

# Beren One Hand

## Volume 2: Blade, Stone, Tree

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## Prologue

They were seven, and in the very beginning, they were brothers. But they knew not that they were brothers, nor knew they indeed anything else, because they were fashioned after the manner of their master, and from his being. And although he could create life, so great a Maker as he was, he could not create mind; for the flame of knowledge and reason is in the keeping solely of Ilúvatar, the One.

As was told in after days among the Children, Ilúvatar summoned the Maker<sup>1</sup> to answer for his temerity. It was told how the Maker, being humble, repented of his fault, and made to destroy these his creations; but the One stayed his hand. For Ilúvatar, who is Justice itself, knew that the fault arose from love and zeal. Therefore instead of punishing, he gave rather of the Flame to these children of his errant son, that they might live independently and from their own wills.

The Seven were set to sleep long years, for the One would not suffer that these, the children of his adoption, should wake in the world before Elves and Men, the children of his heart. The Seven were set to sleep; but they were no longer only brothers. The Maker had made them male in the beginning, since he was male himself, and could only make that which his own nature encompassed. But the One is neither male nor female; or better said, is both together, and much more. Thus it was part of the gift of the One that those creatures known in after days as the Seven Fathers of the Dwarves should be, more truly spoken, four fathers and three mothers. For it is part of the weave of Arda that all of the Children must so be patterned, in pairs who come together in order to perpetuate their kind; that even the sublimest among them should be humbled in this matter and reminded of their kinship with the beasts. But because the female principle was not in the Dwarves from their beginning, and is strange to their natures, it has not rested easily in them, and has been at times a cause of discord and an encouragement to furtiveness and other ills of the spirit.

The Sleepers were laid in three pairs, in three wide places in Middle-earth; but the Eldest, he who took the title of Durin, he was laid in sleep alone. When the time of their awakening came at last, the Seven awoke, and the pairs looked into each other's eyes; but it was not purposed that the members of each pair were meant solely for one another, as is the design among all other Children, for they were Seven, which breaks the pattern.

Then all were called by Durin the Eldest to a pool under stars near the centre of that land of velvet night. Being called, they must come. Brothers they had been, and as brothers they greeted one the other. Only, as each embraced most dearly the others now in turn, in some embraces smouldered something more than the love of brother to brother. Deep through their blood ran currents new and strange.

The Seven stood long by the bank of that quiet mere, hand joined to hand in a wordless circle of joyful hearts. Seven stars burned above seven brows; and it is said that a traveller of clear eye can glimpse that circle yet, glimmering deep within the waters.

Years unnumbered passed, and still the Seven sojourned by the Mirror of the Stars, while their race multiplied after its kind. In seven tribes their scions were numbered, in appearance after sire or dam. Durin stood at the head of the clan of Longbeards, and these were the wisest and strongest of all. The Western tribes were Firebeards and Broadbeams; Ironfists and Stiffbeards were they of the East; Blacklocks and Stonefoots, those of the pair in the South.

Broadbeam had loved Firebeard from the first moment she saw him, as they awoke together among the cool stone pillars on a rainy hill far in the western wilds. She had obeyed the call, and had obeyed the need of the others, but although she loved them most dearly as brothers, the tenderest side of her heart was cold to all but Firebeard. Therefore after many years had passed, and the numbers of the Dwarves had grown great, she went to the Eldest and laid bare to him the wish of her heart to return, with her desired spouse, to their distant abode.

Durin frowned. "It is not yet," he said. "In time, you shall have all of your wish; but it may not yet be." And

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1 Aulë.

that same evening he came to her, and lay with her, that she might bear for him more of his people. Thus is it seen how the shortfall of the Maker, the unbalanced fashioning at the beginning, could not wholly be put right; for without remaking the work entire, either some of the Seven must die without issue, or they must for a span of time set aside the gentle customs of marital love, crossing the grain of Nature's design.

Broadbeam went then to Firebeard, and she said to him, "I can stand no more of this. Durin has enough Longbeards, and the others can look to their own kinds. You must help me, for I desire only you."

But Firebeard also had suffered under the abuse of Nature, and in this wise: feelings of jealousy smouldered in his breast, which only burned the hotter with the passage of time. He had spoken to no-one of this inner turmoil, and outwardly was as kindly to his siblings as ever, but each time a brother lay with his beloved, the fire of his fury grew, until he came to fear for his reason. He hated those who came to her bed, but more bitterly even than this did he resent his beloved for permitting their coming. His head told him this was nonsense, that he was unjust to her, that she had no choice; but his heart had long since shut its ears.

Thus it was that the fire rose in his mind as he heard her plea, and although she asked him to do that which he most desperately desired to accomplish himself, the great raw wound of his fury would not allow matters to be resolved so easily; rather he thought to dissemble, and to exact from her a sore revenge for the long, long tally of stabs he had received, one for each time one of the others had lain with her, or had got from her an alien child. Thus does jealousy distort and poison all that it touches, subduing all gentle usage.

He turned to her, and his eyes burned as hotly as his great beard. "If I give in to your profane desire, and do this thing," he said harshly, "if I help you to break the command of the Eldest, sowing who knows what discord among our folk, who until now have been a harmonious whole; then you must swear to me a vow."

"Anything," she quavered. "I swear it already. For this lying with those whom I do not love is breaking my heart."

"You wish only me, you say," he grated, "yet how can that now be? Since so many, many times another has warmed your bed."

"I could not help it," she sobbed. "Do not cast it before me so! How could I help it? It was not of my wish, it was not of my wish!"

"Yet it happened, for all that," said the other, feigning coldness. "Such a vasty litter of troth-breached whelps as stands between us must demand a matching measure of absolution. So large a measure indeed that I know not whether the world can contain so broad a bushel."

Broadbeam knelt before him, crying with abandon into her hands. She could not form words, only shook her head, with what meaning only she could know.

Firebeard stared down at her, and a part of him was scouring itself with silent whips of fury at the sight of her distress. It was as if, by his words, he had stabbed himself in his own heart; but another part of him revelled in her pain.

He bent toward her. "There is only one way," he said softly. "Perfidy must be paid for with obedience. And since the perfidy was dire, the obedience must be strict. Do you, therefore, bind yourself to me, and your issue after you to mine, for all eternity? Do you cede to me the mastery in all the corners of your life, to the last and least? For I say to you, only thus may you hope to heal the breach. Only by the strongest and strictest of bonds may the gaping hole in our lives be drawn by its edges together – and maybe, in the course of time, even closed. What say you to that, brother who is no brother?"

She ceased suddenly to cry, and gazed wetly at him over the top of her hands, as the true meaning of his words sank in.

Seeing her hesitation, the anger flamed in him again. "Is this your faith?" he raged. "So lightly do you hold

your promise? You swore to me! But now you would cast all away, on some mithering doubt?" He bent low before her and hissed into her face, "Do this my will, or by the roots of my beard! You will never set eyes on me again!"

She lowered her hands, and the look on her face was now merely sad. "So be it," she said. "But it is I who am blameless; and you who break trust. Yet both of us will pay, as will our children, down the ages."

The deed was easily accomplished. Firebeard brewed a drink of some roots that he knew, and all of the brothers drank of it, although Firebeard and Broadbeam only made semblance to drink. The other five fell quickly into slumber. But as the guilty pair made to creep away, they were accosted by some of the children who were now grown to stout strength and understanding, with full beards of their own.

"Elder brothers," said the Firstborn of these, "what do ye here? What ails the others?" Although he spoke with respect, his suspicious eyes flicked around the scene, and over the snoring sleepers who lay scattered around the fire.

"That is none of your concern," snapped Firebeard. "Stand aside!"

The other shook his head. "Ye have bent the order of things," he said. "It is plain to see."

Firebeard bared his teeth. "That may be," he said, "but we have our reasons, which ye can never know. And if we have bent the Brotherhood, will you be the one to break it? For that must come, if you will not give way, and allow us of your sires and dams to pass as we will."

The other hesitated, then took a step back, and bowed his head low. The others with him did likewise. "Not I," answered their leader. "I would have us remain one people; but I forebode that much hurt will come from this, which will be slow to mend."

But Firebeard heeded him not, only took his path into the West with his sad and chastened spouse, their bewildered peoples trailing behind. The thought flitted past his mind that he might thus no longer lie with Stiffbeard and Stonefoot, as had been his pleasure and his wont; but he thrust the furtive regret from him, and hastened on his way.

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With the victory over the evil Crebain, there began now one of the most pleasant times Beren had known. The warmth of summer was at its height, the forest was kind. The boy was free at last to roam as he pleased, and all the beasts and birds knew him and greeted him. In addition he could bask in the satisfaction of having fought and won an important battle against their common enemy. The Druug and the Elves both knew of this affair, and it even began to be rumoured among his own people.

He had seen nothing of his farming folk since leaving them at the start of the year, but they had not forgotten him; nor had he escaped the calls of this other life.

There came a day when Beren was making flint arrow-points under the supervision and occasional correction of Lion Scar, a middle-aged man who was married to Nose's older daughter Smiles a Lot. It was after midday. Several of the clan were to be seen about their activities in the current camp clearing, and not far off a group of five visitors from the Squirrel People held animated, laughing conversation with old Afraid of the Fire and two of her sons.

Suddenly there sounded a whistle, and everybody stopped what they were doing or saying. People looked up, tense and alert. Some got up quietly and melted into the undergrowth. Beren had felt no inner wrongness, but nevertheless he copied Scar in reaching for his bow. Just in case. As he laid hand on it, a faint noise came to his ears which he recognized after a moment as the sound of a walking horse. Listening to it while he silently strung his bow, his trained ear told him that the horse was shod, and was bearing a rider.

The leisurely hoof-beats halted and somebody loudly called a greeting in Druug. Beren knew that voice! He jumped up, dropping the bow with a clatter, and ran in the direction of the sounds. He broke through the intervening bushes to find that the rider was indeed Arthad, as he had known. The boy ran up to the older man, laughing with delight.

“Thad!” he exclaimed in Mannish. “What brings you up here?”

Arthad dismounted, smiling at him, and clapped him across the shoulders. “Hello, boy,” he replied in Druug. “Can’t we talk in a proper language for once? I get tired of twisting my tongue around your northern gabble.”

“Of course,” laughed Beren, changing speech. “But how did you find us?”

Arthad grinned. “Drum-talk,” he said. “How else?”

By this time others of the People had begun to appear out of the greenery, including Nose. He came up to Arthad and took his hand.

“Welcome, Horse-breaker. Come and sit with us and tell us your news.” Nose turned then to the others and briefly explained who Arthad was to those who did not know him.

The soundless appearances of so many people had made the horse a little nervous. “I do wish those two-legs would not pop up so!” it whickered to itself, flicking its ears about. “And I could just about bite someone to death for a mouthful of oats.”

The party made its way to the camp site, Beren assuring the horse in the meantime that there was nothing to fear and that there would be something to eat.

Most of the Druug who were in camp gathered round, curious to see a Man of Haleth in these northern woods. Two of them knew Arthad, or Horse-breaker as we should call him in that society; others had heard somewhat of him. The talk and tales went on for most of the rest of the day. As the sun sank lower, the People drifted away by ones and twos, leaving Horse-breaker at the end of the day sitting just with Nose and his family. In the usual unspoken way of the Druug it seemed to be taken for settled that Breaker would spend the night with the Noses.

After the meal was ready and they were sitting around the fire eating it, Nose said, “Now tell us the real purpose of your visit.”

Horse-breaker indicated Beren. “That one’s father sends to ask if he would care to take part in some training of warriors.”

Everybody looked at Beren, who squirmed uncomfortably at being the centre of attention.

“I knew it would be about Speaks,” said Nose. “But training? His training here goes well. Already he has killed four of the monster folk; and lately, numbers of these foul birds which the Black One also sent.”

Breaker opened his eyes wide at that. “Has he indeed! He is certainly starting young. But, Older-wise-one, I do not need to tell you that the boy lives in two worlds. The other world has its ways of doing things; these ways he also needs to learn. He and his true-father talked this over already in the winter.”

Nose shrugged slightly. “As with us all, his path lies before his feet.” He turned to Beren. “Will you go to this thing, Speaks with Birds?”

Beren looked glum. “Yes, Father,” he said. “I think I must.”

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When Beren entered the training ground, a large fallow field in the shadow of Foen, he found groups of men

and women marshalled into various companies. Some of the squadrons were marching about; pairs of others were attacking one another; while others hunkered motionless, engaged in purposes obscure. He saw many young people. Beren was attached to a company of boys and girls not far different from him in age. Gramlach, who was his company leader, gave him a nod of recognition as he joined.

They had to sit idle for quite a while, but eventually things got under way. Gramlach had them all sit around him. He explained that the purpose of the day's exercise was to introduce them to the shield-wall. But before they began learning how to form one, he said, he thought they might enjoy the chance to attack one. There would be no rules about it; they could attack how they liked.

The youngsters looked at one another and grinned. This sounded fun!

The attackers were equipped with sword-length sticks which had a knot of tarry rag at the end. It was explained that the defenders would also have tar on the end of their 'spears'. The only rule was, and it counted for both sides, that whoever got tar on them had to retire hurt. Anybody discovered in the shame of still fighting with a tar smear would have to run a gauntlet of tarry rags into the pond at the end of the battle.

They were taken along the field for a little way to a place where a second company were exercising with large, rectangular shields. Gramlach exchanged a few words with their leader, who then turned back to his troops. Under the shield-commander's shouted orders, his young people moved smartly into position. When these came to rest, Gramlach's youngsters found they were facing a solid wall of shields which bristled with tar-headed spears both long and short. Nevertheless, Beren thought it looked doable: if one could only make it past the tarry ends of the sticks, the way to attack seemed then wide open.

"Right," said Gramlach to the company, "when I give the word, you can go to it. Do your worst. Just one thing: keep it frontal. Don't try to go around the sides. We'll save that one for another day." He looked along the line of eager stick-wielders. "All right – go!"

Beren went forward at an easy lope, falling a little behind the ruck of his classmates, most of whom were charging all out, yelling at the tops of their voices. The first wave met the spears with a clash. There followed a furious mêlée; but numbers of the attackers soon began, dismayed, to pull out of the fight. Gramlach and the opposing leader were hurrying up to check for smears. Beren arrived in the thick of this process. Slipping neatly into a gap left by a 'casualty', he smacked the long spears aside with his stick and was in close to the shields. He ran at them with his full weight and succeeded in forcing a gap, through which he thrust his tar-tipped stick. "You're out, friend!" he shouted at the appalled face of the boy he had struck. That one obediently pulled his shield back and retired, but his place was immediately taken by a new shieldsman; and all the while Beren was having to fend off jabs by the shorter spears of the shieldsmen on either side. The new shield thrust him back, and just as he realized that he was no further advanced than at the start, a stick got through his defences and rammed him painfully in his ribs, leaving a streak of tar down the side of his tunic. Cursing, he retreated backwards out of the fight. His fury was not much allayed by the realization that he was the last of the attackers to fall out.

Gramlach thanked the opposing leader, then gathered his chagrined troops around him. He looked critically at their tar-smearred ranks: hardly anyone had escaped without a bruise or a scrape, and one or two had more severe cuts. Gram sent the wounded off to be salved and bound, then addressed the remainder. "Not bad," he said, "and at least there were no cheats. But have you learned aught from it?" He looked around. "Anyone?"

A girl not far from Beren raised her hand hesitantly. "It's hard to attack a shield wall?" she said.

"Right," affirmed Gramlach. "It's hard to attack a shield wall. And that's why the shield wall is the foundation of our defence. That's why we're going to practise it. Luggin' a heavy shield around with you is not much fun. But we'm not doing this for fun; we'm doing it to survive. You just did it the fun way, and you all have copped a job of washing from it. All of you. In real life you'd be looking for your arms and legs about now, and that would be just the lucky ones.

"Did you count the number of casualties on the other side? There were three, out of maybe a hundred. Truth

to tell, I'm a bit surprised at that, didn't hardly expect any, even with youngsters such as those. Experienced soldiers would have fended you off with one hand while scratching their... er, while filling their pipes shall we say, with the other.

“Properly managed, a shield wall is close to unbreakable. I say ‘close to’, because there ain't no certainty in war, and in an unlucky fight, under a stupid general, heavily outnumbered say, caught in bad country, any army will go down. But the shield wall is your best chance to go back home after the war. So, you will learn how to do it. You will learn it 'til you're covered in bruises from tar-spears; that's so you won't end up covered in blood from real spears. You will learn it 'til you can twirl one of those heavy shields over your head with one hand. We're going to spend the rest of the day learning it, and you will go home bruised and aching, and you will be cursing me so bad my ears will be itching. And this will just be the first of many, many days like it. But if at the end of it all, Powers fend us from ever needing to fight, but if we do, if you can stand there together like a rock the enemies break off like water, and go home afterwards to bounce your baby on your knee, then I will rest easy, because I will have done my job right. And that's all I need to know.”

Beren had never heard Gramlach talk this way before. On the farm he had always seemed a little hesitant, a little unsure. But here he was in his element: an experienced man who knew exactly what he was talking about.

They were bidden then each to take a shield from a pile on the ground nearby. Beren hefted his; it didn't feel too bad. The shield was made of several layers of hide stretched over a withy frame. They were lined up then in a single rank and each of them was given a short spear.

Gramlach paced in front of them after they were settled, straightening a shield here and there. “You will learn other formations,” he said, “and there is a lot to know about dealing with casualties, moving, changing formation without leaving holes, and so forth. But the base lesson is one I hope you already have some inkling of: trust the shield wall. This is important. The first time you have to stand there while a crowd of horrible, yelling goblins is charging at you, waving swords in your face, you will want to run.” Beren thought of his own recent experiences and could not avoid a shudder at the recollection. “But the core and centre of the training we will give you here,” continued Gramlach, “is learning *not* to run. Basically it's simple: if too many of you run, you will *all* die. But if you can master that impulse to run, that's your best chance, your absolute best, of living.

“It could be, as I said, that you're led into a bad situation, and come under pressure. But the shield wall can take huge pressure, so long as the hearts of the defenders remain firm. You might take ten percent casualties, or even twenty. If you happen to be unlucky, you might be one of them. So you get a cut, maybe a bad one. But at least you are behind the shields, your comrades will drag you back out of the fight, out of reach of the enemy. While they hold the line, you've got the same chance as any other wounded. But only if the line is held, and held, and held, no matter what.

“So stay with your shield; trust your mates; and don't let down their trust in you. That's the way to stay safe.”

A boy raised his hand. “But what happens if the enemy is too strong? If you take twenty percent hurt, and you still haven't won, or even after thirty or forty say?”

Gramlach looked exasperated. “Look, I said it already,” he said. “Enough enemy will swamp any formation. Of course they will. But you can be quite sure that if the odds are that monstrous bad against you, you'm going to die anyway, whatever you do. So better to die a brave man than a coward.

“Of course we all of us hope never to be in that kind of jam. But in no case is it *ever* right to drop your shield and run. Not ever. If you have to die, at least make up your mind to die like a Bëoring.” He struck his hand with his fist. “Make the bastards pay. And so long as you stick to your shield, they will pay high.”

With that sobering thought in their heads they commenced the exercises. By the end of the day they were

indeed as weary as Gramlach predicted they would be. However, each of them had by that time stood several times in the front rank, fending off attackers; they felt they had achieved something, some firm basis to build on. They certainly did curse Gramlach most richly, but their confidence in him was well on the way to becoming very high indeed.

*'Unlucky fight.'* *'Outnumbered.'* *'Go down.'* Was there no-one there that day who shivered at the echoes of these words knelling down from the future? No. The young people laughed and joked, oblivious to the storm-clouds gathering on the horizons of their lives.

That evening, as Beren was ruefully regarding the bruises on his arms and chest, Hrotha surprised him. Although Beren respected the old man, they had never been close. But Hrotha came up to him now and offered a bottle of his prized liniment. "Gwanna oil, they calls it," he said gruffly, "or nigh enough. Them Dwarves bring it up from some southern country. They boils it up outer lizards, so they say. Can't go past it for pure penetray-shun. Goes through glass even, see?" Beren touched the side of the bottle and felt that it was indeed slightly oily. "Best thing for they joints, young 'un. I d'know how 'tis, b'lieve me I do."

After the evening meal, Beren sat with his mother and father for a while in the warm end room. They were, as usual, busy with some of the endless series of tasks that need to be done on a farm, but he was excused for the evening on account of the battering he had endured during the day. His father commiserated, having gone through the exact same experience thirty years before.

"Later you should also learn how to fight in a company of archers," put in his mother. "You're a good shot, and have a strong arm, but there is much to learn about coordinating with the other fighters. And at least the training won't knock you about so badly!"

Parth, the daughter of Bremund, had been another recent addition to household. Beren glanced at her and Eilinel as they sat chatting and laughing together at their looms on the other side of the room. He wondered if he should hint in this wider company at a topic that had been on his mind. "Um," he ventured at last, "I didn't notice any people today training with swords."

His father looked up and caught his eye. He knew what particular sword his son was likely thinking of. "Well, no," he said slowly. "The fact is, not many of us have swords, and we don't train the masses in their use. In any case, a short spear seems to be the more effective weapon from behind a row of shields."

Beren considered. "Suppose a man wanted to learn how to use a sword, though, Father," he said, "how do you think he ought to go about it?"

His father stopped work on the boot he was patching and straightened up. "Well, hrrm. That is rather a question. I suppose the simplest answer would be, your man should seek out the best swordsman there is and learn from him. But who that 'best' might be I cannot well say." He thought for a moment. "Truth to tell, I never received much tuition in the art myself. My grandfather had some brisk swordsmen about him, but they have all by now either died or grown hoary in age. But look you now, the Elves fight with swords; perhaps Gramlach could tell you more of them, or recommend someone."

Beren had already quizzed Gramlach on that subject. "Gram said the Elves don't seem to have to train for anything," he added. "He says, if Elves want to do something, they just do it."

His father smiled ruefully. "They do make everything seem so easy," he said. "I have often wondered at it. Well, if there is no teacher to be found among the Fair Folk, I can think of only two further leads. The first is, you might join the companies of Hador's folk who train with the Elves of Hithlum. Your kinsmen Baragund and Belegund took that path, and found much profit by it, or so it is said – we've not had their own word, they have not been back even to visit for some time.

"I mention the second for the sake of completeness, although it sounds rather unlikely. Rumour has it that the best swordsman to be found anywhere is a Dwarf by the name of Yg. But who he might be, and where to find him: these are questions to which I have not the answers."



Beren was a week marching to and fro under Gramlach's unrelenting tuition; then came shearing-time. For the first time, the boy took direct part in this, learning the skill under Hrotha's hand and eye. The work was hard, but he found enjoyment in it nonetheless. The crisp feel of the shears snipping through the wool; the clean whiteness of the cut fleece beneath the dirty outer layer; the warmth of the struggling, reluctant beast, and the sharp smell of it; these were the sensations of the shearing. The fingers of sunlight in the barn, the dust, the sweating backs of the other workers, these he already knew.

An Elvish party led by Aegnor came to buy fleeces. The sombre-faced Elf-lord greeted the boy with real regard. He complimented Beren on his victory. The boy reddened and mumbled something in reply. As the flame-haired Elf made to go, a sudden memory rose into Beren's mind.

"Lord," he said impulsively, "before you go – I wonder, might I ask a favour?"

Aegnor smiled down from his horse. "And what might that be?"

Beren felt awkward now, and half wished he had not spoken. "Well, er, my friend, you see, he is the smith here," he stammered. "And he would... he said... well the thing is, he would like to learn anything he could which has to do with his craft, you know. Forgive me if this sounds foolish, Lord, but he very greatly wishes for just a small look at your sword."

Aegnor said, "Why does your friend not ask this for himself?"

Beren blushed again and looked down. "I suppose I am just cheekier than he is, Lord."

Aegnor laughed openly at this answer, which was something few men had seen him do. "I can well believe it! But bold tongues are often honest ones, which is no bad thing. Very well then, master Beren. But the glimpse of a sword alone will do little to answer your friend's desires. I will send someone to him." And with a smile and a lift of the hand, he rode away.

Some weeks went past, which Beren mostly spent happily gathering autumn fruits in the woods with the Druug. He had resolved to help his birth-family with the harvest though, and when that time approached, he journeyed once more back to the farm.

Harvest was an anxious time for the farmers. With an eye on the weather, they came together in groups to discuss the order of the work. Not every field was ready at the same time, so those who had to wait, or who already had their grain in the barn, would lend their labour to speed the work for those whose fields were ripe. Where the order could not be decided, lots were drawn. It was also understood that any unlucky ones whose yield was ruined by an untimely storm would receive a share from those who had enjoyed better fortune.

The work was hard, but the district received the satisfaction gained from working together; people also took some pleasure in the work itself, the winning of security through effort. Lines of reapers would carve their steady way down the length of the field, followed by people who tied the sheaves together and stood them up to dry. Others organized a supply of food and drink, or whetted the scythes and suchlike. Beren was too small yet to swing a scythe so was relegated to the party of children who gathered gleanings after the stokers.

Once the grain was dry, it could be loaded onto ox-carts and taken into the threshing barn. There, although the work was far from over, the harvest was at least safe from vagaries of weather.

Beren stayed at the farm for long weeks of hard manual work. He learned what it was to be so tired that one fell asleep into one's plate at evening meal. Besides the grain, there were berries and fruits to be picked in that season, and pigs to be slaughtered. The year's vintage of ale was brewed and casked, and last year's was tasted – strictly for purposes of guidance and comparison, of course. At the end of it all was the harvest festival, which followed much the same riotous and magical course as in previous years.

A sense of the timelessness of this life came over Beren as he watched the dancers thump past in their red-faced whirl: the eternal, slow cycle of the years which waxed and waned. People were born, loved, and grew old; but the seasons with their tasks and joys came around again and again forever.

The farm was very quiet on the day after the festival. Heads were thick; people slept late and did little. Beren however was up early and restless. After scraping together some breakfast in the empty kitchen and moodily kicking his way around the yard for a while, he decided to visit Gorlim.

When Beren arrived at the smithy he found his friend rushing about trying to organize an exchange of goods with a party of Dwarf traders. Gorlim was glad to have help from Beren – his father being laid up by a mysterious malady which, although by no means restricted in its occurrence to the time of the harvest celebration, never passed it by either.

There were five Dwarves in the party. Only four of them were doing any work; these were the usual sort of broad, gnarled, dyed-bearded Dwarves one could find anywhere, clad in rough broadcloth. The fifth, whom the others seemed somewhat afraid of, was different in build and dress. Beren had never seen a Dwarf quite like him before. Although sturdily built like all Dwarves, this leader was taller than most. He was clothed in black, touched here and there with gold, and he carried himself with a casual elegance. His tunic was well cut, albeit with a rather high collar; and instead of the baggy hose normally favoured by Dwarves, he wore a kilt of the same black as his tunic. His legs were covered by long stockings of the same colour, bound with gold straps. His belt buckle was gold, and there were serried golden studs spaced along the belt. The Dwarf carried a long sword, golden-hilted, in a black metal scabbard strapped across his back. His hair and glossy beard were dark and undyed. The beard was carefully braided and oiled and his hair was held back with thin golden bands.

As Beren entered the yard, the gold-and-black Dwarf flicked a glance of indifference toward him, then went on with the job of supervising the loading. Now and then he spoke some concise command to the workers, in the Dwarf language which no other race knows. His voice rang out deep and harsh in the narrow yard.

Gorlim leaned his head close to Beren's when they were alone for a moment inside the house. "I don't know who he is," he said. "He turned up once already this year. The others are a regular crew, I know 'em; but I ain't seen him before. Thinks a fair amount of hisself, don't he?"

The work of exchange and loading lasted until lunchtime. Annag came out and timidly offered the Dwarves some refreshment. The normal crew would have been ready enough to accept this, but on this occasion the black-clad leader would not allow it. As soon as all was concluded, he made his subjects mount the wagon and make ready to depart.

At that moment, a clatter of hooves sounded from the lane outside. The rider, when he appeared, was revealed as a dark-haired Elf mounted on a fine grey. Elf and Dwarves looked at one another in passing, all parties appearing about equally nonplussed; then without exchanging any greeting with the newcomer, the black Dwarf flicked his own horses into action. The Dwarves drove out of the yard and away.

The Elf dismounted and came over to them. "Greetings!" he began pleasantly. "My name is Maegam. My lord Aegnor bade me come to lend you some of my knowledge."

Now it was Gorlim's turn to look nonplussed. "I'm sure you are welcome, Sir," he said, "but what knowledge would that be?"

"Why, smith-craft," replied the Elf. "That is my calling, even as yours."

A light dawned in Beren's head. Suddenly he did not know if he wanted to stay here, or run away.

Maegam however was looking at the tray with scones and cream which Annag had brought out for the Dwarves. "My!" he said. "Those smell good. Are they yours, Mistress?"

Annag blushed deeply and curtsied. “Yes, Lord,” she murmured shyly, “if it please you.”

“Mm!” savoured Maegam, and rubbed his stomach in an absent, wistful manner.

Gorlim laughed suddenly. “Would you like a scone, Sir?”

“Hah!” replied the Elf, “I thought you would never ask. I would! Shall we fetch some stools?”

Soon they were all sitting around the small table in the yard and munching scones with relish. Maegam had such a friendly, unassuming way about him that the others were quickly put at their ease.

“These are excellent, mistress,” said the Elf, indistinctly, because through a mouthful of scone.

Annag was so pleased she grew almost an inch. “I do thank you for your kind words, Sir, but I’m sure you have much better at home!”

Maegam gestured with half a scone. “Now there you are wrong. We have nobody who can make scones. Could I tempt you to come back with me?”

“Alas, Sir, I have my husband and son here to look after.”

The meal continued in increasing merriment. Maegam had them all laughing at a foolish mishap he had suffered on the road. Gorlim in reply related a rather broad joke the miller had told him. Annag tried to shush him, but Maegam wouldn’t allow this, and laughed as heartily as the others at the end.

When the plates were empty, the Elf pushed back his stool and said, “So, my friend, what can I share with you from my poor skills?”

Gorlim thought about it. “Well, Sir, Maegam, I have heard that Elves make wonderful fine ironwork. Well I say ‘heard’, but that makes it out a bit flat, like, because mostly I’ve seen the makings with my own eyes; don’t need to do no hearing. I don’t doubt you could teach me a great deal, a very great deal. Though I’m sure I don’t know why a great lord like Aegnor would think of me at all, or make an offer like you said he has.” Beren, listening, tried to wish himself into the ground. “But that’s as may be,” continued Gorlim in his stolid way. “I’d be very happy, very happy indeed, to look and listen to any trick or art you’d care to tell me.”

Maegam considered for a moment. “You lay the burden of choice on me,” he said, “but this I find far from fair. I am sleepy after my meal of scones, and loth to put my brain to work. I will throw the ball back to you. What would you like me to make?”

Gorlim, for once, had his answer ready. “Well, if you asks me straight-like, then a knife for the young fellow here,” he said firmly. “All he has is his small kid’s knife, plus a few stones his wood-people chip an edge onto. He’s been a good friend to me. Time he had a decent knife of his own.”

Despite Beren’s protests, this was agreed upon. Together the two smiths sketched out a design on a piece of board scraped clean for the purpose.

Maegam then asked to be shown the various pieces of steel stock available. He went over the entire stock. In the end he chose two billets, although he did not seem entirely satisfied. “These will do,” he said, “but if those Dwarves are claiming to sell you the best quality, then they are not telling you the truth.” He hefted the lengths of steel. “There should be more of the stuff of coal in the metal, and some earths which are found in uncommon places. But these will make a reasonable knife, if not an outstanding one. This steel we shall use for the bulk, and this for the edge.” He indicated then the amounts of each which would be needed. Gorlim fired up the forge; Beren taking bellows-duty as usual. The smith heated up the pieces of stock at the indicated points, and as soon as the metal was glowing and ductile he pinched off the lengths with blows of a cold chisel.

When all was prepared, Maegam laid a hand on the young smith’s arm. “Look you now, we are about to

begin,” he said. “But my way is not your way. I do not hammer the poor metal, to force it all unwilling to go the way I want; I talk to it. Can you believe me?”

Gorlim opened his eyes wide. “You *talk* to the iron?”

Maegam smiled. “This you will see,” he said. “The entire secret is this: all things have a true nature. Once you truly understand what this nature is, many things become easy. So with iron: only understand its deep nature, and you can persuade it to go where you want. Come! I will show you.” And leading the wondering Gorlim back to the forge, he bade him lay the pieces of metal side by side and bring them to a white heat. When that was done, when the heat of the glowing metal was making their eyes water, the Elf first turned to Beren. “I pray you, lad, keep pumping,” he said. Then to Gorlim: “Now take my hand, and close your eyes!” He closed his own eyes and put his other hand so near over the glowing metal that the red light could be seen shining through to the back of it.

For a moment nothing happened. Then Gorlim cried out: “Oh my goodness! Oh my goodness!” And before Beren’s unbelieving eyes, the metal began to flow. The shapes lengthened and thinned and embraced one another. “Pump!” cried the Elf to Beren without opening his eyes, and the boy hastened to pick up the tempo he had momentarily allowed to slacken. Slowly, the metal formed itself to the outline agreed for the knife: the point filled out, the guard broadened, and finally a small amount of excess settled into a lump at the end of the tang.

Maegam opened his eyes and signed to Beren that he could stop. He released Gorlim’s hand, who staggered back like a man caught in a strong gust of wind. The bewildered smith rubbed his hands over his eyes, then stared at the cooling knife. “I *saw* it,” he whispered.

“There is luck in this piece,” remarked the Elf, “because you make it as a gift for another. He will bear it to good fortune. Now come – there is yet more to do, as you know; and I can show you some tricks that have less about them of Elf-magic and more of simple craft. Tell me now, have you any clay?”

Beren left them to it and went outside and slumped dazedly down against the wall. He still could not quite believe what he had just seen. Willow’s words to him about the ‘other world’ came back to his mind. Was that the same thing? But then where was the door to this other world, where the true natures of things could be known? Willow had seemed to think he could learn to find it. Gorlim perhaps had just had a peep through; but Beren had no idea where he should start looking himself.

He did not know what to do, and he did not feel like talking with anyone, or seeing any more magic; so he went into the store room and started setting to rights the disorder caused by the morning’s trading. When that was done, he took an axe around the side to the wood pile and began splitting stove-wood. Doing that, he had to stop thinking about things and concentrate on not splitting himself along with the wood.

After some two hours he heard the Elf fetch his horse into the yard. Beren heard him exchange some last words with Gorlim, and heard the hoof-beats as he rode off. The boy caught a last glimpse of Maegam’s straight figure and dark head as he disappeared up the lane.

Gorlim came to the boy after a few minutes. Beren laid his axe down and they both sat down on stumps.

“Lad, it were you what told Aegnor about all that, weren’t it,” said Gorlim, looking straitly at him; but his voice was gentle and held no anger.

“I’m really sorry for it, Gorlim. I blabbed away without thinking.”

“No, no,” said Gorlim, “there’s no need to be sorry. I’d’ve given – well I’d’ve given, well a heap ’o gold, ’most any size, to learn what I learned today. I wouldn’t have you sorry about it for anything. But there’s just this: it’s like how we was speaking last winter, you and Nel and me. About the Elves. They’s strong drink, Beren, that’s what it is. As for me, well, I reckon I’ve had about my lifetime’s ration of that drink today. I just about reckon I have. I wouldn’t *not* have had it, don’t get me wrong, but I don’t want no more of it. So

mebbe next time, think on a bit before you speak. Do you understand what I'm saying to you?"

Beren nodded slowly. "I won't be so heedless again, I promise."

They sat in silence for a while, listening to the sounds of the afternoon: the rustling of the wind in the trees, distant birdsong, the occasional voices of other inhabitants of the tiny settlement.

"Will you... do you think you'll be able to do that yourself now?" asked Beren shyly.

"Ah!" said Gorlim. "No, I won't. That young fellow is miles ahead of me – miles. I saw the way he went, mind. I saw all of it. And a wonder and a glory it was too, Ber. Oh, a wonder it was. But never in a thousand years will I learn to walk that road. No – never, never, never.

"But here's the thing. You might say: well what were the use of it. What use to have all that spectacle when at the end of it all a chap is just left where he started. But that chap had his eyes covered before, Ber; and now the chap can see. He understands *how* now, even if it ain't in him to *do*.

"A plague on it! I can't say what I mean. Never was much good at words. But I'll say this: today is the most important day of my life. It cuts it in two pieces, like: before, and after. In no wise is the bit that came before like to the bit that is to come. And that's all I'm going to say about it. I can't talk to iron in the Elvish fashion; I'm stuck with the good old hammer. But I know what to say now, and that hammer is going to do my talking for me."

He stood up. "Come and look at your knife, anyway," he said; so they went in and looked at it together.

That day indeed marked the beginning of a noticeable improvement in Gorlim's skill in the smithy. Word began to percolate around after some few months, and eventually people would come from quite distant parts of the valley especially to ask him to do work for them, and to watch him do it. People said it was a proper caution to see how he seemed to cajole the hot metal into exactly the right shape with just a few brisk taps of the hammer. The things he made fitted easily and quietly into the roles intended for them, and they wore well. Young Gorlim really understood steel, people said; why, he could tell a good piece from a bad just by feeling and smelling it.

The only person unhappy with this changed state of affairs was Angrim.

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Beren had been deeply engaged in his old life on the farm for several weeks, and now autumn was well advanced. The leaves were turning; nights were cooler; and migratory birds were gathering, preparing to fly south. Beren knew that the People would also be preparing for their own migration, and this time he was resolved to go with them. Now that the harvest season was out of the way, it was time to return to his other, more vital life in the forest. He would say goodbye to his birth family before the trek began, but for now he was eager to rejoin the people who lay nearer his heart, and to take up again the familiar, peaceful ways of the woods.

He slipped out of the farm therefore early one morning, after perfunctory goodbyes, taking only his bow. Birds greeted him everywhere. Their talk was still much of the recent defeat of the Enemy's emissaries, and Beren bathed proudly in their chorus of gratitude and praise. However, once he had entered the forest proper, the birds remained as usual in the tree tops, from where they took but small notice of anything moving on the ground below. He was left therefore to make his way alone and in relative silence. Pale leaves were descending in ones and twos everywhere.

He stopped suddenly, obscurely aware of a presence somewhere close. He had reached a glade formed not long before by the death and fall of a giant of the forest, whose carcass was stretched mouldering across the open ground. Its fall had torn a gap in the canopy through which the early sun was sending golden rays slanting down to the floor.

Beren swung round, and had a shock. There was a girl sitting on a great branch of the fallen tree, watching him. Where had she come from?

The maid had silvery blonde hair and was clothed from neck to ankle in a flowing dress seemingly made of many misty layers which had a subtle sheen of their own.

Beren came a few hesitant steps nearer. "I know you," he said. "You are – are you not Silmenen, of Aegnor's following?"

She made no reply, but only nodded slightly, still watching him intently.

"But what are you doing here?" the boy asked.

The Elf shrugged slightly. "Everybody has to be somewhere," she replied. "Do you think you are the only one who loves the woods?" She stood up suddenly and skipped light-footed along the branch, the motion sweeping spots of sunlight across her dress and hair. She ran up the branch to a point where it thinned and had risen high above the ground. Beren saw then that she had run to chase a thistledown which had glided past some way over her head. At the high point, the slender maid sprang lightly up, caught the seed delicately, and landed again on the swaying branch, some way over Beren's head.

"You'll fall if you're not careful," he warned.

She laughed, and the sound was as light and airy as the thistle. "I shall not fall." She smiled slyly down at him. "But do you not wish to come up and join me?"

Looking doubtfully at the slender branch on which Silmenen was balancing, Beren went several yards back along the dead tree to where the thick root of the branch joined the trunk. He clambered his way onto the crumbling round of wood, stepped onto the base of the branch and began to inch his way along it. As the branch twisted its way higher, so the footing became narrower and less secure. It looked a lot higher from up here than it had from the ground. The branch began to sway alarmingly under his weight. He stopped while still several yards short of the girl-woman. "I dare go no further," he confessed. He sat down then and, to steady himself, held on to a smaller branch which rose out of the main.

The silvery Elf danced back down the branch to Beren and sat herself down within conversational distance, gathering the cloudy dress about her legs. "Rashness at least is not one of your faults," she commented, stroking the fragile thistledown held between her slender fingers. "Bold, but not over-bold – that is well."

She sat looking around the spaces that surrounded them, clearly relishing the clean, open air and the warmth of the sunlight on her body. He for his part studied the delicate planes of her face, remembering the harvest feast of long ago. The frog and the moon-moth – had that been real?

Silmenen closed her eyes and breathed in the scented air. "I come to live here sometimes," she said. "I am like you – I cannot be long without the forest." She released the gossamer-plumed seed and idly watched it drift away.

"I've never seen you in here," he said, but she only laughed in reply.

Beren wondered what this strange person wanted from him. He could not believe their meeting was just by chance, and he was impatient to find out what she had in mind, and to get on with his journey; but the creature seemed content to sit there high up on a branch indefinitely, doing nothing; simply living. Somehow the puzzled boy could find no way either to break off the conversation or develop it further.

"I hear you are promised to Angrod's host," Silmenen remarked after a time. Her voice was lazy, her eyes half closed to the warm sunlight.

The boy felt obscurely embarrassed, and spoke some clumsy words in reply, attempting to frame an apology

for throwing his lot in with the competition.

“Oh! View it not so,” she laughed. “We are all family here, and it is all one to us whether you march with Angrod or Aegnor. But I do not think you are destined to draw sword in any Elvish host. I try to see it, but it fades before me like a mist.”

He sat silent for a while, uneasy, while he absorbed this. “Willow spoke of *seeing*,” he said at last. “Is this the same thing?”

Silmenen nodded, her dark eyes on his face.

“And the smith, Maegam,” pressed Beren. “Does he *see* the iron in the same way?”

“Yes,” she said. “It is the same.”

“Then what do you see for me, if it is not to be at Angrod’s side?” he asked.

“I see many things,” she answered, toying with the hem of her dress. “Present and future.”

“Well, what things?” he asked when she volunteered nothing further.

“Such knowledge can be perilous.”

“I don’t care about that,” he said boldly. “Tell me!”

Silmenen only laughed in reply. “Perhaps I was wrong about the rashness,” she teased.

Beren was beginning to find her evasions annoying. “I believe you are just making it all up,” he said. “Why mention seeing, if you’re not going to say any more?”

“Will you force me to tell?” she laughed. “Very well. I see a great battle! Led by a wise old marshal, fought by two doughty generals. The fight sways one way and another; but the right prevails in the end. Grievous losses, but much rejoicing. The forest echoes with the deeds of the heroes!”

It took a second or two for him to understand what she meant. He snorted. “That is well known. That is no feat of seeing. The whole forest echoes with it, as you say.”

She glanced at him slyly out of the corners of her eyes. “You wish for something more impressive? Very well. I see a sword.”

He stiffened, jerked to attention. “What sword?” he said warily.

Silmenen laughed merrily at his changed manner. “Ah! That seems to have struck closer to the marrow.”

“Anybody can see a sword,” he parried. “The world is full of swords. That doesn’t mean a thing.”

“This is not just anybody’s sword,” she said. “It is the sword of a hero. Made by the gods; for heroes past, and heroes present, and who knows? Perhaps for heroes future as well.”

“Huh,” he scoffed. “That’s just air and... and... air and fluff. Anybody could say the like. I don’t believe you know a thing.”

“Oh, boy,” she sighed. “It is a sword made of ice. It came from your great-grandfather to your great-aunt, and now it is to come to you.”

Beren received this revelation curiously without shock. He realized that he had known from the first that she knew the secret of Nixenárë. However, the source of her knowledge remained an unfathomable mystery.

“Well, all right,” he said. “I was wrong. I admit the proof; you can see things that are hidden. But how do you *do* it?” he said, facing her squarely.

Silmenen looked away from him again, up towards the canopy, seeming to admire the way the leaves fluttered in the breeze. When she spoke at last, she did not answer him directly. “When the first Men wandered into these lands out of the East,” she began dreamily, “we had long awaited their coming. We did not know much about them, save that they were our brothers and sisters, all of us children of the One. But we expected you to be like us. Little and little though we found ever more differences. Things which for us are as natural as breathing, our new kinsmen lacked. For example, we your elder siblings sense both the seen and the unseen worlds – one the world of matter; the other the domain of the spirit. The skilled among us can swim between them like a fish. We did not imagine there could be beings able to feel and reason but who had no vision of the unseen world that surrounds us and bathes us like a great sea. It is as if one met a race of blind people, who have always been blind, whose forebears were blind, all blind. Blind. Save one or two who could perceive some faint gleams of light; but these few were scorned, and not believed. A blind folk, wandering unknowing through a world so filled with light and colour.

“That is how you Men seem to us. Only some scattered few of you have found the way. Your Willow is such a one; and you could become one too. Your eyes and ears are not glued shut. You just have to find the way to open them.”

Again it took the boy some time to absorb this. “If you can see so well,” he said at last, “why are you so reluctant to share that knowledge with us poor blind ones?”

“Because it is terrible!” she cried. “Think what it is to live with the knowledge that ones you know and love will die, and to know how they will die – also with the foreknowledge of one’s own death. It is said among Men, I know, that we Firstborn know neither kindness nor mercy, that we have hearts of stone. And it is true. For what other material could endure what our hearts have to endure?”

Nobody said anything for a while.

“Why did you meet me here today?” he asked. “I do not believe it was chance.”

“Oh,” she said, with her delicate nose in the air, “to tell you of my visions, what else? Of present and future, as I said. It will not make you glad; but that is nothing to me. I am a stone-hearted Elf.”

“Tell on, then,” he said, but with a weight on his own heart.

“I have told you most already. See the young hero! Victorious in war. With a mighty gift which is soon to come to his hand. And so magnanimous! See how he helps his friend the smith! Wrenched the poor man’s life into new courses, he has; quite chased the old one away. Your friend will never be the same again.”

“I do not know why you are talking to me like this,” said Beren uncomfortably. “We won the fight against the Crebain fairly; and it was mostly Goracc and Thunderbolt’s doing in any case. I know well that I had the smallest part of us three, and I have not been a braggart about it. And I cannot help it that Nixenárë is to come to me, that was not of my doing. As for Gorlim, I know that was wrong of me, but all I can say is, it did not seem so at the time. And wrong or not, it has not turned out so badly, has it?”

Silmenen sighed, then leaned forward on the branch and laid a slim hand on his knee. “Let us come down out of this tree,” she said. Beren stood up cautiously and made his way back along the branch until he could jump down safely. He found though when he turned that Silmenen had slipped silently down, somehow, behind his back. He shook his head, went the few paces between them. The slender Elf-woman stood there, very little taller than he, looking at him out of her strange dark eyes.

“You mean to go south with your Drúedain this winter, don’t you,” she said.

“Yes,” he said cautiously, not seeing how this fitted in.



“I have fenced with you, boy; spent many idle words. Thus can we play who have all time. But the meat and weight of my seeing is this: I see you helping the weak, and helping your friend the smith. I have teased you for your deeds, but I should rather praise you for them, for they bespeak a brave and generous heart, if not quite always a wise one. That is a thing to be treasured, and I do treasure it, despite my scornful words. But even the best may have, nay must have, their particular blindness. I will speak now of yours. In the heart of your blindness I have seen a lonely soul, somebody who loves you, and who craves your love in return; but someone whom lately you have utterly neglected and forgotten.

“Bethink you that a man’s character may be judged not so much by what he does as by what he leaves undone.”

To Beren this was the most shocking thing she had yet said throughout the whole conversation. He knew immediately that she was speaking of Hiril. A wave of guilt rose up in his breast as he realized that the Elf-maid had spoken nothing less than the hard truth to him. It sat now on his heart like a stone.

He realized suddenly that he had not seen Hiril at all over the entire harvest season; but to his shame, he had not once thought to wonder at it.

“Where was Hiril this autumn?” he asked Silmenen.

“Do not pester *me* about your domestic trifles,” she said tartly. “I am going now. *Nai Varda varuvasëlyë!*”

“Wait!” he said. “Wait! You said present *and* future. But your words have been all of the present. Tell me at least, if I am not to fight at Angrod’s side, what then?”

She turned back, eyes glittering. “Have you not heard visions enough for one day?”

He shrugged. “You did say you would tell me.”

“I said I had seen them both,” she replied.

“Well, that’s not very fair,” he said, “you tell a fellow you know what’s in store for him, and then you don’t tell him what it is.”

The slender Elf-woman looked him over. “I had rather thought to spare you the knowledge,” she said slowly.

“Hmm, well, is it bad news then?” he said uncomfortably. “All the same, I should like to know. Not everything,” he added hastily, “but a hint or two might be useful.”

“Just a hint or two,” echoed Silmenen in mocking tones; she bowed then and spread her hands. “As you wish. If you really would know, then, son of Barahir, what I have seen for you is this: a long, lonely, hard road. But standing at the end of it is a glory like the Sun.”

“Oh,” said Beren, dismayed. “Lonely and hard. Well, I asked for that, I suppose. Glory or not, though, it does not sound like a very happy future.”

“Be thankful that you have one at all,” she said.

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This Maia had many names, but the name he preferred for himself, and which he required all his servants to employ, was Mairon, which means Admirable. After his own self, the love which lay nearest his heart was that of Order; and his tool to achieve it was Power.

Mairon had been in the beginning of the following of Aulë the Maker, whereas from the tumults and

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2 May Varda bless you!

disorders of Melkor he had recoiled in distaste. However, despairing at last of Aulë's mildness and humility, Mairon had taken up with the rebel Melkor, whom he still secretly despised. His hope was to ride the raw force of this mightiest of all the spirits descended into Arda and guide it with subtle, patient touch at last into more productive channels.

Melkor had squandered his own power, to the point where his present campaign threatened to stall. That Vala sat now in his tower, fuming, like an old, fat spider whose limbs had been bound by the very flies he had purposed to eat. However, over long years of waiting, under Mairon's guidance a plan to burst the bonds had at last taken form. More power would be wasted – Mairon had not been able to prevent it; but then again, it would not be *his* power that was thrown away on grand and empty gestures. Melkor would be weaker thereafter, and his own position more secure.

The time was to be soon. There was much yet to do; many things to arrange.

Mairon had smiled when he first heard the news of the defeat of his spies.

It lay within his power, should he contemplate so drastic a waste for so piffling a gain, to annihilate this hilly country with its dark needle woods. He could kill every last living thing in it. More: he could render it unfit for life. But such was not his way. He would not spend an ounce of his slowly augmenting might for any return less than total rule.

He was not free to act as he pleased. He must perform his master's will; at least, well enough to escape censure. He was bidden by his master to spy out these lands behind the Leaguer, and this command he would carry out, but it amused him to puzzle out how to outwit the inhabitants at the smallest cost to himself. It was like a game. Well, he had lost a throw; but that only added spice. He would have to sharpen his wits. The prospect pleased him.

Nevertheless, he had not expected the setback, and he wondered greatly how it came to occur. These beasts, working together – how had that happened? It was impossible that they should have cohered to such a force on their own; the power to do so was simply not in their natures. Mairon remembered well the small and heedless piping of the Kelvar<sup>3</sup> in the Music, knew its meagre measure. No, there was a Power at work in this northern land, of that he was certain. And he was fairly sure he knew who. He remembered her: the dark lady in the garden. Feckless, unproductive, mystical, yes all of those; but powerful. More powerful than he, if he were honest with himself. Why had she decided to meddle in Middle-earth rather than continuing to dream in her garden? He could not imagine a reason; but the fact was so. She made out to be content to sit behind walls in her southern bower, idling the time away with her footling lover, he with his pretty silver locks, but the smell of her was all over these pine mountains, and all over this last execrable business with the birds.

Mairon was not disturbed. It was axiomatic that system and method must overcome disorder in time. He could be patient; as patient as time was long. He would have to bethink himself of some new design, that was all. Not birds this time – they were too weak. He needed some form of life with more power to rend. He would think on it. One or two possibilities came immediately to mind; but he would think on it.

\* \* \* \* \*

As the days grew short, Beren sought out Goracc again. He brought with him, as a gift, flesh shredded fine from a young coney which he had hung for several days beforehand. Goracc accepted the tasty offering with pleasure and relish. After the old bird had satisfied his hunger, Beren raised a subject which had been on his mind for some time.

“O wise counsellor and friend,” he began, “I know that you are a wild creature and that your life is other than ours, even we Drúedain who love the woods. Whereas we can build a shelter or a fire, you birds and beasts have only your backs to turn against whatever the weather sends you. Yet I would not lose you to the winter untimely. I have wondered if I could not help you in some way. Would you think of spending the cold

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3 Living beings were categorized by the Eldar as Kelvar, which were able to move about, and Olvar, which were of their natures sessile.

months in a little house by my farm-family? They would be honoured to host you, I am sure.”

The grizzled old raven gazed at him with affection. “It is a generous thought,” he croaked, “and I will consider it. But many objections present themselves immediately to my mind. To begin with, I do not know that I could now travel so far as that. I believe it is ten leagues to your farm, if it is an inch. Nor would I wish to leave these lands which I first knew as a chick. This hill is windy, it is true; but it sustains me in other ways. I might be warmer and well fed in some strange land, but pine away all the same from want of the scenes and smells of my birth country.

“Also, there are dogs and cats on your farm, are there not?”

Beren’s mouth turned down. He had not thought of these things. After a minute though he had a new thought. “How then if I made you a little nest here in your own country? A small shelter, with a roof, and walls against the wind, lined with moss and straw. How would that be?”

Goracc thought about it. “That... sounds acceptable,” he admitted at last. “Although it feels like weakness to hide now from the seasons that I have greeted with my beak and feathers all the long years since I first left the egg.”

“With respect, Goracc, I do not see the matter so,” said Beren. “It is not weakness to come in out of the storm, just sense.”

“There speaks Man,” answered the raven dryly. “We wild creatures do not turn our backs on the world. We are a part of it – how should we do other than embrace it?”

“Roof and walls are part of the world too,” said Beren.

“Tscha!” said Goracc, dismissing that casuistry with the flick of a wing. “Truly, if it were – if the matter concerned just myself alone, I would die as I have lived, under the sky. But none of us lives just for ourselves alone. Therefore I am, despite what I have said, minded to accept your offer, if it might be done as you suggest. Winter is a hungry time, regardless; but it will be easier to bear an empty stomach in the warm.”

“Perhaps I might help in that matter too,” said Beren.

“And how would you do that?” said Goracc. “Are you not going south with the Drúedain this year?”

Beren looked down at his feet, gloom written on his face. “No,” he replied. “That plan is now changed.”

Goracc regarded him unwinkingly for a moment. “Hmm,” he said. “Well! If that be so – but no. It is idle to say, what if this, what if that. Do not make me promises. I will only say that I should not turn my beak away from any tasty gifts which might appear on my nest rim. But if you do not come, then you do not come. I shall not reckon such up to cast before you. That is not our way.”

