

Beren One Hand Volume 3: Blackshirt

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Prologue

Starlight glimmered on the spray of water where a tiny stream fed the dark pool under the trees. The runnel whispered to itself, throwing off drops which glittered faintly along their swift curves. Each tiny globe sped down, free and whole for an instant of time, before meeting and merging with the calm surface. Hidden birds in the trees all about gave forth a trickle of accompanying sound, sweet and liquid as the brook.

Two pale figures stroked their slow way into the pool, embraced by the cool water. A cloud of midnight hair streamed out from the smaller figure; the larger was trailed by a broad band of silver.

Melian dived and came up beneath the tiny waterfall. She laughed with soft delight as the water caressed her brow. Thingol idled in the dark water near to her, just stroking now and then to keep afloat.

"I think your delight in this world must be measureless," he said to her, smiling.

She did not reply at first, only closed her eyes happily under the trickles. But some note that had sounded in her lover's voice made its way eventually to the surface of her awareness. She opened her eyes, shook the water from them, and searched his face with the keen perception of long and close connection.

"Can it be that you are not quite so content, my lord?" she said. "Do I sense something amiss?"

He raised his eyebrows. "Your ears are indeed keen," he said. "It was only a small matter, a momentary shadow of memory."

She considered him a moment with her dark eyes. "Were you troubled again by your dream?" she said at last.

He sighed. "Yes," he said. "It came again last night. I must have eaten something bad, or at least a surfeit."

"You eat sparingly, as ever, and here there is nothing bad to eat," said Melian. "It was the same dream? The dream of Men?"

"Aye, the same," said Thingol. "But last night worse than ever."

She examined his face with concern. "It is only a dream," she said. "An unpleasantness in the night, now past. The world we know remains as it was."

"This dream troubles me," he said. "It woke me in the same way, with the same sweaty horrors. And the world as we know it is *not* the same. These creatures, these Men, they infest the earth already, did you know? They woke with the coming of this Sun we have now."

"Yes, I knew," said Melian. "Their coming was foretold. But my lord, it is not good to speak of them in such spurning words. They are Children of the One, just as you are."

Thingol was sceptical. "So you have assured me before," he said. "But I struggle to believe the tale. These wreckers, these blunt-foots, these mayfly despoilers: design of the One? How could that be? It would be almost as absurd to claim that the Orc-horrors were also Children. No – there must have been some mistake, some substitution."

"My lord, I tell you once more, it is not so. You may be assured of it: Men and the Eldar are brothers."

"Not even you Maiar know everything," he replied. "You soothed my fears before with such honeyed words, but my dreams come ever anew, and each time worse than the last. You see much, high Lady; but you do not see my dreams, nor witness their horrors."

"But a dream..." she started.

The King shook his head firmly. "No," he said. "Do not try to tell me that my vision lies, for I know that it

does not. This is no ordinary dream, and you know that as well as I.”

Melian sighed. “What shall I say to you?” she said. “Visions may be true, yet not wholesome. I do not know whence your dream comes, but I doubt from any place good. The truth it shows may be twisted or incomplete. Trust it not!”

“Let me tell you what my dream foretells of Men,” said Thingol, “and of their deeds and character, and you shall tell me the excuse, the twist, whereby it can be made to seem good. It runs thus: Men will betray us Firstborn, no less, and sell us to the Enemy.” He swam closer to her. “Is *that* not so? I see you do not deny it. There is yet more! My dream tells me that in time to come, after we Eldar are forgotten, Men will swarm on the earth like rats. They will fight each other as rats do, and from their hands will come nothing but dirt and ugliness.”

“That is not so,” said Melian, shaking her head.

“All but so,” countered Thingol. “They will cut down all the trees, and kill all the beasts, and rob the ocean of all of its fish; they will pour filth into the good waters, and at the last they will poison the very air. Do not tell me such acts come from God. These Men will do the work of the Enemy, and do it better even than he. Children of the One, are they, even as we? Faugh! Better if we fought them, than greet them as siblings. Far better.”

“My lord,” Melian said sadly, “in great part I cannot gainsay you. All this *will* come to pass, and a terrible chapter in the world it will be. All this is known.” She left the waterfall, and swam slowly to and fro, a pale, undulating shape in the water. Her voice sounded troubled. “Do not imagine that you are the first to feel this pain. Bitter tears have been shed in Aman over Men, and are shed still. Although we who descended into the world in the beginning doubt not that in this rising of Men we see, as in all things, the will of the One, the working out of this Will is something we have found hard to bear.

“But my dear lord, although your dream does not lie, it does not tell you the whole story. You see only a part of the picture. You pass by a tree, and in it you see only crows, and you say: they are all crows. You do not see the eagle in the tops.”

“Well, you may keep the eagle, for my part,” retorted Thingol, “if the carpet of crows must be his price. Some things are bought too dear.”

Melian was silent for a while. “Do you believe me when I tell you that the best of Men will rise higher even than we?” she said at last. “We must not condemn them all as lot, but give to each of them his deserts, the same as we do among ourselves. You wish to judge Men by their deeds, and this is right; but deeds are done by each person, separately, and not by a people as a whole.”

Thingol grunted, seeing the justice of this, but reluctant to give way.

“This too I will say,” continued his Queen. “It may be that we must live through evil days the better to appreciate the good.”

“My days are not evil,” said Thingol, “and I wish for nothing better than what I have. I have no need of griefs to strengthen my savour for living. Only fewer dreams, maybe.”

“The world is wider than Doriath,” replied Melian, “and many now suffer evil times. Their days will grow worse before they grow better. And even to Doriath, evil must come.”

“Here? In Doriath? I can but hope I will not live to see it,” said Thingol.

Melian made no reply, but shivered slightly as she swam.

“Are you cold?” asked Thingol. “On such a mild night? But no! It is not the cold that makes you shiver! You

know perhaps that I will *not* live so long. Is that not it?"

"Pshaw," retorted Melian. " 'Know?' My lord, we have been to this before. I do not *know* future things, not in this life I chose. I have told you how, when I came into the world, and took form as one of its inhabitants, I laid my sight aside. Indeed, it must be so – flesh is no armature for the vision and understanding I commanded as an immortal spirit, there in the Void, before there was Matter or Time. I can in my present form barely remember my former powers, and I comprehend not a tithe of them. I have set all that away from me. I made my choice, and I accepted all the conditions: the good with the bad. In this life I am not Melian the Maia; I am the consort of Thingol, Sinda of Doriath."

"Oh come," he scoffed, "that won't pass. We sit here in this land that *you* have fenced from evil, of your own power, and you presume to tell me you have laid all your force to one side?"

"That which I can do, I do," she said. "I have, maybe, greater strength than many here; but it is little enough for all that."

She swam close to him and laid a hand on his arm. He let his eyes travel over the beautiful face he knew so well. Starlight and more gleamed in her dark eyes.

"My dear," she said to him earnestly, "I tell you straight from heart to heart: I have no vision of your death, nor do I know when it will occur. Of forebodings and other megrims of that sort I will not speak."

Thingol's frown remained. "Why not?" he said. "If you fear something, should you not tell me, in case there is something I can do to avert it?"

She cocked an eyebrow. "Oh, shall I so? We see you already wishing to wipe the earth clean of the race of Men, all on the strength of a dream. To what plunges would you commit if I told you my fears? Such vapourings as mine are a poor guide to actions. He who acts on such hints and portents may end up invoking the very evil he would avoid."

"What, then, should one take as a guide to action?" asked the King.

"Character, as revealed in deeds," replied Melian. "You have said it yourself."

He smiled fondly and traced his wet finger down the curve of her nose. "You are one too many for me, Fay," he said. "As always. Well clear it is to me who truly runs this kingdom."

"Only one can rule," she replied, shaking her head, "and that one is not I; and believe me, it is better so. Power should not rule. Thingol King must choose his own course, and live his own life. If it pleases him betimes to hear the counsel of his wife, then good; if not, also good."

Thingol said nothing for a time. Then he said, "But you are wiser than I, as well as stronger. Should not wisdom rule?"

"My lord, not so," said Melian. "I am not wise. I do but see a very little further. Would you call up to one who stands upon a chair, and can thus see over the heads of the throng: hail, chair-stander, you are wiser than I?"

Thingol replied, smiling, "I might, if her name were Melian."

She splashed him. For a while the two played and laughed as children, under the kindly eye of the ancient stars. The pair swam on then, exploring the far reaches of the pool.

"You may jest how you please, but I hold you for wise all the same," said Thingol, returning to the theme. "Oft have you been my guide and example."

"Oh, pshaw," she protested. "What is this? 'Example'?"

“You have greater power than you confess to,” he replied seriously. “This I know – have long known. Yet you exercise modesty and restraint.”

“I shall duck you under the water if you persist with this nonsense,” she said, eyes flashing.

“I know that you will not do that,” he said, “because a queen should be gracious; and you are gracious. Grace hears compliments – well, graciously. So sit you there, Queen, and demurely hear your praises sung. You have fenced this land for us, and hallowed it, and that was a great and wonderful deed. But it was also sufficient, and fitting, and restrained. It is something to know that you feel no meddling urge to sally forth and right all the wrongs of the world.”

Melian floated very still in the water, tilting her head a little back to keep her nose above the surface. She looked at him without expression.

“What?” he said, perturbed. “You will not be telling me that you feel restless, that you hunger for wider action?”

“No,” admitted Melian.

“Well what is it? I can read your heart as well as you mine; I know when you are disturbed. What is it?”

The Queen’s brow was clouded, in a manner that Thingol could not remember having seen before. “You praise me for a restraint which I may not claim,” she said, constraint sounding tight in her voice. “My conscience pricks me.”

He sat straight in the water, astonished. “What do you mean? What have you done?”

“You spoke of an urge to meddle,” she said, “and I have assured you that I have none. But I must say to you – confess to you – that in large part that reluctance is because I have meddled already.” The Queen sighed. “More fool I. For I must tell you that a fruit of that meddling now walks the earth. He will come here to us, like an eagle to her young; and not all my powers or fences will hinder his coming.”

* * * * *

Choker had thought for a long time about how he could best find out what deadly thing lurked in the forest to the South, and at last he had come up with an idea. The problem was to observe without being caught. He wanted to spread out his men, but one couldn’t do that to any useful extent in the woods, because of the closeness of the growth. Spread them out enough, and some of them might well escape whatever trap there was; but there was no point to that if the surviving party could not mark what was going on. To find out, to escape and report back; that was what was needed. But cover under the trees was so dense that the men had to be close to see each other. That was no good – the risk of one caught, all caught was too great.

That last, long sneak they had done had been a revelation. Nobody had known about the broad river valley running up into the forest – or at least, nobody Choker reported to. Choker’s idea was to use this river. He hoped that if he placed a party on each side of it, then anything that scragged the one – and they should probably count on there being some scragging – would not so easily be able to cross the stream to scrag the other.

That was the theory. Sometimes he thought the whole business was a giant trap, and that they were all marked for death. But wasn’t that true anyway? What else was there to do in life? You just had to sneak and scrounge your way through it as well as you could. If you did it well, you might run a long way, yes quite long perhaps; but the end would be the same.

So anyway, here he was with his picked squad, back again where the forest began. He had divided his force into four parties, two on each side of the river, with a decent spacing between them all. They’d snuck through all the open, farmed land, and it had taken them a long time. They’d had to move by night, and even then

there had been alarms. The Soft-skins had settlements everywhere. They weren't so hard to outwit maybe, and they didn't much go out at night, but their cursed dogs would bark. Choker had originally meant to do the sneak by daylight, when the parties could see each other, but it just had not been doable, with no cover from the burning sun. So they had crept by night, straining to see the others under the poisonous moonlight, waiting at each moment for – what? Whatever death had taken all the others before them.

But Death had not come. Choker wanted to think about that; he felt that it meant something. He could not quite believe they had penetrated so far, right into the heart of this secret land. No Rrrk had been anything like this far, and ever come back. He almost thought he should turn back now, reverse the sneak, and report; but he had not found out anything of real value. The mystery remained as opaque as ever.

As soon as the morning light was decent enough, he gave the sign, and the whole squad began to move. Following the river bank, they came among the trees, and slowly worked their way deeper into the wooded country. It was a relief to have left the farms behind. True, there was a road which wound in and out of sight, but there was no traffic on it this early. Anyway, there should be no particular difficulty in keeping out of sight when someone did come along.

They crept along so for the whole sun-scorched day. They were deep in woodlands now, yet there was no alarm. At nightfall, as they had arranged beforehand, they huddled under bushes where they were, rather than gathering together. Silence was ordered; fires were unthinkable. At first light they would go on.

The attack came at dawn.

Choker had woken, had sniffed the air warily. Two of his party were already awake, their eyes gleaming as they silently returned his glance in the early light. On hands and knees, Choker peered carefully through the bushes. He could not see any of the next party, although he could see the place where they should be lurking, across the river and further up. He sat there blinking, trying to relax, shivering a little in the damp, misty air, sniffing the air and listening. But there was nothing of concern to be smelt, heard or seen. Time to be up and doing.

A distant noise of thrashing undergrowth made him jerk up his head again, all senses twanging taut. He saw a Louse of the party ahead leap into view, before scrambling in seeming panic through the bushes, clawing at something on his neck. Choker saw it run only a couple of paces before it seemed to trip, disappearing into the undergrowth.

Choker's initial moment of blankness was flooded by a horrid realisation. The Scrag! This was it!

Two breaths had not gone by. Other noises were now coming to his ears. Choker crouched back down, lips stretched in a silent snarl. What...?

He heard a gasp from just behind. He whipped his head around to see Squirmer, one of his party, staring open-mouthed at a slender dart, hardly longer than his own finger, sticking out of his upper arm.

Choker didn't wait to see the result, he was already acting. His leg muscles bunched before propelling him up and wide like a frog. He was leaping for the river, two paces away. There had been no time to form the intention; instinct was in charge.

A brush of air on his face spoke of a near miss as the blur of bushes passed in the quick arc of his leap. The wheeling picture shattered in cold shock as his body met the water. Tumbled helplessly by the current, water flooding into his mouth and nose, the stream turned him right-side up for a flashing instant in which he caught sight of a brown face with a slender pipe to its lips. Then the glimpse was past, and he was engrossed in the silent struggle for breath.

After a time of choking terror the length of which he could never afterwards estimate, the stream dumped him onto a mat of branches. Breath whooping in his raw throat, Choker lost no time in scrambling out of the soggy mess. Once on dry land, he ran for all he was worth. No caution now, just run. He reached the open

ground before long, but he pelted on, in full daylight, past furious dogs, shouting farmers. Terror lent his legs a speed beyond belief. When he couldn't run any more, he found shelter in a patch of brambles growing in the corner of a quiet field. No house was in sight, only a few cattle grazing in the distance. Scratched, terrified, utterly exhausted, Choker huddled on a bed of dead brambles in the dark centre of the bush, staring out with reddened eyes at the hostile world. Not until long after dark did he muster the courage to creep out and away.

