slowly paled, until the world's sun rose stinging in her eyes; but it seemed to dull rather than clarify the sense of vision. Through a weary day of march, dim shapes of trees, and of cattle and houses, passed like shades before Artanis's eyes. She heeded them not, but stumbled like one half-blind from sedge to trunk.

The cold splash of water on her toes brought the Elf-woman to her senses. It was another stream, amber coils winding quietly over shingle. The water shaded from a mellow umber in the shallows near the bank to the darkness of secrets in the deeper pools. The tarnished sun, westering behind them, brought bronze to the branches and a faint warmth to her back.

She turned to Melian, who was standing gazing across the stream into the forest beyond. "Where are we?" Artanis whispered.

"This stream is called Celon," replied Melian in quiet tones, "and yonder is Nan Elmoth. It is a place that lies close to my heart. I wanted to show it to you." The Queen paused, regarding the dark forest that bordered the far bank with eyes that shone with some light of memory. "Come. Let us enter."

The Elf-women splashed through the stream and slipped quietly into the wood. The ground over which they now trod was thick with mould of leaf, and the moist smell of vegetable decay ruled the cool air. The further the pair penetrated, the taller grew the trees. These were massive, smooth boles, reaching far up into the airs above, branching and spreading in the towering heights, holding up a giant's canopy. It was as great a wood as any in Doriath, although far darker and quieter.

This was an old place: everything gave evidence of it. There were ancient trees in the joyous groves of Doriath, hale and venerable as noble kings and queens; but Artanis had seen no trees in the outer world so old as these.

"Does anybody live here?" she asked Melian in hushed tones.

"One only<sup>32</sup>," replied Melian, "but we shall not meet him. Come, let us go further in." She led the way on light feet deeper into the darkness of the wood.

The Queen stopped finally in a glade bedded with soft mosses. The sun had set and the sky above was fading to a deep velvet blue. The gloom of evening was gathering on the forest floor.

The pale face of Melian turned to her companion, a light of stars shining in her eyes. "What do you feel here?" she whispered.

"The weight of evil," replied Artanis darkly. "As everywhere in Outland."

Melian shook her head. "You must learn to widen your gaze," she said. "Consider: everything in the world, everything, was conceived in the thought of the One. It is true that the beauty and harmony of the conception is on every side marred and incomplete. Except where the Gods rule; and I too have managed to heal my own small corner of Arda, as you know. But you do not see truly. You look, and you see only the marring. Learn to see through to the beauty beneath! It is always there for you to find."

The Queen glanced to see the effect of her words on Artanis, but read only doubt and despair in the bright beauty's eyes. Melian reached to her companion and took her hand. "Close your eyes!" she commanded.

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32 The dark-Elf named Eöl.



Artanis did so, and straight away she gasped like one dashed in the face with cold water. Lids closed, she held tight to Melian's hand and breathed wonder. "Why," she whispered, "I can *see*. The stars turning overhead in the long years... the sweet sound of night-birds... oh, the beauty!"

Melian let go her hand. "Learn to see for yourself," she said quietly. "You *must* learn. Do not allow the shadows to deceive you."

Artanis was still shaking with the force of the experience. She looked around her, trying to see the whole of things as Melian could. "What is this place?" she whispered at last. "Why did you bring me here?"

"This is where I first met my love," said Melian, the memory shining in her eyes. "It is woven into my heart, and his. I wished to show you its beauty."

The golden-haired woman gazed at her elder with clear sight for a long moment. "That is not all the reason," she said.

Melian laughed. "Ah!" she said, "I knew that your sight into hearts at least was keen. Well then, to be open about it, I have things I wanted to ask you."

Artanis seemed as if she pulled herself taut. Her features took on a wary look. "What things? And why here?"

"Artanis," replied Melian earnestly, looking into her eyes, "there is a cloud that hangs over you. And not over you alone – for I perceive this darkness also in the eyes of all ye folk who returned but recently over the sea.<sup>33</sup> I perceive the cloud; I sense evil therein, although I cannot clearly see its nature. I desire you to open your mind to me – and perhaps also to yourself as well."

The bright-haired Nolda stood looking at the Queen for a long moment, considering in silence. No hint of her thought could be read from her face. "But why have you brought me here to ask me this?" she said at last in a guarded voice. "You could have done so as well in Doriath."

"Because I wish to deal fairly with you," said the Queen. "I have a power in this world that I do not wholly enjoy. In Doriath, in my own realm, because of that power, I could compel you to tell me anything I desired to know. This is not a thought which gives me pleasure. I do not wish to compel anyone; even the thought that I can makes me uncomfortable. But here we are outside my domain, and I cannot compel. I can merely ask."

"Your question is broad," said Artanis quietly. "I cannot answer it, so."

"Noble woman of the Noldor," said Melian, "we have spoken often, you and I. When we have touched upon the travails of your flight from Valinor, you have wept with me over the death of the Trees; but beyond that point you will not go. Not one word will you say about your journey to this shore. Nor can I see what is happening in Aman: a shadow lies over that land, and extends far out over the sea; and I wonder at that greatly. Now why will you never tell me more?"

"Because those woes are past," said Artanis, "and I wish to take what joy I can in the present, untroubled by memory. Indeed the future may hold woes enough for all of us."

"But you are troubled by memory, all the same," replied Melian. "That is easy to perceive. But you cannot be healed of things that you will not speak of. And you must be healed, Artanis. You have often said to me that you feel of no use in this world; and it may be truth that there is no role for you in the struggles of this present age. But you are Elda, my dear, your life is the life of Arda, the whole of Creation, from its beginnings until its final end. You must take thought not only for the present age, but for all those yet to come. I laid my all-sight to one side when I descended into Arda, but some things I can yet see. Do you believe me when I tell you that a time will come when the fate of Middle-earth and all its peoples will hang

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33 The Noldor.

upon a word of yours? You must be ready for that time. You cannot be ready if you labour under a weight of sorrow and remorse.

“But I have yet wider concerns than these.” She came closer to Artanis and looked deep into her eyes. “It was said at the beginning that you Noldor came as messengers of the Valar. If none of you has confirmed this, at least not in my hearing, still, none of you has denied it either; but I, I can no longer believe it, even though in sooth you came in the very hour of our need.<sup>34</sup> For none of you ever speak of the Valar, nor have your high lords brought any message to Thingol, whether from Manwë, or Ulmo, or even from Olwë the King’s brother, or any other of his folk that went over the sea. This gap in the reckoning has yawned now so wide that I can no longer ignore it, but must look for the truth within. So tell me, Artanis: for what cause were the Noldor driven forth as exiles from Aman? Also, what evil lies on the sons of Fëanor that they are so haughty and so fell? For I surely know evil when I see it writhing black before me. Now tell me. Do I not strike near the truth?”

Artanis replied, although with obvious reluctance. “Near,” she said, “yet not in its centre. We were *not* driven forth, we came of our own will; although I will admit, against that of the Valar.”

“*Against* the will of the Valar?” said Melian. “But why? What drove you to such a desperate recourse?”

Struggle showing on Artanis’s features. She hesitated, as one picking a way through a deadly morass. “Revenge drove us,” she said at last. “That one we name Morgoth destroyed the Trees; this you know. But I doubt you know of his rape of the great Jewels.” She told Melian then of Morgoth’s murder of King Finwë at Formenos, and of his rifling of the great treasury, full of splendours conceived and wrought by the minds and hands of Fëanor and his ilk. Lastly she spoke of the most grievous loss of all: the theft of the three Silmarils, in which now of all things in Arda the last true light of the Trees yet lived.

Still the Nolda said nothing of the Oath, nor of the Kinslaying, nor of the burning of the ships at Losgar.

At the end of the tale, Melian said, “Much you have told me! Yet more I perceive, not yet told. You seek to draw a veil of darkness over the long road from Tirion, but I smell evil there, as well as grief.”

“That is as may be,” said Artanis stiffly. “I at least have done no evil; and I will not tell tales of others.”

Melian pressed her. “I do not seek to accuse, but Thingol should learn of these matters for his guidance.”

Artanis set her mouth firmly, shook her head. “Maybe,” she said, “but he will not learn them of me.”

The two women stood there tensely in the dark, will straining against will. But it was Melian who first sighed and relaxed. She looked down, and Artanis noticed, as if for the first time, that the dark-haired Queen was slender and slight of body; smaller than she was herself.

When Melian raised her eyes again, there was nothing to see in her face but earnest affection. She took Artanis’s hands. “We must not be enemies, you and I,” she said. “I understand your reticence, I can even honour it. Well, let us leave the crimes of others for others to confess, or to be found out in.”

Artanis inclined her head. “I think that is best,” she said, but the wariness remained in her voice.

Melian held her hands still and also her eyes. “That is well,” agreed the Queen, “but my concern for you remains, Artanis. You will speak no evil of others. But what of yourself? Will you confess to me?”

“But I have done no ill,” said Artanis, tension showing in her voice. She would have liked to have withdrawn her hands and gaze, but she found that she could not.

“So you have said,” said Melian, continuing to look hard at her, “and I believe you. But it is not what you tell

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<sup>34</sup> Beleriand had been overrun with Orcs, and Doriath threatened; the returning Noldor turned the scales of battle, forced Morgoth to retreat, and constrained him within the Leaguer.

yourself. I feel the tight knot of self-accusation within you. The Ice. Something on the Ice. What happened on the Ice, Artanis? On the terrible Ice?”<sup>35</sup>

“Leave me alone,” whispered Artanis.

“You must face this knot, Artanis, and undo it,” said Melian. Her voice was soft, but inescapable. “Face it. Find the way to forgive yourself. Else you will never be any use. Not to yourself, not to anybody.”

Artanis tried to shake free her hands and flee; but she could not.

There was a glow now behind Melian’s eyes. “Tell me, Artanis. Tell me your grief. Tell me what frame of knives you are stretched over. Confess to me. What happened? What happened on the Ice?”

The other twisted away in vain, her breath caught in a sob. She shook her head without breaking the gaze that locked her to Melian’s eyes like a bond of steel. “No!”

“Of your own will you must tell me,” said Melian gently. “I cannot heal you alone, you must begin the process yourself. Artanis: come, tell me. The grief wants to be released.”

Artanis fell to her knees, sobbing openly. “I couldn’t save her,” she burst out. “I couldn’t!”

Melian knelt down before her, still holding her hands. “Who could you not save?”

“Elenwë,” sobbed Artanis. “Oh, Elenwë, forgive me! I am sorry!” She broke into a storm of tears.

Melian held tight to the shaking shoulders, the silky golden hair of the head bent before her spreading luminous beneath the stars. Long moments passed. The sobs of the Elf-woman slowed at last, broke, then finally stopped altogether.

The women huddled there still in moist embrace. “Elenwë was Turgon’s wife,” murmured Artanis close by Melian’s ear. “She had kept up all our courage, over the whole terrible crossing. The cold was bitter, the wind like a howling wolf. And there were crevasses; ice-fanged maws that opened and closed. Many died; so many. But we were almost there! Almost there!” Artanis lost her breath in renewed weeping for a time, then slowly calmed enough to go on. “Elenwë was the best of us, Melian. The best and the brightest spirit.” The woman gulped. “We could see the land ahead. But she slipped, with her child Idril – some hole or other. There was no shortage of them, Varda knows. Elenwë cast the little maid from her as she fell, and the child went into the water. My friend... Elenwë was broken by her fall. But she still lived. She – she – she – oh, don’t make me tell of it. It was, it was, there was a crack. Turgon had dived after the daughter, but I slid down to Elenwë. Only I was slender enough to fit. She was some way down, some way. Deep I clambered down, into the the blue dimness. The ice around us was moving all the time, I could hear it creaking. I came at last to where I could reach my friend’s hand, see her face. She looked at me, but she could not speak. There was blood. Black it looked in that place where everything else was blue. I grasped her hand and pulled. It hurt her, but I pulled all the same. It hurt me so to hurt my friend, my – oh, she should have lived, Melian, and not I! Things would have been different.

“But these are useless words. I pulled; better to pull her arm out of joint than to leave her there. But I *couldn’t*. I could not budge her, pull as I might. Then the ice-jaws moved again...” The golden-head broke into renewed sobs, cradled in Melian’s arms.

The two of them stayed there long under the tall trees, beneath the slow circles of the stars. The Elf-woman gradually quieted, while Melian stared sightlessly into the dark, her mind occupied by many thoughts.

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35 The boats stolen from the Teleri having been spitefully burned by Fëanor, the remainder of the Noldor had to cross to Middle-earth on foot over the Ice of the Helcaraxë.

A shrill whistle of almost painful intensity shocked Beren into instant wakefulness. He sat up with a gasp in the darkness, and was aware of Long Hair beside him jerking up too. Immediately he was smitten by a feeling of wrongness: the same one he had felt years ago, when Nose had saved him. Orcs!

Beren looked about him wildly but he could see little. The black shapes of leaves were sharp against the dim night blue of the sky, on which a scatter of summer stars could be seen; but everything at ground level was pitch dark. He knew inside himself that the night was fairly old.

All this took only the time needed for a single breath. As he took the next one, Nose loomed up in the darkness next to them. "Stay here!" he hissed, and then vanished. His place was taken by a rustle and a faint warmth on the cheek that was Sunshine. From the sound of it she was stringing her bow.

For a long moment there was no sound but the piercing whistle; then it cut off. At about the same time, fires began to flare in a rough circle around the camp site. Figures could be glimpsed throwing brush on them before quickly disappearing again into the gloom.

Sunshine nudged the two of them with her arm to move and kneel back to back with her. She had not only strung her own bow ready for action, but had also brought those of the children, with some arrows. In the light of the fires both the children worked rapidly to make ready their own weapons. Then they sat still and waited nervously. Other families could be glimpsed nearby, also alert and watching.

They heard thrashing noises from the bushes, and suddenly the night was rent by harsh voices. Into the firelight strode nightmare figures. The flickering red light gleamed off fierce eyes set in broad faces, and slithered along the horrid honed edges of blades. There seemed to be about twenty of the creatures standing there in the light. The Orc leader was huge: almost the height of a Druug. His eyes were sunk in black pits in a great head, round like a stone. Beren could see his fangs catch a ruddy gleam from the sullen light as he gave orders.

The leader made a peremptory gesture and sent about half the squad off to one side, a direction from which a scatter of light arrows were coming. Orc bows began to twang in reply. Savage laughter was heard. The rest of the creatures advanced cautiously into the gloom at the centre of the ring of fire. Beren could see the leader looming closer and closer, black against the light. Arrows began to fall among the Orcs from the bows of the women and children gathered at the centre. These claimed one or two victims, but most of the arrows bounced off mail and plate. The leader shouted something, and began to run towards them. The other Orcs followed, yelling and waving their weapons. Beren raised his bow, in a hand that shook despite his fury with it, and took aim at the great face bounding towards him.

He never loosed the shot. It was all over in a couple of breaths; Orcs simply fell like corn under the scythe, for no reason the shocked boy could see. Before any of the panting onlookers could really take it in, there were no more running figures; all were lying prone, some twitching, in the dying light of the fires.

Nose rose slowly from the dark ground several feet away from them and lowered his blow-pipe. Other Druugs were doing the same at other points around the circle. Soon further People stepped out of the dark from beyond the fires. They gathered together in low-voiced discussion while others busied themselves building up a proper fire and dragging the vermin away.

Somewhere a child was sobbing still in terror. Beren himself was shaking with reaction. He could still see in his mind's eye the dark pits of eye sockets in the brute head running at him. He wished passionately that he had had an opportunity to shoot. He sat down next to the fire and shivered.

Nose came to him and laid a warm fur over his shoulders. "All over now, my son," he said.

Beren looked up at him. "I would have shot him, Father, but I had not time."

Nose patted his shoulder. "I say this not as a thing for anyone to rejoice over, but I am certain you will have other chances in your life to shoot at Orcs!"

Beren squeezed the old Druug's hand in return. Nose turned to go, but before he could move off, Beren said, "Father – what made the whistling noise?"

Nose looked at him sharply. "You heard that, did you?" Beren nodded. "Hmm. Go and talk to Willow in the morning." And then he was gone.

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Willow was old – just how old, nobody seemed to know. She was a tiny, stubby woman, incredibly bent, with tired, leathery brown skin hanging everywhere in indecorous folds. She smiled all the time, showing a mouth only scantily equipped with teeth, and was ever ready to gossip or laugh. Despite her bent frame, she could get around quite easily and made nothing of the marches from camp to camp. Her husband had been dead for many years but she had children and grandchildren in the clan. Everybody liked Willow. Beren had often shared a joke with her.

Some little time ago he had asked her about what lay south of the hills, the place Nose had told him to avoid. "Bad country, over those hills!" she had said to him. "Don't go near it!"<sup>36</sup>

"Yes, but why?" Beren wanted to know.

"Because there are things there that would eat you," she had replied, as if to a small child.

Beren was impatient. She was no more forthcoming than Nose. "What things?" he had asked, dancing in his vexation. "Wolves? Tigers? I want to know!"

Willow had frowned at him. "You do not ask because you want information," she said with a sniff. "You just want the pleasant shiver which comes from hearing of a distant danger, one which you are unlikely to meet in the flesh. Well, I refuse to provide it. I am not here for your entertainment."

"But you do not give me information, either," said Beren. "The world is full of chances. Maybe I will have to go to that place. What should I do then? Things that eat me? Pah. Is that all I am to know for my help?"

She considered him without words for a long moment. "All right," she said then, sounding thoughtful. "I will tell you something. Truth may be heard even in light words. Perhaps you might come to need the knowledge at that. Hear this advice, then! If you find yourself in that land, do not drink from any stream! For in them runs not water, but madness."

"Oh," said Beren. "Don't drink there? All right. Thank you." He did not know what else to say.

Willow had shaken his shoulder and glared at him. "Be sure you remember my words!" she had hissed. "Do not let them go to waste!" She had let him go then, and he had gone off, with much to think about.

Beren found the old lady the morning after the attack stretching a skin on a drying frame. Willow squinted at him. "Ah!" she said, "It is the boy with the beautiful eyes. Come and sit close to me, I like to look at them."

Beren obeyed her request, even though the old lady smelled a bit, close up like that. "Some excitement in the night, Grandmother," he said.

She gurgled with laughter. "Excitement! For some, maybe. For sure, the Orcs had plenty. But they'll have to try harder if they want to excite *me*." She glanced sideways at Beren. "You weren't worried, were you, Blue Eyes?"

His first impulse was stoutly to deny it, but something made him pause. "I was scared," he admitted at last.

The old lady let her work fall and laid a knotted brown hand on Beren's. "Everybody gets scared," she said

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36 Nan Dungortheb it was called by the Elves, the Land of Dreadful Death.

to him quietly; “everybody. Only when you get so old, you’ve been scared so many times, you get bored with it and give it away. Nothing scares me now. But it was not always so...”

She gazed at him intently. “Look at me!” she commanded. Beren looked into her eyes; he looked past the gossip, past the smiles, and saw the life. Days and nights flickered through his mind, and faces – sisters, lovers, enemies; the wise old men and women; magical beasts and speaking trees. A handsome man smiling; a woman’s voice raised in passionate argument; a baby crying. All lost, past, sunk deep in the well of time.

The girl was running for her life. Beren could taste her gasping fear, feel the pounding heart and stretching sinews as she screwed her whole body, her whole existence to the burning point, the one overwhelming focussed urgency of making arms pump and stubby legs flash over the ground faster than seemed humanly possible. Her panting lungs could not keep pace, could not supply her straining heart. Her air-starved blood turning acid sour; cramps in the legs, ignored. The foe was close behind, the clumps of his pounding feet, his harsh breath, so near, so terrifyingly near; she expected any terrified second to feel his blade in her shrinking back.

Oh gods oh gods. The rocks. Not far, would she make it? Would she make it? Let it be soon, come on, come on! Where was the cliff, where, where?

Here. A great gulf opened under her and she was sailing through the air, all effort past. She sensed rather than saw the enemy, a bare two paces behind, clawing and caterwauling as he tumbled through the rushing airy spaces.

She hit the water cleanly and drew her knife as she swooped under and up. As the monster behind her crashed into the water and floundered, she moved up sleek as a seal and stuck the knife straight into its throat, shoved both away. She surfaced then, gasping, as the thing thrashed its life out in a lake of spreading red foam.

Beren shook his head and looked about him. Around him were the familiar trees, and the tents and fires; in front of him a pegged-out skin, and an old lady without many teeth smiling cheerfully at him.

He put his hand to his head. What *was* that? Had he seen into Willow’s past?

“Fear is nothing,” said Willow. “Everybody fears. What distinguishes the valuable from the worthless is what you do in spite of your fear. You passed your test last night, when you aimed at the big leader.”

“How did you know I did that?” demanded Beren.

“Ah!” she replied, “I am so deep in life, I find it harder not to see things.” She leaned over and touched him lightly on the knee. “You are also one who sees. It will save your life, but you will sometimes wish that it had not.”

Beren felt confused. Too many images were buzzing through his head. His question remained unasked however. “Nose said that you could tell me about the whistling,” he said. “Why couldn’t he just tell me himself? Is it some sort of secret?”

Willow was silent for a moment. “Words can steal power,” she said at last. “It is not that we do not want people to know. But words are wrong for some things.”

Beren thought about that. “Can you show me, then?” he said.

She looked at him, considering. Then, seemingly having decided, she levered herself slowly to her feet. Beren got up and helped her. Once upright, she said simply, “Come,” and hobbled off into the undergrowth. They had not gone far before Willow stopped and parted some bushes. There in front of them stood one of the stone Druug which Beren had first noticed and admired the previous year. He had occasionally come across further examples in the time since.

“Put your hand on its head and close your eyes,” commanded the old lady. Beren did so. At first all he could sense was the smooth stone under his fingers; but gradually something vague swam into his deeper senses. What was it, what was there? Some movement...

He snatched his hand back suddenly. “It’s alive!” he said.

“I will not say what it is,” said Willow cautiously, “but it is not dead stone.”

“But why could not Nose have shown me that himself?” said Beren. His head ached.

“Young Big Nose does not have the gift,” she replied opaquely. Her look turned fierce. “But come now! Are you ready to give something of yourself for the defence of all the people?” The boy nodded, puzzled. “Then place your hand again! But this time, think of last night; think of aiming at the big leader.” Beren laid his hand, trembling slightly, back on the head of the stone figure. Willow covered his with her own. “Close your eyes now, and remember your defiance!” she ordered him. He thought again of the previous night: the firelight, and the yelling. The big Orc running towards him, fangs showing pale at the corners of the slit mouth. The boy glared at it in defiance. Death to you, you filth! ran the thought in his head, You are *not* going to win. He raised the bow, and this time his hands were steady. He drew his arm back to full stretch against the good hale strength of the bow, aimed carefully, and loosed. The arrow smote the monster full between the eyes, and it collapsed in a heap at his feet, its last breaths rattling in its dying throat.

His eyes sprang open and he fell back against Willow, half collapsed with the shock of it. She steadied him with arms that felt like old whipcord. “There, there!” she soothed, “It’s done now. Very, very good. That will serve us well in times to come.” She rocked the boy to and fro. “Ah, you’re only quite a little lad still, after all.”

He struggled free, a bit embarrassed. “I’m all right.”

Willow turned to go. “Come on then, that’s enough of this foolery for one day. I’ve work to do.”

“But Grandmother!” Beren said. “What about the whistling? You still haven’t explained it.”

She turned back to him, waved an impatient hand. “Ach! Your playmate will tell you.” But which playmate, and how the playmate should tell him, when nobody else apparently could or would, the old lady refused to explain.

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The attack became something of a watershed in Beren’s view of life in the forest. Before it, he had given no thought at all to anything beyond the day-to-day adventures and pleasures of the free life in the wild. Now he had to face the realization that others were working and fighting every single day to protect his life, and the lives of all the other people too. He was ashamed of his former heedlessness, and felt now a strong urge to help. If he but knew it, this marked the beginning of his transition from child to adult.

But what could he do? Despite his boasting to Long Hair, he knew he was yet too small, too weak, too unskilled to track or fight effectively. He would only get in the way. But how could he go back to the old way of living? Eyes, once opened, can be closed again, but one cannot unsee that which was seen. The bone die had been cast, the water was out of the cup.

For some days he mooched about the camp-site, refusing to join the games and ventures. Sunshine glanced worriedly at him from time to time, but there was nothing she could say or do; whatever the boy was chewing over – and he was clearing chewing over something – he must work it out on his own.

But then an idea came to Beren. He sat up, and gradually a smile of pure pleasure grew on his face as he turned his idea over and over. It was a *good* idea. *That* was how he could help the fight. But where to start?

The current camp-site was in the shelter of a small hill crowned with a cluster of bare rocks. Beren scrambled uphill and soon was at the top. The trees were few there and stunted by the wind and the lack of soil. Birds were scarce at ground level in the deep forest – they stayed in the treetops; but here he could see and hear several. He looked around and notice a chaffinch foraging beneath a nearby tree.

“Chaffinch!” he called. “Here! To me!”

The bird fluttered up and landed on his shoulder. “Got food, got food for me?” it warbled to him.

Beren cursed under his breath. In his haste he had forgotten to bring any. “No food. But listen! Danger in this country. We all must help! You’re a bird, you can fly and keep watch!”

The brown and grey bird looked at him nonplussed. “What danger? No danger here. Need to look for food.” It puffed its feathers out proudly. “Have chicks!” It flew back to its foraging.