They spoke some more then about the details. Beren said he would ask Arthad to build the shelter; Goracc’s people should also help and advise.

Goracc then turned to the subject of last summer’s campaign. “Thunderbolt has said to me, and I think it good counsel, that it might be well to visit those places again, to be doubly sure the Enemy is gone and has not returned. Will you go with him?”

“Of course,” answered Beren.

“Then I will send word. Shall you stay ’til he comes? I doubt not that he could be here tomorrow, or the day after.”

All was done as the old bird suggested. Beren spent much of the following two days in his favourite pastime of listening to Goracc’s tales. The old raven had travelled far and seen much, and his memory reached back

into the deep past.

As soon as the eagle arrived, he and the boy set off. The two were old comrades by now, and were easy with one another, but Thunderbolt's way was not Goracc's, and their times together were spent mostly in companionable silence.

Their tour through the northern areas delivered the reassurance the eagle sought: the enemy was entirely defeated, and had not tried to return. Here and there too they were able to be of some small assistance in helping the beasts rebuild their shattered lives.

After doing all they could, the two turned back. On the first evening they camped not far from the Rock Well, which Beren had learned was named Rivil by the Elves. Boy and eagle chose a place on the south side, away from the wagon road. This was a pleasant enough spot in summer, but they found it a little moist in the present season; recent rain had not had time to drain away. The whole area seemed to be affected, and after searching in vain for a dry spot they camped at last in a thicket among the alders. So as not to have to lie on the damp earth, Beren gathered small branches to sleep on. It was not the most comfortable bed he had ever known, but his people made little of such matters. He passed the night oblivious of any discomfort in the deep, sweet sleep of youth.

He woke, fully refreshed, as the first grey light began to filter through the tree tops. He could see that Thunderbolt, high on a branch in the same tree that Beren himself had slept under, still had his head tucked under his wing. There was a cold bite to the air and Beren thought there would likely be frost in more open areas. In the way he had been taught, the boy looked carefully around, sniffed the air, and consulted too with his inner sense. No, nothing but the normal life of the woods; it would be safe to build a fire.

He stood then, shivering slightly in the cold, and began looking for dry growth – dead branches on trees for preference; nothing lying on the ground would be dry.

There was an alder nearby with some promising-looking twigs on it. He went to examine them, but as he raised his hand, the tree pulled back, and said "No," in a deep voice.

After a short interval of terrified confusion, Beren found himself some way up a tree on the other side of the clearing. He had reacted like a startled cat; he had no memory of clambering up here, although he supposed he must have done. Heart pounding, he peered back through the screen of branches at the tree that had moved under his hand.

He saw to his fright that the tree had eyes – great deep eyes, which it was blinking slowly. The thump of Beren's heart sped up as he saw the thing pick up its huge feet and sway towards him. As it moved, Beren realized that it was not actually a tree at all; indeed after some moments he could not think why he had thought otherwise. What he beheld now was a tall being, well over twice the height of a man, clad in a rough grey garment and crowned with a tattered wreath of dark alder leaves, garlanded here and there with the typical small cones of that tree.

The alder-giant came over to stand under Beren's perch. It gazed up at him. The boy realized that he was not so high out of reach as he had imagined, and prepared to climb higher.

What stopped him were the eyes. He was used to the eyes of the Eldar, out of which shone much of the majesty and wonder of their long sojourn in the enchanted West. He had also often marked the depth of experience and wisdom in Goracc's remaining eye. But those eyes were as nothing to the eyes of the creature now standing below him. Looking into their depths, Beren felt as if he was peering deep back through the layered centuries into the hazy beginnings of time. This creature made Goracc seem like a chick. Not even the Elves had seen as much, or thought as long and as deeply about the world and all the creatures in it as this being, as was apparent in these eyes he now saw before him.

The Walker, which was what the creature clearly was, spoke now again in its slow, resonant voice. "I beg your pardon, boy. I did not mean to startle you. But I did not wish to lose any of my dress." It sounded

almost apologetic about it.

“Who are you?” the boy whispered.

The strange being thought about the question. “Who am I?” it repeated at last. “Hrm, well, how shall I answer? I am who I am. But then again, I am nobody much. I suppose though, you would like some name to call me by? You soft-skins are great ones for names, I know. My own people do not use them in quite your way among ourselves. Our names for each other are like stories: always growing.

“Well now, hrm. Let me think. Names. I have many. I must choose one for you, I suppose; and choose quickly. You lively folk who name things are also impatient, that I also know. Even the Fair Folk are so, let alone you later ones who burst out of bud then blow away almost before a person can take a breath. No sooner do you come, than you are gone. Laughing children one day, old bones the next. Ah, me. Mysterious indeed was the design of the One!

“But after all, it is not a matter of great importance. Have it as you will. Call me Rattlecone. Yes, Rattlecone. That will do.”

The boy had listened fascinated to the long exposition. Now he climbed slowly down. Thunderbolt had at some point awoken and had flown down to a lower branch. He sat there now observing the scene with what seemed like silent amusement.

“Are you a Walker? Or of what sort are you?” asked the boy.

“‘Sort’ he asks?” ruminated the creature. “Hah, names again! We are our own sort, and cannot be other. What does it matter what sounds this one or that one makes with the tongue? It does not change anything real. But if you must have a handle, know that the Elves call us Onodrim. Men took that word and made of it Ents. The name of Walker I do not know. I walk, yes; but so do many other things in Middle-earth.”

Beren bowed low. “I am honoured to meet you, Rattlecone of the Onodrim. Do you wish to know my name, and my people? Or that of my friend here?”

“No,” said Rattlecone. “I know who you are. And your friend. I have glimpsed you both betimes as you rush here and there. Not but that you do good work by it; very good work. It was well done to clean that spawn of evil out of the northern woods. My people had among ourselves only begun to frame some sort of discussion of the question, entered into the problem as it were, touched on some preliminary issues; when you quick ones rushed in and solved it all for us.

“Alas, there are many evils in the world, and not all of them will wait on our slow thought. We Tree-wards are strong, but we have all the time there is, and it therefore suits our natures best to take our time. However, quick evil requires a quick answer. I know that in my heart-wood, and so do some others of my race. Not all of us will admit it though. I think I can safely tell that to you. Yes, it is true – I say it again: we are not all of one mind. Some of us say: let us not meddle in things which do not affect us. There again, others of us take a different view.

“Our shame is all the greater therefore, and our disunity the more grievous, now that we have encountered an evil that is as slow to match our thought as we could wish, and which hurts us in our very heart-wood; but one which we find is beyond our powers to deal with.”

He closed his mouth tight then, and said nothing more. The boy and the eagle looked at one another.

“What ‘slow evil’ do you mean?” Beren wanted to know. He was baffled.

Thunderbolt had thought clearer and further. “Are you asking for our help?” he said, fixing the Ent with a fierce amber eye.

The being who had named himself Rattlecone turned his own eyes first this way then that. He did not seem to relish the eagle's words. "My chief would not be pleased if I did that," he said carefully.

"But did you seek us here today for the purpose, shall we say, of mentioning this evil of which you speak?" asked the proud bird.

Beren glanced in surprise at his companion. He himself had assumed the meeting was a chance one.

"I did," admitted the Ent.

"Suppose you tell us something of the evil," suggested the eagle. "Then we might see what can be done."

"Hah," replied the Ent. "Well now. I can do that I suppose. Although it is always difficult to frame words at the speed you hasty ones desire. You would not care to wait a sun's turn or two while I gather my thoughts? No, I thought not. Well, so. Know then that there are many powers in the world – many spirits which came into Arda when first it was made. Indeed the whole Creation is founded on, and animated by, spirits; otherwise it would not be real. It would be like a dead tree rotting in the forest – the stuff of it would not hold together, it would wither and crumble away.

"Now, there are spirits of destruction as well as creation, and some who may be both. It is not a simple matter. Many of the destructive forces have been marshalled by the Dark One who sits now over there to the North, waiting like an old Onod. Hah, what am I saying? That is a poor comparison. He, an Onod? Never tree put out sweet leaf at his behest, nor ever will.

"But as I say, this Melkor, this truant Vala, this lord of lies, this master of destruction, sender of the Orcs, fermenter of hate; he has marshalled many wicked Powers to his cause – or brought them beneath his chain and lash. Many, but not all. There are others yet which heed him not, but they are not good.

"In a far south-east corner of this land there lies a valley. This valley has been the home of one such Power since time began. While that Power slept, it was not much matter, because we could avoid it, although others perhaps were not so wise. Lately though, and we do not know for certain how or why, this evil Power has awoken, and now it grows. It grows on the land like a cancer. It is not quick; we have had time enough to think, and to take counsel. But all our debate has been in vain. We have no power to fight it. Against the advice of our chief, some of us have sought help from the Elves; but they can do nothing against it either."

"This chief of yours sounds like a bit of a stick-in-the-mud," commented Beren, but the Ent did not make answer to that.

"If the Elves cannot help you, is it likely that any other creature in Middle-earth could do better?" said Thunderbolt.

"We do not know," said Rattlecone. "But if we do not ask, we never shall know. And there is also this: it is not just a matter which affects trees. In time you others will suffer its destructive power yourselves. Already some of you begin to be inconvenienced."

"Who is that, then?" asked Beren, curious to know. "South east? No-one lives down there, so far as I know."

"The Dwarves have long had a road through that valley," said Rattlecone. "Now they can travel it no more, and must go around."

As Beren turned over these words in his head, a great light suddenly dawned. He thought back to Zalta's news last spring about 'trouble down South'. He said, "Ah. I... think I may have heard something of that."

"Dwarves..." mused Thunderbolt. "Do you think they may have stirred up the evil of which you speak?"

"Not on purpose, no," replied Rattlecone, but left other possibilities unmentioned.

An idea blazed suddenly in Beren's mind like a sun; it seemed to come from nowhere. "What about the Lady?" he said, proud of his idea. "She lives down South now they say, in a magic wood; but I heard she knew these lands once. Have you thought of asking her for help?"

Rattlecone turned to gaze at the boy, his deep eyes shining with wonder. "I do not know how it is that you, a child of small years and narrow compass, should light on the very person who was our first recourse. A strange chance perhaps, except that such matters may have little to do with chance.

"The Lady! Long have we known and honoured the Maia of whom you speak. Indeed, we have consulted with her already about this new trouble. Alas, she cannot help – or I should rather say, may not. The matter shapes as follows: we should think of her as a soldier who guards a post. Now suppose one cries for help at a distance. The soldier on duty may wish most fervently to give aid, but they may not leave their post unguarded, lest far worse evil befall. So it lies, we believe, with the lady Melian.

"I will tell you, though, that it is partly owing to Melian's words that I speak with you now."

"How is that?" asked the eagle.

"Her words to me were: neglect not the small hands when those of the mighty are helpless; for not every difficulty is surmounted through strength."

The boy and the eagle were silent for a while, considering. "Can you say more of the nature of the cancer?" asked Thunderbolt at last.

"It is a dryness," said Rattlecone. "This is death for us. We cannot now approach the heart of it. There is no water in it anywhere, none at all. Not even in the air. Any living thing who ventures there will dry and crack to dust in that deadly air. Three of us have died now attempting it." The Ent's voice thickened. "Three! All the long years we knew them, these our brothers; our grief for them is still at its flood. Many, many cycles of the new seasons they might yet have enjoyed, the sunlit flush of blossom and new leaf which charms us so; we who spent so long under only the stars. But now our three brothers are gone to darkness. We call to them, but they do not answer. We shall not see them again until the world is made new."

The boy and the eagle were abashed by the weight of his sadness. A fuller sense of the seriousness of the threat entered Beren's realization.

"Tell me where this valley is, and I will look," said Thunderbolt.

"Follow the Dwarf-road," said Rattlecone. "But go with care!"

Beren said, "As for me, it is in my stomach to talk of this with my father Nose, and with Willow." He looked uncertainly at first the Ent, then Thunderbolt. Was this going to be another war? He did not think it was one that could be won with the aid of a few birds and squirrels. "I would like to help, even though I do not see how."

"Very well," said the eagle.

"Where shall we meet?" asked Beren.

"I will find you," replied the bird.

Matters being agreed, they parted.

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Nose and Willow heard Beren out in silence. At the end of the account, Nose turned to Willow: "Do you know aught of this, Grandmother?"

She sat silent for a while, turning over who knew what in her head while her withered lips worked and mumbled. "Not enough," she said at last. "I must go closer, and look."

Nose looked at her doubtfully. "That is a long way from here, Grandmother, and those lands are hard."

"I shall not go in my own body," she said. "Take the boy. I will see it through his eyes." Observing Beren's discomfiture, she cackled with sudden laughter. "No no, boy, fear not! You need not suffer to have old ladies riding in your head. I can read all I need from you after you return."

Thus it was that Nose and Beren set out together on a dismal day of rain. Some time after dark on that first day they crossed the river warily by the bridge near the inn, since there was no ford that far down. The weather continued dark and damp the next day as they threaded their way into the hills. Soon they were passing along the same deeply-cut valley through which Beren had gone earlier that year on the patrol with Goats. About midday, they left this stream and climbed through the dripping forest toward the South and East. After some stiff climbing, the trees began to thin, until finally they ceased altogether. The pair found themselves then at the edge of a high moorland which rolled before them through the misty air in a series of whaleback slopes as far as the eye could see. To the right, the moors sloped up towards distant rocky heights which were touched here and there with early snow.

The steady rain had broken by that time. Patches of blue began to appear between the wet puffs of grey which still scudded thickly across the sky. The air was chill; the showers which still swept past from time to time flung down more ice than water.

Thunderbolt came to them not long after, descending quickly before landing heavily on a dead branch. Beren was shocked at his appearance. The eagle's wonderful colours were dulled, and the edges of his feathers looked ragged.

"Thunderbolt!" exclaimed Beren in concern. "Is all well with you?"

"No," replied the bird in a voice even harsher than usual. "I have barely escaped with my life. The Tree-ward spoke truth: that is a place of death. If you will take my advice, you will not go there, as it seems you mean to."

Beren translated this to his foster-father, whose disquiet at the report was obvious. "We need to know more than that," Nose said. "Ask him for his account."

Thunderbolt told them that he had followed the Dwarf-road, as planned. He flew into a region in which all the growth appeared dead. Before he could investigate more closely, he flew out of all moisture into a space of air so utterly desiccated that his very feathers began to crack before his eyes. In as near to terror as an eagle could come he had wheeled tightly around and rowed his way back to living air as quickly as ever he could.

After Nose had heard all this, he sat for a while in thought, grim-faced. "These signs are all bad," he said at last. "But I think we must still look for ourselves."

"Will you see more than my eyes?" replied the eagle, after this thought was translated to him. "Can you run as quickly as I can fly? Where I have barely escaped, you will surely come to grief."

"If we cannot retreat so quickly, we shall not fall in so quickly either," was Nose's reply. "And if a person must decide, their own eyes are worth two of any others', be they eagles or no."

Seeing that the man was determined, there was nothing the eagle could do but wish them the best of what fortune there was to have, and retire to seek his own cure.

Man and boy looked at one another in concern. "Well, let us push on," said Nose. "At least we have a better idea now what to expect." Taking up his bundle, he led the way further over the moor.



Druug were a stealthy people who preferred the shadows of the woods. Both of the travellers felt uneasy at the lack of cover on the moors. Largely for this reason, their progress was slow. At the end of the day they made shelter in a small cave – just a crevice, really, in a stack of rocks in the corner of a tiny valley. Years later, Beren was to come across it again, and be overcome by a powerful nostalgia for the lost days of the past.

After taking a wary look around the chosen camp site, the two of them gathered twigs from dead heather and were soon warming their chilled limbs over a bright blaze. They talked of many things over supper, partly in an effort to dispel the gloom of the eagle's report. Since Beren had now met a Walker for himself, Nose told him more from his own knowledge. "Always I have seen them about," he said, "away there in the warm woods in the South. Since the times when I was young, younger than you even. We have little speech with them, because no folk can master their slow talk, and there are few among them who speak anything of ours. But we are friendly with them, and they have helped the People in the past, so it is said anyway. They are not friends of the Orcs, and you should thank them maybe, Speaks, because they help us in our fight. Indeed it is solely they who guard your farmers during the winters, when we are not here.

"Now the Walkers have spouses, and it is not with them as with the Dwarf-folk, whose wives are scarce and hidden, so that few men have seen one; the Walker-women are as numerous as their Men, and they go about openly, or as openly as any of the Walker folk do, which admittedly is not much, because they are a private people, concerned mostly with their own affairs. But the Walker-women love not the forests. Their care is rather those plants which can be cultivated; or at wildest, the small growth of the hedgerow. These interests of theirs are not those of the People, so our paths cross but seldom. Do your farmer-folk tell no tales among themselves of the Walker-women? For you are closer to them in thought than we are."

"I never heard of any," said Beren. "But then, I never asked."

"Hmm," said Nose. "Well, I speak of the Women because their land lies not a day's journey from here," he continued. "And that makes me uneasy. Can it be chance? I see no connection with this trouble of your Alder-Man, but there are strange tales told about the Walker-Women, and it makes me wonder."

"What sort of tales?" asked Beren.

"I know very little," said Nose cautiously, "and I should be slow to speak evil of others on such flimsy grounds as I have. But rumour among us in the South is that not all those who visit the Walker-women are seen again."

"But what happens to them?" asked Beren.

"I do not know," said Nose. "I have told you now all that I know, which is only what is said among us in the South. I have never met any of the Walker-wives who live in these northern lands. When we first came into these lands, some seven or eight summers past, we explored them from one end to the other, naturally, to see what sort of lands they might be, and to find where the best hunting and harvest was to be had and so forth. This land of many pines is bounded on the East by a range of hills; not high as hills go, but a harsh country, rocky heights cut by deep ravines, and offering passage only to hardy hunters and a few goats. We wandered at that time south, skirting the pine-clad slopes on the near side of those hills. We came at last to a wooded country – a dark, wild, forsaken land, visited by few. And there we met Walkers, and there they turned us back. It was a Willow-man we met there, who knew a few words of the Speech, and he told us it was the land of the Women, and no good place for us. So we came away."

The old Druug's words aroused an intense curiosity in Beren – one which would come near to costing him his life some few years hence. At present though he could only wonder mightily what sort of beings the Walker-women were, what they looked like, and what exactly it was that they did with, or to, unwary visitors.

Their meal being then finished, the two of them curled up in their skins next to the fire and sank into the deep and instant slumber known to the hunter, the sailor and the shepherd.

Their continued passage the following day was slow. They found themselves now in a high country of rocky peaks and hollow valleys. At the bottom of almost every cwm lay a tarn whose cold, calm depths mirrored the clouds drifting past in the silence of the sky. The travellers were forced to back-track several times, and at last, at Nose's suggestion, they turned almost around and made their way first into the easier lands to the North before turning at last again to the East. The sun was sinking behind their right shoulders as they climbed to the top of a high ridge and found a deep, forest-filled valley before them.

"Ah," said Nose, "this I know. The Dwarf-road runs here."

They clambered down off the ridge and soon found themselves under the shelter of the woods. Both of them breathed a sigh of relief – they had felt exposed and uncomfortable in the open lands, where anyone could see you from miles off. Descending cautiously through the gathering gloom, they came eventually to the road at the bottom of the valley. The late afternoon sun still gilded the tips of pines high up the far slope, but the hollow of the valley where they were standing was already deep in shadow.

A hush seemed to lie over the land. There were no travellers on the road, and a careful examination of its surface suggested that no-one had passed along it for some time.

The furrow of a stream could be seen on the far side of the road but the wide bed held only a trickle of water. Nose shook his head over that. "That is not right," he said. "So little? But come, it grows dark. Let us make camp. I want daylight before I see my way further."

That night they spent in a dell a little way up the farther slope. They made no fire.

The following day dawned fine but cold. Shivering a little in the frosty morning air, the grizzled brown Druug and the straight young lad returned to the road and examined its surface again in the better light of morning. Little further information was to be gleaned, however. The only recent tracks were those of animals; no horse or wheel had disturbed its surface for many days.

After first tasting it cautiously, Nose filled his water skin at the trickle of water, and bade Beren do the same. They advanced then warily up the valley, keeping to the woods a little way to one side of the road. They had not gone many miles before they began to feel a change. The air felt dry on their faces. There was no more water in the stream bed, and the grass began to appear withered and parched. After only one more turn of the valley they noticed yellowing leaves on the smaller bushes. The further they went, the worse it grew, and the more dead growth they saw. They began now to see dead trees standing here and there, still covered with brown leaves; and the frequency of these increased with each bend in the road. Quite quickly the two travellers reached the last point at which plant life could exist. Further up the valley there was no green at all to be seen, only dry growth, already here bleaching to silver. The eyes of both man and boy were stinging in the parched air and their lips were beginning to crack.

Nose paused now, and his face was grim. "It is even as the eagle reported," he said. "But let us venture just a little further." He took a sparing drink from his flask.

A sense of horror grew in them as they trudged deeper into that gully of death. They reached a point from which the dry, dead growth had been burnt off; all that was left was blackened ashes, drifting mournfully here and there in the lifeless wind. The valley walls, exposed now to view, rose high on both sides to ridges sparsely crowned with rocky spires of uneasy form. Looked at directly, that was all they were – towers of rock; but away from the centre of the gaze they seemed to acquire a malign presence. Once or twice Beren thought he saw one move in the tail of his eye, although there was never anything amiss when he turned swiftly to look.

The silence on every hand was total.

It hurt even to breathe now and both of them had begun to cough. Their skins chafed in the terrible dryness and their very hair felt brittle and dead. For some time now too Beren's feet had felt sore. He turned one to examine the sole and was shocked to find that the whole surface was covered with cracks, some of which

were starting to bleed. The liquid blood shrunk away to a brown stain almost as soon as it seeped from the wound.

Nose stopped then and looked ruefully at his own injured feet. "I think we must go back now," he said huskily. "Anyway, we have seen enough."

They turned their backs gladly on that place of death and made their way as quickly as possible back to moisture, greenery, and the joyful sounds of birds.

They found the Holly people preparing to trek. There was time for one quick talk with Willow, after which Beren had to part from them.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beren came home to the farm on a dark day when sleet was rattling at the horn windows of the house. He left his bow and bag by the door after he came in and poked his head into the kitchen, from whence had come the sound of several voices. Most of the women seemed to be in there, busy with one thing and another. But who was the slim girl with the glossy hair like polished wood?

Oh Powers – it was Hiril!

"Hello," he said, "I'm back."

All heads turned in his direction, staring blankly for fraction of a second. Then recognition fired in their eyes, followed by a joyful welcome. Beren resigned himself to the usual succession of indignities and discomforts known as bathing, combing and changing. A brief lull in the swirl of purposeful activity let him exchange a quick word and a smile with Hiril. "How ever did you get so tall, Sis?"

She blushed. "Just happened, I suppose." Then the inexorable machinery pulled him back again into its chain of demands.

Over dinner that evening he heard much news of the district and its small affairs. Nobody asked him about his own, but he was content not to tell. These were different worlds; he knew he could never find a way to explain the one to the other.

Hiril showed him the corner where he was to sleep. She said they were too old to sleep together any more. He stopped her as she went to go.

"Don't go yet, Ril. Stay and talk for a while, eh? We haven't talked for ages."

She sat down. "I know. But you're always away."

He examined her in the candle-light. "You look like you've done a lot of growing. I didn't recognize you! I thought when I came in, who's this tall girl?" He gestured at her chest, where bumps were beginning to show. "And just what do you call those?"

"Stop it, Ber," she said, but mildly.

"I guess you're not a kid any more. I don't feel like one myself, sometimes. If you knew some of the things I've been doing!"

She smiled. "Tell me about them."

He opened his mouth, then stopped himself. "No," he said firmly. "You tell. Tell me everything."

She spread her hands. "I don't know what there is to tell. Life just goes on."

“Well,” he said, “you could start by telling me where you got to in the autumn.”

“Oh,” she said, “I went with Cal to stay with Grandfather. Grandfather Beren, out west. We’d just about worn all the letters off the books Cal brought with her when she came to us, so we went to study some of the ones she’d left behind. It was fun.”

Beren had a very different idea of what fun consisted of, but he said nothing of that, just remarked, “I thought you were meant to go to aunt Andreth some time?”

“Next autumn,” she said.

“So what did you learn from the books? What was the fun?”

Her eyes lit at that and she started to tell him of the things she had learned, from the tales and songs of the three Houses of Men, to the deep histories of the Elves. Listening to her animated voice speak of Valinor, Beren had a vision of a wide, green land, more beautiful than he had ever known; of venerable trees as mighty as hills; of fabulous creatures, and beaches strewn with diamond sand; and his heart was pierced with the joyful laughter of the gods which filled all the valleys.

She stopped, and he sighed.

“Can you see it?” she whispered, gazing into his face. “You *can*. I could tell.”

“I never knew there were such things in books,” he confessed.

She looked down, fingering her shell necklace. “Oh, yes. There are wonderful things – and terrible too. The only trouble is, I have nobody to share it with,” she said, “nobody to talk to. And I need to, sometimes. I’m scared sometimes. Parth’s nice, but she doesn’t care about such things. All she’s interested in talking about is clothes, and boys.”

“I thought you would be talking with Cal,” he said.

She thought about that before she was able to put her thought into words. “I suppose you would think so – but it doesn’t work, not really. Cal is too much here and not enough here,” she said, touching first her head, then her heart.

He grinned. “She seems to have heart enough where Gram is concerned.”

“Oh, well,” she said, “it must not be the same heart, or something.” She giggled suddenly. “Probably somewhere a bit lower down, in fact.”

They talked on for some time, in casual words, but warmth came into Hiril’s pale cheeks and a light was shining in her eye. They were stopped by the familiar ruddy head of their mother pushing the skins aside. “Come on, you two,” she said firmly. “Enough talk now. Go to bed.” Hiril said good night then, but a look of perfect comprehension passed between the two of them; and when he crept, later, after the household was quiet, into her bed nook, she was awake and waiting for him.

“One last time,” he whispered, and saw her nod in the gloom. She lifted up the fur so he could slide in beside her. Instead of cuddling him in the old way, however, he felt rather than saw that she had put both hands up to her face. She seemed to tremble. He put his own hands up to hers, and felt the hot tears.

“Come on, Ril, come on old girl,” he whispered, “tell me what it is.” But she just shook her head violently and buried her wet face in his shoulder. He put his arms around her and stroked her hair. “Shh, it’s all right. It’s all right Ril. It’s all right now.” And holding tight to each other, the children slowly drifted into sleep.

Beren woke in the dawn and crept back to his own nook without waking her.

The winter followed its usual round of chores and sports, with talk and tales in the evenings. Beren made an effort to spend more time at the farm, and to help more with the jobs. Mindful also of Andreth's words to him earlier in the year, months ago as that was, he also asked Hiril to help him start again with his letters. He found her a patient and helpful teacher. He could not stand it for long at a sitting, but he persevered with a small amount of time every day, and soon was able to both read and write simple texts in a laborious fashion. After a while he even began to enjoy it.

He spent less time with Gorlim than before. Angrim had finally taken on a boy for one thing, which relieved Beren of a lot of the donkey work of carrying and pumping; but there also seemed to be a new sourness in the atmosphere at the forge which Beren did not at all relish. Angrim had taken to drinking openly now and seemed to spend much of his time finding woozy fault with his son. In a private moment, Gorlim told him he was about fed up. He had plans to open a small shop on his own. But he also wanted a bit of a farm, he said, so he was thinking about clearing a tiny bit of land in the valley to the North. Beren did not feel that this idea was very practical, and said so.

"Look," said the smith, "what else can I do? Nel and I want to be married. And we need a place of our own. You see how it is now with Father; it just wouldn't do, Ber, not here, nor anywhere near here neither. Well then, where? Think some farmer's going to let me camp on his land? Not likely. No, got to do it the hard way. It's that or nothing."

Beren was worried for his friend, because he had a fair idea how much work might be involved in clearing land. He also wondered uneasily what the Walkers thought about such activities, and made a mental note to sound Rattlecone out about it at an early date.

On one of his first visits to the forge that winter, he asked Gorlim for a favour – for something his father had suggested a few days before. He asked Gorlim if he could borrow a length of steel bar stock.

"And what would you be wantin' that for?" asked Gorlim in surprise.

Beren didn't quite know how to explain. "Er, well," he stuttered, "I sort of wanted to learn a bit, or practise a bit, how to fight with a sword, you know. Father suggested it would be good to do some exercise, to develop the right muscles, like you do with shooting. He said a nice heavy bit of steel would be the job. That's why."

Gorlim scratched his head. "Well, I can lend you a piece, no problem with that," he said. "Makes sense, I suppose, since you'll be gettin' your Dad's sword one of these days I imagine, though not too soon I hopes, saving your presence. Might even be able to knock you up a real one meself in a year or two."

Beren was grateful. "Thanks, Grol, I appreciate it." And with the help of Gorlim's advice he selected a length of bar stock of a convenient length and weight. Later, with Arthad's amused help, he set up a tough withy dummy in one corner of the farmyard. He spend some time every fine day in doggedly whacking this with the heavy steel bar, coming at it from a variety of angles and occasionally swapping to his left hand. The exercise made his shoulders and arms very sore to begin with but he soon toughened to it. After a few weeks he even began to wonder if he should some time exchange his bar for one of heavier grade.

Arthad also helped him to build a shelter for Goracc, and went with him to set it up – a full day's trip either way, even on horseback. Beren had to smile at Arthad's reaction to meeting a bird which could speak. Later, after the snows began, Beren went out and shot a buck. He cut the flesh up into manageable portions and parked it in the warmth of the cabin for several days, until the others began to complain about the odour. He took the whole mess then to Goracc's hill and left it high in a tree where the ravens could reach it, but not the foxes and cats. It would freeze there and keep for the whole winter.

Nobody pretended to enjoy winter, taking it as a whole, but the evenings at least were pleasant. To lay the work down at the end of a cold day and come to warm your body before the fire, while warming yourself inside with mulled ale, was a deep pleasure; one to be savoured. Beren loved to sit back on the bench in the

nook, jostled by warm bodies on both sides, blinking sleepily at the fire while he listened to the talk. Sometimes there would be song as well, or somebody would get up a tune on the harp or pipes.

One night the conversation took a turn which made him sit up straight and pay attention. Hrotha had been talking about his younger days. He said his father Garaf had been a hunter in his beginnings; he only decided to farm here a bit later, at the time when many folk were settling. "About when I were as high as you, boy," he said, looking at Beren. But they had known nothing of farming. His Dad had wanted to prove the land, said Hrotha, and settle down with his wife and nippers; only he hadn't known how. "But somebody up and showed 'im," he said, looking around at the company. "Sev'ral somebodies. An who d'yer think it were?"

Clearly most of the adults knew the tale, but nobody would have dreamed of objecting to hear it again, so they just muttered vaguely and shrugged their shoulders

"Trees!" said Hrotha. "Blinkin' trees! And lady ones at that. I'd swear on my old Dad's bones, but fact is I don't need to go so far as that, cos there's some here today what seen it too, and can go witness that ev'ry word I say is true. Ev'ry word. Now, they set to, those Tree-women, an' they 'ad my Dad a-plantin' o' corn, and a-gath'rin' of it again, and with fruit trees, an' all sorts. They larned 'im up, and they larned 'im across, and then they larned 'im back down again. T'ward the end of it, 'e had the whole farming business down pat. Only, he said they was no good with pigs. 'E 'ad to calkulate that one out on 'is own. Wore out a pig or three at it, 'e did that. Them tree-women didn't know nothin' about pigs, nor sheep neither. Stands to reason I suppose: pigs ain't trees.

"But you can never have it perfect, and my Dad were mortal glad of the help, pigs or no. A fine farm we had in the end, and still have. The only real fly in the ointment were young Marrus."

Someone made the necessary enquiry.

"Young Marrus? He were, well, he'd be a cousin o' mine, I do suppose. At remove. 'E were a young lad on a place down the road a piece. Tallak has that place now, Tallak what married that good-lookin' blond sort from northern parts."

"'Ere!" put in Methemel, looking up with pursed lips from her knitting. "You just leave off of blond sorts, my lad, and get on with yer yarn."

Hrotha looked disgusted. "Never a moment's peace," he complained. "Pass an innersent remark, and there you go. Dumped on by a ton o' brick. Well anyway. The long and the short of it were, Marrus up and vanished, round about the time we were seeing the last o' they Tree-women. There was some talk about that. Powerful pretty, some o' them creatures were – I b'lieve a man's allowed to say that about *trees*," he put in, glowering at his wife. "Powerful pretty. There were talk they might 'a lured young Marrus away with 'em. But nobody ever got to the bottom of it. Could be he just met up with some varmint in the woods – bear maybe, or even a goblin. Thick with goblins it was here then. A sight thicker than now, any road."

Beren move uneasily in his seat. This tale chimed too closely with Nose's account for his peace of mind. The talk moved on to other matters, so he learned no more about the Walker-women. He remembered however what Andreth had said about the Bëorings learning to farm. She had said that it was a strange tale; one that he had now heard, maybe. He resolved to ask her for more details when next he saw her.

### Year 445

The long, icy weeks passed at last and the sun began once again to climb higher in the sky. The first thaw came, and once again the air grew loud with the sound of many waters. The yard turned to mud, but Beren persisted with his hacking of the dummy. He had graduated by this time to a heavier bar, and the dummy was beginning to look the worse for wear. Soon he would have to get Arthad to help him make a new one.

As the spring advanced and the time drew nearer when the Druug could be expected to reappear in the northern lands, the boy began to wonder how, or indeed whether, he could in wood and camp keep up these

crude exercises. He could hardly lug bar and dummy around with him wherever he went; he was beginning to think that it would have to remain a strictly winter activity.

The change of season brought a renewal of traffic upon the roads. One day, after Beren had been out all day helping the men cut up a fallen tree, he returned in late afternoon to find that a party of Dwarves had visited the farm to bargain for woollen cloth and other goods. They were loading some of their purchases as he arrived in the yard. He thought he recognized one or two of the crew from previous years, but when he went inside to change his muddy clothes, he saw now also the same black-clad Dwarf he had seen at the smithy the previous summer. This haughty-looking Dwarf, who again seemed to be the leader of the crew – and indeed it was hard to imagine him in any other role – was discussing some details of cloth with Beren’s mother. From the expression on her face, Beren knew she was not pleased about something; but since it was no business of his, he took off his wet tunic and went out again to the yard to put in half an hour with the dummy before sundown.

The Dwarves glanced curiously at this activity as they went to and fro, and when the black-clad leader came out of the house, he paused and subjected Beren and his exercise to a long inspection. After a minute or so of this Beren wished he would go away – the Dwarf was making him nervous. At last the other tore his gaze loose and spoke with the other Dwarves, who were securing the load. Finally the wagon was manoeuvred out of the gate, and everything was ready for their departure. Black Tunic spoke some brusque words to Emeldir as she stood near the house door with a scatter of the other farm folk. He made to go then, but looked a last time towards where Beren was hacking doggedly away at his wicker dummy. The Dwarf hesitated, then changed his course and came over to Beren.

“Move your feet,” he said.

Beren, nonplussed, looked up to meet hard black eyes. “What?”

“Move your feet! Like this,” said the Dwarf, and he demonstrated, making a mock sword-stroke with a flowing movement of his whole short body. “The stroke should come from all of you, use all of your power. Shoulders alone are not enough.”

Beren tried to copy what he had seen. “Like this?”

The Dwarf’s face turned indifferent. “Good enough,” he said, then turned away.

Beren stared at the retreating back for a moment, then called “Wait!” He hurried after the Dwarf and caught him up. “You know about this?” he demanded.

“It is my life,” answered the Dwarf simply, but without pausing in his walk.

Walking sideways was awkward. “Would you teach me it?”

The Dwarf glanced at him, frowning. “What? No.” He reached the cart and began to clamber up.

Beren stood there in the mud, looking up at him. “My father says I should look for the best swordsman there is.”

“Good advice,” said the Dwarf ironically, reaching for the reins.

“But who is the best? Do you know?”

“I am,” replied the Dwarf. He flicked up the mules with the reins, and the cart clattered out of the gate, leaving Beren feeling that he had seen a great promise waved before his eyes, only to have it snatched away again.

\* \* \* \* \*

The day Beren first heard the drums in the hills, he went looking for Arthad. He found him in the stables. The older man nodded to him in greeting.

“So what’s your advice this year, Thad?”

Arthad smiled. “No advice.”

Beren matched his grin. “Any objection if I go?”

“Good enough, young feller,” said Arthad. “Pretty sure you can do it on your own now. Just don’t be thinking you know it all, all right?”

“I won’t.” Beren laughed with pure happiness, then skipped out and ran into the house. He searched until he found Hiril with Caladis in the end room.

“Can I speak with Hiril a minute, Aunt?”

Caladis shrugged acquiescence, so Hiril got up and followed the boy out of the room.

“What is it?” she said.

“I’m off,” he replied. “I just wanted to say goodbye.”

Her mouth turned down and she looked at her toes. “I miss you when you’re away, Beri.”

“I have to go, Ril. You know that. But I’ll be back, lots. There’s all that marching to and fro I’m supposed to do.”

“I won’t see you much then either – I’m not much good at those things.”

Beren stood on one foot, feeling awkward. “Look, things are changing now, Ril. We’re growing up, whether we like it or not. Look at you, you’re practically a woman. It’s got to cause some changes.”

“My body is becoming a woman’s,” she answered slowly, “but I don’t feel at home in it any more. It is full of strangeness. It’s too big, and it does things. I can’t be a child any more, but I don’t yet have the wisdom or strength to be anything else. And there is nobody who understands. Not even you, even though you come closer to it than anyone.”

He went to her and hugged her warmth. His head hardly reached her shoulders. “I’ll always be here, Ril. I just have to go away sometimes. But I always come back.”

She smiled tremulously, hugged him in return, then pushed him away. “Go on, you. You’d better be off. Take care in the woods!”

“You too!” he replied, somewhat at random, as he ran out of the room. A few minutes later he passed her again on his way to the exit, clutching his bow and bag, wearing nothing but a leather breech-clout. He flashed her a last grin, gleaming white teeth in weather-freckled face, then he was off. She came to the door and watched the copper-haired figure as it ran down the road. She sighed then and turned back to her books.

Beren for his part, although he was worried about his sister, did not think about her for long, because he had so many other things to occupy his mind. He thought with pleasure of the summer before him and wondered if it would be as full of excitement as the last one. He thought over all the strange people he had encountered and all the things he had done. The Orc-hunt; the war against the Crebain; Silmenen, Meagam, Rattlecone. And behind them stood yet others, and others; and over all of those figures that peopled his mind shone Nixenárë, Frostfire, the fabulous sword of his ancestor.

He found the Holly People where the drums had told him, in the hills not far behind Grandfather Beren’s



farm. His friends and his family greeted him with warmth, and the first couple of days were spent in catching up with their news.

Early on he sought out Willow in her tent.

“Hello, Grandmother,” he said. “You see, this time I greet you first of all.”

He expected some acerbic reply, but she surprised him by smiling at him all over her face. “My dear son,” she said, “it warms my old heart to see you. I am pleased that you visit me at any time. Sit now and tell me your news. My daughter has a brew preparing.”

The daughter, whose name was Made Bean Soup, turned her head and smiled welcome at him.

Beren sat and accepted a cup. He described some of the winter’s happenings while covertly examining the old woman. She seemed hale enough, but had she always been this thin? It was only when Willow tried to change her position that he realized how weak she had become.

The Dry Valley lay uppermost on Beren’s mind. He and the Druug had parted ways for the winter immediately after his and Nose’s exploration; the boy was bubblingly curious to know whether Willow had in the meantime come up with any way to combat the creeping evil. When he asked her, though, the old lady turned vague. “Time enough for that,” she mumbled, before turning the talk to other matters.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beren had early in the year a tryst to keep: he had arranged to meet Rattlecone and Thunderbolt at Goracc’s hill at the first full moon after the crocus bloomed. He arrived a day early and was glad to find that the old raven had passed the winter in relative comfort, and seemed fit and cheerful.

“Master Beren,” the old bird croaked, “my heartfelt thanks to you! Never have I experienced such luxury, never was I so warm and well fed since I left my mother’s nest. I am almost ashamed of it. Nay, truly, I *am* ashamed. But not enough to forego my comforts next winter, I confess.”

“Of what use then is your shame, O Goracc?” asked Beren.

“Hah! Wisdom from a chick. None at all, I admit. But let us leave this for an unprofitable subject. What have you learned in your springing life, what have you seen?”

So Beren told him of the sword-exercise, which the old bird approved of, and of his new facility with pen and ink, which Goracc found very intriguing.

“Ah! I have heard of such things,” he said, “and the Fair Folk do much with these claw-marks; that I do know. I would like to see this done, because I never have yet. Do you happen to have the makings about you?”

Beren had to disappoint him, but promised some time to bring pen and paper and demonstrate the art of writing. He mentioned then Hrotha’s tale, and added to this Nose’s own experiences with the Walker-Women.

Goracc sighed. “You have heard now some account of the Onodrim and their Visse, that is wives in man-tongue. I could add something to the tale, maybe, but what good would that serve? I should be slow to open my beak over affairs which are not my business, nor yours either. Of the Onodvisse I will say only this: they have strange gifts, which they do not bear happily. Givers of life and givers of death they are. The ones who desire order desire it too much; and the same can be said for the ones who prefer disorder. I do not see how they can ever be content, and the thought saddens me.” And he would say no more on the topic, despite Beren’s questions.

Beren did learn though, to his surprise, that the old raven and Rattlecone had known each other for some

years.

Thunderbolt turned up towards evening, and greeted the boy with his usual spare affection. He said that he was now fully recovered, and indeed he appeared so. The Walker himself, their Ent friend, did not arrive until the following morning. As they spotted him making his unostentatious way through the trees toward the rocky top of the knoll, it occurred to Beren that, for such a large figure as he was, Rattlecone could move quietly and quickly; but he supposed that if a Tree-shepherd was not at home in the woods, then nobody was.

Rattlecone stood where he had halted. Raven and eagle perched on a branch near the Ent's head, and Beren clambered up to one only a little way below. In that wise they were able to converse together in reasonable comfort.

It did not take long for boy and eagle to give their separate accounts of the terrible dry cancer which was creeping down the eastern valley. The Ent stood for a long time after they had finished, swaying to and fro. "What think you of this, Goracc?" he said at last.

"It is a thing of the earth," said Goracc. "I had thought that you Onodrim could mostly work your wills in that domain. But you tell me that you are checked?"

"Hrm yes, ordinarily we can do much with earth and stone," said Rattlecone. "But the malice behind this reaches now beyond earth. We might perhaps have contained it, had we acted earlier. We can do so no longer."

"Then it grieves me to say it," croaked Goracc in his resonant voice, "but for the moment I can think of nothing to do. Yet there must be some solution, some point of attack. Life is a struggle, true, but we are not put here simply to die by inches. We must think, and not give up hope."

"If I read the matter aright," said Thunderbolt, "this is an evil too great for us children of Arda. Only the immortal Powers have the strength to defeat such. But they are vanished from the world this long age past, and care no more, it is said, for what courses it follows."

Rattlecone replied quickly, surprising them with his vehemence. "No," he said firmly, "that is not so. They have *not* abandoned us; but it is no proper way to raise an Enting, that is a child, if one guards its every stumble, brushes aside every stinging thorn or branch. The Powers have not left us; they have but stepped back to allow us freedom to grow and to learn."

Goracc nodded his beak. "My understanding of the matter is the same as yours, old friend," he said.

"This is no small thorn that we face," said Thunderbolt dryly. "And even if what you old ones say is true, the effect is the same. They cannot help us."

"Say rather, they will not help us, unless we ask," said Goracc.

"Aye," agreed Rattlecone, "we must ask. We Treefolk would ask. But we do not know how. Our law-giver, our Queen, our holy Mother, the Power whom the Elves name as Ivon<sup>4</sup> (if one must tag with a noise of the mouth a being of such surpassing reverence), made all the living things that flower and grow, as well as those of four legs or feather; but she has no power over stones, water, or air. We know not the others, nor how to ask them for help. Yet ask we must, of that I am certain."

Nobody said anything for some time. "My cousins, the great eagles of the mountains, are the children of Manwë himself," said Thunderbolt at last, with a hesitation unusual to him. "Perhaps I should take the matter to them. Yet I do not like to call on them every time we have a check. They were not put there to be eternally rescuing us from scrapes. That is not what they are for. Their purpose is rather to be a foil and counter to the Dark One. I do not think they would be pleased to be called away to repair some, as they would see it, minor trouble with stones."

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4 or Yavanna.

The tall Ent turned to Beren. "Speaks with Birds," he said, "have your people rede in this matter?"

Most of the talk had been far over Beren's head. He had felt ever smaller and less important the longer the parley had gone on. He sat up now however and gathered his wits. "I am not sure, Rattlecone," he said hesitantly. "Our Eldest I think may have some ideas. But she has not yet told us what they are."

Rattlecone thought long before he replied. "We can wait," he said at last, "and think, as Goracc suggests. Indeed, one might almost say that waiting is what we do best."

And with that there was nothing else for it but to let the matter rest for the time being.

After bidding them farewell, the eagle flew off about his business. But as Beren made to take his own road home, Rattlecone stopped him.

"You go west, if I do not mistake?" he asked.

"Yes," said Beren, "up the valley."

"So do I," said the Ent. "We might go together. That is, if you do not mind my company?"

"No, of course not," replied Beren. "But surely you will go much faster than me, being so much bigger?"

"Ah," said Rattlecone. "Yes. Hrrm. Ah." He stood bouncing up and down slightly on his long toes; he seemed to have many more than ten. He looked down at Beren. "Hmm well, perhaps you would care to ride on my shoulders?"

Beren thought about it, and looked the tall Ent over in his turn. "The whole way?" he asked. "Wouldn't I get too heavy after a while?"

The suggestion seemed to amuse Rattlecone faintly. "Mm, no," he said. "I do not think you are so heavy. It is only half a day's walk to my home. I have carried eight times your weight, eight times as long, and not thought it excessive."

On Beren shrugging his acceptance, Rattlecone picked the boy up, carefully but without apparent effort, and lifted him onto his shoulders. Beren found this perch smooth and broad and reasonably comfortable. He settled himself in for the ride, admiring the view afforded him by that lofty height. Rattlecone's ragged-leaved head was right beside him, so he could converse easily with the tree-man.

"Did you say your home is up the valley?" Beren said to him.

"Yes," said Rattlecone. "Right up among the roots of the mountains, further up even than the hill of the Little People."

"What little people?"

The Ent looked at him sidelong out of his deep eyes. "You do not know them?"

"Well, no," said Beren, "not so as to say, 'my goodness, how small those people are.' All the people I know are much of a size. Some of them start off little – like me – but it doesn't last."

"Well then," said Rattlecone cautiously, "if you have not, perhaps I had better say no more."

"Honestly," said Beren, "you are as bad as Goracc. He is always hinting at things, then never telling me any details. He didn't want to tell me about you Onodrim. And now that I have found out all about you, he is refusing to tell me about your Onodvisse."

Again Rattlecone seemed to be amused. "So you know all about us, eh?" he said. "That is no small

achievement! But as for the Visse: my advice to you is, leave well enough alone. You will take no harm from your ignorance.”

“Is it true that they – well, that they take young men away?”

Rattlecone stopped, and looked at him. “We shall not remain trail companions for long if you continue to ask such questions,” he said sternly.

Beren was contrite. “I beg your pardon, Rattlecone. My tongue is always getting me into trouble. I am sorry. I will not ask you about Onod business again, it was most rude of me.”

The tall Ent bent his head a little and continued striding along. “You are young, and are therefore excused much. But do not forget that youth is the time you spend learning not to be young. Or at least it should be so.”

Beren did not say anything again until the pink had left his cheeks; but this never took long. In this case the time needed was just long enough for him to remember that he had meant to ask Rattlecone what he thought of forest clearing. He told the Ent all about Gorlim’s plans to clear a farm, and at the end of the tale he waited for a reply, until he realized at last that he was not going to get one.

“You don’t say anything, Rattlecone?”

“What do you expect me to say?” replied the Ent, rather curtly.

“Well, whatever you like, I suppose,” said Beren, feeling a little confused. “I thought you might be interested.”

“Interested!” said Rattlecone. “Is the shepherd interested to hear of the wolf that raids his flocks?”

Beren was silent, feeling himself flush once more. “I never thought of it that way,” he said after the tide of discomfort had receded. “I am sorry, I have said something stupid again. But... but you know, even the wolf must eat.”

“I know,” said Rattlecone, “and the shepherd knows that too. That does not mean he is glad about it.”

Beren thought some more, then said cautiously, “The shepherd goes hunting after the wolves who would eat his sheep. I hope you don’t mind if I ask... since it does rather concern me personally... er...?”

The Ent eyed him sideways. “Do Onodrim hunt Men? Is that what you want to ask? It has been suggested that we should, yes.”

This was enough to make Beren feel acutely uncomfortable and to wish that he had never accepted the Walker’s offer of a ride.

Rattlecone stopped in his tracks and sighed. “You need have no fear. None of us will harm you, least of all I. We Onodrim are in the service of life; we are different from your shepherd, whose only interest in his sheep is, after all, the meat and wool he can get from them. We care for trees because they are our charge, because they are in a sense our own people; also because we love them. Killing can never feed love.” He sighed again. “There are some, known to us, who see it differently. But of we Onodrim at least you need have no fear. We do not love Man and his axes, and with some of us the feeling runs high; but none of us would raise a hand to you. We know that you too belong in the world, that you are our distant kin; even though your ways are strange to us, most strange sometimes. We know that you need wood to burn and to build. Nevertheless, every tree cut down before its time is a grief to us. We cannot feel it otherwise.”

At the end of this long speech, Rattlecone shut his broad mouth and strode on. Since leaving Goracc’s country he had climbed over a wide, high spur, treeless on its upper reaches; he was now descending again. Beren recognized the land – they were in the high valley which climbed up to the left towards the pass

through the mountains called Anach by the Elves. The ragged line of snow-covered peaks which blocked the way to the South had been clear to see from the bare heights of the ridge behind them, and he began now to get white glimpses of them from time to time through gaps in the trees. Nose had told him that Anach was a risky route through the mountains; but, apart from the Dwarf-road, which it seemed was now impassable even for Dwarves, it was the only direct exit from Dorthonion to the South.

“What would you have us do then, Rattlecone? I feel bad about cutting wood now. But even we Drúedain must have wood for our fires. We would freeze in winter without them.” The unwelcome thought flicked through his mind that he did not actually know what ‘we Drúedain’ did during the winter. “And my friend really needs a house of his own, with a little bit of land to farm.”

“If you ask us, we could perhaps ask the trees to move and make space,” said Rattlecone slowly. “If it were not too large an area. We will not willingly give up the whole of Dorthonion to you.”

“Well, of course not,” said Beren. “We only need a little bit of it. But what did you mean, ‘ask the trees to move’? Trees can’t move!”

Rattlecone smiled sideways at him. “Can they not? Would you care to make a wager on that, young human who knows all about us?”

They continued on as the sun sank lower, conversing on many topics. Rattlecone listened more than he spoke, and Beren was never averse to chattering about his own affairs; but the boy learned some interesting things about wood and water all the same.

Rattlecone told the boy he had been born far to the East, long before the sun was made. He said he had seen the first Elves, and had, with the other creatures of the earth, cowered in terror at the wrath of the Powers when they had made war on Melkor; he who was now named Morgoth, the Great Enemy.

“They locked him up then, and had the fortune of the world favoured it, locked up he would be still,” he said. “Alas that they ever set him free! But it is not for us to find fault with those who made the world. They see reasons behind things that we could not dream of. All the same, one might observe, that good does not comprehend evil, and that an honest heart will the more readily believe lies. On the other hand, neither does evil understand good; and that might be the saving of us at the last.”

The tall Ent spoke feelingly of the dim world of his youth, of the vast forests lying under the shadows; a time when scent and touch were as important as sight. “It all seems like a dream, now,” he said. “The trumpets of war woke us from it, and I do not think now that things can ever go back to the way they were. Time moves on like a stream. Then, too, we had quiet under the stars, but now we have these watch-fires of Sun and Moon to shine light into every corner of the Enemy’s doings. We must have them while the war goes on, and there is no end of it in sight. Of course we hope for victory, and trust that we will in time achieve it. But what afterwards? Even were the Gods to call these lights home, it would not be the same. The Earth is no longer used to darkness. No, those times are lost and gone.”

He told Beren that he had travelled far in his youth. “The world is wide, young Pedar<sup>5</sup>,” he said; “wider than most folk in these parts conceive. We who are crammed in this far cold corner of it are prone to thinking that this is all there is. But there are wide lands to the East and South where many strange peoples roam the earth, uncaring of our northern troubles. Other evils there are too, and other powers. Never think you know the full story about anything – no, not even about us Onodrim! The Sower and Shaper of all things is not knowable, and there is always another leaf on that great tree.”

The high, rolling country on the far side of Anach had come to an end in a line of cliffs which fell away in precipices to the misty dark green of the forested valley below. Rattlecone found a ravine some way back from the edge and made his way down its steep and twisty bed. They emerged after a time onto a steep slope covered in tall pines. The light was fading from the sky as they finally reached the bottom and crossed the

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5 ‘Speaks with Birds’ is approximately rendered ‘Pedar ‘ni Aewin’ in Grey-elven.

river, which was here a small, loud creature, milky with stone-flour ground by glaciers in the white mountains to the South. Rattlecone continued on up the valley, keeping to the north bank of the river, since the southern bank was fenced with cliffs for some way yet. After they had come another four or five leagues, by which time all trace of day had long disappeared from the sky, their path being lit only by the young moon, Beren tapped Rattlecone politely on the side of his head.

“My people are not far now, Rattlecone,” he said. “Up the hill, that way,” and he pointed to the right.

The Ent stopped. “We can part here if you wish,” he said, “but hmmm, it was in my mind to show you where I lived. It is not much further. I am often there, and if ever you wanted to find me, it would be a good place to start. You may stay with me there tonight, if you wish to.”

Beren was curious to see what an Ent-house might be like; in all his travels in the woods he had never seen any structure, natural or made, which looked like it might fill such a role. Therefore he agreed readily, and the Ent once again took up his steady pace up the valley. Before long he crossed back over the stream and made his way up a side valley, almost a ravine, which climbed into the great hills to the South. The walls of this notch rose up steeply, hardly the distance of a stone’s throw on either side. The pines here grew thinly by reason of the many rocks: rough stony shields which broke through the soil in clusters, their rounded forms pale under the moon. The moonlight shimmered also on a brook which burred its quiet way down the centre of the gully. High ahead of them Beren could make out the ragged white-and-black horns of the mountains, austere beautiful under the moon. He thought he could smell snow on the chilly air which flowed down from the heights; and indeed, after some minutes of steep climbing, patches of it began to appear here and there in sheltered places.