* * * * *

Beren had continued to write home at scattered intervals during the whole of his three years in Tumunzahar. Caladis had taken on the duty of replying, at something like the same frequency. The previous autumn she had written to him of an event which had been long awaited in Ladros; but for one reason after another she was not able to send this letter until later in the year, by which time the heavy snowstorms of the northern winter had closed the roads for most normal traffic. The letter was not sent until the thaw of the following year, after Beren had already left the City. In fact he passed its carrier, unknowing, on his journey home. He never received this letter.

What had been written of began as follows.

On a warm afternoon in late summer the gate-wards of Newfort became aware of the approach of a horse-borne party of some size – perhaps a hundred all told. They were military men by the look of them, riding in two ordered companies. There was little in the behaviour of the band to excite alarm, and in fact many things spoke rather of peaceful intent. The soldiers were riding easily; nobody wore more armour than light mail, and none of them held a weapon. They had three carts with them, piled high with what appeared to be furniture. Most significant of all was the presence among the soldiers of unarmed women and children. Nevertheless the Gate-marshal, being a wary man, conscious of his charge, ordered the great doors to be closed in precaution. He stood then outside the smaller postern together with several of his spearmen, all curious to see who these visitors might be.

The first troop rode over the bridge in a loud clatter of hooves and drew up before the gates. The leader, a tall man of rangy but muscular build, dismounted, then stood looking over the reception while he struck dust from his kilt.

The gate-guards in their turn took him in. They beheld a man with a fine head of dark hair, and keen grey eyes, set in a tanned face of a firm cast of feature. Although this leader was not old, he had the face of someone who had seen much weather and battle, but perhaps fewer firesides and full boards. He looked like someone who knew what he was about; a man used to being obeyed. He reminded the Gate-marshal strongly of someone, but for the moment that worthy could not put his finger on whom.

The leader fixed the Gate-marshal with his eye. "I had not thought to find the doors of my own home shut against me," he said drily. "Do you not know me, Garth?"

Garth peered at the man more closely. The features suddenly gelled. The Marshal's mouth opened comically in surprise. "Good Powers preserve us," he stammered. "It's never Master Baragund!"

"It is," replied Baragund. "Will you open the gates for us? We have come home."

The Gate-marshal hastened to do his bidding, then stood to one side at the salute.

"I will see you soon again, Garth, I make no doubt," Baragund said as he swung upon his horse again, "but we must away now to greet Father." He urged his horse forward and led his dusty troop clattering inside the stockade.

The Marshal saw that the second troop, as he now expected, was led by the younger brother Belegund. "Ho, Garth!" that one called as he passed. "Is there wine left in Newfort? I've a throat on me that could tan leather." But without pausing his horse for an answer, he saluted the Marshal, nodded pleasantly to the other

guards, then led his troop on through.

The news passed through the town like a fire in dry grass. The Brothers were back! Bregolas's boys! People came running, not just to goggle at the sons of the Lord-designate, sons of whom these ten years past much had been heard but nothing at all seen; but also to greet the other returnees, many of whom had been well known in the town.

However, as the crowd thronged around the soldiers, now all dismounted and waiting in turn to lead their head-drooped mounts past the well, the initial enthusiasm of the welcome developed into a sort of hesitation. The memories the Newforters had of these friends and neighbours who had sojourned so long in northern lands did not quite match the sudden and vivid reality. The faces they saw were intimately familiar; the returnees answered to their names; they grinned and laughed as freely as before; but they were not as they were. This stern and masterful face, was that really young Bân as they remembered him? The ring in that laugh, had Kilar always sounded that assured?

The soldiers were tired, they had ridden long; but a light was to be seen in their faces which had the town-dwellers looking doubtfully for its source in the sky, or around the square.

A great deal of talk was going on, but most of it at present was on the side of the townsmen. They had any quantity of news to relay, of the usual sort among people and family: not only births, deaths and marriages, but calamities, jokes, remarks which had passed from mouth to mouth. The soldiers listened politely, replying with a word here or a question there. Later in the day, after the returned men and women had dispersed to their families, it was the travellers' turn to talk, at their individual hearths. Firelit faces listened avidly to their tales of Orc-hunts and other campaigns, and of the wonders of the Fair Folk and their cities.

The returnees spoke with animation and warmth of the two commanders, the Sons. As they told it, the elder brother was the more hard-bitten. If there was any softness in him, they said, he kept it for his family. He drove his command hard, but nobody resented that, because he drove himself even harder. And there was also this to praise: Baragund was very careful of their lives. He took no risks with his men unless circumstances demanded it. Troopers prize such a commander above rubies. His men called him the Soldier, and so high had he risen in their estimation that they would have followed those keen, calculating eyes and that blunt voice anywhere.

On the surface, the other brother was a contrast. He loved all the pleasant things of life, and his first care in barracks was to see that he got them, and his troop too. He affected a reluctance to campaign, and his words to his men on setting out were rueful, but newcomers quickly noticed that all necessities were done quickly and well. Belegund would never tongue-lash like his brother, but a quiet word from him would get things moving all the same. Once in the field, he was as cautious and wily as an old fox. His men called him Greencloak from his favourite apparel on manoeuvres.

But these revelations happened later in the day. In the present time, the horses were still being watered. A runner had been sent to the Hall, and now the returning messenger pushed his way through the crowd to the side of the two brothers.

"If it please you, Sirs, your father Bregolas is at exercise with his troops, outside the city wall to the East," he panted, "but your kinswoman Andreth says to bid you most heartily welcome."

"No word from the Lord of Ladros?" said Baragund.

"Why no," said the messenger, "his Lordship has not been well. We look rather in these days to the Lady Andreth for rulings on most matters affecting the House."

Baragund frowned a little at this news. "Well, we will see them both soon enough, but I think our duty lies first with Father. What say you to that, Brother?"

Belegund groaned. "Duty, duty," he complained. "Must the talk always be of duty? The old man will keep.

Let us think first to lay some of the dust in our throats, for all love.”

Baragund was used to his brother and passed over what he knew to be nothing more than talk. He turned back to address the messenger. “Can somebody look to the quartering of our men and our families?”

The Hall-major having now also arrived, these matters were quickly taken in hand. The brothers took short leave of their wives and children and rode again back out of the gate. They turned right once outside and took the path that wound around the fence to the East.

“Well, the old place does not look much changed,” said the Greencloak, cheerful despite the postponement of his ease. “A little shabbier perhaps; we have been used to living in different style these last years.”

Baragund only grunted.

“I do not think they see so much of the Fair Folk down here,” continued his brother. “One can almost feel their absence in the air itself.”

“They never did come here much,” replied the older man. “Look! That must be Father’s troop.”

They had rounded the stockade, opening to their sight the wide fields to the South. The spaces so revealed were filled with ranks of men engaged in the coordinated movements that spoke of an army under training. Two things struck the brothers straight away: the unusual nature of some of the movements, and the amount of polished metal being worn. As they approached closer, and took in more of the extraordinary details of the soldiers’ dress and armour, their amazement grew.

The brothers halted at the edge of the field before dismounting and tying their horses to a stake. As they stood there beside their grass-tearing mounts, trying to match what they were seeing with anything they knew of martial exercises, one of the burly sergeants left off shouting and approached them.

“Hey, you!” the man shouted at them. “If you’re not going to join in, ladies, then take yourselves off. If we want spectators we’ll advertise.”

The taller of the visitors leaned towards the man, resting his hands on the fence between them. “My name is Baragund,” he said shortly. “I am looking for Bregolas. Would you point him out to me? I cannot tell who is who under that get-up.”

The sergeant flipped up his visor and eyed them with disfavour. “Get-up?” he sneered. “I’ll get up you in a minute, my fine friend. Just take yourselves off! And that smartish, if you know what’s good for you. Otherwise...” His face changed suddenly. “*What* did you say your name was?”

“Baragund,” replied that one, “and my brother here is Belegund.”

“Uh,” said the man in armour. “Uh. You wait here!” He turned and went off in some haste.

“Well!” remarked the Greencloak in low tones to his companion. “What think you of this parade of polished monkeys?”

“Let us not leap to conclusions,” his brother said. “We should hear what Father has to say. This must be him now.”

Two soldiers were approaching, flanking a large figure who was pulling impatiently at the lacings of his helm. On being lifted off, this revealed the sweating face of Bregolas. Eyes alive with delight, the big man shouted aloud with welcome. Father and sons came together and for some moments there was a confusion of greetings.

Bregolas pulled away at last, turning impatiently to his assistants. “Help me get this damn armour off, will you?” While the others helped him take the bulky pieces off one by one, the Lord-apparent looked his sons

over with a mixture of welcome and surprise on his face.

“We had your letter, thus expected your return this many a day,” he said, “but not on *this* day, not more than any other. Why did you not send a rider ahead to warn us!”

“But what for?” replied Belegund. “We are here, we are our own message.”

“Well, I suppose you are too,” said his father with a guffaw. “Many a year I have missed you boys. How long have you dallied there in Fingon’s courts? Ten years, if it has been a day. You should have come back sooner, we need you here. I need you. Father is not well, not far off his time I would say, the Powers fend my words from evil. Matters have not gone well here, his sister and her familiars do nothing but stand in my way, stand in the way of any progress, any improvement. But enough of this. Have you eaten, rested? No? You came to seek me straight away? Now that is duty, that is what we need! Oh this will mark a good turn of things, I have more hope now. But come! I will see to your care. We will have time to talk. You *are* staying, I hope? It’s not just a flying visit?”

“No indeed, Father,” the younger brother said. “We have come home. We would have come sooner, but with young children it is not so easy, you will understand.”

Still talking animatedly, their enthused father led them back to the fortified town. The soldiers, being freed from their duty for that day, marched behind them, cheerful at the thought of the beer they would shortly be drinking.

Later that day the brothers, accompanied by their wives and children, made their visit to Andreth in her chambers.

“Welcome, welcome,” she said to them as they all filed in. “Come, sit you all down and let me look at you!”

Aunt and nephews had not seen each other for ten years, and both parties were naturally curious to see what changes time had wrought in the other. To the brothers, Andreth seemed the same silver-haired, cool, decisive person they remembered, albeit somewhat bent and shrunken. She for her part cast a more critical eye over her nephews. In their essence they seemed the same cheerful boys she remembered, only filled out from the callow striplings they had been into men in their prime. There was muscle on their frames and experience in their faces – more than experience: Andreth marked in their features the light of wisdom and nobility which only those acquire who live long among the Eldar. She was pleased with what she saw.

Baragund had always been as tall as his father, but now that she saw him in his prime, she saw that he carried his strength with greater grace than Bregolas. She was powerfully reminded in fact of her own father, a feeling which deepened as she looked over the firm cast of the young man’s features. She had always thought him a promising lad, and everything she saw now emphasized and confirmed that early impression.

Belegund was somewhat shorter and denser, built more after the manner of his uncle Barahir. As with his uncle, he looked well knit, and likely to be strong out of proportion to his modest size. His face was open and fair, and his clear grey eyes sparkled with a desire to please and be pleased. It was the face of a man who enjoyed all the good things in life without being ruled by them.

Both young men were clean-shaven, and both were dressed in the same sort of weather-stained woollen kilt and armless tunic. Baragund looked tougher, Belegund neater.

Andreth turned now to the women, who sat there with the slightly over-polite, stiff posture of new relations on a family visit. Both were fair of hair, as one expected of Northerners, but otherwise they seemed very different. Baragund’s partner Rhasûl was tall, strong and beautiful, with a thick river of ash-blond hair sweeping past brow and cheeks. One felt that a light of challenge would leap into the woman’s piercing blue eyes at any hint of a check. Indeed to Andreth’s eyes this northern woman seemed half wild, like some high-mettled horse from the lonely plains whom nobody had ever fully broken, only partially gentled to the rein.

Faelind, the wife of the younger brother, seemed to first glance like a wisp of nothing next to her forceful wed-sister. The girl sat quietly, one would almost have said meekly, hands folded in her lap. Her hair, which fell in broad waves about her shoulders, was silken fine and luminously fair. Her face was wide, a little too much so at the forehead, tapering past well-cut cheekbones to a softly rounded chin. Faelind's skin was pale and fine, appearing almost translucent next to Rhasûl's outdoor tan. Her downcast eyes were the mild blue of forget-me-nots. The young woman – and she must be very young – appeared gentle and kind. Everything about her seemed rounded, delicate, soft; but as Andreth examined the girl, the eyes came up to meet hers.

A smile twitched at the aged lady's wrinkled lips. No, this child was no weak reed. Agreeable and gentle she might be, but there was a core of diamond to the mild woman – Andreth could detect it in her eyes and in the strong cheekbones. Faelind would give with an open heart, but she would never give in.

Andreth said some words of welcome to them while she looked over the children. The oldest of these was Baragund's daughter Morwen, a dark-haired girl of six or so, who stood slightly forward of her father, returning Andreth's gaze with an independent eye. She had the colouring of her father but, it seemed, much the same spirit as her mother. Her features had that slight misproportion which looks unhandsome in a child but which often flowers to a striking beauty in adulthood.

The other youngsters, two young boys barely out of swaddling clothes, were cuddled on their respective mothers' laps. Belegund's, who looked to be the younger, was crying fretfully.

“Well!” said Andreth at last to the brothers. “I did not expect you so soon; but the warmth of your welcome is just the same. I am of course glad to see you again, as I am to meet your families. But it goes further than that: you are needed here.”

“Aye,” returned Baragund somewhat drily, “Father said the same. Only with something of a different emphasis.”

Andreth smiled grimly. “I can well imagine,” she said. “He and I have not seen eye to eye for some time. Lately it seems to have become more bitter than a mere family disagreement. It is not the time now to make my own case; indeed I do not wish to make a case to you at all. I have confidence in your powers of judgement and will for my part leave you free to come to your own conclusions.”

“Thank you,” said Baragund.

The younger lad leaned forward. “Aunt, can you tell us where Barahir is living now? We thought to overnight with him on the way, but we find he is moved from Sightfoot. They told us that he and Emeldir had a small place now not far from here.”

“He lives an hour or two to the South,” said Andreth. “I will get someone to write out some better directions.” She searched the faces of the two young men. “You heard the news of his loss?”

“Yes, we heard about it from Beren,” said Belegund, meaning the elder of that name, Emeldir's father. “We neither of us can understand it at all,” he continued, looking sombre. “Cruelty from the Enemy one expects, and one can at least, in the last resort, bare one's teeth to him in empty defiance; but here there is nobody to blame. It seems to have been the blindest of chances: senseless, random and cruel.”

“All of that,” sighed Andreth. “But life is full of chances, both good and ill. We must not think everything happens at the design of this power or that. Nonetheless I feel Barahir's loss extremely, the more so since I can think of few who deserved it less. And then there is his boy... but that tale can wait. I will send word to him, to Barahir I mean. I know he will want to see you, and it is right that the whole family should meet to mark your return, or as much of it as we can gather, since Bregil has not come north now this many a year, and Beril is bound to her bed. And I will send for Bebeth – she serves with Angrod, not far away. You will surely wish to greet your sister. We might not have many more such chances to meet as a family, for reasons which will occur to you when you see your grandfather.”