“Wait!” said Beren. He stood for a moment, indecisive; then he bunched his fists. He turned and ran back down the hill. First things first. Back at the camp-site he gathered up all the scraps he could find – which was not many; the People rarely had enough excess to waste on scraps – then he dashed up the hill a second time. A climb like that would have had him panting a few months ago but now it barely deepened his breathing.

The birds all flocked gladly to partake of his munificence, but he could not impress a single one with the urgency he felt himself. Their horizons were simply too narrow. They knew this tree, and the next, and the next; but even the adjoining hill, which Beren could almost throw a stone to, was already a foreign land – some other bird’s territory.

He looked around. There was rabbit-sign everywhere: cropped grass and scatterings of black pellets. The rabbits had of course made themselves scarce as soon as they had felt a human on the hill. They had already lost several of their number since the two-legs had been in the neighbourhood, and were not at all disposed to show themselves while any of the cursed sneaky creatures were in the vicinity.

Beren searched until he found some burrows. He lay full length and put his mouth to one. “Hey! You rabbits!” he called. “I need to speak to you. Send up your chief!”

There was no answer except for some scuffling noises. Beren thought for a moment. What was the point of being able to speak to them, if they wouldn’t come? They *must* come.

He turned back to the hole, and put as much power as he could into his voice. “Rabbit! Chief rabbit! I know you are there. Come here! I summon you to me. I won’t hurt you. I need to talk to you!”

More scuffling, followed by a silence. Then came a surly rabbit voice: “I am chief here. But who are you who walks on two legs like the Throwers of Thorns yet knows the Way of the Rabbit?”

“Never mind who I am,” said Beren. “I want to speak to you of danger. A danger we all face!”

“What danger?” replied the rabbit voice. “*You* are danger, you Throwers, you Strangers. Take yourselves away, Two-legs, then we should only have to fear the Pointy-eared Death and the Red Thief.” By that he meant lynxes and foxes. “You should – what?” There was a whispering in the burrow. “Yes, yes, all right,” the voice replied in hushed but irritated tones, before turning again to Beren; “And the Hook-Beak Fliers, obviously; and the great Dogs – what?” More whispering. “I already said the dogs!”

Beren swore under his breath, then tried again. “This is a danger we all face! There are two-legs who attack us! If you don’t help, they’ll overrun the country!”

“Two Legs fighting each other? Sounds good to me,” said the rabbit voice sneeringly. “Now release me from your summons! I cannot spend all day wasting words on one whose *breath stinks of flesh*. Oh, yes. Did you think I would not notice? What was your last meal, Two-legs? Did it have long ears and a fluffy tail perhaps?”



Now get you gone! I have wasted enough of my valuable time on you, Enemy. Go!”

As he turned away, he just caught one of the underground rabbits saying to another, “The *nerve* of the creature!”

Beren sat on the windy hilltop gnawing his fist. Obviously it wasn’t going to be as easy as he had thought. But he wasn’t ready to give up quite yet. Scanning the skies, he quickly located the soaring shape of a raptor – he thought probably a Red Kite, though at this distance he couldn’t be certain. He stood up and whistled through his fingers just as hard as he could. The bird checked its slow circling and began to descend.

The great hawk settled heavily onto a branch nearby. It was indeed a Red Kite, and a magnificent specimen too. Cold eyes behind a cruelly hooked beak regarded the boy with only a little interest. “You are the chick who can speak as we do, aren’t you,” said the bird, before Beren could marshal his words. “I’ve heard of you. What do you want?”

Beren laid out his concerns all over again, this time necessarily in Hawk. The great, sleek bird listened to his tale without overt reaction. When the boy finally wound down and stopped, it looked away down the hill for a moment, before turning again to stare at him.

“You don’t understand,” the hawk said. “You don’t understand anything. My folk live at the edge of death, all the time. What are your concerns to us? Will they help us feed our young? Your knowing our tongue means nothing. We are not friends to you. We are not friends to *anyone*. I know nothing of this Maker, nor of this Destroyer<sup>37</sup>, of whom you speak. We make ourselves, and none destroys us, save ourselves. Now go your ways, and do not bother me again.” With that it spread its great russet-dappled wings and beat its way back up into the free air.

Beren slumped dejectedly on the ground. So much for his brilliant idea.

“I am afraid you will have to wait,” came a strange, throaty voice from behind him. The words had been spoken in Grey-elven. The boy whirled around, but there was nobody there; only a huge, knobbly-legged, unkempt-looking raven perched on the rock. The bird was obviously very old: many of its feathers were white, and they were absent altogether from some places. Its grizzled head was turned to one side as it gazed at him from a single brilliant black eye. The curved, black beak was long and deep and altogether of massive construction. Beren felt that, with a beak like that at its disposal, the bird would be able to punch a hole in his skull with ease – as was indeed the case.

“Was that you?” demanded Beren.

“Who else?” replied the raven.

“But you know Elf-speech!”

The raven chuckled, a resonant, vibrating sound in the lowest possible vocal register. “Did you think you were the only one with the gift of tongues? Although ‘gift’ is too light and easy a word for all cases. Some of us had to work hard at it.”

“I can’t help being what I am,” said Beren a little resentfully.

“No indeed,” replied the raven with a sigh. “None of us can. That goes too for the creatures you have been trying to bend to your plan. It is true what the hawk said – life is a struggle for us wild ones. We creatures with wings or four legs have to work hard just to survive. Most of us have vision enough only for those immediate necessities of living and dying. Anything else is a luxury we cannot afford.”

“I suppose that’s true,” said Beren hesitantly. “But it’s just that, well... I don’t think it is going to be good for anybody if the Orcs win. Their Master, I suppose I should rather say.”

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37 Beren had tried to tell him of the One, and of Morgoth.

“You are right!” croaked the aged bird. “I, Goracc the Old, know you are right. Ninety summers and five have I seen since I came out of the egg. Many things have I learned. I have spoken with the Fair Ones<sup>38</sup>, and with the Shepherds of the Trees; I have heard the voices of those who made the air and the waters. Stories I know of the dark times before the coming of the Sun. I myself remember well the coming of the Men from the South and their great battle down there in the valley with these evil spawn of goblins. Tall was their leader, and bright as sunlight on an icy shard was his sword.

“I know what the Dark is. Yes, the dark Master of the goblin swarms is the enemy of all freedom and life. I know this. Under his dominion we would all of us, whether winged or footed, four-feet or two, find only pain and death. We would all be choking in the dust together. I know you are right.” Goracc broke off then and cleaned his great beak on a stone. The boy noticed that the eye on the other side was milky blind. The raven fixed Beren again with its good eye. “Word of you has passed among us, boy, as the hawk told. Some of us have been wondering what it means.”

“I don’t know,” said Beren. He hesitated. “The man you spoke of, the man with the bright sword, was he... do you happen to know if his name was Boromir?”

The raven looked at him in surprise. “Aye, it was that,” it said.

“I *think* he was my great-grandfather.” The boy said. “I’m not actually sure how many ‘greats’.”

The old raven sat up straighter. “Do you tell me that!” it croaked. “Well. Now that is an interesting chance. You are of his line? Then you should thank me, boy.”

“Why is that?” said Beren.

“Ah!” said the raven. “Because I helped him. The Elf-speech was fresh on me in those days, but I knew enough to warn him, and he had sense enough to listen. A horde of enemies awaited him in ambush; but we ravens were aware of them. With our warning, he was able to turn the situation, and the would-be biters were bitten themselves.

“Who can tell the future? Not I. But it seems likely enough that it would have gone hard with your great-sire, had we of the Black Feather not taken his part that day.”

Beren bowed his head. “Then I do thank you, O venerable Goracc.”

“Things have been quiet since that time,” said Goracc, “more or less. But lately I have been uneasy. There is something in the air. The Enemy probes ever a little harder, and a little harder. He sends always more of these filth of Orcs. On the other claw, it is a pleasure to me to see how your friends the Drúedain have dealt with them since they have taken to visiting us here during the snow-free months. Mighty hunters of the Orcs are the Drúedain; although they are not without help either.”

“Sunshine said something about help as well,” said Beren. “What does it mean? What help is it?”

“Hmm, well, I think I had better not say,” said Goracc. “It is not my secret. They do not like it to be talked about. You see, they do not all agree. Some of them are set against helping the Kelvar – the beasts and birds, that is: living things who roam about, from their own natures I should perhaps add. And then again, they have their own troubles; domestic troubles, you might call them.”

Beren was mightily puzzled. “I don’t understand any of that,” he said. “Who are ‘they’?”

The raven shook its head. “I will say nothing more at this time. But come! We were speaking of the birds and beasts, and what help they can give to the common cause. I understand your design, because it has also been my own. Fruitless, though, have been all my persuasions. I am only a raven, and since we too are eaters of flesh, the others do not trust us. Even among our own flock, the young seldom listen, and old grow few.

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38 Elves.

“But now you have come! A long-egg of Boromir, and with the gift of tongues. I must ponder on that. Maybe it will be given to you to succeed where I could not. Who can say?”

“But I do know, what I said to you first, that just at present, nothing can be done. You will have to wait. Few of us can see long enough into the past to make out the future. Most will not see a growing evil until their beaks are rubbed in it. And that time is not yet.”

“But wait for how long?” asked Beren. “I want to help. It must mean something, that I can talk to the birds and the creatures!”

“I doubt it not,” said the battered old bird, “but everything happens only at the appointed time. Until then, you must wait. Sign will come. In the meantime, learn and prepare. And enjoy! Live your life! For you will never have it again.”

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In the height of summer, the movements of game, and their own wordless whims, drew the People to the northern edge of the country. They travelled down the dark pine-slopes of Drûn to the edge of the grasslands, where they hunted antelope, furtive under the dark threat of distant Thangorodrim. At night the scattered watch-fires of the Leaguer of the Noldor could be seen on the plains about; in the further distance, an uneasy flicker of red among the ragged mountain fence of the Enemy’s fortress showed that he, too, was far from sleep.

Since the herds were moving each day further to the East, in line with the forest’s edge, the People could follow them without camping each night away from the eaves of the woods where they felt protected and at home.

At last the sombre hills of Drûn came to their end at a shallow valley. A sparkling stream tumbled down its centre out of the higher ground to the right. On the far side of the valley rose a whale-backed ridge clad in mixed pine and oak. At the northern end of this, something wonderful glimmered under the clear light. It was a white tower, rising graceful above the trees.

At this change in the country the herds at last scattered and headed away into the plain to the North.

Big Nose stood on a height at the forest edge and watched the last of the animals as they disappeared into the open country. “No matter,” he said, “we have enough.” He turned then and contemplated the distant gleam of the tower for a while, scratching among the sparse hairs on his chin.

There was the usual work to do in butchering the last of the catch and processing the flesh and the skins. The group was busy with this for several days. The place where they had halted seemed randomly chosen, but it did not take Beren long to discover watch-stones around it. Did the stones move? Surely not.

The boy was also now more aware of people who came and went. At any given time, several members of the group would generally be absent. Beren knew now that the purpose of these excursions was to watch for Orcs. The patrols ranged widely, using every skill of eyes, ears and nose to watch for sign of the hated marauders. They were made up predominantly by the young, unattached men, but almost every able-bodied adult not immediately burdened by dependants took occasional part.

Chases Goats, Nose’s son by his dead first wife, had been away at the close of the antelope hunt. He turned up next day, looking cheerful as ever, but somewhat scratched, as if he had had to run through brambles. As usual with patrol returnees, Goats was received back into the group without fuss or overt comment. The young man went straight to have a few quiet words with Nose. Beren, who happened to be nearby, caught Goats’ quick sign of seven fingers. Nose looked worried and shook his head. Beren, catching the look on the old man’s face, felt some consternation himself. He couldn’t recall ever having seen Nose look concerned about *anything*. It was something of a shock for him to see it now.

The chosen camp-site, there on the slope at the edge of the forest, was a pleasant, airy place. Fresh breezes from the plains to the North sent cooling fingers feeling into the trees.

In the first light of morning, a heavy dew lay chill on the long grass, while a skein of fog wound along the fold of the valley below. The summer sun rose directly into the eyes of the wakeful Druug, who squinted away from its awful power and drifted back into the comforting gloom of the trees. Long before it was touched by the sun, the valley's ribbon of morning fog began to writhe and dance; but even after it broke and dissipated under the gathering power of the day, breaths of mist could still be seen, a mile away across the valley, entangled with trees on the facing slopes.

All day, the People worked quietly at processing their hunting gains. The slow path of the sun showed via motes of hot light that pricked between gaps in the dense roof of leaves.

Eventually all the work was done and the smoked meat packed off to storage. One by one, the People finished their tasks. Some lay sprawled and silent in the heat. Others squatted on, finding other uses for their hands. Nose, for example, was working at a piece of red jasper. He told Beren there was an elk inside it. The leathery old man had no tools to work the hard stone, apart from a rasp made from a piece of bone with sand fixed to it by pitch. This, together with endless patience, was all that he possessed with which to work out his design.

As the heat began to ease toward sundown, one after another of the group left what they were at and wandered away from the clearing towards the forest edge.

The People stood silent under the edge of the forest, contemplating the last of the sunlight which reddened the far slope. The tower on the distant crest shone like a flame under the long evening rays.

Nose turned to his wife and children. "What do you say, shall we visit the Speakers?" He meant the Elves.

The children voiced their immediate, excited and noisy assent. Sunshine, together with others nearby, murmured a more restrained approval. In the way of the Druug, most of those standing there seemed to have come at the same idea.

Nose eyed the mile of open land they would have to cross. "Let's wait until deep in the night," he said. "When it's nice and quiet." By various gestures, smiles and nods, the People indicated their accord.

They stood there in silence for a while after that, before drifting by ones and twos back to the camp. By that time the sun had dipped below the edge of the world, leaving only a halo of rosy light behind the outflung shoulder of Drûn. It was growing gloomy beneath the trees, but it was not long before fires began to flicker and dance. The People enjoyed a fine feast of roast antelope that evening, and afterwards there were tales and laughter.

Beren and Long Hair were woken in the deep night by the two adults. Yawning and looking about, the children found most of the camp already awake and busy. The fires had sunk to ruddy and winking coals, but bunches of thrown twigs here and there woke one into flame. But as soon as the last preparations were made, all fires were extinguished with water and earth.

The people stood then for a while in the intense darkness, doing nothing but listening. After some minutes, dark-adapting eyes could distinguish the velvety sky between gaps in the trees. A barely lighter band toward the North and East marked where the forest came to an end. Carefully then, one after another, the people moved out.

Following Nose away from the trees, Beren perceived the two women beside him as vague dark shapes of whispered footfall. No other of the People could be seen or heard.

The four of them paused at the edge of the open and looked around. They could see no fires or other lights of human hand, but the stars of the young world blazed high and glorious in the midnight dome of heaven

overhead. Below lay the shadowy hollow of the valley, wreathed in mists. To their right, it wound away into the gloom of the hills; to their left it simply vanished into a flat vagueness. The wooded slope facing them across the gap appeared as a fuzzy mass of featureless black. No trace of the tower on its summit could be seen in the faint light prevailing.

Dew soaked their legs during the long, silent descent to the watercourse. Although there was no alarm, or overt cause for concern, a sense of unease began to grow in Beren, from what source he could not tell. The wide valley lay innocent of any harm beneath the noble stars; but an aversion for the place grew on him.

The loom of willows and the chatter of water revealed the stream. The water pulled cold at the legs of Nose's family as they felt their bare-footed way across the slippery stones of its bed. Beren found it hard to concentrate on the necessary task of balance, so oppressive had become the sense of nameless dread this valley evoked. But once the far side was gained, it was not long before the dark miasma of fear began perceptibly to ease. Once started, the fading proceeded with speed; quite soon, the feeling of horror had vanished whence it came.

They reached the trees on the climbing slope, but at Nose's silent prompting, the children must still trudge uphill for a weary time. The old man finally stopped in a glade where the trees were thinner. Beren could see by that time, through the net of branches, that a little early light was stealing over the sky. The children were sleepy, and all were wet and shivering with cold. Adults and young alike, they were glad to curl up under a fur and sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beren woke up feeling hungry. All his megrims of the dark hours had vanished as if they had never been. The boy sat up. He could see one or two fires burning, and his nose could smell cooking.

Long Hair was up before him and was sitting on a log, chewing something. Beren shook off his skin and hopped over to her. "What have you got there, Hairy? Give us a bite, eh, I'm starving."

His foster-sister jammed all that she had in her hands into her mouth at once. "None left," she said indistinctly past bulging cheeks. "Lazy goes hungry."

"Mean old she-weasel," said Beren. He ran over to Sunshine where she sat nearby. "Mother, mother, feed me something, please. Otherwise I think I might die." He fell to his knees and grasped his stomach theatrically. "Can't... make it..."

Sunshine raised her eyebrow at him in mock disapproval. "Well! I don't know that I hold with people who sleep through all the work, and then expect to be fed." She laid a hand on his shoulder and pushed him gently. "Seems to me a *true* hunter of the People would forage for himself. Why, he'd be clever enough to sneak a chop out of the basket over there. That one. The basket I'm too busy to keep an eye on right now." And she winked at him and turned back to her work. Beren ran to the basket, deftly extracted two chops and waved them wickedly at Sunshine as he ran off. She shook her head after him and smiled.

He found Willow not far away, but the old woman was talking with some of her family. His questions would have to wait.

Beren looked around that place while he chewed at the succulent antelope meat. It was an open, airy forest with golden sunbeams angling down on all sides. The canopy high above seemed lighter and greener than in most of the forest Beren was used to. Some little time ago, in the dell where the People were presently camped, a forest giant had fallen and torn a gap. Great, moss- and fern-covered sections of it were still to be seen, but the once mighty trunk was fast returning to the earth. Beren poked at some of the man-high remains with a stick, amusing himself at how easily they collapsed into punk.

Nobody seemed to be in a great hurry to find the Speakers. As on the previous day, people were bent on relaxation. It was only towards afternoon that a general movement to start commenced. People stretched,

yawned, and began to walk.

Once everybody was walking, the boy found opportunity to talk to Willow. The leathery old face wrinkled into a smile as the boy sidled up to her. She said, "Questions, Blue Eyes. I can see them brimming out of you."

"Well yes, I have some," replied the mop-haired child. "But how else can I learn things?"

Willow grunted. "Ask away then."

Beren hesitated. "That valley..." he said. "Did you... well, did you *feel* anything as we came through?"

She made no reply for a while as she picked her path through the straggly growth on the forest floor. They were making their way through a vast, dim space, punctuated by great trunks rising up to the roof of leaves far overhead. The air was cool and sweet and full of vegetable odours. The fears of the night seemed far away.

"I feel it now through you," admitted the old woman at last. "But it wasn't *my* grave I walked over, all unknowing."

The boy shivered. "Do you think it was mine?" he asked involuntarily, although fearing the answer.

Willow shook her head. "No," she said, but the glance that she sent him was a thoughtful one.

"Are you sure?"

She laughed. "Yes."

"Where is mine then?" Again the question sounded bolder than he felt.

Again Willow looked thoughtful. "I cannot see where yours lies," she said after a pause. "Not that I would tell you if I could. But I can see where it is not."

Beren would have pressed for more information, but the old lady only shook her head and refused to discuss the matter further.

The going in that kindly wood was good, and the way even began after a time to have the appearance of a made path. The People wandered along this snaking track for some hours, until the golden rays of the setting sun began to stream almost horizontally in through the trees to their left.

Suddenly Beren glimpsed the white tower between the branches. In the dense growth of the trees, they had come close to it without his knowing. The left side of the tower glowed in the ruddy light of the sun while the right was pale in blue shadow. Here and there he could see glass glittering golden in the last of the sunlight. He stood rooted to the spot, overcome by wonder. He had never before seen any made thing so large, and yet so harmonious in outline and proportion.

He came to himself after an unknown number of minutes to find that the others had gone on quietly ahead and were no longer in sight. He started running to catch up. After a couple of bends in the track he came to a junction: the main path continued along the ridge to the tower, but another path split to the right, where it descended quickly through the trees into deep shadow. Nobody was in sight, but a quick glance at traces on the ground showed him that the People had taken the descending path. He was just about to turn into it when a small figure popped out from behind a tree and said "Boo!"

It was Long Hair, grinning at him. "Father made me stay and wait for you," she said.

Beren's heart was still pounding from the surprise. "Does he think I can't read a trail?" he grumbled, and started the descent.

Long Hair scrambled after him. “Are you excited, Clumps?” she asked. “I don’t think I’ve ever met any Speakers.”

Beren remembered the harvest dance of long ago. “Oh, I have – lots,” he said airily.

They had left the sunset behind them now on the far side of the ridge and were descending into the gloom of its shadow.

Long Hair was impressed in spite of herself. “Have you really?” she said. “You never told me! What are they like?”

“Speakers?” said Beren. “Well... er...” He scratched his head. “I don’t know what to tell you, to be honest. They’re not like anybody else, that’s for sure.”

She snorted. “You’re as much use as an owl in daylight, Clumps,” she said. “Have I ever told you that?”

“Only about six times every day,” he replied. “Look, if you wait a bit longer you’ll meet some Speakers yourself, and then you can be your own owl. Shh! We’ve caught up.”

The evening blue was deepening toward black as the silently descending Druug began to discern lights ahead of them. Sound now also could be heard: the sound of many voices joined in song. But such a song! It came to the entranced listeners in waves; like a river of gold, rich as heavy silk cloth.

The People were descending into a dell, in which the lights were scattered. The glorious song suddenly broke short; figures carrying lamps slid down to them out of the trees and approached through the light screen of undergrowth. Soon the People found themselves surrounded by Elves, laughing and calling greetings.

A tall Elf with red-gold hair and a generous and fearless face came up to them. “Greetings, O people of the woods!” he called to them in their own language. “Greetings Grandmother Willow, greetings O Big Nose; greetings Fire, Black Snake, Rowan, and all of you! It is long since we met. Will you stay a while and eat with us?”

The Druug returned greeting, and there were smiles and laughter on all sides. Elvish maids and youths, teasing and chattering, sought out each member of the group and guided them all through the trees to the far side, where a log fire was already kindled.

Beren found that the Elvish chief was walking at his side. Clear grey eyes twinkled down at him. “Welcome, Speaks with Birds,” he said. Then, to the boy’s surprise, the Elf switched to Grey-elven: “Or should I rather say Beren, Elf-friend, son of Barahir and Emeldir?”

Beren looked up into the brave, true face above him and a pang of love for the man pierced his heart. He knew without having to think about it who the Elf-lord was. “Thank you, my lord Angrod,” he stammered. “Either one will do.”

Angrod laughed merrily and clapped him on the shoulder. “Well guessed on your part!” he said. “Angrod I am indeed in these younger days; Angarato it was from my mother’s mouth, in the West of my youth. But fie upon such quibbling over names, more suiting the dusty scholar than any wight with pith to him. Come and enjoy the feast!”

The feast passed like a dream of song and talk, food and wine. The Druug sat in a circle round the fire, each head garlanded with a wreath of woodland leaves. Their brown, stumpy forms contrasted strangely with the light and agile Elves, but when each side laughed, the laughter was the same, and the light in the faces was the same.

Beren sat between Sunshine and Long Hair. Sunshine’s face glowed with the light of a joy greater than any lent by the fire; indeed Beren could not recall having seen his foster-mother looking so happy and relaxed.

She laughed and made lively answer to the sallies from slender, merry Elves as they came and went. Everybody was well looked after, and nobody ran short of food or drink. Sunshine had a leaf platter with a selection of savouries and pastries in one hand and was balancing a horn of wine between her feet.

Beren turned to Long Hair. The girl ate and drank as if in a daze, dark eyes round with wonderment as she took in as many details of the scene as she could encompass. He nudged her. "Well Sis, what do you think of Speakers now that you've seen some?"

She turned luminous eyes to him. "Oh Clumper," she said. "If only I'd known! I never want to leave them." She squeezed his hand. "You were right. I'm a fool." Beren gave her a rough hug with one arm in reply. He did not know how to say to her that some things are simply out of the ordinary; that nobody knows anything about Elves until they meet them. And little enough, perhaps, even then.

Nose sat at the other side of Sunshine, and on his far side sat Angrod. Beren liked to look at the Elf's mobile face as the firelight caught it. The Elf-lord had none of the gravity or depth Beren remembered in his brother Aegnor; Angrod looked like a man who went straight at things, joyfully, whether they were friend or foe.

At the moment the Elf was deep in low-voiced talk with Nose. He looked troubled by what he heard.

The people moved and mixed. A dark-haired woman, clad in hunter's green, caught Beren's eye. She looked familiar somehow, although he could not pin down the association. The question was resolved when she came over to him, smiling. "Greetings, Cousin," were her first words to him. "I am Beleth. Bregolas, who is your uncle I think, is my father."

He looked up at her in surprise. "Oh hello – but what are you doing here?" He knew now who she reminded him of: his own father. Had he but known it, her resemblance was even stronger to himself.

Beleth smiled, but there was sadness to glimpse beneath the expression. "I serve for this time with Angrod's war-band," she said.

"Oh..." replied Beren. He continued to examine his cousin, wondering. Her face had strength in it, and her lithe figure was well-knit. He thought she fitted well with Angrod: the boldness and the truth were the same. But there was no joy in her eyes. "Do you not like it?" the boy continued.