The dwelling, when they reached it, seemed at first hardly to merit the name. Rattlecone made a sudden turn away from the brook and took a few steps up a steep grassy slope, pale under the moon. The ground flattened out at the top. Beren found himself then facing two huge trees, still winter-bare, whose branches laced together overhead, sketching out the form of an arch. The black dots of cones scattered over their wide outlines revealed them to be alders. Through the arch he could see a wide, grass-grown shelf which stretched back to a rocky overhang. The foot of this cliff was hidden in black shadow, but the front of the hollow was adorned by a magic curtain of falling flashes: moonlight glancing off falling drops of water.

Rattlecone paused in the archway and caressed the trees on either side. Once inside, he set Beren down on the moist turf in the cool moonlight. “This is my home,” he said simply.

Beren shivered and un-slung the skimpy sleeping fur he had brought with him. “Can you show me where I should lie?” he said. “I’d make a fire, but I think I’m too sleepy to bother.”

“Are you cold?” the Ent enquired.

“A bit,” admitted Beren.

“Hmm.” The Ent regarded him thoughtfully. “I was forgetting that you are so small and tender. Hmm hmmm. Well, come then. This way.” He led the way into the hollow at the base of the cliff. Beren followed him, dodging the drips.

Although it was difficult to see much out of the moonlight, there seemed to be a considerable opening delved into the cliff base. Rattlecone led him to a dark alcove which from the touch of it seemed to be floored with a thick layer of some sweet-smelling dry growth. The scent reminded the boy of something he could not place.

“Will this do?” asked Rattlecone in a diffident voice. “I am sorry, it is probably not very comfortable for you. I am afraid I did not really think the matter through. But I am not so used to human guests, you will understand. It makes me all the more reluctant to forbid you your fire. I would not be happy to see fire here, and I hope you will understand that too. But perhaps I can warm you some other way.”

Beren laid his fur over the soft, fragrant bed of herbs. “I am used to cold,” he said, yawning. “It doesn’t

matter.”

The Ent left the chamber, and even though he was not away for long, Beren’s eyelids were already drooping before he returned.

“Here,” said Rattlecone. “It is a bowl full of drink. Don’t spill it.”

Beren stood up, carefully felt for the bowl, and took it. “But it’s not hot,” he said, confused, because at the same instant he had just started to wonder how Rattlecone had heated something so quickly.

“It is only water,” said the Ent, “but it will warm and fill you all the same.”

Beren shrugged and took a drink, since he was thirsty in any case. And water it indeed was, although clean and tasty water from the living springs of the mountain. But as the liquid reached the back of his mouth, a feeling began to spread outward from his throat. It was a feeling of warmth, but also of strength, of percolating support. He had the curious sensation that the sinews and nerves of his body were growing and knitting more firmly into each other. He suddenly did not feel at all sleepy any more.

“My goodness!” he said. “You call that water!”

“I am not certain that I do entirely right,” said Rattlecone slowly. “It would perhaps not be good for you to drink too often of my brews. But once or twice will, I think, do you no harm. I will leave you now. Good night!”

“Good night!” called Beren, and lay back on his springy bed, snuggled in the fur. Water? My goodness. There were some marvellous things to be found in the world, to be sure. He lay there for some time, feeling warm and comfortable, and thinking over all the happenings of the past couple of days. Then all at once, before he knew it, he was asleep.

The morning dawned wet, but warmer. Beren awoke feeling refreshed and full of an extraordinary vigour. He jumped out of his bed and ran outside to find Rattlecone standing in the middle of the green shelf with the gentle rain running down his sides.

The boy danced to his side. “Hello Rattlecone. Don’t you mind the wet?”

“Why, no,” said the Ent. “A good morning to you. It is a fine day!”

Beren looked around at the wet, grey sky, and at the fog of drizzle shrouding the valley, and pursed his lips. Then he turned back and craned his neck again to look up to the tall figure. “I must be going,” he said. “Thank you for your hospitality, and especially for the drink!”

The Ent smiled down at him with humour sparkling in his eyes. “It does not seem to have done you any harm, at any rate,” he said. “Well, master Pedar, I bid you farewell for now. Come to find me as soon as your eldest speaks her thoughts on the business of the Dryness!”

Beren turned to go, but he stopped in mid-hop. “Oops! I nearly forgot. When can I show you the land my friend wants to clear?”

Rattlecone sighed. “I would rather that you did not clear it at all,” he said. “But since I cannot prevent that, I must do the next best thing, I suppose. Tell me where I should meet you. I can come in the last quarter of the moon. Would that suit?”

Beren explained the place; they agreed the time; then he left.

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Beren’s memories of the last time he had ‘done a favour’ for Gorlim were still painful; now he was

uncomfortably aware of being on the same path again. This time therefore he resolved to inform his friend fully before anything was committed.

He spent a few days first with the Druug, then flitted through the forest to the settlement at the foot of Foen. He did not visit the farm this time but went straight to the cluster of houses by the mill which housed artisans and similar people who did not make their primary living from farming. Besides seeing Gorlim, he also wanted a new bow. His present one was no toy, and could drive a heavy brass-tipped arrow through the rib cage or skull of an Orc, but it was beginning to feel a little small and toy-like to the growing boy; an impression that he particularly marked since drinking Rattlecone's potion.

The bowyer measured the boy's height and shoulder width by eye and felt the muscles of his arm. A taciturn man, he only grunted at the results, but the stave he selected was a particularly stout one. Beren strung the bow and drew it with appreciation; the added power of the bow matched well with the growing power of his arm. He quickly arranged payment with the grizzled craftsman and skipped along three doors to the smithy.

He arrived in the middle of an argument, which unfortunately had become no rare thing at the smithy. Angrim turned his red-veined and hostile face to the sound of the visitor, ready to snarl; but the moment he recognized Beren, he bared his brown teeth in an ingratiating and quite shockingly false smile, and ducked his head in welcome.

"I just wanted a few words with Gorlim," said Beren uncertainly.

"Oh, ah? Well, he'd be as well flapping his gums to your mastership as working at the piece, that's sartin," said the older man sourly. "Look at the botch he be making of it. I never saw the like!"

Gorlim finished wiping his hands on a rag then threw it down in disgust. "Just keep your hands off it," he said to his father. "What was it you was wanting, Ber?"

"Fine doings when a man's not allowed to touch what in his own smithy," grumbled Angrim as Beren led his son outside.

The boy turned then to his friend in the early spring sunshine. "Sorry – did I walk in at a bad time?"

Gorlim sighed. "No worse than usual. What is it, youngster, is it something quick?"

"Um, no," said Beren. "Not that quick. Why?"

"If there's a bit of jaw involved then let's go sit in the Rush," said Gorlim. "I could do with something to settle the dust."

They went out of the yard and down the dusty lane for a few steps to the miniature public house known as the Rush and Buttercup. Ducking under the low beams, nodding to one or two of the other customers, they sat at a table whose coarse grain had been smoothed by many elbows. The small amount of light filtering in through thick, greenish bullseye glass in the narrow windows only emphasised the darkness of the room.

Once tankards were in front of them, Gorlim asked again what it was about.

Beren moved on his bench a little uncomfortably. "Er – well Grol, you remember the Elvish fellow I got to show you those things with iron," he began.

"Can you ask!" replied Gorlim with feeling.

"And you remember how I promised not to do it again," said Beren faintly.

Gorlim gave him a long look. "Ohh, my," he said, shaking his head. "You'd better tell me all about it, youngster. Before I up and throw you in the river. Because you won't have no breath spare for talking, after."



Beren started then and told him the whole story: how he had got to know the Tree-shepherd, what sort of folk they were, and how Rattlecone had claimed that he could induce the trees to make space. As he talked, Gorlim's eyes grew rounder and rounder.

"And that's where it is," concluded Beren. "He's going to meet me in Imrath Angrod<sup>6</sup> next week. But nothing is fixed," he added hurriedly. "You don't have to agree to it if you don't want to."

Gorlim shook his head slowly and sat back. "Well that's an eye-opener, and no mistake. You do get about the place, lad. Talking birds, magic Elves, and now tree-men. I don't know what to think about it all, I'm sure."

"But will you come and meet Rattlecone?"

Gorlim looked dubious. "I don't know about that. Don't sound quite canny, nohow. Big feller, ain't he? How do you know he's safe?"

Beren scratched his head. "Um – well, I suppose I don't know, if you put it that way. But I don't know that you're safe, either. Or anyone."

His friend guffawed. "Happen you're right about me. Could explode any old day if Father keeps nagging at me the way he do." The look of apprehension settled back on his face as he returned to thinking about Beren's suggestion. But he took a sup of his beer, and when he put the mug down again there was a glint of resolution in his eye. "Well," he said, "your tree-man can only eat me once, I suppose. And I will admit, I'm powerful curious to see him."

The following week they hiked the few miles down-river to where the path leading to Aegnor's fortress forked off.

"I wonder why they call it Angrod's Valley," said Beren. "His place is much further down."

"I did hear they had it opposite in the old days," said Gorlim; "Angrod were here, and his brother had the place down river. But they had to swap. The talk was something about a love-match gone wrong. Didn't pay it much mind."

Gorlim stopped after they had gone only a little way up the valley. The stream bent right at that point and a meadow extended on its far bank back to a long, wooded slope.

"This is the place I thought of," he said. "It gets the sun; seems to be good soil. I had old Hrotha up here to look at it, he said it was all right."

Beren looked around, at the blue hills rising in the background, and at the butterflies jinking over the meadow flowers in the warm sunlight. "It's a nice place, Grol. Has Neli seen it?"

"Course," said Gorlim. "She picked it, truth be known. I had thought to start felling this summer. There's lads who would help."

Beren looked at the tall trees which covered the far slope in a dense carpet. "It's a lot of work, all the same. You'd be months at it. Look at that one there! Must be all of two yards across. And that one. Better if you see what my friend can do for you."

"Well," said Gorlim, "that's as may be. It all do sound a bit too easy, somehow. Where is he got to, anyway, your tree-pal?"

"He'll be here," said Beren. "Show me around a bit more while we're waiting."

"We put in some pegs to mark the bounds," said Gorlim. "Finding 'em again will be the job, though."

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6 Sindarin: Angrod's valley.

They wandered around for the rest of the morning and did eventually succeed in finding most of the pegs. At noon they sat to eat in a sunny, sheltered spot among some rocks near the stream. The bubble and chatter of the water made a pleasant background to their meal.

They were just brushing off the crumbs when a merlin swooped down on them. Gorlim jerked back in surprise as the bird fluttered to a landing on Beren's shoulder.

"Thing coming," the bird said laconically in Beren's ear. "Walking tree. No danger."

"Thank you!" replied Beren, and gave the hawk a morsel of the dried meat he kept about him for such occasions. He had fat and seeds ready for other sorts of birds. The merlin flew off, showing its handsome chequered underside. Beren passed the message to Gorlim, after which they both stood and waited; Gorlim somewhat nervously.

It was not long before they spotted the tall figure of Rattlecone making his way up the valley. Beren waved and they went down to meet him. He greeted the Ent, then indicated the round-eyed Gorlim, who was hanging back a little.

"This is my friend," Beren said to Rattlecone. "He wants to get married, and he needs a place to farm."

Rattlecone looked at the nervous smith with his steady old eyes. He inclined his head down as far as it would go and said he was happy to make the acquaintance. Gorlim could think of nothing to say in reply, only ducked his own head and gulped. He had not quite realized that the Ent would be so *big*.

They took Rattlecone up the slope and showed him over the land. As they went along the length of the indicated area, the Ent looked at as many of the individual trees as he could. He went up to several and touched them, almost tenderly.

"Many of these are known to me," he said gravely, "although it would take me some days to make a full tally. Some have lived much of the life allotted to them, but most are young and full of vigour. It would grieve me past telling if they were all to be cut down – as so many have been here already; so many. I would beg you to tell me what I can do to prevent that."

The two humans look at one another. "You told me you could ask the trees to move?" said Beren somewhat doubtfully.

"I could try," said Rattlecone. "Do you wish me to?"

Beren looked at Gorlim. The latter tried once or twice to speak, but his voice only came out in a croak. He swallowed convulsively and at last managed to get some words out.

"Well Master," he said, "I ain't used to an easy life, if you take my meaning. I don't hold with no pampering, 'tain't good for a man. I come here today with my young friend here, 'cause I were curious, like; but I think I would have stuck with the hard way, choose how, if it were just down to me. Would have taken the rough with the smooth. But this what you say about saving your trees, well, that's a whole 'nother side of it. A whole 'nother side. I hope you won't take it amiss of me if I say to you that I never thought of things in that light before. Trees be just trees to us, your Honour; simple, unknowing folk as we be.

"I'm not so quick with my head-piece, Master, and I would wish for some more time to mull this over. But if you can see your way to clearing me a little bit of land to use, why then, it would save me laying axe to your – well, almost sounds like they be your childer, the way you speak about 'em. I would not want to be doing that now, leastways not so casual, although a man cannot get away altogether from needing wood. But if so be as you could speak to your – speak to them, like, the trees I mean, and ask them kindly to move along a bit, well then, that would be best for all, seems to me." He ran down at that point and stopped.

Rattlecone's mood seemed to lighten considerably as he listened to this lengthy and rambling response.

“Man, you almost sound like one of us,” he said with a twinkle in his eye. “I had thought you Men were all such hasty, flighty beings. ‘Not so quick with the head-piece’: hah, that is good. I must remember that. And you speak truth. These trees are not my children: but I love them as if they were. All right. Let me hold counsel here with these tree-folk and see what might be done. It is no light matter; but since it is life and death for them, then they must move. But even then there will be much to discuss over the when, the where, and the how.” He closed his eyes and raised his arms up, long-fingered hands extended, as if feeling the air. “It will take some time. I will send word when there is more to tell.”

He just stood there then, in the middle of the bare-branched wood, looking uncommonly like a kind of stunted tree himself. Since there did not seem to be anything more to say, after a while the two humans gathered up their things and stole away.

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The spring unfolded with its usual beauty. Beren was busier than he had ever been. There were now five other groups of Druug in the northern woods; the place began to seem almost crowded. However, the Orcs were coming now in such numbers that all the Druug were kept busy. Beren took his full part in these hunts, and he was aided now by birds of all sorts who would bring him word of marauders. This intelligence was broadcast among the groups via the secret drum-talk. Although the sizes of the raiding parties had doubled, and doubled again, few of them now penetrated even as far as the Valley, and none of them returned.

Life in camp went on just the same, but Beren found less satisfaction now with his former companions. It was a smaller group these days, and the fun seemed to have leached out of it somehow. Matted Hair and Big Belly, with their scratchy growth of beard and broken voices, were spending less time now with the kids and more with the other striplings. Beren found Noisy and Beetles on the other hand to be unripe, childish. He grew impatient at their juvenile preoccupations.

With Long Hair he could not seem to stay five minutes at peace. She would be friendly at one moment, only to round on him bitterly the next. Relations between them seemed to have sunk to an endless sequence of squabbles, like summer thunderstorms drifting over the plain. It exasperated Beren, and whenever she spat at him, try as he might to control his own temper, he would too often lose it and begin to shout back. The pair of them severely tried the patience of Nose and Sunshine.

One day they had worked hard digging and gathering roots of a number of plants they knew. Beren had had the luck to come across a rare delicacy: a knob of dark fungal matter, insignificant to look at, but utterly delicious in taste. Nose had told him they were very rare in these cold northern woods.

There was not enough for more than a single exquisite mouthful. Long Hair examined his find enviously. “Play you for it,” she said to him. “Blade-stone-tree.”

“Why should I?” said Beren. “I found it.”

Her brow clouded straight away. “I might have found it as well as you. You just had luck. It isn’t fair.”

“Look,” said Beren, rolling his eyes, “we’ll cut it in half. How about that?”

“There’s not enough of it to bother,” she said. “Look at it! It’s only a nubbin.”

Loth to enter into yet another fight, Beren offered the black lump to his sister. “You take it then.”

Long Hair shook her head, backed away. “No, no. I’d never hear the end of it. Play or nothing.”

Although feeling a vexation that he tried to conceal, Beren lay on the ground and readied his hand for the old game. You started with a fist. Two fingers together meant blade; keeping the fist was stone; wide-spread hand meant tree. Stone beat blade; tree beat stone; blade beat tree. “Best of five?” he said.

“All right,” agreed Long Hair.

But Beren won the first three. Seeing his sister’s mouth turn down, he hastened to say, “Forget them. Let’s do seven.”

It was uncanny. He simply knew what she was going to do. When had that started? He had not played this game for some time.

Long Hair sat back, lip trembling. “You’re witching it. Witching it! Why should *you* learn all these things?” She scrambled up. “It isn’t *fair!*” She ran off into the bushes, sobbing.

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Willow still held her counsel, so there was no movement on the matter of the Dryness. As the weeks went by, and there was no word either from Rattlecone, Beren often wondered if anything was happening about Gorlim’s clearing. He had been past the place once or twice since then but had noticed no changes, and no sign of the Ent.

At the time when the willows were in full new leaf and the alders just bursting forth, but while weaker-spirited trees such as birches and oaks were still hesitating over their own ventures into leaf, Rattlecone came right up to the Druug camp one day to find Beren. The boy came out of the tent on hearing some commotion. Its cause was the familiar tall figure striding up the slope towards them, trailed by a trotting gaggle of open-mouthed and exclaiming Druug.

The boy ran up to his friend and greeted him. “Hello, Rattlecone! Do you have news?”

The creature looked down at him solemnly. “News? Yes, I have news. But do you?”

“You mean about the Dryness? Willow hasn’t said anything. Shall I remind her?”

Rattlecone waved a branchlike hand. “No, no. It needs time. Thought must not be disturbed. But come you now, sit on my shoulders again. We will go to fetch your farmer friend.”

Beren was hoisted up, waving gaily at his envious Druug companions. Rattlecone set off then with his long stride.

The distance to Gorlim’s valley was not far in miles, but Rattlecone appeared to be at some pains to avoid settlements of men. He took a wide detour far up onto the skirts of Foen.

“Fear Men? No!” he said in answer to Beren’s enquiry. “They could not harm me, I think, even if they wanted to. No, I think rather of their comfort. I do not wish to disturb their minds, hrrm no.”

“Comfort? I don’t know what you mean,” said the boy.

Rattlecone kept silence for a few strides, thinking what to say. “Your farming kin have turned their backs on the forest,” he said at last. “They do not want to think about it. They do not want its wild inhabitants to parade before their faces. No, no, it would not do. As a fireside tale we may be acceptable; as a living, moving reality, no. I do not think so.”

Beren heard this out in silence. He was proud of his birth people, valued them highly, even though he preferred himself to live in the forest; but he was beginning to realize that there many who did not share his estimation.

Rattlecone stopped at the edge of the forest and set the boy down. “Fetch your friend, and then we will all meet at his clearing,” he said. “Somehow I do not think he would be eager to ride on me! And it is not so far now in any case.”

Beren in fact had some trouble carrying out this errand. No-one answered when he knocked at the door of the smithy. A neighbour told him that Gorlim was staying some way up the valley with his sister. There had been some commotion, the neighbour said.

The boy had no way to let Rattlecone know about the change of plans; there was nothing for it but to set off up the river.

Beren was very used to crossing large tracts of country on foot. Although he was still very young, he was strong of body and in superb physical condition. He settled into the steady wolf-trot that eats up the miles. Just as with climbing a hill, the secret was to relax into it and not push the pace. Ingrained deep in his soul by this time was a conviction that undue haste was merely sweat wasted. There was all the time in the world. Things would come to pass in their own time; if not, then they weren't worth the having anyway. This was the Druug way of looking at things; and for all I know, it may be the best way.

He arrived at the sister's farm in mid-afternoon, having run some four or five leagues. He knew roughly where the farm lay, but at the end he had to enquire. Most of the people he spoke to had not seen the lad before and were astonished at his near-naked appearance. He could hear within houses as others were called to come and see the wild forest boy. Shutters swung wide, heads popped out of doors and windows. As soon as Beren had obtained the information he sought, he made to the open-mouthed watchers a low, sweeping bow, then ran on.

His display of grubby skin excited the same amazement at the farm itself, but Gorlim soon pushed his way through the circle of gogglers. "Beren! What are you doing here? Is Mother all right?"

"I don't know," said the boy, "I didn't see her. But I have news about – about that other thing we talked of."

Gorlim led him inside and introduced him to his sister and her man. They promptly asked him if he would like a bath. Taking the hint, he agreed; and afterwards, for the sake of harmony, he also donned the woollen clothes they set out for him. His hair he could do little with, but he bound the shaggy mop back with a leather thong.

Once he conformed a little more to their idea of how a human being should dress, the crofters found the lad fascinating company, and listened to his stories of the forest and its various peoples with absorbed interest. They knew very little about it, even though it lay at their doors.

It was some time before Beren had opportunity for a private talk with Gorlim. When they were alone at last, the young smith explained what he was doing here up-country. It was not a pleasant tale.

"The cur struck hand to Mother," growled Gorlim. "So I laid him out on the floor. Weren't no use staying after that. I tried to get Ma to come too, but she wouldn't. She wouldn't come! I just know he'll take it out on her, too. But what could I do, Ber? What *can* I do?"

Beren was silent. This was outside his experience.

"Brother-in-law were for pitching un in the pig-wallow," went on Gorlim, "but he can't expect me to be part o' that, not me own father. Wouldn't do no good, nohow. But I don't know what to do if Ma won't come away."

They left the subject then, there being nothing useful that either could say about it.

Gorlim was impressed when he heard that Beren had run all the way from Sightfoot. "But why didn't you just borrow a horse?" he said. "We can do that tomorrow for going back, any road. I don't fancy going all that way on foot meself, that's for sure. But just thinking o' that, would it be any use now? Haven't we missed our 'pointment with your big pal?"

Beren was sure that the Ent would wait for them, and said so.

“Oh, well,” said Gorlim. “I can look in on Mother, any road.” His face brightened as a thought occurred. “Neli too, come to that.”

They set off next day, Beren riding behind the smith. They had borrowed a towering gelding that made light of the double load. The two friends passed the time companionably, sometimes talking, sometimes singing; the leisurely clop of the hooves providing a convenient tempo. The sun had not risen high when they reached the path to Gorlim’s staked-out parcel of land.

As the horse rounded the last bend, the two of them almost fell off it from shock. The slope which had previously been thickly wooded was now bare. The ground everywhere looked churned, as though by giant swine rooting for tubers.

They pulled the horse up and jumped off. Gorlim stood there, hands on hips, taking in the sight.

“Man alive,” he breathed, “he did it! Just look at that!”

There was movement at the near side of the clearing. Beren at least was not surprised to find that it was Rattlecone. The Ent detached himself from the line of trees and stumped up to them, grunting a greeting in his resonant voice.

Beren started to explain the reason for the delay, but Gorlim stopped the boy’s flow of words with a hand on the shoulder and a look. The smith turned then to the tall Ent.

“Mister,” he said, “I don’t know how to thank ’ee. I’m that pleased that your trees have made room for me, so’s I don’t have to go a-cutting of ’em. I don’t know how you did it, but I’m just that grateful and pleased, I don’t know what to do with meself, and that’s a fact.”

Rattlecone raised himself up on his toes once or twice at this. “Hrmm,” he said drily, “so, so. I am glad we have reached an accommodation. Hrm yes. But I imagine you will still need some wood to build with.”

Gorlim looked down in embarrassment, but then up again. “Well, your Honour, there’s no sense denying it. Yes, I will. Wood for a house, and for fence posts; to burn in winter too, come to that. I’m sorry about it, but it seems to be the way things are in this life: one man’s fortune is another man’s sorrow, so to speak.”

“Perhaps we can accommodate each other there, too,” said Rattlecone. “Can you tell me something of the sizes and amount of the timber you require?” So for some time Gorlim led him over the patch of turned-up soil, describing where he planned to set fences and so forth.

“About here’s where we thought to build the house,” the smith said, “but truth to tell, I’m hard put just now to say exactly where it is we lit on. It looks some different with no trees here. I must fetch Neli up here and see what’s to do. Seems to me it might be better to have it down there a ways, down-slope a piece. But sorry, Mister, you was wanting to know about timbers. Well, I dunno what to tell you. There’s all sorts goes into a house.”

“I have seen human houses,” said the Ent. “Just pace out the outline for me.”

So Gorlim paced out the dimensions he and Neli had in mind. At Rattlecone’s further prompting, the smith told him something of the arrangement of rooms they wished to build.

“Come with me now,” said Rattlecone. They followed him a long way, first across the stream, then into the rolling country on that side. They had to jog now and then to catch up, and Gorlim grew red in the face and was puffing before the Ent reached his destination.

There, towering before them, they beheld a huge tree, a true forest giant; but grey and dead. A last few mournful dead leaves were scattered high in its branches. There was a tall hole in the base, and the heart seemed to be hollow for a long way up, but there was clearly a great deal of fine wood remaining.

Gorlim eyed the tree, but a look of embarrassment was on his face. "I do appreciate your effort, Master," he said, "but I just don't think we can manage with this one. Look at the size he be. 'Twould be mortal dangerous to fell it, for one thing; and it's a long way to haul. I don't want to seem ungrateful, but the job's got to be doable, and that's all there is about it."

"Wait," said the Ent, "and stand well back."

Puzzled, the two humans retreated several paces. Rattlecone waved them back further, and yet further. They saw him go close to the tree and stroke it with his many-fingered hands. The Ent seemed to be whispering, although they could not hear what he was saying. This went on for some time.

Gorlim was uneasy. "Do you know what's afoot?" he asked Beren in a low voice. The boy shrugged his total bafflement in reply. They waited in slowly gathering apprehension.

The quiet of the forest was suddenly broken by a loud crack. Another crack came, and then a whole volley of them. Wondering eyes saw dust puffing away from lines up the whole length of the tree. The air became shaken by a gathering groan, until all at once, the whole tree collapsed with a roar of sound into a billowing cloud of dust and chips.

"Look out!" cried Gorlim, and he pulled the boy back as the cloud of dust enveloped them. Ends of wood and bark went flying past them through the air.

After the noise and motion had settled, the two spat out sawdust and tried to wave the clouds away to see what had happened.

The sight revealed when the dust dispersed was enough to astonish them all over again. Where the great tree had stood was just a tall pile of broken wood. But although it was interspersed with random trash, the truly astonishing thing was that most of the wood appeared to be neatly squared-off planks and spars.

Rattlecone was standing next to the pile, brushing bark junk off himself. The two humans ran up.

"Are you all right, Rattlecone?" asked Beren.

"How did you *do* that?" Gorlim wanted to know.

The Ent took no notice of either question. "Now you have timber," he said to Gorlim. "I hope it is sufficient for your present needs. I will carry this back for you. It will be at the stream side for you when you return."

Gorlim tried stutteringly to thank him, but the Ent brushed this aside. "No thanks are necessary," he said. "We do but accommodate each other, is that not so? And now I think we have concluded our business together?"

"Aye, Mister," replied Gorlim, eyeing him in lasting wonder, "I suppose we have that. And you have my very best thanks, whether you want them or not. But I'd better be getting back. I want to fetch my Neli; and get a plough on that land; and lots of things." He looked around, perplexed, at the featureless forest surrounding them. "Ah. Now there's a come-up. Don't rightly know which way we came."

Beren laughed and grabbed him by the arm. "Come on," he said, "this way. Goodbye Rattlecone, and thank you for everything!"

Rattlecone smiled. "Until next time then, young Pedar." He waved farewell.

\* \* \* \* \*

A little later in the season, the Holly People found time to visit the Elves of Aegnor's following for two days of dance, feast and song which glowed in Beren's memory like a polished jewel, or some brilliant forest butterfly. Shortly following that occasion, Beren was called again to practise manoeuvres in the militia. For

some of that time he came under the command of his mother, and found the alteration in her manner on these occasions as impressive as it was scarifying. Although it could not be said of Emeldir that she lacked assurance in the normal life of the farm, in similar wise to Gramlach, she seemed entirely at home in a martial setting. Beren came also to realize just how physically tough his mother was. She led her pupils through a demanding routine of long and late marching and manoeuvres, but she was ever at the front and seemed eternally fresh. Orders came from her promptly and were always brisk and to the point.

In the evenings at the farm, Beren found Hiril friendly enough, but no longer so disposed to talk. She spent much time by herself, turning over who knew what thoughts in the privacy of her head. Direct gaze seemed to make her uncomfortable: she would stand with her back to a corner, arms crossed defensively over her chest.

Beren's last day at the farm for that stint was the first really warm day of the year. He saw Hiril in the morning, but when he wanted to leave, he could not find her.

He poked his head into the kitchen, where he found only Mari with her mother. In reply to his query, Mari only shrugged and said she had not seen Hiril since the noonday meal; but old Methemel said, "Maybe she's up in that old pool there, lad. She be that fond of it, tha knows; and the day so warm an' all."

Beren stood stock still for a second, then turned and ran. He was a fast runner. He sped out of the gate, to the open-mouthed amazement of Dagnir and Mal, and in no time he had reached the gully of the dam. He leaped up the path to the top like a gazelle. As the water surface came into view, the white form of Hiril burned into his eyes like a flash of fire. His sister was floating motionless in the shallow water.

Heart in his mouth, he dashed towards her. "Hiril!"

The girl reared up in shock at the sound, then swiftly covered her nakedness with her arms. Wet, dark hair streaked her white face as she stared at him.

Her shock turned to fury. "What do you think you're doing?" she hissed. "Why must you always hound me? Can't I get a moment's peace?"

The boy sat shakily down on the bank, heart still thumping. "I thought something had happened," he said. He had to say something.

"I haven't got any clothes on. Go away. Go *away!*"

He turned around to face the other way. "I'm not going away until you come out and talk to me. There, I've turned my back. Now come out."

The girl clambered out, seeing no alternative. She dried herself furtively and pulled on her damp clothes, then sat down beside him with a sullen flump. She busied herself wrapping the wet rope of her hair in the towel.

"I know exactly what you are going to say," she said, "and if you ask me, you need your head opened and your brains examined. And if you keep on nagging and nagging at me this way, I might just be the one to do it."

Beren said nothing.

"So you had a bad dream," Hiril went on. "You were a baby. Babies have bad dreams. It's time you grew up and left this nonsense behind you. Maybe then I might have a little peace."

He shook his head. "That dam is not safe. You only have to look at it."

"Beren, that dam has been here since Hrotha was a boy. And nothing has ever happened to it yet. If it has been happy to sit there, rain or shine, for all that time, then it is going to keep on being happy to sit there."



She looked at him, frustration written on her face. "It's only sense, but you are too pig-headed to see it."

He sat there, feeling helpless. "I can't make you stop. I can't *make* you understand. But can't you do this for me? Don't I mean even that to you? Is it so hard to find somewhere else to swim?"

"This is the only place nobody else comes to," she said.

"With good reason," he said.

"It isn't fair of you to twist my arm this way. It isn't in the least bit fair. Why do you do it?"

"So it isn't fair," he said. "Will you do it for me?"

She looked at him sidelong. "If I promise, will you stop hounding me about it?"

"Hi-ril!"

"Oh, all right," she said. "All right! Look, I won't come any more. I promise. Does that make you happy?"

He looked in her face carefully, searching for signs of deception, but found an opaqueness in her which he had never before encountered. He could not tell if she was lying or not. But what else was there to do?

"Happier," he said.

"Well thank the Powers for that. And now that you've spoiled my swim, I suppose we'd better be getting back."

They trudged together back down the road, both feeling the same complicated mixture of affection and annoyance. At the house door, he stopped her.

"Look, Ril, I've got to go," he said.

She raised a hand and patted him on the cheek just the tiniest bit too hard. "Walk safe," she said, and went into the house.

\* \* \* \* \*

Eilinel and Gorlim's wedding took place on Midsummer's Day.

The miraculous clearing of Gorlim's land, no less than the appearance on it of a huge pile of seasoned and cut timber, was the talk of the whole district. The smith's explanation was received with blank suspicion. People said that no good would come of it; it weren't neither canny nor right to get such advantage from woodland powers, even supposing the wild tale were true. The smith's dogged reiteration that he had only done it for the sake of the trees drew sceptical shakes of the head, and knowing grins, until he became so vehement and red-faced in his insistence that people learned to avoid the subject in his presence.

Beren's role in the affair had not improved his reputation in the community. They had always disapproved of such a likely young lad going off to live with the Wild Men; but now, after this latest episode, disapproval became tinged with apprehension. The old stories of his unnatural powers were revived and elaborated.

All the same, the local people were not inclined to sacrifice practicality for dry principle. They did not quite approve of the young smith's sudden access of fortune; but there it was, the thing was done. And Gorlim was after all a good fellow, well liked and respected in the district. If he chose to consort with strange beings and powers, well, that was his folly. In the meantime, there was the land, and there was the wood. Many hands set to with a will to help him fence his land and build a cottage on it.

It was a fine cottage, admired by all hands. They set it in a sheltered hollow of the land, but with a fine view

down the valley. They made a little barn on one side of it, and a little smithy on the other. A pig-sty and a byre were also planned. A plot near the cottage had been hastily fenced against rabbits and deer, and now had late vegetables planted in it. The cottage itself was built of stone, which was something of an innovation in the district. Exciting of particular notice were the windows: the local glazier had excelled himself and had produced many panes of a clear, white glass. The front window had a wide central expanse of leaded diamonds and a decorative border of leaves and roses. Its windows made the interior of the house light and airy by day; in the evenings, the yellow lamplight shone out of them in a most welcoming fashion.

Since Gorlim's own father was judged neither willing nor capable of the undertaking, Barahir sat with Gorlim on the eve of the wedding for a quiet talk. Eilinel being an orphan, Emeldir performed the same office for her.

"I don't set myself up as an expert in such things," Barahir said to the young smith, "but I've been a husband quite a few years now, and I've learned a number of things in that time about what does and what doesn't make a happy marriage, which experience I offer now to you.

"It isn't all that hard actually to keep a woman happy. A woman can put up with a lot of hardship in my experience; they can work hard and deal with shortages and so forth without complaint. The one thing she needs is to feel loved, to feel special, appreciated. It doesn't necessarily take much: just a word and a smile now and again. And listen to her, really listen. Sometimes a woman just needs to talk about things, talk her worries out."

Emeldir at the same time was saying, "Keeping a man happy is really not a big job – bed and a full stomach are most of it. But most men make things, or do things. Work and the power to do it are important for a man. So find out about the things he does. Be interested, pay attention; and give him proper praise for them."

Barahir: "It's always better if you can do things together. You work hard, Gorlim, I know you do; but so does she. It's ugly when a man sits around at close of day while his wife still labours. Don't do that; pitch in. There's no such thing as woman's work, or man's work: there's just work."

Emeldir: "Nobody could call Gorlim lazy, but watch out he does his fair share of things, in the evenings particularly. Some men are funny about that, and you want to set the expectations firmly from the start. Don't allow yourself to be taken advantage of."

Barahir: "Young fellow, you'll probably be looking forward to another side of marriage; to playing the bull a bit. You know what I mean. Well, that's understandable. But you need to remember that men are not bulls. Never, never force: always persuade. That's not necessarily an uphill job – a lusty young maid usually doesn't require much in the way of persuasion." His lips twitched. "Or an older one either, for that matter. But just remember, being married to Eilinel doesn't mean you own her, nor that you have any rights over her body. If you want to have fun inside the bed border, you'll have to work a bit for it. But if you put a little effort in, you'll be repaid tenfold."

Emeldir: "Of course being married means the physical part of it. You're a farm girl, I don't need to draw you a diagram! But the thing is, it needs to work differently between human beings. We're not cows just to be led into a field and mounted whenever the bull pleases. Never let yourself be forced; don't stand for it. I hope and trust my husband is putting a bit of a flea in Gorlim's ear about that. And in any case, that's not how it is supposed to work at all. It's a pleasure and a bond for people. If the two of you can get this right, then it can be simply glorious between you. And I do speak from experience! I've been so lucky."

Barahir: "Find out what she likes, the kinds of touch, and do it for her. Let it be like a love-gift. Tenderness and a soft touch are always a popular item with women, but sometimes they like a bit of wildness for a change too. There's no book of rules, you just have to develop a feeling for it."

Emeldir: "Don't just lie back there and let him do all the work. Find out what he likes, and if you can, do it for him. Make it your love-gift. Men can be surprisingly shy, and reluctant to ask; or they don't want to be always asking. Don't be afraid to offer things, or to start things."

Barahir: “Now there may be times, surely will be times, the oftener as you get older, when you can’t perform. My advice is, firstly, don’t worry about it. It happens to all of us from time to time, it’s normal. Just be a bit patient. Next day – sometimes even half-an-hour later! – things will work again as good as new. The other thing is: at such times, don’t just roll over and leave her hanging. You’re more than just your pizzle. Use your imagination.”

Emeldir: “Some nights you just might not feel like it – you’re tired, or you’re messy or cramping with your monthlies, or for whatever reason. And you absolutely shouldn’t do it if you don’t feel like it. But just remember, it’s hard for a man to want to and not be able to. Exercise some kindness. You’re more than just your fanny. Use your imagination.”

The wedding took place on a stretch of meadow not far from the place where Gorlim and Beren had eaten their lunch earlier in the year. A half-acre or so had been mown, and many tables and benches which had been brought up by carts stood there now in rows under the warm sunlight of a perfect summer morning. An outdoor oven had been built of bricks to one side, and before the day was far advanced it was hot and active. Other food items had been prepared beforehand and brought on the carts. The whole district had been invited, and a large proportion of it had managed to come. Maegam was there with his partner Limchelos, a dark-haired Elf-maid with dimples which she put to frequent use. Annag had come of course, and even Angrim had managed to sober up for the occasion and was strutting about, trying to look important.

The ceremony itself was conducted by Fréagond, who at seventy-five was the doyen of the district. He was a fine-looking man, still straight and vigorous, with a mane of shining white hair. Eilinel and Gorlim stood before him under a wicker arch wound with roses, all standing there open under the sky, lit by the noonday sun. Parth was Eilinel’s handmaiden; Gorlim was flanked by the carpenter’s burly son. Gorlim was looking uncommonly awkward in uncomfortable-looking ‘best’ clothes, his big hands red and raw from a scrubbing which had nevertheless failed to evict all the grime from their finer cracks and creases. Beren thought he resembled nothing so much as a panicky squirrel backed into a corner. Eilinel on the other hand was looking radiantly happy in a dress of gleaming, misty-white material which had been cunningly cut to flatter her figure. There was not a man there who did not think she looked ravishing; indeed several of the younger spirits were asking themselves why they had not paid a little more attention to someone they had formerly dismissed as a rather plain and dumpy farm-girl.

The dress had been Maegam and Limchelos’s gift, conceived in conspiracy with Annag and Emeldir.

When everybody’s attention had at last been gathered up, which had needed Barahir to stand up finally and bawl above the chattering crowd for quiet, Fréagond began.

“Friends!” he said. “This is a glad day, a bright day, a day to remember. You all know Gorlim, our worthy smith here,” but catching sight of Angrim’s frown he amended this to, “the son, of course, of our other worthy smith; and you all know Eilinel, and you value her as I do, for her gentle nature as much as for her honesty, her diligence, her skill, and for her many other fine qualities.” Here Eilinel blushed a deep red and bowed her head. “I have said nothing so far about her looks,” went on Fréagond, with humour in his eye, “and this has been to spare not only her own blushes, but the feelings of some others who are here today. I speak of all you other young fellows, who have allowed Gorlim to beat you to such a beautiful prize.” There was a general laugh at this. “Well, you will just have to chew your fingernails and bear it as best you can. The fact remains that Gorlim is the lucky fellow who has persuaded Eilinel to make her life with his.

“I stand here therefore before you with the glad duty of declaring between them the bond of marriage.” He turned around then to face the couple, and took one of their hands in each of his.

“Gorlim, son of Angrim and Annag, do you promise to love Eilinel with your whole heart, and to stand together with her through the good times and the bad, the full and the lean? Do you promise to guard her, to care for her, and to work hard for her?”

“I do that, Sir, with all my heart,” muttered Gorlim in a low voice.

“Say therefore after me: Eilinel, I thereby pledge thee my vow to wed.”

Gorlim turned to Eilinel and repeated the words.

“Eilinel, daughter of Nathron and Maervess, do you promise to love Gorlim with your whole heart, and to stand together with him through the good times and the bad, the full and the lean? Do you promise to support him, to care for him, and to work hard for him?”

“Yes, Sir,” whispered Eilinel; and she in her turn pledged her faith to Gorlim at Fréagond’s prompting.

Fréagond had them kneel before him then, and placed a hand on each of their heads. “Freely under heaven, in the sight of all men, and in the sight of those Powers who made and ordered all good things, we find here Eilinel and Gorlim, who having jointly resolved to join their lives together, for the purposes firstly of drinking from the cup of that deep joy which only true couples can know; and secondly for mutual support and help; and thirdly in the hope of children of their union; I do therefore declare to be a wedded pair; and let none seek to damage or intrude upon that bond, but rather hold it as sacred as they do themselves.” He stepped back then, raised the couple to their feet, and smiled at them. “Now you may lawfully – and thus, of course,” and he winked broadly at the onlookers, who laughed on cue, “for the first time ever, we are sure! – kiss one another.” The blond-bearded young smith bent to take his tender young bride in his strong arms, and she raised her own white-clad ones to wrap around his neck. As they kissed under the brilliant light of noon, all the people cheered. Then in laughter and in talk the whole company settled down to the really important business of the day: enjoying the feast.

Beren took his turn to kiss Eilinel’s soft cheek and to pump Gorlim’s hand; then he sat down next to Hiril and happily began to stuff himself with the several varieties of delicious food on offer. The children of his table all drank too much beer and became very silly. Afterwards, differences forgotten, Beren linked arms with the rest and danced and sang until late. Leaving out being sick at the end of it, and the terrific headache he had the next day, it was a grand occasion.

Looking back long afterwards, he thought it was perhaps the last truly happy day of his childhood.

\* \* \* \* \*

That summer, as always, the People moved camp often, but this year they never seemed to move far at any one remove. It took Beren some time to realize that the short journeys were tailored to Willow’s failing powers.

There was no discussion, no planning, but the chain of camp sites wandered steadily toward the South and East. Eventually they found themselves in that wild valley, already familiar to the boy, which wound its way to the South of the granite fastnesses which occupied the centre of Dorthonion. Rising behind them stretched the slopes up which Beren and Nose had climbed the previous autumn.

The drums told them that the others were camping not far away. There was drum-talk almost all the time now.

The cicada days of summer had come. The fiery midday sun pours straight down out of a hard blue sky; no bird flies in the heat, beasts seek their holes. Swine on farms lie crowded into narrow bars of shade, their only movement the flicking at flies of an irritated ear. Far to the North, wild cattle wallow to their nostrils in pools, closing their great eyes against the shimmer of heat in the layer of air above.

The People too dozed in what shade they could find during the height of the day. Men sought in vain for shelter from the merciless light. Forests that formerly had seemed most dense and dark now offered scanty shelter from the pricks of intolerable glare from high above. Drowsy and uncomfortable, flinching from spears of light that jabbed the eye, the Druug crept from place to prickly place, seeking in vain for somewhere cool. As they moved, blades of hot light slid over skins made sheeny with sweat. The interminable zither of insects maddened with its monotony, and the air was thick with the hot perfume of the

stoic pines.

At the end of one long, hot afternoon, Beren and Long Hair were cooling off in the valley stream. The main waters were snow-fed, thus cold enough to set the teeth chattering no matter how hot the day; but the children had found a warm spring. They were luxuriating now in a little pool in which one could choose one's temperature by moving just a little this way or that. The ground at that hour lay in shadow, but the low-slanting sunlight, which at that hour in that season still felt hot to the skin, burned tawny gold in the tree tops.

White Teeth, an active, handsome girl with fine eyes, found them splashing in the lovely water. "Grandmother Willow would like to speak with you, Speaks with Birds," she said to Beren, flashing the teeth she was named after.

Beren looked at Long Hair, who simply shrugged. The People had no fixed government or hierarchy, but they all held it proper to comply, when one could, with the wishes of older people.

"All right," he said to Teeth. "I'll be up there directly."

He found Willow, as was usual with her these days, lying on a bed made from ferns and leaves covered with a skin. Her resting place had been chosen near an opening in the trees so it could receive cooling air. The old woman looked browner and slighter than ever – like a piece of dried meat, thought Beren. He felt he could almost pick her up with one hand.

"How goes it, Grandmother?" he asked as he settled down beside her.

"I am sorry to interrupt your swim, Speaks with Birds," said the old woman. "That was thoughtless of me."

He shrugged. "The river will still be there tomorrow."

She mumbled her gums at that, thinking thoughts she did not say. She said finally, "Tell me again about the Dryness. Tell me of your talk with the Walker, and with your bird friends."

Beren had briefed Willow on this conversation soon after it had occurred, but he reprised now again what the three of them had said about the terrible wasted valley which lay now not far off to the South and East.

At the end of it, Willow's wrinkle lips twisted into a wry smile. "For all your Walker friend's supposed scorn of words, you will notice that he is still caught in their net," she said. "Indeed it is said that the Walkers love words so much, they can spend a whole week just saying hello. Have you heard them at it, in their own speech?" she chortled. "No? Ah, you must. It is like some strange, deep, wild music. All the magic of the woodland is in Walker speech, that which they use among themselves.

"But I waste time. To the business. I have thought on this long. I think your Walker is right: aid is needed. Aid of the gods. But there may be more ways than one to petition for it." She thought some more, and finally sighed. "Thank you, dear son. That was all that I wanted, you may return to your waters now. But tomorrow I think we must all have some more talk on this matter. More words, yes. All of us. All of the People who are now here."

As the first grey light began to creep over the world the next morning, the drums began to speak. Beren went up the hill, following the sound, but also enjoying the bird-talk and the brief coolness of the morning air. He found Antelope sitting around a large drum on which he was thumping a stuttering rhythm. The man's legs were clasping the drum firmly while his palms struck the surface. By skilful choice of place to strike and by angling his hands, he could vary the quality and pitch of the sound. He would run through a phrase, at a volume which was hard to bear at such close quarters, and then he would sit for a while listening. Faint replies came from several quarters during these pauses.

Antelope nodded to Beren as soon as he saw him, without breaking the rhythm of his drumming. The boy sat at a comfortable distance and watched him at work, while listening to the throbbing sounds.

Whenever Beren was asked in later years about the drum-talk, he found it a thing difficult to describe. He said that it was nothing so simple as coded speech; that is to say, there was no particular pattern of notes to represent any given word. Instead, the drummer painted a picture in sound, in which emotions were carried as much as factual information. Drumming involved a great deal of repetition and subtle elaboration. The more Beren heard of it, the more of it he understood, and the more of it he came to realize there was to understand. He arrived at last at the view that there was more, far more, that could be said with the drum than by anything so crude as speech.

So now he understood very well that Antelope was conveying the need to gather, and to talk. A sense of urgency and importance was conveyed; also a sense that these matters were not new, but things already known; also a sense that the concern was not common, not natural, and not addressable by ordinary means. There were a hundred nuances to be caught, and many more which Beren was sure he was not catching. He listened carefully as always, and also as always, the more he heard, the more he felt he was feeling his way steadily deeper into the thought of the drum.

Later in the hot day people began to drift in from the woods. Everybody gathered in a wide glade on top of the hill. Whole families came quietly in, and single men and women. Young and old came, large and small, Druug of all shapes and sizes. As the rays of the sun began to angle towards sundown, small fires began to be kindled. Beren had never seen so many of the People together at one time: there must have been a hundred, perhaps a hundred and fifty of the stocky brown people gathered there. More were still coming. They moved silently after the manner of Druug, but a low hum of talk filled the glade, punctuated, as old friends met again, by the gentle, free laughter of the People.

By way of the usual mysterious consensus there was a drift towards the centre at sundown. Willow was there. She was sitting on a wolf skin, surrounded by several members of her family. Around about, people were setting up poles and tying torches to them. These smelled strongly of fish oil, but they burned with a bright, pale flame.

As soon as all were gathered and settled, Willow got to her feet with the aid of her oldest daughter, Made Bean Soup. The sky above her was still glowing a deep blue, but the evening had advanced far enough that the golden, wavering light of the torches flickered brighter now on her withered face than the waning daylight.

“I bid you all welcome,” Willow began, “ye of our People, from near and far, of all natures and notions and sizes.” In slow words, the old woman described the matter before them. She told of the warning from the Walkers; of the journey of Big Nose and his son here Speaks with Birds; and of Speaks’ recent parley with the Walker and the birds. She wound to a halt finally, and sat down. Nose had to stand up then and give his account, and finally Beren.

When the boy stood, he saw the People’s bright eyes all fixed on him. His found his knees inclined to shake. Some in the audience, those who already had heard or seen something of Beren, were whispering of the wonder to others. Speaks with Birds! Truly named, he who could speak with all the wild things. They observed his paler skin, his copper-tinted mop of hair, his blue eyes catching the lamplight, and they marvelled.

After Beren had said his piece and had sat down again, the talk went back and forth. As the evening deepened, people argued and interrupted one another, and the talk would often drift away from the matter in hand. However, with a word from Willow, or from other quarters, the conclave would somehow find its way back on track. There was no organization to the meeting. People came and went; others gnawed at roasted ribs, or passed cups of soup about.

A man stood up after a while. He was more bald than not, only a tattered fringe of greying hair remaining. He told them he was called Gap Tooth, for reasons that were obvious to all.

“I was born of the Seal People,” he lisped, “who hunt beside the zestful waters, far to the South. Far have I travelled in my life. It is cold here in the North, and at times I still miss the sound of the Great Water. But I

found a woman of the Bear People who warms my heart, and the sound of her voice means more to me than the waves on the sands. So here I have stayed.

“In my mind is a story that my father told to me. A great storm there was upon a time, ran his tale; rain which went on for days and days. The waters rose, the sky was dark. Sometimes the rain would stop, and the hopes of the people would rise; but always the rain would start again after only a little while. The people could not hunt, and the flood water was evil to drink. The balance was lost, the land was being ruined. At last, in their despair, the People of that time fetched out their drums. They drummed to the rain and the storm, trying with their speech of drum to speak to the wayward elements, to persuade them back to their duty. They drummed for a day, two days, maybe more. No-one reckons of time in the heart of the drum. They spoke their despair to the storm, they spoke of their need, and of the dumb creatures too and their need. Many took part, even to the young people who had not the knowing of the drum. They all came together, and they drummed with one voice, for their need was not the need of this one or that one, but the need of all together.

“The storm heard their plea, and broke. It broke, and the rain stopped for good, and the clouds pulled away, the sky could be seen, the sun shone. The storm heard them, and forbore. And this is as it must be, because They who made the world are not our enemies, but our friends and elders, and they will heed our need at the last.

“Hearing your tale of evil, I ask myself, if the drums spoke to the storm in my father’s day, could they not speak to the storm in our day? But this time, not to send it away, but to summon it.”

There was dead silence at the end of his words. All there felt exactly as Beren: that Gap Tooth had hit the true note. The Seal man had found the way. There was no more speech, and as the minutes passed, people began gradually to drift away to their own fires.

Beren went over to Willow. She was lying on her skin, looking tired and shrunken. She grasped his hand when he came to her. “I knew there had to be a way,” she whispered to him, her eyes shining. “Come, Speaks, help me down this hill. Tomorrow will be busy.”

\* \* \* \* \*

It was indeed busy the next day. People from the various tribes gathered early and discussed practical matters. It was known that dryness was the danger. They must take water with them; but that was only the first of the things they must take. Human skin as well as that of the drums must be protected; for that, they gathered as much tallow as could be found. Hunters went out to fetch more. Drums were needed, and still more drums; thus withies and hides. There should be pattens to protect the feet, and a sort of snow-goggle for the eyes.

Beren was everywhere, working together with Long Hair, and Big Belly, and Noisy. He did not have the skill to make anything, and there were better hunters than he, but there were a thousand things also for unskilled hands to do. Late in the day it became clear that they would not be able to start on the morrow. Long Hair and Beren worked on after dark, until Sunshine came and fetched them away. After a quick sup, they curled up together and fell at once into an exhausted sleep.

The older woman smiled a little wistfully at the two tired-out children as she covered them with a deer skin. The dark head and the copper: what would they come to in the end? Ah well, she thought, one day at a time.

The next day began with that haze of grey around the horizon which is the forewarning of a truly hot day. Indeed, the first red touch of the rising sun felt already hot upon the skin.

The work went on, and towards noon the gear began to be loaded onto several travois.

There had been argument about the route. Beren and Nose had avoided the Dwarf-road on their own expedition; they had in fact walked roughly parallel to it, and had only sought it first far to the South. This seemed the natural course to the Druug, and many now argued for it. The consensus only began to swing

when full understanding sank in of the weight they would have to drag. In the end, they decided to strike East rather than South, aiming to find the made road as soon as possible.

Beren went to Nose about noon the next day and asked about pattens and a mask for himself.

The old man looked him up and down. "You will not need them, Speaks with Birds," he said, "because you are not coming."

"Yes, I am," said Beren. But Nose just shrugged in answer. Beren thought for a little, then went to find Lion Scar, who he knew had been making pattens.

"Scar, could you please make me some shoes, and a mask thingie? I want to come."

Lion Scar looked at him in surprise. "I do not think that is wise, Speaks. This is not some light-hearted jaunt we go on. You know the young people will stay behind."

"I have hunted Orcs by myself, and other creatures of the Enemy too. I do not see why I should not come now."

Scar struggled to find the words to express himself. "That is not the same. Against an Orc you may match your skill. The greater the skill, the lesser the danger. But this, this dry thing cares nothing for how skilful you are. It is an elemental power. How is it that you do not understand that? Did you not see it for yourself, when you went with Nose? Or have you forgotten so soon? I did not go, I did not see, but I can perceive clearly what it means, and I find it all the stranger that you cannot."

Beren felt stubbornness rise in him like a bitter spring. "I do not see why you older ones should all go, but not I. Even Willow is going."

Lion Scar grasped him by the shoulder. "Willow is going because she must. I doubt she will come back. I am not sure I will come back myself, or any of us if we do not succeed, which is something none of us can know. And I am big, my body holds much water. You, Speaks with Birds, are small. And that is all that matters here. Could you drum, it might be different. But you have not learned the drum. We need as many drummers as we can get – perhaps more than we have."

Beren's mouth set firmly. "I don't care," he said. "I am coming, whatever you say. If I cannot drum then I can carry drums, or water. Or I can look after Willow. So if you will not make me some shoes I must make them myself, or hobble along with none. So tell me which it is to be."

Scar looked at him and sighed. "Speaks with Birds, if you live, you will make a doughty man. I say 'if'. All right. Come back in half an hour."

Beren hugged him in thanks and ran off to find some job that needed doing.