Andreth spoke a very little longer, giving them quick news about various family members; but she had kept an eye on the women, both of whom were now showing signs of fatigue.

“Now I will not keep you further,” she said at last, after rounding off quickly. “The children at least need rest after the journey. Are you not tired, Morwen?”

The girl raised her chin. “No,” she said firmly.

“No?” gave back Andreth. “But you have come a long way.”

“That is nothing,” said the girl. “I shall be a great hero when I am grown. Heroes do not notice journeys.”

Andreth sat back. “Become a hero?” she said. “A high ambition! Some girls are content simply to marry them.”

“That would be silly,” returned the girl. “Why should I do such a thing? I do not see why anybody ever marries. If I married, I should have to have babies. I do not want babies, they would just get in the way. Besides, I think they are very foolish and useless.” Here she cast a scornful glance at her young brother, who sat sucking his thumb drowsily.

“People find reasons to marry,” said Andreth with a wry smile. “But we shall not debate this further now. Go, rest you all. There will be time for talk.” She caught the two men with her eye. “There are many things to talk about.”

* * * * *

Bregolas, eager to show the brothers his military innovations, arranged a thorough exhibition as soon as possible. Before he took his sons out on the field he described to them his general conception of training and behaviour. Morale was everything, he said; as high as possible on your side, everything working to lower that of the opponent. Properly done, there would be no need even to engage the enemy.

The young men listened to all of this in polite silence.

Bregolas took them then to the barracks. He said he wanted them to meet some of his up-and-coming young warriors. The Fist of Ladros, he said, rubbing his hands together with enthusiasm; that’s what they were calling the force.

The rooms they entered were loud with muscular young men who all seemed to be guffawing or shouting. The indoor air was rank with the liony smell of unwashed male carnivore. Behind his father’s view, Belegund Greencloak wrinkled his nose.

Bregolas led them down the hall, accompanied by perfunctory salutes and nods from some of the men. The brothers caught glimpses of side chambers – a refectory; an exercise hall; a room from which sounded the clinks and grunts of weight training.

A press of squatting bodies came into view at the end of the room. From the shouts and the movements, it seemed that a game of some sort was in progress. At each throw, the bodies would tense, awaiting the result. When the die came to rest, they would sway all at once: losers groaned and swore while winners crowed. Men slapped down silver coins and pushed one another. Every word seemed to be thrown out at twice normal volume, and the tone was aggressive and boastful.

Someone caught sight of the approaching figures. “Officer present!” The men left their game lying and all stood up.

“Sorry to break up your play, boys,” said Bregolas. “I just want Caz.” The man indicated left the group and came over to them with something of a rolling, swaggering gait. Bregolas laid a hand on the man’s meaty shoulder. “Boys,” he said, turning to his sons, “I want you to meet Cazimek, one of my best young leaders. If

I had a thousand like him, I believe there's no force on Middle-earth that could stand up to the might of our Fist. Caz, these are my sons, newly returned from a sojourn in the North."

The brothers saw before them a man of somewhat unusual appearance. He was heavily muscled for one thing, and wore a thin, tight tunic, perhaps the better to show off his physique. The hair both on his face and head had been meticulously arranged: the one carefully shaven to leave a thin stripe of dun-coloured stubble looping around his lips, the other greased and combed into a high rearing crest towards the back of his head. Most of the young men lounging about seemed to be groomed after the same exaggerated pattern. The man's breath was sour and he had pimples on his thick neck. Empty blue eyes gazed truculently at them from beneath prominent brows.

"We've already met," remarked Baragund somewhat drily, because Cazimek was the sergeant who had spoken so brusquely to them on their first arrival.

"Uh, yeah, sorry about that," said the muscled man. "So, uh, hello and all that. Hear you've been with the Smoothies all this time eh?" When the brothers looked blank, the man made signs about his chin. "No beard," he added helpfully.

"We have served these ten years under Fingolfin, the High King, yes," replied Baragund with careful politeness.

"Sure," said Cazimek. "High king, yeah. Got it. King of the Smoothies, heh heh. Right. So what were you doing there all this time? Singing songs and that, eh? 'S what they say the Smoothies get up to all day. Heh heh."

Baragund looked the man up and down, but made no reply. Instead he turned half away, to Bregolas. "Father, shall we move on to the exercise field now? I think we have seen enough here."

Bregolas raised his brows at his son, surprised. "Don't you want to see the training rooms?"

"Hey," said Cazimek, nettled.

Baragund continued to address his father. "No," he said. He turned his head further away, towards his brother. "What about you, Legi?"

"Hey, you," repeated Cazimek. He pushed Baragund lightly on the shoulder. "Hey, I asked you a question, pal. 'S not manners to turn your back when somebody asks you a friendly question."

Baragund paid the man no mind at all, was listening to his brother's reply.

Cazimek leaned forward to give a more aggressive push, but he never connected, because Baragund's hand whipped out to grab the man's wrist. Cazimek's incipient movement stopped as though he had hit a rock. The beefy commander stared unbelievably at Baragund's hand, then glared at his adversary before trying to jerk back.

People in the room were stopping what they were doing and turning to take in the unfolding tableau. Cazimek was still trying to jerk his hand free, but suddenly he blanched: Baragund had begun to squeeze. The Soldier was wearing a short-sleeved jerkin himself, because it was a warm day. His weather-tanned arm, large and well-shaped like the remainder of his body, although with none of the exaggerated roundings of Cazimek's beefy limb, was deeply corded now with clenching muscle.

Cazimek quailed. The power of the other man's grip was unbelievable, immense. White in the face, the sergeant began sweating and gasping between curses. "Let go, let go!" he moaned. He sank slowly to his knees, whimpering.

Baragund bowed himself forward, still gripping. "Next time we speak," he said to Cazimek in quiet tones, "I

shall expect you to employ courtesy, particularly when speaking of your betters. And I shall expect you to keep your hands to yourself. Do you understand?"

Cazimek nodded through tears of pain. Baragund let him go. His adversary nursed his injured wrist in the other hand, rocking back and forth on his knees and groaning.

The onlookers were silent. Many had their mouths hanging open.

"Well, I'm glad that's settled," said the Soldier pleasantly. "Shall we go?"

"With a good will," said his brother grimly. "Come, Father, let us come out of this." And nothing the protesting Bregolas could say could hold them from leaving the room. Once they were again out in the fresh air, their father turned to them in exasperation.

"What did you have to do that for?" he demanded of Baragund. "Caz is one of my best men!"

"His address was singularly discourteous, and he laid hand on me," said his tall son. "There was no excuse for it. I am not used to being treated so, and I will not suffer it. I treat others with courtesy, and I require it to be returned."

"It's just his way," protested Bregolas. "It was high spirits! That's the kind of men I want – plenty of spirit. You can keep your manners for tea-parties with your aunts. Soldiering's not about manners! If they have to be a bit rough around the edges to be good fighters, then so be it. I accept the reality of that, and you would be wise to as well."

"He did not seem like much of a fighter to me," remarked the Greencloak. "Nothing but a puff-ball. It takes more than beef and hair grease to make a soldier. And built-up soles," he scoffed. "Did you see?"

Bregolas was growing angry. "I've heard enough of this talk now. Don't you be insolent to me!" He was shaking a finger in his younger son's face. "You've been away too long, learned bad habits, grown a mouth on you. Both of you. Well you're home now, it's going to be different now. I'm still your father, and I am due to be ruler here any time now. So you listen to me. You've had a fine time over there with your Elvish king and I don't know what; a fine time. But there's man's work to be done here. Not Elvish flim flam, but man's work. Elves don't know a thing about it, and neither do you. You've met one soldier, and I hope you haven't ruined him, and you base all your opinions on that. Why don't you wait until you've been thoroughly acquainted, seen the men at their work, seen what they can do, before you open your mouth about it. Eh?"

Baragund was silent. He bowed his head shortly. "It is just as you say, Father," he said slowly. "It is true: I know little of your methods. I would value it if you would show me more."

The younger brother said nothing. He felt he had seen quite enough. This was his childhood home, but he felt a stranger here now. Every shining recollection of King Fingolfin's court only made this present reality seem the more foolish and squalid.

They spent most of that day at the exercise grounds, and most of the next; then the weather broke, and the first of the autumn gales were upon them. The brothers had observed all the shouting and posturing in silence, a silence which Bregolas had not sought to break with questions, although he sent uneasy glances in their direction from time to time.

Before they could come to grips with the topic, Barahir arrived in town. He sought out the brothers as soon as he could, and embraced them with affection.

"Man alive," he said, "but you've grown some meat on your bones, the pair of you! Your time away does not seem to have done you any harm!"

They in their turn were taken aback by the change in the older man. Barahir's hair was salted now with grey,

and his face was lined. They had last seen him as a young man in the prime of life, much as they were now themselves. It made one think.

They did not mention his loss, but instead asked after his son, about whom they had heard no more than some hints from Andreth.

“Ah,” said Barahir, looking a little sad, “there’s quite a story there. Aunt suggested we all sit together while we tell it. There are some aspects to it that you ought to know about.”

The brothers looked at one another.

“When you say we should ‘all’ sit,” asked Baragund in careful tones, “do you intend that ‘all’ to include Father?”

“Er, no,” said Barahir, looking slightly uncomfortable. “Look, it’s not what you think. Obviously you have picked up that there’s a bit of a feud going on at the moment. You’ve landed in the middle of it, and it is going to be ticklish for you. But we don’t wish to do anything sneaky about that, or to sway you to or from any course. This is not plotting. Bregolas will become Landholder, no question; and when he is, we’ll be as loyal to him as any. It’s only that, as far as young Beren is concerned, Andreth and I see things rather differently than your father. It will be easier for us to discuss the matter among ourselves without, well, dissenters I suppose you might call them.”

“I am glad that you perceive our duty to Father as clearly as we do ourselves,” said the Soldier stiffly. “I must tell you that we cannot be party to a secret meeting, no matter how harmless its intent.”

“There are no secrets,” insisted Barahir. “You can tell him anything you like about it, before or after. We just don’t want to have to argue with him during it.”

This being settled, the brothers agreed to the meeting. After some talk on other topics, they asked their uncle how things were on the new farm.

“Oh, the place is well enough,” said Barahir. “Less work than the old, but I don’t know that that is necessarily a good thing. You know our daughter died?”

The brothers replied that yes, they had heard some time ago.

“Well, we didn’t want to stay in the old place, with all the memories. But lately I am wondering if it would not have been wiser to stay. Painful memories may in the end be better than none at all. There is an emptiness now in our lives, and sometimes we are no longer sure what we are living them for.”

“And how is Emeldir faring?” asked the Greencloak.

“Not well,” was Barahir’s short answer. He did not elaborate further.

Bregolas was cross when his sons told him about the planned meeting. “Oh, I know what that will be all about,” he snorted. “Go if you wish, it is all one to me. If you’ll be advised by me, though, you’ll keep your wits about you. Aunt has a wily tongue on her. She’s managed to get Barahir well under her wing, that’s for certain. Just watch out it doesn’t happen to you. Remember whose sons you are.”

Andreth welcomed them in her rooms, where as usual she had a fire burning. The brothers found it uncomfortably warm. They could not help noticing again the hesitancy of age revealed in her movements.

“How old are you, Aunt?” asked Baragund. “If it is not impolite to ask?”

His brother rolled his eyes.

“Ha ha, shall I squeeze your wrist if I think it so?” Andreth cackled. “How that made me laugh. About time

some real man showed up these young swaggercocks. My age? Goodness. Let me see now. I was seventy already when Father died. He was a great old age. You remind me of him, Baragund. Legi, you take more after my mother's side. You won't remember her. Where was I? Oh yes, age. Mmm, mmm. Seventy. Oh, I can't reckon it. How long ago did Father die, Bari?"

"Seventeen years, or thereabouts," said Barahir. "That would make you eighty-seven."

"My goodness!" said Andreth, "I wish you had not told me now. Well that would make Brother eighty-nine. But Father lived to well over ninety."

After some more pleasantries, they got down to the business.

"Well now!" said Andreth. "I have something to show you that you may remember." With that she fumbled at a wrapped bundle by her side. When she brought out the crystal sword, flashing fire-rainbows around the room, Baragund and Belegund each caught their breaths. It was just as they remembered from years ago: the frosted guard, the lambent blade; graceful and deadly.

"Nixenárë!" breathed Belegund.

"Do you dare to put it to the test again?" asked Andreth, watching their faces.

The brothers looked diffident. "I am sure neither of us would shrink from the challenge," said the elder, "but is there any point? Surely we had our lesson pretty clearly the first time."

"I do not urge you to useless pain, to 'prove your manhood', or any of that nonsense," said Andreth. "I leave that to Bregolas's puff-pigeons. I have a reason for being curious. It is up to you. I will tell you all about it, make you the test or no. But I would be interested to see what happens."

Baragund shrugged; reached out with his hand for the sword. The biting snap came as he expected. He jerked his hand back and then looked ruefully at the white mark on it.

"It was quicker this time," he said.

Then it was Belegund's turn, but he fared no better. "Indeed, quicker for me too," he said. "I am sure I laid full hand on the hilt the first time, before it decided it did not like me. Definitely quicker this time, and more vicious too."

"Same for me," said Barahir.

"You tried again too?" asked Baragund.

The older man nodded.

"All right, Aunt," said the stern-faced Soldier, turning back to her. "What's all this about?"

"Simply this," said Andreth, clearly relishing the moment. "When Barahir's young lad Beren made the test, the sword accepted him. It accepted him! What do you think of that?"

The brothers sat up straight, the surprise showing clearly on their faces.

"Great Powers," Baragund said. "Great Light in the West! Truly?"

"By the Kindler¹," exclaimed his brother. "Is it true? He is the Heir?"

"He is," said Barahir. "We know that; but that is all that we know. We do not know why, nor what the Powers

1 He meant the Valier named Varda, who kindled the stars. In later times she was more frequently named as 'Elbereth', which means 'Star-queen'. 'Kindler' in Sindarin is 'Gilthoniel' – hence 'Elbereth Gilthoniel.'

intend by it; although clearly they intend something. He is an unusual boy, and he has trodden strange paths. We have not known whether we should help him on them or hinder him.”

“Where is he?” said Baragund. “I would much like to meet him.”

“Well now! That presents problems,” said Barahir, and proceeded to tell them of Beren’s strange adventure among the Dwarves.

At the end of the tale, the brothers were silent.

“I do not exactly like the sound of that,” said the Greencloak after a time.

“I neither,” said Baragund. “I have heard little of the Stunted Folk to their credit. If he wanted to learn the sword, why did he not come to us in the North? There are many, both Elf and Man, who could teach him as much sword-craft as his skin could hold, and never ask price for it. And I never heard of this Dwarf prince before, either.”

“But is he well, how has he fared among them?” asked the younger of the pair. “Have you had word?”

Andreth brought out the small bundle of ink-stained papers, which the brothers read through rapidly but with interest. Barahir observed their facility with an emotion as near to envy as his heart would produce. The brothers sped through the pile in the time it would take him to worry his way uncertainly through a single page. He sighed, and wondered not for the first time what the point of his life had been, now that he had, it seemed, seen the best of it.