She laughed, and it was like sunlight on a deep pool: bright, but only on the surface. "Oh, but yes!" she said. "It is most wonderful. I have learned so much." But all the time she spoke, the shadow lay under her features. Without knowing how, or whence it came, the boy felt a wave of sympathy for this woman welling up inside him. Impulsively, he grasped his cousin's hand. "I am sorry," he said.

She coloured a little, squeezed his hand, then freed herself. "No need," she said. She smiled and rose, said "Perhaps we'll meet again," and left him.

Afterwards Beren could never be sure which parts of the remainder of the evening were real, and which parts he had dreamed. The songs and the bright faces of the Elvish folk blended into a tapestry of which one end was anchored in memory, but the other faded into a confusion of glamour and moonlight. One picture, however, stood out from the rest like a rock from the stream. He found himself again next to Angrod. The Elf-lord had smiled his wonderful smile at Beren, and had said to him, "Would it please you to stand with us when you have come to your manhood, Beren? We will keep a place here for you."

\* \* \* \* \*

Choker was in the grip of a nightmare. He was lying on his back, bound to a something he could not see, some sort of moving carriage. He was moving feet-first towards a group of figures which, as far as he could make out through the gloom, straining his eyeballs down to look towards his feet, most resembled large birds, some kind with long legs. He glided nearer and nearer to the figures until he stopped with a jerk among them.



They *were* birds; grimy birds, with harsh amber eyes and large, boat-shaped beaks. The beaks glistened greasily under the dull light, and he saw that each was tipped with a hook. The birds clattered their beaks together over Choker for a long moment; but suddenly one of them ducked and nipped into his belly, piercing and holding a roll of the skin with its hook. The pain stabbed through him, followed by similar shocks as the others joined in from both sides. But then they began to pull with a frightful strength.

Choker was half-insane with the tearing pain of it, but he couldn't scream, couldn't thrash his head, couldn't move. The pit of agony as the birds ripped a gaping hole in his stomach and then began methodically to tear out and eat his intestines was unbelievable, indescribable. The creatures worked slowly, tilting their heads back to shake down each mouthful. They broke off momentarily to squabble over the delicacy of his liver, before returning to the terrible, wrenching work of destruction. Finally, he felt and heard the disgusting knock of their beaks on his backbone as they searched his ravaged belly cavity for scraps. Now that there was little more flesh left to be torn, the waves of appalling fire surging through his howling brain began at last to ebb a little, the edges to become duller.

Through the mist of savage pain he saw the birds suddenly jerk their beaks up from their gory work and point them the same way. They were glaring together at something outside his field of view. Then, beaks clattering with vexation, they backed slowly away and vanished from sight. But a familiar smell began to steal into his nostrils. Oh no...

The Mind-eater leaned its noisome visage over his prone carcass. "Ah, 771," it said to him in its harsh half-whisper. "Before we commence the subject of our present discussion, a point of information for you: your body is, in fact, whole. We wished you to experience this educational episode without the inconvenience of actual damage. You may now verify this for yourself."

Choker found that he could move his arms. He ran shaking hands over his belly, which was unaccountably still complete and undamaged. He could not quite believe it. The massive pain still echoed through his skull; the awful memory was still red raw of having his guts slowly torn out and eaten. Which was truth, which lies? He waited in disgust and despair for whatever came next. He could only hope blindly that he would escape this present encounter with so little harm as the previous.

"Of course you will, 771!" said the hissing voice out of its squirming maggots. "We have no wish to make you suffer as an end in itself. That would be pointless. No, all our actions are directed to one end: to further the divine plans of God himself; the Melkor, He who arises in Might; Creator and Destroyer; the Only and the All. As it was in the beginning, so shall it be in the end. We all have our roles to play, no matter how minor and insignificant; even you.

"Now. As you know, we suffer a present temporary nuisance on this plane, this momentary confinement, these petty skirmishings with a handful of demented rebels. It can count for nothing in the end; but just at present, it is an inconvenience. These yammering fools thwart the Plan.

"In order to hasten the inevitable victory of the true Power, we need information about the lands that surround us. Effective scouts are useful to us. You have, I believe, survived now five missions into the Outlands. We feel it is time to take things to a new level. For your next foray, we will give you a team of twenty.

"Of course you will scout and, if possible, capture as opportunity presents, as in all such missions. But your main purpose is to select, to weed. Take careful note of your team members: observe them closely. At the end of the mission – supposing you survive – you will be asked which members, if any, you would like to retain. There need not, in fact, be any at all. We leave it entirely up to you. But know this: you will take out another twenty, and another, and another, until the team is complete."

The horrible thing turned from him and paced back and forth at the side of his field of view. Then the voice resumed. "Of course, the likelihood is that you will not survive to lead your chosen team. But in that unfortunate – and, alas, only too likely! – eventuality, at least you will have satisfaction of knowing there will be no detriment to the Plan. We have a multitude of similar projects in train. You are only one candidate

out of – oh I forget how many. These large numbers are difficult to retain in the mind.”

It stopped, and the stinking maggot-face leaned over him again, enveloping him in a cloud of its graveyard stench. “It would be death for you, yes – but what does that matter? The individual may die, but the Plan goes on.”

\* \* \* \* \*

When the autumn change came into the air, the Druug began to think of their journey south. Beren thought glumly of the coming separation, of the lonely months of winter spent here in the North while all the people he had been so close to were far away. The forms and faces of his birth family passed though his head, but they seemed empty and without meaning: weightless as the faded leaves which were falling now at every hand. The rebellious thought germinated at the back of his mind that this time he would go with the People, make the journey south with them. Nobody could make him stay here.

He took his troubles to Goracc, the next time the band happened to find itself near the old raven’s hill.

“Every creature has its homeland,” wheezed the old bird. “Is this not yours? Why would you wish to leave it?”

“But I hate the winter here,” mumbled Beren. “It is so long and dull.”

The raven replied, “I am sure I find the winter harder to bear than you do in your warmth and shelter. But I would never think of leaving here. This is my home.”

“That’s just it,” said Beren. “The People are my home. I want to stay with them.”

“That is not what I taste in the waters,” said Goracc. “There are also the claims of your birth family to consider, and your duty to your line. It may not be granted to the long-egg of Boromir to follow his own pleasure.”

Beren felt rebellious. “Long-egg be blowed,” he said stubbornly. “I don’t see why I can’t follow the People, as is my wish.”

Goracc was silent a while. “It is not for me to give you counsel,” he said at last. “But your right course will always lie in your heart. Listen to it! Your heart will not always recommend the easy path. But follow it you must, always.”

These words of the wise old raven stayed with Beren, irking him like a prickle in his clout that he could neither find nor ignore.

When the time came, the boy did stay, although he was not himself sure why. Perhaps Goracc’s words tipped the scales. However, although bowing to the force of external currents in the matter, he resented the arm-twisting he felt he had been subject to, and was angry with himself for giving in to it.

It is easy for we old ones to purse our lips over Beren and say to ourselves that he might have shown a bit more patience, since the parting was only to be for a few months; but the dominant part of his life as an independent, aware being had been spent with Nose and his people. He had only been separated from them once before, the previous winter, and in his memories of that now distant time, feelings of loss and confusion stood high and stark, like rocks rearing above the vague sea of other impressions.

Thus he entered again the world of the farm, populated by figures both familiar and strange. His ways were no longer their ways. They on their side found him an irritation; and he for his part found that almost everything about farm life grated on him intensely. He regretted many times his weakness – as he named it to himself – in giving up his half-formed plan to go south with the People.

He had grown apart from his sister over the months, although this caused her much more grief than him. He

saw Hiril now as soft, and clumsy, and unskilled in anything worth doing. He could not see why anyone would waste their time messing about with ink and paper; and in his enduring resentment he flatly refused to receive any more instruction in it, from Caladis or anyone else.

Hiril was hurt by this because she was becoming fluent in the old Elven tongue, and craved praise and approval from her brother, whom she loved. But Beren was too full of his own disappointments to spend any thought on hers, or to take notice of her loneliness.

His parents did not know how to talk to him any more. They had missed him acutely during the summer, and had looked forward every day to his home-coming. But now they felt that they had lost their brave, bright son; in his place was this resentful stranger, shaggy and dirty, with his quick movements of eye and hand, his uncanny ability to appear or disappear silently at will, and his preference for squatting on the floor. A bath and a haircut only emphasised the profound alteration. Barahir and Emeldir tried to hide their dismay, with little success.

Ormalan, who was grown to a heavy-witted, thickset boy of ten, early on made the mistake of trying to reassert his authority with Beren. Despite being a head shorter than Mal and considerably lighter, Beren laid him on his back without effort. After Mal protested that he had been taken by surprise, they went at it again, with exactly the same result. No longer daring a frontal attack, Mal attempted to work out his spite in sneaking acts of meanness, but Beren almost always was able to keep one step ahead of him. He took to bombarding Mal with stinging pebbles at all sorts of times, managing it even while in company. Since nobody could catch him at it, Mal's protests were only believed by his parents. The tension in the house came to a head at last in shouting and rancour. After that, Beren spent as much time out of doors as he could.

Winter sports occupied his attention at first, but these also proved unsatisfactory. Hunting was a popular activity, but Beren could take no pleasure in it. He would hunt at need to fill his own belly, but he had no stomach for killing creatures he could talk to unless it was a case of his life or theirs. Even with the Druug he had begun to avoid hunts when he could, preferring to learn the many cunning ways to gather vegetable sustenance from the forest.

In contests of skill – shooting, wrestling, stick-fighting – he found that he now simply outclassed all feasible opponents. Even when he matched himself against much older competitors, he found that almost always he was stronger and quicker than they, more supple and cunning. He thought them a poor lot. He derived no satisfaction from this mastery, nor advantage from it either; it served only to make him more enemies.

The disenchanted boy spent a lot of his time helping Gorlim in the smithy. Gorlim had outgrown most of his pimples by now and his golden beard had thickened almost to the point of respectability. He also now held himself with much more assurance. The young man's long frame was still rangy and unfilled, but only fools hold that strength lies in bulk of muscle. For all his wiriness, Gorlim could lift the end of a cart with ease and could wield a heavy hammer all the long day, whistling while he did it.

Gorlim's father Angrim was too sensible of his own material advantage to object to Beren helping out in the smithy – and the boy was so strong now that he was in fact a considerable help. Angrim was also well aware that Beren, eccentric though his dress and habits might be, remained the son of the local chief; that meant grandson of the Landholder of Ladros, no less. So he showed a relentlessly smiling face to Beren, at times almost fawning on him. Only Gorlim knew the bile his father poured on Beren's name after the boy was gone.

Gorlim had found however that the best way to deal with his father was mostly just to ignore him. There were few impediments to this, since Gorlim was in a fair way to becoming a better smith than Angrim, and was by a long chalk the more industrious. People preferred to deal with the son's cheerful nature than to suffer Angrim's sourness and excuses. Gorlim was like his mother in that both of them had the wish to be happy, and saw no reason why they should not simply choose to be so.

Although the youngsters refused to allow Angrim's presence to dampen their companionship or conversation, in fact he often absented himself. The smith would make vague excuses about business to

attend to, but from the scents which accompanied him on his not always very steady return, the business appeared chiefly to have to do with the trade in beer. At other times Angrim was wont to 'do the accounts' behind closed doors upstairs, in a room with a comfortable couch in it.

Gorlim's mother Annag was in and out. She had many friends in the settlement, and times they did not come to her for a brew of tea and good talk, she would go to them. At home when she chanced to have no such visitors, she spent most time in the kitchen, from whence she could often be heard singing. Annag looked kindly on Beren, and was accepting of his differences, but she would never believe that he got enough to eat with the 'forest people' as she named them, and was constantly tempting him with sweet or savoury goodies. It must be admitted that Beren was easy to tempt.

From helping in the smithy, Beren made the acquaintance of many people from the district, out to its farthest corners. Everyone eventually needed a new plough tip, or horse-shoes, or a wheel or harrow repaired. There was very little in the way of coin in circulation. Customers paid mostly with farm produce; or rather, with laboriously-scrawled notes or tickets for same. Once a year the Dwarves came with iron to exchange for meal, cloth and leather. When this visit was nigh, goods were brought to a shed beside the yard where carts were parked, and the tickets were redeemed.

Eilinel visited the smithy as often as the weather and her duties permitted. Often she went together with Beren. She and he had always liked one another. Neli was one of the few people in the farm community who, Beren felt, accepted him, completely and whole-heartedly, in his changed way of living. The boy only discovered how much that acceptance meant to him after he found it in Eilinel. He grew ever more deeply fond of the quiet, cheerful girl. Part of his enjoyment in escaping the farm for the smithy derived from the skiing excursions through the crisp air with Neli's compact figure gliding beside him. She went booted and cloaked against the cold, her sparkling eyes and pink cheeks showing in the gap between the thick plaid she wrapped across her mouth and over her head. Neli was not built for sport, but was a brisk skier for all that; probably better than Beren himself in fact, which was perhaps not surprising, since it was an art the People did not practise.

Eilinel and Gorlim had an understanding that they would marry as soon as they were a little older, and as soon as propitious circumstances could be contrived. Of course, like any couple, the first problem was to find somewhere to live. Although Eilinel and Annag were firm friends, nobody thought of Eilinel living at the smithy as a serious proposition. It was clear to all that there would be no luck in that. Gorlim had discussed possibilities with 'the Master' as he called Barahir, but what he really wanted was a place of his own. Smithing was his trade, and he meant to stick by it; all the same, he came of farming stock, and had farming in his blood. He dreamed of a little place of his own where he might keep a few goats and pigs and have a field or two of barley. That would be a lot of work to look after with a smithy as well, but their children would help out as soon as they started having them.

Whenever Gorlim spoke of his desire to have a little farm away out in the woods, Beren thought darkly about the Orc-raid of the foregoing summer, as well as the various hints he had picked up during the year that such incursions might be on the increase; but since there seemed little point in dampening anybody's hopes by giving expression to vague forebodings, he held his peace.

Despite their special status as a couple, whenever Gorlim and Neli were together they never made Beren feel like an unwanted extra. On the contrary, the three of them made a harmonious and merry group. They talked of all things under the sun of course, but the older pair were deeply curious about Beren's life among the wild wood folk, and listened with interest and wonder to anything he told them about it.

Gorlim showed particular interest when Beren mentioned his visit to Angrod's Elves, and the wonderful music and food. In his turn he told the boy about the harvest feast, which Beren had missed this year. There had been quite a number of Aegnor's people there, he said. Of course they mostly came to buy fleeces, but Gorlim didn't care about that. His eyes shone whenever he spoke of the Elves, whom he revered as almost supernatural beings.

"Aye, and wonderful things they can make by their magic too, there's not a doubt of it," he said. "I'd dearly

love to get a look at one of they swords, now, for one thing. Your Pa showed me his, once, and that's an elven blade, as I d'know." Gorlim's face was full of light at the memory. "Have you seen it, Ber? Silly me, course you have. Your own Pa. But cor! A body can't but admire the mirror shine of it, and with its name written on it as neat as you like in them curly letters they got, fine lines a-shining there which a body can't even hardly see the width of. Sharp enough to shave with, it is, that sword, with no nicks at all, despite that he have used it often, or so they do say. Carries light as a feather. And that's just an ordinary sword, every-day like, as you might say. Begging your father's pardon o' course. Don't mean to say he's ordinary. But just imagine what a great lord like that Aegnor might carry on him. I did get a look at the sheath of his'n last harvest-tide, and I never saw anything like it. Green as sun through the new leaves it was, and scattered with little silver birds. No smith I know could have made her." He shook his head.

"But Grol," said Beren, "if you liked the sheath so much, why didn't you ask him for a look at the sword too?"

Gorlim glanced at him in surprise. "Who, me?" he said. "Ooo no, I couldn't be doing that. Who be I to be askin' great lords like the Lord Aegnor for peeks at their swords? No, no."

"Well, you didn't mind asking Father," said Beren.

"Well yes, sure, but it was, well I don't know, it's different with your Pa. Not like a chap be like to be familiar with him, you know, but he's easy in his ways, if you know what I mean. I mean, he's the Master and all that, everybody d'know that, but he's just a chap like you and me when all's said and done, after all. He didn't mind a bit me askin' that time."

"Go on with you. Aegnor wouldn't mind either," grinned Beren.

Gorlim looked sceptical. "Yah, you're all talk, you are. Bet you wouldn't be game yourself. Waltzing up as bold as brass: Aegnor, old chap, gis a squint at your blade, if it be no trouble. Ho, yes. I can see that happening, sure."

Remembering his cousin Beleth, a thought struck the younger boy. "Why don't you spend some time with the Elves, Grol?" he said. "Lots of people do. You could learn how they make swords, and all such things."

Gorlim gave him a long look while he thought about this. "Well, Ber," he replied in his slow way, "I will not hide it from you: that exact thought have from time out of mind been in my heart. Very greatly do I desire to watch the Elvish smiths at their work. Howbeit, I do not doubt they work up high where I could not follow. But it would be a wonder to me just to be by, and to watch them at it. And who knows? I might pick up something for all that."

"Then why don't you?" said Beren. He turned to Eilinel, who had been churning butter while listening to them talk. They were in fact all working at something; idleness was a rare luxury in their simple community. "How about you, Neli?" he asked. "Wouldn't you like to live with the Elves, and learn all their secrets?"

Eilinel laughed, startled. "Who, me? Not likely!"

Beren couldn't understand them. "But why not?" he said.

She looked down at the churn, concentrating on turning it for a while. "I think it might be too much for me," she said at last.

Gorlim nodded. "Aye," he said. "I am with Neli in this. Elves are not for such as we. They be too strong a drink. Like a candle flame to a moth: a shining glory, but with only frizzling at the end of it." And nothing Beren could say would persuade him otherwise.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beren had heard that winter in southern lands could be a much more hesitant affair, with periods of mildness and thaw alternating between snow and rain. Indeed, the Druug told him that if you went far enough to the South you would run out of snow altogether. Beren knew that nothing but truth came out of the mouth of a Druug, but he had a lot of trouble accepting this. Winter without snow? It didn't seem to make sense. How would you even know it was winter?

Here in the North there was nothing complicated about it. Summers were hot, and in winter you got snow. Any kind of thaw was a rarity outside of the uncertain weather in spring and autumn. This was convenient because it was much easier to get about on snow than on mud and slush – pleasanter too.

There were times of storm though when everybody was confined indoors. These blizzards could last for days, and it was a weariness to the spirit to be confined all that time in a dark, draughty house with nothing but the unremitting howl of the wind to listen to. Tempers were apt to fray, particularly among those who were used to be out and about.

Beren was sitting moodily in the wood-house at the end of the yard during one such period. He slept there now, in the men's half of the loft with Gramlach, Arthad and Dagnir. Gram was sitting in front of the welcome heat of the fire, repairing leather war-shirts. Beren was helping him with this, cutting and trimming the leather pieces to pattern. Dag was at the other end of the lumber-strewn room, expertly cutting shingles with a light axe by the light of a lamp. The fire was hot on their faces, but cold air tickled their legs and sides, even around the firs they had draped over the backs of their chairs. The wind roared outside and set currents of air in motion inside the room which made the flame of Dagnir's lamp twitch uneasily.

Beren had been thinking, as he often did, of the South, and wondering what his friends among the People were up to. His longing to be with them in the free spaces of the woods was as intense as his frustration at being confined in the cold and dark in a sort of rabbit hutch for all the long months until spring. Not for the first time, he cursed himself for wavering in his former resolution and for listening to Goracc. What use was he here? What did a raven know of these things? He told himself vehemently that next year it would be different.

"Fire's getting a bit low," Gramlach said to him. "Just jump up and fetch a couple of logs for her, will you?" Beren laid his leather and shears on the floor and did as Gram asked. He was philosophical about this; these sorts of chores were always the lot of the most junior. At least here in the wood-house they had the firewood stacked sensibly along the inner wall: one didn't have to risk freezing one's nose off fetching it from outside, like in the big house.

He brought two thick billets of wood and together they laid them on the fire, eyes clenched against the heat. They stood back then and watched for a moment as the flames licked over the new wood.

One can charge a basin of hot water with salt and set it aside. The liquid will cool and cool and remain clear and liquid for quite a long time until, in a single moment, the salt crystals will appear from nowhere and lace themselves together into a solid. So now: as Beren stood there, weeks of brewing discontent crystallised all at once into a full-formed decision.

The boy turned and said, "I'm going over to talk with Father."

Gramlach turned to him, surprise on his face. "What, now?" he said. "Middle of the storm?"

"Yes."

"Seems to me you'd do better to wait, young 'un."

Beren shook his head firmly. "No, I'm going now."

The big man chewed his lip, cocking an ear to listen to the roar of the wind. "Want someone to come with you?" he asked. "Some of them drifts are pretty big just now."

“No no, I’ll be fine.”

Gram shrugged. “Well, if you must, you must. You best rug up a bit then, and run quick. Duck over into the cow-shed and go round the long way. Don’t try to go ’cross the yard.”

Beren pulled on some fur-lined boots and fetched two thick woollen plaids from the loft. The heavy wraps weren’t over-clean, but they were densely woven and warm. Wrapped in these strong-smelling coverings, he went to the door. Gram came after to help him out the door. The man said “Ready?” as he laid his hands on the latch. Beren nodded, and Gram jerked the door open. A freezing blast of snow-laden gale swirled into the room, causing Dag’s lamp to flicker wildly, and the man himself to curse. Beren dashed instantly through into the dark of the storm; behind him, Gram slammed the door hastily shut.

Although the darkness outside was not absolute it was impossible to look at anything properly because the ice-laden wind cut at exposed skin and stung the eyes. Even standing up against the freezing torrent of air was difficult. Beren wrapped the plaids close about his face and stumbled blindly in the direction of the main house. Boy-like, he had not paid any attention to Gram’s advice. He found however that he had underestimated the difficulty of the short journey. From the lodge to the house was perhaps fifty yards, and it was impossible to get lost in the enclosed court. But when Gram had spoken of drifts, Beren had in mind something perhaps knee-deep; but on the east side of the court the snow rose up towards the eaves of the barn in a hill, more than the height of a man. Across the centre of the court the snow was piled in man-high dunes, twisted in obedience to the wind’s wild logic.

Beren found the first drift by falling into it. He was out of the wind then but only because he was buried, choking, in an icy sea of powdered snow. Floundering for solid footing, he found it at last and managed to drag himself free of the clinging drift. He was clogged all over with snow and struggled to clear it from his face. Lumps of ice frozen to the ends of his hair whipped him painfully when thrashed by the wind. The boy was panting with reaction and shivering uncontrollably with cold. He tried to orient himself, but he could make out nothing through the snow-seethed darkness, and the cold and the unremitting buffets of the wind were beginning to confuse his mind. His mind flashed back to the gruelling time with Camlaf, when was that? years ago, it seemed – and tried to recall the feeling of certainty he had felt then. Get a grip, he thought to himself. You were just a baby then. If you could do it then, you can do it now.

But nothing answered him except the howl of the wind and the penetrating cold.

Numbly, he tried to think. Come on. Where was the wind blowing from when he came out of the door? Then he remembered: from the right. He turned until he had the gale in front of him and slightly to his left, and stumbled forward. The snow underfoot became less, and in three steps the wall of the lodge loomed up on his right quarter, just where he had hoped for it. Relief bloomed inside him as he reached the log wall, finding there shelter out of the gale. He stumbled beside the wall until the stink of the midden told him he was near the end of the building. A quick dash brought him to the comparative shelter of the cow-byre. He unhooked the door at the end and quickly slipped inside, into the odorous warmth of the cowshed. Beren leaned panting against the inside of the closed door, realizing what a close shave he had had. He would pay a bit more attention to Gramlach’s words next time, that was for sure!

As soon as he had recovered somewhat he made his way past the row of beasts in their stalls. One or two of them raised their heads and eyed him, munching, in the placid and opaque manner of cows. The animals radiated warmth, and they smelled strong and grassy-sweet. Beren made his way through the dairy and at last into the warmth and light of the kitchen. There were six people in the room, few of whom he was particularly glad to see: Hrotha and Methemel, Ormorod and Mari, the girl Kirimel and the youngster Kamorod. Beren had no interest in or business with any of them, so he passed through without breaking step, only nodding briefly to Hrotha.

Most of the others were gathered in the end room where the looms were set up. Of the farm’s customers, the Elves spun and wove their own cloth, so only wanted fleeces; but the Dwarves preferred to buy the woven and dyed product. They valued the dense wool of the highlands greatly and paid – for Dwarves – a good price for it. The demand was generally greater than could be supplied, so any spare time between more

necessary work, particularly during winter, was often spent in weaving, at least by those who had the skill.

Three looms were presently in use. The woman Lorinis, who had recently come to live at Sightfoot Farm, sat at the first, working at a length of heather-checked plaid. Eilinel was busy with her own work on her far side, and Hiril, nearest the door, was learning the trade at a third loom. Hiril glanced up at Beren and smiled welcome.

Seated on the other side of the fire were Caladis, Emeldir and Barahir. Of the remaining company in the house, only Arthad and Ormalan were absent. They were maybe in the harness room or stables.

Emeldir smiled at her son and shifted to make space on the bench between herself and Barahir. “Come and warm yourself,” she said. “No, wait! Hang up that wet cloak by the outer door first.” Beren did as she suggested, tugging off his boots as well, and was soon back. He plumped himself shivering into the gap on the bench and stretched his feet to the fire. The heat was an excruciating pleasure as it crept into his almost frozen extremities. Emeldir put an arm around him and hugged him, and his father was a matching warm presence wedged firmly against his other side. Beren blinked at the fire sleepily and felt, for the first time that day, almost content.