The burning sun sank low; the long, hot day came to a close at last. All the work was done, and the People rested themselves in preparation for the effort tomorrow. All up and down the slope, the twinkling lights of fires were to be seen.

Nose had made no comment when Beren returned bearing pattens and mask. The family sat around the fire, talking of all kinds of things except the task looming in front of the People. That neither Sunshine nor Long Hair was coming in the morning, Beren knew; but nobody said anything about his own plans.

In the first light of morning, Nose met him at the travois. "Have you changed your mind, Speaks?" he asked.

"No Father, I have not," answered Beren. "I am coming with you."

Nose shrugged. "Then I must tie you up," he said. "Because I do not want you to come." He lunged out and grabbed Beren by the wrist, tugging some cords from his waist with his other hand.



At this moment Willow, who was perched on a travois nearby, spoke up. "Leave the boy be!" she said.

"I am tying him up for his own good," replied Nose, wrapping the cords about Beren's wrists.

"Let him come," the old woman said. "I order it."

Nose returned her a long, straight look. He shook his head. "No," he said.

"If you tie him, I will just cut him loose again, so you may as well save yourself the trouble," said Willow. She grinned at the man's expression.

Nose looked at her, then at the boy, then back to Willow. "I do not want him to die," he said at last. "It is not right."

"Pshaw," snorted the old lady, "what nonsense. He will not die! Don't be a fool, O Biggest of Big Noses. Stick to smelling with your nose and leave the thinking to me."

The beak-nosed man stood considering. He had heard the assurance in the old seer's voice. After a long moment, he turned to Beren and sighed. He loosed the ropes. "Son, if you truly wish it, then come," he said. "I hope we will not both regret it."

\* \* \* \* \*

The camp of the great parley lay not too far as the crow flies from the Dwarf-road, but it took them the best part of the following morning to reach it, for it was not easy to manoeuvre the heavily loaded travois over the sloping and forested ground between the two valleys. At last they all arrived, one after another, in the wide cleared area through which the road ran. Each crew as it arrived went through much the same motions: they let go of their travois, then stood there puffing while ruefully examining their hands, wiping sweat from their faces, and just generally collecting themselves.

Finally there were over a hundred people standing assembled. They were all Druug, thus all accustomed to move warily and silently through the deep woods; to stand now exposed under open skies took some getting used to. Most of them were looking uncomfortably around at the openness and wishing they were back under the shelter of the trees.

Beren had pulled with the best of them. He was standing wiping the sweat off his forehead when he spotted movement among the trees opposite. After the initial adrenalin twitch, he was perhaps the only one of the group who was unsurprised to recognize the tall figure of an Ent as it left the border of the forest and came towards them. It was of course Rattlecone.

Beren ran to meet his friend. "Hello Rattlecone," he said cheerfully, "were you looking for me?"

The Ent looked solemnly down at him from his deep eyes. "Aye, small one. But there are so many of your folk gathered here, I had trouble to make you out."

The rest of the Druug were standing huddled together, open-mouthed, a few paces away. They looked bemusedly between the boy and the tall figure of the Walker as the pair spoke together, since of course they were not able to understand the Elvish words.

Beren gestured in the direction of his Druug companions. "We go to fight the dryness!" he said proudly to his friend.

Rattlecone nodded stiffly, since his frame was not conducive to looser movement. "Aye," he said, "I heard. So said the breezes and the bird talk. It is noble of your people, and of course I shall be glad if you succeed. But can you survive the conditions better than we? Such tender beings as you must be?"

"We think so," said Beren. "We have much tallow for our skins, and wooden shoes to walk on, and we carry

plenty of water. We will be all right!”

“Well. Hrrm. I hope so. But tell me now: who is your chief?”

“We have no chief, Rattlecone. But Daernem<sup>7</sup> here is my father, and Tathar<sup>8</sup> there on the carrier is our oldest.”

The Ent strode over to Willow’s carrier. The People made way, but Soup held her ground beside her mother, chin lifted towards the Walker. Willow herself gazed up at the tall being with interest. Rattlecone inclined towards her carefully, this being the nearest thing to a bow he could manage. “The blessings of the Powers be upon you, eldest and mother,” he said to her in Elvish.

Beren started to translate, but Willow silenced him with a movement. “Isht, boy, I know what he said.” Her bright eyes remained fixed on the Walker. “But you can say thank-you to him from me back.”

After this had been conveyed, Rattlecone spoke further. “Honoured elders, I cannot come with you into the valley, but can my strength not at least aid you up to that point? It is far for small people to drag laden sledges. I could pull them all.”

As Beren translated this offer to Nose, the latter’s eyes lit up. “Ah,” he said, “that is welcome offer. I know this road; it takes the straightest course, but not the flattest. There are two ridges to be crossed between here and the Valley, and the thought of them had lain heavy on me. But let me put it to the others.” He gathered some of the older members of the group and put his head together with them. There was brief discussion, with some nodding of heads; then the circle broke apart, and Nose came back to Beren. “We accept!” he said. “In your private ear, Speaks, I do not believe his claim that he can take all of the travois, because we have over thirty here; but that is no matter. Let us test his strength!”

There was some delay while the travois were roped into an orderly chain, then the combined cords were brought by a strong man of the Salmon people to Rattlecone. He bowed low before the Ent, which seemed to amuse the Tree-man, judged by the flicker in his eyes. The Salmon man, who was called Brown Skin, held out the knotted ropes. Rattlecone took firm grasp of the large knot, then walked forward carefully until all the ropes were taut. Every watching Druug was silent, curious to see if he would manage; most rather doubting that he would. Their doubts were confounded however, because after a slow and cautious start, Rattlecone set off down the track at a brisk walking pace, dragging all thirty bumping travois behind him without apparent effort. A great cloud of white dust began to rise up. The Druug, amazed and deeply gratified in equal measure, hurried to take place in front of the dust.

The first day of the journey passed thus with unexpected quickness and ease. They saw no-one on the road, and as the long rays of the setting sun began to slant down over their right shoulders, they arrived at the last ridge line before the road descended into the valley which led into the Dryness. They were at that time still some five or ten miles north of the point where Nose and Beren had entered the valley a few short months before. It was with dismay therefore that they observed the beginnings already of yellowing in the grass and other small growth beside the track. The cancer had advanced.

Rattlecone let the travois drop and strode away uphill faster than any of the them could follow. They ran up after him and found him standing still on a hillock at the very top of the ridge. Coming up beside him, they could see for themselves the spread of the blight all over the valley below them.

“I would not have believed it could be so quick,” muttered Nose.

The tall Ent beside him said nothing, but his bark-grey face was grim.

Older members of the People were still making their wheezing way up to the hilltop, where they joined the sad and wordless party gazing down at the desolation below them.

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7 Sindarin: Big Nose

8 Sindarin: Willow

They all trudged back down again after a while to the line of travois. They had first to tell Willow the news, then to discuss what to do next. They had originally planned to fill all the water containers, skins as well as some clay pots, at the stream in the valley before them; that was now impossible. Beren conveyed their difficulty to Rattlecone, and the Ent at once volunteered to take a watering party with some travois back downhill to the last brook they had crossed. As soon as this party had set off, the rest of made camp beside the road.

There was little talk that evening around the fires. Everybody who had seen the awful blight was shocked and dispirited. They had known that the task before them would be hard, but more than one person there that night began silently to fear that it might be impossible.

The Ent returned in the cool blueness of the evening, tirelessly dragging several travois laden with weary Druug and bulging water-skins.

The sun was shining in their faces the next morning as they followed the well-made Dwarf road down the slope into the valley. The stream at the bottom was, as they had expected, bone dry. The surrounding low growth was brown and dead, as were about half the trees. Wordlessly, they went on. Conditions became rapidly worse, and they soon began to feel the dry air harsh on their skins and eyes. They stopped by general consensus and started to apply the devices long prepared. Tallow was smeared on every piece of skin, whether dead leather or living human hide; pattens were strapped to greasy feet, and cunningly devised masks of oiled leather were donned. Mounted on the latter were large nut shells in which a pattern of tiny holes had been bored. It was hoped these holes would be enough to allow some vision while impeding the entry of the hyper-dry air. The masks covered the mouth and were provided at that place with a holder full of grass which could be wetted in order to moisten the breathed air.

Nose, hardly recognizable in his bizarre gear, came over to Beren. "Tell your friend he should go back now. We thank him most heartily, but he should not venture himself further."

But Rattlecone declined. "I can go further," he said. Indeed, he suggested that the humans should spare their feet by riding on the travois. They tried this, but quickly found the choking cloud of dust worse to endure than limping on hard pattens. Willow, lying on the first travois of the chain, was the only one who could travel that way in any comfort. Rattlecone could, however, carry Beren on one shoulder, and an old man of the Bear people on the other; and this he did.

They passed first through the zone of silvery, sun-dried thickets; then through the burnt zone, where only ashes stirred in the lifeless breeze; until at last even ashes were left behind. After that there was only rock, the burnt blue sky, and the harshness of the waterless air in their lungs.

They went on, and on, and on. The Ent trudged behind the people, dragging all the load. The alkali dust of their passage bound itself to any moist surface it could find, where it grated and stung.

"Stop, stop!" cried Nose of a sudden. "*Onod, dari!*"<sup>9</sup>

Rattlecone stopped. The humans followed Nose in gathering to him. When the dust cleared away, it could be seen that the Ent was suffering. His crown of leaves had withered, and long cracks ran up and down his raiment. His large feet were in tatters; every step left wet marks which shrank and dried to nothing almost before one could notice them.

"Tell him he must go back!" cried Nose to Beren. "Look at him! If he comes any further he will die here. We can go on from here. He must go back! We will not let him do this!"

Beren turned his gaze to the long face of the Ent and lifted his mask to speak the clearer. "I guess you know what he was saying," he said to the Walker. "We think you must go back now. To save your life. In fact, Nose is demanding it."

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9 'Ent, stopping!' Nose knew the word, but his grasp of Sindarin grammar was negligible.

Rattlecone sighed. "Yes," he said tiredly, "I must. But I am ashamed to go back. I, who am strong; I who have endured all weathers for a thousand years; I, I must go back, while you parcel of soft-skinned mayflies presses on. It shames me."

Beren jumped down off his friend's shoulder, and told the Bear man he should do likewise. He turned to the Ent and stood with his hands on his hips. "Nonsense," he scoffed. "Think what you have done for us, what loads you have carried. See some sense, Rattlecone, and turn back. If you hurry you can reach waters to drink and soak in before the sun goes down."

"Hrrm, hrrm. Well, so I will," thrummed Rattlecone in his deep woodwind voice. "There is no more need for words. Bid your people farewell from me, and good fortune. Come to me again, small one, should we both see new days." And with that he turned and hurried back down the track. Soon he was lost to sight.

Beren sought out Willow while the people untied the train of travois. He found her labouring for breath behind her mask. "Is all well with you, Grandmother?" he asked.

"Just tell them to get on," she husked in irritated tones. She coughed.

The true agony of the journey began. If it was difficult enough to breath and see while stumbling along on awkward wooden shoes, it was three times harder to do so while dragging a heavy load. They had to stop often to drink, or to reapply tallow, or to adjust or repair someone's pattens. Their stores of water and grease began to diminish with frightening rapidity.

They had entered that high-walled stretch of valley where Nose and Beren had turned back last time. As before, the half-formed towers of rock loomed menacingly above them on either side, seeming to cast shadows not only in the corners of the vision, but also in the corners of the mind.

Nose and Beren were walking side by side, each pulling a rope of their travois. Nose growled as he eyed the malignant stacks of rock. "Idols to unclean gods," he husked, hawking thickly to clear his throat of dust. "But who set them up is another question."

Beren had not the moisture in his own throat to reply.

At sundown the party of weary Druug arrived at the valley head. This was a great rounded hollow set among an immensity of rocky heights. There was not a single living thing to be seen in the whole expanse. The Dwarf-road wound through the barren hollow for some way before climbing the far side of the valley in a long, straight ramp. The road disappeared into a dark open door high in the wall at the end of the valley.

The fading light was tricky, and the wall was yet a mile or two distant; perhaps this was the explanation for their uneasy impressions of the mountain above the tunnel mouth. The summit there seemed too rounded to be quite natural. And weren't those rock columns extraordinarily like made pillars on each side of the entrance, and weren't those protrusions figures in a row above? It was impossible to be certain. In any case the ramp, when they reached the foot of it, proved to be mathematically straight, and obviously the work of hands.

"Dwarf-work," remarked Nose, examining the closely-fitted stones of the surface.

They had to camp where they were in the blue and lifeless dusk. There was no wood for fires, and they had but a dismal time of it, sitting or lying in the dark, painfully breathing the parched air. Few of them managed to sleep at all. Beren dozed intermittently, starting awake from time to time to stare, wide-eyed, into the dark that pressed around them. A few stars twinkled dimly in the heavens above, but they lent no light to the earth below. Nothing on the ground could be seen; even the black shapes of the stacks on the surrounding valley walls could barely be distinguished from the gloom of the sky behind.

The silence was total. Only now and then to their ears came a distant rumbling, as of rockfall in some remote defile, somewhere back in those hostile hills.

The rock towers made Beren uneasy. Although he could detect no certain movement, after several waking episodes he was ready to swear the dark silhouettes rearranged themselves while his gaze was elsewhere.

The first daylight creeping across the harsh surrounding planes of rock revealed a weary, abraded clump of humans with little water left. The remaining tallow they needed to save for the drums.

“Now is the time,” whispered Willow to them. “Let us set down in the middle.”

They followed her instructions and unpacked the drums. One by one they drifted back to Willow where she lay on her travois. No-one was sure how to begin.

“Give me a drum,” she husked. “A small one. Where is Gap Tooth? Ah, there you are. Sit you down here by me, Gap Tooth, and remember what your father told you. If I see it aright, he used more than just words in the telling, eh?”

“Indeed yes, Mother,” replied Gap Tooth. “He told with the drum too.”

“Then drum for me, if you would, the song your father taught you – the song to the storm.”

The old brown man sat down with his drum next to Willow. He thought for a minute, then began to patter out a tentative beat. The others stood around, listening intently, feeling their way into the message. By ones and twos, they drifted to their own drums. Hesitantly, they began to follow the rhythm. A man near Beren began tapping quietly, matching and strengthening the fragile chain of beats. Another old woman on the far side sat to her drum and added her taps and tunks to the weave; then two men. As more joined in, the music began to take on depth.

The players were beating gently, almost stroking their drums as they would caress a lover. It was not what Beren had expected. He had thought of volume, of the defiant roar of hide; but glancing around at the brutality of the hills, at their enormous static violence, the knowledge came to him that this evil could never be defeated by power of human hand. Their way, their weapon, must lie in what hand and heart could do together, which no stone could ever compass. It was a prayer they would be shaping, not a command.

He sat down and, as with Antelope some days before, concentrated on listening. With so many players converging to the harmony, the message of the music was far deeper, far richer than that of a single drum alone. It was rising now to a stream with power; it pulled at Beren’s heart and made him want to shout, or maybe weep. For winding through the building river of sound was all the pride of Man, but also a lament for the things of this earth which must fade and pass away.

Nose drew Beren to one side. “I must drum,” he said. “I must. Dear Son, can you look after things? Take around the water and the tallow. Keep an eye open. All right?”

“Yes, Father, of course,” said Beren. “I wish I could drum too. But I don’t know how. I don’t know how!”

“Everything in its time, Son,” said Nose. “Come, let us set about it. And never fear, we will beat this thing.” And with that he went to fetch his own instrument.

The sun by this time was streaking the landscape with a pitiless light. By the time the first rays touched the huddled group of humans, the only small centres of movement and moisture in that whole vast amphitheatre, everyone who could drum was drumming. The sound was intense in Beren’s ears, but as he looked up at the cold rock walls, a chill smote his heart. How insignificant the People were! A few tiny figures beating wildly at baubles of skin, whose sound faded to nothing in the barren immensity.

Nevertheless, the boy kept doggedly to his work. He hobbled slowly around on his cracked and burning feet, wetting the grass in a mask here, sprinkling tallow onto a vibrating membrane there. As he circulated, he began to feel a change; a feeling that began in his aching feet and crept towards his head. At the beginning, everyone had drummed from his or her own heart. The result had been rich, but ragged and uneven. But now,

little by little, the separate threads were coming together. The ragged quality slowly fell away as the beating hands began to speak from the same heart: the heart of the People.

His comrades no longer responded to him as he came past with the water-skin. Nobody paused any more, nobody looked up; all their concentration was on the drum – on the drum, on the music, on the common need of all.

Beren came to a stand, unable to go on, unable to think. The pulse of the drums beat in his head and gripped his chest. The focus was complete. Still the surging rhythm grew in power. On they played, and on, but time meant nothing to the ecstatic drummers. Each was living the drum; the message pounding in their blood and in every singing fibre of their being.

The hours passed, the sun rose high in the sky. An old man not three yards from Beren gasped suddenly, wavered, straightened again, then fell over. Before Beren could think or react, one who had been squatting drumless to the side scrambled up and hurried over. The new man took the drum from the nerveless fingers of the other and slipped into the cadence.

Beren, trying to shake the wild drumming out of his head, ran to the pair. The cheeks of the stricken man were folded slackly inwards, and indeed his last breaths were even then rattling in his throat. The old man was finished, used up. Soon, with a final shudder, his breathing stopped altogether. Beren covered the pitiful husk with a skin and left him. There was nothing else he could do.

Another drummer collapsed, and was replaced. But the power of the drums, the passion of the drummers, all drumming now as one, waxed still in potency, growing like a living thing. Like a slow tide it rose, and pulsed, and gathered; and rose again; each time a little higher. Beren, carried helpless like a chip in the flood, felt sudden conviction surging into him, an intense faith in what he had not until then truly believed: that what they intended was possible. They could do it. They would do it!

He caught a discordant element on the far side of the group. Hurrying to the place, he found another drummer in difficulties: a grey-haired woman, worn in the face, faltering. He squatted beside her, wishing with all his heart there was something he could do to help. But it was clear that she had, like the others, simply reached the end of what she could do.

The woman looked at him despairingly, gestured to the drum; then her eyes rolled up and she slumped into a faint.

Beren stared at her, then at the drum. All the time the music surged and beat in his heart and head.

There were no more replacements.

Without knowing how it happened, he was sitting in that place, drumming. He had never drummed before. Perhaps his heart knew what to do; perhaps the tide of all his folk surging in him, through him, with him, carried him along. He was living the music, adding his young strength to the gathering flood, and the power and passion of his young heart. The joy of it was more intense than anything he had ever known. He forgot his feet, his broken lips, and the pain it cost him to take each breath. The power of the drums was everything; it was in his blood, it filled his thought, his every desire, his whole life.

The unified power of the people called to the sky, and called, and called. Still they played, and still they played. They would not be the first to break. They had become unbreakable; one heart, clenching ever tougher, like a fist of steel.

An uneasy wind got up, blowing dust and scraps away from them up the valley. The wind, picking up power, began to moan around the towers of rock crowning the valley walls. Suddenly, had those drumming in their passion attention to spare to it, they would have seen a curious thing: at the far entrance of the valley, there appeared hurrying towards them what looked like a wall of vapour. Closer and closer swept the wall. The wall was upon them; it was past them. Its passage brought a wonderful change: the appalling tightness of the

air relaxed. Moisture had returned. Breathing became sweet again, withered skin slowly filled out.

This first crack in the wall of dryness fired the hearts of the drummers to a fierce blaze. Their gods were hearing the call! The beating music of their drums grew in confidence, took on renewed fire, fiercer focus. It gathered and throbbed and made the air throb with it.

Slowly the mist increased. The outlines of the rock towers became vague; the sky above them paled toward the colour of milk. The remorseless drums held the charged air in a joined grip, sending their demanding plea into the vaults of heaven.

The light faded as the air above them grew thicker. Great, vague masses could be glimpsed now, moving in the high heavens. The masking of the sun did nothing to lessen the heat, which had become intense. Beren, drumming in the gloom like one possessed, was dimly aware that the wind had died away. He hardly felt the sweat that blinded him.

At last it became altogether dark. The oppression in the air, beating in their heads with the rhythm of the drums, had risen to an unbearable, sticky clutch. More drummers were failing, but for the rest there was nothing for it but to press on, to maintain their hold on the heart of things. The hammering tide of power squeezed the thick air, now heaving like a live thing in the grip of the drums.

Twitchings of light began to flicker across the arch of oven blackness that roofed them in. Hot wind in cat's-paws played with scraps on the sightless ground, then died away again to nothing. Blue lights wavered here and there in the denseness of the dark, high above their heads. The tension in the air was becoming unbearable. The exhausted and afflicted people groaned and swayed as they drummed, and drummed, with fingers that bled.

A sudden stab of fire lit the heavens. The rock walls of that place leapt out of darkness with the stroke; vanished again into the oppressive black, as a deep mutter of thunder grumbled across the valley. But the thunder, too, was in tune with the drums. More flashes followed; the shudder of thunder coming ever more often. The drums sucked up these mighty percussions and threw them back at the shaking air. The sounds in the heavens gathered like a wave, swelled, rattled. Blue flashes now everywhere, becoming continuous. Like the torrent that pours from a dam break, like a gathering avalanche in the mountains, the immense forces called up were breaking their bonds.

The straining heavens tore all at once, with a shattering report, across the whole of the sky. Forked rivers of fire rove the darkness all around into shivering fragments. With scarcely a pause between strokes, the fire-streams descended again, and again. The tearing roar of thunder and the intense light blasted the puny human drummers into shocked silence. But the drums had done their work; the power of the stones was broken.

The people had no time to feel their pains or even to gather their wits. Columns of white and blue fire were playing down now continuously on the rock towers all around them. The noise was unbelievable: the crack of splitting air, the roar of elemental fire, the boom of shattering rock. Again and again the strokes fell from heaven, until molten fragments of rock cascaded down from the heights.

The fire columns sputtered now staccato. One by one they fell silent, darkness replacing the awful glare of their fury. But the monster the drummers had called up was not finished. The dazed and exhausted people became aware of a deep roaring sound approaching from the wastes around them. It grew to a deafening pitch; then suddenly, without further warning, water fell on them in a solid mass from the sky.

If that be called rain, then there never was rain like it before, and one should hope there never will be again. The force of it pressed people to the ground. They gasped for air, but there was more water than air in what their mouths sucked in. Beren stumbled through the roaring and the dancing mud to where he thought Willow was. The water pounding on his head was addling his already tired wits. There was no light at all but for flashes from the fire-rivers which still, now and then, dealt their spiteful strokes at the towering idols on the valley walls. Somehow the confused and battered boy succeeded in stumbling into the old woman's sled, only to find that other frantic shadows, shouting to each other through the roar, were already tending to her.

As he turned away, gasping for air, Nose loomed out of the pouring darkness. His foster-father drew a skin over both their heads. Beren found with relief that this kept out the worst of the flying water; he could breathe again without effort. The skin also sheltered his head from the bruising weight of the downpour.

“Get under the ramp! Leave the gear!” shouted Nose into his ear. The older man staggered off, leaving the skin with Beren.

The staggering boy peered around at the struggling figures revealed by the intermittent light. He found two who were lying on the ground gasping. He brought the skin over them, and with that help, at the boy’s shouted urging, they all three began with difficulty to crawl towards where Beren thought the ramp lay.

There were currents of water flowing over the ground now, and they were growing in depth and force by the second. It was clearly imperative to reach higher ground as soon as possible, and to find some shelter from the elemental flood which was pouring on them out of the sky. It felt to Beren like the end of the world. He had time to be briefly appalled at what they had done. What primal power had they awoken?

Without knowing quite how he had managed it, he reached the hollow under the ramp at last. The old couple he had helped collapsed gasping at his feet. Beren’s head rejoiced to be free of the pounding water while his lungs took deep breaths of the moisture-fogged air. The deafening roar of water was to be heard on every hand, but there was none falling directly on him here, and he was profoundly grateful for it.

A levin-flash revealed that there were not many people under the shelter. With a sinking heart, the boy grasped his hide and turned again towards the elements. He made two more trips after that, rescuing three more dazed and exhausted people. Then he could do no more; he could no longer even stand up.

Nose found the boy where he lay slumped against the rock wall. The flickers of light revealed deep lines of exhaustion graven in the old Druug’s face, but he lifted Beren tenderly and brought him to where a large group of the People were huddled together for warmth. The old man turned then and made his way back into the rain with bowed back. New refugees were still stumbling in, sometimes in pairs; but not often now.

After some long minutes, a final party of Druug, with Nose among them, appeared out of the curtain of water and sat themselves down by the others in a wet fog of total exhaustion. There was nothing more to be done.

There was no light, no prospect of a fire; nothing to do but wait. The rain had fallen away now to a steady, soaking shower. On all sides they could hear the roar of waters, overlaid with the deep, distant thunder of the main watercourse. The ground shook from the thud of mighty boulders being rolled down the riverbed.

Daylight found the people huddled together in a cold, hungry mass. Three of their number had died in the night. A quick head-count revealed that many more must have perished in the tempest.

The valley revealed to them by the first grey wash of daylight was unrecognisable. Where formerly there had been a dry, rocky bowl, they now beheld a racing, living, brown monster of a river which swirled through the centre of the valley. Ochre torrents fed into it from every side. The roar of the river drowned out the sound of the rain and made it hard to converse. The place where they had drummed the previous day was now deep under coursing brown water.

Some of the younger men crept out to scout. They returned in triumph with two travois. The People broke up the runners to get some firewood. Beren helped by shaving soaked wood down to its dry heart with his knife, then shaving up a pile of fine punk to help get the fire started. It was a fine blade, this knife of his, and he felt renewed gratitude to Gorlim every time he used it.

Everything was damp, but the People were used to making fire under such conditions, and managed to bow one up eventually. A hearty blaze cheered them all up, and a brew made from salvaged herbs and dried meat worked even more good magic.

Beren crept around to where Willow lay, as close to the fire as they could get her. The old lady was breathing



unsteadily, but her eyes were open. Recognition came into them when Beren drew close.

“Well, you did it, Grandmother!” He had to bend right over and shout it into her whiskery ear. She nodded weakly at him and grasped his hand momentarily.

He looked into the tired face of Willow’s daughter Soup, sitting on the other side. “Shouldn’t she eat?” he mouthed at her, but the woman just shook her head.

The rain stopped for a time in the afternoon. People took the opportunity to wander out to see what else there was to be found. They found several bodies, but their hearts had already been heavy with the expectation of this. The People had no elaborate death rituals, holding that the body was simply a house from which the spirit fled at death; but the bodies were covered with rocks against the ugliness which jackals and vultures would otherwise inflict.

A few patches of rain-washed, kindly blue sky peeped between the heavy clouds, but the air was still as full of water as a sponge. Frequent showers occurred. However, this was natural rain, and the People revelled in it, opening their mouths to drink in the sweet water. The memory of the dry Death they had hardly defeated was still strong among them.

A sleep and a meal, no matter how skimpy, had left Beren feeling frisky again; and like all the others, the defeat of the Dryness had raised a great weight from his heart.

Or had they defeated it? The evil had been wrought by stones. The stones were damaged; all around, the towers of rock were shattered; the life was departed from them and they looked like idols no more. But how severe had the punishment actually been? The boy was itching with curiosity to investigate the rock at the head of the ramp, on which most of the fury of the lightning had been directed.

He was surprised to find that Nose had the same idea. Nose looked at him askance, however, when Beren mentioned his own intentions.

“This may not be safe,” he told the boy. “Better if you stay here. Have you seen Willow? Maybe you want to stay with her.”

“Oh come on, Father, what can happen?” Beren bubbled. “I’m sure we can spot any danger in time to run. I can run faster than you anyway!”

“You are more trouble than any other four boys together,” grumbled Nose. “If you must come, then cease prancing about like a young goat, and walk warily like a proper Holly-person. And keep your eyes peeled. I do not know what is in that hole up there, and I do not particularly want to find out. I am only going to look because I think that somebody should. But it is not a foolish boys’ summer romp.” Although he continued to scold Beren in like vein whenever a suitable expression came into his head, the two of them set off up the ramp.

As they neared the top, the extent of the lightning damage became clear. They also gained an uneasy idea of what had been there to destroy. The row of projections above the gaping black door had, it seemed, indeed been figures. Each one was heavily scored with black tracks where the levin had smitten. The heads of the figures had been battered almost into shapelessness, but the shapes which the ruins suggested were far from comforting.

The entire giant cupola over the blocky mass had been smashed in. As boy and man approached the door, they could see rays of sunlight streaming down from the hole and lighting up parts of the floor of the dark chamber within.

There had been doors to the opening, perhaps originally of stone, which had been almost entirely melted into pools of glass. But this did not look recent. There had been no doors closed across the hole when the People had first entered the valley.

Nose stopped at the glassy black mass on the left and cautiously poked at it with his bow-stave. "Now what do you suppose could have done that?" he asked rhetorically.

Beren's high spirits had gradually evaporated during the approach to the top, and by now he was moving as warily as Nose. He sensed something wrong here. The whole valley felt wrong, but this feeling was local. It had grown on him out of nothing as they had climbed the ramp. It did not feel like Orcs, or even like something living at all. But there was something not good in this chamber, of that he was sure.

Man and boy peered carefully together inside the opening. They beheld a large paved space, only partially lit by the sun streaming through the break in the dome. Further back, the hall faded again into blackness. After creeping forward a little more, they could make out a dim row of pillars to the left. A little further, and far to the right they could see another patch of sunlight. On the far side of that they glimpsed what looked like more pillars, with stone figures between them.

In the centre of the row of figures, a shape shone in the light with the buttery gleam of gold.

"The evil in this place is not destroyed, only subdued," muttered Nose to the boy, and Beren felt the rightness of this himself. "We should leave it alone."

Although he had spoken in low tones, the hollowness whispered his voice back to him. "*Loan. Oan. O.*" The old Druug shivered at the sound.

"I want to see what the golden thing is," whispered Beren.

"Have you no fear?" demanded Nose, grasping his arm.

"*Fear? Ear? E?*" whispered the hall back.

Indeed, the fear of the place was thick on Beren like a dark miasma, but he knew also that he would not be able to rest until he had found out about the gold; so he shook off Nose's hand and crept over the polished floor. Cursing savagely under his breath and peering about him apprehensively all the while, the old Druug hesitated, then crept after the boy.

The figures between the far pillars seemed to be of ordinary human shapes, carved from various sorts of stone. Most of them had been shattered, but some were still whole. But the central figure which blazed with gold, and more than gold: Beren could not make out what that was. He crept closer. All at once the picture became clear, and his stomach gave a heave.

It was a mummified corpse, clearly of a Dwarf. The dead Dwarf's head was bowed onto its chest. The shimmer of gold came from a broad carcanet about its neck. The Dwarf's end had been cruel: from the pillars on either side of it a stony spike had somehow been thrust out into the chest, and on through the chest. Each spike ended in a needle point. The spikes supported the corpse from falling. Beren was glad he could not see the face. Fighting against repugnance, trying to put aside the choking fear of the lurking evil he sensed, he crept closer. He felt a strong desire to get a better look at the necklace.

The fan of gold was a thing of most wondrous craft. Ten thousand facets glistened in the half-light like the hide of some fabulous beast. The textures were never the same for any distance; they wove among each other in subtle, shimmering patterns. The more one looked, the more one saw. At the edge, the carcanet was scalloped and netted like the finest lace. Scattered over the expanse were jewels of light such as the boy had never seen before, or even imagined. They took in the rich glow of the gold and gave it back as fire.

A work of hand so delicately made, so harmonious, and so beautiful – it was far beyond anything he had ever known. It was like something out of a dream.

Beren forced himself to stand now quite close to the body, trying to master his knees which were shaking with tension. He examined everything with care, being careful not to touch.

Nose was standing behind him now, still trying to pierce the shadows in the far reaches of the hall, still cursing softly.

The Dwarf had tresses of glossy black hair. Beren had seen hair like it before somewhere, but could not think where. The terrible dryness which had sucked every trace of moisture from the body had dulled and broken the hairs, but enough remained to show what it had been.

Something didn't fit. The fingers – they seemed slender for a Dwarf; and the head was not so big either. The braided hair... Realisation came to Beren suddenly. He turned to Nose. "This is a girl!" he whispered in amazement.

Nose peered at the body, first from one side, then the other. He nodded.

Nose leaned in close to the boy then, and there was a glint in his eye. "The stink of unclean magic in this place is beyond belief," he whispered fiercely. "I am going now, and if you will not come, Speaks with Birds, then I will drag you. There is no Willow here now to stop me. Come away. We don't know who her kin were, and you have no more use for the shining stones than I."

Beren had in any case endured about as much terror as he could stand for one day. He nodded assent, and the pair retreated with caution back to the door. Neither of them could suppress a deep breath of relief when they emerged again into the fresh open air.

Running towards them up the ramp was Chases Goats.

"What is it?" Nose asked Goats when the younger man had come close enough.

"Willow," panted Goats. That was all they needed. All three turned around and ran down the ramp.

They found the old lady gasping weakly for breath. Her eyes were closed, but when Beren came near, her eyelids fluttered open. Slowly the eyes came to bear on his face and into focus. She twitched her fingers.

"Take her hand," said Soup softly. Beren took into his own the withered old hand that felt like a sack of bones in fine leather – bones which now tightened and squeezed briefly. She jerked him then slightly towards her. He bent over, putting his ear to the feebly moving lips. He heard her whisper:

"Dear... son. I leave now... this old body... behind. I am... not sorry." The hand again gave him a faint squeeze. "Be not sad... for me." Then after a sequence of gasps: "My bonds... fall free... and I run... into the light." She choked then, and he thought she was going; but she gathered strength from somewhere and said, "A last... summer. Did I... not say?" Her lips moved in a faint grin and she twitched again at his hand.

Beren stepped back and his place was taken by one of Willow's family, most of whom were sitting silently around her. The halting breaths were weaker now, but somehow calmer. As the People waited there, as the sun rose higher, so the gaps between the faint breaths grew longer, and longer. When there was no breath left, the body of Willow relaxed with a long sigh and lived no more.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Druug had paid a heavy price for their victory over the Stone Idols: fully a tenth of their numbers had perished in the storm. Most of the bodies were never found. The Holly People had lost three besides Willow. Afraid of the Fire had collapsed and died from exhaustion; Tireless Dancer's man Two Bags got lost in the rain and was never found again; and Lion Scar, true to his foreboding, had not come through the trial. The stubby craftsman had helped three people to shelter, then had gone back out into the storm to look for more. They found him in the morning face down in a pool of mud. Dancer had at one stroke lost both husband and brother; the poor woman was sitting in a corner, rocking back and forth and moaning.

The People could not dally to mourn, for there was little water fit to drink, and they were short of food.

Much of their baggage had been washed away and destroyed, although this was very much the least of their cares. The People were not accustomed to thinking of material possessions as either important or lasting.

Gathering what bits and pieces they could, with the hale supporting the weak, they began to move in groups back down the valley. The torrent had subsided in the night, and there now was room to pass beside it with care.

The fugitives had not progressed far before they were brought up in their tracks by a strange sight unfolding before their eyes. From around the next bend in the valley a crowd of dark figures had appeared. These were obviously Walkers. They were many – perhaps a hundred, or even more. The People were accustomed to meeting Walkers, when they met them at all, in ones and twos; none of them imagined that even the whole forest could hold as many of the Tree-folk as they now saw sweeping up the valley ahead of them.

The creatures were spread out across the breadth of the valley floor. They were busy doing something, although for some time nobody could make out what.

After some minutes, the two peoples had approached each other close enough for the Druug to perceive that what the Walkers were busy at was planting. Each of them carried a thick bundle of saplings or shoots under one arm; they went to and fro, deftly slipping the seedlings one by one into the muddy ground.

The Walkers which the Wild Men knew were very various in appearance, but they all followed a basically treelike pattern in their bodies, or were at least reminiscent of trees in their forms and raiment. Here now there appeared others, Walkers of a sort which no Druug of their party had ever set eyes on before. Beren, for his part, knew immediately what they were; and indeed it was not difficult to perceive. Here at last he was seeing the Onodvisse – Entwives.

The Entwives were as tall as the menfolk, but there was little of the hoary oak and elm about their shapes. Indeed to Beren's eyes they seemed most like to shapely human women, although of course much larger in proportion. Some were clad in green of various shades, others wore hawthorn white, or gorse yellow, or iris blue; but all were wildly beautiful.

The Walkers were all constantly talking to one another – Beren supposed it was talk, although it sounded to his ear more like music; a tune for bass-voiced woodwinds which sometimes thrummed a phrase, sometimes boomed, sometimes descended to a growling throb in the pit of the belly. The Tree-folk passed their deep-throated melody from one to another, here rising, there falling, and occasionally all sounding together in loud and emphatic chorus.

Striding in the front ranks of the scattered planters he saw a huge, piny, black-barked Ent with a great block of a rough-haired head. There seemed little doubt that this black Ent was in command – the others were quick to obey his deep-toned, brassy commands. He looked to Beren like a fellow you would not want to cross.

Few of the Walkers paid the humans any attention, so intent were they on their task. The People simply stood back and gave the creatures their road. However, the Druug bowed their heads low to the tall Pine-lord as he swept past, such was his power and hauteur. He at least was aware of the draggled group of humans, but the glance he flicked to them in answer to their courtesy burned with a hostility which struck all the humans with dismay.

The People sat back on their hams after the Walkers had gone by, feeling puzzled, and a little hurt. This did not look much like the gratitude they had expected. Well, it was no matter. They shrugged their shoulders and resumed their trek.

Where the Walkers had passed, the formerly naked earth now bore a decorous veil of green. The busy Ents had bound any water-scoured and unstable ground firmly with a network of briar and thorn, through which saplings here and there poked their tender heads.

At long, weary last the folk reached ground with undamaged trees. The Holly People paused at the first likely-looking piece of ground and buried there the body of Willow, which they had dragged with them all the way on a salvaged travois. No-one had wanted to leave her in the barren valley under the broken stare of the idols. The People made camp then in that place. They spent the evening talking quietly together and remembering the old lady's long and eventful life. Everybody had a story to tell of Willow. Beren contributed the time she had shown him the Watch-stone, and what she had said to him about fear.

Over the next day or two, the different groups went their separate ways. Nothing had been discussed with purpose, but everybody knew it had been decided that the tribes would assemble again in the time of Fall of Leaf for a great dance and a feast.

Hunters went out for meat, old Orc patrols were exchanged for fresh ones. Beren took his leave as well. He wanted to look up Rattlecone and see how it went with his injuries.

His way lay across almost the entire width of Dorthonion. He didn't hurry. The weather was still hot, game was lying low. He travelled through the familiar country to the south of Foen, passing not far from the farm. He avoided it, even though the harvest was almost certainly already in motion and his contribution would have been welcomed. Beren was worried about his Walker friend and wanted to visit him first.

After a few days of pleasant travel he was climbing the familiar small valley which led up towards the snows. The brook water felt wonderfully cool when splashed on his face and laved over his hot feet. He left the freshness of the stream at last with some reluctance and turned uphill towards the giant alders, now massive and dark in full leaf.

He found Rattlecone standing under the curtain of drips. It seemed to be a favourite place. The Ent glanced down at him but spoke no greeting as Beren joined him gratefully under the cooling rain.

"We won," the boy said simply.

"I know," said the tall Ent. He laid a woody hand briefly on Beren's shoulder; in his eyes played lights of many depths. "I cannot properly express my thankfulness to your people, nor my pleasure at finding you alive yourself. Among my own folk I would take a week to express such a sacred and fervent matter; maybe even longer. Alas, I fear your impatience would spirit you away before I had so much as cleared my throat, were I to try to thank you in such wise."

"That's all right," said Beren grinning. "Don't bother with thanks or such nonsense. Oh Rattlecone, it was a glorious adventure! I would not have missed it! If only we had not lost so many people," he finished rather sadly.

The boy turned then to look the figure beside him up and down. "But tell me, Rattlecone, how are your feet?"

"Oh, they heal well," Rattlecone assured him. "We can regrow lost parts, you know."

"Can you? Well, I have seen lizards grow their tails anew," remarked Beren, "but I suppose with you it is more akin to branches shooting again from a stump."

The odd-assorted pair, the great craggy Ent and the lively boy, talked for some time under the thin waterfall. Beren described the details of the journey, and of what they had done at the end of it. He described the drumming, the awful storm that came after, and at last he gave Rattlecone an account of the strange trespass he and Nose had made into the Fane of the Idols, and what they found there.

"It will be hard luck for the Dwarves," commented Rattlecone, "but I do not believe they will be able to use that road again. I think it is as your wood-father said: the power is not destroyed, it has only retreated. It has suffered a reverse, and we can hope that it has been compelled within its former bounds; but its centre remains. Hrrm homm, the Dwarves must deal with their own problems. Their convenience is not a matter

that concerns the Onodrim.”

“Nor me either,” said Beren. He stretched and yawned. “I feel as though I could sleep for a week. I’m hungry too – I did not have much luck with hunting on the way down. I will have to go and find something to kill, I suppose.”

The Ent looked down at the boy with wry affection. “Would you care to sample another draught?” he said. “To fill your hunger, and for refreshment. I see in you no bad effects from the first; we might venture a second. What do you think?”

“More of your ‘water’?” said Beren. “Well, all right!”

The Ent left the waterfall and led Beren back into the shaded hollows carved into the cliff behind. He went to an alcove which contained, as well as baskets of herbs and fragrant growth, several large stone jars covered with heavy lids.

“Hum now, homm hrrm, let me see,” rumbled Rattlecone to himself. He chose a jar at last and removed the lid. As he passed his hands over the vessel, a wonderful thing happened: it seemed as though the jar became full of light, a light that shimmered strongly over the face of the Ent and illuminated the ceiling of the cave behind him. It was a greenish, golden light: it danced like the morning sun shining through the fresh, sweet growth of spring.

Rattlecone dipped a small wooden bowl into the jar and then offered it to Beren. When the boy took it, he found that the contents once again seemed indistinguishable from ordinary water. The boy looked doubtfully at the rays of light which still shone out of the jar; looked again at the water in the bowl, then finally to Rattlecone. The Ent nodded, a gleam of amusement showing in his eyes. “It is just water,” he said.

“Oh come now,” scoffed Beren. “Ordinary water does not glow like that. Or taste like the first one did, either.”

“I did not say it was *ordinary* water,” said the Ent carefully. “But do not drink it if you do not wish to.”

With a last searching look into the great Walker’s eyes, Beren raised the bowl to his lips and took a hesitant sip.

Rattlecone tutted and shook his head at this. “No,” he said. “Drink deep, or not at all. You will not get the full use of it if you sip at it.”

The boy did as advised, tipped up the bowl and drank. The cool water went down and down. The effect was not the same as the first one he had tried, how many months ago was it? This time he felt as if cool sap was flushing up into his whole body, bringing strength and growth with it.

Beren put the empty bowl down and stood up, feeling fitter and more whole than he had ever felt before in his life. He felt, in a calm sort of way, as if he could go out and wrestle trolls. His earlier hunger had vanished.

The two of them left the chamber then and sat together in the shade of the alders – that is, Beren sat on a branch while Rattlecone stood. They conversed desultorily of this and that, both feeling a little sleepy in these hot noontime hours.

Something very strange then occurred. A feeling came out of nowhere, for no cause, and with no warning at all. All of a sudden Beren felt uneasy, no longer sure of his place on the branch. He grasped it convulsively, suddenly afraid of falling off. Rattlecone reached up a hand and steadied him. The great tree above him was creaking and seemed to be swaying back and forth. Pebbles began to fall down the cliff at the far side of the lawn.

The boy looked confusedly at the cliff, then at Rattlecone. "It's really moving!" he said. "I thought it was in my head."

"Aye, it is real," the Ent said ruminatively. "The earth is stirring in her sleep. I have known it once or twice. It is no great matter."

Beren slithered down the tree and tried to stand on the ground. The swaying seemed to be growing worse; he found it difficult to stay on his feet. The great trees whipped their tops back and forth, and now larger stones were clattering and thumping their way down the cliff face.

"It will pass," said Rattlecone. "Be calm, and wait it out." And indeed, even as he spoke the motion passed its height and began gradually to diminish.

"There now! It has passed us without scathe," said the Ent; but the boy was not listening.

Faint and far off, it seemed to him, he heard a voice crying. A voice he knew.

Without a word to the astonished Ent, Beren turned and sprang into a full run. He pelted out from under the trees, down the slope to the stream, and then he pounded down beside the stream itself. When he had reached the level ground of the larger valley, he stretched his legs into a faster pace. Soon he was running at the greatest speed his lungs and heart could sustain.

With the power of the draught still in him, Beren ran all that day, and all evening, and late into the night. At last, in the dull light of an old moon, he cast himself down in a thicket and slipped for a few hours out of consciousness.

The boy was up again as the cold light of dawn filtered through the spectral trees. The energy of Rattlecone's drink had left him now; his legs felt like they were running through treacle and his heart sat heavy in him like a cold stone. He forced himself on, lungs sawing at the air like bellows.

Sunrise found him at the farm. He did not break pace at the house but sped immediately to the pool above the dam.

Fear had gnawed at him throughout all the cold hours, a horrid coil of fear; fear of what he might see. Now the very sight he had dreaded lay stark before his eyes. The harsh, undeniable solidity of it struck him like a blow.

The dam had collapsed and let all the water out.

With tread as soft and hesitant as a deer, the boy examined the earth all around that place. The tracks were confused; several people had been here yesterday. But here and there, where the former bank had been, as well as in the soft mud which yesterday morning had underlain the shallows, were clearly to be seen the marks of slender, bare feet; not quite fully grown in size. Each marked stamped itself on his mind like a white-hot brand of despair.

Forcing his feelings down, the boy went on with his careful task until he had read all that the ground had to tell him. When he was finished, he turned toward the farmhouse, walking now slowly and wearily.

Harvest time had begun, but nobody was in the fields. Riders passed him twice along the road, but neither stopped to speak with him.

Beren entered the kitchen. He found his mother there, bending with two others over a map spread out over a table.

Emeldir glanced up; she saw Beren and stood up straight. She was clad in gear of war. When the boy took in her face, what he saw there frightened him.

“So you are here at last,” his mother said to him in bitter tones. “You have taken your time, as was ever your pleasure. But now there is no more time to be squandered. Your sister is lost, somewhere in the forest. You will join the search. Come, I will show you your allotted duty. Here, by the river: between here and here.” Finger stabbing at the map. “Parth is already posted to that area, but there is not much use in that girl. Go you and stiffen her sinews. She will inform you of the wider organization.”

“But Mother,” he began hesitantly, “Hiril is not –”

To Beren’s appalled amazement, his mother turned and struck him savagely across the face. “If you do not instantly obey my will,” she hissed, “I will have you whipped. Get to your duty!” Rubbing his jaw, and feeling as if his world was falling to pieces around him, the boy could think of nothing else to do but numbly obey. In any case, there was that in Emeldir’s face which did not brook argument.

He found Parth standing sobbing at the edge of the wooded country. She could tell him little more than he had already deduced from the evidence at the dam. The earthquake had been even more severe in this district; several buildings had been damaged. When the farm-folk were mustered afterwards, Hiril had been missing. They looked first at the pool, because it was known that she went there sometimes on hot days. There they found the dam collapsed and the pool empty. Some children playing in the lower river had escaped by the skin of their teeth from being swept away in the flood. Only the fact that they had run to clearer ground when the earth started shaking had saved them.

Of Hiril no trace had been found, save her clothes left on the shore of the pool. Beren had already marked where these had lain.

Parth said of Beren’s mother that she was convinced the girl was lying hurt somewhere, or had wandered, dazed, into the woods. Emeldir’s iron insistence on an organized search could not be gainsaid. Nobody had dared suggest to her that the girl was almost certainly drowned; not even Barahir, who was still too stunned to know what else to do.

Putting aside as best he could his wounded heart – twice wounded in fact: once from the awful, tearing loss of his sister, then again from his reception at the hands of his mother – Beren tried to think what to do. He quickly realized that he ought to search the downstream banks of the river – he, who could track in the Druug way. He would soon be able to see if anybody had emerged from it. But he must do it speedily, before too many others had trampled along the banks.

He quickly explained his intentions to the doubtful Parth, gave her a hug, then set off for the river. He spent all that day combing the banks for signs, crossing over from time to time to check the other side. There was a certain amount of overlay from other searchers, but he was able to assure himself that if Hiril had been washed down that far, and was still living, then she had emerged nowhere.

Neither did he find that which he had secretly expected and at the same time dreaded to find: her lifeless body.

Scratched, muddy and exhausted beyond measure, Beren ran back upstream when the sun went down. He collected a shivering Parth from her strip of woodland and the two of them returned to the farm. There they found no hot food, only dried and smoked items from the military store. Emeldir was as remorseless as ever and would have organized a continuation of the search in the night if Barahir had not quietly put his foot down. They were not superhuman, he said; most had got little sleep the previous night; now everybody needed a rest, and they would search the better the next day because of it. The furious Emeldir raged at him, but not even her will could replace sleep in the bodies of exhausted men. Beren could hardly keep his own eyes open and he saw that most of the men were in the same situation. Ragnor had fallen off his bench and lay unconscious and snoring on the rush-covered floor, and most of the others looked about set to join him.

Thus the company retired to snatch a few hours rest; only Emeldir did not sleep, but went out with a lantern to search again the woods around the former dam.



In the morning the dreadful business began all over again. Beren was sent out to a quarter of his own, but again he left it and ran down the stream to where his search had left off the previous day. Again he spent the entire day scrutinizing the banks for sign, again with no result. By the end of that day he had reached a distance downstream beyond which a living person could scarcely have been carried. He ran the long way back again that evening, and again he pretended to have swept his allotted area of the woods. On the third day he managed to cover a little more ground down the stream, but he had reached now the limit of what was practical; he therefore gave up this despairing but reasoned search on subsequent days and went through the motions at least of fulfilling the tasks to which he was directed.

So it went on. Nobody had any spirit for a drudgery which none of them believed in, but none of them dared speak against Emeldir. The woman had dark blue shadows under her eyes now, and her formerly burnished hair had become dirty and dishevelled, but the commanding will burned as fierce as ever.

On the fourth day, neighbours came quietly to work at the harvest. Emeldir came out and screamed at them to leave the corn and come and help. They withered under her fury, and most of them slunk away, but they crept back again after she went away and continued furtively at the necessary task.

On the sixth day a neat grey pony came clopping up along the farm track, carrying Silmenen perched on its back. The silver-haired Elf-waif came into the room as Emeldir was tongue-whipping a huddle of dispirited house-men to carry on the search further down-river.

The human woman turned sunken and bloodshot eyes to the Elf. "Do you bring news?" she asked in a voice raw from shouting.

Silmenen shook her head.

"Help, then?" went on Emeldir; this was answered by another shake. "Then I do not know what business you have here," she rasped. "It is an ill time for visiting." She turned back again to address the others. "You have your orders. Any questions? No? Then mount up. I will be with you directly."

"This cannot go on," said the Elf-woman in gentle tones.

Emeldir rounded on her with a snarl. "Stay out of our affairs!" With an effort she collected herself a little. "I desire no quarrel with the Fair Folk, but woe betide any who stand between me and my kin. Now, you've been warned. I'll not do so again."

"Emeldir," said Silmenen in the same quiet voice, "your daughter is dead."

There was silence in the room as everybody stopped short at what they were doing and held their breath. Emeldir stood motionless and expressionless for a moment. She said then, quite quietly, "I have no more time for this nonsense." She turned on her heel and went to stride out of the room.

The Elf raised her voice, and now everybody could hear the steel in it. "Emeldir!"

The human woman stopped with a jerk. She turned around slowly, as if pulled against her own will. Silmenen came up to her and the pair stood facing one another. They made a strange contrast – the tall, martial red-head towering over the silvery, childlike Elf; but there was no mistaking who had the greater power.

Silmenen said some words to the human woman in low tones which nobody else could hear. Suddenly Emeldir put her hands up and covered her face. She stood motionless for a moment, blind and dumb, before her shoulders jerked violently. Two more such silent convulsions followed; then a harsh gulping yawp came out of her covered mouth. That first tearing sob was followed by others; slow at first, but gathering pace, like the mountain boulder whose solitary rattling descent sets loose more, and then more, until finally the whole slope is in motion.

It seemed to the appalled onlookers hardly possible that a human throat could make such sounds. As the mortal woman bowed her quaking head and shoulders, the strange silvery maid reached up her arms to put around her. Silmenen pulled the big woman gently down beside her to sit on a bench. Emeldir laid her head on the other's breast then and cried as if her heart would break. The onlookers looked at one another, the utter and unspeakable rawness of their hearts graven on their faces. One by one they crept out of the house, leaving the two women alone in it.

They stayed in there for a long time.

\* \* \* \* \*

The errant spirit would not come to Melkor's call; he had to be hunted down. But evade as the spirit might, he could not escape, so was overhauled at last. Melkor had him set in strait bonds and brought before his throne.

The Lord of All leaned forward. The bound one, despite his insouciant boldness, shrank before the baleful eyes.

"Towers fallen," Melkor rumbled. "Chambers collapsed. Work upset, plans set back. Thousands of these scum of Mobiles crushed to pulp. What have you to say for yourself?"

"Why should you expect me to say anything?" scowled the other.

"Yours was the charge," said the Lord. "You were commanded to patience. You were granted a position of trust. Yet you broke that trust. You could not resist, could you, to play just a little with the power vested in you. To the great frustration of my endeavours. How am I supposed to respond to this, this extravagance of careless petulance?"

"Your response is all one to me," sneered the spirit. "You do not command me. I am free, and I am peer to you. I came of my will to this place, and I can go out of it whenever I choose. So what if I did toy with the pieces a little? What is a tower or two? Such are easily mended."

Melkor gritted his teeth together. "In your speech are many untruths," he grated. "Now this is something that I will not stand. I cannot have liars in my court. Therefore I must have you schooled in your true position, which is that of abject vassal."

He had the shouting spirit hauled away and sat in thought until he had devised a lesson that he thought met the case. In truth, it was not difficult; for it is a law woven into the fabric of the world that if you give in to evil, you become its basest and most helpless slave. The spirit had sold its freedom entire the moment it had first made compact with Melkor.

Thus it was that the spirit was woken from rest on a time, only to be cruelly and grotesquely put to death. I, who cannot die, killed! was the last thought that coursed through its despairing mind.

A moment later, unaccountably, it lived again; only to undergo the whole appalling and degrading experience all over again.

Then again. And again. And again. It lived; then died. Lived; then died. The cycles of dissolution and horror, moment by moment renewed, stretched down endless days that lengthened to weeks, and the weeks to months; until the months extended at last into years.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was a grey, sad time. Beren's mother and father drifted around looking bowed and old. Beren was shocked to notice that his mother had a sprinkle of grey in her hair. When had that happened? And the lines in her face.

Emeldir came to him, and hugged him, and cried, and said she was very sorry, and cried again.