They spoke together after that for some time further, mostly Barahir telling the brothers about Beren’s time in the forest with the Drúedain. The two young men shook their heads over that – these were matters quite outside their experience. All in all it was a lot of news to take in.

* * * * *

Choker’s report on the disastrous foray to the South, of which he had been the lone survivor, echoed far up the chains of authority in Central. He might have trembled had he known that it received brief mention at the highest of all levels. As it was, he was called for questioning before potentates whose psychic power made him quake in his boots. After that ordeal they left him alone for a time while the information was chewed over. Choker was very relieved when his next orders were relayed to him by someone nearer to the ranks he was used to. This personage was a rangy, scar-faced Rrrk whom Choker had seen once or twice about the place, but not had previous contact with.

Scar-face looked up from some papers when Choker came in. “I’m proposing new thinking,” the Rrrk said without preamble. “That being, to ignore the southern forests, and concentrate instead on mapping out the settled, open lands. The Command agrees that this is a change of emphasis worth trying. Previous doctrine was, as you may know, to concentrate on the Elves, and thus on the forested areas which they prefer to frequent. However there does not appear to be a strong Elvish presence in these Southlands, whereas the population of human farmers is considerable. Humans have not been viewed as posing any grave threat to our regime and campaign, but this concept is currently under review. In any case it would seem prudent to investigate all possible foes.” The Rrrk stood up and went to gaze out the narrow window of his office, which looked down on a square in which low-ranking Lice were being shoutingly drilled. During this pause, Choker luxuriated in an unaccustomed warmth of spirit. *This* was an officer he would be glad to follow. If only they were all this way!

The Rrrk turned to face him and continued. “This change of thrust in the South matches well with your assessment of the main dangers to scouting parties. We have heard something of these wild wood-haunting humans. All reports agree that they avoid open, settled areas. The farmers who do live in these spaces are, again it is agreed, not greatly to be feared when not under Elvish direction.

“Do you see the difference? The wild men are deadly to small parties of scouts, but are present in such small numbers that they can have no wider military consequence. With the farmers, it is the other way about: they can be scouted in relative safety, but they may have some potential to resist organized invasion. It is the measure of this potential that we must determine.

“Thus, 771, we are going to send you south again. Your picked squad is gone, alas, but we will give you the best replacements we can assemble. This time you are to follow the revised doctrine; that is, you will avoid the wooded areas, concentrating instead on mapping the humans’ distribution, assessing their numbers, their capacity to organize, and gathering any other information about them that you can. We assess the risk of such a foray as not excessive. I therefore can state with some confidence my expectation of seeing you again at what I hope and trust will be an interesting and informative debriefing. That is all. Dismissed.”

Choker had set about the task with more enthusiasm than he had felt for years. *This* was the way it should be done! No more blundering, no more senseless squandering of lives and time!

It was a shame that this foray, too, was to end in disaster – one that would not only claim the lives of all Choker’s squad, but would also destroy both his own hard-won if relatively modest position and status, and that of his erstwhile superior. Choker would escape with his life, it is true; but events would occur on this debacle that would trouble him for the rest of his days.

* * * * *

At the wintry close of that year of 448, at Sunwending, the Bëorings of Ladros held a great feast. From East and West they came, from all the scattered settlements of Dorthonion, slicing their way on sleigh and ski through the first snow of the season. The great Hall of Newfort was bright with fire and loud with talk. Many there had not greeted each other for a long space of years; others had never met at all. Wives gathered in animated discussion of scandals, marriages and births; men stood in sober groups, exchanging laconic news of Orc raids and farming troubles.

Baragund and Belegund had met with their sister, Beleth, the previous day, and the three of them were now keeping close to one another. Beleth’s face wore a light of gladness that those who knew the woman had rarely seen there before.

Many waited eagerly for their chance to greet the brothers, Bregolas’s returned boys. Menelrond was first in line, by right of size, or simply because he was Menelrond. His blue chips of eyes sparkled, his mouth opened wide in his great beard. “Ahh!” he roared. “Come here, the three of you!” Opening his arms, he took Beleth, Baragund and Belegund all together into his powerful embrace. Released again after a moment, the erstwhile captives expanded their cracking ribs with relief and took a grateful breath. “Welcome back from the North!” rumbled Menelrond, beaming down at them.

Beleth smiled. “But cousin, I at least have not been so far away,” she teased.

“I have not seen you in as long,” retorted the big man, “so it is all the same.” He looked behind the brothers to where their wives were holding slightly back. “By the Powers, lads, are these your partners? I see faces who will make a stir among us! Once boys here get to know there is such beauty hidden in the North, why, we won’t keep many of them, I’ll be bound. But will you not introduce me?”

Rhasûl and Faelind were named and led forward. Belegund at least had feared their large cousin might mete out unseemly embraces to the women, but the big man surprised them by bowing low over Rhasûl’s hand, then Faelind’s, and in bidding them most courteous welcome.

Then it was the turn of Menelrond’s own family. Glifinnath embraced all three siblings as warmly as her husband had done, only one at a time. Gilach thumped each brother on the back while clutching their hand in a grip of steel. They were greeted by Gildor; then by Gilraen, glowing in the first happiness of her marriage to the man whose arm she held, whom she named to them as Alagos. More connections still were crowding around now.

Beleth had retreated a little, having no taste for such extended and effusive salutations. She found herself standing near to Barahir and Emeldir. She knew them at once, although she had not seen them since she left, ten years before, to take up service with the Fair Folk. Like many, she was shocked at how much they had aged in the meantime. Her brothers had already marked the changes in Barahir, which Beleth in her turn now took in with a feeling of sadness, almost of grief; but the case with Emeldir was even worse. The red-haired woman had been one of those people whom one instinctively feels are unbreakable; now, no longer.

Barahir from his side remembered his niece as a blithe, merry, active girl. In the meantime Beleth had filled out, appeared infinitely tougher, and was browned from much outdoor service. Her face exhibited a surface cheer, but unhappiness lay not far beneath. Obvious, too, was the absence of any consort.

“I will not try to out-Menelrond my cousin,” Barahir said to his niece, taking her hand in a warm clasp.

“That would indeed be difficult,” she replied, smiling. “It is good to see you, Uncle, after so many years.”

When it was Emeldir’s turn, she placed her hands on the firm shoulders of the younger woman and gazed into her face. Grief recognized grief perhaps; in any case the two tall women embraced and held each other tightly for a long moment. When they released, unaccustomed moisture twinkled in Emeldir’s sky-blue eyes. She wiped at them impatiently. “We shall not speak of the past,” she said to Beleth. “Only of the future. What course do you plan now, fellow woman of the bow?”

Beleth’s grey eyes met hers. “I do not know,” the younger woman said, shaking her head. “Quite honestly, I do not know.”

The bell rang then to call the company to table. Beleth smiled at them in apology. “I must sit near Father,” she said.

“We can talk more later,” said Barahir, “if it would please you as much as it would surely please us. Come, Beleth, talk with us. Perhaps we can all of us thus better see our way forward.”

Table-valets skilfully led each person to their allotted place. The Bëorings, unaccustomed as they mostly were to trappings of rank, were not so very sensitive of precedence, and most accepted their position with more or less of a cheerful willingness to be pleased. There was only the chance to be borne, as with all such arrangements, of landing near to someone disliked, or between dull and unprofitable neighbours. The table was too wide, and the general level of noise too high, for conversation across its width to be practical. Therefore those who had bad luck with their table companions shrugged internally and prepared to turn their attention to the food.

Before the commencement of service, a horn sounded in the Hall, and a herald’s voice rang out over the subsiding talk: “Pray rise for the Landholder of Ladros!”

In a thunder of chairs being pushed back, the rows of people rose to stand. All eyes were fixed on the door; no-one now was speaking. The old, old man appeared, walking very slowly, clutching the arm of his tall son and heir, Bregolas. He was helped with some difficulty onto his seat at the head of the table. Cushions were placed around him, and a servant stood close behind him on either side, ready to spring to his support.

Bregolas leaned in to his father from his place at his right hand and whispered something inaudible in the old man’s ear. Bregor nodded with a jerky motion, looked up, and visibly tried to pull together the threads in his mind. He peered vaguely around at the company. In the waiting silence, his weak voice sounded. “Kinsmen, kinswomen, sons and daughters of Bëor,” he trembled. “Be welcome in my house. Hum, ah. Your house. You are very, ah... I bid you...” he trailed off into blankness, mumbling at his gums.

Bregolas looked up, nodded to the Hall-major. The servitors busied themselves, and soon steaming and fragrant plates began to be carried into the Hall. People were sitting down again, one by one, a little uncertainly. Voices rose in subdued talk.

Andreth was seated at Bregor's left hand, with Barahir on her left, followed by Hirwen, then Emeldir, then Gilwen.

Andreth peered down the table while tasting the soup. She leaned towards Barahir. "Can you name me the people?" she said to him. "My eyes fail me these days. All I can see is a blur." Barahir did her bidding, and the old lady nodded as the names came, one after the other.

"I do not recognize the man sitting next to Gildor," said Barahir, when he had got so far.

"Rather an ugly sort?" asked Andreth. "Head like a bun?"

Barahir smiled. "He fits that picture, yes."

"Ah," said Andreth, "that will be Gildor's particular friend, Urioc."

"His *particular* friend?" repeated her nephew.

Andreth snorted. "Do not tell me you have never met with this difference," she said. "Not even you could be so provincial."

"I have met one or two such," admitted Barahir. "In women, too. But it passes my wit to understand how a man can prefer another man."

"Then it is your wit that is lacking," replied his aunt waspishly. "People differ. Men and women differ. Would you call me strange, because I prefer some strong, forceful man, with the wonderful warm man-smell on him, and a firm, well-shaped backside to admire as he walks away? Rather than some soft, bulgy good-for-nothing such as you men, most of you men, dote to swoon over? What does your wit say to that?"

Barahir eyed her with affection. "You should leave that wine alone, Aunt," he teased. "I fear it may be a little strong. Joking aside, I would say, it is natural in woman to feel so, as it is natural for we men to prefer the curves, satin skin, and perfume of a woman."

"Nature is as nature finds," retorted Andreth. "I cannot make out Gildor and his partner at this distance. But I am sure if you look, you whose eyes are so very much sharper than his wits, you will observe that they care for one another no less deeply than any other couple. Look at that, and tell me again what is natural and what is not."

Barahir took covert glances at the pair. "Aye, true," he admitted at last.

"It is not the body that matters, but the spirit," said Andreth. "I am surprised to have to teach you that at your age."

On the far side of the table, Faelind leaned towards her countrywoman's ear. "How like you the South so far, Sister?" she asked in the language of their homeland.

"Too many trees," replied Rhasûl. "They call it the Pine Mountain, but it seems to my eyes to be all pine and very little mountain. This is tame country here. Tame, but not rich. We have better in both respects at home. Still, there may be some good rides to be found after the snow clears." She surveyed the people sitting opposite with a sceptical eye. "As for the men: I think I have the best of them."

"Yet there are some men of good face and figure," said her wed-sister, looking in the same direction. "Women, too."

"I doubt this old lord will last out the year," remarked Rhasûl. "That will bring changes. His sister there has been used to rule through him; but she is in for a rude shock." A touch of spite coloured her voice.

"I liked her," said Faelind.

The older woman glanced at her wed-sister with amused tolerance. "You like everybody. No, to my mind she is one of these hall-bodies, ever sitting indoors, ever talking and plotting. Such are not to my taste. I misdoubt she has forgotten the feel of a horse's back between her legs – or anything else between them, either. Dried-up old sourpuss."

Faelind let this crudity pass without comment. "Legi is unhappy with the way things go here," she said.

"Baragund too," said Rhasûl. "As for me, I cannot judge these questions, but it is doubtless a great fuss made over matters of small import. Men will always argue over this and that detail of armour and tactics. But this new wed-father of ours, what's his name, Bregolas, he will rule with a firm hand when his time comes, so much is clear to see. And better a ruler who stirs about and knows what a sword is for, than some old hall-harpy who does neither. No, I cannot see that the change of rule will be any great matter of grief."

The younger woman chose not to pursue this topic either. "I had hoped, in this new land, that we would be further from Him," she said, nodding to the North, with her meaning plain to perceive. "For the safety of the children. But it seems we have only drawn something of a circle, and we find Him now to the North, rather than the East, and not much further away than before."

Rhasûl shrugged. "We have chewed on this before," she said. "You know my view. There is no final safety. Yet things have been quiet now for many lives of men. The heart should not quail even in direst danger; but there is not even reason in fearing danger where there is presently none to see."

"Perhaps you are right," replied Faelind meekly. Her other neighbour addressing her then, she turned to converse with him. It was some minutes before she had opportunity to speak again with her countrywoman. "Do you know what I miss most of all?" she murmured into her tall sister's ear. "There are no Fair Folk here." Her fine features were wistful.

"I am with you there," said Rhasûl soberly. "It is a great absence, a vacancy. Indeed I wonder at it greatly."

* * * * *

The returned brothers were careful and noncommittal during the whole of the winter, avoiding any debate with their father about the army. Indeed, they had enough on their hands with settling in their families. There was living space enough in the Hall, but they all wanted a place of their own, away from the atmosphere in the Hall, which was always fusty and sometimes tense. In the new year they planned to take up a farm in the same enclosure as Menelrond's, the big man having made this offer at Sunwending. He had told them that he could do with the help, since of his children, only Gildor was still at home.

The matter of Bregolas's army came to a head with the first Dwarf-shipment of spring. Two weeks after the roads had dried enough to be passable, a convoy of several carts was reported from the small fort on Lasthill². It made its steady way along the road into the valley and appeared at last at the gates of Newfort. As soon as Bregolas had word of its arrival, he gathered up his sons, who were still at that time living in the Hall, and hurried with them down the still-muddy street to the Gate-square. When Baragund asked him what it was all about, his father just shook his head and grinned.

The wagons had been drawn up on one side of the square and many of the Dwarves were busy rinsing the dust of travel from their throats with beer from the tavern. A considerable crowd of onlookers had gathered to goggle at the wagons, whose loads were covered and thus only to be guessed-at.

The overseer, a square-built Dwarf with a great bush of dark beard, came over to greet the men as they came up to the train.

"Galín!" cried Bregolas to the Dwarf, coming briskly up to him and reaching down to shake his hand effusively. "Is it come?"

2 At the entrance to the Vale of Ladros, at the north-eastern extremity of Dorthonion.

“See!” replied the Dwarf, reaching to the corner of a nearby wagon and flipping up the canvas on one corner.

Bregolas peered in and said “Ahah!” He reached into the wagon and drew forth a high, mirror-polished helm, made after the same pattern as those of his existing troop. He turned and brandished this to his sons. “Now we can really make a start,” he said to them with enthusiasm. Turning back to the Dwarf he said, “It’s as we agreed? Four hundred full sets? With swords?”

“Yes,” said Galin. “Yours as soon as you open your storehouse to us.”