“And how are you rugged types managing over there in the lodge?” his father wanted to know.

“Oh, all right,” said Beren. “You know. It’s a bit boring to be shut inside all the time, is all.”

“You sound like you need a bit of cheering up,” said his mother.

“Oh, well, not really,” said Beren. “It’s all right. Like everyone keeps saying, spring will come again. But then will come summer, and then autumn, and then another winter. It was next winter I wanted to talk about.”

His parents exchanged a glance over his head. “What about it?” asked his mother.

Beren drew a deep breath. “Well,” he said, “I was wondering if you’d let me go with the People next year. When they go south.”

Hiril’s loom stopped with a jerk, and Caladis also looked up, a look of consternation on her face. Barahir said slowly, “Your mother and I have been wondering for some time when you were going to ask that.”

“Does that mean you have an answer already?”

“More or less,” said his father. “The short answer is, if this is the wish of your heart, we won’t stand in your way. You’ve obviously learned a great deal from the wood people. Our only worry is that there are other things you maybe should be – or could be – learning which you are not, and will not, if you stay with the tribes.”

“Well I’m not learning much of anything stuck in this house all winter,” said Beren.

“That’s true,” admitted his father. “Also here, there’s only household and farming matters you could learn. And whether I like it or not, I have to recognize that it seems unlikely you’ll ever settle down to being a farmer.”

Beren shook his head in agreement.

“There’s more things than farming, though,” continued Barahir. “Or than woodcraft either, for that matter. We’re none of us here just to wallow in rural bliss: we have a war hanging over our heads. We have a duty to prepare for it. Every one of us with the strength for it needs to learn how to fight; but that’s exactly what you’re not in a way to learn, where you are.”

Beren sat up. “Father,” he said earnestly, “the People do a lot of fighting. A *lot*. More than you know about,



maybe.”

Barahir leaned back and looked at him in some surprise. “What fighting?” he asked.

“Orcs,” said Beren. “They hunt a lot of Orcs. I know that.”

His father was doubtful. “Are you sure?” he said. “It’s been some few years since we’ve found trace of Orcs at all, or had any trouble with them.”

The savage face of the Orc-chieftain came into Beren’s mind, and he shivered. “Yes Papa,” he said. “I’m sure.”

Barahir scratched his head. He heard the certainty in his son’s voice, but didn’t know what to make of it all. “Well,” he said, “clearly there are things going on in the woods that I don’t know much about. I’d very willingly hear more about them from you, or anyone. But be that as it may. The fact is, you are my son, and the grandson of the present Landholder. We have responsibilities. You know, perhaps, that I am tasked with the defence of the upper valley here. I do not do it for my pleasure: it is a duty. That duty, or a similar one, will in the course of time naturally devolve on you. Whether you take up the duty or not is up to you. But the duty is there. The choice of how you spend your life is yours; I don’t want to push you one way or another. But I also don’t want you to be able to say afterwards that you were not fully aware of the circumstances.”

Beren was silent for a while. Then he said, “But why are you telling me this now, Papa? What are the things you think I should be learning?”

“How to lead an army!” said his father. “And part of the road into that is learning how to fight in one. I do not doubt that your People are worthy hunters, well skilled to bring down an Orc or two. But the Enemy has Orcs beyond count; so we are told, and must accept. You must see that such swarms of foes can never be brought low by such piecemeal warcraft as your hunters can perform. Our only hope is for the men of the Houses to stand, sword drawn next to sword, in close-massed ranks, with the princes of the Eldar. You need to learn this way of battle.”

Beren recalled, not quite comfortably, how Goracc and Nose had at times said similar things. “You mean the military exercises,” he said in glum tones.

His parents looked again at each other. “We think you should start to take part, yes,” said his mother.

“But that’s mostly in summer, isn’t it?”

“Mostly,” agreed his father, “although now and then the militia have drills in winter too. Not often enough, maybe. We should never assume that the enemy will wait on our comfort.”

“Well then,” said Beren in wheedling tones, seeing some leverage, “if I join in the exercises in summer, would you be happier if I went south next winter?”

“Well, we could consider that,” allowed his father.

Caladis sniffed audibly, but Beren paid his aunt no mind. He was happy with how things had turned out. He sat on for a while in the warmth, but his conscience began to prick him. “I’d better get back and help Gram,” he said.

“Before you go,” continued Barahir, “I may as well tell you. We’re going to Newfort soon, and I would like you to come.”

“Well, I don’t mind,” said Beren. “It’ll make a change. But why do you want me, particularly?”

“Andreth wants to see you,” said his father. “She sent a message some days ago.”

“What about?” asked the boy.

“She did not say; and I will not tell my guess. Leave it to her.”

Emeldir pushed gently against Beren from the other side. “It’s nothing bad,” she said. “Don’t look so worried!”

“Well, but I do worry sometimes,” said the boy earnestly. “About a lot of things. And there’s a lot I haven’t told you about; I’m sorry for that, I don’t keep it back on purpose, but somehow it has been hard to fit in this time, and, well, I don’t know...”

“We understand,” said his mother with another gentle squeeze.

“When shall we go to Andreth?” asked Beren.

“As soon as the storm passes,” said Barahir. “We’ll ski down. It’ll be fun.”

\* \* \* \* \*

They set off early on a freezing cold day. The winter sun was up and slanting redly through the trees. Mist floated in silent, wavy layers near the ground, but the sky overhead was a clear, clean blue. The snow lay deep and powdery, sculpted here and there into strange shapes by the recent storm winds, but the air at present was perfectly still.

Accompanying Beren and his parents was the usual guard against Orcs and wolves, consisting on this occasion of Gramlach plus the burly brothers Ragnor and Dagnir. All of them were armed with bows, one or two of which were kept strung at all times. The men were lightly loaded, each only carrying a small pack with spirits, sausage, sugar; odds and ends such as tinder boxes and metal cups; and a change of clothes.

The road mostly followed the river apart from occasional diversions to cut off long loops. Since it was made for laden carts, steep hills were avoided. This made the going fairly easy. They were all of them experienced cross-country skiers and all of them, even Beren, knew how to conserve their strength on skis and how to obtain the best speed with the greatest economy of effort. Nevertheless it was a long, testing journey they had ahead of them. This night they planned to stay at the crossroads inn, and the following night at some farm or other in the vale of Ladros.

Hour followed hour as they glided through the still white landscape. They saw no other living thing. The tall Hill of Sight behind the farm, which Beren had also heard named as Foen, fell behind more quickly than he would have believed. After a very short time it had shrunk to a mere low blue hump, occasionally to be glimpsed in gaps between the trees. The valley wound its way under the shadow of other, less imposing granite domes in the same general line as Foen, which heights exhibited a great variety of rounded shapes. Now and then also, when the trees opened out, they could see the snow-frosted darkness of the slopes of Drûn climbing away to their left.

They stopped once or twice to eat and to melt some snow to drink. A slosh of spirits in the hot sugared water made an agreeable toddy. Finally, as the lowering sun began casting long blue shadows across the snowy fields, they reached the crossroads. The warm light flickering through the thick bullseye windows of the inn made a welcome sight.

The principal users of the roads, who thus usually made up the bulk of the customers of the inn, were Dwarf traders; the landlord was of human stock however, and human travellers readily patronized the place as well. The two kinds mostly kept to themselves in the common room, but rubbed shoulders at the bar and elsewhere amiably enough. Elves were rarely seen there.

There were few travellers on the roads in the present season, and after the tired skiers had shaken the snow from their equipment and come into the warmth of the common room they found nobody but a party of six

Dwarves sitting in cheerful conversation around the fire and drinking from mugs of mulled ale. The Dwarves greeted the chilled humans courteously enough and made room for them on the settle.

The landlord's daughter came over to greet them. She was a plain but well set up woman of thirty-five or so with a firm set to her mouth, but the germ of kindness in her eye. From time to time she puffed away from her face wisps of black hair which were constantly escaping from the bun at the back of her head. Her hands, which were on the large side, were reddened from constant exposure to soapy water. Zalta was her name.

“Good evening Sir and Madam. It's a pleasure to see you again. Did you come all the way from your farm, Sir, on skis? That's a powerful long way. And this is your boy I know, I remember him from last time, though how I don't know, seeing as how he's shot up like a young elephant. Not that I've ever seen an elephant to know, mind, young or otherwise. And you lads,” this to Ragnor and his companions, “are you keeping well? No more scars Ragnor? Or only from the ladies perhaps, hidden away from view, like?” Ragnor grinned sheepishly and the others laughed. He was well known for his romances. “What will it be, Sirs and Madam? Mulled ale perhaps, or would it be cider for the lad?” The guards asked for ale, but Barahir and his wife preferred mead. Beren was given a little of the latter but was made to slake his thirst first with hot water seethed with herbs. They dined on large servings of a hot, savoury stew, ballasted with crusty bread, after which they collapsed into their beds.

The next day's journey found them at first descending through woods along a stretch of valley in which the river dropped from level to level over a series of cataracts. After an hour or two the way became more level again and the river calmer. The valley opened out at that point and they began to pass areas where the trees had been cut down to make way for farm land. The cultivated areas were by no means continuous, each consisting of a small central cluster of a few houses ringed by local fields, but these settlements began slowly to become more frequent. The road had grown broader as they had entered this more populated area, and they also began to encounter other travellers – sometimes single horsemen, and once or twice Dwarves in sleighs pulled by reindeer; and once they passed a party of men working to clear a deep drift. The skiers stopped briefly to exchange greetings and news with the red-faced diggers, who were clearly glad of the chance to pause, lean on their shovels, and exchange a few words with the travellers. They all knew Barahir and his lady, and made their gruff respects now to his son.

The skiers did not make quite such good time this day as on the one preceding, when they had been skiing over pristine snow. The lowering sun found them in open country with snow-blanketed fields stretching away on both sides of the path. The river, willow-fringed, wound quietly along a little way to their right. The land in that direction appeared to be open and under cultivation for some distance. The timber buildings of farmsteadings were scattered here and there, dark against the snow; fingers of smoke rising into the still air marked where others nestled less visibly in some fold or other of the land. Some miles to the south, a dark strip of forest could be made out, stretching to the feet of the long line of bare, rolling hills where the Downs began.

On their left, the extent of cultivated land was much shorter. Here the white fields sloped up towards the pine-clad heights which marked the furthest eastward extent of the highlands of Drûn. A gap in the line of hills ahead of them marked where a narrow valley drove up into the high country. The distant slopes on the far side of this inlet were lower, and their trees were of different character to those of Drûn. Beren realized that he had been on the far side of that divide only the previous summer. A little way forward in that direction, then, lay Angrod's fortress.

In the blue shadows of evening they passed a stockade by the side of the road which Barahir told him had been built by Dwarves as a way-shelter. There were stables on one side of the enclosure and a low sleep- and cook-house on the other. Smoke coming from the chimney showed that it was occupied. They did not stop there but continued some little way further before turning off into a track to the South. “My kinsman Menelrond lives here,” Barahir told Beren. “He'll put us up.”

Their goal turned out to be quite a settlement, built close to the river. The boundary was fenced by a stockade, high and strong, which was built from tree trunks set on end. Near the top of this palisade a row of sharpened stakes was fastened, one between each pair of logs, all pointing downwards at a steep angle. Every

few yards a log of the palisade was cut shorter at the upper end to afford a slit for shooting. The general effect was quite fearsome; it certainly looked much more impressive than the fence at home. Beren said so to his father, but Barahir considered the structure with a sceptical twist to his mouth and remarked, "Yes, it looks very fine, but one good fire-bucket would see the end of it. I trust more in spears and bows, and in good strong arms; and in a firm spirit behind each one."

The gates were closed and barred, but there was a postern gate just to the side, around whose edges firelight glimmered in the fading light. Barahir smote on the door and called out, "Ho there within! Here are travellers and kinsmen." The door was opened and they were welcomed into the firelit guard room. Four men were standing who had clearly just been toasting crumpets over the fire. Metal pots of drink stood in a row beside the hearth, basking in the warmth. The small room was filled with a delicious smell of crumpet and hot spiced ale. After a short explanation, one of the crew was told off to escort the visitors to Menelrond's house. Reluctantly the travellers left the warmth and the enticing smells behind them and followed the man, out again into the gloom and cold, into the wide enclosure inside the stockade.

It appeared that there were several homesteads within the enclosure. Towards the centre were larger structures which Beren thought were probably barns. There seemed little order in the arrangement and size of any of the buildings.

They were led to a large beam-and-plaster house with a great, shaggy roof of thatch. Butter-yellow light gleamed through small diamond-paned windows set at chest height; a scattered second row of windows, dark at present, could be seen marking the story above.

The door was pulled open by a huge man with a thick grey-golden beard which cascaded like a torrent over his broad chest. Merry blue chips of eyes peeped slyly out from beneath tawny brambles of eyebrows.

"Barahir!" boomed the broad man in a voice like thunder in a barrel. "Come in my boy, come in! Then tell us what brings you here in this snowy season – and on skis too? Good Powers save us!" Their guide from the guardhouse saluted them and left to return to his mulled ale. The travellers came inside, and Menelrond shut out the night and the cold air. They took off their skis and the rest of their wet gear while the greetings and talk went back and forth. The other members of the family had quickly appeared and were crowding the inner doorway. First came a handsome, smiling woman with thick dark hair whom Menelrond introduced as his wife Glifinnath. Behind her stood their all-but-grown children Gilach, Gildor and Gilraen. Beren looked at the three last with interest as he unfastened his boots. Gilach was a tall young man just filling out into the shape of early manhood. The strength and the kindness of his father were in his face, but his dark hair and pale face came from his mother. Gildor had golden hair, and in his face there was such a light! Almost Elven he looked. Although well-knit in the frame, he was still as slim as a fish and beardless. Beren thought that he could not yet be twenty.

When Beren's eyes turned to Gilraen, a lump caught in his throat. He beheld a laughing maid of seventeen or so whose hair also returned the lamp's glow with almost more than reflected light. Beren was only a boy of eight, but for the first time in his life he was stirred by the sight of a woman's face. What caught his breath was not so much the round of her cheek, soft in the lamplight, but the gladness and the innocence of her nature. She was as warm as sunlight and as clear as spring water. Wit and courage sparkled in her eye.

Water was heated for the travellers to wash themselves. Beren was used to bathing in cold water, when at all, but the warmth was very welcome in this wintry weather. He climbed then willingly also into the warm woollen clothes which had been laid out for him. He had got used to the scratchiness again by now. As soon as he was clothed, he found his way down to the centre of warmth and company. He found everybody sitting at several tables in a large, fire-lit room. His parents were seated in the places of honour at the head table, to the left and right of Menelrond. The lamplight glowed in the big man's beard and gleamed off his teeth as he threw back his great head and laughed a table-shaking laugh at something Beren's father had said.

Beren was shown to a place near the foot of the table with Gildor on his left and Gilraen seated across from him. Gilach sat at the foot of the table on his immediate right. The boys on either side of him did their best to make their young kinsman feel welcome and at ease. They asked him about the journey, and about his life in

the upper valley; but Beren was having a hard time keeping his eyes open and made but heavy weather of the conversation. The sons soon saw how it was with him and tactfully left him in peace. In their own conversation however they did not speak over him as others in their place might have done but took pains to include him tacitly as a member of the company. Beren appreciated the warm feeling of acceptance and soon found himself liking the young men very much.

Whenever he succeeded in levering his eyes wide open he found the lively, lamp-lit face of Gilraen before them. He could hardly turn his gaze away from her. He was mighty glad the table was too wide to permit easy conversation across it – he didn't know how it was, but he felt an awful, tongue-tied shyness in the gentle maid's presence. It was a feeling entirely new to him and one which he found most disconcerting. She met his eye once and smiled at him, causing heat to rise in his cheeks.

Beren managed to finish his plate without actually falling asleep into it, but he was nodding more and more and the periods of alertness in between the nods were becoming sparser and shorter. He woke with his head on the table to find Gilach shaking him.

“Come on, young fellow,” said the dark boy, laughing at him, “you'd best let me guide you to your bed!”

Beren dragged himself upstairs after Gilach and was asleep before he hit the bed. The elder lad smiled and shook his head. He pulled off Beren's in-house buskins and covered his young kinsman up carefully before leaving him and taking the lamp downstairs.

They let Beren sleep a little longer the next morning. Barahir and Emeldir rose early and sat on for an hour after breakfast, exchanging news with Menelrond and Glifinnath. They told their hosts one or two things about their son which made the older couple sit up and open their eyes. Thus when Beren eventually appeared, tousled and very hungry, the pair looked at him with a sharper interest than they had shown the previous evening. However, there was no time to go into it further, because the travellers had to be on the road. After Beren had swallowed a hasty breakfast, his party strapped themselves into their gear and were away.

This last leg of their journey was the shortest one, which looked like being just as well, because the weather had altered during the night. The previously clear skies were now dusted with mares' tails which rapidly thickened and lowered as the day progressed. Very soon there was no blue to be seen any more and the disc of the sun became weaker and weaker until it disappeared altogether. They skied on through the greying day along a wide valley dotted with small settlements. Woods when they did appear consisted mostly of birch, alder and willow, often pollarded. Cat's-paws of wind had begun to shake the leaves.

The six of them arrived at the gates of Newfort in the gloom of an early evening, just as the first snowflakes began to drift down around them. Beren remembered the gate of Newfort and the courtyard inside it, but he only now became aware of the *size* of the place. The town was built on a low mound, and what seemed to him like hundreds of dark buildings with snow-covered roofs stood in rank after rank up the slope ahead of them. He had never seen so many houses in his life.

There was no fire outside the gate-inn on this occasion, but a warm glow in the windows of the inn itself gave evidence of a fire within. The travellers were greeted by the gate guards and, as they paused a moment in conversation, other figures came out of the door of the inn and also called greeting. The weary skiers pushed on soon however and made their way up the sloping main street. Not many people were abroad and Barahir's party did not have to stop again until they had arrived at the top and were once again facing the great hall which housed the Landholder of Ladros. Beren noticed this time that its high roof was thatched, and that the deep brown, polished wall timbers were intricately carved with beasts, and flowers, and with the Powers knew what else.

No-one was about in the cold dusk. They did not try the main door of the hall but went around the side. As they were stamping the snow off their boots under the lee of the gable a serving girl poked her head out of the door to see who was making the noise. She gaped as she saw who the visitors were. “Master Barahir!” she gasped. “You've come!”

“Hello there,” replied Barahir. “Miriël, isn’t it? Yes, we’ve come. Just in time too, with the weather turning bad again. How goes it with you?”

“Oh, nothing much changes with me, sir. But come in out of the snow! I’ll go and tell mistress.” And with that she disappeared. They all trooped in, glad to be out of the cold. Very shortly a grey-haired, well upholstered woman hurried onto the scene. She exclaimed with pleasure, kissed Emeldir and embraced Barahir. He held her at arms’ length after loosing her clutches and looked her over. “You’re looking uncommon well, Sister. Can I take it that life has been treating you well?” After some more quick exchanges of this sort he turned to Beren. “Come and greet your aunt Hirwen, Beren.” So Beren had to submit to a powdered embrace and the usual remarks about how big he had grown.

They met most of the rest of the family at dinner. Only Bregor, the old Lord, was absent. Bregolas took the place at the head of the table, with Andreth sitting at his right hand. She had nodded to Beren when she saw him, and although she spoke no further word to him that evening, he felt her dark eyes resting on him often during the course of the meal.

Beren’s uncle had changed little. He was a big man who never seemed to Beren to be quite easy in his skin: all his actions seemed either a little more than what was called for, or a little less. This seemed all the more strange to those who contrasted him with Barahir, because the younger brother radiated such an impression of poise and profound inner calm. People said that, of the two of them, Bregolas had got all the beef, but Barahir had the juice.

Beren was seated at the children’s table. The big girl on his immediate left paid him no attention but spent the entire meal giggling and chattering to her friends. Once or twice in a paroxysm of careless mirth she shoved against Beren. He thought ruefully of the delicacy and good manners of Menelrond’s young people.

On his right was a stocky, dark-haired boy of about his own age who looked familiar.

“I’ve seen you before, I think,” said the boy. “You live up the valley in the West, don’t you? You came here once with your sister.”

“That’s right,” said Beren, and told the boy his name.

“Hathaldir,” gave back the other. In the diffident manner of boys they then began to pick up the threads of old acquaintance.

The adults seemed to have curiously little to say to one another. The travellers were tired, true, and even Emeldir’s usual ability to maintain an exchange of female banalities essentially forever seemed dampened by fatigue; but there seemed more to it than that. Andreth ate in silence, and it was also obvious that Bregolas had small interest in farming. He asked only a couple of polite questions about the state of the land and returned short, indifferent answers to Barahir’s enquiries in like vein.

“Have much trouble with Orcs up your way?” he asked Barahir after a while.

“Very little these days,” answered Beren’s father. “I believe my son sees more action than I do.”

“Ah,” said Bregolas. “He’s out with the wood-folk most of the time, isn’t he?” Barahir nodded. “I suppose they will grub up the odd goblin out of the bushes. But tell me, do you ever do any campaigning?”

Barahir moved uneasily in his chair. It did not appear to be a topic he was happy to venture into. “Yes, from time to time,” he answered cautiously. “When the work allows.”

“Well, you won’t find Orcs sitting at home in your barns, you know,” said the big man to him while gnawing on a chop. “Won’t scare ’em out of the district either. A show of force is the thing. We send formations around regular, and we don’t see hair of an Orc. That’s the way to do it, if you don’t mind me telling you.”

Beren had his own ideas about the reason for the paucity of Orcs in the valley, but held his tongue.

“We’ve a new unit here now,” continued Bregolas, “very smart. Only small yet,” and here his eyes flicked quickly at Andreth, “but very effective. They make a rattling good show. You ought to have a look at them while you’re here. I’ll parade ’em for you tomorrow if you like.”

Barahir shrugged. “All right. If the weather behaves.”

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The weather did behave, more or less. There was still a thick overcast but no more snow was falling. The parade took place in a field on the east side of the stockade, but since everybody had to pass through the gate, the funnelling of participants as well as spectators into the first courtyard provided an early opportunity to see the soldiers. They were certainly easy to distinguish. Their torsos were covered in a plate armour which had been lacquered black, then polished. The edges of the plates were picked out in silver. In general shape, the suits of armour built up in width towards the shoulders. Two side pieces clasped the waist closely while the stomach was covered by plates mimicking the abdominal muscles. Higher on the sides a series of curved pieces like ribs angled outwards. These were overlapped on the front by broad, square bulges modelled, in form if not size, on human chest muscles. The structure terminated at the shoulders in great rounded shells, each as large as a man’s head. At the ends of these the line of the shoulders was further extended outwards by small wings of metal. Each soldier wore a wide belt of polished silver plates, and their thighs were covered by a segmented leather kilt, stained black and picked out with silver rivets. Each man carried a light metal shield and wore a sword on the left side and a long knife on the right.

The most striking part of the whole ensemble though was the helm. Made of metal polished to a high finish, the helm rose over the cheeks and temples in long curves which ended in two high horns at the top. Slits were cut at a menacing slant for the eyes and a grinning line of holes marked where the mouth was.

Beren took in the absurd, bloated shapes of the armour with amazement and wondered how much padding a normal man would need to prevent him rattling around inside like a bean in a box.

The mixed stream of soldiers and spectators made its way out of the gate and towards the exercise field. Bregolas joined Barahir’s party while the soldiers were forming ranks. He clapped his hands together cheerfully. “Impressive, aren’t they? We’ve just a few at the moment, we’re just starting. Those Dwarves, what they charge for the armour! Well it’s just eye-watering. But we’ll work up in time. I think we can give you a pretty good taster as we are, though. Give you an idea of how a whole army would look. I find it a pretty staggering thought, I don’t mind telling you.” He looked over at the troops, who were nearly ready. “Got to go!” With that, he raised a hand to his visitors before striding over to stand at the side of the field.

Beren had seen the levies marshal at home, and he knew that somebody had to give orders in the small matters while the leaders worked out how to address the large ones. But he had never seen anything like this. The sergeant began to shout orders in a brazen voice like the roar of a bull, which the men obeyed on the instant, all at once, like a machine. The sergeant brought them to rigid attention, but was unhappy with something, and made them go through the exercise again and again, all the time screaming abuse. The spectators were clearly used to this spectacle but Barahir’s party were shocked into silence.

At last the men were drawn up to the sergeant’s satisfaction. Bregolas sauntered over then and began to inspect the men. There were perhaps forty-five or fifty of them, in three ranks. Once or twice he stopped and made some remark in leisured tones to the sergeant, pointing at the offending item. The sergeant screamed in the unfortunate’s face each time and made him do thirty deep knee bends. In full armour that wasn’t funny.

The program involved an incomprehensible series of movements, marches, bellowed battle-songs full of vainglory, and the flash and clash of sword on shields. It got boring after a while. Beren couldn’t see the point of any of it.

Finally it was over. The puffing soldiers were dismissed and began to pull off helmet and breast-plate as

quickly as they could. Relatives and friends streamed in to help them with their straps.

Bregolas came back over to the travellers where they stood in a group behind the low fence. “So, what do you think, eh?”