But Beren could not cry. His grief sat like an unshiftable burden on his heart.

He worked as hard as he could at the harvest jobs. He worked without pause through all the daylight hours, trying to exhaust himself, trying not to think. Despite the aching weariness of his body at night, sleep would not come.

Nobody in the district felt like celebrating the harvest that year.

The earthquake seemed to have originated in Angband. All the watchers in the Leaguer had seen a vast cloud of dust and ash rise out of the three peaks at the time. There was speculation about some catastrophe the Enemy had suffered, but there seemed no chink in his armour; probing patrols had been turned back by strong forces of Orcs and trolls.

At nut-time, it began to be spoken that Barahir and Emeldir would give up Sightfoot Farm and go to live somewhere else – whether lower down the valley, or higher up, was not yet decided. The talk was that Menelrond's son Gilach would take over the farm. Beren understood his parents' reasons for wanting to leave a place where every moment something could come before the eyes to remind them of their lost child, but he could not view it the same way. Sightfoot was his home; indeed the only real home he knew. Nevertheless he was surprised at the depth of his own dismay when he first heard the news. Among the Druug he had gone for weeks at a time without thinking of the farm; now it seemed that it had more hold on his heart than he had known. All the certainties in his life just seemed to be drying up and blowing away.

The boy was in the yard one day, hacking doggedly at the battered dummy with his steel rod – his scrimping excuse of a practise sword. His mind was filled with bleak thoughts. A vision of his probable life rose before his eyes: rootless, folkless, neither one thing nor the other. He could choose to be Druug without clan, or an impatient and discontented farmer. Either would leave him as some kind of second-rate, dislocated drone, with no place at the centre of things; at best the toothless guardian of a pretty blade he had not the skill to use.

He stopped hacking and stared a while at the crude dummy, then at the steel rod in his hand.

With sudden, vicious force, Beren cast the rod at the barn wall. The steel struck with a thud, leaving a scar on the wood. He turned away then and made his way out of the gate.

It was a good day's journey to the inn at the cross-roads. For once the boy kept to the roads. He had no heart at present for his old life in the woods. He had brought nothing with him, not even his bow. He could not drink from the river for the thought of what it contained, so he had to wait for inflowing streams to slake his thirst. Luckily there were nuts and berries to be found at this time of year, enough for a snack on the trot.

He had passed one or two wagons on the road and he found several parked outside the inn. The roar of noise in the common room reflected the numbers of these sojourners.

Beren looked quickly over the company but could not see the face he sought. He waited until he had caught Zalta's attention – her father made no secret of his uninterest in such poorly-paying customers as he – then leaned over the bar for a few words with her.

She blew the hair out of her eyes, looking harassed. "Young Beren, isn't it," she said. "Not in skins today then?"

"No," he said, pitching his voice to carry above the noise, "I've been staying at home for a while."

Zalta put her hand up to her face. "Oh lor," she said with round eyes. "I forgot. Oh dear, I'm so sorry. I was that sorry to hear the news. What an awful thing! And they never found her...?"

“No,” he said briefly.

Stark sympathy rumbled Zalta’s forehead and glistened in her dark eyes. “That’s cruel hard for your mother, that is. Cruel hard, not to be able to say goodbye. And she such a bonny woman too, your mother, such as we all admire. So pretty; but tough as boots. Oh, a bonny woman she is. She’s the last one to deserve something like this.”

Beren did not wish to pursue the subject. “Zalta,” he said, “do you know a Dwarf, leads a team now, dresses all in black, with gold trim. A bit of a snooty sort.”

“Him?” she snorted. “Black and gold? Aye, I know him! What do you want him for? Never mind, none of my business. But listen, boy, all the same: if you’ll take my advice, you’ll steer clear of that one. He’s not safe to meddle with.”

Beren did not quite know how to answer that one. “I’ll take care,” he said, “but I’ve got to see him. Do you happen to know where he is?”

She blew the hair out of her eyes while she thought. “He was here only last week,” she said. “I think he was headed west. He’ll likely be two weeks on the trip at least in that case. I doubt you’ll see him here before that stretch of days. Lessen you was to follow after him and chase him up... but then, no, he might be anywhere, up country.” Her father had called her once already and now he repeated the call with some impatience. “All right Pa, all right! Be there in a tick!” She turned back to Beren. “If you really want to see him – which I don’t advise – but if you really do, best thing’d be to come back here in two weeks time, or a bit short of it. All right? Now, was there something else I could get you before I go?”

Beren shook his head. “Oh, just one more thing: do you know how he is called?”

“Yg,” she said. “Nice and short. Like his temper.” Then she bustled off to attend to her father’s demands.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beren was back at the end of the two weeks, but he had to wait four more days before his patience was rewarded by the sight of Yg and his crew driving a filled wagon up to the entry.

The boy gave the Dwarves some time to get settled before entering the building. When he did so he found that the black-clad Dwarf was not, as Beren had expected, with his crew; he was seated at another table with some other Dwarfs almost as finely dressed as he. Evidently he had preferences about the station of the company he kept.

As the boy came to their table, the Dwarvish nobles, who had been deep in conversation over great pewter mugs of beer, stopped speaking and looked at him blankly.

Beren bowed low. “I am Beren son of Barahir, at your service,” he said, in the way that he had learned was held polite among Dwarves.

Nobody bothered to give him the formal reply. Yg, who seemed to be the ranking Dwarf even at this table, looked the ragged urchin up and down. “What do you want?” he asked curtly.

“Sir, I am in need of lessons in the use of the sword,” replied Beren. “You will remember, Sir, that you and I exchanged some talk about it last winter, at my father’s farm up the valley.” He saw a light of recognition come into the Dwarf’s eyes, as if the memory had just then returned to him. “You refused me then; but we had not at that time mentioned payment. I am prepared to pay any reasonable fee you name.” At this point in time Beren had no idea how he could pay anything; he was making it up as he went along. He would cross any such bridges as far into the future as he could shove them. Of one thing he was fairly certain: that he would never get anything out of the Dwarf without paying for it.

The Dwarf's hard black eyes had widened at the absurdity of the child's temerity. He ignored the offer, said only, "Get out of here before I have you thrown out." He turned back to his company, taking no further notice of the boy. Beren stood there irresolute for a moment, then retreated to the door.

*What was the meaning of that?* one of Yg's companions asked him in their own language.

*Some half-bred peasant brat,* Yg told him. *I came across him at some hovel or other; whacking a wicker dummy with a great iron bar, if you will believe it. I made the mistake of speaking to him. Listen, forget the brat! You were telling me what Cold-striker suspects of the ones we mind-bound.*

They continued in low voices discussing schemes for some minutes. But as Yg reached for his tankard to refresh his voice, the end of a staff swooped past his eyes and knocked it flying.

The cursing Dwarves skidded their stools back hastily to get out of the way of the flood of beer. Talk in the room had lulled at the crash; people craned their necks to see the cause of the upset.

The astonished Yg turned to find the curséd brat standing at the table-end with a long stave in his hand.

Beren bowed shortly again. "I most humbly beg your pardon, Master, for the disturbance. But I will *not* be dismissed like a... like a... like a piece of rubbish. Your rank is doubtless higher than mine; but if princes cannot afford courtesy, then who can?"

The Dwarf stood, teeth bared, beer dripping from his jerkin. Eyes glittering, he took up his sheathed sword from where it lay on the end of the table. He grimaced in added fury at the sight of the liquid spattering the sheath, then drew the shining blade to inspect it. At the flash of the naked blade, the room became very quiet.

Beren, undaunted, pressed further. "I have some skill with the stave, Sir, which may help me along. I have heard from others that you are an expert swordsman, and you make the same claim yourself. I will pay! Is it not said of the Dwarves that they will render many services for payment?"

Yg wiped the sword carefully with a dry cloth, then turned at last to face the boy. Despite his bold intentions, Beren quailed a little at the deadly look in the Dwarf's eye. The black-clad figure began to advance slowly, sword held at the high guard. Beren backed away.

The Dwarf lunged suddenly. Beren attempted a parry with his staff, but there was a silver blur of movement, accompanied by the loud bite of steel in wood. The staff jarred in Beren's hand, and a foot-length of it clattered to the floor at his feet.

Beren retreated further. "I am offering you fair dealing," he said. "Why will you not even discuss it?"

"All the sword you will ever get from me, boy," said Yg through his teeth, "you see now before you. And you will get it for nothing. Like you not that for a bargain?"

Beren dodged another probing thrust and backed around an empty table. "You're not being reasonable," he said. "Just set a price. Set me a price! Is that too much to ask?" There was not a lot of room left now between him and the corner.

Just as the boy was starting to wonder, with a rising feeling of panic, just how he was going to get out of this fix, a sudden hail came from the far side of the room. "Oi! You there, Mr Dwarf! Just stop a minute, hey?"

Boy and Dwarf turned their heads together. They saw three men on the other side of the room, all of whom held strung bows, with an arrow ready on the string. Still others were following close behind with their own hastily fetched weapons.

The midmost of the archers stepped forward, bow raised. "There'll be no killing of boys in this establishment, Mister," he said firmly, "not while we're here to hinder it. Just so's we know where we stand, eh?"

The Dwarf sneered at him. "The bow is a coward's weapon," he said. "Take up your blade and come at me, churl, if there is any manhood at all in your stomach."

The beefy archer flushed, but his aim did not waver. "That's as may be. I won't be diverted. You stick that boy, Mister, and I'll stick you, and that's all there is about it."

Yg turned back to Beren with eyes as flat and empty of emotion as a fish's. He straightened slowly, shrugged, and slid his sword carefully back into his sheath. He turned and bowed ironically to his persecutors.

"Stick him, gentles?" he replied silkily. "Hardly! His life is not worth the labour of cleaning my blade. I had merely intended to beat him black and blue with the flat. But I bow to the will of the company. If it is the custom of this House to allow its customers to be drenched in their own ale by whatever backwoods brat cares to make the essay, why then, I have nothing more to say. Not within doors, anyway. Matters may go otherwise in other places." He finished with a final flat stare towards Beren, then retreated to his table.

The boy had followed him, however, and would not be cowed. "What about lessons?" he persisted. "Why won't you teach me at any price?" His voice rang loud in the tense silence.

Yg, eyeing him, breathed heavily. "Are you so weary of your life, boy?" he hissed through gritted teeth. "Or is it simply your humour to goad me? If so, I must tell you, it is a frivolity which not many have survived."

Zalta's clear voice rang out suddenly. They turned to see her standing in front of the bar with her hands on her hips. "Why don't you set him a price?" she demanded. "That's all he wants. Set him a price! Set an impossible one, if you want to get rid of the boy. Why do you have to be so nasty about it?"

There was growled assent on every side. "Aye!" people echoed. "Set the lad a price!"

Yg looked around at the glowering onlookers. "I wished only to have my drink in peace," he said to the company. He turned to Beren and smiled silky menace at the boy. "In my own place, I have my own ways to clear myself of such pests as you." He shrugged again. "But in other houses, I must play by other rules. So, then. Is it agreed? If I name you a price, to teach you the way of the sword, you will cease to plague me?"

Beren, with sinking heart, thought he could guess what was going to come. But somehow he had allowed Zalta to paint him into this corner.

"All right," he said. "Name a price, and if I cannot meet it, I will leave you alone."

The Dwarf laughed at this reply. He looked then around the room as if seeking something. Not finding it, he stood up and strode towards the kitchen. Beren followed him, followed by Zalta, followed by the archers, followed by a long gaggle of all the other customers. They were all craning their heads to see how it would play out.

In the kitchen, the Dwarf ignored the amazed staff goggling at him through the clouds of steam. He was inspecting some of the great copper basins hanging on the wall. He lifted up a huge one, glanced at Beren, then laughed and put it back. He chose another, of quite moderate size, of volume perhaps five or six pints. This basin Yg slapped on a bench, then turned his hard black eyes on the boy.

"Fill that with gold," he said, "and I will teach you all that you desire to know."

Beren looked at the hard face, then at the deep basin. Expressionless, he nodded to the Dwarf, then turned and left the room.

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The green things planted by the Onodrim had grown fast. Some of the saplings were now higher than Beren's head. The stream had returned to its proper bounds, and was again sweet and fit to drink. The towers of rock

remained along the valley rims, but they were now broken and robbed of all their former ominous power. Beren could see where moss was taking hold on one or two. Birds sang in the bushes, there was sign of rabbits, and Beren even caught sight of a deer or two.

When he reached the round valley at the head of the gorge, he could not help shivering at the memories it held. Apart from the return of moisture and nature to the place, little seemed altered; the rocky fane still stood broken under the sun.

The boy paused, irresolute, between the puddled glass of the melted doors. As he had climbed the ramp towards the dark opening, the same choking sense of menace as before had grown again in his breast. Whatever evil there was here, it had not gone away.

The fear was no worse than before, but having escaped from it once, his spirit rebelled against facing the trial a second time. But Beren had little time today for such nonsense. After all, he told himself firmly, nothing had happened last time. Stop being such a baby!

Eventually he swallowed down the hard lump of dread and forced his legs to move. Treading as softly as he knew how, he ventured a few paces into the doorway before halting again, chagrin now souring his terror. His knees were shaking. Furious with them, he commanded them to behave. You coward! he said to himself, you managed it perfectly well before; why now this almost overpowering urge to run away?

Finding no answers, but fervently wishing himself elsewhere from this place, and wishing with all his heart that he had never had this stupid and crazy idea in the first place, he crept on.

After what seemed like an age of torment, he reached the point where he could peer around the edge of the chamber into the dark spaces within. Everything seemed exactly as before; the gold-clad corpse of the Dwarf-girl still hung in the centre of the row of figurines. The boy breathed out in silent relief.

His heart was pounding now, each beat jerking his whole chest. The fear was so strong he could taste it in his mouth. He tried to remember Willow's words about fear, but they seemed faint and far away. Step by step he made himself walk nearer and nearer to the mummified figure. The bright gold slowly grew in his field of vision until he could make out its shape. Now he could make out the lacy pattern of the edge; and at last the individual jewels, and the fine black hairs of the Dwarf where they covered the gold. Three steps more, and he was there. Two steps. One.

He would have to unfasten it from the back. This thought had just formed in his mind when his eye caught movement in the corner of its field.

Beren jumped back like a startled hare, then gasped in disbelief at what he saw. One of the carved stone figures was moving.

The figure walked towards him at an easy pace – almost strolling. In shape it was like a youth, a youth carved with superb skill from granite, speckled pink and black. Liquid reflections glided over its polished skin as it moved. The stone youth was slender and graceful and not much taller than Beren himself.

Beren began to back slowly away, but the approaching figure glanced behind his right shoulder and laughed. The boy swung to that side and discovered to his dismay that another figure was lounging there. On his left a third emerged from the shadows. They had him boxed in.

Strangely, his fear had vanished, leaving an icy calm. The boy's brain was working at supernormal speed and on many levels. Part of it noticed something curious: when the statues moved, it seemed that the rock of which they were made stayed still; only the boundaries moved. The first one had walked, as it were, through a thick vein of white quartz as it approached him, so that the white glistened first on its breast, then as a stripe down the sides, disappearing in the next step around the back.

Beren's voice rang loud in the stillness. "What do you want?" he challenged the stone figures.

The statues replied in unison, their voices ringing hard and clear as crystal. "Want?" they said. "Why, nothing. We want nothing." They each took a pace closer.

Beren was switching his gaze between the three, but he could not keep all of them in view at the same time. "I know how this goes," he said, while trying furiously to think. "You are playing with me, like a cat plays with a mouse. But the cat plays because it must eat. That is why it hunts, and the play is to make it a better hunter. Do you tell me that rock eats human boys?"

The figures had halted to hear him out. Now they laughed. "No," they replied as one, "assuredly not." They took another pace closer.

"Then will you let me go? After you have had your play?"

The stone images shook their heads slowly and in unison, the swivel motion bringing new patterns of crystal grain to light on either side.

Beren swallowed. "But why? Tell me at least why. I have done nothing to you, to deserve your spite. Or do you simply not care how you are known? Is it one to you that you will be a name for evil, spurning all justice, as it is honoured and kept among all kindly peoples? Why must you make me your enemy undeserved?" Fingers of desperation were stealing into his soul.

"We do not spurn justice," the voices rang cold, all together. "On the contrary: we keep it. It is you who have affronted justice."

"What? What have I affronted? I have never hurt you!"

"You came to rob," the figures said. The first extended a crystal-speckled finger towards the necklace hanging from the dead Dwarf. "That. That belongs to us."

Beren looked at the gleaming gold, then back to the stone figures. "I never touched it!"

The figures laughed at that and did not bother to comment.

"That is not justice," the boy continued. "And who are you to claim that gold for your own? You will never tell me that is your own work. The Dwarves made it, so much is clear. And the jewels look Elven to me. Where then is your claim?"

The lead figure bent towards him. "The *gold* is ours," it hissed. "The gold is *us*. It is all one to us how it is squashed or cut, and whichever magpie baubles may be gummed to it, or not. Gold is of the earth, therefore it is ours. We were robbed of it, and now we have it back. *You* will not rob us of it anew.

"We know who you are. You came with these other lice that scurry about over the noble faces of patient rock. You made cause with our foes, called down the lightning upon us. Is that not affront? Is that not deserving of retribution? The gods of the air are jealous of us and will not let us have our place in the sun. So be it. We endure. Our day will come. But *you* are no god. Therefore *you* will pay now for your presumption."

Beren made a sudden dash to leave the circle, but the leader grabbed his arms in its stony grip. The boy stared into its perfectly cut granite features, just a few inches from his own face. He could see the delicate carven line of eyelids and nostrils.

"There are many ways for you to die," said the stone youth pleasantly. "We could kill you as we killed the Dwarf. The Dwarf was dull. She only cried, so we just stuck her, let her juices out to run over the dust. Her feeble substance will fritter away over the long years. But you, you have not cried. You have spoken well. We honour that. Therefore we will let you choose from several deaths.

"Look now upon us. We are one with the rock deep beneath, and can manifest it as we will. Have you marked that? Ah, we see that you have. Know, then, that there are many secrets in the depths. Great jewels



lie hidden. Would you like to see?" The rock inside the figure's outline moved then with dizzying speed. Colours and shapes flashed before Beren's eyes quicker than he could take them in. When the motion stopped, the statue had become a perfectly cut figurine of pure emerald, as green as spring grass. Again the textures whipped past, and this time they settled to the heavenly blue of sapphire. One more time, and the figure before him blazed with diamond coruscation.

"If it is gold you desire, we can bury you in it," the fiery-sparkling creature said. It swept away the diamond and in the next instant stood before him as a beautiful shape in gleaming, buttery gold. The figure drew Beren's hands together then and pulled them gently towards it. To the boy's amazement and horror he found that his hands sank into the thing's body. As it inched towards him, first his lower arms disappeared, then his upper, until he was staring into the golden face just an inch from his own.

"Thus we can send you to sleep, deep below," the golem whispered to him. "Just a little further to a golden kiss. Gold will fill your eyes, gold will stop your mouth. Deep, deep below you will lie, too deep for your blob-folk ever to find. There you will sleep forever, hulled in your shroud of gold, until the world is unmade. Is this your desire?"

Beren could only shake his head dumbly. The figure laughed and stepped back, the boy's arms emerging as it did so, until they had returned to their former posture in which the monster was holding Beren's wrists in front of it. The gold of its substance whisked away to be replaced by veined and crystallised rock.

"You are shivering!" exclaimed the figure. "Is your flesh cold? We have all the heat you could ever want." The textures whipped past in an upward direction. Beren felt the hands gripping him grow first warm, then uncomfortably hot. "Beneath the earth is heat enough to warm your bones – or bake them to ashes," continued the stone man. With another of its crystalline laughs, the statue let him go entirely and stepped back. Again the textures whizzed past, up and up. Beren began to feel heat on his face. The shape before him began to glow first dimly red in the gloom, then yellow, waxing at last to an intense white, before which the boy had to stagger back and shield his scorching face with his arms.

The glow and the heat faded. Gasping, Beren uncovered his eyes to see the statue once again standing languidly before him as pink-speckled granite.

"How like you then the fire-death?" the thing enquired, spreading its arms in query; but the boy was too shaken to make word or sign in reply.

The stone youth sighed. "Ah," it said regretfully, "I believe you are dull after all. We tire of this. Time to make an end." It held up a hand to shoulder height, and as boy watched in a kind of horrified fascination, the four fingers began to extend into long, sharp needles of rock. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the other two doing the same.

For a moment he thought of simply letting it happen. He could not think of anything which would prevent those wicked stone knives from piercing his heart within the next few breaths; and at least that would relieve it of the burden of loneliness and loss which had weighed so heavily on him since Hiril's death. What was it Willow had said about bonds falling free?

The thought was no sooner in his head however than he felt a strong surge of contrary feeling, almost as if from somewhere outside himself. He felt instantly certain that Willow would never approve of anyone simply giving up life without a fight.

Beren whipped out his knife and lunged at his tormentor with all the speed of desperation, but the stone youth was quicker. A swipe of its other hand turned Beren's blade out of its path with a clash of sparks. The knife was knocked out of his grip and fell clattering to the floor.

"Do you not remember the game?" the thing said to him pleasantly. "Stone beats blade. You know that." All three of the figures raised their stone needles, ready to strike. Beren stared at the bitter points, knowing with his reason that his life was at its end, but utterly unable to absorb the fact in his heart. He wondered if it

would hurt.

But the final stabbing thrusts never came. Before the boy's unbelieving eyes, dark cords flashed in from the shadows and whipped around the statues. The ropes were moving and thickening and tightening before he had time to take a breath. The figure in front of him writhed in the grip which had seized it, but it could not free itself from the strangling cords. Cords? No, they were *roots!* Their rapidly thickening web twisted at the living statue, wrenching its limbs out of place. Tendrils began to squeeze their relentless way into all its crevices. Before the boy had taken three breaths, chips were spalling off the stone figure; before he had taken six, it had crumbled in front of his eyes to a disordered heap of inert gravel. He looked quickly behind him and saw that the same treatment had been meted out to the other two.

His gaze followed the three thick vines back into the gloom, where it met a slowly advancing shape that he knew. It was Rattlecone.

The Ent withdrew the long tendrils back into its hands from whence they had come. He stirred one of the lifeless heaps of gravel with his great foot. "But tree beats stone," he remarked ruminatively.

Beren's trembling limbs would no longer support him; he sank helplessly to the floor. "Rattlecone!" he gasped weakly, trying to shake the roaring faintness out of his ears. "I was never so glad to see anybody in my whole life."

"Aye," replied the Ent drily, "I can well believe it. But get up now; we must not linger here. Shall I carry you?"

"No, no," said Beren, pushing himself up, "I just felt faint for a moment. Here, help me." He reached up, and with Rattlecone's support managed to stand again on still shaking legs.

"Come, let us go quickly," said Rattlecone.

"Wait," said the boy. "I'm not going without what I came for." He retrieved his knife from the floor and staggered to the Dwarf. "Just let me get this thing off her." He stopped then and considered the withered corpse of the Dwarf where it hung forlornly under its princely adornment. "Wait a minute – I've a better idea. Rattlecone, you can break these stone spears, can't you? We can take her with us, necklace and all."

Rattlecone looked blankly at the corpse, then back to Beren. "You are wasting time," he said. "Where should we take it? To what purpose?"

"Anywhere!" replied Beren. "It's the least we can do. Let's not leave her here in this stinking hole!"

Shrugging his acquiescence, and perhaps feeling that this was the quickest way to get the boy out of that evil place, the Ent reached out on either side of the body and broke the stone spears without apparent effort. Supporting the dried body in his arms, he led the way out into the sunlight. He did not stop again until they had reached the bottom of the ramp.

"I think they will not come after us here," he said. "Not while the sun shines, at any rate. But by nightfall I would be many miles from this evil place. Hrrm, come now, tell me your wish for this remnant, then let us be about it, then away as soon as may be."

Beren thought for a moment. "We'll make a cairn," he said. "Just something to keep the animals off. There's no time for anything more elaborate. But anything will be better than leaving her in that chamber of horrors."

At Rattlecone's suggestion, they put some more distance between themselves and the Fane of the Idols before carrying out Beren's ideas. The Ent lifted Beren to his shoulders and made a quick pace. As they went, in answer to the boy's questions, he said he had come to the valley to see how things were after the work of restoration; he had been on the other side of the bowl from the ramp, but had seen Beren enter the temple; fearing the worst, had come as quickly as he could.

“Do you realize what folly that was, boy?” he said sternly. “You barely escaped with your life, and I too with mine. Stone is slow – slower even than wood; were it otherwise, my lifeless body might by this time have been standing there with yours.”

“But you dealt with the statues pretty well, Rattlecone!” said Beren from his seat next to the great hoary head. “Doesn’t tree beat stone, like you said?”

“Hah!” replied the Ent. “Hah no, not always! Those things were just playing with you. They were not aware of me until too late. No, what we deal with here is one of the great, old powers of the earth – that was clear from the start. Too much for one insignificant little Ent. Had they gathered their full might – homm, no, I do not wish to think of it. This was a cursed folly from start to finish. Oh, such folly!”

Beren considered this for a while. “If you knew it was folly, why did you come after me?” he asked at last.

“Do not ask me why!” said the Ent with a blast of expressed air. “I have not done anything so foolish for a thousand years. No, longer. Do not tempt me to such again! Next time I will leave you to your fate, be assured of it!”

There did not seem to be much answer to that, so Beren fell silent.

Some way past the entrance to the hollow valley, after they had reached a point from which the ruined temple could no longer be seen, the Ent laid the mummified Dwarf in a niche. He fetched slabs and blocks and at Beren’s direction built a rough sarcophagus around the body. The last stone to be laid was a great, flat slab which the Ent fetched from across the valley and carried slowly back in the lowering rays of the sun. Before he laid it on the grave, Beren unfastened the glorious sweep of gold from the body, folded it carefully, and wrapped it in a skin. He turned then and addressed the dried, dead Dwarf in a low voice.

“Lady,” he said, “I beg your pardon, if that be not impertinence, for taking your treasure. I take it only out of need; although I suppose any robber would say the same. I would gladly pay you for it, and I have at least brought your remains from that pit, and done you what honour I can. I give you my pledge in addition that I will do my best to find out who your kin are and to make known to them where you lie. Besides that, all I have to leave you is my knife. My friend the smith made it for me; it is a good knife, and I hate to lose it. I hope you will accept that as payment for your loss.

“Rest now! Be at peace!” he concluded. He laid his knife at the side of the dried-out figure, which looked smaller now without its golden glory, then signalled to Rattlecone to lay the slab on top. The descending stone eclipsed the withered body of the Dwarf-girl, with its strangely familiar glossy hair, then settled into its place with a thud.

Rattlecone turned to the boy. “Come now, my Pedar!” he said in firm voice. “Let us put some distance behind us, and that quickly.”

\* \* \* \* \*

As soon as he clapped eyes on the black-haired Dwarf, Beren knew.

Yg was sitting alone this time, brooding over the remains of a meal. His eyes widened in surprise as Beren slipped into the seat opposite him.

Without further ado the boy slid the skin-wrapped package across the table. “I do not think this will fill your basin,” he said quietly, “but the jewels and the wonderful craft of it may add to its value beyond the crude weight of gold. And I would guess... I would guess *now*, at any rate, that it might lie nearer to your heart than I imagined earlier. I don’t know. Only you can tell for sure.”

The Dwarf leaned back, looked from the package to Beren. “This is gold?” he asked, disbelief in his voice.

Beren nodded. "Take a look," he said.

Curious in spite of himself, Yg lifted a corner of the skin with a cautious finger. What he saw caused him to draw his breath in with a hiss. He laid the fold back and took a quick and furtive glance around the inn; but nobody seemed interested in them.

The Dwarf stood up. "Wait here!" he commanded in a low voice. Carrying the package, he went to the bar, where Beren could see him talking with the serving woman. Something was arranged. Yg looked back at Beren, beckoned the boy to follow him. He led the way out of the room and down a corridor which had several smaller rooms on either side. He urged Beren into one of these, almost pulling him with a hand on one arm, then closed and barred the door. He motioned the boy to sit down at the small table in the room and sat himself at the other side. The Dwarf turned his attention then to the skin-covered package, which he unwrapped carefully, as if almost afraid of what he might find.

At last the full shining spread of the necklace lay across the table. Its golden light dazzled their eyes and seemed to flicker on the walls.

Yg raised his hard black eyes to the boy's face. "Where did you get this?" he demanded.

Beren started to say, "What about your promise..." but Yg stopped him with a raised hand. There was a look about him which made Beren feel it would be wise to obey.

"First things first," the Dwarf said quietly. "We will speak of your devil's bargain in good time. But first you will tell me how this thing came into your possession."

So Beren told him most of the story: of the drumming, the storm, and its aftermath. Yg sat up with a hiss as Beren reached the part about the dead Dwarf, his eyes glittering with some unnameable emotion. He asked further questions in demanding tones after the boy came to the end of his account. What had been done with the body? Where buried? Beren, staring in fascination at the blackness and gloss of the well-tended hair of the figure opposite him, gave him the answers he required. He told how he had done the victim as much honour as he could, and how he had left his knife.

At the end of the account the Dwarf sat a while in silence, his eyes on the necklace. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking. At last he gathered the shimmering gold with careful hands and stowed it in a satchel of his own. He looked up then again at Beren.

"All right, boy," he said slowly. "All right. I did not expect ever to see you again; but you are right, the payment is enough. This changes everything between us." He stood up. "I will keep my bargain, but there are things which must be done first. Several things. After they are accomplished, I will seek you again." Without further word or gesture, he turned around and left the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

The anticlimactic end to his risky quest left Beren feeling empty and bemused. How was he supposed to meet Yg again? No arrangements had been made. Did the Dwarf expect him to hang around the inn for an indefinite length of time? He felt as if he had been left dangling.

He took his problems first to Zalta, who shook her head over the whole affair. "I thought you were well out of that," she said, "and now you've dived head first right back into it again! What do you want to get mixed up with that Dwarf for, anyway? He's a bad lot if ever I saw one. You saw how he was all set to cut you, and yet you won't be told, but must go on chasing after him! You need your head read if you ask me."

"I can't explain it, Zalta," he said, "I'm just doing what I have to. But now I don't know what to do. He said to wait. But where? How long? I can't hang around here all the time – I need to be with my people."

"I should just about say so," the black-haired woman replied, hands on hips. "Your poor mother will be

thinking she's lost two children and not one."

"Oh," he said, looking guilty. "Actually I meant my other people – the forest ones."

Zalta looked at him for a while in silence. "Young fellow," she said at last, "I do not think you are set on the right path in life." She left him then and went about her business.

He left the inn and stood there, irresolute. A cold wind was sighing through the branches and the air was full of dead leaves. Duty called him to his home; but it would soon no longer be his home, and already it seemed empty to him, a habitation of mournful ghosts. He had left it in desperation and now he did not know if he could face it ever again.

At that moment, as if to help urge him to the course he all along had meant to take, the drums began. He quickly absorbed their message: the gathering! He began to run.

The place of the meeting was the wild, clean country behind the line of granite hills which formed the spine of Dorthonion and of which Foen was the last and the highest outpost. The slopes here faced the South and were sheltered from the northern gales. Here there were many southern trees mixed with the pines, and the forest was more open and contained more varied life than in some other parts of the highlands. There seemed to be a depth to the place – a special taste in the water, a special colour in the leaves; here, in the whole of the land, the echo of the Creation was perhaps the loudest.

In a forest clearing beneath granite towers glowing under the sun, on the last warm day of the year, the great gathering of the six tribes took place. Beren arrived soon after midday. He found that many people were already there; more were streaming in from every side. People were carrying game and food of all kinds, and fires were already kindled. The clearing was filled with chatter and laughter; the normal furtive caution of the people seemed set to one side for once. Beren knew, however, that there would be guards enough nosing warily along the northern frontier.

As he looked for his foster-family, he realized with a jolt that he had not seen them since his sister died. He stopped in consternation. How could he tell them? He did not want to; but how could he not?

But the moment he saw Long Hair's liquid eyes open wide in recognition, he saw that they already knew.

Sunshine hugged him tight, and no words were necessary. He could not help some curiosity however.

"How?" he asked.

"The Horse-breaker called on us," said Sunshine softly. "We have missed you sorely, Speaks with Birds. Have you eaten? No? Come, sit by the fire and drink this while I prepare something for you."

He sat close with his foster-sister, her arm around him, across the fire from old Nose. Sunshine, tending the cooking, completed the circle. They spoke only of casual things: hunts successful and unsuccessful, Leather's new baby, Talkative's chances with a girl from the Bee People. As the warmth of their company closed around him like a sleeping-fur, he realized with gratitude that it was the one thing he had truly needed.

He badly wanted to ask Nose's advice about Yg, but he could find no place to start. The whole story seemed to wind all the way back to Boromir and his wild battles. It did not seem like something Nose would think highly of. Indeed, sitting there among his people, in the forest which had long claimed him for its own, Beren himself began to wonder why he did not simply give the whole business away. These noisy farmers and their flashy forays on horseback, long knives shining under the sun – what did all that matter to him? Why not stay on quietly with the People, living simply in the way they did, in the way that was dear to him, close to the good earth?

Except he knew that he could not. All ways were shut to him except one.

Later in the afternoon there was much visiting among the camp fires. Speaks with Birds was greeted warmly on all sides, but far from gladdening Beren's heart, this seemed to weigh upon it further. He felt restless and could not find the way to contentment.

In the evening the dances began. Sunshine put on her treasured bead dress and the hat of gleaming feathers and joined in. The women sang of sunlight and the laughter of babies. The rows reformed after that, the older ones sitting down and leaving just the young unmarried women and men from all the tribes. These then danced the oldest dance in the world: the dance of the way of the man and the maid – the boldness and the coyness, the fire and the water. There were more dances, and still more, and always the voices of the People sang together, the soft music of flute and tambour weaving through. Turning hands caught the firelight and bodies swayed and bobbed over twinkling feet.

Sleep was fitful. The boy awoke the next morning to talk and laughter. The meeting would last at least another day; but suddenly he could stand no more of it. The simple joy in meeting old friends and new, of dancing and singing, of listening to stories: it was not for him. Gathering up his few possessions, he left quietly, with only a word to the startled Long Hair.

For the next four weeks he drifted through the forest like a shade, unhappy and irresolute. It was a cold and hungry time. The gales blew in the treetops, in which few leaves now remained to hide the leaden skies. The game was scarce and shy, and there was not much to forage.

Beren checked at the inn from time to time. Yg had taken the road to the South with a wagon, then had passed back through a few days after that, now heading east. Nothing had been heard of him since then. It began to look as though nobody ever would; he would disappear, taking Beren's treasure with him. So much for the honesty of the Dwarves.

The drums began to pass their message of winter withdrawal, and still nothing was decided. Beren was on the point of rejoining his foster-family and this time joining them in the journey to the South, but he called at the inn one last time.

This time the Dwarf Yg was there. Beren found him, clad in his usual gold-trimmed black, sitting among five or six others at a table near the back. The Dwarf looked up as the boy approached, displeasure on his features. "I have been waiting two days for you," he said to Beren without other greeting. "Do you think I am your servant, so, to wait upon your pleasure? Meet us behind the stables in ten minutes."

"But, but," said the boy, "shouldn't we talk about wheres and whens? Where will you teach me, what arrangements must I make?"

The Dwarf waved this away with an impatient movement. "The sooner you do as I tell you, the quicker you will find these things out," he said.

Beren scratched his head. This seemed like a strange way to proceed. However, the Dwarves were getting up and paying their bill, and there seemed nothing else but to do as Yg demanded.

He noticed Zalta's sceptical eye on him as he left the room.

He stood there, shivering a little in the cold wind, watching the Dwarves as they made ready their cart. Several boxes and chests were tied on it and a kind of canvas roof arched over all.

Yg beckoned him over at last.

"What is all this?" demanded Beren. "Are you going away again? What about our bargain?"

Yg said no word to him, only glanced quickly around. Nobody else was in yard. The Dwarf nodded then briefly to two of his companions. Before the surprised boy had time even to react, let alone to protest, they grabbed him. Two of them held him while a third whipped a gag over his mouth. Beren began to struggle

furiously, but his yells were muffled by the gag and there were too many opponents.

Despite their strength and numbers, the Dwarves had no easy time tying him up. Yg kept glancing around, and began after long moments of the struggle to issue sharp commands to the sweating Dwarves in their own language. At last though they had the furiously struggling boy secured and were able to bundle him under the canvas. A cloth soaked in some pungent liquid covered Beren's mouth. Before he could shout muffled protest, the world swam away from him: first into a red fog, then nothing.

He woke with a headache some indeterminate time later. He was lying on the jolting cart, jammed between two long boxes which reminded him uncomfortably of coffins. Any view of the outside world was obscured by the canvas swaying a short way over his face, but he could tell it was still daylight. From the rock and pitch of the cart, as well as the sound of hooves, it was clear that they were already under way.

Had Beren been a normal nine-year-old boy, that would have been that: trussed up like a chicken, he would have had to wait upon the Dwarf's pleasure. However, he was not normal, and several factors combined to give him a chance to turn the game in his favour. To begin with, he had a strength far in excess of the norm for his age. Both his father and mother were physically strong, and he had inherited from both in full measure. The hard existence of the Druug had toughened him further, as had living close to the young earth, filled as it still was with the vigour of its making. The two Ent-draughts he had absorbed had added to this already considerable total as much more again.

Even more important than sheer strength was the ability to keep a clear head. Beren had by now several times been in danger of his life. He was becoming used to it, and used to staying cool and thinking his way out of difficulties.

He tested his bonds. His hands were tied behind him, and his feet were bound together, but that seemed (apart from the gag) to be the tally of his restrictions. Slowly he applied his full strength to the cords about his wrists. They were far from cruelly tight, and as he felt them stretch, hope came to his heart. Again and again he flexed against these bonds. Greatly aided by a film of grease remaining on his hands since his last kill, he patiently worked one hand towards looseness.

It took him the best part of an hour, and a certain amount of pain, but at last he succeeded in freeing his hands.

The boy had heard the Dwarves conversing with one another from time to time, and at a certain point he realized with a shock that he had no idea what they were saying. You and I will not think this unusual, but Beren had been from childhood abnormally gifted at reading the hearts and minds of, it seemed, all the creatures which ran or flew. Only now, for the first time in his life, he found his intuition to be powerless. Initially he wondered if it was because he could not see their faces, could not examine their expressions; later on, as he enjoyed no more success under more normal conditions, he realized that this could not be the reason. Of all the peoples in Middle-earth, Dwarves seemed to be the only folk whose thought was opaque to him. In time, after he had learned some lore about their origins, more grounded explanations for the exception occurred to his thought; but for a long time this blindness where he had been accustomed to clarity puzzled him greatly, and disturbed him in almost the same degree.

However, none of this occupied his mind right now. Quickly he searched for something sharp. He found to his joy that the Dwarves had left his satchel behind his head; and further, that they seemed to have left it unpillaged. He looked for his knife, but then cursed when he remembered that he had left it as payment for the necklace. He did have three or four flints though, of various sizes and shapes, adapted to different purposes. He picked the sharpest of these and was about to slash the bonds about his face and legs, when he hesitated.

He knew that he could easily slip out of the cart and into the woods without the Dwarves being able to prevent it. Indeed, forewarned as he was now, he did not think they would find it easy to subdue him again even in a straight fight. But was that his best course? He was puzzled by the whole affair. What was it all about? Why kidnap him? What did they intend? He could leave now whenever he liked, but there seemed no

harm in sitting tight for a while. That way he might learn the answer to the puzzle.

He put the large flint aside and chose instead a smaller flake, which after some juggling he was able to slip into a crack in the side of a box, chosen so that the flake was not obvious to the eye but could readily be extracted. He then spent frustrating minutes unpicking the knot in his wrist-bonds, then still more minutes in cunningly retying these cords so as to remain easily escapable, yet appear plausibly tight. When he was finally finished, he arranged his bag as it was before, squeezed his feet through his bound arms to have his wrists once more behind him, and took stock.

From the quality of the light he guessed it was about mid-morning. He had been smelling the air ever since he awoke, and he knew where he was without needing to think about it: the cart was well down the road which led east towards the mouth of the broad vale of Ladros.

Time to become 'awake' and see what reaction that aroused. He began to make as much noise as he could against the gag and to thump his feet on the wooden boards. Quite soon the shadow of a hand fumbled outside at the canvas edge, which was then thrown back. Yg's face appeared in the gap. The Dwarf had a knife in his hand.

"Be quiet," the Dwarf commanded. "So long as you ride quiet, you need have no fear for your life; and I will teach you, just as we agreed. But I have many other calls on my time, thus I must do this on my own terms, or not at all. You must lie quiet, do you hear me? There are many things I can do to you which you will not like, although they will not hinder your learning. The less trouble you give me, the quicker everybody will be pleased. Do you understand?"

Beren glared his fury, but eventually nodded. The canvas was replaced and tied again.

It was no more than mid-afternoon when they halted. Beren guessed they were at that time not far from Newfort. Later he realized that Yg preferred to wait for darkness before passing the town. The boy felt the cart bounce over some ruts, then he heard the hoofs and wheels crunch on gravel. They passed into shadow and came to a halt. The sound of other Dwarvish voices came to his ears, followed by the squeak and slam of a gate closing.

The canvas was lifted back. One of Yg's party rolled the boy wordlessly over and tugged casually at the bonds, judging their tightness. To his credit, he checked with rather more care to see that Beren's hands and feet were warm, that the blood was able to circulate. The stocky Dwarf lifted the boy out then and slung him over a well-muscled shoulder. Free of the cart, Beren was able to see that they were in a small yard surrounded by a wooden stockade. As far as he could make out upside-down, a good part of the area inside the fence seemed to be given over to a long thatched building, constructed of turf walls between wooden frames.

Yg was standing to one side, in animated, almost vehement conversation with several new Dwarves. These kept glancing over to Beren with unease written on their features.

The helpless boy was carried into the building, past several more Dwarves, all of whom looked surprised and uneasy in mixed degrees. He was set down at last, roughly but not unkindly, in a corner of a small room which contained nothing but a pair of beds. His carrier stood guard over him there until Yg appeared. The black-clad Dwarf appeared to be annoyed, although this was so close to his usual manner that it was hard to be certain. Some words were exchanged, then Beren's carrier went out. Loud voices continued to debate in Dwarvish elsewhere in the building. Some of the voices did not seem very happy.

Yg bent over Beren and untied his gag. The boy spat bits of thread from his mouth, then opened it to speak; but Yg raised a hand to cut him off.

"Do not start with me, boy," he said. "Later you will come to know me; and then you will know, as not all of these fools outside yet know, that I will have my way, and the less talk, the less pain with it. You do not know me yet; that is the only reason I am giving you this warning. Once. There will be no other. Do we understand



one another?"

Beren looked long at him, then nodded.

"Good," said the Dwarf, nodding in his turn. "I detest fools. I shall be glad to find you are not one. You have started well; take my advice, and continue so. Then we shall all be pleasant.

"Someone will come to feed you presently. You need not waste your time shouting. There is no-one within earshot who will help you. Perhaps tomorrow night I will loose your hands, and make some better arrangements for your feet; but I will keep you fully bound so long as we remain in Man-country."

He left then with his usual abruptness, calling in Beren's former carrier to watch him. A third Dwarf came in with mattresses and blankets which he dumped on the beds with a curt word and a nod to the guard. The guard lifted Beren onto one mattress, then stretched himself out on the other.

Beren and his minder looked one another over. The Dwarf had grizzled, reddish hair which he wore bound into an enormous, coarse plait. His moustache and beard were also red, and also plaited, although with much more care and finesse. His nose was large, his face ruddy, his eyes black. Beren noticed one more thing: although clothed in dull, anonymous attire, the Dwarf bore himself with that indefinable air which says 'soldier'.

The Dwarf, eyeing Beren in return, extracted a pipe from somewhere in his tunic and commenced slowly to fill it with some dried herb from a leather pouch. When he had finished, he struck a light in the bowl from tinder, and lay there smoking in clouds of aromatic blue. Beren watched this procedure with fascination, having never seen it close up before.

"Look," said the boy at last in a low voice, "what's all this about? Who *is* he?"

"I'm under orders not to talk to you, boy," replied the Dwarf in a gravelly voice, "but I will just say this to you: better you do what he says. Most folk find they have to in the end, come long come short, so better stick with short and cop it easy. Catch my drift? Now you just lie quiet there and let a chap have a quiet smoke, there's a good lad." And that was the last word Beren could get out of him.

Later he was fed. Some time after dark, they fetched him out again. The cart journeyed steadily on for several hours of darkness while the boy dozed intermittently, attempting to put out of his mind both the growing cold and the stiffness in his limbs. The party stopped again at some indeterminate point, another way-station, where Beren was hauled up like a sack and deposited on another bed. He was too groggy to pay attention any more to the faces and the strange talk.

He was woken by the pain in his bound arms. Whatever happened, he resolved to escape that day. He would not stand any more of this. If it meant giving away all he had fought and sacrificed for, well, so be it.

There were several Dwarves sleeping in the room, snoring and making the air thick with the smell of unwashed bodies. Beren was used to the easy Druug attitude towards such things, but he had not smelled the odour of sweaty Dwarf before, and he found it disturbing. However, he had not to lie in discomfort for long, because the first light stealing into the room brought the red-haired Dwarf with it, banging on the door frame and calling out to the sleepers. The team was soon up and moving about their business. It was not long before the boy was hastily fed some bites of bread and cheese, washed down with small beer.

Yg came in, looking as immaculate as ever. He looked at the boy dispassionately, then said something to the guard, who reached down to pick up the crumpled gag from the floor.

"No!" said Beren. "There's no need for that. I won't shout."

Yg stopped in his tracks. "Are you refusing my order?" he said, and there was ice in his voice.

“It’s a stupid order,” replied the angry boy. “Why should I obey it?”

“Well now,” said Yg. “let’s see if I can make the reasoning clearer for you. I only need fetch my whip.” But something about the look of wild fury in Beren’s eyes made him hesitate. “Look, boy,” he continued in more reasonable tones, “I have no interest in making you suffer. The gag is mere expedience. It is only for another few hours. After that we can allow you more freedom.”

“I don’t understand any of this,” said Beren. “First you were prepared to kill me to get rid of me; now you tie me up so I won’t run away.”

The Dwarf leaned over him. “At first meeting,” he said, “we had no business together. Now, we do. We have a contract, and I will honour it, but I must honour it in the way that suits me best. This way is that. And now I have no more time to waste on idle conversation.” He motioned again to the red-bearded guard. This time Beren submitted to having the cloth bound across his mouth, only thinking dark thoughts in the privacy of his head.

In the cart, he found that his bag had been removed, but he was relieved to find the flint still peeping from the crack where he had stowed it. As soon as the cart was well under way he made to free his hands again.

This, however, he found difficult. His hands had swollen, and the grease from the day before – was it only the day before? – had in the meantime worn or rubbed off. Either the bonds had been retied while he slept or he himself had done too good a job. In the end he had to retrieve the flint and use it to cut the cords. He could not reach them with the stone flake in his fingers, so he had to find a crack to jam it into. After a couple of false starts from the flint falling out, he began to slice the cords, taking care not to slice himself in the process.

He had nearly freed his hands, and was already planning how he would exit the wagon, when the cart stopped with a jerk. Yg’s unseen voice sounded loudly. “You there – what do you think you are doing? Clear the road!”

Beren started then in surprise, because it was his father’s firm voice that replied.

“Your pardon, Master – but I think you have something of mine.”

“Get out of my way,” came Yg’s cold voice in answer. “Or I will cut you down myself, then have my men haul your guts into the ditch.”

Beren finished freeing his hands and went hurriedly to work on his feet. His hands were clumsy from long bondage and would hardly hold the flint. Next spoke another voice that he knew; a woman’s voice.

“Do you see this, Dwarf?” It was Emeldir, and her tones were as cold as the Dwarf’s, or even colder. “Do you see it? *We* do not move. *You* shall remove the cover from your load.”

Yg hesitated, irresolute. In the meantime Beren had freed his feet; now he tore at the gag.

“Do you know who I am?” burst out Yg. “I am Yg, the King’s son of Tumunzahar. You will not lay a finger on me, you would not dare! Put your coward’s bow away. Spill but a thimble of my blood, and you petty scabblers in the dirt shall be wiped from the face of the earth by the vengeance of the King’s armies. Is that what you want? A war between our peoples? Come, tell me now – is that nothing to you? Shoot if so, and send your people to the Pit with it. If not, then stand aside!”

“That may be... something to me,” admitted Emeldir, “but these ones here? I do not think they give a fig for your princship.”

The gag was cast aside and Beren struggled to throw back the canvas. When he emerged into the open air he saw his mother and father on horseback, blocking the track ahead. Emeldir had an arrow on the string of her

long black bow. Ragnor and Gramlach, similarly armed and ready, formed the remainder of the mounted party.

All on cart and horseback equally were staring, however, at the brown figures who had apparently just emerged from the small amount of cover afforded by some scattered bushes. Beren saw Big Nose, and Chases Goats, and Owl. Talkative was there, and Antelope and Morning Star standing together. He saw Late, and Red Sash; and between them even the slim figure of White Teeth, who flashed the same at him. Many more of the Holly people were standing around in a crescent. Yg and his men were covered by many bows, and had no retreat.

The Dwarf looked over the ranks, silent fury flashing in his eyes. Then he shrugged, and pointed to Beren, still unwinding himself from the canvas. "Is this what you seek?" he said.

"Mother, Father," called Beren, "what are you doing!"

His father looked nonplussed. "We came to rescue you," he said.

"But I am all right!" said Beren. "Why should I need rescuing?"

All those listening gazed at him in amazement. The Dwarves looked stunned.

His parents looked at one another, confused. "Zalta sent us a message," his father said. "She sent to say there was bad business afoot; she thought you might have been kidnapped."

"That was just a misunderstanding," said Beren. "I go of my own free will. I am going to learn how to fight with a sword, Father. You said to look for the best teacher there is; you even told me who he was. Well, here he is."

His father looked dubious. "Has that been proven?" he asked.

Yg had picked up the cue. He leaned forward. "Ask any of us," he said. "Not just these ones here; any of our people. They will all confirm it. I know of no better master of the sword, and I have looked."

"All the same..." said Barahir. "I know I said the best, Son, but so may a man speak, not meaning to be taken entirely seriously. Second- or even third-best would do as well you know!" Beren made no reply to that, and his father flushed at the echo of his own words. "Look," he said, spreading his hands, "you need to learn to be a bitter fighter, of course you do, but not necessarily the absolute best there is. I had thought to send you to Hador's people in few years. There you would learn many things – not just the sword; things you can learn nowhere else."

"This is the path in front of me, Father," Beren said quietly.

His father was silent for a moment. "Maybe you see it so," he said then, "but it is not right, to go off on your own, with no word to your family. This was not well done, Beren. You are still only a boy. You have enjoyed considerable freedom in the past few years, since circumstances seemed to call for it. But now, I think, you begin to abuse that freedom. Perhaps you should spend some thought at last on the duty a son has to obey his father."

"You obeyed your own father, did you not, Papa? I have not heard that that turned out so well."

His father flushed again, and Beren was instantly regretful, because he saw that he had hurt the man. When Barahir spoke again, although his voice was sad, it retained still its habitual tones of kindness and reason. It suddenly struck Beren that he had never seen his father lose his temper.

"Well, Son, if this is your free choice, knowing all that you know, then so be it. I cannot drag you from it," Barahir said. "I wish you joy, and always will." The man swallowed. "And I may... I cherish the hope that you will come home to us one day."

He turned then to Yg, who had been observing this family interchange with a cynical air. When Barahir spoke now to the Dwarf prince, his whole manner changed. He seemed somehow to grow larger, and appeared suddenly much more formidable. His voice rang out hard and clear. "Listen to me now, Dwarf. King's son or no: if this boy comes to harm in your care, I will have the blood out of your carcase, if it is the last thing I do. Do you hear me now?"

Yg made no sign in return. Barahir scowled at him, then pulled his horse around and rode off the track.

His mother had lowered her bow, and now she urged her horse up close to Beren. "Son," she began, then hesitated. "I know... I know you have been hurting, since your sister... since she..." Emeldir stopped, looking for the words. "Please don't go," she went on in low tones, her head bowed. "I have lost one child; please don't rob me of my other."

Beren clambered off the cart and hobbled with stiff limbs to his mother's side. He put his hand on her leg. "Mother, please," he said. "I must go. But I will come back! It is only for a few months!" It would be much longer than that, but he was not to know that.

Emeldir's blue eyes swam with a plea she struggled to utter. "Son," she said at last, in a voice so low he could hardly hear it, "I am empty and lost. Please don't leave me."

Beren's heart was wrung, but he could not change his course. He shook his head sadly. "Mother, I am sorry."

Emeldir straightened up at that and wiped her face. She sat now high above him on the horse, her back ramrod straight. The iron was in her again, stamped into her features.

"Go, then," she said to him, the same iron ringing hard in her voice, and glinting in her cold eyes. "Do as you list. Follow your pleasure, as was ever your wont. But do not imagine that you can go as you please, and come back as you please, and that all will be as it was before."

Then she too turned her horse and left the road free.

That just left Nose and the Druug. Their heads had been turning back and forth between the speakers, noticing the emotions, but mostly unable to follow the sense.

Beren's foster-father stepped forward. "The Horse-breaker told us you were in sore trouble, Speaks with Birds," he said, "but it seems it was not so?"

"There was a mistake, Father," said Beren wearily.

"A mistake which leaves marks of cords on your wrists, and threads about your mouth, and which hobbles your walk?"

Beren shrugged. "Even so." There did not seem to be anything else he could say.

Nose looked at him. "We are used to you coming and going. But this time I think it will be different."

Beren looked down. He had no more words.

Nose came to him then. He took the boy in his arms and embraced him close. Then he too at last also turned away. The Druug slipped severally away into the bushes and were gone in an instant, who knew where.

Yg motioned the boy to clamber up with a jerk of his head. The Dwarves whipped up the horses and continued the journey without a word said. Yg eyed Beren as the boy came forward and sat in the front of the wagon with the others, but held his tongue.

Beren watched the figures of the horsemen behind them as they rapidly grew smaller, until a bend in the road hid them from view.

A long time after that, Yg spoke. “You lost your sister?” he asked.

Beren glanced at him, then nodded. The Dwarf was silent again for many minutes. “I did not know that,” he said at last.

\* \* \* \* \*

The journey lasted for a weary long count of days. The red-bearded soldier, whose name was Akhal, told Beren that their destination was the great Dwarf-city of Tumunzahar, that which the Elves named Nogrod; but this meant little to the boy. He was also too wrapped in pensive contemplation of the bitterness of the recent parting on the one hand and apprehension for the unknown future on the other to have much interest in the landscapes they were passing. In any case, his knowledge of the shape of the world outside his own land was scant, and it was not until long afterwards, for instance, that he realized that he was travelling back along the same route Andreth had described in her account of the great northwards migration of the Bëorings.