In a short while matters were in hand. One of Bregolas’s retainers took Galin off to inspect the trade-goods earlier agreed on. The wagons would rotate: as each was unloaded at the Hall, it would proceed to the storehouse and load up with flour, cloth and leather.

Baragund rooted around in the contents of a wagon for himself. He brought out one of the wide-shouldered, black-lacquered pieces. He examined it on both sides, hefted it, tried the flex, then passed it wordlessly to his brother. He climbed down then and looked in the other carts until he found one carrying swords, one of which he then pulled out. He sighted along the blade, felt the edge, and made some experimental passes with it.

Two carts had already rattled off when a disturbance occurred in the crowd at the edge of the square. People pulled hastily to one side to reveal the furious approach of the figure of Andreth. She looked around until she caught sight of Bregolas, then hobbled over to him.

“What is this?” she shouted. “What have you done?”

“Ah! And a good morning to you too, Aunt,” replied Bregolas in cheerful tones. “I was wondering if you would show up. In your state of age and health I think I would rather have stayed away from the chill morning air, but you know your own business best.”

“None of your cursed cheek, dolt,” she spat. “Explain yourself!” With that she lashed out and swiped the big man on the leg with her stick.

“Ow!” he said, and swore. “That hurt!” As she went to hit him again, he caught the stick and twisted it out of her hand. Then he had to catch her arm to steady her. “Now don’t be tiresome, Aunt. This is nothing that need concern you. I have just bought some military stores, that’s all.”

She shook his hand free. Her dark eyes were flashing fire and there were twin spots of colour on her cheekbones. “Give me back my staff.”

Bregolas wagged a finger in her face. “Only if you agree to be reasonable, and not hit me with it,” he said.

She fumed for a moment, undecided; then she raised her chin and bared her teeth at him. “Hit you?” she hissed. “I will take your head off with it next time!”

He shrugged. “Then no staff. Shall I have one of my men escort you back?”

“Forget the damned stick,” shouted the old woman. “Answer my questions. Does not concern me? I do not care how you gaud your pack of swaggering wall-proppers; that is indeed no concern of mine. But the stores are! How much have you spent? I see twelve wagons here, twelve wagons!”

“Sixteen,” he grinned. “Some are loading already.”

“Loading with our meal, our stores! You will clean us out! What if we have a bad harvest? You purblind fool. Why have I not been told of this?”

“So much excitement!” said Bregolas, making quenching motions with his hands. “Come now, Aunt, calm yourself. You will do yourself a mischief. Now, we have been over this before, have we not? Why should you

expect to be told? You do not rule here.” He leaned forward, his expression hardening. “In point of fact, nobody is obliged to ask your permission for anything. Anything at all.”

Andreth stood up straight. Her fire turned to ice. “Has the Lord given permission?”

He shrugged. “Father is old, and muddled. I did not want to trouble him with the matter. And do you know what, Aunt?” His eyes turned cold. “He will be dead very soon. Then I shall be lord, and all your objections will be so much fluff on the wind. So, what do a few weeks, a few months matter? The sooner you get used to the situation, the wiser for you.”

She stared at him a while. “We shall see,” she said at last. “We shall see how much it matters. I go now to the Lord, and if he will listen to me he will summon you to council, and if you do not come? Why then,” she spat, “I will have you cast in irons, as a renegade.” She turned to the two brothers, who had been standing by looking acutely uncomfortable. “You both shall also come. Now, I pray one of you boys give me your arm, in lieu of my staff.”

“No!” said Bregolas. “They both stay here. I need them.”

Neither Baragund nor Belegund moved, although the difficulty of the decision was plain to read on their features. Andreth stared at them without expression. “So, so,” she muttered to herself. She turned then and beckoned to one of her own retainers. Without another word, she clasped the man’s arm and hobbled wearily back up the street. The bystanders turned uneasily back to their business, most of them feeling shocked at what they had just witnessed.

A little later that day, Bregolas was just concluding matters with Galin when a man-at-arms came trotting down the high street into the square. He came up to Bregolas and saluted. “The Lord of Ladros bids you come to council, master,” he said, looking nervous.

“So she managed to squeeze it out of the old dotard!” remarked Bregolas to his sons. He turned back to the soldier. “I will be there directly,” he said.

The man swallowed. “Sir,” he stammered, “he said, they said, that you was to return on the instant, sir, with me that is. And if you would not come, I was to fetch my squad and, er, take you. Sorry sir, that’s what they said.”

Bregolas smiled silkily. “Did they really!” he said. “Well, if you put it that way, I suppose I have no choice but to comply.” Nevertheless he turned back to Galin and discussed a few closing matters with him and some of his own retainers while the soldier sweated and fidgeted. Just as the man was about to open his mouth again, Bregolas turned to him. “I am ready now,” he said, smiling at the man. “Come, boys, let us see what jolly surprises Aunt has prepared for us.”

Entering the bed chamber, Bregolas found not only Andreth beside the bed, but also Barahir. The two brothers locked eyes for an instant.

Bregolas inclined his head a trifle. “Brother. I did not expect you, although perhaps I should have. You must have ridden very quickly.”

“I was coming anyway, on other business,” said Barahir. “The messenger found me on the road.”

“What luck!” said Bregolas. “Well, I am always happy to see you, of course. But shall we dispense with business first? It would not do to waste Father’s energy on idle chit-chat; and Aunt has had a tiring morning, I know.”

“As you wish,” said Barahir shortly.

Bregolas turned to his father. “You summoned me, my lord,” he said smoothly, with a short bow. “What is

your command?”

Andreth leaned over the wizened figure in the bed. “Tell him!” she hissed. “Tell what we agreed!”

Bregor turned his head slowly in her direction and focussed his eyes with difficulty on her face. “Thank you,” he quavered. “I would like some, yes.”

“Tell Bregolas what we agreed!” she shouted directly in his ear. “About the grain!”

The old man looked confused. “Grain?” he faltered. “I don’t... I haven’t...”

“Tell Bregolas,” she said, enunciating each word clearly and separately, “he must not spend all our stores. Tell him!”

“Aunt,” Bregolas broke in, “please. I must ask you to stop. This scene is becoming just too ridiculous. Can you not see that Father is past deciding such matters?”

She sat up, looking grim. “Then it must go before the family. I insist.”

Barahir said, “Shall we send for Hirwen and Gilwen?”

“Do not be ridiculous,” Bregolas replied. He shrugged slightly. “Everyone who matters is here. Shall we vote then, as we are? A formality, just to satisfy you? I believe we all know the arguments, no need to go over them again. A show of hands?”

“Just a minute,” Andreth said. She turned to Baragund and Belegund, who were sitting beside their father, looking unhappy. “We have never yet raised this matter before the two of you. We thought we did right not to speak of it; but now we can no longer do so. The issue is this: your uncle here and I,” indicating Barahir, “do not agree with the way your father trains or equips his soldiers. As a difference of opinion it might not matter so much; but he buys equipment from the Dwarves, equipment that we think is not worth its price.”

Bregolas broke in, “Come now, Aunt, do you really think you are qualified to judge that?”

“Be quiet,” she said. She turned back to the brothers. “Until now he has been held in rein. Until today. But now I am told he has spent the best part of our store of grain, our insurance against bad times, to buy a whole load of this worthless metal. You two have military experience – more than me! – and you have had the winter now to judge of your father’s methods. Now it has come to the crunch. You must decide. How say you?”

There was a grim look in Baragund’s eye. He looked at his brother. “Shall I speak for both?” he asked him quietly.

“Aye, Brother, do. I know we think the same.”

“Well, Aunt,” said the Soldier. His face was set in hard lines. “We learned many things while we were away. And one of the things we learned was to find out truly where one’s duty lies; and once found, to stick to it like glue.”

Barahir looked at his feet. He had a glum feeling he knew where this was headed.

Andreth’s own features were no less hard. “Are you telling me you will vote for this folly?” she rasped.

Baragund shrugged slightly. “Our duty is to support our father.”

Bregolas sat back, looking fiercely triumphant. “An obedient son is worth his weight in rubies,” he said smugly. He shot a glance at Barahir. “I best you there, Brother, I believe,” he said, the sneer plain to hear in his voice.

Andreth narrowed her eyes at him. “You are a low hound, to wound your brother so,” she hissed.

Something seemed to snap in Bregolas. He leaned forward, purple in the face, and smashed his fist on the arm of his chair. “Do not flap your tongue in my face, witch!” he shouted. “I shall have you locked up as a madwoman, if you tempt me to it!”

The old man in the bed started at the noise. He clutched his chest, looking wildly from side to side. Andreth glanced at him in frustrated concern, then turned her savage glance back to her nephew. “You will be the one to be locked up,” she spat at him in a furious whisper. “I will have the guard –” But here she was stopped by Barahir’s hand on her arm.

“No,” he said. “Leave it, Aunt. We’ve lost. Time to go.”

“See, Andreth?” said Bregolas, sneering openly now. “Even Barahir understands these matters better than you. He knows it would mean blood running in the gutters of Newfort if you tried to call the guard. *Our* blood, the blood of our people. But Brother also knows I would win, and he knows your neck would be the one to be stretched, yes as a renegade; and possibly his own too. So I should get out now while you still can, if I were you.”

Andreth glared at him, and at the two young brothers. Without another word she stood up and left the room with Barahir. A short moment after that, scared retainers crept in and huddled quickly to the side of the distressed old man in the bed.

Bregolas stretched his legs and sighed. “Ah well. Perhaps we are making progress at last. Come, boys, let us away and share a cup together. It has been a weary day.” He stood up and stretched now his shoulders.

The brothers stood as well, but Baragund fixed his father with a distinctly unfriendly look.

“Yes, Father,” he said, “we must talk. But there will be no cup.”

Bregolas raised his eyebrows. Hearing the hard tone in his son’s voice, reading his stiff posture, he felt suddenly uncertain. “More talk?” he said. “Well... if you wish it...” He went with them to his own chambers, poured himself a cup of wine, raised the flask questioningly to the brothers, then placed it again on the table when they both shook their heads. He sat down and looked them over.

“Well, what is on your minds?” he said.

Baragund looked at his brother. “You can say it better than I,” he said.

The Greencloak’s usually cheerful features were stamped with disapproval; a deep glint of anger smouldered in his eye. “I have to tell you, Father, and I know Brother feels the same way, that we are... that we are unhappy to the last degree with what we have just witnessed.”

Bregolas glowered at him. “You made your choice,” he said angrily. “Would you now go back on it?”

“No, sir,” said Belegund. “Brak spoke of duty. You are our father; our duty is to support you, in public. That we undertake to do. In private, we feel ourselves free to express our disapproval. Our very profound disapproval.”

“You are insolent,” said Bregolas.

“No, sir, I am not,” said the younger man.

“Either you are with me, or you rebel,” growled his father. “You boys need to realize that. And if you are with me, you must obey my commands. Preferably without so much bleating.”

“We are not boys any more,” retorted his younger son with some heat. “We are men. We have learned and

seen much; we have commanded men ourselves. We have voices, and they will not be silenced. In respect of your treatment just now of family, our family too, and no caitiff members of it either, but people most worthy of honour; why, I found it simply shameful. Do I speak for you too, Brother?"

"You do," said Baragund. "Matters must not go on like that, Father. They shall not."

Bregolas sat up, a look of white fury on his face. "You will not speak to me in this way," he said.

"Someone must," said the Greencloak. "To bring you to some sense of propriety and reason." The contempt in his voice was plain to hear.

"You insolent pup!" his father shouted. "I will have you whipped!"

"I advise you not to try, Father," retorted the Soldier.

Bregolas, red-faced, was about to speak more furious words, but the expression on Baragund's face made him choke them back. He looked over his eldest son uneasily, taking in again what a large and formidable man he had grown into.

Instead he sloshed more wine in his cup, slamming the flagon savagely back on the table. "I do not know what it is you want of me," he said sulkily. "If I sat back like a milk-toast, nothing would get done. I am sorry Father is old and dying, but I did not make it so, and I can do nothing to hinder it. And if you knew how Andreth has thwarted me over the years you would appreciate better my forbearance, my extreme forbearance, in leaving that bag of spite, that shrew, that wrinkled crow, untouched and free."

"But they are right, Father, and you are wrong."

Bregolas stiffened, the red rising again in his face.

"What? By heaven, you try me very hard," he growled. "Are you my blood or not?"

"Of the others as much as yours," said his younger son, "but blood has nothing to do with it. Right is right and wrong is wrong. Baragund and I disagree fundamentally, in almost every aspect, with the training and equipment of your men. We believe that the things they are learning, and the things you make them wear and wield, would in any kind of real battle serve only to get them killed. Aunt was right: the money you are spending is wasted."

"Now I did not expect this from you, at all," fumed Bregolas. "Have you not paid attention to what you have seen? But wait – we have been restricted in our training in the winter months, that is it. Wait til you see the new squads perform. You'll change your minds!"

Both brothers shook their heads. "No."

"Barahir has cozened you!" he flung at them. A sneer pulled at his lips. "As if that furrow-grubber would know anything about soldiering."

"No," said Baragund, shaking his head. "Barahir has been a mirror of honour. He has told us nothing of his opinions, and he told us why he wouldn't tell us. All we know is the obvious fact that you and he are not in accord."

"Father," said Belegund, "we have seen battle for ourselves. We both bear the scars of it. Indeed I wager we have seen more of such things than *you*, Father. We don't need to ask Barahir for opinions, we're perfectly capable of forming our own on the question. Which we have. We've discussed this. So there you have it: we'll support you in public, if pressed to it. You are our father, and we owe you that duty. We will not see you shamed. But nothing you can say or do will induce us to have any part in this... in this nonsense game you are playing with your troops. We want nothing to do with it."

Bregolas stood up, his face white and closed. "You will leave this house, the pair of you, without delay," he said coldly. "You are more like to weasels than sons. I had almost rather lost to that scheming witch than won under such terms. Get out, both of you. Go!"

Surprise and exasperation in different blend marked the faces of the brothers.

"Come, Father," began Baragund, "don't be ridiculous."

The big man leaned forward, bared his teeth. "If you do not leave this instant, I will call my guards, and have you both run out at the point of a sword. Do you wish it?"

Perceiving clearly that their father was beyond reason for this time, the brothers saw nothing else to do. Although both were seething with contempt and outrage, they bowed stiffly to him and left the room.

Bregolas let himself down in the chair again with a thump. He sat on there frowning, biting his nails and drinking, while the day slowly darkened around him.

* * * * *

Artanis much preferred the free airs of the forest, and the company of none but Melian and Lúthien, but necessity and courtesy obliged her from time to time to consort with other subjects of the King, or even to converse or dine with Thingol himself.

It was at one such meal that Artanis's stifled impatience at the narrow talk of the court, so much less meaningful than the sound of the wind in the branches, and at the gleaming gold and silver, so tawdry next to the tender beauty of leaf and flower, was diverted by the entrance of a messenger. The herald whispered first to the door-wards, who allowed him then to the side of the King.

"News, Lathron?" said Thingol. "May I hope it is good?"

"It is good, Sire," replied the messenger, flushed in the face. "Celeborn has routed the forces east of the Mountains. That land is clean now of enemies, so that the people of the wood may return as and when they will, and pursue their lives in peace."