“Very impressive,” Barahir assured him. He turned to Emeldir and to his house-men. “Wasn’t it, fellows?” They all nodded and grunted vaguely.

Gramlach put his hand up hesitantly. “Excuse I sir, but would I be able to get a bit closer look at that there gear?” he asked.

“Of course, happy to!” said Bregolas. He motioned the sergeant over to them. “Othronn, just step over here a minute, will you?” The sergeant was a beefy man with a red face. He had taken his tall helm off but had not yet undone all the straps of his hulking breast plate. They examined the heavy, padded helm while the man stood sweating. Barahir noticed his condition after a minute and said, “Let the sergeant climb out of that hot armour, Brother. We want to see inside it anyway.” Bregolas nodded at the man to continue, then had to help him with the buckles. The glossy black plates came away at last and revealed a surprising amount of belly and rather less chest than one might have imagined from the look of the exterior. The inside of the armour was, as they expected, extensively padded. The men hefted pieces thoughtfully in their hands.

Barahir looked at his brother in enquiry. “Doesn’t that get rather hot in summer?” he asked.

“Well yes, a bit,” said Bregolas. “But an army is no place for milk-sops, you know. Toughens ’em up.”

The armour was made of some light metal which bent readily. It did not seem to be steel. “What is this stuff?” asked Gramlach.

“Some Dwarvish business,” said Bregolas. “Don’t ask me. Costs an arm and a leg, whatever it is.”

“Is it strong?” the other continued.

Bregolas knitted his brows together, clearly irritated at the direction of the questions. “Look,” he said, “no armour will keep out an arrow, everybody knows that. Important thing is that it’s light. The padding stops a lot, and in the field the men wear mail underneath as well.” Gramlach raised his eyebrows at that but said nothing more.

“May I look at that sword?” said Barahir. The sergeant drew it from its sheath and held it out to him. Barahir took the glossy-polished blade and swished it from side to side. He tried the edge with his thumb. “Very light,” he commented. “Same metal as the armour?”

“Listen,” said Bregolas, who was becoming red in the face, “I see what you’re about. I see what your angle is, Brother. But it’s the wrong angle. You have to make a show, can’t you understand that? That’s what it’s all about. No enemy is going to stand and fight faced with a line of such troops. If you have to worry what your swords are made of, you’ve lost before you even started. Anyway, you can’t get that sort of gloss on steel, and that’s all there is about it.”

Barahir shrugged. “I don’t agree, *A Choneg*<sup>39</sup>, but we have not agreed now for so long, and about so many things, that one more time won’t make any difference. And now I suggest we go and take a bite to eat, inside in the warm.”

Bregolas threw up his hands in annoyance and turned away.

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After lunch Beren was sent for by his great-aunt. He found her the same as ever: straight back, calm face,

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39 O Brother (Sindarin).



and silver hair woven in tight braids.

“Welcome, Nephew,” she said kindly. “Sit you down here by the fire. How fare you among the Drúedain? How has that worked out?” So he told her a lot about life with the People, to which she listened with interest, nodding the while. They spoke then of other light matters, but Andreth paid careful attention to the boy the whole time: noting not only the things he said, but the way he said them, the way he held himself, the light in his eye. After a time she came to a decision.

“Beren,” she began, “I wanted to see you for a reason. You are very young; but you will not always be so. There will come a time when you will need to consider what sort of life you will shape for yourself. I know your father has already spoken to you of this.

“I want to show you something. It may be too soon; but my years urge me to wait no longer.” Leaving the curious boy agog to know what was going to come next, the old lady got up and went to a wooden chest against the wall. She lifted the lid and took out a long object wrapped in blue silk, which she placed on the table. Andreth untied the ribbons which held the cloth tight, then resumed her seat.

“Open it,” she commanded, with her eyes fixed on Beren’s.

Beren looked at her, wondering, then back to the cloth-wrapped object. He moved hesitantly to the table, gingerly laid hold of the cloth and folded it back. At the sight revealed, he drew in his breath.

Beneath his hand was the hilt of a sword; but a sword carved from ice. The hand grip was cross-graven into a thousand facets which threw back the lamplight in glints of coloured fire. The guard-pieces made delicate S-shapes which glistened, inside and out, in sinuous trails of icy light. The bare surfaces of the sword misted slightly like a breath of frost, even as he watched. The boy unfolded more of the cloth, to reveal a long blade bright with gleaming highlights. He thought it was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

He looked enquiringly at his aunt. She was sitting tense and erect, watching him with intensity. “Now pick it up,” she ordered.

He advanced his hand, but as he touched the sword, it was as if a shutter opened in his mind. The kaleidoscope of sudden noise and movement shocked him, and he jumped back.

His aunt’s posture of tension relaxed, disappointment beginning to write itself over her face. “Damn and blast it. So much for hopes. Somehow, this time... Never mind, Beren. Just wrap it up again, will you?”

“Wait!” the boy cried. What had that all been? An urge welled up in him from nowhere to touch the sword again, this time properly. He reached out his hand a second time, and this time he was prepared. He grasped the sword around its frosty grip, and immediately his mind was flooded with images – almost they seemed as memories which until now he had forgotten.

He felt, rather than saw, a night-shadowed garden, brimming with serenity like a chalice full of fragrant wine. Then that scene was whisked away and another shone out in his mind: a smithy with roaring fires too hot for the eyes to stand. Standing in it, hammering with mighty strokes at a white-hot piece, Beren saw a great, dark figure; all Creation lay in its hands, and its face was too glorious and terrible to look at. That scene vanished and now he beheld a lake, and a dark lady, of a beauty which took his breath away. Finally he saw himself in the middle of a great battle. He was wielding the ice-sword, and none could withstand it. The noonday sun flashed off it like levin-fire as he cut his way through the foe.

The impressions faded then and he became aware once more of the room. He looked down at the long blade in his hand and saw the way it gleamed with more than reflected light. Then he glanced up to his aunt. To his surprise, he saw that she had her hand pressed to her mouth and had reeled back in her chair. Her face was white with shock.

“Oh by the Hope,” the woman gasped. “Oh by the All-Mother herself. Is it really true?”

“I don’t understand,” said Beren. “What’s going on? What sword is this?”

Andreth gathered herself together with an effort, breathed deeply. Once composed again, she sat straight and fixed the boy again with a stern eye. “What sword?” she repeated. “If you cannot guess, the sword itself can tell you. Look at it!”

He looked again at the hilt and blade of the sword. As he turned it in the light, the rainbow trace of a glistening thread caught his eye for an instant before vanishing again. He tried to find it again. Ahah! No, gone again. One had to hold it just right... there. There were letters, actually *inside* the blade it seemed, looping in a curving gossamer, but so fine! As fine as the first silk of a newborn spider on a fair spring morning.

He made the letters out with some difficulty, trying to remember his lessons. “Nike... Nixenárë<sup>40</sup>,” he said at last.

“Yes. It means Frostfire,” said Andreth.

“But...” said Beren. That name – wait a minute. “This is *Boromir*’s sword? *The Frostfire*?”

Andreth only nodded, her eyes bright.

Beren put the sword down gently. He felt stunned, and could not think what to say. It was as if an old song had not only come to life out of the shadows but had risen and clouted him over the head.

“Show me your hand,” said Andreth. She looked it over. “Mmph. Well. We’ll have your father in, I think.” She slipped out and was shortly back, followed by Barahir.

“Is it? Truly?” he asked, wide eyes going from the sword on the table to Beren.

“Pick it up again, Beren,” said Andreth. So he did, and lifted the blade high.

“Oh, let me sit down!” said his father, and collapsed weakly in a chair. He stared at Beren holding the sword as if fascinated.

Beren was mightily puzzled by all of this, and was beginning to feel exasperated. “What’s it all about?” he demanded. “Why are you all acting like this?”

Andreth leaned forward. “What it is about, my boy,” she said meaningfully, “is that there are only two people we know of in all Middle-earth who can touch that sword. And before today, we knew of only one. Me.”

“But what do you mean?” said Beren. He turned to his father. “Can’t you touch it?”

“By no means,” said Barahir. “Put it down again and I’ll show you.”

Beren laid Frostfire again on the table. Beren’s father stretched out his hand gingerly towards it. As he went to touch the hilt, a *crack* came from the sword and a cloud of icy mist flashed up. Barahir jerked his hand back with an oath, then showed it to Beren. There was a white frost-scar on the tips of all four fingers.

Beren sat down and looked at the sword in bafflement. “I don’t understand,” he said. “Why am *I* allowed to touch it?”

Andreth reached over and hefted the sword herself. She laid it on her lap and caressed the long, crystalline blade. “I might ask the same of myself,” she said. “Have asked, in fact. But let me tell you a little of the history of this thing before I come back to the question.”

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40 *ṅórnórý*

She sat back in her chair and a far-away look came into her eyes. “I was nineteen when we joined the great trek to the North,” she began. “Some of the House of Bëor had been in these northern lands almost from the beginning, but in small numbers, trapping and hunting in the wild forests, or serving the Elves. Most of our folk had stayed in the Encampment down to the South, as had the other Houses. But there were too many people there for one thing, and once the Eldar realized that there was strength in us, they encouraged numbers to leave and settle in northern lands under their fealty. The fair folk of Marach chose the coast lands far in the North and West; the people of Haleth, being not so enamoured of, I will not say enraptured by, the Eldar, preferred rather to settle in the woods to the South of these lands, where the climate is milder. We Bëorings came here.

“It was a long journey, because we were not a war-party all of young men who can go swiftly, you understand; we had to take everybody together, young and old, fast and slow, and with cattle too. And we had to find food, water and shelter along the way. My grandfather, well I thought him old then, but there was still some black in his hair, and he could get about well, hunt and so forth; I suppose he was in his sixties at that time. Hah! That seems like nothing at all to me these days. Anyway, he was the leader, under Finrod of course, because Finrod was constantly with us, and helped us greatly, in all kinds of matters. The other brothers, Aegnor and Angrod, we saw more of only later.

“So we made our way up the defile called Aglon, and a weary way around it was too. It’s clear the Dwarves have a secret way through the hills, since they come up across the Downs from the South, but nobody has ever managed to find out just where it lies. A great convenience it would have been for us at that time, but you will never get anything out of a Dwarf without paying a substantial measure for it; and some things you cannot get out of them at all.

“Well, we came out into the wide lands at last, and there we had our first sight of the Enemy’s lair. That struck many to the marrow. Indeed some were so overcome that they turned back. I do not know what became of them. I lost my best friend Malloth at that time. She turned back with her family, and I never saw her again.

“But I digress. We turned then into Ladros and tried to settle there, not so far from where we are now; but there were too many of the foul brood of goblins here at that time. Hunters were not so much bothered by them but there was no chance to settle and cultivate the land. So for the time we had to retreat to the moorlands to the South. Times were hard there because the cattle we had were of a breed not well suited to that cool country. We tried to change to sheep, but we knew not much about sheep at that time, nor anything much else of a farming nature come to that, except how to tend the cattle we had brought with us out of the East. How we later learned to farm is a strange tale but one for another time.

“It is a beautiful country there nevertheless, up there on the high downs, although it is perhaps not so easy to appreciate such things when hunger gnaws at the stomach. They say the Lady was there in days before the sun; she lives down South now, and is Queen of the Enchanted Wood. Melian is her name, or one of her names. Her full story – well, nobody knows her full story perhaps; but what we do know would make another evening’s tale. So many tales – you need to come more often, boy! Or send your sister. She is one to collect tales.

“There is a lake down there, hidden in folds in the hills. It is not easy to find even for folk who know the country. Now I guess you have never yet seen Tarn Aeluin, Beren, but I hope you will see it one day. I will just say to you now that nobody who has seen it doubts that the Lady made her home there. It is a wild place, and people who bide there have strange dreams sometimes, even waking dreams; but evil things do not come there.

“We had been in that country some few years, three maybe or four, but it was no sort of life, scratching a living in the hills. Some even spoke of returning to the South. But one night my father had a dream.

“My father was Boromir. Yes, he was my father. He was a great, strong man. If you make a picture in your mind, Beren, of someone of the size of your uncle, and with the mettle of your father, you will hit not too far from Boromir’s mark. At that time he was no longer young, but there was not much snow in his hair, and his

vigour flowed still in full spate. Not but what my father even some twenty years on from that time was match for any other man that I know or have ever known.

“But to the dream. My father says he dreamed of a lady robed in shadow; but she was not evil. In his dream, she stood in a narrow place where a tiny freshet sprang out of the rocks and made a pool. She beckoned to him, and he knew he had to find that place, and that it lay not far away. Many days he searched for it in vain. He scoured the lake shore, and any place nearby where there were rocks which could harbour a spring; but nowhere could he find the place of his dream.

“Three times he had the dream, but it grew fainter each time, and he feared at last that he would not have it again. When he woke on the third morning, wondering what he should do, what he *could* do, he realized that it was always night in the dream. The rill of water sparkled under the stars, and they gleamed off the dark lady’s hair and eyes; and he could hear night birds. Thus he resolved to seek the spring at night.

“I will not tell you where he found it; but find it he did, closer than he ever imagined. If ever you need to know, you will, of that I am sure. It is not for me to be serving out words which were lent to me only.

“He did not see the lady at the spring, but he tells me that he knew she was there. He *knew* it. He felt compelled to put his hand into the pool. And there he found this.” She stroked the sword. “You cannot see it under water.”

Barahir breathed out, entranced. “So that is how it happened,” he said.

“Yes,” said Andreth, “but there is more to tell. My father had a blade already, the one you bear now, Nephew, as you know. You may also know that it was given to him by Finrod. It is no bad blade, but Father said there was no sword like Nixenárë; there never had been such a sword, and never would be again. With it in his hand, at the head of the doughty men of Bëor’s race, he cleared the Orcs in many battles at last completely out of Ladros. At the end we were able to remove hither, and our lives opened out from that day.

“We soon became aware that the sword suffered no other hand to touch it. Except mine: and how that was proved was through a strange chance. You will know that I am no maiden of battles, I have no skill in such things. I could make shift to bend a bow in those days but would not warrant to hit the target – the whole target, mind, not the clout in the middle! – even so often as two times out of three. And my arms have not strength to swing a sword.

“But this happened years afterwards, when my father was an old man, and my own hair was turning grey. They had been years of peace, and it had been long since my father had last used the sword. He did not wear it openly: he wore his old sword Dagmor that he gave to you afterwards, Barahir. You were just a brat with a loud voice running about the place at that time. It was before you were fostered with old Garaf up the valley.”

Barahir looked up. “Since you are telling secrets, Aunt, perhaps you could tell me why Dagmor came direct to me and not to Father.”

“I was not in my father’s counsel about such things, Nephew, so I do not know for sure. I will say that reasons do present themselves to my mind. You must know firstly that my father was not a patient man with his children. He and I understood one another, but Bregor had but a hard time of it. And of all his grandchildren, you were the only one he thought anything of. I tell you that now because you are grown, and no other is in earshot to have their feelings hurt.

“The sword Dagmor would maybe have come to his son in the normal way; but Bregor already had a blade, bought long before off the Dwarves. That was a mistake, I believe: there is no luck in a bought sword. But it was how it was.

“It was not of my father’s will that you were sent west, but he could not gainsay it, and so at the last he sent his sword with you. He wanted you to have at least some good heirloom of your house, I think. And that is

all I know.

“But I depart from my tale. Nixenárë had not been seen for many years. I, like most others perhaps, thought that he had long since put it back where he found it, wherever that was. I did not know the story of the Lady and the spring at that point – he told me that afterwards.

“There came a hot night in summer. I woke with a fever. I had not this room then: I had another, on the north side, with a window. I feel the draughts more now, that is why I moved my seat.

“I opened the window for a breath of air, but there was no breath to be had – all was hot and still. It must have been close on midnight, because the evening’s north glow had left the sky, while the morning’s had not yet appeared. It was full dark and the velvet sky was bright with stars. The tree which still stands on that side was rustling a little as though there was some movement in higher layers of the air. There were night birds fluting sweetly in its branches too, although I did not pay that notice until afterwards. The fever was in my head and I cared naught for birds.

“I went to my ewer, but it was empty. There was no candle burning, but you can readily believe that I knew my way about the place by that time. And there is always a little light. So I felt my way out of the door and turned left, towards the cool-room, purposing to fetch myself a drink of milk. Mark you now, I turned left; and my father’s chamber lay in the other direction.

“The flagon of good milk was very cold under my hand. And I cannot tell you how it was, but all at once it was no flagon I was holding, but Nixenárë, and I was standing not in the dairy but in my father’s chambers. He struck a light, and there we were, the two of us, and the sword.

“Thus it has been my lot and burden now since my father’s death to ward this thing. That is some eleven years ago – no, twelve. Often and often have I wondered why I was chosen, and not my brother. Also whether there would be any other. Indeed, Beren, I will tell you that we have frost-burnt the hands of all the descendants of Boromir, and more besides, trying to find an heir. And now at last we have one. At last! I will sleep easier from hence.

“There remain just two more things to say. The first is this: I do not think there is any power of Elf, Man or Dwarf which could break or even mar this blade. Father told me it would shear steel or even stone, yet it remains as pristine as the day it was made. As for the second: only Boromir had the dream, and only he could wield this blade. He did not see any need to bruit the news of it about. I have kept to that path. Few know much of it at all. Perhaps only a handful know that it bides still in Middle-earth, and is in my keeping.

“And that is all my tale,” concluded Andreth. “As for your question, Beren, why you? I do not know. And I do not wish to swell your head. But I will say, the sword’s choice has not made me unhappy.” With that she sat back and looked full at the youngster to see how he was taking it.

Beren’s mouth was down at the corners. “But I don’t know where to start,” he said.

“What do you mean, old fellow?” said his father.

“Well,” said the boy miserably, “I suppose I have to do those things now. Like Boromir. But I don’t know how. I can’t even ride a horse.”

Andreth laughed, but she came quickly to sit beside the boy and clasped him in her arm. “Ah, there, we try you too soon,” she said, embracing him with rough tenderness. “Beren, my poor lad, you don’t have to do any of that! Not until you’re much bigger; if, indeed, at all. But the sword has to come to someone, do you see, and now we know that it was meant to come to you. In time, it will. I will keep it for now. I did wrong, perhaps, to tell you of it now, while you are still just a boy. I am sorry, Beren. But I am old. I cannot have much time left. That is why. Do you understand?”

“But if you die soon, Aunt...”

She shook him gently, smiling the while. "I promise you, I will do my best not to! But seriously, Beren, even in that case, what are you thinking, that you, a boy, would be thrust in front of the massed hosts of the House of Bëor, Frostfire in hand, to defend the folk against all comers? No. The sword will come to you to guard when I die; and I must own, that could be at any time. But it will be long before you can use it, or be expected to. Grow to a man first, and then we shall see."

His father also laid a hand on his shoulder. "Think no more about it now, son. The challenge won't come to you before you're ready to meet it; that's not how things work. And we will be at your side, always."

Beren returned his father's smile. "I'm all right now, Papa. It just sort of hit me all at once, that's all."

Barahir gave his son's shoulder a last squeeze, then sat back in his chair. He looked at Andreth. "Well!" he said. "What happens next?"

"My brother will have to be told," said Andreth. "And yours."

Barahir grimaced. "I was afraid you'd say that. Come on then, we'd better get it over with."

"No," she said, holding up a hand, "not now. In the morning, when Bregolas is out. Then we can tackle them one at a time, and in the right order."

He nodded slowly as he followed the path of her thought. His mouth twitched at the corners. "It is cunning you are, Aunt."

"That's as may be," she said. "But listen now, particularly you, Beren. We have to tell your uncle and grandfather about this. But don't take to heart anything they might say. Only one person gets a vote in this matter: the sword. And she has chosen you. Nothing anyone can say or do can alter that. They may fume; they probably will. But just let it run off your skin like water off a duck's back. The true things, the things that matter, they remain unchanged."

\* \* \* \* \*

The shadowy chamber was the same as Beren remembered from last time, and his grandfather also seemed no different – still the same fierce gaze, the same bald head crowned with wisps of snowy hair. A little more shrunken perhaps?

"Hah, hum! So you visit us, Son. Be welcome. We do not see you often enough. Eh? Eh? Not often enough, no."

"It is a long way to come, Father," replied Barahir. "And there is always much to do, as you know."

"Yes, yes," said Bregor. He turned to Andreth. "Was there something especial, Sister? I usually take a cup of spiced wine at this hour, as you know."

"Yes, my lord, there is," she replied. "Forgive the disturbance in your refreshment, but a matter of some moment has arisen. Indeed I have taken it upon myself to send for Bregolas to join us. He is engaged on the exercise grounds, but will be here presently. Shall we wait on his coming?"

"Wait?" repeated the old man querulously, glaring at her with his pale eyes. "Tush – no! Well, of course yes, but can you not commence the matter now, sketch in its main features for me, so to speak? Bregolas will forgive any informality I am sure." He pulled impatiently at a rope by his side. "Drat the girl!" he muttered. "Where has she got to?"

Andreth unfolded the wrappings from the long bundle she had brought with her. Nixenárë blazed out, filling the chamber with sprites of reflected light. "My lord will remember this."

The old man sat up and opened his eyes wide at the sight. "Ah! Oh yes. Such memories, such old glory! Ah,

the sight takes me back to those days. Frostfire, and the wars against the Orcs! Long ago. Hah yes.” He mumbled his gums a moment. “Hum. Ah. I must say though, Sister, I have wondered why you still keep this thing by you. As a keepsake, hum yes a memento, of course. But its time is past, surely. Father did great things with the sword, in the days of our youth. But Father has been gone these many years. Better it were laid with him at last, don’t you think?”

“My lord will remember that the sword passed to me. No other can hold it.”

Bregor moved restlessly on his seat. “Yes yes Sister, but this must be a matter of sentiment only. You cannot pretend that you have ever had any use for it. And now you grow old, pardon my bluntness, but the fact remains. The blade will have to be disposed of anyway, after you go. There’s no use in a sword nobody can hold, ha no! And you know we have tried everybody.” He jerked at the bell-rope again. “I usually take a cup of... a cup of spiced wine at this hour...”

“An heir has now been found, Lord,” said Andreth with solemnity. “Look!” She nodded to Beren and held out the sword to him. He came over hesitantly, took it from her hand, and held it high. Frissons of cold light played along the crystal blade.

The old man goggled at the picture now presented to him, seemingly trying to make sense of the matter. “Who is this child?” he asked weakly at last.

“My son, sir,” said Barahir. “You will remember.”

“Oh. Yes of course.” He turned his head then vaguely from one side to the other, as if looking for something.

Andreth took a pace closer to him, pointing to Beren with a straight arm. “Boromir has an heir now, my lord. A strong, brave boy, and of your blood; a boy who gives every sign that he will grow to become as mighty a warrior as his forebear. The great days of the House of Bëor that once were will come again. Surely is this a great matter, and cause for joy!”

There was a soft knock on the door at that moment and a serving girl hurried in with a flagon of wine on a tray. The girl poured a cup for Bregor which the old man took in shaking hands. The others waited patiently while he took a long, avid sup, and then another. With a couple of brusque flicks of the hand he indicated to the girl that she should place the tray, which also held small plates of assorted dainties, on the table beside his high seat. She bowed then and left.

“Ah!” he sighed at last. “Oh. That warms the heart. Now where were we? Oh. Oh. Heir. Hah. Yes. Well hmm, but well, are you sure now?” he asked Andreth, at which she simply indicated Beren and the sword again with her hand. “Ah yes, to be sure. Well now. Hum, hah yes.”

“This is a great matter, my lord, is it not?” Andreth pressed.

“Ah?” Bregor sat up and glared about him fiercely under bristling brows. “A great matter? Well yes! It is indeed!” he said.

“I think we must pledge our support and countenance for this rising star of our House, lord, is it not so?”

“Yes!” said Bregor. “Of a certainty, we must do that. Hah, yes!”

“We share your joy, lord, in celebrating this momentous occasion. Through a scion of Bregor, the renowned Lord of the Bëorings, is the sun now rising again on the House of Bëor. The torch passes ever to a new hand. Glory to our House!”

The old man stood now, fire in his eyes. He raised his wine cup. “Glory to the House of Bëor! I pledge thee, son of my son. Mighty days stand before us. Come now, boy, and sit by my side!”

Beren gave the sword back to Andreth and approached the high seat with some diffidence. He wished this

whole audience was over. Nevertheless he sat beside the old man as bidden and looked up dutifully into the withered face.

“So, uh, young er, young...”

“Beren, sir,” supplied Barahir patiently.

“...young Beren,” continued Bregor. “Great times, eh?”

“Yes, sir,” said Beren.

“Another found at last to wield the Sword of Boromir, eh? Eh? Hum yes. He was my father, you know. Boromir. Did you know that?”

“Yes, sir,” said Beren.

“Well I remember him in the last great fight we had with those rat-folk of Orcs. Hah. Let me tell you a little of that day. I was with the third company, and we held the left wing.” He commenced to tell a rambling tale of improbable-sounding deeds. He had not got far with it however before the door was thrown back and Bregolas strode in.