Since the weather was mostly grey and wet, and the Dwarves not much disposed to talk with him, there seemed to the depressed boy little to distinguish one dull day from the next. Sometimes there were hills, sometimes plain. There were days when they stopped in great caravanserais, and others on which they saw no other living thing. Beren was indifferent to all.

He woke one morning to find that the rain had stopped in the night. He could hear birdsong and the nearby purl of water. Early sunlight was glowing on the canvas over his head. The four Dwarves of the party were still bundled up in their sleeping sacks, snoring in various cadences.

Beren poked his head out of the canvas and looked around. He saw that they were parked on a lawn-like patch of grass surrounded by graceful, smooth-skinned trees of a sort which was strange to him. The air, although cool, was fresh and fragrant. A brook wound and murmured its way nearby along a little gully; but somewhere, not too far off from the sound of it, he could hear a stream of greater size.

The boy slipped quietly out of the wagon, relishing the chill feel of dew on his bare feet. He made his way to the brook, stepping silently over the tender grass. There he took an ice-cold drink of water, before going to investigate one of the strange trees. The grass gave out here, the ground being covered instead with a layer of crackly, crinkly brown leaves. He had to use all of his wood-skill to walk through them without noise.

Beren ran his hand down the smooth grey bark. Almost like skin, it felt. The life-sense within answered silently to his touch. He stood awhile, taking in the sense of the whole wood, feeling its connectedness. Beyond the water loomed the presence of a much, much greater wood. He could sense trees there which were like nothing else in his experience. The feeling of mystery and magic streaming out from the centre of that forest beat on his forehead with a power like the noonday sun. He was drawn to it. Suddenly he would have given anything to wade the stream and to give himself up to the shaded avenues leading deep into the heart of the secret wood.

He looked at the wagon, battling temptation. Why not leave the Dwarves and go his own way? He was still hesitating when the mood was broken by the rumpled head of Akhal emerging from the canvas. The Dwarf looked around, nodded to Beren, then levered himself clumsily out of the wagon to land on the grass with a thump. He already had his pipe in his hand and started searching through his clothes for the other makings. Beren came back over to him and stood idly watching the process. The pipe being filled, the Dwarf reached back into the wagon for the firepot the Dwarves kept filled with coals to save time kindling a fire. Akhal lit a taper and applied it to the pipe. Shortly after that he was contentedly puffing clouds of strong-smelling blue smoke into the clearing.

“What is that great wood across the river?” Beren asked him.

“Eh? Oh that. A dark place. We just call it *Zirsun-asakâ* – Forest of Shadows.<sup>10</sup>” He glanced at Beren curiously through his smoke. “How did you know there was a wood there? You haven’t been wandering,

10 Called Nan Elmoth by the Elves. The large stream was Celon.

have you?”

“No...” Beren decided on a half- or perhaps quarter-truth. “The birds told me.” Which indeed they might have done. “Didn’t you know I could understand their speech?”

“Mmph,” grunted Akhal, eyeing the boy. “I did hear some stories, yes.” He seemed not quite happy at having them confirmed, and not disposed to say anything more. He busied himself puffing at his pipe, from time to time flicking doubtful glances from his dark eyes at Beren.

Eventually he knocked out his pipe and reached again for the firepot. “Let’s brew up something hot for once,” he said. “Can you fetch me some sticks, lad? Don’t wander too far though, it wouldn’t do to get lost.”

Smiling privately at the idea that he could get lost in any wood, Beren set about gathering some twigs. By the time he got back, the other Dwarves were up, stretching and yawning. Yg set him to work again, fetching water this time. He eyed the boy critically as he came back with a full bucket at the end of each arm.

“There is no doubting you are strong,” he said. “Is that usual with Men-children?”

Beren laughed. “I don’t think so.”

“Hmm.” The black-clothed Dwarf thought about that for a moment, then looked around and sniffed the air. “We’ll stay here today.”

They spent the whole of the mild day in that grassy place, cooking, washing their clothes, even washing themselves. Beren spent most of the time wandering about and relishing the strange woods. He wanted to find the river and take a look at the forest on its far bank, whose call he could even now feel in his heart; but at his first attempt to sidle away in that direction, Yg called him sharply back. Of course he could have simply slipped into the undergrowth in the Druug way; these clumsy-footed Dwarves would never find him if he chose not to be found. But what would he do in this strange land on his own, so many days’ journey from home?

The black-clothed Dwarf had more to say. “If you wander off, Orcs will eat you before the week is out, leaving your bleaching bones for birds to pick,” he said. “Stay by the camp!”

Beren bristled. “I’ve been living in the woods all my life. Do you think I am a baby?”

“Yes,” said Yg. “Do as you’re told.” He turned to go.

“I bet I’ve shot more Orcs than you have,” said Beren rebelliously.

Yg stopped in his tracks, looked back. Surprise contended with contempt in his face. “You?”

“Yes, me,” said Beren. “Eight Orcs; and any number of Crebain, and other spies.”

“ ‘Shot’ is little to boast of.” The Dwarf’s lip curled.

“Do you think it was easy?” replied the boy hotly. “Will you tell me I should have gnawed them down with my teeth?”

“The bow is a coward’s weapon,” sneered the Dwarf. “You should think shame to confess to using it.” He turned on his heel to attend to other business, leaving the boy fuming.

The Dwarves gathered around the fire in the early gloaming, talking among themselves in their own language. Beren, feeling more excluded than ever, went and wrapped himself in his sleeping bag in the wagon. Lying there, musing, he was overcome by a wave of unbearable loneliness. He missed everybody, and his mind became filled with longing thoughts of the people he knew and loved. He felt he would give anything to be with Nose and Sunshine and Long Hair around their own fire, yarning about the forest and the

animals in it, or over the small affairs of the People. What was he *doing* out here, far from home? And in such strange and unfriendly company too. What was the *sense* in it? Nobody thought it was a good idea: not his parents, not Nose, nobody. He had rushed into this without asking anybody's advice – he had not even thought to speak to Goracc or Rattlecone about it, had just dived in. Well, he was here now, too late to turn back. He just had to see it through.

He wished he could have talked to Hiril about it all.

With these dismal thoughts circling through his head, he at last fell asleep.

They arrived at the river the next day, shortly after starting. Staring at them across the water were ranks of tall trees. Even in the bareness of winter, the spaces under their branches looked dim and secretive.

Akhal nudged him. "There's your wood," he said. "It's an Elvish place, we don't go there much. Not any more, anyway. There was a chap used to live there<sup>11</sup>, marvellous smith he was for an Elf; taught our smiths a lot by all accounts. We're proud of our smith-work, and it takes a lot for us to admit to being bettered at it, but in his case it's true. My lord here has some armour of his make."

Yg turned a disapproving eye on him. "Akhal, you talk too much," he said, upon which the soldier fell silent.

They travelled up the right bank of the chattering stream until close on noon, at which time the trees on the other bank came to a sudden end. Shortly after that the stream broadened out into shallows. It seemed that here there was a broad sill or shelf of hard rock which resisted erosion. Whatever the explanation, it made a convenient ford.

On the far side, the path skirted the edge of the forest for some time. They reached the end of it before the close of day, and camped at last in the shelter of a small spinney. Only then did it occur to Beren that they had not slept in a way-shelter for days – indeed, he could not remember the last occasion. Was it while they were still back in the hills? He asked why there were none locally.

"Celegorm won't allow them," replied Yg shortly. "Elf-lord in these parts. We probably won't see him."

There were rainy days after that, but the air seemed much milder down here in the South, and the grip of winter less severe. Beren would have expected snow by now at home. The landscape around them was also of a type foreign to him: too flat, too open. The country north of the river – what he had been able to see of it through the constant drizzle – had been even flatter and opener, and here it was not so extreme as that, but it was novel to him all the same. Much of the country was gently rolling grassland, lightly wooded in parts. Now and then they saw the smoke of settlements, or lights in the evening. Sometimes also they saw cattle which seemed domestic in their size and behaviour.

"Do Elves live here?" asked Beren.

"It's Men who have the kine," Akhal told him. "Don't know where the Elves live, meself."

"North," said Yg laconically.

A day or two after that they left the houses and cattle behind. For some further days they journeyed on through open lands apparently empty of every kind of life, except for birds. At the end of that time the nature of the country changed once more, to airy, pleasant woodlands. Here the road left its level course and began to wind down into a wide valley. They camped for the night not far into the wood.

A change of weather came in the night. A line of storms swept through, flinging sleet on their canvas and whipping the cloth about. The next morning dawned cold and grey, with intermittent icy showers, but shafts of weak sunlight began to appear through the trees before the day was much older. The party unwrapped themselves reluctantly from their sleeping bags, ate some mouthfuls of tasteless biscuit, caught and

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11 Eöl.

harnessed the horses, then got under way. At about mid-morning they reached the bottom of the valley. There the path turned south to follow the bank of a stretch of running water<sup>12</sup> broader than any Beren had ever seen, flowing away ahead of them. He thought he could probably shoot an arrow over it, but nobody could throw a spear that far.

Here, as happened now and again, they met a party coming in the other direction. Normally the two groups would stop and exchange a brief word, but this time the leader of the opposite group – several of whom, Beren was interested to note, also had beards and hair of flaming red – said something to Yg which made him curse. The black-clad Dwarf whipped up the horses then with a nod to the other. Once they were going again, Beren dared ask him what the matter was.

Yg glared at him, seemed about to make a harsh reply, but reconsidered. “Caranthir is at the tolls,” he spat. “Hold your tongue now, boy, I’m not in the mood for your prattle.”

They continued along the bank, in glum silence on the part of the Dwarves, for half an hour or so. The river began then to broaden out until at last it spread right out, divided into many channels, over a width of perhaps half a mile. Here the shallow water rushed chattering over beds made from stones of every size. With care, a path could be found across.

“The northern way would have been shorter,” remarked Akhal to him, “but we avoid that these days – too much contact with you-know-who.”

Beren had no idea what he was talking about, but he was not paying much notice in any case, because a feeling of tension had been growing in him. Something had happened here, or would happen.

“What is this place?” he asked Akhal.

“Why, the Ford of Stones it would be called in your language, I suppose,” replied the red-bearded Dwarf. “This river is Gabilân, which the Elves call Gelion.”

“Was there ever a battle here, or something else of that kind?” asked Beren.

“Why yes, there was, in my father’s time,” said the Dwarf. “It’s funny you should ask, because there were Men in that fight. The Orcs drove them down into the corner of the rivers here, and it would have gone hard with them, but Caranthir and his Elves rescued them. Or so they say; although knowing Caranthir, I say it takes a lot of believing.”

At this point Yg turned round and ordered them savagely to be silent.

They made their way carefully across the stream, crunching and jolting across the stones, with water swirling hungrily through the wheels all the way. The way led up then over a little overgrown island, then down again across the next branch. This went on in similar fashion all the way across. The Dwarves all breathed out in relief when the steaming horses at last pulled the wagon lurching out of the last water and up the far bank. Beren breathed out too, for his own private reason. Whatever evil might haunt that ford, he had no desire to meet it, now or ever.

They came out then onto a road made of carefully laid stone slabs, broad enough for three carriages to pass abreast. This causeway stretched arrow-straight up the gentle slope ahead of them, passing through great cuttings where folds of land interposed, and being carried on stone arches over hollow places. The thought of the labour and skill involved in such a construction of this magnitude caught Beren’s breath. He had never seen anything remotely similar before.

The rolling clatter of the wheel rims on the first of the paved road made the boy start – it was a new sound in his experience. The ride seemed also almost impossibly smooth, with none of the jouncings he had long been accustomed to. Beren wondered at everything as they made their steady way up the slope; admired the sheer

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12 The river Gelion.



faces of the cuttings, and stared open-mouthed into the airy depths whenever the wagon rattled over a great stone bridge.

At the top of the long grade the road ran underneath a great arch, with tall towers on either side. These were unlike the beautiful white tower of Angrod's fortress, being square in section and built for function rather than beauty, but their size and the energy implicit their construction invited almost as much wonder. As the company passed under the arch, the boy goggled at the wide span of stone as it glided high overhead. There began to grow upon him a feeling of smallness, of insignificance, which he was not to lose again for a great while.

Behind the tower to the left some tall figures were standing. One of these came out into the road and held up its hand. The Dwarf driving their carriage turned off the road at this command and drew the horses to a halt.

The lead Elf – for Elf he clearly was – came up to them and looked them over. “Greetings, my lord Prince,” he said pleasantly. “You must have made a fast passage.”

“Yes, perhaps so, Palavantar,” replied Yg gruffly. “Your pardon, but could you assess us? We are in some haste.”

“Why, surely” replied the Elf. “Tilias, Limlith: come.”

The two Elves so called joined Palavantar the back of the cart, where one of Yg's men was already lowering the tray-back. But before they could proceed, a new figure emerged from the house: a tall Elf with a wild mane of raven-black hair and deep-set eyes of a penetrating blue. The face of this Elf-lord – for that he surely was – was strong, almost beautiful. Its cheekbones were high; a hawk nose was set over well-cut lips.

“Ho, Yg!” cried the newcomer, sauntering towards the wagon. “Well met! It has been some time since your singular features last swam before my gaze. My digestion has missed the stimulus, I own it. But tell me, before we proceed. I have a burning wish to know. How likes your neck the new-found kiss of air?”

On hearing this remark, the other Dwarves of the party looked uncomfortable, even apprehensive. They bent further over their work and dared not look up.

“Greetings, Caranthir<sup>13</sup>,” replied Yg through gritted teeth. “I dare say my neck gets as much air as your manners.”

The Elf came close up now to the carriage. Due to his height he was able to stare directly into Yg's face with his unearthly blue eyes.

“I will have the head off you, Dwarf, one of these fine mornings,” he said pleasantly, pushing the thick hair back from his face. “When the mood takes me.”

Yg bowed his head ironically. “Ever ready to meet your Elfship whenever and wherever he pleases,” he replied.

The black-haired Elf turned to look critically over the boxes in the cart. “You have not many goods,” he commented. “I fear you will never succeed as a carter, Yg, for all that you look the part.” He turned his head suddenly and held Beren in his gaze. “But what is this?” he asked.

Beren found himself floundering in the grip of the strongest personality he had ever encountered. There was a fire burning bright in this Elf, and a light in his eyes such as to awake either awe or terror. The boy swallowed hard, and wondered what to answer.

The eyes released him from their grip, turning again to Yg, but the Elf left a finger pointing at Beren. “This – what is this?” he repeated.

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13 One of the seven sons of Fëanor.

“That is none of your business,” replied Yg shortly.

“Oh. Is it not?” said Caranthir. He shrugged in mock dismay. “Alas and fie, what shall I do now with my question? Policy will not let me lay you on the rack, my good stuntling – thus must we sacrifice our pleasure to the good order of nations.” He turned to the other Elves who were standing uneasily by. “Friends!” he declared to them, arms raised. “Our good Prince Yg has decreed that we have no business here. So: none shall have business! Come, let us carouse within, and leave these shrunken ones to nurse their precious, private business, by themselves, out here in the rain. *We* dare have no part in it, thus no part will we take. The road is closed!”

Yg writhed in helpless frustration. “He is a human child who is come to learn the sword, if you must know,” he ground out.

The eyes found Beren again and seemed to search through his soul with searing-hot fingers. “Is he, now,” mused the Elf. “Mortal, eh? Well, they make brave fighters, that I do know. Even if they do not seem good for much else. But that already passes the mark of some other, shorter folk I could name.”

Yg was growing purple in the face. “Will you assess toll on me, my lord? Or do you mean to throw this compact over entirely?”

Caranthir, he knew, would only dare push them so far; he derived far too much profit from the tolls to risk antagonizing the Dwarves to too great a degree.

Fulfilling his expectation, the Elf laughed, and turned to go. “Reckon him up,” he said to Palavantar with a casual wave of his hand, then disappeared back into the house.

Palavantar completed the process with apologetic speed. At last the wagon was away again.

They found more traffic on the stone road than they had so far seen: hardly a half-hour went past without someone coming the other way. Most of the Dwarves they encountered called or nodded a respectful greeting to Yg.

Yg’s party continued along this fine, made way for some few days. Way-stations were now again frequent and provided welcome amenities, comforts and company. Beren’s presence invited many curious looks, but few questions.

The road wound its way up a stream valley which became more deeply cut the higher it climbed. The air grew cooler again, the ground about them grew hilly, and pines were now again to be seen at ever increasing frequency. To Beren it felt almost like home. He was not surprised one morning to glimpse white peaks behind the tree-tips.

As the mountains drew nearer, one great pyramid of stone began to loom in front of the rest, slightly to the left of the trend of their direction. Its head was usually wreathed in grey clouds, but these parted now and then to reveal a blunt point of rock and ice, stark against the sky.

“Shulukbund<sup>14</sup>,” said Akhal to Beren with a nudge and a grin. “We’re nearly home!”

The road continued its way along a deep defile to the South of the great mountain, whose upper heights they now only rarely glimpsed. Swollen grey clouds filled the spaces above them and the way led them through frequent curtains of rain. Torrents which gushed down whitely on all sides roared through culverts under the road. The wind’s relentless flapping at the wet canvas only served to underline the wayfarers’ discomfort. Everybody was looking forward to the end of this seemingly endless journey. An end of jolting on bare wooden boards; an end of trying vainly to stay warm, with a cold wind finding all the gaps under the canvas; an end of each other’s forced company; of their leader’s uncertain temper; and of day in, day out having nothing to watch but the backsides of two horses.

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14 ‘Rainy-head’ – Mt. Dolmed.

The last way-house stood at a crossing of four great roads. This was a large building set on one side of a fortified courtyard; a square-cut watchtower loomed over the other. In this house at least they were able to enjoy a hot meal, plenty of novel company, and a reasonably comfortable night's sleep.

In the morning, they clambered onto the wagon and went wearily on. They took the south road of the four, which commenced immediately to wind its way into the chilly heights. Here full winter clutched the world in an icy grip. Each of the party pulled on all the clothes he had with him, but the freezing air nipped noses and ears all the same. They began to encounter drifts of snow across the path, and here and there steamy-breathed parties were at work clearing the road. There was a great deal more traffic on this stretch of road. They were not often out of sight of other wagons, most of them piled high with goods of all sorts and sizes.

Towards the close of the day, the road was edging its way slowly around a mighty massif to their right. On the other side a sheer drop fell into blue whistling emptiness. A narrow gap between the rock walls appeared, into which the cart turned. They had shortly to pull the horses to a stand, because the gap opened, allowing the sun to shine directly into their eyes. Hands up as shields, they manoeuvred carefully into the shadow at one side of the gap. When Beren lowered his hand again, he gasped at the sight which was revealed.

The travellers had emerged into a vast trough in the rock. The far end of this hollow space, this great gulf in the hills, lay not quite a mile distant. On the top of that wall the sun glistened green through clear waters which curved over a lip of rock to fall the whole length of the cliff, smashing at last in a cloud of roaring vapour far below. The roiling waters flowed along the depths of the notch towards them and disappeared in a rainbow of spray at the right-hand end.

These natural wonders, although impressive enough, were not however what had excited Beren's awe. Spanning the torrent in the ravine sprang the mighty arch of a bridge. At the far end of the bridge the way passed through a high gate in a towering wall of stone, taller than the tallest trees, on which serried watchtowers could just be made out, looking tiny as warts in comparison. But what reached up behind the wall shrank it to an insignificant curtain of stone, a child's wall of sand set in puling defiance against the elemental might of the tide. Huge stone guards Beren saw carved against the hill, rearing up, big themselves as mountains, each clad in stony mail and helm. A vast battlemented gate arched between the giants, closed with bronze doors the size of lakes. Soaring above the whole to the full height of the beetling cliff were towers and torch-lit windows innumerable. Beren was seeing with his own eyes that which few of his race had ever beheld: the might and strength of the great City, Tumunzahar, the Hollowbold of the Dwarves.

The travellers clattered up and over the swell of the great bridge and on through the tall entrance in the outer wall. This was flanked by great stone doors, extending up almost the full height of the wall. Behind the doors were hinged high gates, also standing open, each formed from an intricate net of ironwork. As their party approached the opening, Beren could see the iron fantastically woven near eye level into shapes depicting stern faces; then higher still, there was a row of writing; then what looked like axes; then more faces, and more writing yet. Then the gates were past, and the cliff of the City reared once more before his gaze. The boy craned his neck back as far as it would go and still could not take everything in; the lines of upward perspective seemed never to give out until the far-off, impossible heights of the very mountain peak, at which point they disappeared into a halo of clouds.

The gate guards looked strong and fierce. As soon as they caught sight of Yg, they stood smartly to attention and clashed their spears to their shields in salute. Once past the guards, the vast expanse of the inner court opened in front of Beren's eyes. Scattered here and there over the paved plain he could see groups of Dwarvish figures engaged in various sorts of business. Tucked to one side was a long, low building which appeared to be stables. At the end of this, the glow of a forge could be made out through a wide door. On that side many wagons were parked, alongside covered stacks of hay. The distant buildings on the other side of the court seemed to be quarters for soldiers. Squads of the same were in evidence in several places, engaged in a variety of martial exercises. The shouted orders that came to their ears were echoed back seconds later from the sheer cliff in front. There might have been one or two hundred people in that court, yet it was so large in extent that they were scattered sparsely.

Yg's party took a direction oblique to the giant bronze doors. It took them several minutes to cross the court,

time which Beren spent in goggling at the shortening overhead perspective of the giant stone guards. He had to stop after a while and rub his neck, which had developed a crick. At the base of the cliff they followed a way which curved slowly around the broad, deeply fluted and figured base of one of the mountainous figures (and how had mortal hands ever cut that? Beren wondered) until it reached a side-gate, which in turn led into a wide hall given over to the passage and handling of goods. This space was filled with noise and activity. Most of it remained a confused blur in Beren's memory; the only clear impression that stayed with him was of long lines of Dwarves carrying sacks to and fro.

Yg and Akhal left the other two of their company (neither of whom had ever spoken a word to Beren, and who barely glanced at him now) and took the boy with them along a bewildering series of passages and up many stairs. The corridors were all stone-hewn, but the surfaces were dry, and not cold to the touch. The air which flowed through them was also mild in temperature (most welcome after the icy, bone-searching winds the travellers had endured on the approach to the city!) and reasonably fresh. The ways were lit by frequent lamps enclosed in glass shrouds. Beren could not work out the system by which they were fed with oil and air.

They climbed high in the city. Most of the height was gained with the aid of a device which Beren could not view as anything less than magical. They told him it was water-powered, but he had trouble believing it. As they approached this thing, for a moment Beren could not understand what he was looking at. Across the square opening at the end of the corridor, parties of Dwarves appeared from time to time from the bottom, rose up steadily to the top, where they disappeared into the roof. Closer inspection revealed that the passengers were standing on wooden floors which rose via some unimaginable mechanism up a shaft. One was supposed to step onto a floor as it came, and then off again at the height desired. A matching, downward-going device was to be found on the other side. The thing was like a kind of wooden waterfall, that went up as well as down.

It was some time before the boy could gather his nerve to make the leap onto the moving platform; but once accomplished, he realized it was no feat at all, and felt rather ashamed of himself. He gave himself over then to watching, entranced, as the floors glided one after another past his eyes.

The three of them arrived finally at what looked like some sort of quarters for soldiers – for officers rather, given the relative comfort of the amenities. Each person they met there went through the same sequence of actions. The Dwarf would snap to attention, salute Yg with a fist to the chest, and receive a nod in return. The ramrod-stiff soldier would generally notice Beren at this point and would thereafter be busy trying, with a degree of success which varied from one to the next, to suppress any unmilitary display of astonishment, while still taking in the stranger in the corner of his vision.

Yg led the way into an office in which most of the walls were given over to niches containing neatly-filed scrolls. The officer in charge stood and saluted, but apparently was of senior enough rank to allow his eyes freedom to widen at the sight of the weary and dishevelled human child in front of him. However as Yg began to explain the case to him in the Dwarves' own language, the officer's face lost its initial astonishment, gradually taking on the carefully neutral expression of a soldier who is vexed by a superior but dares not show it.

At the end of the talk this officer looked again at Beren, still without expression. "You are to stay with us," he said to him curtly in the Grey-elven speech. "Follow me, please." Beren looked uncertainly at Yg, who nodded him away. The officer-Dwarf was walking out of the door already, so there seemed little that Beren could do but follow as directed. The boy waved a hand in farewell to Akhal, then scampered after the officer.

The officer led him down a corridor and past another desk to a wooden door. This he unlocked, before ushering the boy inside. Beren found plain but comfortable-looking quarters: three well-lit rooms, with a bed in one, a bath in another, and a desk, chair and assorted scrolls in the third. There was even a tiny window admitting a certain amount of wintry daylight.

The sound of the door made him turn. The Dwarf had closed it and left him alone. Beren tried the door and found it was locked.

He felt that he ought to be furious, but somehow he had not the spirit for it. Feeling unutterably forsaken, and impossibly far from everybody he knew and loved, he went and sat listlessly on the bed.

Perhaps half an hour later he was woken from a doze by the sound of the door opening. Shaking the sleep from his head, saw that it was Yg. The black-clad Dwarf cast some small object with a clatter onto the desk, glanced at Beren without expression, then went straight back out of the door, which he shut behind him with a decided snap. Beren had not managed even to emerge from his bedroom before his captor had disappeared.

The boy pounded on the locked door and shouted, but nobody came. After some minutes he gave it up in despair. He thought then to wonder what the Dwarf had left for him, and turned to look at the object on the table.

It was the knife Gorlim had made for him, that he had left weeks ago in the tomb of the Dwarf-woman.

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Towards mid-morning of the following day, the key turned in the lock. The door swung open to reveal the officer from the previous day standing in the doorway. Beren, who had been peering moodily out of the narrow window at the glass-distorted mountain scenery, swung around eagerly.

“Good morning. Will you come with me?” said the Dwarf, courteously enough. He led the way back to the office where Beren had first seen him yesterday. The Dwarf closed the door, beckoned the boy towards a chair, then sat himself behind his desk.

Beren did not sit. He came to the desk and leaned his arms on it. “Why have you kept me caged like an animal?” he said. His voice was not raised, but there was a glint in his eye. “I have done nothing wrong. Are you Orcs, that you shut me up like this, for no other reason than pure spite?”

The officer flushed. “I beg your pardon,” he said stiffly. “I do not willingly lock anybody up, but I have my orders. Now, I brought you here to tell you some things for your information, including the reason for your detention. Will you sit down and listen?”

Beren shrugged his acceptance and sat down.

“Among ourselves, there are several ways in which I am called,” began the Dwarf, “but it is probably simplest if you call me Porin. I am Commander of the Fourth Legion, sometimes known as They of the Bright Armour. The Prince received his military training in our ranks, and now he is, well, perhaps you would call him our honorary Colonel. Technically I am not under his command, but in practice I would – I do – find it very difficult to deny any wish of his.

“Yesterday he explained to me that you and he had some business together. He did not explain its nature to me, and I do not speculate. With that I have nothing to do. But he requested of me – ‘required’ might be a more accurate term – that I accommodate you here, in our quarters. You are to be here for some time. So now I am faced with a problem. The bare requirements of accommodation of course present no difficulty. But we are a proud legion; we admit no other body of soldiers as superior to ourselves, except perhaps the King’s guard itself, and that not in all individual cases. Yet now we find ourselves required to play nursemaid to a child of a different race – a civilian child, of unknown family, rank and nurture. Even the room you have been assigned does you honour far beyond any accomplishments you can possibly have squeezed into your tender years. I tell you in all frankness that my men are not happy that we have been dealt with in such... but I must speak no treason. But the fact is, my men are not happy; not happy at all.”

“I don’t know what you expect me to do about it,” replied Beren with some heat. “I did not ask to be here, in fact I did not ask for any of it. I paid a high price to be taught something I badly need to learn. I did not bargain to be kidnapped, and dragged far away from the people and lands I know, to be locked in a strange room in a strange city, among strangers. I care nothing for the offended dignity of your men. That is entirely your own problem, and you may just stuff it into your pipe and smoke it.”

The Commander stirred uneasily. “‘Kidnapped’ you say?” he said. “An ugly word... but I cannot meddle in the Prince’s affairs. As for the situation here, you take me wrongly. I can handle my own men. My concern is for you. I am responsible for your care. We have no youngsters here, and the people who are here are, for reasons I have explained, not well disposed to you. I cannot see that you will have but a miserable time among us. Where should you eat? How pass your time? I must decide how best to arrange matters for you.”

“Must I remain in the city at all?” said Beren. “I am not well used to sleeping even beneath a thatch; to be buried in this ant-hill suffocates me. Can I not live outside somewhere, and come in for my lessons? I do not need accommodation; in fact I do not need any care from you, Sir Commander, I am well able to care for myself.”

The Dwarf looked surprised. “Outside?” he said. “But there is nothing outside but ice and rock. How could you live outside?”

Beren was silent for a moment, remembering the journey up to the city. He had reluctantly to acknowledge the Dwarf’s words for truth. “It is true, I had forgotten we were so high,” he said at last. “But I do not know if I can live like this. If this be the price for my lessons, then I think I must let them go. I do not think I can survive in this lifeless place, so far from growing things.”

The Dwarf eyed him with concern. “Well,” he said uncertainly, “I can see that I will have to revise my ideas. I had thought that you men lived under wood only because you did not know how to build in stone. I had not imagined that you might prefer wood roofs to stone ones, or even – as you claim? – none whatsoever.

“But this is idle talk. The question of where you are housed you must take up with his grace the Prince. For the time being I am bidden to house you here. Those are my orders, and I will obey them. But it is my wish that you be as comfortable as possible inside those bounds.”

“When can I see the Prince?” asked Beren.

“I cannot tell,” replied Porin. “Naturally that lies with him. But I do not imagine you will need to wait long.”

“Then I suppose I must endure the conditions, for the time being at least,” said the boy. “But why must I be locked up? It is the same nonsense as at the start. Does he imagine, having paid him his price, that I will run away?”

“I cannot answer for my master,” said Porin, “or guess what he intends for you; but I must tell you that it is not our custom, most decidedly not, to expose our affairs to the scrutiny of strangers. We cannot have you wandering the City at your will.”

“Well for the Powers’ sake,” said Beren, “if that is the case, could you not simply have asked me not to roam? I have no wish to ferret among your secrets. Anything would be better than being locked up. But wait,” he continued, seeing the Dwarf about to open his mouth, “I know the answer – it was your orders, not so?”

The other acknowledged with a shrug.

“Well, O bright-armoured Porin, Commander of the Fourth Legion,” said Beren, leaning forward now and fixing the Dwarf with his eye, “I will tell you this for your profit: orders or no orders, if you try to lock a door on me again, you will have to wrestle with me first. And although you may not think it of one of my ‘tender years’, I do know a trick or two there.”

The boy was surprised to see the Dwarf’s face brighten with interest in response to his words. “Is that so!” Porin said. “Truly, you wrestle? It was not just a manner of speaking? Many of us here pursue this sport. We would be interested to see your tricks. We might consider of a match with one of our striplings.

“But I should put games to one side. You ask me to go against a direct order from his grace the Prince.

During your journey hither you have, perhaps, learned something of his temper? Then you will know that you ask much of me. Nevertheless, it insults my nature to imprison anybody, let alone a lad who has as far as I can see done nothing to warrant it, and shown considerable spirit into the bargain. Therefore I will, this once, chance the lightning falling on my pate. Only give me your parole, boy, that you will remain within the immediate vicinity of your chambers, asking leave before going further, and your door shall remain unlocked.”

The boy stood up to attention and laid his arm on his chest, as he had seen the Dwarf guards do. “I am most sensible of the favour you show me, Commander, and I do you honour most sincerely. I give you my parole with a good will, and would go further too. And perhaps,” he added, “a small contest, some friendly holds and throws between comrades as it were, might go some way to mending your men’s affection?”

The Dwarf laughed. “Aye, maybe it would,” he admitted. “I will think on it. But for now, I have other things which demand my time. May I have you escorted to your room? You will find there a meal prepared for you. If there is aught amiss with it, inform the *uzraku-mikokh*<sup>15</sup> in the antechamber.”

“Uzraku – sorry?” said Beren.

Porin scratched his head. “Ah. The sergeant? Under-officer? There should be scrolls aplenty to occupy your time until the Prince makes known his pleasure. But wait,” he hesitated, looking in doubt at Beren, “I suppose you can read?”

“To be sure,” replied the boy with irony, “but not your Dwarvish scratchings!”

Porin looked disconcerted. “Oh – of course not. I beg your pardon. Elvish, then? I will see what writings we may have. And now – if there is nothing else...?” He stood up.

A thought had struck Beren. “Just one thing – may I have materials for writing myself?”

Upon Porin agreeing to this, Beren allowed himself to be led back to his room. The meal was interesting and tasty. Shortly after it was cleared away, the sergeant brought him paper, pen and ink. The boy filled in the time before dark agreeably enough in laborious scratchings with the same.

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Yg came for him the next day. He was clearly not pleased to find the door open. “What is this?” he demanded.

“I gave Porin my parole, and he agreed to leave me free,” said Beren. “I explained to him that I would fight him, and anybody else who cared to step up, if he did not.”

The black-clad Dwarf sniffed. “Indeed. Well, we will take that up later. King Gebshâr will see you now. Come.”

“Just wait a minute,” said Beren. “You and I have things to discuss. I have put up with a lot from you, because of what I hope that you, and nobody else but you, can teach me. But –”

Here he was interrupted. With snakelike speed, Yg had drawn a long knife from his belt, placing the point against Beren’s throat.

“Be quiet,” said the Dwarf. “Still your tongue for one moment, and listen. I have allowed you considerable license on the road. But now you are in the King’s domain, and things here go otherwise. I am the eldest son of the King, may his beard never grow shorter. To amuse myself, I have spent much of my life acquiring certain skills. I have no need to sell those skills in order to feed my body. You, through a chance I cannot begin to understand, somehow acquired the one coin which could buy my teachings. Therefore have we

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15 ‘Master of a hundred’, loosely translated as sergeant.

made our compact. I will teach you all I know; you, in return, must allow yourself to be taught. Necessarily, that requires you to be here. Necessarily, we must restrict your movements. Necessarily, it puts you under the King's power. He is the King. Do you know what that means? It means that what he tells you to do, you do. If he tells you to jump off a high place, you will jump. At present he told me to fetch you; and he told you, through me, to come. So you will come. Already I have overspent the King's time. I explain this for you only because you are new, and because we have been comrades on the road, and for other reasons which we need not go into. Next time, I will not explain; you will be whipped, and cast into irons, and then you will have to see the King anyway. Do you understand?"

Beren looked along the gleaming length of the steady blade. "Yes," he said.

"Then come, with no more words." The Dwarf slid his knife back into its sheath and led the way down the corridor. Beren followed, angry, but seeing that there was no more use in present struggle.

"I shall not jump off a high place for anybody," he muttered rebelliously.

Yg looked at him sarcastically. "Well, child, since anybody who spends more than half an hour in your company must, if my experience is any guide, become possessed of an urgent desire to throw you off the first cliff he comes to, I doubt the necessity could ever arise," he said.

Beren was never granted the freedom to explore Tumunzahar as he would wish, so his acquaintance with it, although long, was largely restricted to the barracks of Porin's regiment, and later to the lower levels of craft and trade. His memories of the magnificence of its great halls were founded on few visits and remained therefore very incomplete. For the rest of his life he would retain an impression chiefly of pillars. Lines of mighty pillars bordering spaces dolven vastly out of the living rock; yet spaces carved in harmonious proportions, filled with glowing air. Pillars, thicker than any tree, turned and polished from glittering black obsidian, or porphyry, or gleaming metal; pillars which led the eye up, and up, into towering roofs of filigreed, golden arches. Between the pillars were spread great lakes of mosaic floor, endlessly varied and alive close to the eye, their immense and staggering detail blurring into the convergence of perspective which stretched away into the distance. The city was a work of mind and hand too vast to comprehend; surely one of the great wonders of the world.

They found the King in a room small, but so decked out with gold as to dazzle the mind as much as the eyes. The floor was laid with golden tiles; the chairs were of gold, as was the table. Cloth-of-gold drapes covered the walls. Just for variety, the knobs on the backs of the chairs were blazing, faceted diamonds as large as chicken's eggs.

Beren's immediate impression of the King was the realization that he dyed his hair and beard a particularly false shade of orange. Surely the Dwarf must realize that people could see it was fake? It made the boy think of a child hiding its head in a bucket, secure in the conviction that this lent it invisibility.

Yg hissed "Bow!" to the boy, doing so himself. Beren lowered himself into an awkward bow beside the black-clad prince.

The King flapped his hand impatiently to motion them nearer. With Yg nudging Beren, the two of them approached to the base of the (golden) dais on which the (golden) throne was set. They bowed again, but the King said "Tsk, tsk!" and bade them stop. They stood straight then. Boy and regal Dwarf looked one another over.

King Gebshâr took in a well-formed youngster of human race. The boy stood with a grace and poise which his ill-fitting clothes, clearly of Dwarven loan, could not disguise. The lad had a tanned face, deep blue eyes full of spirit, and a mass of dark hair, clumsily bound behind the neck. The Dwarf was impressed in spite of himself by the boy's spirit and bearing. Interesting, he thought; now what can we make of that.

Beren in his turn saw an old, fat Dwarf whose pudgy hands, covered in rings, never seemed to stopped fidgeting. Close-set eyes of a watery blue, set in pink, crusted rims, were shadowed by bristling brows of



faded ginger. They were eyes which glided off the face, which never seemed to look for long in one direction. They made quick, furtive forays; here to one side, there to the other; and when one least expected it, a surprising quick flick right in one's face.

After the King had finished inspecting the boy in his sideways manner, he turned to address a remark in Dwarvish to one side. Beren noticed then that there were two other Dwarves lounging on a couch on that side. They were young, and there was enough family resemblance between the whole group of them to make Beren guess – correctly as it turned out – that these were other sons of the King. One was as red-haired as most of the inhabitants of the city; the other had something of a bleached look. They were both staring at him with insolent smiles on their faces.

The King turned back to them and spoke in Sindarin to Yg. “So, eldest son,” he said in creaky tones, “this is the creature who you claim has rescued your honour? A child, and a human child at that! *This* is who raked your chestnuts out of the fire? *This* dared that which you would not? *This* stood firm where you blanched? Ha ha ha! The jest could only have been sharper had he been an *injam-ukmath*<sup>16</sup>.”

Beren snuck a glance at Yg standing beside him. The Dwarf stood at parade rest, making no sign, but his face was red.

The brothers sniggered.

The King then addressed Beren. “I have three sons,” he said, “as you see here. What a world of expectation there can be in such a word as ‘son’, and what a depth of dismay there is in practice. Of some more than others, of course. I had a daughter, whose remains I believe you had the misfortune to encounter. I say I ‘had’ a daughter, and you may take it that it was ‘had’ long before she met her death; for she stole from me, and shamed me, yes me, her own father. She shamed me to the roots of my beard. And this, my first son,” here he pointed to Yg with a shaking hand, “since he loved his viper sister more than his father, this swart-bearded ingrate leagued with that traitor brood of mine, helped her to her unnatural treachery. They tore my very beard off, the two! Yes even that. Tore it out! Left me naked and beardless before my creditors. Naked and beardless!

“But of this Yg of mine I should have expected no less, since he was ever a disappointment to me. He has never cared for the important things, has ever dallied his time away in the weapon halls. Look at him there, in his vain dress of black! That, as much as his traitor hair, discovers that his heart leans rather toward his mother's lumpen kin, faithless and craven, than to the noble house of his father. Faugh! I should cast him off, see how he likes it to earn his own crusts. Shove him out to ply his ignoble trade in the dusty pathways of the world.”

The King turned suddenly to Yg. “What say you, son of your mother? Should you like to make your way in the wide world? Work for your living? No all too evil prospect, surely. And if, as it happened, there was no clamour for strutting boasters with polished blades, well then, you could hawk wares from door to door. Eh? After all, you have already some practice at it. Hmm? Might that not be so bad, eh?”

“It is for you to say, Father,” replied Yg in level tones, but from a face flushed with resentment.

“I am pleased to joke with him,” said the King aside to Beren. “We are family, he does not mind it. He knows his father's temper. Eh? Eh?” This last was said again to Yg, who however only inclined his head stiffly in reply.

Gebshâr considered Beren again, looking him up and down. “You there, boy,” he barked out suddenly. “Turn around!”

Nonplussed, the boy looked to Yg, but found no help in that quarter. The King was making impatient swirling motions with his hand, so Beren turned uncertainly around a full turn until he was facing the King again. He looked to see if this movement met with the royal approval. Seemingly so, because the King turned

16 ‘Leaf singer’, a pejorative term for Elf.

with an unpleasant smile on his face and said something in the Dwarf language to the other sons, who obligingly tittered in response.

“This new pupil might be good for you, Yg,” said the King with a leer. “Young meat, always a good thing. Perhaps you will be able to work out some of your – shall we say humours? – upon him. It will at least make a change, a distraction from the usual objects of your, ah, attentions. What think you of this notion?”

Yg bowed, his face now a deep, furious red. “Your Majesty may say his pleasure,” he said through clenched teeth.

“Ha ha ha!” said King Gebshâr. “Yes, I may! Oh, ha ha ha,” and he went on so for some time, rolling and shaking in his high golden seat. But eventually the paroxysms subsided, and he looked about him moodily, chewing on a tendril of his beard, which gave no sign of having been uprooted, despite his earlier protests. His eyes flicked to and fro between the figures, or at nobody at all.

“I suppose I should thank you, boy,” he said at length. “You have saved *my* honour at least; that of my son there is, I calculate, beyond saving. When there is no water in the well, a bucket brings up only mud. But I cannot admire the price you have exacted for it. Sword-training? Forsooth. Weapons are for the vulgar. There is no profit in chopping people up.” He sat up suddenly, glaring at Beren, and his next words were fierce. “Well? Well? Have you got nothing to say? Have you no tongue in your head?”

Beren thought of all the things he could say, but in the end he chose probably the wisest course possible.

“My lord King,” he said, “I have nothing to say that it might profit you to know. I am sorry about your daughter, though. I did her all the honour I could, even before I knew who she was.”

The King stared at him for long seconds with an almost irritated expression on his face. “Get him out of here!” he barked at last, flicking with his hand. Yg tugged urgently at the boy’s cuff and half guided, half dragged him out of the chamber. His powerful grasp on the boy’s elbow forced him to walk out backwards, facing the throne all the way.

Yg, the moment they were clear of the chamber, let his breath hiss out between clenched teeth. His face was still red and his eye gleamed wickedly with suppressed fury. For the first time in their acquaintance Beren was genuinely afraid of the Dwarf, and again made the wise choice to hold his tongue.

When they at length arrived back at the barracks, Yg turned to him in the doorway. “I will come again tomorrow,” he said briefly. “We will discuss terms then.” He paused in the act of going, but looked not at the boy, but to one side. “Perhaps you have more sense than I supposed,” he said. “I think I would have killed you then, had you but spoken a single word.” He left abruptly without waiting for a reply.

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Their interview the next day turned quickly stormy. The boy insisted that he could not live inside a mass of stone; the Dwarf said that he had no option.

“You cannot keep me in here!” shouted Beren. “I will escape in spite of you!”

“You are more trouble than a mine full of water,” said Yg through gritted teeth. “If I had known your nature at the start, I would have spitted you the moment I had you cornered, and to the Pit with those beardless women in the inn and their prick-sticks.”

“And thrown away your honour,” sneered the boy.

“Oh, you think I have so much honour among my people that I care so greatly to lose it?” There was a red glow at the back of Yg’s eyes. “You make a grave mistake, boy; one you will make once too often. It will be too late to learn your folly once your heart is spitted on my blade.”

"I am not interested in your threats," said Beren. "You made a bargain to teach me. So teach me, and nothing else. Where I live is my own concern."

"I care not a straw where you live, or even if you live," said Yg. "You may take yourself to the Black One, and welcome. But!" and here he smote his fist on the table, "you may not come and go through our domain as you will. And I tell you this: the first time you are absent for a lesson, that will dissolve our contract. If I set eyes on you after that, you will count yourself lucky to be driven from these halls with only a whipping."

Beren was silent, turning over many things in his head. He could not see a way out. Yg would not teach him elsewhere; that was clear. But how was he going to live? Already he longed for running water and the sound of the wind in the trees. He missed the talk of the small birds. Here there was no life, only dead stone. He did not see how the Dwarves could stand it, and he was sure that he could not himself. But where was the choice? He would have to try.

"That leaves me only one option," he said sulkily.

"No: two," replied Yg. "Either submit, and learn; or leave as you are. Those are the only choices."

Beren glowered, but he could see no way out. "Accepted," he said at last.

The Dwarf eyed him, frowning. "I had liefer that you had said no," he said. "You do not know what price you ask of me."

"Nor you of me!" burst out the boy with passion.

Neither of them spoke for some moments. Yg stirred himself first. "There are just two more things," he said. "The first is, how you shall pay for your subsistence." He looked a little uncomfortable saying this.

"What do you mean?" said Beren.

"You bought lessons," said the Dwarf shortly. "You did not buy housing, clothes or food."

The boy was incensed. He sat up straight and glared at Yg. "You push yourself out very far, Dwarf," he said.

Yg slammed his hand on the table with the speed of a snake. "Do not trifle with me, you son of incestuous goat-herders!" he shouted, spittle flying. "And you will address me as My Lord Prince, or Your Grace!" He collected himself then with difficulty and continued in cold tones, "Once again you display your unwillingness to accept the facts as they are. Well, it is all one to me. We will simply have you whipped into the mines. A shift or two on the ore-carts may cool your insolence."

Again there was a pause. "You seem determined to make this experience as unpleasant as possible," remarked Beren sourly at last. "All right then. Tell me what I must do."

"You must work for your living," said Yg brutally. "We will find out what you are good for – if anything – and set you to it." He got up. "You fatigue me with your nonsense. I am going to drown my cares with wine."

"You said there were two things," said Beren. "What was the second thing?"

Yg stopped. "Oh," he said. "Ah. Hrm, yes. You have seen the King; well, now it is the will of the Queen's grace also to grant you an interview. My mother," he finished awkwardly.

The boy shrugged wearily. "As you please. On the instant, I imagine?"

"Ah, no. I will come for you this evening. And Jummurrud – my chamberlain – will arrange work matters with you tomorrow."

"I can hardly wait," said Beren acidly. Yg only frowned at him in answer, then left the room.

The Queen's chamber was different from the King's in every way. It was panelled softly with wood; the lighting was mild and low. Beren could not detect a trace of gold.

Yg and Beren were met by a servant, who conducted them into an inner room with a log fire burning, but no other light. A large figure on a padded stool turned to face them; only then did Beren detect the gleam of gold.

Spread out on the Dwarf-woman's lap was the broad fan of necklace Beren had taken from the dead girl, glowing in the firelight.

The Queen – for it was she – beckoned them closer. As they came around the stool they could see her face lit by the fire. Her eyes first examined the boy; then she turned to Yg. “Thank you, my son. Now you will leave us for a while, if you please.” Yg bowed, glanced a little doubtfully at Beren, but withdrew without comment. The Queen motioned for Beren to sit on a stool opposite. He did so, then turned his interested gaze to her.

The Queen was broadly built, to an almost excessive degree; broad even for a Dwarf. Her bosom and arms had been fashioned to the same massive scale. Her silver hair was wound about her head into a flat disk, almost like a mushroom, if mushrooms could be spun out of gleaming silver wire drawn impossibly fine.

Beren stared in fascination at her beard. He had known already that Dwarf-women were so arrayed, both from the dead Dwarf in the cave, and from a doubtful early glimpse at the inn; but seeing a living Dwarf-woman was different. Women with beards! On the Queen this growth also was silver, and it appeared even finer than the hair of her head. It was forked into two glossy plaits which ran like mountain freshets down her front.

The whole should have appeared ugly, or at least fantastic; but the broad woman was beautiful for all that. Her skin was as fine as milk, and her features were regular and pleasing. Beren saw that her eyes were large and full of gentle feeling.

The Queen in her turn had been regarding him. “I thank you that you have come to me,” she said at last in a measured voice of pleasant melody. “My mother thanks you, also.” She nodded to the far side of the fire, and for the first time Beren became aware that another person was sitting there, back in the shadows. This woman, as square-figured as her daughter, leaned forward now. The boy took in a withered face of great age. The hair and beard of the Queen's mother were sparse and pure white, but in that ruin of a face the eyes were still alive and black. They were Yg's eyes.

The ancient nodded to him and rasped, “You are welcome to me, boy.”

The Queen stroked the bright golden shimmer on her lap. “It would please us greatly if you would tell us how this work came into your possession,” she said. “I have heard something already from my son, but I would hear it in your own words.”

So Beren told again the story of the dryness, the drumming, the storm, and what came after: his fight with the marble-men, the rescue by Rattlecone, everything.

As he came to an end the Queen bowed her head. A tear glittered in the firelight before dropping onto the gold. She wiped her eyes with an embroidered cloth, then raised her head again. “The dead girl was my daughter,” she said.

“Yes Ma'am, I know,” replied Beren gently.

“They tell me you have also lost one who was dear to you,” the Queen continued in her soft voice.

Beren swallowed. "Yes, Ma'am," he said, "my sister." Then, after a pause, "But... well Ma'am, I am only young. I don't know these things. But I'm pretty sure that to lose a daughter is worse."

"I do not think one can weigh one grief against another, so," replied the Queen. "Grief is grief. My heart goes out to you for your own bitter loss. But I will say that I perhaps know better how your mother feels, than I do of you. Tell me, is your mother... but no. Were she here, heart could weep embraced with heart, I am sure. But it is unfair to ask you, a young lad far from grown, to stand proxy for her." She sighed. "In all things I am unfair. I cannot help your mother; she cannot help me. It is you who needs my support at this time. But my spirit is weak, and I can neither staunch my tears nor banish my despair."

Beren was touched. "Lady Queen," he said, "please don't think of it so. It's true that life has handed me some lumps lately, but nothing I can't deal with. And anyway, I asked for some of it. But I know how deeply my mother was hurt, and I see it in you as well. If... if I could help in any way..."

"Child, I thank you sincerely for your offer, which must spring from a generous heart. But you have already helped me, in great measure. You have returned to me the last remains of my daughter, which, as it is immeasurably poorer than having her alive, is at the same time immeasurably better than having nothing at all.

"May I trust that your own mother had this fortune, which is no fortune at all?"

"Alas, no," replied Beren in a low voice. "My sister was never found. I think my mother looks for her still."

"Oh, woe!" cried the Queen. "How I wish that I could talk with her. Oh, I feel for her extremely!"

"But words can mend nothing, least of all the griefs of a human woman a hundred leagues from here. I cannot speak to her, or even for her. Nor will it avail me to spend more of them over my own state of mind and heart."

The gentle Queen wiped her eyes again. She gathered herself then, put the cloth away, and sat up straight. "But tell me, my young creditor," she said, "what can I do for you in return for your gift? Alas, there may not be much. I have not much say in the affairs of this city. But I have heard that you long for green things, and there perhaps I can help. I have a garden; I give you leave to visit it whenever you please, although I fear it may be but a poor recompense for your constraints."

Beren stood up and bowed low. "Ma'am," he said, "I thank you from the heart. That would help me more than anything."

The great lady waved his thanks away. "Come, come! Sit you down again. It is but small recompense from my side. I will add to it whatever more lies within my narrow scope. Let me see... shall I perhaps tell you the tale of this golden thing, which cost my daughter many pains, ensnared her in its glory, and at last took her life? Would you like to know that?"

"Yes Ma'am, if you please," replied Beren soberly. He expected the Queen to commence the tale, but there followed a pause in which nobody said anything. The ancient by the fire, who had been observing them both, hitched herself straighter and gave forth a rattling cough.

The pensive Queen sighed and stroked the gold. "There is no luck in this thing," she murmured. "It lies cold under my hand. I fear it will not be the last time it is washed with the hot blood of a mortal heart. But to what it will come in the end, who can say?"

It was the older woman who eventually broke the silence.

"My grand-dam made that, boy," she said, "back in the days of King Targubiriz<sup>17</sup>. In Gabilgathol<sup>18</sup>, that was,

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17 Gold-beard.

18 The twin city of Tumunzahar, lying also at the skirts of Mt. Dolmed, but a little to the North.

the sister-city of this one, and the place of our birthing, my daughter here and I.

“In those days the Sun and Moon were not yet come; our people had lived for long with only the stars to see in the heavens. Although mostly we regarded them not – after all, it is all the same underground. There came on a day the rising of the Sun, and of the Moon; and shortly after that we learned that the Enemy was returned; and shortly after *that* came to these shores those Elves who name themselves of Noldorin race. We call them *Mahalbuhû*<sup>19</sup>, because they had learned many things from the Maker<sup>20</sup> himself, which was a wonder to us to learn. (Think of it, they had spoken with our Maker!) We had long known of other *Fanâd*<sup>21</sup>, but we had not much to do with them, being as different in temper from them as an axe is from a willow-whistle.

“Of these *Mahalbuhû*, now, some are great lords indeed. Many are masters of battles alone, which is of value against the Enemy I am sure, but such does not warm the hearts of our people nor set fire in our eyes. Since we *Khazâd*<sup>22</sup> ourselves were Made, so is it our passion to make things ourselves. Therefore the *Mahalbuhû* who are also makers are of most interest to us. Some of them have black hearts, sure, but knowledge of itself is neither evil nor good. This is a property only of the heart of the one who wields it. Profit may therefore be had from the teaching of either black heart or white.

“Nevertheless, it cannot be doubted that there is more luck in dealing with just hearts than with evil ones. The greatest and happily also the most just of all the true *Mahalbuhû* is a lord named Finrod, whom we name Felakugundu, that is hall-delver. Ah, you raise your eyes? You have heard of him? But truly, few have not. Felakugundu: great wonders have our twinned cities had from his hands. The people of Tumun helped him dig his caves in return, but that is a mean gift, the work of labourers mostly with small skill of hand. In your private ear I will say that the King of that time – great-grandsire to the one these Fire-beards have now – was not sorry to find them some employment.

Now Targubiriz was King in Gathol, as I said, and he thought to give Felakugundu a more kingly gift. My Grand-dam Medb was known as the finest worker of gold among all the Clans; and that is no small claim. She and her circle conceived a necklace, of as fine a work as may be. And lo! there it lies, the work of her hand. Those jewels that bedeck it they had of Felakugundu. (Alas, their making is a secret we have not won. And they *were* made; do not tell *me* such fire ever came out of the earth.) A tithe of them we returned to him, even those you see burning there.

“Medb put all her gift into it. Never worthy piece did she make after, try as she might. Well do I recall how she would throw later attempts at the wall in her fury.