"Gods send that it may long remain so," said Thingol. "And what of the hurt on our side?"

Lathron's face grew graver. "Hard enough," he said. He lowered his voice. "The names are written in this billet," he murmured. "I suppose my lord does not desire that I speak them out in this company?"

"No," said the King, "your thought is good. Give me the paper, here. I will pass on the ill tidings where I must."

There followed details of the engagement, and the tactics used, which held small interest for Artanis. She turned to Lúthien, who sat beside her. "Who is this Celeborn?" she asked the grey-eyed beauty in a low voice.

"Oh, he is very beautiful," replied the maid, her eyes sparkling. "He is my cousin. Or Father's, or something. He is always off fighting the monsters in Outland, which is a shame, because he is great fun."

* * * * *

Once he had descended from the mountains of Tumunzahar, Beren's joy in once more being among the living things of the earth grew boundless. Again and again he had to halt his pony and wander among the trees by the roadside, running his hands over bark and through leaves, and taking in deep breaths of the pure air. Rain caught him betimes on the road, but he only laughed and let the clean water run down his head. He would often break into song: sometimes trying to recall some of the beauty of the elvish melodies he had heard, at others singing some rhyme he had learned in very early days at his mother's knee.

The pony took a dim view of all this and called him a fool, or worse. Little Beren cared.

However, as the days of the journey increased, his joy diminished a little. A feeling began to grow on him almost of dissatisfaction, of incompleteness; of an expectation not quite fulfilled. His heart seemed to be seeking something in the woods that it was not finding.

The truth of it, what he realized at last, was that he no longer seemed quite to fit in the wild lands. As soon as this thought came to him, the songs stopped and he grew pensive.

He was far from home – that was doubtless the reason. Things would be different when he came to his own country.

He had no map and was not entirely certain of the way, only that it led north after the Ford of Stones. He reached this ford on Gelion on the fourth day, having passed through the tolls with no complications.

The unease he felt at the Ford was undiminished, so he hurried the protesting pony over the shallows. Was it the battle Akhal had told him of? Or was there some other reason? Shuddering, he turned away. He had no reason to believe he would ever see the place again, so he was happy enough to leave things unexplained; if forgoing the satisfaction of knowing was the price for leaving it far behind him, then he held it cheap.

Despite such slight shadows on his spirit, he savoured all things that he saw and heard, and did not hurry. The wide horizon was a constant pleasure to him; he could sit on the pony and watch the shadows of the clouds creep over the downlands for hours, or close his eyes and listen to the high, pure song of the lark as it trickled down from the airy heights above.

It was a lonely road. He passed occasional Dwarvish traders, but other Men he saw only at rare intervals, and usually then just a herd-youth riding one of his beasts. He met no Elves in all the wide lands after the toll station.

One morning he spied the dark tops of trees in the distance as he walked with the pony over a crest. The memory rushed back to him of a secret place, shadowed in winter; and he resolved this time to make a proper visit, now that his days were his own to spend.

He had forgotten how mighty were the trees of this forest. Even the outriders, the first ranks, stretched their farthest fingers up to a great height in the sky. He hobbled the pony in a grassy clearing at the eaves of the wood and walked slowly into its depths, using all the senses of mind and body to take in its fullness.

Beren wandered in Nan Elmoth, lost in wonder, the whole day. Faint stars were showing in the blue evening sky before he found the clearing again.

A snort and a dim shape revealed the pony to him. “There you are!” the beast said. “I thought you had lost yourself in that dark hole.”

“Don’t speak of it like that,” replied the boy mildly. “It is not evil.”

“Well there’s no grass in there, so much is plain to anybody with a nose,” said the pony, with the air of one bringing out a telling argument. But Beren only sighed once more and went to light a fire.

On the journey down, three years previously, the weather in the early part had been so dismal, and Beren had been so lost in his own misery, that he had not paid much attention to the lie of the land; for this reason he took it in now with extra interest. After he left Elmoth and had forded Celon, the open lands rose before him in wide folds to a rolling plateau. This was a silent land of cool winds, with few signs of life to be seen but rabbits and the occasional eagle.

A day dawned at last on which Beren descried the faint blue shapes of mountains on the horizon ahead. As he rode on, so these grew darker and more defined, taking on form and character. He found that the path led

towards a cleft in that wall. Closer to, the ranges on either side proved different. Those on the right hand side were better described as hills, being rounded and green; but on the left he could detect the ragged line of blue and white which marked the true heights. These were the domain of ice and rock, the high places where no-one came, where no voices were to be heard save those of the wind. In that direction he was looking at the outer fences of Dorthonion, his home; and at the thought, a thrill ran through his heart.

In two more days the path had led him to the foot of the high country. On the left, all passage was blocked by unscalable cliffs which climbed like a giant's staircase into the cloudy heights behind. The path he was following curved slowly to the right, curling around a vast mound of rock. On top of this hill he could make out a great fortress – Elvish from the look of it. Lights glimmered from many windows in the gathering dusk, and colourful banners waved from its towers and battlements. As he rode around this loop in the road, a greater light and space of receding perspectives emerged steadily from behind the shoulder of the hill. This retreat of the horizon seemed to indicate a rift in the mountains which offered further passage.³

With a wondering eye for all that he could see, the boy walked slowly with his horse around the base of the fortified hill. He had no memory of the place from the journey down, but on that occasion he had been wet, and cold, and miserable. He shivered again at the memories of the lonely days spent huddled, wordless, under the dank canvas, bumping together with the alien Dwarves, as the monotonous rain fell from the skies.

He encountered further forts and camps at intervals along the road. Arriving at the narrowest place in the pass, he found that gap spanned by a sturdy wall, through which the path led under a wide arch, torch-lit now in the gloaming. The stout wooden gates lay open; several Elvish guards in bright mail stood on each side, standing easy, but keeping alert. They said no word to the traveller, but nodded greeting. One or two raised a friendly hand.

Once through the arch, he found there were actually two walls; he had not reached open country as he had expected, only the enclosure between them. On one side of this court stood a well-lit, low building. The sounds of singing which emerged from it, together with other signs, made its nature clear. On impulse Beren turned that way – some company, a mug of ale and a bed would make a pleasant change.

Once the pony was settled in the adjoining stables, Beren entered the main building. Ears, eyes and nose all guided him unerringly to the common room. There he found a company more mixed than any he had yet seen: all three of the major races of Middle-earth made part of it, and there were even tables of mixed company.

Beren enjoyed the evening, but since nothing much of note happened on it, we will just savour the hot food and the warmth of the fire with him, share his pleasure at the songs, stretch out luxuriously with him in the soft bed, then go our ways with him in the morning.

The country opened out again on the far side of the wall. Pines cloaked the hills on the left; the first Beren had seen for some time. He rejoiced at the sight of their dark ranks. He was almost home!

Two days later, having rounded Lasthill, he found the wide valley of Ladros open before him. Beren had to stop a moment to take it all in. Home! After so long. He could scarcely believe it.

Some little way along the path into the valley, he was attacked by a feeling of shyness and hesitation. Where should he go? He had not thought on it. His whole thought had been concentrated on reaching the land of his birth; just what he would do after he reached it was a question that had not occurred to his mind.

Nose. He would seek out his foster-father first, settle back into the old ways for a comfortable space, and then he would see.

But what to do with the blasted pony? Leave it at the inn, his thought told him. Along with these clothes and all the other truck.

3 The pass of Aglon.

Thus he hurried past Newfort in the dusk with his cloak pulled over his head. He camped furtively in a thicket that night and went on his way quickly in the morning. He passed the path to Angrod's tower, then Menelrond's locality; passed them by with no more than a glance. People who met him on the road looked at him curiously, for he cut something of a strange figure – a human youngster, unaccountably clad Dwarfish.

The inn looked just the same, although somehow almost smaller. He looked at the row of windows, thought of the Dwarf-girl he had glimpsed there, years ago now, and grinned. He had learned a thing or two in the meantime and he believed now that he understood that matter a little better.

Zalta also looked shorter, but as she measured him with round and unbelieving eyes, he realized that it was he who had grown. Indeed her first remark was a mention of the fact.

“Well, you may just about knock me down and drag me out for the cat to lick,” she continued. “It's never anything but surprises with you, master Beren! Here, come straight away into the back room and tell me all your news. If you don't mind? I'll feed you directly, but I must hear how you survived that dreadful Yg. I'd given you up for lost, really I had.” She turned to one of her helpers. “Irma! Mind the bar a minute or two, will you dear?” With that she grasped the boy's arm and pulled him into a small room used as an office. “Sit down, sit down!” she said. “Now tell me! Have you been with the Dwarves all this time, or where?”

While he told her a little about his time in the City under the Mountain, her eyes grew rounder and rounder. When the boy was finished, Zalta shook her head. “Well I never!” she said. “I never would have taken him for a prince. All right, from the airs he gave himself, maybe. But I saw that Elf-lord once, Finrod as they call him. *There* was a prince.” She sighed. “And handsome! I could have melted at his feet. Happened I to be that way inclined, so to speak. But he'd never be looking at such as me, not in that way, so kind and gracious even as he was.”

“Don't you have a man, Zalta?” asked Beren, before he could hold his tongue. But she only laughed, and said he was welcome to find out if he could, but he would not do so through *her*, he could be certain of *that*.

He left his pony and things with Zalta as he planned and set out the next day clad only in a piece of cloth wound about his loins. He had no idea where his old leather clout had got to, nor his bows and other Druug gear either. But as he stood there in the morning air, straining his ears for any note of the drums he had not yet heard, an uncomfortable realization stole over him.

He felt cold. He actually felt cold! Had he never felt cold, all those years running around half-naked in the forest? He could not remember feeling so. But now he definitely was. The twigs and grass underfoot pricked his tender feet, and the bushes had scratched his skin already. Worst of all, he was growing hungry.

Grimly, he realized at last what he should perhaps have expected: his years in Tumunzahar learning the hard trade of swordsman had left him soft and ill-prepared for the perhaps equally hard life of a Druug in the woods. He had some catching up to do, so much was clear. He hoped fervently that it would not take him as long to re-learn his old habits and skills as it had taken to acquire them in the first place.

Feeding his belly was going to be a problem with no bow. Well, he would just have to forage until he could make another, or at least make some snares. And where were the damn drums? Never a sound of one had he heard yet.

Four days later he walked sore-footed into Nose's encampment. His own vexation matched the amusement of some of the people there, both having the same source: that they had heard his approach.

But that did not matter. They were his people, and they surrounded him, laughing and clapping him on the shoulder. He found he was much of a height with the largest of them now.

And there was Nose, looking older, but embracing him warmly, pounding him on the back, followed by Sunshine in her turn; but who was this behind them?

The moment Beren took in the pert brown cones on Long Hair's chest, and the curve of her hip and thigh, he knew with certainty that he had already known the last time he and she would curl up together under a fur. That first glance seemed to stamp her figure on his mind like a cattle-brand. He had to look away, but he wanted to look back. Things inside him were stirring that he had never felt before.

Long Hair was as shy as he. "There you are again, Speaks with Birds," she said, smiling tremulously behind her hair. "Or is it Clumper who has returned to us?"

"Seems to be," he admitted. "I got soft among those damned Dwarves. Hello, Hairy, it's good to see you again." They embraced at last, shyly, with no contact below the shoulders. The warm smell of her in his nostrils fired his blood most strangely.

Later he sat with them by the fire, while Sunshine prepared one of her famous brews. "I can't stay," he told them, not revealing that his original intention had been to do exactly that. "Not this time, anyway. I just stopped by to... well, to say hello. To say I am back, and to hear the news, you know." He finished awkwardly.

The next day he got away as quickly as he could. As he hurried back through the forest, a darkness lay on his heart. He felt lost, displaced. He did not know any longer where he belonged. All through those years in the strange stony city he had consoled himself with the thought that his loneliness and longing were temporary, that he would one day be released, be able to go home.

Now he was for the first time tasting the bitter truth that there is sometimes no longer a home to go to.

Goracc. At least he would pay his respects to the old raven.

He found him still alive, but too weak to get out of his box.

Goracc was full of joy at the sight of him. "Long-egg of Boromir," he wheezed, "how the sight of your face gladdens my eye. I have thought much on you in the airy days and through the cold nights. Oh, many times have I thought on you. I have wondered how you were living down there in the South, among those wood-shy people who value only lifeless metal and stone, so strange they are. But you have survived, and I hope you have no scathe? How is your spirit? Did they wound you, did they lay scars on my chick? I so feared it."

"I am not sure, Goracc," said Beren slowly. "I thought I had escaped them without scathe; and they are not all so hard either, the Dwarves. Friendship I had there, even love. The burdens that were laid on me were, I thought, nothing I could not shrug off again; but now I am not sure."

Goracc was silent a while. "I had feared it," he said. "If you will tear a part of yourself away, it is not so easy to put it back again."

"I don't think it was me who did the tearing," said Beren.

Neither said anything for some breaths.

"My chick," said the raven after the pause, "glad I am to see you returned, since I must soon leave this life. I know I cannot help you, even had I the life of the Eldar; for each of us must make his own path in life. But still, companionship and guidance are worth much. Mine you must, I fear, shortly lose. Indeed you come back just in time: I doubt I will see another moon. Say farewell to me now, and come not back. It is best."

With tears running unregarded down his face, Beren said, "Go then in peace, most honoured and venerable counsellor and friend. Find the skies where you may fly free."

"May you find peace," croaked Goracc. "Go now and fly your path, Long-egg of Boromir. But remember me."

* * * * *

Andreth had not shown her face much since being bested by her nephew. She had abandoned all her former cares: the management of the house fell now on the shoulders of her nieces Hirwen and Gilwen, and little pleased was Bregolas when they went running to him with problems which Andreth in former times would have solved by herself.

The household was much disturbed. Andreth's meals were often late, and poor; and her faithful and reliable old maid Tillis had lately been replaced by some useless girl with neither manners nor sense.

Apart from regular visits to her brother's bedside, she had kept to her chambers. There was enough there to keep her busy. At present she was trying to collate two versions of the same text, one of which she herself had made many years before, and the second which had been brought to her by Faelind, who had interested herself in the lore of the Marachians⁴. Both were transcriptions of an old rhyme of the Northern people. Traditions of the old times could be gleaned from such songs, provided one knew enough of the background to make the best sense of passages whose meaning had long become obscure to the singers but which had been preserved down the generations by rote.

Today the work was not going well. Andreth did not feel well. Her joints were aching cruelly, and she had slept only fitfully, a condition that had plagued her now for some years, but which had grown much worse since the fight with Bregolas. She would wake and lie there, consumed by vexation and burning shame.

Now she was trying to read these documents, with old eyes which saw nothing clearly any more, despite the cunning curved glass she had obtained from the Dwarves. Candles were another item which seemed in short supply lately, and she did not have enough of them. Andreth had not yet admitted to herself, however, that a central cause of her exasperation with this present task was the manifest difference in quality between the two versions: for whereas Faelind's text was written in a clear, elegant hand, her own version was crabbed and faded.