“Ho, Father,” he said cheerfully. “They tell me there is some matter of council?” He nodded at Barahir and then stopped short. He had caught sight of Andreth and the sword. As Bregor had begun to reminisce she had sat down and laid the blade, as on the previous day, naked across her lap. Bregolas’s eyes went from the blade to Beren where he sat beside the old lord, and they narrowed slightly. The big man moved then again, walking slowly to his father’s small table, where he picked up cup and flagon and poured himself some wine. “By your leave, Father,” he said. He eyed Andreth over the rim of the cup. “Good morning to you, Aunt. I see you come properly armed against all contingencies. Is there some outbreak of war I had not heard about? Or is it simply your whim?”

She shrugged. “You may call it whim if it pleases you.”

“I cannot but wonder why you cling so to that old relic.”

“Why should I not?” she answered.

“That’s what *I* said, Son,” broke in Bregor. “But now it appears —”

“Because it clutters up your chambers?” Bregolas replied, ignoring his father. He shrugged. “Of course that is for you to decide. But there’s no *use* in it any more. It belongs in the past. Better if Grandfather had thrown it back into the lake, or wherever he got it from.”

“Son,” tried Bregor again.

“If it had not been for this sword, Nephew, you would not be here now,” Andreth said.

The big man gestured impatiently. “Yes, of course. But past deeds require only thankfulness and remembrance. We need not be forever trying to drag them into the present. The present has its own needs, which the past cannot address. The past should keep to itself; we do not want to keep tripping over its ambassadors. Especially when they have lost all power and use.”

Andreth stood up at that and moved to face her chair. She swung the sword at the chair. It was an inexpert blow without a great deal of power behind it; nevertheless the blade sliced cleanly through the thick wooden leg on one corner of the chair. There was a slight *snick*, and the chair fell over, the cut leg skittering to one side.

“Very dramatic,” sneered Bregolas. “But there is no-one left to wield this famous ruiner of furniture. Is



there? None of us can hold the thing but you. And with all due respect, Aunt, I cannot see you leading the host. It was Boromir's blade, and his alone. Those days are gone now, and the use, sense and point of that fancy icicle have gone with them. Leave it alone at last, for all love. It's a distraction, a waste of time." He glanced mockingly at Barahir. "Why, surely not even Brother here can approve – it is not as if it were a *steel* sword, after all."

His father had been trying to capture his attention all this time, and now he had resorted to tugging at his son's tunic.

"Tsk, do not jerk so, Father. What is it?"

"My son," husked the old man, "this is a great day. Another has been found to wield the blade!"

"Oh come, Father," said Bregolas, "you must not let Aunt here wind you into her tales. She is venerable, but her ideas are not always so sound as they might be."

"It is true," said Andreth. "There is another."

"What other?" said Bregolas suspiciously; but then his eyes fell again on Beren. "No," he said, shaking his head. "Oh, no."

"Oh yes," parried Andreth. "Come, Beren, and prove it once more."

The boy stood up and once again took the icy sword from her and held it high. The grip was too big for his hand, but his strength could easily manage the weight of the long weapon. Rainbow motes glimmered between his fingers.

"Do you not see?" trembled old Bregor. "The great blade of my father has at last chosen a new master!"

"No," replied Bregolas slowly. "I do not believe it."

"But, Son," said his father, "surely you remember how nobody else could handle the blade. I tried it myself and it sorely burnt the skin of my hand. We all tried it, with but the same result. I remember the sting of it well, even if you do not. And now see! See how the boy holds it without scathe!"

"Nonsense," snorted Bregolas. He glowered at Beren. "The thing must have lost its bite with time, that's all. Give it to me!" With that, he reached suddenly and grabbed the hilt out of Beren's hand. But the sword struck at him with the speed and venom of an adder and he flung it down again, cursing. The blade rang with a singularly pure note as it bounced on the floor before clattering to rest. Beren hastened to pick up the weapon while Bregolas, swearing, nursed his burnt palm under the other arm pit. There was a deep groove cut in the floor where the sword had struck.

"Curse you, you Elvish witch!" Bregolas shouted at Andreth. "What are you plotting? You thwart me at every turn. But now you have reached too far. Have you the nerve, the presumption, to put this dirty brat forward, who spends his days grubbing shirtless in the woods with savages?"

Barahir stepped forward. "Ward your tongue," he said with a stern eye. "I will hear no more of that."

The big man glowered at him and Andreth. "Tongue!" he sneered. "'Twere better for you if you thought on your future, Brother. One day *I* will have the say. My own sons will return before long, and then we shall see. You may have more than words to trouble about then." He turned away. "Now take up that – that trinket, and get out of my sight."

Bregor had shrunk away from the argument and was mumbling again into his wine cup. Seeing no use in further talk, the three of them came quietly away.

Before Beren's party started back for home, Andreth had a final word with the boy. "You've been letting

your studies go,” she said to him, raising a finger to his face. “Don’t ask me how I know; I have my ways. And you can just wipe that stubborn look off your face if you don’t want a back-hander!”

Beren tried to conceal his annoyance. “I’m sure I won’t need letters if I’m going to be a fighting man,” he said as neutrally as he could.

“Rubbish!” snorted Andreth. “Brutes are ignorant; but a proper man knows things. Many’s the hour my father spent with Finrod, getting his letters. Yes, and he mastered the old speech too. If it was good enough for Boromir, it’s good enough for you, young lad. See to it!”

\* \* \* \* \*

Choker’s first sortie with a larger force was a disaster – the Star-eyes<sup>41</sup> caught them and only five of his squad got away, and none of those any good. The survivors were whisked away after he got back, he never saw them at mess again. With the next team he was out for a long time. They made a wide circuit to the East before heading south. They spent a long time wandering in a wilderness of trackless hills before they came across what looked like a considerable settlement of Dwarves. The Dwarves were relatively easy to dodge and Choker felt at last that they had managed to make some useful observations. The trip back was uneventful, although there was the usual trouble keeping order. Two Lice ended up being left behind, heads separate.

Choker knew there were all sorts at Central. Most of the really high ups were strictly unhealthy: Firelords<sup>42</sup> and such like; you kept well out of their way. Same with the Mind-eaters and the rest of what Choker thought of as the fear-and-pestilence lot. Luckily there weren’t so many of these ones. Guards and similar muscle-brains were much more numerous, and thus unavoidable, but a Louse with his wits about him could usually duck around them. You kept your nose clean and stayed out of their way as much as possible.

Then there were hordes of nameless types of minor viciousness who mostly conducted the complicated administration of Central. They were harmless enough in themselves, but they backed themselves up by muscle whenever it was needed. The debriefing was carried out by one of these creatures: a misshapen, bulging, humped thing which squinted at them out of slanted, watering eyes. It had three long black hairs stretched across its scalp, and its glabrous skin was a uniform leaden grey. The report took a weary long time, the grotesque administrator raising all sorts of querulous objections and having to be told things twice. Finally the creature was satisfied. Choker was then told to reassemble his surviving team and to report in a side chamber behind the guardhouse of his mess. He rounded them all up eventually – some had to be whipped out of the shittery – and paraded the sullen line of Lice in the hall, eighteen of them, jostling each other spitefully. The administrator-thing turned up after another weary wait, but now with an unpleasant novelty in tow: a hulking creature of the kind called Logzh<sup>43</sup> which had to bend to fit its head under the high doorway. The Logzh surveyed the row of apprehensive Lice with piggy little eyes, ran a horny thumb along the blade of a great chopper it carried, and grinned a frightful grin down at them, exposing an array of wet, brown-stained tusks. Two guards of more ordinary size came in after and busied themselves going down the row of Lice, chaining each to shackles in the wall. The Lice looked at each other in wild fright, but no-one dared protest.

When all was ready, the administrator turned its squinting glare on Choker. “So, so!” it spluttered. “Now, Squad Leader, you will designate, as was described in your orders.”

Choker left his stance at the side of the wall and slowly walked down the row of terrified Lice, looking carefully at each one in turn. “Him,” he said at last, touching the chest of a smallish Rrrk who snarled at him in answer. Choker resumed his measured pace. Near the end of the row he touched another on the chest: “And him.” And that was all. He went back to stand at the opposite wall, legs apart, arms behind his back, watchful.

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41 Elves.

42 Balrogs.

43 Probably an early sort of Troll.

The Logzh gurgled with pleasure and lumbered down the row to the little Rrrk. It raised its chopper, but Choker's voice rang out to stop it.

"No!" he said. "Those two are the ones I want to *keep*."

The flabby grey beast in charge of the show reared up in surprise and opened its eyes fully for the first time in the interview with Choker. There was a moment of silence. Then it slowly nodded. "As you wish, Squad Leader." And it turned and signed to the Logzh.

The Logzh was efficient at its work and the time of screams was quickly over. After the bodies, and odd bits and pieces, had been hauled away and the cleaning teams were mopping up, the two shivering survivors were unchained. Choker had a word with them. "Keep yourselves out of trouble," he told them. "You'll be under me again in a few weeks' time." If I survive that long, he thought, but didn't add. But any Louse might think the same, always. There was no certainty.

Those Lice who had scouting duties like Choker's at present were not part of any regular Legion, possibly because their turnover was quite high. They did mostly sleep and mess together, however. Choker kept his ears open in mess and had made a number of acquaintances. These types were wary and laconic, with none of the rankers' pleasure in boasting. Apart from that, no Louse would give another the time of day unless he thought he could screw some advantage out of it. Talk in any case was not encouraged, but there was a certain amount of guarded and as it were measured exchange. From these remarks Choker was able to establish that the southern highlands remained a problem. There were rumours that the higher-ups were concerned. Just a month or two ago a quite large team had been wiped out, had disappeared with no trace. Choker remembered their leader: a large fighting Rrrk with a competent and determined air. And now he was gone. No survivors, no word of the nature of the enemy. Some said it was Elves, but there were all kinds of tales, and no agreement. People said anything from walking trees to little brown men with flint arrows.

Choker had a strong suspicion that he himself was being groomed for a sally to the South, that that was what all this selection business was about. But he shrugged in his thoughts. Sooner, later, what difference did it make? Everybody made carrion eventually. At least, if he got sent to the South, he might find out what the secret was. No matter how briefly his head stayed alive afterwards to hold the knowledge.

#### Year 444

Winter was always long in the North, and this year it seemed even longer than usual. But the spring, when it did come, always came in a rush. So one day there were snowdrops pushing their way through the layers of snow on the ground; a few days later the temperature suddenly climbed, and the air became filled with the rushing sound of waters near and far. In less than a week the crocus were sprouting, and soon the new, moist earth under the trees was covered by a carpet of purple and gold. Every year it was the same; but every year the glory was just as profound.

On a cool, damp day some mornings after the crocus had come, Beren was helping Arthad lunge a yearling. The boy was trying not to talk to the horse, because he knew that it would interfere with the exercise, which was to accustom the horse to human-language commands and to carrying a saddle; but the horse was restive and kept asking him what the point of the business was.

"Look," said the exasperated boy, "just do what he tells you, all right?"

"I'll kick his head in if I catch him without that whip," replied the young horse. "Yours too, boy. I don't care if you talk like a horse or not."

"You really don't have any option, horse. You're not ever going to catch him like that, I'll tell you that for free. You may as well set your mind to get used to the whole affair and just go along with it. Make it easy for everybody."

Arthad broke in at this point. "Look, boy, how I gonna teach this horse if you be always talking to it?" he

protested.

Beren was about to answer when a faint noise made him break off and hold his head up. Arthad heard it too and jerked in surprise. Then he had to 'psht' at the horse and snap the whip at it to prevent it sidling over to him.

Both humans listened for a moment. "That's drums," said Beren. He looked at Arthad and saw that the man was smiling widely.

"Yep," said Arthad happily. "Heard that before."

"You mean – it's the Druug?"

Arthad nodded.

"Sunshine said there would be more this year," mused Beren. The two of them listened a while longer to the faint throb as it came first from one direction, then was answered from another. "I don't believe I'm going to wait for Nose," the boy said at last slowly.

"Put horse back first," said Arthad. "Then talk. He had enough for now anyway."

After the young horse had been stripped, still protesting, of its saddle and tack, then left to kick up its heels in the field, the two humans sheltered in the harness room. They sat looking out over the horse-yard. It had begun to shower again and the air was filled with the scent of growing things.

"You think I should wait, don't you," said Beren. "You may as well out and say it."

Arthad gave him a considering look. "You pretty good, boy," he said. "Pretty strong, good shot, good wrestler, good everything. Seen you give those bigger boys a thrashing; pretty good show, ha ha. You learn Druug ways pretty good too. But you still got a lot to learn. Got no experience yet. That's what keeps a man out of trouble." Beren sat there, saying nothing but looking stubborn. "You've had some near scrapes. Like this winter, in the snow drifts, crossing yard. Experienced man wouldn't do it."

Beren sat up, his mouth open. "How did you know about that?" he asked.

Arthad guffawed. "Gram tell me, how you think?" he said. "He keeping an eye on you, see you disappear; him swearing, just set to go fetch you out when you come back and go the way he say."

"Oh," said Beren, somewhat crestfallen. "Well, I did learn from it. I told myself I wouldn't ignore Gram's advice another time."

"Good to know. But tell me, what scrape you gotta fall in before you listen to *my* advice?"

The boy looked down. "I suppose you're right. But it's so hard to sit here twiddling my thumbs when I know they're just over there!"

"Old man Nose won't keep you waiting long," said Arthad. "He come in a day or two. You wait, you see."

In fact it wasn't Nose this time, it was a younger man named Owl. Owl had never been near a farm before and glanced around with suspicion, the whites of his eyes showing, as wary and ill at ease as a wild beast. After Beren had made his usual hasty and cursory goodbyes, and the two of them were once more under the shelter of the as yet bare trees, the short brown man breathed out in relief.

"Crazy, how those big people live," was all that he said.

Beren was too happy to be back in his beloved woods again to pay Owl much notice. They walked all day up the valley, until at last, on the hills of the watershed which marked the extreme western edge of the lands he

knew, Beren was reunited with his summer family.

Once again he had to adjust to a radical change in lifestyle. Those things which had galled him at the start of his winter sojourn, he had insensibly become used to; now he was obliged to become unused to them again. His body was sensitive to the cold air; he got hungry; and he had backslid in his ability to move quietly. He became more determined than ever to remain with the People next winter. Anything would be better than these eternal dislocations.

The People welcomed him warmly as always, and he slipped back into the easy ways with his playmates and companions of the previous year. There were six or seven of them who ran around together, yelling, singing or playing, as the mood took them. Chiefs of the gang were Matted Hair and Big Belly, both a few years older than Beren. The perpetually grinning Noisy was closer to Beren in age. There was no sex preference in the group: Long Hair and Plays with Beetles easily held their own in the gang with the boys. Indeed, any onlooker would have found little to distinguish between them in terms of cheek, dirt, or boldness.

Beren knew everybody in the tribe by now, but this year there were new faces to be seen: members of the other groups which had journeyed north this year, visiting for purposes of parley, or simply because of a chance crossing of paths. There seemed to be three of these groupings, which were known respectively as the Salmon, Squirrel and Bear People. Beren learned for the first time that Nose's group was known among the other Druug as the Holly People.

The other groups usually kept their distance. In fact Beren was not to witness a gathering together of all the northern sojourners until the following season; and then it was for a pressing and particular reason. In the mean time the groups kept in touch via the drums. Beren was interested to inspect one. He found they were cunningly constructed from a light but stiff frame of springy canes. In its collapsed state the frame looked like nothing much – just some coils of stout withy bound together. But after insertion into a shaped and sewn sac of hide, the frame was first untied and then given a shrewd twist which snapped it open and stretched the hide to fullness. Small billets of wood were jammed into the framework on the sides to bring the skin under full tension; as a final step, the hide was laced tightly closed.

Drum conversations however were infrequent and rarely of prolonged duration. They most often occurred just prior to a move to new camping grounds. Beren realized that this policy made sense in the insecure environment of these northern woods.

Nobody taught him the drum-language, but over the months of the warm season he began to pick it up anyway – partly from context, partly from remarks dropped by the elders on the occasion; helped always by the boy's sensitivity to all kinds of communication.

After the initial period of adjustment to new, or at least renewed, circumstances, Beren began to think. He had much to think about. Andreth's revelation had affected him deeply, but he chose to put Nixenárë away into the back of his thoughts to ferment for a while. In any case there seemed little he could or should do about that matter at the present time. His surface mind was much more occupied with the Druug's fight against the encroaching Orcs.

Much more than most children of his age, whether in forest or farm, Beren was conscious of the threat of war which loomed over the free folk of his world. He could not forget his father's words about duty, and Angrod's face and his offer were also often in his thoughts. At the same time, he was acutely aware of his own youth and inexperience. He wished passionately to be able to take some part in the fight, but he knew it would be many long years yet before he could play a man's part with other men. He knew also that he had a power no other had: how to speak with the creatures of fur or feather. He could not see just how he could use this gift in war, and Goracc had in any case told him to wait; but he was becoming impatient to begin.

The sign that things were moving, when it came, was of an unexpected nature. The time was yet early in the day. Beren had just returned to the camp-site after a drink and a splash in a nearby stream when he heard a sudden clatter of wings above him. The boy looked up in surprise to find that a large raven had settled on a nearby branch and was eyeing him beadily.

Beren caught movement from the corner of his eye, and didn't need to turn to know what it was: several onlookers were reaching swiftly for their bows. "Stop!" cried Beren in an urgent voice, raising his hands in the air. "Wait!" When he was certain, looking around the clearing, that all hands were stayed, he turned back to the raven and addressed it in its own speech. "Greetings O bird of the black feather. Whatever you seek, by my advice you will seek it elsewhere; else these my people will shoot at you."

"I seek even you," replied the bird, "and since you sit among these other wingless ones, necessarily I must seek you here and nowhere else. My message to you is this: the old one of our feather whom you know would have speech with you. Now, I pray you, hold off these here of your feather so that I may depart in dignity, and not be chased by the flying thorns which seek the heart's blood."

Beren turned to the Druug, who had stood open-mouthed, listening with wonder to the raven's croaks that emerged from the boy's mouth. "The bird had a message for me," he said to them, "Let him go in peace." Then he nodded to the raven, who flew off unmolested. The Druug all gathered around him then, agog with interest. What message? they wanted to know. What was it all about? Beren explained as best he could.

When Nose returned to camp later that day, several people made haste to inform him of the day's wondrous events. "What of it?" he said, unmoved. "It is not news to us that the boy has this gift." But when Beren raised the subject with him quietly after the evening meal, the old man listened with attention.

"The bald hill, not far south of the Hill of Sight," he mused. "Yes – I can bring it well to mind." He looked at the boy, measuring him. "I think someone should go with you though, the times being what they are, and you being yet so young. Chases Goats is away; perhaps I will ask Talkative – or Owl. Yes, Owl will be better. Talkative is not always very wise."

Beren set out with Owl the next day. Owl was a man of few words, but he was of an amiable disposition, and was a friendly presence on the trail. He was even browner and stumpier than the Druug average, and was superb at the Druug art of silent movement through the woods.

Towards midday the two arrived at the hill which was familiar to Beren from his earlier encounters with Goracc. Owl turned to grin at him and motioned with his hand, palm downwards, then finger to the lips. Beren caught his meaning: they would try to sneak up on the ravens.

Slowly they ghosted up the hill, every sense strained. Whenever Owl paused in his movements, Beren found that the man had cunningly chosen a place where the shadows broke up his outline and made him very difficult to see. Despite knowing exactly where his companion was standing, the boy had to strain to detect the outline of a human form. Owl had other tricks: he squinted so the whites of his eyes could not give him away; he never allowed himself to stand outlined against a patch of light; and he avoided all sudden movements. Beren did his clumsy best to emulate him.

They were close to the crown of the hill now and they could hear the cawing of several ravens. At that moment a shape passed overhead. Both the humans froze, straining without head movement to see what was in the sky. A falling shadow and nearby thump made them jump; but their apprehensions were relieved when they saw that it was an eagle. Pieces of bark litter fell from the stout branch on which creature had landed. Beren thought he had never seen a more noble and magnificent bird. It turned its great head to regard the two humans with a fierce amber eye.

"Are you coming?" it asked them in its own speech. "Or must we wait all day?"

Beren translated this to Owl, and both of them stood up rather shame-facedly and stretched the crouch out of their limbs. Beren explained to the eagle what they had tried to do.

"You might have escaped the ravens' eyes," it replied in matter-of-fact tones, "but little under sky escapes mine. Now come!" It launched itself again into the air as the two humans made haste to climb the rest of the hill.

At the top they found the eagle together with Goracc as well as some younger ravens. Owl looked wide-eyed around the ring of birds, then smiled apologetically at Beren and retreated back a little way down the hill. He clearly felt it was not a business he could assist in.

Goracc looked feeble and shrunken, and he wheezed. Clearly the winter had been hard on him. Beren, eyeing him critically, grasped for the first time in his life the reality of age and death. He realized with a sense of dismay that Goracc would die; and quite possibly soon.

With these thoughts in his mind he squatted down before the bird and addressed him. "I greet thee, Old One," he said in raven speech. "Hast thou a message for me?"

"Greetings, long-egg of Boromir," replied Goracc, replying in Sindarin. "Shall we save time by conversing in the Elf tongue? The eagle here can speak it." The great bronzy bird made no comment on this, just dipped its head and polished its great beak along its sides. "When first we met, you and I," continued the old raven, "you were anxious to rally the folk of feather, as well as those who go on four feet, against the Orcs of the Enemy. I advised you to wait until you were older. Well, matters have taken a new turn, and we may have need of your gifts rather sooner than I expected. Thunderbolt here has seen things with his own eyes; it will be better if he explains."

The noble bird dipped its head to Goracc and then turned its attention to Beren. "There are not many of my race," said the bird, speaking slow Elvish in its harsh voice, "but we fly over the whole of this land. We know it in all its length and breadth, from the kine who range by the rising sun to the ice mountains where the sun sets, where live the undying eagles of the Gods. The leagured menace in the North do we know, and the many-legged death that stalks through dark ravines in the South.

"We know the creatures whom the Elves call Yrch<sup>44</sup>, and we have hindered them where we might; but I will say, that has not been often, for they are larger than we, and they shoot at us. Also they are fain not to be seen by ones or twos, but prefer always to swarm like the rats they resemble.

"We see how the Yrch try to spy out the ways of this land. So far the brown folk you live among, with help from others, have been able to deal with them. The Yrch in fact are not of present concern to us. Lately, though, others have come. Some look like crows of great size, others like no bird I know; and we have heard of some who creep upon the ground. All come from the evil in the North. They kill as they come. We fear they are spies of the Enemy. More come, and yet more. And since they all have one purpose, unlike normal birds and beasts, these spies and sneaks coordinate their force, and thus are able to pick us off one by one.

"This one here called Goracc is long known to us. We know he has lived long, and has seen many things, and is wise beyond measure. We have sought his advice at last. He told us what we had perhaps known in our hearts: that we birds, and perhaps all things which fly, swim or crawl, must forget now our busy concerns and draw together as one. All we can do separately is to die separately.

"We are not used to put our trust in Men. You two-legs trap and hunt us without pause or let, and none can withstand you. Only the inedible have any measure of respite, and that not always. But you, you are different. So Goracc has said, and so it is as I see it with my eyes. Will you help us?"

Beren had listened intently, but he was startled by the last question. "I...", he stammered, "I, help? Well of course, if I can. But I'm only a boy. They don't let me go about the woods on my own yet."

The two birds heard this in silence. "It is no more than I have said to you myself," said Goracc at last. "Well, we must do what we can without you, lad. Perhaps the Shepherds of the Trees will help." He considered a while longer. "How long will it be, do you suppose, before you are fit for this task? Or is that not fair to ask?"

Beren took time to consider on his side. "White Teeth is the youngest among us who hunts Orcs," he said slowly. "But she is almost grown. Matted and Belly go hunting on their own, for food I mean, not Orcs, but

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44 Sindarin plural for Orc.

they have some few years on me. Not many, though. Goracc, nearer than that I cannot say. But I will ask Father.”

The old raven sighed. “I seems I must take my own advice to wait,” he said. “In the meantime we will do what we can. Go thou, boy, and think no more on it. Ripeness will come when time for ripeness is.”

There was nothing more to be said, so Beren gathered Owl and set off with him back to camp.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beren mentioned the fears of the birds to Nose, and his own wish to help, but the old man merely grunted in reply. Beren knew he would have to wait for any conclusions to work their way through Nose’s head. A day or two later, however, another thought came to him. He sought Nose again. “Father, what are the Shepherds of the Trees? Goracc has mentioned them more than once.”

Nose sat back. “Ah, those would be what we call Walkers,” he said.

Beren scratched his head. He found himself no wiser after Nose’s answer. “Why are they called Walkers?” he asked somewhat at random.

Nose glanced at him as if he had gone soft in the head. “Because they walk.”

“But we walk, too,” said Beren, bouncing with exasperation. “Why not call us walkers!”

“Because walking is in our nature, but theirs not,” answered Nose, his serene gaze fixed on his work. But after a moment his lips twitched. He squinted at Beren out of the corners of his eyes. Suddenly his calm expression broke up and he laughed out loud. He reached over and touched the boy. “I beg your pardon, Son, I am playing with you. To answer you shortly: the Walkers are trees. They are trees that walk and talk. The Elves have a name for them, but I forget it. Ono-something.”

Beren thought this over. Walking trees? That didn’t sound right. “Are you sure you are not still toying with me, Father?” he asked suspiciously.

“No, Speaks with Birds, this time I speak to you straight. You will meet one some day, without a doubt. Then you will see.”