“She told me it tore her heart to let the necklace go. But we makers are poor folk, without power. It is our sad lot to labour at the bidding of those with no sniff of craft about them, but who, by accident of birth, or sometimes through the craft to bend men’s souls, which is no worthy craft at all, occupy the seat of power. In just such wise did Targubiriz take the Necklace. The work went then to the *fund*, the Elf. He valued the gift highly, so I am told. I say no bad word of Felakugundu; but the affair was ill fortune for Medb, that is certain.”

The old Dwarf seemed to have wound down now. After some little time, Beren said, “But Ma’am, how came the necklace back here?”

“Eh?” She sat forward again. “Oh. I beg your pardon, I was far away in years long past. Well, it needed repair. Felakugundu sent it to the King, and he brought it to me. Ah! That was no happy day for me, because who am I? The unworthy heir of great forbears, that is who. I would not dare set hand to the work; I would have marred it for sure. We gold-workers took counsel together, and we counted three whom we thought might be trusted with the repair. But Aeg, the daughter of my daughter here, she was the best. We all knew her work, and in her we saw again the hand and mind of the gold-smiths of old. Indeed, she was the first I

19 ‘Friends of Mahal’, i.e. Noldor.

20 The Vala Aulë, known by the Dwarves as Mahal.

21 Elves.

22 Dwarves.

had seen fit to stand with my own grand-dam, Medb.

“We are few, we gold-smiths, because all are women, who are not many among us *Khazâd*, Mahal alone knows why. Even fewer are the true *zarkâna*, what we call the ones at the very peak of craft, those touched by Mahal himself. Aeg was one such.

“Alas! She mastered the necklace, only to have it master her. She could not bear to part with the golden glory, and fled with it, in defiance of the King. Yg chose to help her, and if you ask me why, my mouth will shut tight. We may not open to you the affairs of our family, even had we the wish to.

“We had already this vexation in the North, this trouble with the Stone-spirits. That is an ugly business, and a wrongness too – stone should obey mortal hand, not the other way around. Alas, Aeg ran her head right into that. She was ensnared, and our folk could not come at her, and had to leave the poor body in the end; that which you, thank the Maker, have now given back to us.

“That is now as much of the tale as I am willing to tell. Only this more: I heard the reports of those who returned from the attempt to rescue Aeg, or to recover her poor body; and I counted the gaps in their ranks. I honour your courage the higher accordingly.”

“I too,” murmured the Queen.

After that, nobody spoke for a while. Much had been only hinted at, or left unsaid altogether; but they were clearly not going to tell him any more. Beren had the impression that for a stranger to be told so much of their affairs was already to receive a considerable favour.

“So that was how it was,” he said. “For my part, I don’t mind telling you, Ma’am, that I have never been so frightened in my life, short though it has been; but I do not mind it, if it means I have eased your heart, in a way I could not for my own mother, and restored the honour of your House.”

“That was a courteous speech!” said the Queen. “I know next to nothing about the customs of you tall folk, who also appeared on this earth with the Sun, or so I am told. But it is clear that you at least have received good nurture.” She sighed and stroked the living gold on her broad lap again. “Presently this work must return to Finrod. The Stone-evil is, you tell me, subdued. All shall be as it was before; save that my daughter is gone.” She took herself in hand then, folded the golden work with brisk movements, then put it away in a drawer. The room seemed darker for its absence. The Queen turned then again to Beren.

“My son will be growing impatient,” she said. “Alas, he does so very quickly. I would... that is... I know my son. They have told me of some of your dealings with him. I cannot... that is to say, nobody has said ‘no’ to him for a long time. You, it appears, are somewhat in the habit of doing so. I hold that for no bad thing; I hope you will forgive me, not think too badly of me, if I tell you that I have smiled in the privacy of my room after hearing word of this from wide-eyed tale-bringers. I admire your spirit, child, and as my son’s mother, I am grateful for it. But have a care, for your own sake! Do you understand me? Do not tread too heavily. I would not that you came to harm, and the grief to me would be tripled if that were to happen at the hand of one of my blood.”

Beren stood and bowed. “Thank you for your advice, Lady,” he said.

“Go to him now,” she said. “I will arrange it so that you may visit my garden, if you wish to. There you may find me at times; and I would gladly converse further with you. I have never been out of this city, save that I was born in the other, in Gathol. The world is wide, and you have seen more of it than I. You shall tell me of your lands and ways, if it would please you. I would gladly hear more of these wild men you tell of, and of your friend the *zarsûn*, the tree-man.”

The boy bowed again. “I thank you again, Lady Queen. I would be very happy to tell you of my family and my friends. I miss them very much.”

She smiled sadly. “*That* I can understand,” she said. “Farewell then for now. And have a care! A little boldness may be praiseworthy; but too bold can be calamitous.”

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Jummurrud, the chamberlain, turned out to be a very fat Dwarf clothed luxuriously in a suit of wine-red velvet, although this was so covered with frills and bobbles and decorations and gold lace and innumerable other costly fripperies that it was hard to see much velvet. On being admitted by Beren to his apartment, the chamberlain glanced around the insides with a fastidious air. He moved as if reluctant to touch the walls or any other fixture. The fat Dwarf’s measured stare at Beren, up and down, displayed an equal lack of enthusiasm.

“You are the human child known as Beren, father not specified?” His tone of voice was as fussy as his clothes and manner.

“My father’s name is Barahir,” said Beren darkly.

Jummurrud carried several scrolls which he now expertly juggled until he had the one he wanted. He perused that one for a minute, frowning and tut-tutting to himself. “I think we will come out of this place and pursue our affairs on the good sergeant’s desk. Hmm?” He backed out of the room. After the sergeant, quite a decent type whose name was Gromm, had shrugged his blank acquiescence, the chamberlain laid the scroll on his desk. He had a pen in his hand from somewhere. He uncorked then a small horn of ink and wrote carefully, while saying under his breath, “Father’s name alleged to be Barahir. B-a-r-a-h-i-r.”

Beren rolled his eyes at the sergeant, who twitched his shoulders in a discreet shrug.

Jummurrud stood up and put his pen away. “Now young man,” he said briskly, “we must find you some fitting employment. Tell me now, what can you do?” But Beren’s recitation of his skills in the forest and on the hunt left the fat official looking very blank.

“Hum, well, yes,” he said at the end, running his fingers over his well-groomed moustache, “that is all very well, very creditable I’m sure; but I don’t just see what use those things are for the City. Can you make anything?”

“Flint knives – at least a bit,” said the boy, “and baskets made from grass.”

“Um,” said Jummurrud. “Baskets.” He looked doubtfully at Beren’s physique, which was much more slender than that typical of Dwarves. “You do not look very strong. I do not think I could set you at digging, or carrying. That would just waste everybody’s time. You might make a scribe – tsk, if you but knew our language. Or some lady’s servant? Mm, no I think not. Have you worked in a kitchen at all? Or a mine? A smithy?”

Beren’s eyes widened at the last. “Yes!” he said. “My friend was the smith where we lived, and I used to help him a lot. Sometimes he would let me beat the iron.”

“Oh. Well, then,” said the Dwarf, still looking doubtful, “I suppose we might give that a try. I will speak with the forge-master.” Without more ado he gathered his scrolls and his bobbles and took himself off with a sniff.

They took Beren down the next day, far down, descending on two of the wooden waterfalls. In the last corridor he could smell the familiar smells of oil and hot iron. The sound of hammers came to his ears. The last sign of all was a fiery light, streaming out of the wide doorway.

He was ushered into a great, high-ceilinged room in which many Dwarves were busy making an endless variety of things. The racket of this was considerable. In massive and oily array down the room stood what seemed to be forges, and presses, and great machines to cut, turn, and bend metal. The walls were hung with gleaming arms and armour of all possible shapes and varieties. Great benches of stout timber stood along the



sides of the room, dark with grime and oil, and covered with piles of objects innumerable: screws and scraps, tools and tangles. Bags of coal stood open against the walls.

The clerk from Jummurud who had led him through the city took him down the length of the room and knocked finally on a window which looked to be made from double panes of a thick but clear glass. The figure inside beckoned them to enter, so they did. Once the heavy door was shut, the noise decreased to a level at which it was possible to talk.

Beren took in a harrassed-looking, elderly Dwarf with bristling eyebrows, sitting behind a desk covered in a disorder of scrolls. The Dwarf looked Beren up and down with a distinct lack of enthusiasm.

“I am Khabbock, deputy forge master here,” he growled. “I’ve been ordered to take you under my wing. Not happy about it – no use hiding that. We’ve no room for passengers here, boy, nor babies. Well, they tell me you have worked in a smithy, or what passes for one among Stretchers – Tall Folk, that is.” With an abrupt movement, he shoved an object across the desk at Beren. “Tell me what that is,” he barked.

The youngster picked up the piece of metal and looked at it carefully. “That is what I would call a file, Sir,” he said. “My friend would use something like this for fine work, to smooth off edges, you know. He had coarser ones for rough work.”

“Humph,” said the Dwarf. “How do you make steel hard?”

Beren was not certain of this one; he thought there were several ways. He said, “Well Sir, after my friend had got the metal in the shape he wanted, he would stick it into a bucket of oil. He said that hardened it.”

“Hot, or cold?” asked Khabbock, glaring at him from under his bristly brows.

“Well, the oil was cold, but Gorlim would heat the piece up ’til it glowed red. Of course that would heat the oil up a bit; it would bubble and smoke, anyway. After that he would do it all over again, only not glowing hot. He said you could tell when it was ready from the colour of the metal. Yellow for tough, blue for springy. I think that’s how it went.”

The Dwarf sat back. “Well!” he said. “You do know something. That will save us some time and trouble. Now look: I’m going to put you in the hands of the Master of Apprentices. I don’t want to be bothered with you, and the Forge Master don’t neither. The less I hear from or about you, the better I’ll be pleased. So you’ll do what work you’re set, and don’t squeak. We haven’t much use for squeakers down here. Understand?”

“Yes, sir,” said Beren, feeling subdued.

The Master of Apprentices turned out to be a much younger Dwarf named Breshke. He greeted Beren amiably and took him out of the office to show him around the establishment.

“You mustn’t mind old Bocks,” he told the boy as soon as they were out of earshot. “He likes to growl and bark, but he’s a decent old sort in his way. He runs the shop well, I will say that for him.”

Breshke said Beren would need to put wax balls in his ears, like all the others, to protect his hearing. The Dwarves used a finger-language in the workshop, which Beren would be taught. Breshke taught him a few important signs straight away, and seemed pleased when Beren picked them up quickly. He showed the boy the refectory and the infirmary. They went through the shop then while Breshke, sometimes having to shout with his hairy mouth close up against the boy’s ear, explained the various works which were under way. He was introduced to one or two of the grimy-handed workers. The two went out then into the relative peace of the corridor while Breshke explained the arrangements by which Beren would be escorted to the workplace every day.

“Can’t I just come here on my own?” asked the boy.

Breshke shook his head decidedly. “No, no, it wouldn’t do. Wouldn’t do at all. But never mind that now, I want to show you where the Forge Master has his private chambers.” He led the way a little way further down the corridor to another opening. The rooms within were lit but silent. Peeking in, Beren saw a similar sort of place to the main workshop, only much smaller, and without any activity.

“You don’t come in here unless the Forge Master sends for you,” Breshke told him. “Understand? And I don’t see why he should do that.”

“There doesn’t seem to be much going on,” said Beren doubtfully.

“Well, that’s the FM. He is master of his own time, I suppose. I’ve known times when it really jumps in here – when he gets an idea and wants some help with it.”

“Seems like he has a pretty soft job,” commented the boy. “He gets to do what he likes while the deputy does all the work.”

Breshke brought Beren up with a hand to the chest. The young Dwarf wore a stern look on his habitually friendly features.

“Now you just stop right there, lad,” he said. “I won’t hear a word said against the FM. That goes for the rest of us here too. I’m not angry with you, I’m just telling you, so you know. It’s not your fault: you don’t know who he is. The way we all feel, if the Forge Master chooses to pursue his own projects these days, then he has earned that right, and much more.”

“Sorry,” said Beren, abashed. “You make him sound like quite somebody.”

“He is that, indeed,” said Breshke firmly. “His name is Telchar, and he is the greatest mortal smith who ever breathed.”

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The stark figure perched high in the snows above the city had stood there for many circles of days. In clear weather, the rising sun frosted the clean snow surface with sparkles and revealed the hard blue lines of distant peaks; in the nights that followed, the only lights visible were the city lamps below and the faint stars above. These were nights in which the being had had to fight hard within itself against the creeping frost. Other times a gale came, thickening the air with fog and driving snow, and at these times only the presence or absence of dull grey light made any difference between day and night.

This was Rattlecone. He had followed the Dwarves the whole way. He knew they had taken the boy into the City. He had come now as far as he could; there was no sign, and no way forward.

He waited for three months before he went back north.

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On a miserable, grey day in late autumn, Andreth was hunched in front of the fire, trying without much success to soak some warmth into her bones. A gale was blowing cold rain into every crack and crevice outside, and sending fingers of chill air through the room at her back.

Barahir was announced, to her pleasure, until with a stab of pain she recalled the news of his loss. She had not seen him since.

“Come in, Nephew, and warm yourself,” she said when he appeared at the door. “I can’t seem to keep really warm anywhere these days. But it is better inside than outside, there’s at least that to be said for it.”

He sat himself heavily on the settle opposite her and stared at the fire while she covertly examined him. He was holding a hand-towel, and after a minute he seemed to remember it, and began to dry his hair slowly

with it.

“Well, Aunt,” he said, but did not go on.

“We shan’t talk about it, boy,” she said gently. “There’s no point.”

“No,” he said dully.

There was silence for some moments. Curse this empty life, thought Andreth bleakly, what was the point in dragging this old carcass any further through it? What was it for, what was *she* for, when young hope could simply be snatched away like that? Finrod would say otherwise of course, and usually she believed it; but at moments like this it all wore a bit thin.

But at least there was still the boy.

“Did you bring Emeldir and the boy?” she asked.

“Mel went to stay with her father for a while,” said Barahir. “I forgot – you won’t have had news of Beren. He has left us. Got some idea in his head to learn sword-craft from a Dwarf.”

The old lady sat up. “What!”

Barahir related the painful leave-taking, and the facts he had subsequently gleaned about Yg, few of which were reassuring.

“Oh, the young fool,” groaned Andreth. “What a thing to do, and what a time to pick to do it. I am sorry, Bari, I am at fault. I should never have shown him Frostfire.”

“I, also, have things said which I would take back,” said Barahir, “but regrets are pointless. What we need now to do is decide our best way forward.”

Andreth stirred irritably. “Yes, of course we do,” she said, “I know that! Don’t teach the deer how to eat grass. Drat the child. You say you couldn’t dissuade him. But he might have changed his views now after some time spent with those Dwarves. What do you think? Is there any possibility of fetching him back?”

“I don’t think so,” said Barahir. “We had a letter from him. He seems to have settled in, and all goes well.”

“Do you have it here? Give it to me!” she demanded. Barahir took a sheet of thick paper out of his wallet and passed it over. Andreth tilted it to the fire and squinted, trying to focus. “Drat it and curse it,” she said, “just read it out to me, will you. It’s more than I can do to make out his spider scratchings.”

Barahir took the letter back. He read it to her, a little laboriously, since he was a farmer and a fighter who had not had much time in his life for the finer arts. Beren had told of the long voyage down, of the grandeur and wonder of the city, of his quarters among the Dwarves, and of his early relations with them. He had omitted the unpleasantnesses he had suffered at Yg’s hands.

Andreth chewed her lips during the recital, and grunted at the end of it. “There’s things he has left out,” she said, “but it sounds well enough as far as it goes. He is probably safe enough. Dwarves are not bad folk, all things considered.” She turned it over in her mind for some minutes further.

“Why did he go?” she burst out at last. “Why? Such a leap into the dark!”

“Who can tell?” replied Barahir. “I doubt he knows himself. I would guess there are many reasons; flight from recent memory being one. I can understand that, since I wish to do the same myself. Did you know we are going to leave the farm? I am here to arrange for something nearer Newfort. Menelrond knows of possibilities.”

She sat up. “You are full of news, Nephew, little of it good,” she said. “Let us speak of that in a moment. But as for the boy: yes. A flight from grief. And perhaps more than grief. Did you not say he tried to keep his sister from that spot?”

Barahir nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

“There are currents in this thing,” muttered Andreth, “forces at work.” She chewed her lip a while before continuing in tones of vexation, “I do not know what is worse: to know that one’s life is guided by the Gods, or to be a rudderless nobody. Sometimes I would have given anything to have been an ordinary girl, not the daughter of a war-lord and hero; never to have seen the Sword, never to have met any Elf. I could have found some decent man, not too thick-headed, and settled down to mind a house and have children. What do I have instead? A doddering brother, a fool of a nephew, a parcel of empty-headed nieces, and a magic icicle. And from the next generation: one bright hope drowned, the other run away. The Black One sits still in the North, and the world’s affairs seem no further advanced. I’m weary of it; but I’m stuck here in body which inflicts constant aches on me but which seems determined to function forever in all vital essentials.”

“Indeed, Aunt, joyless days are nothing but a weariness. But in the nature of things, I can expect to have much longer than you to regret them.”

She looked at him with fierce compassion in her eyes. “Ach, you are young. Time stretches before you. You will find joy again, Barahir. Your son will come back to you, and if he has not by that time become a fitting heir to Boromir, then I do not know what he is doing down there in that hole under the mountains! Also, you and Emeldir have one another. I do not mean to engage in a contest of misery, but I would have you sensible of your advantages. My own heart has been aching empty these sixty years and more.<sup>23</sup> Be grateful if yours is not!”

“You have never managed to forget him?” he asked gently.

“No,” she replied shortly.

“From all I have heard and seen of him, his grief is the same,” he said.

“It is,” she said. “I know all of his heart which concerns me. But that only makes it worse.”

They left that subject then and discussed for a while the planned move to the East. Andreth could see both good and bad in it.

“The devil of it is, it leaves nobody to take over the militia up the valley,” she said.

“Aye,” he agreed. “Gilach is untried. Bremund is a good fighter, but he’s a man of limited vision.”

“What about Gramlach?”

“Gram is coming east with us,” said Barahir.

“Oh?” said Andreth, then smiled. “With Caladis. Of course. Well, the military problem will solve itself one way or another. It’s nothing I can meddle in. That aside, I won’t deny I’ll be grateful to have you nearer. I could use the support, if nothing else. Bregolas never stops with his fool ideas. I wish his boys would come back. I cannot think why they dawdle so in the West. Have you any news?”

“From what I heard,” said Barahir, “they are busy making families. As soon as one child reaches travelling age, the other wife starts to hatch one.”

“Hmph. Blasted children, nothing but trouble. Well, they had better visit soon, if they want to see their

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23 Andreth’s love for the Elf-lord Aegnor, and her parting from him, are described in ‘Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth’ in volume 10 of Christopher Tolkien’s ‘History of Middle Earth’.

grandfather again,” said Andreth.

“Is he so bad?” asked Barahir.

“You will see that for yourself,” she said.

They said nothing further for a while, both lost in thought. At last Barahir sighed and stood up.

“I had better find my chamber and change for dinner,” he said. “I’ll pay my respects to Father afterwards. Until later then, Aunt.”

As he reached the door, though, she burst out anew. “How in Middle-earth is he going to do it, that’s what I’d like to know!”

“Who? And do what?” asked Barahir.

“The boy. Beren! Was he not born for the woods? However is he going to live without them? And those blasted Dwarves are about as far from an honest Druug as it is possible to get.”

### Year 446

Beren had expected that he would start his lessons immediately with Yg, but in fact he did not see the Prince again for some time. His first teacher was an old retired weapons master of the legion with which he was quartered. This spare old Dwarf, Azhadin by name, put him through a strict course of exercises, of the various sorts of strokes and counters, and how to move all the parts of his body as a coordinated whole. Other exercises taught grace and balance. The practice sword was heavily weighted, and at least to begin with, Beren could hardly go to sleep at the end of the day for the aching in his arms and shoulders. Later he became hardened to it.

Azhadin was an exacting teacher, never allowing the smallest lapse. When Beren did something wrongly, he was required to do it again and again and again until he got it right. It was weeks before the Dwarf deigned to engage directly with the boy, and even then this was not combat but still more repetitive exercises: strike and parry, strike and parry, endlessly on through the empty hours, until Beren’s body twitched through the movements again in his sleep.

Combat practice when at last it came was still under the old Master’s supervision, but with a younger Dwarf playing the role of opponent. The combatants were protected by padded clothing and wicker face masks, and the ‘swords’ they plied were stout staves. These could deal a stinging blow, despite the padding.

The boy’s days were filled with hard physical work. He ate his evening meal with the Legion juniors, then retired to his room, where he would usually fall straight to sleep. In the morning he would be up and washed at daybreak (announced in the City by gongs), and then it was all to be done again. Carrying and holding in the heat of the smithy; endless exercises with the heavy sword.

There was not much that could be called leisure time. Beren was not able to take up the Queen’s offer to visit her garden. When he asked Porin for permission, the Commander was apologetic, but unmoveable.

“I’m sorry, lad, but it is out of the question. I’ve had no orders about it. Anyway, you can’t just go visiting royalty whenever you please. If she wants you, I’m sure she will send for you.” So this further disappointment joined the others which Beren had no option but simply to accept.

The wrestling matches were organized as promised. There was a lot of debate about a proper match for the boy, since a Dwarf of his height would be much heavier, whereas one of his age would be shorter and (since childhood lasted longer in Dwarves) probably much too soft and immature. In the end they chose a youngster proudly sporting his first wispy beard, of build a little shorter than Beren and a little heavier. The human boy proceeded to lay the Dwarf on his back with ease. That calibrated his handicap, so to speak. They tried him

then with progressively harder opponents until his contests became roughly equal. The boy enjoyed these bouts almost as much as the soldiers did, since they reminded him not a little of similar times with the Druug. It was a welcome social contact; and as had been guessed, it also went a long way to repairing his reputation among the soldiers he had been foisted upon. In time, indeed, the attitude toward Beren of the Legionaries of the Bright Armour evolved from their initial offended pride to something not far from comradely affection.

Beren began also to make his way in the smithy. The dour old workmen had looked at him askance to begin with, but both his willingness and his unexpected strength and capacity for work began slowly to win them to a grudging acceptance. The apprentices, too, whose view of him in the beginning had verged on the hostile, came with time to view Beren, if not exactly as one of themselves, at least as a known personage in the workshop; generally as a pleasant fellow, somebody who pulled his weight and who could spin an engaging yarn over a cup during breaks. Beren himself was not aware of an additional factor, since nobody ever alluded to it, but the most important decider in his acceptance by his workmates was his unassuming manner. Everybody knew that he was a protégé of the Prince; had he once given himself any airs, he would have been finished. As it was, he prospered.

Indeed, Beren was far from lonely. The Dwarves as a people were closed-mouthed and tight-fisted, and there were not a few among them who shared the stony nature of the wagoners who had passed the entire journey from Ladros without once greeting the boy; but he found that others of them could be companionable, even friendly.

All the same, the boy missed his old life exceedingly. His longing for trees and growing things was a pain sharp enough to make him writhe on his bed and want to cry out. He did not know how he had stood the lack of them so far, and he was always at any given point sure he could not stand much more of it. He was constantly on the brink of giving up and going home; but somehow, having come this far, he hesitated. And so the lonely days became weeks, and the weeks extended to months.

The initial outrage and resentment excited by his treatment at Yg's hands had never gone away. Now each hard, soul-aching day only stoked these fires further. Indeed, a furnace-glow of anger was steadily building in the boy's breast. He did not know yet what he would do with it; but he thought that somebody was going to have to pay – somehow, some time.

To begin with he expressed his anger in his combats, but he soon found that to be a mistake. An angry fighter leaves too many openings for a cool-headed opponent. So he bottled up his feelings and forced himself to remain icy-cold during his fights. He learned cunning, to look always for the opening. When it came, he would strike to hurt. His first young opponent, whose behaviour to him had been comradely at the beginning, grew closed and resentful. As Beren improved in skill, so the opportunities to inflict hurt on his exercise partner increased. One day, after Beren had jabbed the young Dwarf for the fourth time directly on a tender area, his partner tore the mask off his red face and threw it to the floor.

“That's it,” the Dwarf said to Azhadin, the old Weapons Master. “Find someone else for this vicious brute to work out his spite on. I've had enough.”

The Master looked at Beren thoughtfully. He said nothing, but the boy's next sparring partner was a strong, full-grown Dwarf with long arms and expressionless black eyes. The boy then found the tables turned. The other was a better swordsman than he, with much longer reach, and equally given to low blows. Beren accumulated bruises. With each new bruise, the fires of his screwed-down internal anger glowed hotter. For a long time he had to suffer in patience with no opportunity to strike back. However, he practised and practised and practised, and as he became ever better at blocking, so his injuries decreased. There came a day when his partner made the tiniest slip, a mere glimpse of an opening; the boy was in and through and out again in a flash, and there was his opponent rolling on the floor, wheezing red-faced and clutching his groin with both hands. He was not able to continue the exercise and had to be carried off. Beren did not see him again.

Despite the strenuous physical regimen, the boy lay often awake during the long nights. Lying there, staring unseeing into the darkness within and without, he began more and more to seek what he needed and longed

for inside his own mind. Denied the forest in daily life, he found an internal forest of memory; yes, and more than memory. The feeling grew upon him that the forest was there, somewhere, inside him, if he could only find the way to it. He became able to call up past scenes as clearly in his mind as if they were present before his eyes. He could bring ever more clearly onto the stage of his mind Nose, and his Druug people, and Goracc, and Rattlecone. The Dead, too, he could meet again: he looked on Willow's face, and heard her crotchety words; he listened again to Lion Scar and watched the run of expressions across his honest face.

As he learned more of the ways of this internal world, so he began also to see himself in it more clearly. The internal Beren seemed to take on more solidity, and the external husk of height and breadth began to seem less important. And at last too he began to sniff out the way to Willow's skill of hiding. It was not something one could describe – a little like standing sideways, or shrinking oneself up, or pushing something down; but then again, not really much like any of these. There were no words for it; one just had to feel it out. The point to realize was that others' awareness of oneself had nothing to do with the real world, with the husk of the body; it was something that happened on the plane where the spirit lived; and on that level, it could be manipulated.

The day came when he stood by the wall and allowed himself not to be seen when the runner came to take him to the forges. The Dwarf looked through the chambers in bewilderment, then called in Gromm the sergeant. Gromm, having no better luck, promptly called in the guard. As four heavily armed Dwarves arrived at the chambers, the boy walked nonchalantly out of his bathroom.

"Where have you been?" demanded Gromm.

"In my bathroom," said Beren.

"We looked in the bathroom," said the Dwarf suspiciously.

"Yes," said Beren, "I saw you both poke your heads in. I think you must both need a leech to your eyes, because you did not see me, although I was there in plain sight."

The sergeant shook his head firmly. "You were not there. I am sure of it."

"Well," said Beren in reasonable tones, "where else could I have been? Not even I can fit out of this window."

Since there was no apparent answer to this question, they had no option but to let the matter be; but they were not happy about it. Their manner to him changed from that time on. Stories had already circulated about this human boy, who had, it was claimed, strange powers to converse with the creatures who infested the world. This latest story carried just a whiff of the uncanny. Gromm swore to all who asked that the boy had not been in the rooms – until suddenly there he was again.

Some days after that, Beren asked to see Commander Porin.

"What can I do for you, lad?" asked the Dwarf when Beren was ushered in.

"Commander," said the boy slowly, "I believe I am going to have to withdraw my parole."

The Dwarf sat up in surprise. "That is... a serious step," he said. "You understand what that would mean?"

"You would have to lock me up, yes," said Beren.

Porin mulled this over. "But why?" he exclaimed after a moment. "Is it really necessary? Is there somewhere you want to go? Perhaps it can be arranged. I dislike to turn key on you, extremely."

"I have to go outside," said the boy simply.

"Outside the City?" Porin asked. Beren nodded. The commander looked uncomfortable. "I am sorry. I have

direct orders from the Prince not to allow you outside. But that is no reason to lock yourself in, surely.” But Beren only shrugged in reply.

“Well, if you will take back your word, you leave me with little option,” said the Dwarf stiffly. He took Beren back to his room in person, collecting a surprised Sergeant Gromm on the way. As they went to close the door on the boy, Porin said to him, “Let me know if you want to give parole again. Matters shall be just as they were before.”

But next morning when they went to give the boy his breakfast, they could not find him. They had found the door locked; nothing seemed amiss.

Gromm snorted. “Huh. More of these games.” He locked the door again carefully, then went to call the guard, same as last time. This time, however, no boy appeared.

Porin was called, and stood in the rooms tapping his teeth. “Well, well, well,” he said. “There is more to this youngster than meets the eye.” He gave some orders to his men. They closed up the room again, and waited on events.

Beren had slipped out behind Gromm the moment the door had first been opened. He was soon outside the barracks, but very quickly thereafter he became lost in the maze of corridors.

Not having any idea which way he should go, the boy closed his eyes and consulted his inner sense. The city spread before his mind like a vast beehive. He could dimly sense the thousands of its inhabitants, but the structure itself was cold to him, inimical. He needed a way out, but he wanted to avoid the main hall and the other openings on that level and side. Surely there must be other exits... without really knowing how or why, he began to pick his way downward and out.

He found there were limits to how well he could hide. The skill did not make him invisible. If he stayed still against some background of which he could plausibly be seen as part, he went unnoticed; the same was true if he was moving as part of a crowd. At any sudden contrast or movement, however, the people around him became uneasy, peering and trying to catch at his outline. Later he found that shadows and scent were other give-aways.

So he wandered through the great city, learning more about this strange elusiveness, becoming slowly more practised at it, and without leaving more than a ripple in awareness behind him.

Beren came at last to one of the wooden waterfalls. He waited in a dim corner until an empty shelf emerged from the ceiling hole, then jumped on. He rode it a certain way down, stepping off at a level that seemed about right to him, although he could not have said how or why. He found himself in an area given over to food preparation. The delicious smells reminded him that he had not eaten that day.

The kitchen was large and full of noise and bustle. The sight of shining pots hanging from the walls brought him, in a flash of memory, an image of Yg reaching for a basin in the kitchen of the inn... Beren shook his head free of the bad thoughts and slipped in, blending without notice into the company. Somewhere among all the rich smells of food and waste his keen nose thought it could detect a faint strand of fresher air. Somewhere here was a door to outside, he was sure of it.

He moved into another room, given over to washing. Here there was heat, but also a cooling draught. Ahah! There! A door to the outside. As the boy approached it he could see sunlight streaming through a crack. A cold stream of free, fresh air began to tickle his bare toes. He could barely contain his excitement.

The door was wedged almost closed. He kicked the wedge away and the door swung open, letting in a flood of sunlight, and free, fresh air. Beren found the sudden sensory rush almost overwhelming, but the Dwarves shouting in the kitchen behind him jerked him into action. He slipped out before the grumbling kitchen workers reached the door.



He heard them replace the wedge, and wondered for a brief moment how he was going to get back in... but time enough to worry about that later.

Indeed he had other things to think about for the present, because above the door and a little to one side he was disconcerted to discover a guard post. The guards were alert. They saw him straight away – or at least, they saw something. Two of them had moved to the rail and were pointing and shouting.

Beren looked down and found that the noonday sun was casting his sharp-edged black shadow onto the ground. Cursing beneath his breath, he raced to the shade of a nearby rock wall. As soon as he reached the wall, he stood quite still, and turned up his new-found skill as high as he could make it go.

Several Dwarves holding swords and axes had by this time clattered down the short stair from the guard balcony and were peering around suspiciously. They sniffed around for some time, but they could no longer see anything amiss. The two on watch were positive they had seen something; they were just not sure what. Now there seemed to be nothing out of place. There was only the open ground to see, bright and bare beneath the sun, and the rock walls beetling up to the sides and rear. Nothing moved anywhere.

Although they remained unsatisfied and suspicious, the guards had at last no option but to retreat to their post. Previously they had been disposed to talk among themselves and to take it easy. This was known as a boring post of duty – intruders never ventured into this high, inaccessible pass; there was never any excitement or alarm. All that had now changed. The uncanny apparition had made the guards silent and watchful. Several of them stood now at the parapet, and these kept scanning the open area in front of the kitchen entrances with suspicious eyes.

It needed all of Beren's skill to remain unseen while he crept slowly further away among the great boulders at the side of the path. At last he turned a corner which hid him from the guards; from that time he could run more freely.

The path led up slope for a hundred yards or so until reaching a crest. When Beren's head reached this height, he gasped with wonder, for the spaces on the far side opened up tremendously. Spreading out before him he saw a rumpled carpet of snowy peaks, strewn seemingly in their hundreds. Blinding white in the sunlight, their ranks receded without cease into the blue distance. The bowl of the sky above him was a polished blue, and the tang of wild air blew fresh in his nostrils.

Somewhere the dazed boy could hear birds talking. He followed the sound up a rise until he looked down beyond into a grassy bowl. It was a mountain meadow, sprinkled with flowers: red, yellow, white and purple.

Beren wandered down the slope, feeling as if he were in a dream. The living lawn felt delicious on the soles of his feet, which lately had known nothing but the harshness of stone.

He found a warm rock in the bottom of the windless dell. There he laid himself down in the fragrant grass, clasping bunches of the soft herbs in each hand. Tears were running freely from his eyes, but whether from grief or joy, not even he could have said.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beren stayed outside, swimming in the pure joy of breathing and seeing, until nightfall. It was not hard then to elude the guards in the torch-lit shadows, and make his way back inside.

The trek back through the city was a weariness. The great dwarven-hive was not a place he had any desire to be; also he was apprehensive to know how his absence from forge and salle had been received. Too late, he recollected Yg's threat about breach of contract.

When he slipped at last through the open door of his rooms, he found Porin lying on the couch, reading a book. As soon as the Dwarf saw Beren, he laid the paper aside and stood up.

“Commander... I...” began Beren, but the Dwarf stopped him with a raised hand.

“I want only one thing from you, boy; and that is your parole,” he said in tones of harsh reproof. “I know you have been out, do not think to lie about it. I do not know *how* you did it, and I do not want to know.” Seeing the stricken look on the boy’s face, he softened his tone. “If you are anxious about the lost day,” he went on gruffly, “I gave it out that you were sick. That seemed best to me. Few know more of the affair than that – only the Sergeant and a few other of my men, and they will not talk.

“But I tell you this: this must not happen again. I understand how you feel; you feel a prisoner here, and you long to escape. But you are not a prisoner, you have proven that today. So either leave, or stay. The one thing you cannot do is both at once. Choose!”

Beren looked down, feeling defeated. “Thank you, Commander,” he mumbled. “I did not expect...”

Porin waved that away impatiently. “Spare me your thanks. What is it to be? Parole or no parole?”

The boy was silent, thinking of the bright flowers in the meadow. Goodbye to that? But what other road was there? “Parole,” he said at last in a low voice.

Porin said nothing in reply, only clasping the boy’s drooping shoulder as he went out. Beren was left alone to regard the emptiness of the stone chambers in the flickering candle-light.

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It was at about this time that Beren received a letter. He unbound the stiff paper eagerly and scanned the contents. It was written in Tengwar characters in an elegant hand which he at once recognized as that of his aunt. He read slowly the following:

“To Beren of the line of Bëor from Caladis Beren’s daughter, greeting.

“I am bidden to write to you by your Father, and what follows will be mostly his words not mine. I may not say what I think of your latest Escapade, lest this letter be torn up and burnt as was the Previous.

“Firstly I am to report that we received your letter of last Autumn and are reassured of your well-being in that strange City so far to the South. You father says to say you are to send Word as you may if there is anything untoward, help lies ever ready at need, no matter how far the ride.

“We in the Family are all well, very busy though at packing and preparations for the move. We have a small Farm or rather Cot quite near the town. Most of the people will stay here, save Parth, and Gramlach also means to come. We will take on a Boy probably to do the jobs that a boy does. I have myself not yet seen the house but your mother has and reports it very comfortable.

“Gilach son of Menelrond is here now at Sightfoot, a handsome boy, with a pleasant manner. We think he will do well. He is newly married, his spouse is a dark girl, not much on her bones, rather quiet. I have not yet had many dealings with her. The other people are all well though Ragnor hurt his foot and was laid up. He is better now. Gramlach sends greetings.

“I am bidden by Arthad to tell you that he has looked after your Raven, he says you will know which one. I am to pass on to you greetings from a Bird, which is the first time I have ever done such a thing, or thought to either. Also he bids me report that the Savages with whom you lately dallied are also all well.

“The Farm is in order, despite some lapse last year when none of us had heart for it. The season looks promising, the buttercups are blooming already.

“Your father bids me say that he loves you the same as ever and that you are not to take to Heart recent words between you. He says people may be of two minds but one heart, and so it is between you and he. He would very willingly hear further from you and repeats that he stands ever ready to come to your aid, etc.

“I send you my own well-wishes as your Aunt. I could wish that you continue your tuition in the civilized arts and not only the Barbarous. Who knows if you can find a Tutor among such strange Folk, only you will know that. I urge you to the same however.

“Given by my hand this fine day of Spring in Sun-Year 446,

“Caladis.”

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Beren was cleaning some moulds in the smithy when a wide-eyed Breshke sought him out. “Go quickly and clean yourself up a bit, boy – the Forge Master wants to see you!” When Beren came back from the wash-room, several shades paler, if not exactly clean, he asked the Apprentice Master about the summons; but Breshke had already told him all he knew.

Before parting from Beren at the door to the inner sanctum, he fixed the boy with a stern eye. “You just remember your manners,” he said. “Cheek is well enough in the shop, and I believe we give as good as we get from you in that respect. We have smiled in our beards too when you have twitted Khabbock. But that won’t do with the Master, not at all. Do you hear me now?” Without waiting for a reply he shoved the apprehensive boy inside.

Beren made his way slowly through the empty workshop towards the rear, where light glowed through a door. He came to the doorway and looked in.

Sitting at a wide bench, under the warm light of several candles, he saw an aged Dwarf of great breadth whose mighty dome of a head appeared as if it had been carven massively from stone. The silvery grey hair which sprang like a feshet from its rim poured down the sides of the head to where it eventually blended with an equally copious flood of beard. This turbulent, shining river of mixed hair had been pushed to one side and shoved behind the table edge to keep it out of the way. Great brows stood out beneath a monument of a forehead, casting the eyes into shadow.

The Dwarf was bent over the table and was attempting, with outsize hands, to manipulate some small metal items which gleamed in the light. Beren was fascinated by the hands; he had never seen any which were bigger. These huge paws were blackened and covered in scars. Two joints of the smallest finger on the left seemed to be missing entirely.

Beren knocked on the doorway. “Beren son of Barahir,” he gulped, “reporting as requested. Er, that is to say, at your service, sir.”

The massive head looked up, deep-set eyes peered at him. These were of a strange light colour, like brushed steel. The voice, when the Dwarf spoke, seemed to come from somewhere near the centre of his broad chest, and was pitched deep enough to rattle the glasses on a side table. “Telchar son of Malchar, at yours and your family’s,” the Dwarf answered him slowly. The two of them inspected each other in silence for a few moments: on the one side, the square-built smith, full of years; on the other, the fresh young human boy.

“Here,” rumbled the smith at length, “you have small fingers. Come and put this in place for me.” He beckoned the boy over.

Beren came and took the bits of metal, which turned out to be a light steel chain. As he turned it over in his hands, trying to understand how it was supposed to link, the smith observed him closely. Beren worked it out at last, opened the clasp and slipped the link at the other end through. He offered the completed loop back to Telchar. “Here, sir.”

The old Dwarf looked over the chain, grunted, and placed it aside. He turned his attention back to Beren. “I must beg your pardon, Beren Barahir’s son, that I have not greeted you before. I have only lately been told that you are with us. Have they been treating you well?”

“Yes sir,” said Beren, “very well. I am happy here.”

“That is good,” said Telchar. “They tell me you are willing, and work well in the smithy, according to your abilities.”

Beren said nothing, only attempted to look bright and attentive.

The Dwarf gazed at him for some moments from under his massive brows while grunting and rumbling in his chest. He seemed to be turning Beren over in his mind, as a case of some interest. When Telchar spoke again, Beren had the impression that the smith had questions which he chose not yet to express; preferring to leave them, for the present at least, sitting mute in the darkness at the back of his head.

“You are the first of your race whom I have met,” he said. “I should like to learn from you a little about your people, about Men, if it were agreeable to you.”

Beren wasn't sure what to say. He scratched his ear in puzzlement. “What sort of things shall I tell, sir?” he said.

“Hrrm,” grunted the old smith. “Well. I suppose I am mostly interested to learn how Men fight, and how they smithy steel. You are too young yet to have seen much of war; and although handy and willing, you are no trained smith, that I know. But perhaps you can tell me something, all the same. I could hardly know less than I do now.”

So Beren told the Dwarf about the military training he had taken part in, as well as the weapontakes and drills in which he had not so far himself played any role but which he had observed many times. He told Telchar about the Druug, and about his father and mother, and about Gramlach, and the shield wall. The smith proved an interested listener, one whose questions steered Beren to describe his father's relations with Newfort, and at last even brought something of Bregolas's doubtful ideas to light. Telchar's strange pale eyes regarded the boy steadily the whole time, but any deeper questions remained unspoken.

The old smith sat back at the end of the recital, his face showing his interest. “Well now!” he said. “That is quite a parcel of information. I thank you for it, most sincerely.” He ruminated for a few moments, rocking a little while making his almost subvocal grunts. “But smithcraft, now. You have not yet said much about it. You say that your people make much use of spears and arrows, chiefly made of bronze. Good enough. But have your people the working of iron at all?”

“Yes sir,” said Beren. “My friend, the smith near our home, he knows how to work iron.” He remembered Gorlim's knife; took it from his belt and held it out to the smith, handle first. “He made this for me.”

The Dwarf took the knife in his great hand and removed the blade from the leather sheath. He looked along the blade, turned it over, felt its edge with a horny thumb, tested the flex, and at last tasted the metal with his tongue.

“This is capable work,” he said at last. “Very capable. The steel is not of the best grade, but the work is quite fine. Indeed, if I did not know better, I would say it had an elvish feel to it.”

Beren, slightly shame-faced, had then to relate the story of Maegam and his assistance.

“Ah,” said Telchar at the end, “that is the explanation. Hmm. You say your friend learned much; but, ah, hmm, I do not quite know how to put this, but do you think the Elf learned anything as well?”

Beren shook his head sadly. “No, Master, alas, I think the Fair Folk are far ahead of us – not just in smith craft, but in all ways.”

“Ah, well,” said Telchar philosophically. He mused again for a while. “I know this gift the Elves have for understanding,” he said at last. “We smiths of the *Khazâd*, we also understand some things about steel, but

we cannot talk to it in the same way they do. But still, I doubt even the Elves know everything. I had wondered how you Men went about it, whether you had any secrets we could learn for our profit. But it seems there are none.” He eyed Beren steadily. “At least, concerning smith-work.”

Beren could think of nothing he particularly wanted to say to this. The one secret that occurred to his mind was one he was going to keep.

The square old smith sat on for some little time after, making his deep rumbling noises in his beard, halfway between a grunt and a hum. He stirred himself at last and looked up at the boy, then made motions to lever himself from his seat. Beren took the hint and stood up himself.

“My boy,” said Telchar, “this has been an interesting conversation. Shall we have more?”

“Of course, Master, whenever you say,” said Beren, bowing. “I am at your instant service, at any time. That is, when I am not engaged by the Prince.”

Telchar frowned at this last. “Aye,” he said, “the Prince.” He succeeded at last in disengaging himself from stool and bench, straightened with a grunt and moved slowly to escort Beren to the door. He glanced doubtfully at the boy, opened his mouth once or twice, as if uncertain how to shape his words.

“You are in a curious position,” he said at last. “A young lad of foreign race, far from your home. You have not said what induced you to come here, and I have not asked, because that is not my business. About the circumstances attending your journey to Tumunzahar, so far as I have heard about them, I will not comment, save to say that I do not approve of them. We are accustomed to behave with more courtesy in Gabilgathol, the city of my birth and kin. Alas, I have no say over these matters. Over steel, I may have a certain mastery; in the affairs of the *Khazâd*, none at all.

“I nevertheless feel obliged at least to warn you. You are swimming in deep waters. I advise you to take care.” He looked at the boy from under a cocked eyebrow. “They tell me you have a ready tongue. That passes among folk with honest hearts and sturdy skins, but it may not elsewhere. If I were you, I should be slow to exercise my wits in uncertain quarters.”

Beren wished naturally to learn more exactly what Telchar was hinting at, but the aged smith only shook his head and would say no more.

Before bidding Beren farewell, the old Dwarf did something strange. He leaned close to Beren and looked long and deep into his eyes, as if searching for something. Whether he found it or not, he gave no sign; only drew back after a time, nodded to the boy, and closed the door after him.

Beren returned to his moulds with much to think about.

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Beren’s next opponent with the sword was a fit-looking Dwarf of middle years, whose manner as much as his glance suggested long experience of command. Unusually for a Dwarf he wore his iron-grey hair cropped short, and his beard was kept clubbed and tucked out of the way. He said that Beren should refer to him as Guard Master; but that if the boy required a more individual label, he should call him Talz. The Dwarf said this with a tinge of irony in his voice, but it was only later that Beren found that the word Talz meant ‘target’ in *Khuzdul*.

Talz was neither mean nor kind; he was simply supremely skilled, and quite relentless. He exchanged very few words with Beren but simply drilled him and drilled him. It was a long time before Talz left any kind of opening the boy could exploit, and even when Beren began occasionally to slip through his defences, the Dwarf was skilled enough to turn the wooden blade and minimize the hurt.

It was left to the old Weapons Master, Azhadîn, to teach Beren the theory behind the exercises. Beren was

introduced to the short sword, and the long sword, and he was taught how to fight with various sorts of shield: target, buckler, or none at all. He was shown the movements to defend against an opponent armed not only with sword but also against axe or spear. And always came the drill. He was made to run through blows and counters, again and again, until he could make the appropriate response to any attack, with speed and force, without needing any time to think about it. He grew muscles in places where he did not know there were any.

The anguish of his first weeks in the city had faded with time, and as he settled into a routine, even though it was a hard one, he was not consciously unhappy. Partly this was because he had little time or energy for brooding; but it is also a feature of the human constitution – a merciful or a sobering one, just as one cares to take it – that it will not sustain for long either great grief or great joy.

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Choker's team of twenty was at last complete. He knew them all; had tested them all. More importantly, they knew him, and they knew each other. They were silent, wary scouts – and what was most important of all: they knew how to work together. Why, Choker almost felt he could trust them. Up to a point.

They had been sent everywhere in Outland, everywhere but to the highlands in the South. In the last three forays they had lost none of their number. They'd brought back quite a few prisoners, too.

When Choker had been hauled up before his current superior, he'd had a fair idea what was going to happen. Sooner or later it was inevitable.

“Right, 771, your next mission is south.” This Louse was flabby, looked irritable. He was large enough, but did not look well. Choker speculated idly whether his flesh would taste bad. “I expect you know that area has been a bit of a problem. Now look, this is what you've been trained for. A lot of effort's been spent on you – don't throw it away. Try to find out what the nature of the danger is. Don't be rash. If you come back with any information, any at all, that's acceptable. Just come back! Understand? Don't take any risks. We need that information. Bring some back, and maybe you'll get some comforts. Understand? All clear?”

Choker had shrugged his assent. That had been five days ago. In the meantime they had slunk through the lines of Star-eyes, in the way they had become adept at. They were hiding up now in bushes, near a stream, from where they could see dark woods on the facing slopes, less than half a mile distant.

It stank of green stuff here, and the rattle of the water sounded harsh in their ears. The burning sun poked fingers through the thin cover, fingers of harsh light which scored their hides whenever they moved through it.

Choker gathered his squad together. “Right, lads,” he said to them in a low voice. “Nobody knows much about this forest country; you know that, you've heard the briefings just as I have. Only thing we know is, it kills Rrrk. Mission is to find out why. But I ain't going to spend my life a-doing of it. None of us are. We're going to be careful, see? It'll be slow, it'll be boring, it'll be cursed uncomfortable; but we'll get out of it with our lives, so long as we stay careful. Now first thing I want to do is just go along the border, from one end of it to the other. We'll go back then and report. That may not sound like much, but it'll be a sight more than any other troop has accomplished. Got me? Any questions? No? Then off we go. We'll be creeping to that spit of land over there, first thing.” That would take them through almost full sunlight, but none of the boys made any complaint, or even remark. Good lads!

The survey took a long, long time. They went pretty hungry, and they all got most horribly sunburnt. The party were in sorry condition when they eventually returned to Central. But return they did; and the bosses were pleased with them, gave them an easy time until they had recovered, had filled right out again.

What they had found out was interesting. They'd mapped the edge of the forest, and found two Elf-forts. It was wooded all along, except at the eastern end. There the valley opened out, where the river came out, the

one they had to cross whenever going west or south.<sup>24</sup> There were soft-skins in that open country, farmers. Choker was thoughtful over that.

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Every now and then Beren was invited to visit the old Master Smith, Telchar. The old Dwarf would usually serve some small beer, often with cakes, of which he was rather fond. The boy found the Forge Master, whether because of his age or for some other reason, to be much more free with his tongue than almost any other Dwarf Beren had met. Indeed, Telchar liked to talk, and would often tell him gossip of the court. The smith made no attempt to hide his contempt of the King, and Beren wondered that he could get away with that; but there were currents in this society of which he was only dimly aware. Many questions concerning its workings had slowly formed in his mind with the passage of time. For one thing, both Telchar and the Queen came clearly from the other city to the North, Gabilgathol. Telchar always spoke fondly of the city of his birth, and spoke too of the northern King, Azaghâl, with a respect that contrasted sharply with the tone of his remarks about Gebshâr. Now that he thought back, Beren was sure that the Queen had hinted at similar feelings. Why then had they left their home, and what kept them here? What power had Gebshâr over them?

There were other puzzles. As Telchar told him more of the great works and gifts the *Khazâd* had given to the Elves over time, a gap in the tales grew ever wider. There was an absence, a thing not said. The thing never mentioned was, just what the *Khazâd* received in return. Dwarves did not love Elves, and Dwarves were not in the habit of giving freely to anybody – there was always a price, and usually a shrewd one. So what did they get for all the metal and the tunnelling? Beren had no answer, and he hung back from asking the elderly Dwarf about something which seemed to be none of his business.

Telchar from the very first had shown no compunction about asking Beren any questions that did not trespass upon the personal, and willingly listened to anything the boy could tell him of life among Men – both sorts, the farmers and the free-living. He was curious in particular to know about the origins of Men, and of the history of the march into the West of the three Houses; he was disappointed to find that Beren could tell him little about either.

“We have some tales of meetings with Men in the East,” he told Beren. “The ones we met were of mixed sorts. It is hard for us to assess the character of Men, to judge what you are like. Some of you seem one way, some another. But one thing seems clear: that you awoke with the Sun and the Moon, and that these are your special lights: you work by the one, and it seems that your souls need the other. It is not so for the rest of us. The Elves have their stars; as for we *Khazâd*, well we do not have much truck with the heavens. We are people of the earth, and flame provides most of the light that we need.”

He spoke on then in rambling fashion about the genesis of the Sun and Moon, and their possible connections with Men, and about the relations between Men and the Firstborn. Beren had small interest in such musings and had to stifle his yawns whenever Telchar returned to the theme, which alas was not seldom.

Beren had never seen much to indicate that the people of Tumunzahar were interested in the war against Melkor. As the Dwarves saw it, that black Vala was well contained, far in the North; any threat he might pose was remote. As a rule, local trading traffic experienced little trouble from Orcs, and nobody Beren spoke to had any concern that such raiders could ever penetrate the might of their great city and fortress. Gradually though, it became clear to the boy that Telchar was an exception. In contrast to the rest of his fellow citizens, the great smith was passionately engaged with the campaign against the spreading stain of evil on the face of Middle-earth. Telchar had no thought of fighting himself, even had his advancing age allowed it; but it became clear to Beren that the smith was deeply convinced he had been put upon earth to make a weapon for a hero. He had not yet made the weapon; nor had he found the hero.

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Beren had heard nothing further from the Queen after the first occasion, and gradually the once bright

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24 The Whitewater, flowing out of Ladros.

prospect of the gardens had faded into disillusion and disappointment. But one day, after he had been many months in the city, he was washing his face in the morning, going over in his mind the techniques he was practising in the *salle*, when there came a knock at the open door. The boy looked up and saw, standing next to Sergeant Gromm, a bright-faced young Dwarf whom Beren immediately recognized as one of the city's rare females.

Gromm was grinning. "Summons from the Queen!" he said.

Hurriedly completing his toilet, the boy pulled on a better shirt, then followed the Dwarf-maid. They rode two of the wooden waterfalls a long way up, arriving finally in a wide hall full of light. Broad doors at the far end stood open, and through these, Beren could see growing things in profusion, and hear the sound of birds. Moist smells of earth came also to his nose as his companion led him nearer.

He paused on the threshold and looked around, trying to take in the space which had opened before him. It seemed to be an extensive chamber of circular shape, roofed by a high dome made of clear glass panes of astonishing size. Much of the glass was covered on the outside by wind-drifted snow, through which a bluish light filtered. Despite the snow, it was quite warm under the dome.

Advancing down a path between scented bushes he now saw the broad figure of the Queen. She came up to Beren and took his hands in hers, which were large, but silken-soft.

"Welcome, guest!" she said to him, smiling from her gentle eyes. "Welcome to my garden. I know you will wish to explore it. Should you like to do that first? Slake your thirst for growing things a little, and then we will talk."

Squeezing the Queen's hands in gratitude, Beren ran down the path she had come from. Soon he was surrounded by bushes and plants of a hundred varieties. Few of them were familiar to him, but he wandered as if in a dream, as ever a new scent wafted to him, or a new colour and shape of growth came before his eyes. Discreet paths crossed his own from time to time, leading to other corners of the chamber.

He came at last to a dark tree – a pine, of a type he did not know, which gave forth a sharp odour of resin that answered some need deep within his brain. The boy threw himself down on the bed of soft, dry needles beneath it and gave himself up to pure sensation.

Some time later he recalled the circumstances and pulled himself together with a start. How long had he lain there dreaming? He stood up abruptly, brushing off pine needles, before walking back in guilty haste.

He found the Queen sitting on a marble bench with seedlings scattered about her feet, each planted in a small box full of black earth. Beren's young guide from earlier that day sat beside her. A gnarled old Dwarf, squatting among the boxes, made a third in the company. There seemed to be some argument going on – at least on the side of the gardener; the Queen herself spoke in composed tones out of a calm face. She broke off when she saw Beren, and beckoned him over. The gardener glanced at him sourly; but then he looked like the sort of person who viewed everything sourly.