The door opened without a knock and the new maid, whose name Andreth could not retain in her head, poked her insouciant head in. "Visitor for you Ma'am," she said, then disappeared again.

"Wait!" cried Andreth. "Who...?" Too late. Fuming, she raised her voice to carry. "Well, come in then, whoever you are!"

The door swung wide and a blurred shape appeared; approached. When he came near enough for her to make him out, she found it was the last person she expected. It was Barahir's boy, the one who had run off to the Dwarves.

She passed a hand over her eyes and looked again. "Beren. Is it really you?"

"Yes, Aunt," said Beren. "I've come back."

She peered at him, trying to take him in. Bigger, of course. Still the same open face, that was good. The eyes though, they seemed harder somehow. Hmm. Well, it was a hard world after all.

"Come in. Come in! And shut the blasted door. Come and sit down and tell me how it goes with you. Tell me everything."

So once more Beren told over the story of his time with the Dwarves. Andreth asked different questions to Goracc and the Druug, sharper questions. After a time he could not stay sitting, and stood to pace around the room. He told her more, and yet more. The ugly times began to come out, and the old pains stirred again in his heart.

"Why must you pace about so," she burst out. "Can you not sit quietly one moment!"

He turned to her. "This is difficult for me," he said in a tight voice. "You don't understand."

4 The Second House of the Edain, later known as the House of Hador.

She fired instantly. “Don’t you dare give me that tale,” she retorted sharply. “You only have yourself to blame. *Difficult* for you? Difficult for *you*? *You* are the one who flouted everybody’s advice and ran off. *You* are the one who abandoned your poor mother to her misery, that’s never been the same woman since. Have you seen her?” She examine his face, realization dawning. “You haven’t seen her, have you. You haven’t even had the decency to visit your own parents. Difficult? Pah! You don’t know the meaning of the word.”

Beren was suddenly incoherent with fury. “You – don’t you, don’t you sit there and say so,” he stuttered, temper fizzing. “You don’t know a thing! What do you know? You sit here among your papers, your scratchings, your... your papers, you’ve never been out in the real world. Difficult? You don’t know difficult. What have *you* ever had to give up?” Even as he spoke the words, memory pricked him. He carried on though regardless, he could not help himself. The frustrations of years had suddenly found an outlet and were boiling up in him. “What have *you* ever lost?”

Andreth was standing now herself, white in the face. “You young viper,” she said in low tones, “how dare you speak to me in that way. Remove yourself. Go and think on your duty to your betters.”

“Don’t you talk to *me* about duty,” he shouted. “Don’t you talk to *me*! Do you think I have been on a pleasure jaunt? What do *you* know of my duty?”

“Get out!” she spat.

“I have been through... through times you couldn’t imagine!” he went on, red in the face. “And for what? For my whimsy, as you seem to think? No – to follow my duty! So don’t you speak to me of my duty, you old witch. You don’t know the first thing about it, nor anything else either.”

“Get out, before I have you thrown out!”

“Give me the sword,” he hissed. “Where is my sword? I have earned it. With my own blood and tears I have earned it. *You* shall not keep me from it. Give it to me!”

Andreth laughed, white-faced. “Now everything is clear,” she sneered. “Now we see the poison fang.” She went to the rope by her bed and started pulling it furiously. Somewhere a bell jangled and did not stop.

Angry and frustrated, Beren retreated to the door. “I shall not suffer your men to lay hand on me. Were I only a little bigger, I would not even have to run from them. But do not think you have seen the last of me!”

“You shall never have the sword,” she threw the words in his face. She hobbled after him to the door and yelled at the retreating shape. “You shall never have the sword!”

She went back then and sat on the bed, her face in her hands.

The maid put her head through the doorway. “Did you ring, Ma’am?” But Andreth only shook her head without taking her hands away. Pursing her lips, the maid went out again, closing the door with a trifle too much emphasis.

After some minutes Andreth lifted her tear-streaked face to the wall. “What shall I do, oh what shall I do!” she cried to the empty room.

* * * * *

Beren looked over the farm which had been pointed out to him as he trotted his pony down the lane. It did not look like much of a place – why, it was hardly more than a croft.

Upset by the bruising confrontation with Andreth, the youth had by instinct fled to one of the few havens of comfort and certainty that seemed to remain to him: the homestead of his parents.

He found his father behind the house cutting kindling, with a young lad to fetch and hold. The man

exclaimed at the sight of his son and dropped the axe. He ran over and hugged Beren to his broad chest, and the familiar father-smell was pulling powerfully at the boy's heart-strings again.

His father held him at arm's length and looked him over critically, and felt his arms. He looked in his eyes.

"There's much to be told, so much is clear," he said. "But you are back, and you are whole. That's the main thing."

Beren in his turn was taking in his father. Older, grimmer, shorter; although the last was surely illusion. Lately everything looked a little shorter to him than before.

Barahir grinned at him, and shook the shoulder he still held. "It is glad I am to see you, boy. It is glad I am. Come now, let us find Mother!"

Inside the house, for an instant, Beren had two mothers whom he could not unite: the tall, striding figure from his memory, singing as she worked, ruddy plait swinging behind her as a counterpoint to the grace of her movements; and this tired woman with a lined face and dulled hair, bent over a sink of suds. But she straightened up as they came in, and there were the same blue eyes he knew. He went to her, and she embraced him with soapy arms.

"Tsk, now I have made you wet," she said. "Welcome home, Son. Welcome home."

She said the words, but there was a distance in her eyes.

Then Caladis had to be fetched, and Gramlach, and Parth. The young lad who had been helping Beren's father was introduced to him as Adril, newly fostered from local connections. After shaking hands gingerly, this boy retreated shyly to a corner and stood gazing at Beren with amazed round eyes.

Parth had filled out in the figure to full womanhood, although she had the same freckled, amiable, bony face he remembered. She hugged him enthusiastically to her breast, which Beren found just a little too much of a good thing. He was not sure he liked these new disturbances. Since when had the softnesses of womenfolk gained this strange new power to set a fire in his belly and make the blood pump in his temples?

Of course they had to have a feast. He did not wish to talk of his more recent troubles to so casual a range of listeners, so he told them instead many details of his time with the Dwarves, which they were very eager to hear about. The entire company listened as if spell-bound to his tale of strange folk in exotic places, all of which were quite outside the experience of everyone present.

"Now where am I going to put you?" said his mother at the end of the evening, after the dishes and pots had been cleaned and the kitchen put to rights.

"He can sleep with me," said Parth with a grin. "We will fit together very well, won't we Beren?"

"Don't be lewd, Parth. No, I am afraid it will have to be the outhouse with Adril, Beren. I hope you will not mind it."

"You should rather ask Adril if he minds," said Beren, but Adril shyly replied that he was welcome – it would be an honour. And indeed Beren found it a comfort to once again sleep next to a warm human presence, something he had been used to since days of early childhood, but which had been one of the many comforts he had been forced to forego among the Dwarves.

There was a family council the next day, to which Gramlach was now openly admitted, looking however as if he was not quite comfortable with the honour. Beren's father then told him of all that had happened since the return of the sons of Bregolas. Beren winced when he heard of the defeat of Andreth. Had he known of that ahead of time, perhaps things would have gone otherwise. Or perhaps not.

"The boys have moved down close to Menelrond now," his father said to Beren. "I am not sure why they do

not stay here, nearer to the town, but I can make some guesses. I do not think they are of the same temper as their father. Of course from the beginning we had rather counted on that; but now it appears that, if anything, we shot somewhat below the mark.”

Barahir sat back then and raised his head slightly to look his son full in the face. There was something of a gleam in the grizzled man’s eyes. “I have not yet told you our main piece of news,” he said, “and that is: we have decided to go back to Sightfoot.”

Beren sat up now in his turn. He had not expected this.

“There are many reasons,” went on Barahir. “Some will no doubt occur to you since hearing my tale. In short, we doubt things can go well for us so close to Bregolas, now that he has the upper hand in hall and town. It will be better for us to be out of sight for a while. On top of that, well, it is too small here for one thing; but most of all, it is not our home.” He took his wife’s hand and held it in his. “We came here, as you know, in flight from memory, but at length it has become clear to us that that was a mistake. An ache in the heart is better than the nothingness we have here.”

Beren looked at them both. His mother sat there with bowed head; it was not easy to read her expression.

Barahir glanced at Caladis and Gramlach. “We have all decided it,” he said. “We are all in favour.” He turned back to Beren. “My son,” he went on firmly, “now that you have at last come back to us, to our great joy, let me assure you, in case there is any doubt in your mind, that you would be welcome with us – more than welcome. It is your home too. I have missed having you at my side.”

Beren had the strangest hollow feeling. He felt he should be feeling some strong emotion; but instead there was just an absence.

“Thank you, Father,” he said, and the absence spread itself wider and became apparent to his father, and to others there as well.

“Well,” said Barahir after a while, looking uncertain, “of course you will need some time to settle in. But there is plenty of time now. You’re back, that’s the main thing.”

The next morning Beren had an opportunity to speak with his mother alone. It was a fine spring day and she was hanging washing on a line outside the kitchen.

“Mother,” he began hesitantly, “I fear our last parting still lies between us, when you begged me to stay, and I would not.”

“Oh, no,” she said without emotion, “take it not so. I do not mind it. That time has long passed. It is forgotten.”

“I would make amends now, if I could,” said Beren. “I am back now, all that is finished. I would gladly stay at your side now, if you wish it.”

She looked at him, but made no direct reply. “Hand me the clothes as I need them, if you would,” she said. “It saves me bending.”

He did as she asked for some time, three shirts and an apron’s worth. “Have you nothing to say about my offer?” he said at last.

“Son,” she answered quietly, “my need was then, not now.”

He spread his hands. “At that time, I could not.”

Her eyes kindled. “Say rather, would not. You chose. You went. It was your idea, your plan. *I* did not figure in it. You thought your lessons would not wait, so off you went. Do not say ‘could not’ to me.”

He swallowed. "Mother," he said, "you do not know what a price in terror I paid for those lessons. The opportunity came to me, and I grasped it. It never would have come again."

Her voice returned to indifference. "Well, it is all one now anyway." She pegged on for a while. "Tell me though," Emeldir asked him coldly, "was it worth it? Did you get what you paid for? Are you now the second-best swordsman in all Middle-earth?"

"I beat him in the end," said Beren, "so I don't know what that makes me."

He handed her the wet pieces until the basket was empty. She took the bag of pegs and bent to pick up the basket.

"Mother," said Beren, "put the basket down again for a moment. I have something I am charged to give you." As she straightened up again, wondering, he fumbled in his pouch for the gift from Nendilmë. "I told you about the Queen, who was so kind to me?" he went on. "She had this made for you. All her family are gifted workers in such things." With that he handed the small package to Emeldir.

When she unwrapped it and saw what it was, her hand flew to her mouth. "Hiril had such a thing," she whispered. "A shell of the sea."

"I did not know if it would be right to give you such a thing," he went on with hesitation, "but the Queen said that I must. She lost her own daughter, you know."

There were tears in Emeldir's eyes.

"You wind it with the little key, and it plays a melody when you open the shell," said Beren awkwardly. He took the shell back for a moment and showed her.

Emeldir had to sit down on the basket. The tears were running down her face. "It is beautiful," she whispered as she listened to the tiny tune playing on her hand. When it was finished she held out her other hand to Beren, and when he came to her, she hugged him close, laying her greying head on his chest. She looked up at him with swimming eyes, face working. "You say she lost... she lost..."

"Yes, Mother. That is why. That is what she said. From one mother to another."

Emeldir was sobbing openly now. "If I could only have found her," she cried. "I couldn't say good-bye. I am held from her."

"Yes, Mother," said Beren, "Nendilmë knew about that too." He stroked her head, and she grasped his hand and kissed it. They stayed there for some time while Emeldir shook and cried against his chest, his arms tight around her. She quietened gradually. At last she sighed, straightened, wiped her eyes and blew her nose.

"How I wish I could thank her," she said, still a little damply. "Such a beautiful thing – if only I could meet her. I must at least send her something, by the carters. I will have to consider of it." She looked up at Beren and smiled radiantly at him, the old smile he knew. "Thank you, my son. Thank you."

* * * * *

Barahir was at the ploughing early the next day. Beren said he would help.

"That would be good," smiled his father. "But just say a word to the ox, will you? I can't manage him the way Thad used to. Now and then he decides he's not going to go the way I want him to, and I have to stop and wrestle with him. It makes the job three times harder than it should be."

So Beren reasoned with the ox for a while, and after that things went better. It was a hot day, and hot work. Towards mid-morning Parth brought them a jug of cool water with pieces of a tart yellow fruit swimming in it. They broke off gladly for a rest.

Barahir indicated the strange fruit. "Mother bought a few of these things, last Dwarf-load," he said to Beren. "Not too bad, are they?"

The yellow fruits had a strong, fresh odour. The taste they lent to the water was most refreshing. Beren bit into one experimentally, but had to spit it out again with a wry face. The flavour was there all right but the bare fruit was just too sour.

They sat there for a while in the shade of a tree, chaffering with Parth. When the jug was finished, she took it with a grin and a wink at Beren and went back to the house, swinging her hips just a little more than was natural.

"Needs a man, that one," commented Barahir as he stretched and made to get up.

"Father," said Beren, "there's something I've got to talk to you about."

His father looked at him, then sat back down on his stone. He looked expectant.

Beren wasn't sure how to begin. "I have been stupid, and done a great wrong," he said after some hesitation. Then he told his father about the ugly scene with Andreth. As his father listened, his face grew grave.

When he spoke, though, he sounded almost relieved. "What you tell me is – not good," he said. "Andreth is slow to forgive. But then again, it is not so bad as all that either. From the way you began, I thought you were going to tell me you had killed somebody!"

"No," said Beren, "although I have wanted to... I seem to be in a filthy temper all the time these days. I don't know what is wrong with me."

His father laughed. "You're at the end of your childhood. Everybody goes through a prickly phase at that time. Reasonable people expect it, and make allowances." He sat there, poking a twig into the earth while he thought it over. Then he looked up at Beren again, a hint of challenge in his eyes. "Well, Son, what do you intend to do now?"

"I tried to see her later, afterwards," said Beren slowly, "but she wouldn't see me. I'll write. I'm afraid it won't do any good, though."

"I'll talk to her myself," said his father, "but I suspect you will have to be patient. I know my aunt.

"Better might be to leave her to cool down for a while, come right away out of it. We're set to exchange this steading next week, after which we will pack our gear and go back home. Will you come with us? When I told you about it fore-yestereve you did not seem to me overjoyed at the prospect. I was surprised at that. But we have not spoken much at all since you came back; I do not really know how you see things. Certainly very differently to me."