“Well,” said Beren, “I’m surprised I haven’t met any already. I think I’ve seen most corners of the forest by now, and I have never come across any such thing as a walking tree.”

When Nose heard this he bent right over and appeared for a time to be shaking. When he was able to sit straight again, tears were leaking out of his eyes. He found a bit of leather and wiped his face. “I most humbly beg your pardon once more, my dear son; beloved of me and most honoured by all the People. I did not mean to show you such disrespect. But sometimes you say such things as to bring me to a laughter which, to my shame, I am not always able to hold within decorous bounds, so quickly does the attack come upon me.

“My son! Know that you have been almost within touching distance of a Walker some three times now to my certain knowledge. Nay, look not so dismayed, there is no shame in your unknowing. There are a thousand thousand trees in this wood; and unless one of them move or speak, how is the untrained eye to know which is a Walker? In time you will learn the signs. But you are yet very young!”

“So everybody is always telling me,” said Beren, vexed in spite of himself. “It is very wearying to be young, and yet more wearying to be so constantly reminded of it.”

“Well, that is true,” admitted Nose. “I remember that myself. But it is also true that no age of life is perfect.



Things do not get better or worse, really; they simply change. So do not envy we older ones, just as it is unwise in us to envy you. The best plan at any age is to accept things as they are. And there is also this. There are many things in our lives which we cannot change; but the choice whether to enjoy it or not lies, always, entirely with us. This may be the only true freedom we possess.”

Beren mulled this over, but could not suck much juice out of it. “Tell me more of the Walkers,” he said, going back to the subject which interested him. “They sound like a strange folk.”

“That they are,” agreed Nose. “But I think it best if I do not tell you any more. It is as you once said of the Fair Folk: there is no use in describing them, one must meet them for oneself.”

Beren found this a very dry answer. He said a little sourly, “Tell me then, are there other strange things in the woods which I have stumbled blindly past, although they lay before my eyes, or under my feet?”

“Yes, many,” answered Nose mildly. “But be not unkind to thyself. Some, even we older ones have not discovered. Perhaps only Willow among us knows them all.”

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Willow was another who had found the winter hard. She was sometimes up and about, but spent a lot of time now lying in her tent, sometimes dozing; sometimes awake and staring dreamily into the fire. One of her children was usually about, keeping an eye on the old woman and seeing to her wants. On this day it was her daughter Leather. Beren knew Leather well, since he was great friends with her son Noisy.

The boy sat himself down in the dirt beside the fire. It was a cold day and Willow was well wrapped up. Beren looked with concern at her lined, weary face and thought to himself, here is another who will not last long. But aloud he said to her, “Greetings, Grandmother. I bring you a gift of brew from Sunshine.” He handed over the liquid in a warm, sloshing skin.

Leather took it from him and poured some into a cup which she handed to Willow, who in the meantime had hitched herself til she was supported behind by a bundle of skins and was almost sitting upright.

“Ah!” said the old woman. “Sunshine is a famous brewer of the gorscht. Please give her my thanks.” She took a sip with obvious enjoyment. “But tell me – why have you not come to see me before, Blue Eyes? It is very bad in you.”

“But, Grandmother – surely we have spoken often!”

“Oh, yes,” the old lady said acidly, “somebody did speak to me once as I recall, some streak of brown and blue I should rather say...” here she broke off to wheeze, “...which spoke some wordless yell in passing. Yes indeed! Perhaps it was even more than once.”

Beren shrugged. “I am sorry, Grandmother. There are so many things to do! Anyway, I am here now. How is it with you?”

She gestured at the skins and the fire. “As you see.”

“It was a long way for you to come, Grandmother. Did you not think it might have been better to remain in the South this season?”

“Ach!” she waved his words away with her withered hand. “Speak not such nonsense. I wanted to come, so I came. Summer in the North is very pleasant. I like the smell of the pines, and the antelope taste better here.”

Beren did not answer, but Willow gave him a penetrating glance. “Do not think you can hide your thoughts from *me*, boy. You are wondering what I will do at change of camp, are you not.”

Beren, who had indeed been wondering this exact thing, blushed and nodded.

“Your winter among the hutch-folk has filled your mind with stupid thoughts. What will I do? I will walk with the others, of course. I will walk until I stop walking. And for me that time is not yet.” There was a pause while she caught her breath wheezily. She gurgled then with sudden laughter, and coughed. “Ah, I see yet more questions you hold trapped in your head. No, you will not get an answer to *that* one. I know, but you shall not. Not today, at any rate.”

Beren reddened. He had indeed been wondering ‘how long’. “It is not easy to have a conversation with you, Grandmother,” he complained.

She snorted. “Nonsense, boy. You only have to speak your mind.”

“Well,” he said slowly, “it is in my mind to ask you for a story, about things that live in the woods. Nose tells me that you know many.”

Willow stared at him for so long, he began to feel uncomfortable.

“Come tomorrow,” she said abruptly. “The weather will be warmer. No story. But I will show you something.”

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When he came back the next day (which indeed was milder) he found Willow up and active. She was discussing some point concerning her travois with her middle-aged son Caught Two Dogs. She looked up when Beren came up. “Ah, it is the tall boy who speaks with eagles. I have some business with him, Son. Can you fix it the way we agreed?” Dogs nodded amiably. Willow turned to Beren. “Listen now, boy, I am going to walk down to the broken pine.” He knew the tree she meant, as she had assumed he would. “Give me a moment to reach it and settle myself, then come to me.”

“But there’s nothing there, Grandmother. No watch-stone.”

She did not reply in words, just clicked her tongue at him and started hobbling across the clearing in the direction mentioned. Beren gave her a few moments, passing the time in talk with Dogs.

“Do you know what she’s up to?” he asked the man.

Dogs grinned at him. “Only one way to find out with Mother,” he said. “Go and see.”

“Well, I will,” said Beren. “Bye!”

He arrived at the tree Willow had named, but he couldn’t see her anywhere about. Puzzled, he looked everywhere – even behind the tree. There was a withered old stump he could not recall having noticed before, but it was too thin for anyone to hide behind. He turned and cast about elsewhere.

“Just what is that old woman playing at,” he muttered. He jumped then, because he distinctly heard someone stifle a laugh behind him.

“Willow?” he said, looking around. A twig came out of nowhere and struck him on the arm. “Grandmother, where are you! Stop playing games!”

This time she laughed out loud, but remained invisible. “I am where I always am,” came her mocking voice. “Look harder!” He looked towards the sounds, but could still see only the dapple of light and leaf. “Not there!” came the voice. “More to the right. More. Yes, *there!*”

The voice was coming from the old stump. He looked at it, puzzled. It would certainly be easy to mistake it for an old woman – even the colour was right. But it was still only a stump.

Or was it? He gazed at the old thing with all his force, and managed at last to see *something* in it.

“Willow?” he said. “Is that you?”

Suddenly she seemed to come into focus, and there she was: no stump, but a wrinkled old brown woman wrapped in a grubby deer-hide.

“My goodness, Grandmother, you’re better at that even than Owl,” Beren said admiringly.

“Silly boy,” she chided. “Owl doesn’t know how to do this.”

“How do you do it then? It’s like turning invisible. Is it a potion you drink, or some words to say? Tell me the secret, Grandmother, please!”

She looked disgusted. “Tscha! Potions! Not even Big Nose was so apt as you at speaking nonsense at the age you are. I admit he has gained a little sense in recent years. Indeed I think it is only his example,” she caught her short breath, “his example that lets me hold faint hope that someday, somehow, you might learn to converse like a sensible human being. But right now I don’t know why I even bother to talk to you, Prattler-to-Everybody.” The long remark had exhausted all the breath she had for the moment and she sat herself on a rock, wheezing.

“Well how am I to know whether it is potions, or what? Please teach me how to do it, Willow.”

“No,” she said, “I will not. I have things to do. Give me your arm.”

Beren was exasperated. “Well if you won’t tell me,” he said, throwing his arms in the air, “what did you bring me down here for then, O most frustrating of grandmothers?”

Willow motioned him to come over, then lifted herself with the support of his arm. She grinned a gap-toothed grin at the boy and shook his arm. “Because I think you can learn it by yourself,” she said gently, punctuating each word with a shake.

“How shall I learn if you won’t teach me?”

“Oh, you’ll work it out some day,” she said, as the two of them paced slowly back together to the clearing. “It’s not good to have too many gifts at once.” She softened a little, seeing his look of dismay. “Look you boy – I will tell you this much of it. There are two worlds: the one we see, and the one we don’t. We all live in both at once, but most people don’t know how to know things in the other world. Indeed it might as well not exist for them. But if you can get there, if you can see and know that part of yourself, there are ways to – well it is hard to explain. But this is my advice to you: learn to know the other world. Then you will understand this trick. Trust me, you will.”

Walking with the old woman, he was suddenly washed by a strong emotion he had trouble giving a name to. It was not exactly affection; more a recognition of the strength of this old person, and of the depths of her wisdom; and the appalling gap she was going to leave when she died, and not just in his life either. He hoped it would not be soon.

Willow stopped walking for a moment and looked at him, shaking her head. “Ah, Blue Eyes – always these worries,” she sighed. “I will tell you this much for your comfort: we shall see another summer together, you and I.”

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A few mornings after the strange business with Willow, which Beren was still thinking about, Chases Goats came to him in the half-light at the beginning of the day. Goats was a cheerful, stocky man with a broad, strongly-cut face and a shock of black hair. Beren liked him.

“Come with me today?” he asked Beren.

“Sure,” said Beren, sitting up. “Where to?”

“Oh,” said Goats, “I thought we’d just look around. See what’s stirring in the woods. Bring your fur, lad, we might be out a while.”

Preparations were minimal. Goats was already toting his own gear; it remained only for Beren to grab his bow, a fur for sleeping, and a few twists of dried meat to shove into his clout. He felt like jumping from eagerness.

Goats led him first to the North-west. They climbed gentle slopes for most of the morning, topping out on the ridge at about midday. From then on they were descending through pinewoods; dark and cool those woods were, on northerly-facing slopes. Beren was intrigued because he knew that they were following the way the People followed on their migration to the southern lands. He had never been past that ridge line before.

They moved, as always, with the caution of wild things. There was a rhythm to it: twist, step, pause; look, listen. It was rarely possible to move in a straight line. Each advance sought the best path: the firmest footing, the most unobtrusive background and lighting, the gap to slip sideways through the thorn; this could lie in almost any direction. But they were Druug, and used to it. They made a fair pace in spite of these constant, erratic, forced variations in speed and direction.

Beren envied the effortless way in which Goats was able to move quickly through the undergrowth with no more sound than the light brush of foliage on his skin. The man seemed able to plan his path several moves ahead, like a master chess player. The boy was learning how to do this himself, but whereas with Goats it seemed as simple and natural as breathing, Beren had to work at it.

They had come down gentle inclines for perhaps a league<sup>45</sup> or two when Chases Goats held up a hand and brought them both to a halt. The man laid his finger to his lips, and the pair went on then with doubled care; with less speed than before, but now quite silently. The trees grew thickly in this locality and there was little undergrowth on the sun-starved forest floor, but the ground was strewn with dry twigs which were hidden under a treacherous layer of dry pine needles. Care was needed to sense and avoid these hazards. The massed trunks restricted sight in all directions, but it seemed to the boy after a minute or two, as he felt his careful way through the hazards, that there was a lessening of the gloom somewhere not far in front of them.

The downward slope steepened. From the light between the tree trunks it was obvious now they were approaching some sort of large clearing. The faint sounds of water began also to come to their ears. They came down at last almost to the edge of the trees, at which place Goats halted.

In front of him, through the thin screen of remaining trees, Beren saw a sunny dell; or better described perhaps as the head of a valley, because he noticed now that it opened out down-slope to their left. The hollow in front of them, some hundred paces wide, was filled with various sorts of flowering bush, and the air was alive with the gentle sound of bees. In the centre of the clearing he glimpsed parts of what seemed to be a wide shield of rock.

Goats spent some time looking carefully around, as well as listening and sniffing. He turned at last and smiled at Beren. “I think we have it to ourselves,” he said. He moved cautiously out from under the trees, followed by the boy. Goats led the way toward the rock. After some few paces they emerged from the bushes into a cleared space of gravelly ground, which had something of a churned look. Beren saw in fact that they were standing in the middle of a road. The disturbances were clearly from carts, also from shod feet.

They clambered up the adjacent rock. Beren found that it was perhaps fifteen paces across. A square hollow, roughly cut into its centre, was full of the water that bubbled out of a spring in the shelf at the far end. The runnel that overflowed the pool tickled and whispered its winding way down a hidden, mossy rill which disappeared at last into the valley mouth.

“What is this place?” asked Beren.

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45 A league is three miles.

“We call it the Rock Well<sup>46</sup>,” answered Goats. “It’s a good place. The God is in the water here.”

“God?” said Beren. “What god is that?”

Goats grinned at him. “Ah!” he said. “Speaks with Birds, do you not know? If you will but spend some time here, you will learn to know him. He is the one who made all the waters, and he lives in some of them still.”

Beren’s eyes widened in reverent wonder. “Is he the one the Elves call Ulmo?” he asked in hushed tones.

“I do not know that,” said Goats. “To my way of thinking, the Fair Folk concern themselves over much with names. They think you can trap any thing in a net of its name; but the thing remains, all the same. We at any event have no name for him. He just is, and that is enough.”

Beren joined Goats in drinking at the well. The water was cool and fresh, with a clean taste. They sat for a moment on the rock, feeling its warmth; looking also at the sky, and savouring the air, and listening to the bees about their peaceful work.

Goats wanted to push on then. He spent a little time looking carefully at the various tracks around the well; then he led Beren into the woods again, still heading roughly north. All that afternoon they traversed a trackless country of rounded slopes and shallow valleys. Goats stopped at last on a steeper uphill slope, where they made camp in a sheltered hollow. They made no fire, just huddled together in their sleeping furs, talking the while in low voices.

Goats told him a little more of the well. “When our Holly People leave this country at fall of leaf, we come first by the Rock Well; and then we follow the stream first west a little way, then all the way to the South. This small water grows to become a mighty river at last. If you follow him down, down, past the narrow valley, past the green woods, past the magic country, past the marshes, you will come at last to a great fall of water. And beyond that is a fine, warm land where nobody goes but the Walkers. It’s a country of willow and water birds; there’s no sound there but the wind and the wild fowl. It’s a fine country. Maybe we hunt there together some day.”

Beren sighed. Sometimes he felt he would never get to see any of the wide world.

They climbed all next day through mild woods on gentle, southward-facing slopes. It was pleasant enough going, but as the day progressed, Goats grew wary. “Something is not right,” he muttered.

Now Beren could feel it too – a dark miasma in his mental space. He suddenly noticed that he could hear no birdsong.

“Is it Orcs?” he whispered in Goats’ ear.

“Don’t think so,” replied Goats. “Something different. We go see. But quiet, careful!”

The ground was rising now more steeply, and here and there they began to glimpse through the leaves rocky crests on the skyline ahead.

Suddenly Goats grabbed the boy’s arm. Both froze. Goats indicated with his eyes: upward.

Beren moved his head slowly until he could look up. Darkness came swooping through his mind at the same time as a black shadow passed them in the air. It looked like a crow – but no crow, nor even a raven, ever grew to that size.

Goats moved his mouth next to Beren’s ear. “Seen enough,” he breathed. “This bad place. Bad for us if they see us, or we here when night comes. We go back.”

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46 Rivil’s Well, headwaters of the river Rivil.

The sneak back took them a long time. The sun was lowering before they could relax their guard and travel faster. Goats pushed the pace then; he did not stop until it had been full dark for some time. Beren thought they were almost back at the Rock Well.

Only then was there time to talk. “What were those things?” Beren asked the older man.

Goats’ voice sounded uneasy in the dark. “I do not know. Never have I seen anything like that.”

“Couldn’t we have shot it?” Beren wanted to know.

He could feel the air movement as Goats shook his head. “It is not the one we see, but the maybe hundreds we don’t see, which we need to fear,” he muttered. Beren didn’t ask how the man knew, nor how he was certain himself, there were many more of the creatures than the one they saw.

“Sleep now,” said Goats. But both of them lay awake a long time, listening and sniffing the night air.

In the following days they wound their way over hill and dale in an easterly direction, always under the trees. They crossed back over the watershed and took a wide curve around to the South to avoid Aegnor’s fortress. Goats explained that they did not need to go there just now – it wasn’t the right time for visiting, and it was pointless to seek for Orcs near an Elf fortress. The pair crossed a valley with some settlements in it and then found themselves on the long hog’s back of Drûn. They sniffed around on Drûn for a couple of days and then turned to the South. Here was a more open country where men farmed; Goats became more wary.

With a start of recognition, Beren realized that the two of them were close to the path he had skied along in the winter. Indeed, they could not be far from the inn at the junction of the ways.

The boy was smitten by a sudden hunger for bread. The People made their own sorts from wild grains, adequate enough in a rough, spartan sort of way; but the memory of Zalta’s wonderful loaves rose up now demanding in his memory and made the water run in his mouth.

The two of them had killed a deer two days before and they were both still carrying most of it, waiting for a suitable opportunity to roast and eat as much of the meat as they could fit themselves around. Beren proposed now to try to exchange some of it for bread at the inn. Goats was dubious, but in the end he gave in. He had never been near the inn and was naturally curious to see it.

They sought the place without more delay. Goats looked cautiously around as they came out of the trees in sight of the building. There was evidence of considerably more custom than Beren had seen in the winter. Several carts of various dimensions were parked at the side of the building, and a party of men on horses arrived from the East while they watched. The two of them waited behind cover while the men dismounted and gave over their horses to be stabled and attended to. After the party had entered the building, Chases Goats and Beren left the shelter of the trees and approached it themselves. Goats was nervous, but had clearly steeled himself to go through with the ordeal.

The pair of them made incongruous figures as they stepped into the noise and smoke – two grubby, undersized humans wearing nothing but skins around the loins, both loaded down with bloody hunks of deer carcase. There was a sudden lull as every person there turned and took in the newcomers with astonishment. Most of them had never seen a Druug before in their lives. Few if any in that room were aware of the presence of Druug in the North; and none of them had imagined the possibility of seeing one saunter nonchalantly into the bar.

The sawdusted planks felt strange under foot as the two of them made their way to the bar. The talk and noise picked up again, but both Beren and his guide were uncomfortably aware of being targets for the scrutiny of many eyes.

There was a scatter of people lining the bar, both men and Dwarves, but there was plenty of unoccupied space. A large, lumpy man with coarse, greying hair and a very blue chin was serving at their section of the

bar. He looked them up and down when they arrived at it but made no comment on their appearance. “What you want?” he asked in accented Mannish.

“Er,” began Beren, “I was wondering if we could trade some deer meat for a bit of bread?”

The barman made no reply to them but turned his head and called out “*Zal-taa!*” The woman Beren remembered from last time poked her head out of the door behind the bar. The man jerked a thumb at Beren and Goats, then left them all to it. He moved several yards down the bar to pull a foaming mug of fragrant ale for a burly Dwarf, who took it eagerly into his large hands.

Zalta blew hair out her face in the familiar gesture and looked with wide eyes over the two wild figures standing before her.

“Well, may my hands turn to wings and fly me away,” she said. “Never a dull moment. Tell me now, do either of you speak Mannish? Because otherwise I don’t rightly see how we’re going to do any business together.”

“Yes, I do,” said Beren.

She looked at him more closely. “Wait, I know you,” she said. “Wait a minute. You can’t be him. You’re not that boy of Barahir out to the West. Tell me you’re not!”

He smiled. “Well I am,” he said. “We came by here last winter. On skis.”

Her mouth open, Zalta looked even more surprised than before. “And does your Pa know you’re running around in the woods with wild men?” she asked at last in a weak voice.

“Yes, he does,” said Beren.

She looked from him to the shock-haired figure of Goats, who grinned and nodded to her. Zalta gave it up. People were endlessly surprising – just when you thought you had seen it all, something like this turned up.

“Well then, my young wild man. What can I do for you that Father couldn’t?”

Beren repeated his request. Zalta agreed to this readily enough and they spent a few moments haggling over the exchange.

“You say your friend here is not much interested in bread,” she said. “Would he be of a mind to try a mug of ale perhaps?” Goats, on hearing the translation of this suggestion, assented with some signs of enthusiasm. So after Zalta had relieved them of half of their meat and brought out in exchange a large, crusty loaf of bread that gave off the wonderful aroma of fresh baking, she pulled a tall, foaming tankard for the Druug and placed a more modest beaker of small beer in front of the boy. She leaned on the bar a moment while they swallowed appreciatively.

“So what brings the two of you out this way, if you don’t mind me asking?” she said.

“Oh, we’re just sniffing around,” said Beren. “We started over to the West and then came along the ridge and then we turned back south, and now here we are.”

“But what are you sniffing for?” asked Zalta in a puzzled voice. “And only two of you?”

“There’s lots more of us in the woods,” said Beren. “Maybe a hundred or so this year.”

“What, types like him?” she said, indicating Goats, who was collecting foam off the tip of his nose with his finger and sucking it off with relish. “Didn’t know there was any at all. But you never said why you was on this jaunt of yours?”

Beren thought about it. “My friend didn’t really tell me. But I think we’re looking for trouble.”

“Hmm.” She considered this. “Trouble, eh. Normally it comes to me without I need to go looking for it. But if we’re speaking of trouble, I don’t suppose you’ve done any of your sniffing down south a ways?” she asked.

“Not this trip,” said Beren. “Not yet, anyway. Why do you ask?”

“Well,” she said, lowering her voice, “because there’s funny things going on. These Dwarves here, they come from all directions normally. Sometimes they come from the East, sometimes the South. The West too, but there’s no through-route there – there’s none come back that way that haven’t already gone it some time earlier, if you take my meaning.” There was a call for her at that point. “There in a minute!” she called back, then turned back to the boy. “Their big town’s somewhere far in the South, the Dwarves’ I mean; and the south path here, that leads down over the moors, that’s their direct route from it. Goes right through the mountain, I did hear. But lately they aren’t coming up it at all. They’re close folk, the Dwarves, hard to get much out of them. But you pick up things behind a bar, you’d be surprised how much. And it do seem like there is some sort of problem, some sort of blockage. They don’t say much, but they don’t look happy about it. Takes ’em longer coming around, costs ’em money, which,” here she glanced down the bar, lowered her voice even further and leaned closer, “which will make your average Dwarf just about cry tears of blood; but it seems worse than that somehow.”

“Wait, wait,” said Beren, “let me translate all that to Goats.” He did so, but drew a blank – Goats had heard of no problem of that nature. Beren conveyed that back to Zalta.

“Hmm,” she said again. “Well, it may be nothing. I have to go, boy. I suppose you’ll be away now? Give my regards to your father and his lady when you see them.”

Beren glanced over the building when they came out of the door. It was a fine, large structure with ample room to accommodate travellers. He heard a sudden giggle and looked quickly up to the far end of the row of upstairs windows. A pair of shutters banged.

Beren blinked thoughtfully. “Do you know much about Dwarves, Goats?” he asked his companion.

Goats was breathing deeply and flexing his shoulders, happy to be out again in the open air. “Nobody knows much about Dwarves, except Dwarves,” he replied.

“Oh,” said the boy. He scratched his head. “Do you happen to know, though... well, the lady Dwarves. Do they have beards too?”

Goats only grinned and shrugged in answer.

\* \* \* \* \*

From the inn they headed south, into the tangle of granite hills to the East of Foen. They found a sheltered corner there towards evening and stayed in that place overnight. The next day Goats risked lighting a fire for the purpose of roasting the remaining meat. He got Beren to look after this while he himself ranged around, keeping watch. It was risky to light a fire in an unguarded camping spot when there were only two of you, even during the day. They both knew how to minimize the smoke, but all the same, here in the North it was not something to be done lightly.

They were both glad of the feast, though, because pickings on the trip so far had been light. The People were used to fasting, but all the same, it didn’t mean you didn’t get hungry; nor did it lessen the enjoyment of plenty when it did happen to come around.

Beren enjoyed the bread too to start with, but in the end he came rather to regret his impulse. There was too much of it to eat at one sitting, but there was no way to keep the remainder fresh, and it rapidly became too



dry to swallow. Goats was philosophical about the partial failure of this venture, but made Beren keep the bread remnants anyway. He said they could find a use for it after they returned to camp.

Next day they continued in a southerly direction, keeping to ridges, and climbing steadily all the time. The land here rose in many waves toward the line of ragged peaks which, as Beren had been told, marked the southern edge of Dorthonion. They began now and then to glimpse rocky, snow-flecked heights ahead of them through gaps in the trees. However, Goats turned to the West before the day was over. They descended then for some way into a deep valley and camped a little distance short of the bottom.

They reached the stream shortly after starting the following day. As they came out into the open by the rushing water, Chases Goats halted suddenly. He turned to Beren. "Tell me what you see!" he said.

The boy looked carefully around – sky, forest, ground – ah. Something had been here. He said as much to Goats.

"When, what sort, how many, which direction?" demanded Goats.

Beren moved cautiously closer and searched for every sign in the way he had been taught. There was in fact rather a lot to see: whatever had been past seemed to have taken few pains to conceal its passage.

With a sudden shiver of recognition he remembered that there was only one creature that bulled its indifferent way through the woods like that. He held his counsel though until he had followed beside the tracks a little way, far enough to be able to answer all of Goats' questions.

"Yesterday morning, Orcs, maybe seven, heading down the valley," he reported at last.