"Come, help me," the Queen said. "Gamil Ubzan here disputes my wishes. I tell him he is to plant these shrubs next to the *zablâ ziruk-halwâ*<sup>25</sup>, but he maintains they will not go together. Tell him he is wrong!"

"But, but," Beren spluttered, "I know nothing of either, my lady. I have not much experience of gardens."

She smiled, and leaned toward the boy in play of discretion. "So I had already guessed. My question was not in earnest. I had already meant to allow Ubzan his way, but it does not do to give in to him too soon or too easily." Her eyes twinkled at the gardener. "Well then, Ubzan, it seems there is nothing left for me to do but to give way with as much grace as I can muster. You shall follow your own opinion about the seedlings."

The wrinkled gardener, looking triumphant, hurried to gather the seedlings onto a small barrow, which he

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25 'Purple spikes of sweetness'.



then wheeled off into the thickets.

The Queen touched her maid on the hand. “You may leave us now,” she said softly. “I will call.” The girl nodded and scampered off. The Queen turned then to Beren and smiled at him with almost a look of mischief on her face. “Ubzan knows much more than I do,” she confided to Beren, “so I usually let him have his way in the end. But I cannot resist arguing with him, it exasperates him so!”

Today she wore her hair in a shining helmet, a style no less dramatic than the mushroom of their first meeting. The silver hairs were woven into a surface which spread on each side, and behind, from the top of her massive head widely out before curving back down in a shell to meet at the nape of her neck. This left a toroidal hollow space around her head. Her soft beard had been trimmed back to a fringe of curls, thick with gleaming silver hairs. Seen in daylight, her skin appeared to Beren more sublimely beautiful than ever. In appearance it was like fine, milky marble – but no, finer than any stone. Pale and translucent, but alive and warm; blushed here and there with living rose, touched elsewhere with the faint blue tint of veins.

The Queen’s face was broad and square, and her features were large, but the proportions and forms were pleasing. Her nose was delicately cut, with a slight tip to its end. Beren found his initial impressions confirmed. There was no doubt about it: square and solid though she was, she was nevertheless a beautiful woman.

“Please, my lady,” said Beren, “I don’t know what to call you.”

She considered him gravely, while he admired her eyes. These were large and dark, full of many shades and feelings.

The Queen said, “I am not sure what to tell you. I have been given several names, and each had meaning for the giver, but may have no meaning for you. Would you like to call me Nendilmë? I was told it means ‘water-lover’, and it is a true name for me.”

“But that – that is surely Elvish, is it not?” said Beren.

“Indeed yes,” said the Queen. “It is the old, sweet speech of they who departed many ages past, across the Sea. Those few who came lately back speak it still.”

Beren was silent for a moment, considering what to say. He did not want to be impertinent. “You *Khazâd* seem to be very careful about names,” he said at last.

Nendilmë looked at him, dimples showing her amusement. “By that you mean, that we do not give them out freely,” she said.

He nodded.

“I have heard it is said of us,” continued the Queen, “among the other peoples, that we *Khazâd* are a mean, miserly folk. I do not know what your own opinion is. Naturally, we see it differently. I would rather say, we are a serious people, and we do not believe in giving away that which we value. We would see that as frivolous. Names – in fact all words, because all are names of one sort or another – these, we value exceedingly.”

“I do not know what to think,” said Beren. “I have friends here among you, but the friendship seems always to go only to a certain point, and then it stops. Not one of you has ever told me your true name.”

“But what is a ‘true name’?” said the Queen. “May not one person among you have many names? Are you yourself only called Beren? Did your mother not call you differently at times, or your sister?”

Beren smiled in spite of himself, and in spite of the jab of pain the mention of Hiril caused him. “Well, my lady, you are right,” he said. “Indeed for some years I have been known among my other people as Speaks

with Birds. And before that they gave me other names, not all of them so complimentary.”

“A curious name!” said the Queen. “But you cannot really speak with birds – surely?”

He smiled, stood up, and walked some paces away from her. There were small birds chattering in the trees; he recognized blue tit, goldfinch, greenfinch. He called to them in their twittering tongues, and they came to him in a brightly-coloured swarm, fluttering to crowd his shoulders and head.

“How goes it, Brothers, Sisters?” he asked them. “Is the eating good?” In reply he received the usual confusion of responses which spanned the range from contentment to complaint. They were small creatures, with a small vision, and their concerns were over small matters, important only to them. He dismissed the birds at last with a laugh and turned back to the wide-eyed Queen.

“I must revise my ideas,” she gasped. “I had not known that you Children of the Sun had such gifts!”

“Most of us don’t,” Beren said. “In fact I think it is just me – among my own people at least. I believe the Elves can talk to anything.”

Nendilmë fanned her face with her hand and looked at him from eyes full of wonder. “None of that diminishes the gift,” she said. “I would not have believed it unless I had seen it. I love the wild things myself – I am perhaps unusual among our people – and I have no wish in my heart to cause harm to any thing; but they will not come close to me at all. And how you make shift to understand that twitter is beyond me to understand.”

They spoke of his gift for a time, and about birds and their ways. The talk turned then to the garden and its history. She apologized to him also for the long period of silence. She had been in Gabilgathol, she said, busy about family affairs. Beren gathered it had to do with her dead daughter.

“Now tell me, if you will,” she said at last, “what takes a half-grown child away from his family, away from anything he has known and loved, to this strange fortress under rock, to spend his days among the secretive strangers of another race?”

“I have come to learn how to use a sword, from your son,” he said.

“I know that,” she replied, “but why?”

Beren raised his hands. “Because he is the best,” he said.

“So they tell me,” she said. “But why is only ‘best’ good enough for you? Were every man-child of the same opinion, we would not know where to stow you all.”

He was silent for a time. “The *Khazâd* are not the only ones with secrets,” he said. “I thought I had a duty, let us leave it at that.”

“You say ‘thought’,” said Queen Nendilmë. “I wonder at your choice of words. Are you no longer sure of it?”

Again silence. “No,” he admitted at last. “I’m not.”

“It can be hard to know where the path of duty lies,” she said, “particularly after such a grief as you have suffered. But I will tell you this, from my experience: if you do the thing which is hardest, you will rarely go far wrong.”

“You think I should have stayed by my mother’s side.”

“Perhaps,” she said, “perhaps not. Nobody can judge it but you. I will say no more on that; you must work these things out for yourself. My concern is otherwise. You are an unformed child here, in a strange place,

without guidance. The influences you are exposed to are harsh ones. I, I have seen my own son..." here she broke off, and swallowed. "I would not have you become like..." Here she stopped altogether, and seemed to be trying to find the words to say what she meant. "See here, child!" she went on at last. "What I am trying to say is this. I do not want to watch, helpless, while your heart hardens and the springs of innocence and kindness I see in you gradually dry up to nothing. Therefore I, Queen of the *Khazâd* of Tumunzahar, for what that is worth, I offer you this freely, asking no price: I offer to take the place of your own mother, if you will, for the time of your stay here. Being now at last free of other duties, I can make this offer. What is your answer?"

Beren was astonished, also touched. As the first warm flush of feeling receded, however, he discovered that it had not dissolved the newly hardened parts of his nature. Awkward questions emerged like rocks from the receding tide.

"From your own words, lady Queen," he said carefully, "I answer you, that if you offer this role freely, does that not mean that you think it a frivolous one, of no value?"

"My care has no value for me, if hoarded," replied the Queen. "Only for you, if given."

Beren cast his doubts aside. The offer rang true. He stood up and bowed. "Then I accept, with great gratitude. And my lady, even though you ask nothing in return, I offer it anyway. I shall be as a son to you, as best I can."

She wiped sudden tears from her face, then beckoned him to her. The embrace was shy on both sides, but both felt a warmth in their hearts where there had been none for some time.

#### Year 447

By this time Beren had narrowed the gap in skill with Talz and began more and more often to score points against the Guard Master. He was given other opponents now in practice, but had also joined the league for stick-fighting as a sport, and was steadily working his way up the rankings.

He was surprised one day during a bout to see Telchar's square figure sidling in through the door of the *salle*. Distracted, Beren disengaged from Talz, backed rapidly for several steps and raised his stick-blade to salute. He turned then to greet the smith.

"It is unusual to see you in this part of the city, Forge Master," said Beren.

Telchar looked almost a little sheepish. "I had matters to attend to nearby," he said. "And being close by, I was curious to see what progress you made." He nodded to Talz, whose face as usual offered little hint of what thoughts might be passing behind it. "Greetings, Guard Master. Might I observe you and the boy during a bout?"

Talz smiled and acquiesced with a bow and a graceful gesture. Beren advanced again, raising his weighted stick to the guard, his body tense and ready. Dealing with distractions had long been part of his training; he hoped he could successfully shut out nerves now.

The bout commenced. Talz, narrow-eyed, made his passes; the boy parried with quick skill. Glimpsing an opening, he whipped his weapon in; barely too late. Another; parried. Lunge, lunge, parry. The feet of the two antagonists danced a complicated, joined rhythm as the sticks clattered back and forth.

The advantage swayed back and forth for some time without conclusion, but a moment came when Talz recovered just slightly off-balance. Beren saw the tiny opening, and was in. A lightning twist, and the Dwarf's stick was clattering along the floor. Talz backed away, smiling a little ruefully and rubbing his wrist.

Beren became aware of clapping, turned. He had forgotten Telchar.

“Bravo!” cried the smith. His huge hands made great concussions when they came together. “Bravo! A most famous bout. I thank you both most heartily for the spectacle!”

Beren reddened slightly. “Guard Master usually bests me when we fight with broad sword and buckler,” he said. “These sticks are really just toys.”

“You’ll get there,” was Talz’ laconic comment.

Telchar came again, at not very frequent intervals, but enough to make Beren wonder. He mentioned it to Breshke one day.

“Aye,” said the Apprentice-master, nodding soberly. “The FM has you in his eye. We have marked it.”

Beren scratched his head. “But why?” he said.

Breshke looked at him askance. “Maybe it’s time we had a talk,” he said. “Come into my office.” Once the two of them were sitting in there with the door closed, the Dwarf leaned across his desk, held Beren in his eye, and said, “Look, lad. Why are you here?”

Beren was nonplussed. “I’m learning the sword,” he said. “You know that.”

“And what are you going to do once you’ve learned it?”

“Go back home, I suppose.”

A look of impatience passed over Breshke’s face. “Is that it? You train to be one of the most famous swordsmen in all Middle-earth, then forget it all, spend all your days trudging dully behind a plow? Forgive me if I find that unlikely. No. You will make use of this skill. Else what would be the point? In fact what you are hurtling down a long but sure path to becoming, my lad, is a great warrior. Do I not speak truth?”

Beren squirmed uncomfortably. He had not really thought it out in such stark terms. “I suppose it could look like that,” he said. “But I’m nowhere near it yet, and I may never be.”

Breshke snorted. “That is not what your teachers tell me. They say you are far ahead of any of your age. Even so young as you are, there are already few grown swordsmen who could trouble you.”

Beren shrugged, a slight flush touching his cheeks.

“All right,” the Dwarf continued. “Now think. What is it that the Forge Master most longs to do? What he has struggled, committed, dedicated his entire life to achieving? You’ve spoken with him often. You must have some inkling, unless your ears are truly made of cloth, with the same between them.”

“The Forge Master? He wants to make a great weapon for...” Beren saw it, opened his eyes wide. “Wait. You mean he sees *me* as his...?”

“He believes you are one touched by God,” Breshke said. “He says he can see it in you.”

“Oh what nonsense,” replied Beren decidedly, the heat rising further in his face. “I’m perfectly ordinary.” The feeling returned to him of feeling hemmed in by others’ unwanted expectations. First Frostfire, now this.

“Like recognizes like,” said the Dwarf.

“What – what do you mean?”

The Master of Apprentices sighed. “How can I explain this to you. You see Telchar as a smith – and so he is; a superbly gifted smith. But he is much more than that. Those of us with the sense for it see in him a potential for great power. We truly believe that Mahal endowed him with special gifts, and that he is capable

of a wonderful creation – something much more potent and sublime than mere cunningly hammered iron.” He studied the unhappy face of the boy sitting across from him. “But Telchar is like a locked chest of treasures. Can you understand? He is not looking for a customer; he is looking for a key.”

Beren had the stubborn look on his face that Breshke had seen before. “I don’t understand,” the boy said. “What key? Why should he be locked? And what has this to do with me? What you tell me doesn’t make sense.”

Breshke stared at the lad, unable to find just the words to describe his deep conviction. “You talk with the Master often,” he said suddenly. “Has he ever told you of his work? Of the things he has achieved in his life?”

Beren had to think. “Actually, no,” he admitted. “In fact I don’t remember him ever mentioning his work.”

“Then ask him,” said the Dwarf. “I should not subject the FM to this; but you would not believe it from me. Ask him what he has made, in all his long years at the forge.”

So the next time Beren sat with Telchar over cakes, that is exactly what he did.

Telchar reared back in his seat and opened his eyes wide at the question. His massive brow contracted. “Nothing,” he replied heavily. “I have achieved nothing. I have failed of my promise.”

This was the last answer Beren had expected. He knew this couldn’t be right. Why, had he not himself seen something of Telchar’s work? There were work-pieces on the benches right now: a bright piece of armour, gleaming in cunning curves; a patterned stretch of fine-ringed mail. Now and then he had even witnessed the smith working at them.

The boy’s mouth opened once or twice like a stranded fish before he could find words to formulate his protest. “I beg your pardon, Forge Master,” he said at last, “but I have trouble understanding what you are saying to me. You are held in such honour! It surely cannot be for nothing. And I have seen you at work myself.”

“Oh, I have made a few trinkets in my time,” dismissed the smith with a wave of his hand. “I have learned some tricks about working steel, it is true. Minor things, mere shaping of matter. Toys and baubles, like these.” He waved his great hand at the bench, at the jumble of half-made objects upon it. “Once or twice perhaps my art has achieved some small contrivance, some piece worthy of passing notice. That helmet I made in my youth for Azaghâl, he who is King of my own city; that was pleasing enough in its way. That was a work of love, for I must tell you, there is more worth in that Dwarf’s little fingernail than some other kings, not too far from here, contain in the whole of their fat, gold-wrapped bodies. So yes, some bits and pieces. But always I have been tied to substance; I have never found the way in to the essence of things.” He sat up and opened his light eyes wide. “Only once! Once I found the way. Oh, I cannot tell you the joy of it. After so many years of striving, striving, and always failing!

“I made a knife, and I think there never was made a better. Not from mortal hands, anyway. I founded it on steel, because steel is what I know; but the God spoke to me. The door opened to me, and I found my way to the true, the higher understanding. That one small knife, a mere nothing to look at – but it was pure sharpness, captured in the metal! It would cut any iron. An iron knife, that would slice iron itself! Just think of that!”

Beren sat silent, thinking. He was beginning to see.

“Could you not then do it again, Master?” he said tentatively. “Having once found the way?”

Telchar’s whole broad face crumpled in distress. “That is the curse of it!” he cried. “I had not slept for days, and at the end I drank too much liquor. Ah, the curse of it! I slept afterwards, like one dead, and when I woke, there was the knife to taunt me, but the knowledge had fled to the four winds. I can *remember* the door

opening, the light of knowledge flooding in. Oh, I shall never forget that holy light! I can remember the *feeling*, as clearly as we sit here; I just cannot remember the *knowledge*.”

“Perhaps you will remember again, some day,” said Beren soberly. “After all, you have been there once, and that must count for a great deal.”

“Aye, perhaps,” sighed the smith. “I have trembled on the brink of it many times. But I grow old, my time has grown short. I think I must go to my grave without achieving the last, great work that I dream of.”

There was silence for a time. “Where is that knife, Master?” asked Beren at length. “I should like to see it.”

“Oh, I do not have it any more,” said Telchar. “The King traded it for something or other, as is his wont. I think that Felakugundu fellow had it in the end, but I do not know for sure.” He mused for a moment gloomily. “One knife, in all my days. Is there never to be more? I wait, and I strive, and think, and all the while the Black One readies his plans in the North. I have it in me to strike such a blow at him, such a blow! I *know* I do. But I cannot find the way.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Beren had not seen Yg for some months when the Prince turned up one morning in the middle of practice. Beren was fighting a furious bout with Talz when the black clad figure appeared at the door. The combatants disengaged and backed warily from each other, but Yg waved them impatiently to continue. They came together again in a clatter of sticks, trying to ignore the presence of the Prince, so much more ominous and potent than that of Telchar or any other spectator. Talz had better success on this occasion, managing at last to penetrate Beren’s guard and swipe him on the thick padding of his leg. The boy tripped and measured his length on the floor.

Yg looked at Talz. “Your own skills have improved, Guard Master,” he said. The crop-haired Dwarf said nothing in response, only bowed.

Yg went to the wall and fetched a mask and stick for himself. He did not bother with padded armour. “Come,” he said to Beren, “let us try a bout.”

The two of them circled for a minute, Beren straining every sense to be ready for the stroke when it came. He thought briefly of taking the initiative, of making a bold stroke himself; instinct told him however that this was not the time. Thus he remained wary and as fully on his guard as tight-hauled nerves could bring him.

Feint, parry. Feint, parry. Then came a movement quicker than he could see; the next thing he knew, he was on his back, and his dummy sword was skittering away across the floor.

“He needs to be much faster,” was Yg’s only comment as he racked his own stick against the wall. “Send him to me tomorrow. We will try him a spell in the Elf’s devil-machine.”

The ‘devil-machine’ appeared to be no more than an articulated dummy, heavily padded. It was an ugly, many-armed thing which most resembled a sort of overweight spider. Beren found it difficult to believe that anything so visually unappealing could have come from the hand of any Elf. Later he heard that it had been made by the one named Eöl who had lived, in former times, in the Dark Wood he had seen and wondered at, over a year ago, on the journey down to Tumunzahar. Eöl was gone from the wood now these many years, nobody could say exactly where. Beren had heard several tales about him during his stay in the City, few of them to his credit.

Akhal was in attendance, which was the first the boy had seen of him for many months. The Dwarf grinned at the sight of him and clapped him across the shoulders. “How goes it, comrade?” he said, and would have entered into an exchange of news, had Yg not bidden them both sharply back to the task at hand.

Under Akhal’s guidance, Beren donned the usual padded clothes. For once, however, he was armed with a

real sword, albeit weighted. Also, instead of a mask, he was given a device with a pair of large round glass disks. This had a leather strap which allowed it to be bound around the head, with the glass disks supported in front of the wearer's eyes. Beren could not in the least see the point in any of it.

Yg had disappeared around the back of the machine. Suddenly there was a sound of running water, a twang of springs, and with a jerk the thing came alive. Its arms made vicious swipes to the front, one after another.

Beren backed away. "You can forget it," he said to Akhal. "I'm not fighting any spider. Ugh, just look at it!"

"Don't talk nonsense, boy. Put the glasses on, it will look quite different, I promise you."

There was magic in those glasses, that was certain, because the moment he strapped them over his eyes, the dingy room, Akhal and the spider-thing all disappeared; all that he could see was a knight, clad in mirrored armour with a featureless visor, standing in a misty blue space without walls or other definition.

Akhal's voice came in his ear. "What did I tell you? No spider. Give it a try, lad – but watch out! That thing will be faster than you. Don't give it less than your best, or even better than that if you can manage it."

Beren approached the knight with caution, feeling his way over the nacreous blue field. As he came near, the knight raised its own blade in guard. They circled each other, stepping warily, while Beren inspected the foe as he would any other – the length of arm, the rhythm of movement – was there any misstep, any imbalance? He saw none at all.

He lashed out with his blade and was instantly parried. He tried two more strokes at different angles, but met with no more success. On the third attempt, the silvery knight reached nearer and quicker than he had expected and caught his blade in the corkscrewing forte of its own. Beren's sword flew out of his hand, the other's swooping blade dealing him a ringing crash on the side of his head at the end of the same movement.

"Pick it up and try again," came Yg's voice.

They went on for some time while Beren accumulated some shrewd bruises. "All right, now back up a step, and listen," came Yg's voice. Beren disengaged, and the silver knight did the same. "This time," went on Yg, "when you come in, I won't make it parry. Strike and see what happens."

Half-wondering if this was another trick, Beren approached warily, but the knight left its own sword hanging by its side. The boy approached within sword's-reach and took a quick swipe at his opponent's unguarded neck. To his astonishment, he heard a meaty 'chunk' and felt the impact through his arm. His sword remained free, so he stepped back quickly. There was no blood on the sword, and neither could he see any damage on the knight.

"That will do for now," said Yg. "Get the glasses off him."

With Akhal's help, Beren took off the glasses. He inspected them with interest and suspicion; then he looked at his blade again, still half-expecting to see some evidence of the blow to flesh he had both heard and felt.

"It's only a seeming," said Yg drily. "Otherwise we would use up too many dummies. Important all the same: you need to know how it feels to win, as well as to lose."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, your Grace," said Beren. "I was beginning to think it was going to be entirely the other way."

"Your losses do not seem to have weighted your tongue at any rate," said Yg sourly. "Flippant as ever, I see."

The boy only shrugged.

Yg turned from the boy with barely concealed irritation. "I don't know what Azhadin thinks he is about," he grumbled to Akhal. "A child could beat him. Listen, give him an hour on this every day. Don't hold back on

him: he needs a few bruises to smarten him up. And one more thing: if I catch you gossiping, I'll have your skin. You know that I will do it."

"Yes, Sire," said Akhal in a subdued voice. He winked though from the eye on Beren's side. As soon as the moody Prince had left, the genial soldier leaned towards Beren. "Don't listen to him, lad," he whispered, "you were good. But we'll tune you up even better. And one day, the Maker willing, you'll give him, yes even the great Prince himself, a right clout over the ear. Quite a few folk are living for that day."

\* \* \* \* \*

And so the weeks and months rolled along for Beren, all much like one another. Was he prisoner, student, soldier? He could never decide. Perhaps something of all three.

As soon as the boy could beat Talz two matches out of three, he received new, younger opponents. They would sometimes be set on him two at a time. He was high up in the rankings in the stick-fighting tournament now and had long since discarded the protection of an age handicap – he fought anyone and everyone. Only the devil-machine, the silver knight, remained unbeatable; they let him get a blow in now and then, but he never won a bout on his own.

In the occasional wrestling matches he had more of a contest, since weight still counted for something there. He was taller than some of the Dwarves now, and as strong as some, but even the least of the full-grown Dwarves was far more heavily built than he.

In the forge he would sometimes now be entrusted with minor smith work. He never became very good at it, but it was certainly more fun to make something, be it ever so simple, than the mindless drudgery he had been set to at first. Tafir, the sour old leading artificer, was sometimes – rarely, but sometimes – almost disposed to be satisfied with his work.

He had many friends in the smithy now and looked forward to the companionable atmosphere. Even Khabbock had unbent to him and would wish him a gruff good day. The boy saw little of Telchar, but still from time to time the old Forge Master would invite him in to gossip.

As the duration of Beren's presence among the apprentices lengthened, they began to forget that he was not *Khazâd* like themselves. They would begin to address him in the language, then revert with embarrassment to Elvish when his incomprehension reminded them who he was. Even when they stuck to language he could understand, they grew more free in his presence with their speech about Dwarvish thought and doings.

One thing that slowly became clear to the boy was that all of the forge people placed their primary, fervent loyalty in the Forge Master rather than in the royal house. The Queen excited their pity, but not their obedience; and none of them had anything but contempt for Gebshâr and his younger sons. About Yg they were more circumspect, but clearly they did not love him.

Telchar had early on warned Beren to watch his step around the Prince. Beren had not questioned that view at the time, but as the black-clad Dwarf began to appear again in his life, his name came up again during one of his conversations with the old Forge Master. Telchar repeated his earlier caution.

Beren had seen a deal of the Prince by that time however, and was inclined to be dismissive. "Everybody says the same," he said. "They're always saying how dangerous he is. But what has he ever done? Nothing! He's all mouth and fine clothes, in my opinion."

The old smith leaned back in his chair and looked at him with wide-eyed concern. "Pardon me that I take an opposing view," he said, "but there I think you make a grave mistake. Grave, and dangerous."

"Oh come, Forge Master," said Beren. "When has anything ever come of Yg's bold words? He's always lashing Akhal with his tongue, but nothing ever happens. Akhal doesn't seem worried."



“Akhal,” rumbled the Forge Master, “is a special case. He and Yg were friends and schoolmates from earliest youth. Akhal, and perhaps the Queen, are the only people I should say are reasonably safe from that viper. Reasonably.”

“That’s pretty strong language, Forge Master,” remarked Beren.

Telchar shook his head. “Viper I name him, and viper he is. You have a care, young man.”

Beren was feeling the chagrin of someone whose views are politely but firmly contradicted by an elder. “Well, with respect, Forge Master, what about your own danger? Nobody likes Yg, that is clear, but you are the only person I have met who speaks his mind about him, unafraid.”

Telchar grunted a single laugh. “All fears fade with age,” he said, which caused Beren to think instantly of Willow. “Besides, the King needs me. But were Gebshâr to die,” the smith went on thoughtfully, “it might well be that I should consider my position.”

Beren thought about it some more. “But really,” he persisted, “has Yg ever actually done anything? Why, he must have threatened me a hundred times, and I’ve heard him threaten others. But I never heard of anyone who came to harm at his hands.”

“I have,” Telchar said soberly. “Yg has killed. More than once. And there are other ugly deeds.” But despite Beren’s importuning, he refused to go into details, only shook his great dome of a head from side to side, making the hair wave to and fro like the gossamer fronds of some strange silvery fern.

“Well,” said the exasperated boy, “if you hold that back from me as ‘Dwarf business’, which I am still not privy to, despite my years among you, can you not tell me what it is that twists the Prince so! For I know that he is twisted, I can see it; I perhaps only did not realize how far.”

The old smith sighed. “Aye, I thought you would perceive it, where others do not,” he said in his earthen-deep voice. “Twisted he is, indeed. Lad, these secrets are not mine to tell; and they have roots which go far back, and involve countless people, not just here in Tumun, but in my own city of Gathol. What I can tell you is this, which is known to many, and not only among *Khazâd*. You have heard the tale of the golden Necklace I believe: of its making, and its repair by the King’s daughter Aeg; of her folly, and her death?”

Beren nodded.

“Well then,” rumbled the smith, “Yg was also foolish. He loved his sister; indeed she is the only person he has ever thought of. It has been whispered that he loved her perhaps a little too well. In any case, she told him of her wild plan, and he agreed to help. Gebshâr caught wind of the deed – Tumun is heaving with spies and black suspicion, although you may not have known it. The King found out too late to stop the maid, who was already running headlong to her grisly fate. But Yg: Yg was arrested, and brought before the King. In the King’s presence a brazen collar was riveted about his son’s neck. With sentence of death if he removed it untimely. He was to wear it until the Necklace was recovered, or otherwise at the King’s pleasure. Oh, Gebshâr made him go out on trade as well; but that was a mere last garnish of spite.”

Several things were at last becoming clear to Beren – including Caranthir’s words long ago at the toll.

Telchar was observing him critically out of his brushed-steel eyes. “I see you do not absorb the full weight of my words,” he said. “A collar. He was made to wear a collar! You do not truly know us, man-child, in spite of your long sojourn among us. If you did, you would know that we *Khazâd* must be free. Dare to bind us, and we will seek your heart’s blood for it. And once our anger is roused, it is slow to cool. Very slow. You may beat a Dwarf to the earth, and have little to fear from him, save that he will seek to do the like to you. But you bind his limbs at your direst peril.”

Beren sat for a while, absorbing this. “I think I begin to see,” he said hesitantly.

“Yg is a lost soul,” said Telchar. “Better you never came near him at all. But since you are here, I say to you again: have a care!”

“I will,” answered the boy. But something was bubbling up within him, and at last it reached the surface. “I do not believe he is wholly bad,” he burst out. “Yg, I mean. There is a decent person in there somewhere. I know there is.”

The smith shook his great head. “I would not trust to it. I would as sooner venture my life on a faulty weld, or a casting full of sand and slag.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The boy thought often on his old life and wondered what they were all doing. He knew about the move to the new farm, for Caladis had told all about it in her letters. But what of his other life? Was Goracc still alive? What was happening with the Dry Valley, and with the Orcs? What marriages and new babies were there among the People? His pictures of them all, farm or wood, were growing faint; squeezed out by the remorseless immediacies of his present existence. He woke once from a half sleep and sat up, sweating, because he suddenly could no longer remember what Hiril had looked like. He forced his mind to delve into the past until he had again built up a picture. But was it a true one? He was no longer sure; and that uncertainty rubbed him like a prickle caught up in the hose somewhere.

He chafed also, unendingly, at both the fact of his confinement and its particular conditions. He was shut away in this vast stone tomb from everything from which his spirit derived sustenance and support. The absence of his loved people faded with time, but the passage of the weeks did nothing to dull the ache of these other losses; indeed it seemed only to make them worse. Sometimes he would lie awake tossing in his bed, despairing, quite certain he could not stand another single day of this stifling burial, this desperate pressure on his being.

But as ever when his frustrations built to an unbearable pitch, the Queen would summon him, talk and laugh with him, dose him, set him writing exercises, send his clothes to be mended or cleaned, and insist that he wash behind his ears. Every occasion was like a great draught of clear water to the boy. She gave him something, something vital, something he had not consciously known he lacked until he received it from her. Her gentleness soothed him as much as the living things of her garden. He told her many things he had never admitted to anybody else; and at last found himself confessing to her, what he had until that point not clearly admitted even to himself, that he held himself responsible in part for Hiril’s death.

Nendilmē, who had been pruning a rose bush, put down her shears in surprise. “But what could you have done?” she asked.

“Something,” muttered Beren, “surely something.”

“Are you a magician, then, to know of such strokes of fortune ahead of time? I might with as much justice claim fault in my daughter’s death; but I do not. Many factors weave into these mishaps, but if one acts as one thinks rightly at each stage, then there can be no blame if matters take an evil turn, unforeseen.”

“But that is exactly the point,” said Beren, looking hangdog. “I did know.”

The Queen’s eyes opened wide. “You knew she was going to die?”

“Not that,” said Beren, “not exactly. But I had a terrible bad feeling about her swimming in that pool. I warned her many times.”

“A feeling...” repeated the Queen, looking at him curiously. “I have heard of such things. You are a strange child, to be sure. But that to one side. If you warned her, surely, you did all that you could do.”

“I could have pulled that dam down,” growled Beren, kicking at the bench. “I would do it now, in a

heartbeat. But I was a child then, and somehow one does not think of such things; one does not really think at all, only feel. Only here have I started to think.”

“Well, *yâ dashthith*<sup>26</sup>, you will feel how you feel, and I do say feel, because I do not think any of this has much to do with the head. *I* think you did all that you could. And it is pointless to take a rod to your own back for no cause.”

Beren sighed. “You talk sense, Mother, but my heart is heavy. I rue even the times I was unkind to her; and they were many.”

She put a hand on his, clasped it. “I know how unkind brothers can be – and sisters, too. But Beren! The past is the past: all you can do is let it go. Now enough of this – come, help me carry these clippings away before Ubzan sees them.”

### Year 448

The year turned. Beren reached the top of the stick-fight rankings and stayed there. In the weapons hall, Azhadîn would now set four or even five fighters on him at once. They began to take him by surprise, to leap out at unexpected moments. Azhadîn took away some of the boy’s protective padding, and he laughed, because it only made him livelier. The trail of bruises he left behind him lengthened, until he heard at last that there had been murmurings against the Prince’s orders.

The day came when he saw the tiniest opening in the silver knight’s attack, and struck for that one point, smaller than a fingernail, with all the power in his body. He connected, only to be blown off his feet by a flash of light. He tore off the goggles in time to see Akhal come around from behind the machine. All of its arms were hanging limp, and there was blue smoke in the air.

“I do not think you were supposed to do that,” said the Dwarf, shaking his head. Beren picked himself up and they both contemplated the machine in silence. “I must tell the Prince,” said Akhal at last.

Beren expected Yg to be angry, but if he was, he did not show it. Indeed he said no word at all, merely fetched mask and wooden sword for himself and beckoned Beren to do the same. They came together at first warily, then with increasing vigour. Beren blocked several strikes and once even managed to clip Yg in return. The bout ended in the same way as their first, but it took much longer, and the Dwarf had to work much harder.

“Well!” the Prince said while Beren was shaking the stars out of his head and propping himself on one elbow, “I think you may at last be worth my teaching. Now we can begin.” He hung his gear on the wall then and left. Beren got up, nodded to Azhadîn, and limped the long way back to his quarters. He stripped off, washed himself, then lay on the bed.

“Begin?” he repeated to the dark ceiling.

From then on, he fought with Yg every day. The Dwarf did not stay silent as at first, but was constantly correcting him, making him run through the same movement again and again until he was satisfied. He was very hard to satisfy. Often he would curse at Beren, call him all the names under the sun, say he had seen more grace and livelier movement in a poxed, three-legged cow. He increased the weights on the boy’s sword, but carried none himself. As the weeks went past however, the comments became fewer and fewer, the fighting more intense. There was a light in Yg’s eyes now, a light of dawning joy. The realization came to Beren that the Dwarf had at last found something he had always longed for: a worthy pupil.

The wrestling was abandoned, then the work in the smithy. Yg was at him all day, every day. He would knock the boy down, then demand that he get up again straight away. Soon he ceased to hold off at all at these times, but would pursue the boy, and Beren had to roll and dodge away from a rain of blows. Under this continued mistreatment, the knot of suppressed fury within the boy clenched ever tighter, ever hotter.

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26 O new son.

One day the boy fell badly and felt an agonising pain as his shoulder crunched on the ground. He had no instant to think about it, because Yg was on him. Fired by fear and pain, the boy grabbed the heavy stick with his left hand, reached from somewhere deep inside himself and swung at just the right angle and with snake-like speed to curve under Yg's defence and ram him on the knee-cap. The Dwarf went down as well, and they both lay there, panting and glaring at one another.

"Azhadîn!" called the Prince. The old Weapons Master came hurrying in. "Help me up," said Yg to him. He turned to Beren. "We will meet again as soon as we heal."

It was a set-back for both of them. Beren's collar-bone healed quickly under the practised ministrations of the Queen's own leech, for she would not hear of anyone else having charge of the boy, but it was some time before he regained anything like his old strength and agility. For Yg the case was even worse. Beren did not see the Prince for weeks; then the weeks lengthened to months.

"He is exercising it," Akhal told him. "I think he dares not meet you at less than full capability."

When they finally met again, both were cautious at first. Gradually they worked back to the fire and pace they had reached before.

### Year 449

A day dawned when Beren faced Yg in the chamber and realized that he knew exactly what the Dwarf was going to do, how he was planning to move. Yg was three steps into his first thrust, only to find that Beren was there before him. The Dwarf received a smack on the side of the head for his trouble. He retreated, stared at Beren a moment through the slats of his mask, then came forward again savagely. Three times he tried, three times he was blocked. Then, with a look of cunning in his black eyes, he feinted, then swooped into a move he had never tried before. But Beren was moving even as the Dwarf prepared, and was ready at the precise moment and the precise angle to dodge Yg's advancing point by a hair's breadth. The Dwarf lost his balance for a fraction of a second, but that was enough. The next thing Yg knew, he was sailing through the air in one direction while his blade curved through it in the other.

Beren leapt to him in an instant, then was standing over the dazed Dwarf with the point of his stick laid to his bare throat. Yg rolled unbelieving eyes at him, then tried to squint at the stick. The boy was panting with effort, Yg also with shock.

"I should take advantage of your weakness, Dwarf, as you have taken of mine," Beren hissed, eyes narrowed to slits. He leaned slightly on the stick, making Yg swallow under the pressure. "And I am tempted to do it, because you have a long bill to pay at my hands. A long bill. But I shall not. And do you know why? Because that would make me a creature no better than you. And that would be altogether more disgrace than I could live with." He withdrew his point and spat on the floor. "You and I have concluded our business. I do not care if I never see you again."

"I taught you all I know," yelled Yg to him as he left the room. "Is that nothing?"

\* \* \* \* \*

A short while after, Beren had gathered his meagre possessions and was taking his leave from a surprised and uneasy Porin, while wondering how best to say farewell to the Queen and to his friends and comrades at the forges. Word quickly passed around the Bright Armour quarters and others of the officers and sergeants were gathering in the commander's office and filling the corridor outside. Many voices were raised, protesting his abrupt departure and demanding that he at least stay for a proper feast and leave-taking.

A sudden commotion occurred further along the corridor. The disturbance propagated itself, wavelike, as a shrinking, withdrawing movement and at last as a stilling of the voices. In the sudden silence, a shadow fell on the door as the Prince entered, flanked by two heavily-armed soldiers in the uniform of the Guards. Everybody stood to attention.

Commander Porin stood also and saluted the Prince. “Good day, your Grace,” he said stiffly, ignoring the two soldiers. “Was there some service I could do for you?”

“Yes,” replied Yg. The Dwarf had flicked a venomous glance at Beren as he entered, but otherwise he appeared quite calm. “I desire you to lay this criminal and vagrant alien in chains,” he said, pointing to Beren, “and hold him under arrest. Do it right now, please.”

“On what charge?” Porin demanded to know.

“Do you dispute my order, Porin?” said Yg, still in a level voice, but now with dangerous undertones.

The Commander drew himself up. “Not at all, Sir. But there must be process. You know that I hold your Grace in great honour, and will always do my utmost, where possible, to comply with your Grace’s desires. But we have laws about such things, as your Grace well knows. No Dwarf may be subject to arbitrary arrest.”

“But this boy is not *Khazâd*, Commander,” said Yg sweetly.

Porin was silent for a moment. “Well yes, of course he is not,” he admitted, “but he has been our guest and friend. That must surely count for a great deal – surely.”

“What do you take me for?” demanded the Prince. “Some drunken companion you can argue law with? I gave you an order.”

Porin stiffened. “Your Grace forces me to remind him that, honoured though he might be, he is not actually in titular command of this city, nor of my Legion, nor me. I will see the King’s warrant on this before I so trample the laws of hospitality and comradeship as to lay hands on this child.”

Yg sighed. “Oh dear, Commander,” he said, “I am sorry for you, I really am. Your future had looked so bright. What do you think took me all this time?” He reached into the satchel at his side and drew out a roll of parchment with a seal on it. “Here is a warrant from the King’s hand. *Now* perhaps you will unbend your over-stiff spine and at last, at long last, follow my many times now expressed order to arrest this law-breaker?”

Porin read the scroll. He raised his face at last with disgust stamped on his features. “This is a tissue of nonsense,” he said. “Spy? Saboteur? What kind of fool does the King take me for?”

Instead of replying straight away, the Prince turned to the soldier at his side. “Go and fetch the rest of your squad,” he said to him. The Dwarf disappeared, speared by hostile glances from the Bright Armour officers standing on all sides. These soldiers looked at one another and moved uneasily. The tension in the room had become palpable.

“At least tell me what you mean to do to him,” burst out Porin.

The Prince spread his hands. “You certainly know how to make me work for my pleasures, Porin,” he said pleasantly. “If you must know, I have in mind nothing worse than to drag this ingrate to the gate and to whip him forth from the City. We shall leave him his worthless life, and all of his faculties. I account it merciful treatment, even generous. But if you mutiny, Porin, you shall not join him, because your head will be on a traitor’s spike, while the remainder of your carcass is fed to the pigs. The choice is entirely up to you.”

Porin glanced darkly at the burly soldier remaining at the Prince’s other side. “And I do not need to ask who would take over command of my men,” he said.

Yg inclined his head agreeably. “The Guards, at least, stand ever ready to obey my commands,” he said.

Porin’s face wrenched in indecision. “You ask me to choose between betraying my Legion, or dishonouring my city,” he said.

Beren, who suddenly could not stand to witness any more of this, stepped forward. "Come, Commander," he said, "I give myself up freely into your custody. I wished to leave this city anyway, and a whipping is small price to be rid of the company of some of its rulers. Do not fall into ruin for my sake, I beg you. Come now, send for some shackles."

There was a tense silence while Porin hesitated. He turned then abruptly, almost savagely, to his adjutant. "Make it so," he spat, with a spastic jerk of his hand towards the boy; then he turned his head away and stared at the wall.

Yg smiled at the grim officers remaining around him. "How pleasant to be part of such an efficient force!" he said. "Everything functions as though greased." He turned his dark eyes toward Beren. There was a glow at the back of them which sent a shiver down the boy's spine, despite his former brave words. "I have long desired to spill your blood, churl," said Yg to him in level tones, "and I have lain awake at nights dreaming of a time when I might tear your insolent tongue out by the roots with heated tongs. That might yet happen, some day; the King would not indulge my wish on the present occasion. But at least I will have the pleasure – the somewhat lesser pleasure, but still worthy of savour – of whipping as much of the hide off your miserable carcass as you can safely spare." He nodded pleasantly to Beren, beckoned to his sweating bodyguard, then left the room.

The tramp down through the city escorted between ranks of soldiers was conducted in grim silence. Dwarves of all classes left their business at the sight and stood watching with open mouths. Many of them knew Beren by sight, and they had all heard of him. By the time they arrived on the threshold of the mighty bronze gates, a considerable crowd had gathered in their tail.

The vast entrance hall with its gilded and figured pillars made their numbers look meagre, but even hosts enough to carpet the ground would have looked puny in that space; it was simply a work on more than mortal scale.

Yg appeared between ranks of Guardsmen. He took a whip, long and stout, out of his satchel and began to uncoil it. Beren's back had already been stripped bare and now his arms were seized by two brawny soldiers.

Before anything further could be done however, a sudden commotion was heard. The wondering crowd parted to reveal the square figure of the Queen, hurrying towards them like a ship driven by a tempest.

"Stop!" she cried when she came near enough to see Yg with the whip.

Yg looked vexed. "Tsk, Mother," he said. "What are you doing here? This does not concern you."

"You dastard," she shouted, "would you disgrace me? Does not concern me – I will show you how much it does not concern me! Am I not Queen still of this city, and your parent? You will do my will, or you shall be whipped in your own turn. Cease now this perfidy, this dishonour, and get you to your chamber, mother's shame. And let me not see your face until my blood has cooled!"

Yg, red in the face, was making shushing movements with his hands while backing away from her fury. "Now now, Mother, I beg you, do not give yourself over to such rash words until you know the facts of the case," he said weakly.

The Queen was about to reply hotly when another voice, a creaking, cracked voice, came from the other side. "You may be Queen, Madam," it said, "but I am King, ha ha." The people shoved each other back to reveal in the ensuing gap the figure that Beren remembered meeting soon after his arrival in the city. The stout old Dwarf was lying on a golden pallet which was carried on the shoulders of eight sweating servants. His cushions were cloth-of-gold and his golden-ringed fingers fidgeted with some dainties on a golden platter. His absurd hair was same bright orange as before.

"It pains me, Madam," said the King, "to thwart your words; but the fact is, I have ordered this foreign child to be scourged forth from our gates. Alas, this being my will, it must now be done." He nodded to Yg to

proceed.

“Sir,” burst forth the Queen with passion, “I beg you, do not sink to this course. Do not shame our city so. Do not shame *me*. We have accepted this boy as our guest, and I have myself entertained him many times. I have found his nature to be honest and straight. If he has committed some crime, then let at least this be heard before wise judges, and if penalty there must be – but I cannot believe it – then let it be measured, and just, and not simply the whim of a despotic magnate.”

The King waved all this away with impatient flicks of the hand. “Tut tut, Madam, my will must be done. Your words may not hinder it, and I will listen to no more of them.” He turned to his son. “Begin!” he ordered.

There were, however, more actors still to make their way onto this strange stage. A deep voice came now from the shadows inside the hall. “Stay!” it commanded. Such was the power behind the voice that Yg indeed paused with the whip held high in his hand, raised ready to strike. The King, astonished, lifted himself up on his pallet, craning his head to see who had had the temerity, the flagrant insolence, to speak against his express command.

A large figure made its way slowly out of the shadows. As it came into the light, a mane and beard of silver hair glowed pale, outlining a high, domed head like a monument. Great scarred hands came into view, and a smith’s leather apron, and deep-set eyes the colour of brushed steel.

Telchar. And behind him now also appeared a large crowd of smiths and other artificers. Some were holding hammers or other tools, and all had expressions of truculence and determination on their faces. Beren saw Khabbock looking stubborn, and Breshke, and old Tafir, and very many of his friends and fellows from the forge. Others were there whom he did not know, and he noticed also some women.

Telchar arrived at the group around the boy. He planted himself squarely in front of the King. “King Gebshâr,” he said, shaking his head, “this may not be.”

Some in the crowd gasped at this. Yg again raised the whip to lay on the first stroke, but with a movement like lightning, the King raised a hand and stopped him.

“Forge Master,” said the King mildly, “this is not a matter that concerns you, surely.”

“I choose to concern myself in it,” said Telchar.

“Well yes, you may be interested, but you may not speak your will.”

“I do, though,” replied the smith.

“Hmm,” said the King, tapping his fingers and looking about him in his old slippery way. “Who, then,” he continued carefully, “Forge Master Telchar, do you consider is ruler of this city, hmm? I, or an ironworker of no rank, who was not even born in it?”

“You, clearly,” replied the smith. “But being master of the city does not make you master of the souls and honour of its inhabitants. You may command me to make to your order, and you may order the disposal of the products of my hand; you do that, and I accept it. You may not dictate the working out of arbitrary viciousness upon a guest and friend. Not while I have breath in my body to resist it.”

“Well, friend,” said the King, “hmm, be your words sooth or no, the bare fact is that I have many soldiers at my command, and I do not think the hammers of your comrades could hold out long against their axes. So you and I may chaffer about what is right and what is not, but it seems to me that you must at the last submit your will to mine, yea even in this small matter of whether some dunghill brat of another race receive more or less stripes than his exact due. What say you to that?”

“Why, lord King,” rumbled Telchar, “only this: that you do not get milk by killing the cow. Bethink you of the gold that you love, and of the jewels of the earth. Remember how these are won. Bethink you of the tons of earth and rock we had to shift in the old days simply to find these riches, in the days before we knew the *Mahalbuhû*.”

The old smith turned to Beren. “Master Beren,” he went on, “your eyes have seen the quantities of steel we produce, and how much of it goes to the *Fanáð*, the Elves. You have wondered what we received in return. We have not told you that, since, as you know, with us it is the same with words as with wares: we do not spend them idly and for no return. But you and I enter now into a new bargain. So, I will tell you. Look upon this!” With that he fumbled under his apron and brought out a curious-looking object. It looked like a lamp, but constructed solely out of crystal, in graceful and simple form.

At the sight of this object, the King sat up and spoke a stream of furious *Khuzdul* to the aged smith. He ended by standing half erect in his palanquin and, pointing at Beren, shouting in Elvish, “The boy is not *Khazâd*!”

Telchar shook his head. “That boy has won and paid out again all the gold he will ever want in his life,” he said. “He has no interest in winning more; therefore there is no risk in telling him. And if you break custom yourself, my lord King, you must expect that others will follow your lead.”

King Gebshâr threw up his hands and subsided, fuming, onto his couch.

Telchar turned back to Beren, and raised the lamp. “This is a work from the hand of Finrod Felakugundu, who when he is not ruling his own city of Nûlukh-khizdîn is a greater smith than I will ever be. For he learned his craft at the feet of that Power from whose mind and skill came not only the Earth itself and everything in it, but also an entire People; even we *Khazâd*.

“There is no evil in the heart of Felakugundu that we can perceive; but nevertheless, he holds this city in a vice – a vice of gold. This lamp you see here has the power to show gold within the earth. We have more like it, and others still which work for diamond, and sapphire, and ruby, and further. But the motive principle, dark to us alas, does not last; it needs to be recharged from time to time. To buy these chargings, we trade steel.

“This King that you see here,” with a gesture toward Gebshâr, “desires gold. And more gold; and ever more gold. It is his desire which is the spring of our labour in the mines and forges, where we turn rough ore into bright steel bars, which then flow in a stream to Nûlukh-khizdîn. Think you that one of the *Mahalbuhû* would stoop so low as to grub in the ground themselves? Hah! No Elf ever raised a sweat over shovel or hammer. No, that is our work. And in return we receive chiefly that which delights only the King, namely this lamp-witching. We smiths hold it a bad bargain; yet the King is our master, so we shrug and work his will.

“Up to a point. That point we have now reached. So, lad, I will tell you what will now happen. The King, for all his lusts, is not a fool. He knows he will not win this fight. He values gold over anything, even face. So he will call off his sad warped clown of a son, turn away, and leave you in our hands.” He turned again to face the King. “Is that not so, my lord King?”

The King stayed motionless for a long moment, with no expression on his face. Abruptly he made a curious sort of moue, beckoned summarily to Yg to accompany him, then bade his carriers in curt words to take him hence. The burdened Dwarves shuffled around in the curious silence of the watching crowd, then hurried the King away. Some of the people drifted away with him, but not many.

The Prince, instead of following his father straight away, advanced to Telchar until he was almost nose to nose with him. “Watch well the King’s health, Smith. Watch it well,” he said very quietly. He turned then without looking at Beren and vanished into the gloom of the great hall.

Porin lost no time in undoing Beren’s shackles. “I must away, because I am still under orders,” he said, “but I will take this on myself, and right eagerly. I most humbly beg your pardon, master Beren, for this insult, and



others you have suffered under my hand. They were not willed; but a soldier may not often command his own actions.” So they took leave of one another.

His friends gathered around Beren. The Queen said, her voice trembling, “I have no words for what is in my heart. I am ready to burst for mortification!”

“Think no more on it, Mother,” said Beren. “Have you not said to me that nobody is responsible for the actions of others? Come now, it is time for me to go. Embrace me and wish me well.”

“Not so fast, boy,” broke in Telchar. “You do not get away so easily. We must have a grand feast!”

Beren refused point blank on this, but since the Dwarves were equally stubborn, in the end they all had to compromise, if they were not to stand all day arguing on the city threshold, exposed to the cold mountain winds. The agreement they reached was to repair immediately to one of the lesser halls and partake of cup and sup. The Dwarves grumbled that it was all most unfitting, but something had broken inside Beren and he was unwilling to spend even one more night in the city under the mountain. So all was hastily made ready.

It was an occasion in which cheer mixed with sadness. Beren’s parting from the Queen was particularly painful.

“I knew you would leave some day,” Nendilmë said, wiping tears from her eyes, “but I had no warning it would be so soon!”

Beren embraced her roughly – or at least, placed his arms as far around her ample figure as they would go. “Do not weep, Mother, please. I am sorry, I did not know myself until it happened.”

When her arms were free again, the Queen fetched something out of her purse. “Alas, I have no parting gift ready for you,” she said, “but I had this made many months ago. It is for your mother. A remembrance, from one who also lost a daughter.”

Beren took the silk-wrapped bundle. “May I look?” he asked.

“Assuredly,” she said.

He unwrapped the small bundle carefully, revealing something at last that brought hot tears to blind him. He recognized what it was. It was a shell, such as came from the distant ocean shore; a shell such as Hiril had worn.

When he could see clearly again, he saw that it must be a made thing, wonderfully shaped out of gold and pearl.

“Open it,” the Queen said softly.

He looked, and saw that the shell was in two joined pieces. Gentle prising with a fingernail popped it open. The open shell lay in his palm like a gleaming little box with a lid; and while he marvelled, his ear caught a gossamer melody, sweet as summer.

He had no words. He wrapped the delicate object away again, and stood looking to Nendilmë with all his heart in his eyes.

Tears trembled again on the Queen’s lashes. “I will be lonely without you,” she said sadly, looking down at the earth. “I would say, come back some day; but I know you never will.”

Beren said, “I cannot tell. But you know, Mother, that it is the same with me as for many others on this earth: our days are often not ours to order as we will.”

She sighed. “Few know that better than I. So farewell. I have loved you as a mother, but I am not your

mother. Give my greeting to her who is.

“Just one more thing: I feel in my bones that you will meet my son again. You and he are not finished with one another. I know all of his faults, better than anybody. But please, Son of my heart: think of me when you face the son of my flesh, and have pity.”

He nodded his acceptance, upon which she kissed him one last time, while he breathed in her warm scent; then she turned away.

After he had said farewell to his friends from the forge, there remained only Telchar.

“Well, young friend,” said the smith, “you have learned a great skill, and at great cost. Now you know how to wield a sword, perhaps none better. But do you have one to wield?”

“Sir, in strict truth, no,” replied Beren carefully. “But I think I shall have.”

“I was certain of it,” rumbled the smith deep in his silver beard, “else I had made you one. Your father’s, I make no doubt?”

“Not... exactly,” said Beren.

“You will not tell me more?” asked Telchar.

“Honoured Forge Master,” replied Beren, “I would tell you; but it would be idle, and fetch me no return.”

At the repeat of his own phrase, Telchar laughed a great laugh from deep in his cavernous chest. “An apt pupil, in more ways than one! Very well, master Beren, keep your secret. Yet somehow I do not think we have seen the last of each other, and I may learn it yet, despite your more-than-Dwarvish closeness. I scented a greater matter than I have known for years; and there is such a thing as destiny, after all.

“And now, young friend, before we part for the time, let me give you what I have made for you. I pondered it long, because a gift should last; but you are still young, and your body will outgrow most gear. At last I struck upon this.” And he fetched out of his apron something which, when it was unrolled, proved to be a belt: a broad belt made of links of metal backed with leather. The boy took it in his hands and examined it. The metal plates, which were light in weight and finely chased, appeared to be enamelled a subfusc brown, but there were bronze and green gleams hidden deep in the glaze, depending on how one tilted it to the light. Beren peered more closely at the graven patterns, then smiled. They were pictures of Dwarves at work in forge and smithy.

“That will not easily wear or break,” said Telchar. “The leather must be renewed from time to time, but that is easy. And I have additional plates here for your growth in girth,” he added, passing over a further package. “I made here a clip and scabbard for your knife, and there is also a clip for your sword – when you have one. It is gear of war, not for show; hence the dull colours.”

“It is beautiful,” said Beren, overcome. “It is a perfect gift, Telchar. I wish I had something to give you in return.”

“Only think of me, when our time comes,” replied the smith cryptically.

The time of leave-taking being now upon them, Khabbock and Breshke took the boy down to the lading hall through which he had first entered the city. There they presented him with a pony, with a warm cloak, and with saddle-bags stored with many days’ provisions.

“But I cannot pay for these things,” he protested. They only laughed at that, and told him to consider it a bonus for good attendance. Thus he left the City of Tumunzahar with a more favourable opinion of the generosity of Dwarves than fireside gossip usually accorded them.

So Beren found himself at last riding out through the tall gate in the wall, acknowledged by stiff, almost furtive nods from the guards. He rode over the long arch of the bridge and took his place in the stream of carts going west. The day was drawing towards its close, and the road, indeed the whole of the giant cleft, lay already in blue shadow. His breath smoked in the cold, as did that of the pony. It was early spring in the 449th Year of the Sun. He was just thirteen.

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