"Not bad," conceded Goats, "but could be better. There were only six, and it was before sun-up yesterday. See how this flower is crushed? That sort closes at dawn." He looked up and down and sniffed the air. "They were slow, and one limps. So now *we* will go quickly." And with that he set off down the valley at an easy lope, Beren following.

They ran quickly but quietly the whole day. Foen appeared before them in the distance, and at a point where the hill loomed large in front of them, the tracks left the valley and headed so as to pass the hill on its western side. Beren realized with something of a start that the Orcs appeared to be heading directly towards his former home. They had reduced the lead of their enemies but Goats judged they were still the best part of a day behind them.

Beren expected that Goats would stop when it became too dark to see the tracks, but he did not. He did slow right down however, and took a line slightly to the right of the last direction they had. Soon they were climbing steeply. As the blue night closed in around them the two hunters continued to work their silent, careful way around the upper slopes of Foen. Goats stopped often to listen and to test the air. He was not moving quickly but nevertheless it required Beren's utmost skill to keep noiseless pace with the shadow that was all he could see of his companion. Once or twice he let his concentration lapse and allowed his feet to make a small noise. Goats laid a cautionary hand on his arm on these occasions and slowed the pace a little more.

The boy became very weary as the night wore on. They were creeping down the far slopes of Foen by this time and Beren thought they could no longer be very far from the farm. The effort to move silently grew to be a lead weight on his head, and all he wished for was to be able to curl up among the ferns and go to sleep.

The cloud of sleepiness vanished suddenly and completely like a blown-out flame as the boy twanged to instant alertness like a plucked bowstring. He had felt it again: the wrongness. It was not far off: in front of them he thought, and a little to one side. He put a silent hand on Goats' arm to bring him to a stop. The man squeezed his hand in reply; he tugged then gently downward, urging the boy to squat beside him in the moist leaf-litter.

There they stayed, shivering in the morning chill, while gradually the grey light grew around them. The birds were shouting their usual morning chorus, and far away Beren heard a cock crow. After some time it became light enough to make out the twists of mist winding between the trees. Goats rose again then and led Beren on with the utmost caution. He would stand scenting the air for a minute before drifting like a shadow to the next piece of cover. He had unslung and strung his bow and motioned for the boy to do the same. They had moved apart now so there were some yards of distance between them. At last Goats stopped at the edge of a slightly clearer patch of ground. Following Goats' lead, Beren put an arrow on the string. He glanced to the older man again and realized Goats was making more finger signals. He pointed to Beren, then a single finger raised. Beren was to shoot first. The boy nodded, and gulped. So his trial had come at last.

But then, unbidden, the memory came to his mind of the time Willow had shown him the watch-stone. He remembered again the strength of the stone under his hand; and from that memory a wave of warmth and support crept over him, steadying his arm and calming his heart.

They waited.

Beren's mind was buzzing like a nest of excited bees. Where will they appear, he wondered. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest. Over there, maybe. Dunno. No! Don't assume anything, could be anywhere, even behind – but no, they're in there all right, I can *feel* them. Keep looking around though, don't be cocky. And calm down! Breathe deep. Relaxed but ready, just like Nose showed you. Relax.

Six of them. And I'm to shoot first. Don't muck it up, six is too many for Goats, he's relying on you not to make a mess of it. Have to get two at least. Let's see – best to take the last one out. They'll hear this shitting bow, shit shit, should have taken the Druug one maybe, it's quieter. No, this one is better, I know it better, and it really punches in the arrows, not like the little bow; don't have to pick and choose aiming point so much. They'll hear it, but they won't know what's going on for a second or two.

Where *are* they? Come *on*. What the shit is taking them so shitting long? So anyway, take the last one, then quick as you like get another arrow on the string. Don't fumble it. Goats maybe will have taken the second-last by then, watch for that. Don't want to go shooting the same Orc. Get another one, and then we'll see. So – aim well for the first; another arrow quick; wise pick of the second target; second arrow off; then you're just about home.

Where to aim? Chest probably. Shit on 'probably', definitely chest. Heart shot. Don't hesitate. Don't bungle it. Shit shit shit, where *are* they?

Stop that! Just relax. Wait. Put everything out of your mind and wait. Wait! You know how to do it.

He forced himself into serenity at last, into the patient, timeless pose of the hunter, relaxed but ready. His mind emptied and his heart slowed down. His left arm hung loosely at his side, grasping the bow. His right arm hung slanted across his body, fingers nipping the end of the arrow on the bowstring. His feet were planted wide in a good, solid stance he could keep up for hours if need be, with just motionless flexing of the muscles from time to time to maintain blood flow. Only his eyes and his inner sense were active.

The sun was gilding the treetops before they came. Alerted by the approach of inner darkness, Beren was expecting the faint sounds before he heard them. Slowly he raised his bow to the ready position. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the mottled patch of shade that was Goats do likewise.

A bush at the end of the clearing shivered, and the Orcs at last began to emerge from it. The leader first, limping a little; then two others behind him. Ugly brutes, thought Beren. The attitude of the Orcs was stolid rather than cautious, but all the same they were actively looking around; and they were treading quietly for Orcs.

Numbers four and five emerged from the undergrowth nearer to Beren. Four looked right at him, but did not see the boy in the uncertain light of the clump of bushes he was standing within.

Where was the last? Come on. Couldn't start til he appeared. The leader was past Goats already. Come *on*. Where *is* that shitting goblin.

Some bushes right up close to Beren shook, and then the sixth raider poked out his ugly sallow face and looked around suspiciously. Beren was shocked to find how near the Orc was. He could see the individual bristles of the creature's stubble. The boy stared in fascination at a large pimple on its misshapen nose. He dared not move a muscle. His arrow was not pointing at the Orc, but the instant he moved he would be seen. All he could do was squint his eyes a little to hide their whites, in the way he had been taught.

The Orc passed by so close in front of Beren, he could have reached out with his bow and touched it. The boy passed through a moment of furious computation – never had he fired at so close a target, hadn't expected it now; how much should he compensate? He lowered his aiming point a little, drew back the string smoothly to the familiar cocked-muscle point, and loosed.

The twang of the bow and the thump of the arrow striking its target occurred together, sounding shockingly loud. Beren heard cries from the other creatures, but his eyes were fixed on the Orc he had just shot. The creature had halted and was looking under its left armpit in incomprehension. The arrow had transfixed its chest sideways; the head of it had caught in the tunic of the left arm.

To the boy's horror, instead of dropping dead as he expected, the creature turned and glared full at him. It snarled then and, tugging at the knife at its belt, started to run at him. Beren already had another arrow on the string and, in a panic, this he now drew back and loosed at the Orc. An instant before the arrow left the bow, the ugly creature collapsed all at once, right in front of him. Beren stared at it as it lay there twitching. The second arrow had passed over it and buried itself in the ground some paces further on.

The boy shook himself back into action. Furious at himself for wasting time and arrows in this way, he whipped another from over his back and onto the string while he cast his eyes around the clearing. He took in an instant the sight of two bodies on the ground, but there was also an upright Orc charging, sword held high, right at Goats. Beren shot at it, but was too hasty: the arrow took the Orc in its lower arm on the far side. Knocked off balance, the creature hesitated and looked in Beren's direction. The boy could not remember reloading, but he found he had done so. This time he took a fraction of a second to be sure. He stretched to cock, steadied, then shot the Orc through the eye. Goats' arrow transfixed it from the other side almost at the same instant.

He could not feel so many arrows left in his quiver now, but he fetched one of them onto the string, then stepped forward in search of the remaining raiders. He found a fifth Orc on the ground, in the act of raising itself on one arm while it tried weakly to unslung its own bow with the other. The boy shot it coldly in the neck and it collapsed back down.

All this had occupied the time it takes for about three breaths.

Beren counted silently: five down. Where was the sixth?

Goats was at his side now, his fingers moving soundlessly. In there, they indicated. Wounded. Caution. You go round that way.

They started separately into the indicated thicket, moving with the utmost discretion. The trees grew sparsely here and the greater penetration of sunlight encouraged bushy ground growth of all sorts. Visibility became limited, and the light was tricky. The frequent open patches were brightly lit by the sky and made the shadowed areas in contrast appear dark and featureless. After the first few moments, Beren could no longer see Goats.

The boy crept along, all his senses tuned to a twanging pitch. There was no sound now but insects; no movement but the gentle sway of leaves in the light air. He could feel though that the Orc was not far ahead. It seemed to have halted. Beren directed his movements so as to work slowly around a little to the left of the dark place in his mind. He glided like a ghost between patches of dappled shade, avoiding the open areas

where daylight penetrated.

He was close now, he knew, but still he could see nothing. In this growth one might almost walk right into the monster before seeing it. That would be deadly – he would not have time enough to duck an arrow-point to the chest. Finally the boy halted as close as he dared come and tried to think what to do.

A little way ahead of him stood a writhen old pine. At some time the tree appeared to have been lightning-struck down to a stump, from which a dense after-growth of black needled branches had built a low and crooked crown. The tree lay right in the direction in which he felt the wrongness, the dark presence. He thought the Orc must be somewhere close to the stump – lurking behind it perhaps.

Behind the stump – or above it? The boy raised his eyes and carefully searched the darkness within the crown of thick growth. The branches of the pine made a dense net of black pierced by a hundred irregular chinks through which the sky glowed brightly. The branch-shapes were twisted and lumpy and almost any of them could have concealed a goblin shape.

Wait a minute! That didn't look right. One of the black shapes had too smooth and regular an outline. At the same moment that Beren realized that he was looking, not at a branch, but at the curved end of a bow, the bow-shape began to move and stretch. The picture suddenly came together, made sense: the Orc was sitting in the tree. It was drawing silently and was about to shoot down at something off to one side.

Without thinking about it, Beren quickly drew back his own bowstring, reached the balance point of unison of arm and eye, then loosed at where he knew the head must be. He heard a double thump. Slowly, accompanied by the crackle of breaking branches, a black shape detached itself from the tree and slid down to the ground. The boy ran forward and arrived at the foot of the trunk at the same time as Goats came from the far side. There they found the sixth goblin lying dead, with a broken-off Druug arrow in its leg, and the shaft from Beren's bow passing right through its ugly head.

The darkness faded from Beren's mind, and the day was once more clean.

Goats was looking uncharacteristically pale. "Come and look at this," he said. He led the boy some steps back into the bushes on that side. There he stopped and pointed down to where an Orc-arrow was buried in the earth. "And I was standing there," he said, pointing to another spot a yard away. Beren looked at the place indicated, then back at the arrow. He measured the line from the pine which overlooked the spot, and whistled. If he had shot the Orc an instant later, Goats would probably have died.

Then began the weary business of the aftermath. Arrow-heads were too precious to leave, and so had to be cut off, and sometimes cut out of, the carcasses. But before that came an even gorier business. Goats warned him never to trust that a goblin was dead until he had seen its throat cut. He made Beren perform the ugly knife-work on each of them while he covered the creatures from the free side, wary arrow on the string. All of the Orcs proved to be already dead except one. After its hot, living blood had spurted under his blade, Beren turned aside, dropped to his hands and knees and was comprehensively sick. There was nothing in his stomach to bring up but strings of bile, but the paroxysm lasted for some minutes and left him weak and shaking. He refused Goats' offer of relief and finished the nasty job on the last two bodies.

When all was done, they found a hollow to rest in about half a mile back up the slopes. The moment Goats decided for the place, Beren threw down his gear and fell down at once into a sleep like death.

He woke in the evening to find that Goats had kindled a fire and was brewing some tea from herbs fortified with shavings of dried meat. The boy sat up and accepted a bark cup of the brew with eagerness; his stomach was growling ferociously.

"I thought we might risk a fire," said Goats simply. The warm light flickered on his strong features.

"I'm glad of it," said Beren, sipping his tea.

“Time to go home,” said Goats. “We’ll reach camp tomorrow I think. They’ve moved, though; there was drum-talk while you slept.”

“I shall be glad to get back,” admitted Beren. “I’ve had enough adventures for a while!”

“Boy,” said Goats, leaning towards him, with an earnest look on his face, “you did well today. Very well. You saved my life, do you know that?”

Beren could not let that one rest. “Look,” he said awkwardly, “that won’t do. I mucked up, and that’s what put you in danger in the first place. And I had it all planned out, too!”

But Goats would have none of that. He shook his head decidedly. “No fight ever goes to plan,” he said, “not ever. The only things you can plan, and only if you’re lucky at that, is to make sure you have enough force, and to pick good ground for it. After the mêlée starts the best you can do is react as flexibly and quickly as you can to each circumstance. You did that well today. The only thing you lack is a bit of experience.” He sipped at his own cup of brew. “Reckon you’re safe enough to go about on your own now, anyway. So long as you keep a cool head about it.”

Beren mulled over the events of the day as the warm drink filled his stomach. All the songs he had heard about them made battles sound glorious: full of valour, and brave deeds, and bright swords held high. But on that day, the first of many other similar days he would live through, he had begun to learn what the songs do not tell: that every battle is a butcher’s shambles, the province only of sweat, dust, weariness, confusion, and the stink of fear. He thought that some men maybe went to war for love of killing; others because they were made to. But he could not see where the glory came into it, either way.

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Beren was glad at first to get back to the camp, and the people he knew, and the mild daily routine. Mixed with this feeling was a vague discontent which he recognized eventually as disappointment. Somehow he had expected that people would treat him differently; but this did not happen. In his years with the People, as he had mastered the skills they prized, so had he slowly won countenance; but it seemed they viewed this most recent advance as simply another increment in the process. If the People viewed him as extraordinary at all it was because of his abilities with the beasts.

The boy did take pleasure in his new licence to travel on his own. He ran hot-foot to Goracc, gleefully reporting his victories and asking when the new war would begin. But from this quarter also Beren found a reaction less fulsome than he expected. Goracc voiced mild welcome at the boy’s promotion, but he said that nothing could happen until Thunderbolt had mustered his own people. Beren must wait; they would find him when they were ready. The boy had stumped glumly back to camp with his former springing spirits hanging limp at half mast.

Beren had long since told Nose of the uneasy news from the eagle; added to this now was the report of the flying black creatures he and Goats had seen in the North. The Druug, mulling over all this, made no doubt that the two events were connected. In the days that followed, other wary hunters of the People had confirmed the tale: something evil was afoot in the hills north of the Well.

Nose had been pensive when Beren told him of Goracc’s plan for him. “I see how you can help with this new danger,” he had said, “but you are yet very young. You say the old bird bade you wait; I must admit, that does not grieve me.”

“Wait, wait, wait!” replied the boy. “That’s the only word I ever hear!”

“The time will come when it comes,” the old man had said. “Be patient! Do not neglect the rest of your life in chafing over this small part of it.”

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The call he had so long awaited came on a clear morning in early summer. The first rays of sunlight were caressing the treetops, but there was a warmth in the fingers of early air that held promise of heat in the day.

Most of the People were up and active. Beren was bringing twigs to feed the small fire over which Sunshine was preparing one of her thin but energizing brews. There was a sudden disturbance in the air; people looked up, startled. A shadow descended; there followed a thump and a shake of branches as an eagle landed low in a nearby tree. It was Thunderbolt.

Beren looked hastily around to make sure that nobody was doing anything foolish. However, it seemed that the People were becoming a little more accustomed to the strange visitors their blue-eyed fellow sometimes received. None of the Holly People had reached for bow or pipe; the two visitors who did so were quickly restrained by many arms before being informed of the particulars of the case in urgent voices. These two were content then to stand in the background, although looking on with very round eyes.

Beren ran up to the eagle. "Thunderbolt!" he cried. "I have waited a long time for your coming. Is it time to start?"

"It is," replied the eagle. "Come you to Goracc and we will tell you what we have planned." And after very little more exchange, he flew off. Eagles are not much interested in small talk.

The two astonished Druug visitors turned then to their friends among the Holly folk and asked if this was a common occurrence among them. "Oh yes," they were informed breezily. "That is our Speaks-with-Birds. He often has such creatures to guest." And so Beren's fame spread among the tribes.

After a brief talk with Nose, Beren set out for the locality where Goracc made his home. His route lay almost directly to the South. It took him two days to reach his goal, flitting through the forest like a spirit, sleeping for a few hours at a time when he felt tired. It was his first long journey alone through the immense spread of trees; he relished the feeling of the forest surrounding him like a vast cloak. Wet or dry, it made no difference to the boy. He was alive, and in his element, and as unreflectingly comfortable with all its conditions as a fish is in water.

He had passed Sightfoot Farm in the dark of the first night, but he was thinking at the moment as a forest creature, not as a farmer and Bëoring; thus he viewed it not as a place of warmth and family, but solely as a too open, too populated area which must be bypassed with discretion.

He arrived at the ravens' hill early one morning after a refreshing sleep. He was still wiping the cold dew off his limbs with a hank of moss when the black-feathered guards spotted him and croaked him welcome. They led him to the tree in which Goracc had his roost. The old raven beat his way creakily to the ground and greeted the boy kindly; Thunderbolt descended from his own tree. The three sat with their heads together and began to plan.

Goracc spoke first. "I have found answers in the past," he said. "Few things are truly new. I heard of these black creatures when I was not much older than you, boy; but it is long since I have thought on them, and the memory has but come newly to my mind. The Elves know of them. They name their tribe Crebain. Like to crows they are, but they are not crows. They are of the Enemy, and he has filled them with spite and strength. They are spies and robbers. One Craban by itself is no overmastering foe; the danger is when they come in flocks. Our greatest present peril lies therein, that we do not know how many we have to face."

"I suppose we must find that out," Beren said, "but what shall we do if there are too many?"

Goracc stared grimly at the boy from his single eye. "We could run," he rasped, "but ask yourself what happens then. If the Enemy is not checked at each point, he will grow beyond confining. This is a small affair in the greater scheme of things, but great dangers have small beginnings. I believe we must fight, regardless of the odds."

"I too," put in Thunderbolt.

Beren took this in. Well, he told himself, you wanted to fight. Stupid to think it would be easy, or safe either. Aloud he said, "All right. I'm game if you both are. But how shall we fight?"

Goracc spoke then at some length. He said that the art of warfare was, in essence, simple: other factors being equal, it was a question of relative numbers. That is to say, one needed to concentrate as large a force as could be assembled and directed on as small a section of the enemy as one could break away from his main. This was the secret to winning. Of course there were other considerations – choice of ground, the determination and discipline of one's troops – but numbers were the factor without which no victory could be won.

The immediate problem that lay before them, he said, was one of persuasion and coordination. They needed to build a network of allies, mostly in the North where the infiltrations had begun. Once they had an idea of the size of the force available, they could think about designing an attack. As Beren had found out the year before, when he had first attempted to enlist animal support, the main difficulty was likely to be the blinkered outlook of most of the creatures; in obedience to the demands of stern necessity, most were narrowly focussed on their own survival.

Beren's task would be to accompany Thunderbolt. To the eagle would fall the task of persuasion; Beren's job was two-fold – firstly to bring the animals to parley, then to translate Thunderbolt's words to them. There were several reasons which spoke for this plan. For one thing, eagles were everywhere respected, if also somewhat feared. Once truce was declared, the beasts would listen to what Thunderbolt had to say. Another advantage of the pairing was that Thunderbolt was a superb scout, able to go anywhere and to detect the smallest event either in the air or on the ground. Lastly, he would make a formidable war-partner in case of Orc attack.

The discussion of various points lasted all that day and evening. When all was at last settled, Beren and Thunderbolt could make a start.

Their first goal was the locality where Beren, in company with Chases Goats, had first himself seen the Crebain. The boy and the eagle spoke with many creatures in those woods, and slowly began to build a unity of purpose towards resistance. It was a difficult, desperate business, for the creatures of wood and sky do not have time in their lives to spare; only the conviction that it was either fight now or face certain annihilation a little later could persuade them to sacrifice to the defence the time and energy each sorely needed simply to maintain existence.

Slowly the numbers and coherence of those prepared to commit to a counter-stroke grew. The boy and the eagle passed back and forth along the whole line of those northern hills, talking and talking. Beren grew hoarse from speaking in bird-voices, and Thunderbolt lost weight and condition.

Another aim of the journey was to gather intelligence. This was a hazardous enterprise, and twice they came under vicious attack from Crebain. The black vermin were active only during the day, but night offered no respite, because they found to their dismay that the Enemy had feathered spies also for the dark hours. Of what kind they were, Beren could not tell – strange breeds of owls perhaps; they had the same large eyes as owls, and they cruised the night airs just as silently. These were large, strong creatures with razor-sharp beaks and claws which they wielded with a deadly zeal. The boy's first encounter with one was almost his last. Luckily he felt the dark approaching presence of the creature before it could strike, and brought it crashing to earth with a blow from his stick. He noted with a shiver the twitching talons which a bare moment before had sought to meet in his neck, and crept back to safety.

At last, after weeks of work, the web was complete. Sunheight was already upon them by that time and the year now entered its hottest season.

They chose a time a little after noon on a hot day in high summer, when all creatures were inclined to laze in the shade and close a sleepy eye. Most of the Crebain were resting in the shade of their nooks between the rocks; only three were on patrol, and these were silently brought down by Beren's bow. At the foot of the rocks, an army in fur was creeping slowly higher. Foxes, cats, rats and squirrels, their differences and

rivalries put aside, converged on the eyries of the Enemy spies. Birds of all kinds came gliding in on silent wing, circling high in the air.

A shrill whistle jerked the Crebain awake. Some shook their feathers and went to creep out, suspicious of the noise; but sudden pandemonium broke out as the first wave of attackers swarmed in, biting savagely.

Beren, crouching behind a rock a little below the stony head of the hill, heard the racket rise to an unbelievable pitch. Black birds began to pour, shrieking their rage, out of several holes. The boy had his bow ready and began to loose off shaft after shaft. Each shot brought a bundle of black feathers falling stricken to the earth. He had soon to stop, because the waiting clouds of allied birds had pounced. These were of all kinds and sizes, and they worked together – the small confounding and impeding the black spies, dodging wicked slashes of beak or claw, while the larger, heavier birds pounced and pecked. The fury of the true crows and ravens was wonderful to see.

It was soon over. Not one Craban escaped. The boy was inclined to prance with joy, but the joy vanished when he realized the price the beasts and birds had paid.

Mindful of Goracc's words, they had concentrated their forces. Thunderbolt and Beren had lent their aid to the smallest of three bodies of attackers; ravens chosen of Goracc's people had captained the other two. News came soon to the boy and eagle of the success of all. But it was not yet time to celebrate, for other nests of the vermin remained.

Boy and eagle conferred with the tired and in some cases wounded representatives of the different animal groups. All the creatures were hungry and thirsty. There was a sentiment among them that they had done enough; that they should break off now and look after their precarious lives. Heart-wrung at the cruelty of the choice they faced, Beren addressed them with gentle but relentless words, and managed at last to gather them into his hands again. Translating Thunderbolt's persuasion, and adding his own, he awoke again in their hearts the realization that there was only one road through to any future for them and their children.

It was too late now to do anything else in the day. They would rest where they were and make the final attack on the morrow. The weary creatures turned then to find what rest they could for the night. Twice they were disturbed by attacks from the savage owl-things, beaten off both times by their own patrols of night birds.

As soon as there was sufficient light, the motley party set off. Thunderbolt had not dared to spread their forces too thin for the first attack, but the concentration he chose had left one sizeable nest of Crebain unassailed. This was close by; they would attempt it with their own force from yesterday. Any reinforcements from the other two who trickled in would naturally be welcome, but few were expected.

It soon became clear to them that this last outpost had had wind of the previous day's attacks. As their force approached the rocky height, they could see black shapes cruising high in the air, silent and watchful. No chance this time of taking them by surprise.

The Crebain pounced. Beren shot til his arm was sore, but the enemy was cunning, and wary of him now. He scored more misses than hits; and then he was out of arrows, and had to leave the main fight to the birds. The besiegers had numbers on their side, having very many more birds than the black fliers, but no one of them was a match for a Craban. Yesterday they had managed to prevail, but the Crebain were warned now, and they proved better at organising their attacks than the motley, makeshift army they were matched against. The ground fighters could do little but watch helplessly as the tide of the aerial battle began slowly to turn against their side. The day was sliding away from them. Their fliers were beginning to waver; the black marauders, scenting victory, attacked now all the harder, eyes glittering with anticipated triumph. Beren could only look on in despair.

Suddenly there came an almighty thump from one side. Beren looked around, and what he saw made him drop his staff and jump and cheer. A Craban had been swept from the sky in the clutch of a golden-brown eagle, the vanguard of lines of the great birds who were sailing down the wind toward them. Another strike followed, and another. A regular rain of eagles was soon falling, the glorious birds darkening the sky as they



stooped through the throng. They were cutting through the vermin like warm rain through a black frost.

Thunderbolt's folk had joined the fight.

All morning the battle raged around the last rock stronghold of the Crebain. Beren pulled arrows from carcasses and shot them again. He was up on the rocks by the time he had run out a second time, and it was then a fight at close quarters. The remaining vermin retreated to their holes, and it fell to the weasels and badgers to go and fetch them out. There was a horrible scrimmage then of biting and clawing, in which every voice seemed to be yelling in wordless savagery. Beren waded through the middle, wielding his staff wherever he could cleanly strike.

As noon fell, all was done. Everybody was scratched or wounded in some degree, and grievously many birds and beasts would not return home at all; but the North was clean again.

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