"How I see things..." said Beren. "Papa, I don't know. I don't know where is home any more. I thought it was here, in my own country, where I have longed to be, all during the long years away. That was all I thought about, all I aimed for: to come home, to my own place, and to take up the role that seemed laid down for me. But now that I am finally here, all that seems to have blown away in the wind. I cannot find my place; I only know where it is not. It is not, I think, any longer with the Drúedain. It is not on this steading, because it is strange to me here. At Sightfoot? I tell myself that is my home, but I don't believe my own telling, because there is a gap there, a gulf. It isn't just Hiril. Something has been cut away from me – I was away too long maybe, went through too much. It was hard there, Father, with the Dwarves, harder than I would ever have thought I could stand. And it went on and on and on. Now I am on one side of that, and my home seems to lie on the other; and I cannot go back to the past." He stopped, and gave a half-laugh. "If I miss anything, it is my companions at the forge, and the gentle Queen in her garden."

The lines of pain were in Barahir's face. "I do not know what to advise you, my son," he said quietly.

"I have promised Mama to stay by her side," said Beren, "at least for a while. But I think I am bound to bide in Newfort first, for a few weeks at least. I cannot let things rest with Aunt. I cannot let my years under Yg simply go for nothing. To work and work all that lonely time, and then to throw it away with a careless word: unbelievably stupid. I cannot believe the Powers would be so cruel as to allow that to stand. There must be some way to make amends. I will stay and see if I can find it."

"I still think you'd be better leaving it for a while," said his father. "Give it some air."

"Not just yet," replied Beren.

Barahir was silent for a while. Then he sighed and stood up. "Come, boy, we need to get on with the ploughing," he said.

And that is what they did for the rest of that day.

* * * * *

Beren's notes to his aunt were returned unopened. His father had no better luck: the old lady received him readily, but she was obdurate.

"It is mortal sorry I am to say it to you, Bari," she said, "but your son is headed the wrong way. Something happened to him in that Dwarf-city. He got twisted some way. I cannot give him the sword until he comes right again. If he does."

"Without going into the question of right roads or wrong ones," answered Barahir, "he is most sincerely sorry, I know that for certain."

"Sorry's not enough," she said sourly. "It will take deeds, not words."

"Andreth," he said, "do you set yourself against the sword itself?"

Her eyes fired at that. "In the first place, I am by no means sure the sword would accept him now; indeed I doubt it," she said. "Secondly, I am not about to let a chunk of ice do my thinking for me. I'm sorry, Nephew, you know I think much of you, and I had thought your son showed great promise. Nobody is more disappointed than I at what happened; nobody. But wishing never fixed anything."

Since Beren was also immovable in his intention to stay a while in the town, Barahir arranged for him to room with a relative, a widow who was glad to feed and house the boy in return for the help he could provide. She ran a small bakery; her pastries had won much praise in the neighbourhood.

In his free time, Beren got to know the town. He found it interesting to compare it to the Dwarf-city: some things were the same, others very different. Although of course the city in the mountain was immeasurably greater. Newfort folk thought rather a lot of themselves, since it was the largest town in a wide area, but the boy once or twice caught traces of amusement on Dwarvish faces, and glances exchanged, whenever townsfolk were too effusive in their praises of their home.

One day in the tiny bakery he turned at the bell to see who had come in the door and came face to face with an equally surprised Hathaldir. The two boys pounded each other on the back, laughing. Beren begged a little time off from the widow to talk with Hath and catch up with his news. They walked through the narrow alleys, talking animatedly while dodging the traffic. Hathaldir had heard some talk of Beren's sojourn among the Dwarves and was naturally eager to hear about it. On his own side, however, he had little to mention.

"Nothing ever happens here!" he said. "I hope to serve with Lord Angrod when I am older, as my brother has done this year, but it will be ages yet before they let me. In the meantime there is nothing but work, work, work. If you go on another adventure, Beri, take me with you!"

Hath introduced Beren to his younger sister Britha, whom the boy vaguely remembered from some far past

time. She was a slim girl, full of smiles, with dancing grey eyes and a mop of dark curls. The brother and sister had several friends, some of whom stirred the same faint recollection with Beren. All together they made an agreeable company and it was always with reluctance that Beren left the laughter and companionship to return to his duty in the shop.

The boy was often restless. He felt stifled in the close confines of the town and left it to roam in the country whenever he had opportunity. The surrounding land was mostly farmland, flat and mundane, but at least the horizons were distant and the air pure. His friends would often come with him. Sometimes they would lend their help to some head-scratching but grateful farmer; at other times they would shoot.

Beren still had no bow of his own to suit his growth. Hathaldir lent him his spare bow, but after some trials with it, Beren had apologetically returned it, saying he found it a little light. Hathaldir opened his eyes at that, since it was a proper hunting bow, only scaled down to match Hath's stature, and in no wise a toy. Not entirely seriously, he offered Beren a trial with one of his brother's old bows, a much heavier affair that was longer than the boy was tall. However, Beren confounded his friend's expectations by bending this easily, and pronouncing himself content with it, despite some awkwardness caused by the length. The children were amazed and impressed – none of them could even string this monster bow, let alone shoot with it.

Their hero-worship made Beren uncomfortable. All he wanted was to belong; he had no wish to be leader.

And still his written pleas to Andreth were returned with the seals intact. He began to think of taking his father's advice and returning to join his family at Sightfoot.

There were many older youths in the town who wandered around in packs, sometimes fighting one group against another, or stealing fruit from market stalls, playing tricks on householders, and generally making a nuisance of themselves. Beren had so far had little to do with them, but one day when he was with Hathaldir and Britha and Ollandar, their way was suddenly blocked by lounging youths. As Beren made to walk around them, the leader, a heavy, overgrown youth with spots, put out an arm to stop him.

"Wait a minute, youngster," he said, "won't you stop and talk a while?"

"What for?" said Beren. "I don't know you."

"Now that's not very friendly," said the youth. "Not very friendly, is he?" he said over his shoulder to his grinning companions.

"Will you let me pass?" said Beren.

"Look," replied the youth, "don't take this wrong. We don't want to give you a hard time. Do we lads?" A chorus of over-solemn 'nos' and head-shakes affirmed this. "We'm just curious, is all. We heard these stories, like. A young lad who lived with the wild folk, then went off with the Stumpy-beardies. All kinds of things we heard. Just want to know if it is true, that's all. Come now, do the civil thing. Just tell us if it is true, then we'll leave you go. Wood-men, then Beardies, eh? Is it true?"

Beren shrugged. "Yes, it's true," he said.

The heavy youth grinned. "Well how about that now. Well I never. And these other stories – nah, *they* can't be true. Someone's been spinning us a yarn, having a lend of us. Talking with birds? Nah. Can't nobody do that."

Beren stayed silent.

"It's not true, is it mister?" pressed the other. "Is it? That thing with the birds?"

"What if it is?" said Beren. "Look, I've had enough of this. I'm going on now, and you'd better not hinder me, nor my friends either." And with that he walked determinedly on up the path. The other gave way just in

time to avoid being walked into, but he turned and walked along with Beren.

“By gor,” said the youth, “by gor. Talking with birds, and that? Can you really do that? That would be something to see. How about that, fellows?”

“Well yeah,” said one of his companions smoothly, “but claiming’s one thing, doing’s another.”

“’S true, talk is cheap,” affirmed a third.

Beren turned abruptly and stood still. The heavy leader almost ran into him, but teetered to a stop in time.

Beren stared up at his opponent, almost a head taller than himself. “Take yourself out of my presence,” he said softly.

Something about the youngster’s manner and his icy blue eyes made the youth uneasy. He was suddenly overcome by the uncomfortable suspicion that this was no ordinary junior to be slapped into line. Better to leave it perhaps. “Sorry squire,” he said, shrugging. “Just an innocent question. Didn’t mean to cause offence.” He turned to his silent companions. “Come on lads, let’s be out o’ this.” They turned around and jostled back down the street, laughing and pushing one another.

“I didn’t like the sound of that,” said Oll after they were gone.

Beren sniffed. “They’re harmless. All beef and no backbone.”

A few days after that Beren was in the shop, stoking the oven, when people began to run down the street. The widow and he went to the doorway. A neighbour on the way past turned to them, excitement written on her face.

“Strangers!” she said. “They’re saying it’s the king of the Northlands! The golden-haired folk have come to visit us!”

Beren and the widow looked at one another. She grinned at him suddenly. “Well, come on then,” she said, “we’ll hear nowt more if we stay here.” They hurried down and joined the throng crowding the gate square. From their position slightly back up the street they could see over the heads of most of the crowd when they stood on a doorstep.

A party of perhaps thirty, a mixed company of men, women and children, mounted on tall horses, were even at that moment clattering through the gate. All of the men, and a few of the women too, appeared to be clad in gear of war: he could see jerkins of gleaming mail, and long swords hanging at their sides. The soldiers were crowned by helms which glittered in the sunlight, almost too bright to look at. The bearing of the mounted folk was noble, but their manner was easy and carefree. Many of the company had hair the tawny colour of grass at the end of summer, a thing which was rare among the people of Bëor.

The leader of the company dismounted. Beren could see Bregolas go to meet him. Beren had never seen a mightier man than this rider – he towered even over Bregolas, who was not small. The man took off his helm and his golden hair tumbled loose, shining in the sun. The fair-haired giant smiled and said some words to Bregolas, but Beren was too far away to hear what they were.

The boy turned to a man who was craning himself on tiptoes right next to him. “Who are they, neighbour, do you know?” Beren asked him.

“They’re out of the North,” said the man. “I’m thinking their leader will be Galdor. Heard a lot about him. Look, that must be his wife and sons there beside him!”

The wife, if that was who she was, was dark and rather petite. There seemed to be two sons: the younger was perched in the saddle in front of his mother, whereas the elder rode on his own pony beside. The woman handed down her younger child – five maybe, thought Beren – then dismounted as well, only to be

immediately lost under the heads of the crowd. The older boy remained on his horse; he had his father's hair, but more than that Beren could not make out. This youngster looked to be about eight or nine.

Greetings being concluded, the entire company began now to dismount and to allow their horses to be taken away to be cared for. The tall, fair-haired people made their way slowly up the street toward the Hall and disappeared from view.

"Come, boy," said his employer. "That's all the show we'll get today, I guess. And you and I still have our living to make."

* * * * *

The town of Newfort was built on a low mound of shattered rock that rose out of the plain. Several other such hummocks of varying sizes were scattered nearby: raised patches of rocky ground which, since they were unpromising places to plough, had been left wild. The tallest trees on these mounds had long since been cut down for timber, but a thick growth of saplings and bushes had sprung up to cover the sad wasteland of stumps. In recent times these hillocks had been protected from cutting by desire of the Lord, in order to promote game for some small hunting and hawking. The people accepted this without too many grumbles, since there was not enough woodland to keep their growing community supplied with firewood in any case, and the occasional illicit coney made a pleasant addition to the cook-pot.

Beren liked to wander through these domains, and often took his friends there. He took pleasure in showing them things he knew about the wild places, and the birds and beasts who lived in them.

It was rest-day, the summer sun was high, the growth dense and green on the trees. The five of them walked out early, while there was still coolness in the air. The day promised to be hot; the deep shadows under the trees were attractive. They knew a place where a spring made a tiny pool, just big enough to splash in; they headed for that.

They found that they were not the earliest venturers into the untamed areas: three figures on horseback were working the edges of the woodland with hawks. Two of them were fair-haired women; the third looked like the boy Beren had seen ride in with the van of the Northmen.

The Newforters watched for a while, admiring the graceful coordination of horse and falcon.

"We'd better not bother them," said Beren. They left the hawkers and idled their way into the woods. A pine of reasonable size grew there which they liked to climb, even though it left resin on their hands and clothes.

Beren was high up in the tree, sniffing the piny scent with appreciation while looking at the figures dotted here and there in distant fields, when his Druug-trained senses began to twitch.

"Uh-oh," he said. "Trouble."

"Not those louts again, is it?" asked Britha, who was perched on an even higher branch.

"'Fraid it is," said Beren.

The gang of oafs had lately been dogging their footsteps from afar – never near enough to excite protest, but they were there, in the background, frequently visible, a trouble to the mind. Now there were some of them in the wood – how many was as yet uncertain.

Beren did not ask himself how he knew it was them; he just did. He could hear their stealthy movements – the snap of twigs, the brush of leaves. It all built to an unmistakable picture.

"What do they *want*?" said Britha in exasperation.

"Me," he said. "I'm a stranger. I don't fit their picture. I've seen things they haven't, can do things they can't.

They can't leave me alone; they have to worry at me like a loose tooth."

"They scare me," said Britha.

"They are becoming a nuisance," agreed Beren. "There's no real danger in them, they're just oafs. But I wonder if I should not find some way to discourage them."

His attention was distracted then by a harsh call from high in the sky. He shaded his eyes to look, then started from excitement. "Thunderbolt!" he cried.

"What?" said the girl, but Beren was not listening. He put his fingers to his mouth and gave a piercing whistle, then began to slide his way rapidly down the tree.

"Hi! Wait for me!" cried Britha, then slithered after him. The others followed.

Children and eagle arrived at the ground more or less together. Beren was first, and quickly took off his tunic and wound it around his left arm, which he held out. There was a flying shadow and a bronze streak which fell out of the sky and landed on his arm with a heavy thump. The boy swayed under the force of the blow. And there was Thunderbolt as of old, gripping deep into the cloth on his arm, and gazing at Beren from his fierce amber eye.

"You had no need to whistle," the great bird said drily. "I am not blind. I hesitated only because of these others."

They were standing a little way away from the pine in a stony clearing in which few plants grew. Beren's friends, Hathaldir, Britha, Ollandar and Marcil, stood a few paces away, staring open-mouthed at the eagle.

"Don't worry," said Beren, "these are my friends. Oh, Thunderbolt, my heart is full to see you! It is a long road I have travelled since we met last. Did we really defeat the Crebain together, you and I? All those years ago?" He pulled himself up. "But I am forgetting my manners." He introduced the eagle to his friends.

"It is good to meet old comrades," said the eagle. He ducked his head of living bronze and drew his great hooked beak across the boy's hand in a brief caress. "I bring you news of one we know. Sad news."

Beren had known from the first. "Goracc," he said soberly.

"His last words were of you, to wish you well. Braac, whom you know, is now head of the raven people. So things go." He turned his head now and stared at something over the boy's shoulder. "Those others, there – are they also your friends?"

Beren looked to the edge of the clearing and saw the figures his other senses had already numbered emerge from the undergrowth. There were perhaps thirty of the gang, and they appeared now on all sides.

"No," he replied.

"Then I should leave," said Thunderbolt. "There is no luck in this encounter."

"I can handle them," said Beren. He found the heavy leader who had first crossed his path, and raised his voice to him. "You continue to plague me," he said. "I give you now fair warning: turn around now and depart. If you do not, then I shall have to teach you manners."

"Ooo!" hooted the leader. "Manners, is it? Tough talk, Beren traitor's-son." Snickers came from others in the ring. "Some folk would say, maybe you would be better keeping your mouth shut. Less'n you want others to shut it for you."

"Keep your dirty mouth off my father, scum." Beren was furious.

“Your Pa is a traitor,” sneered the oaf. “And a coward. All the town knows he’s run off out of it. Wouldn’t stop to take his lumps.”

Beren’s temper lost all bonds. “You worthless wall-propper!” he shouted. “You waste of a slut’s birth-wailing! You are not worth to lick the dog-turds from the bottom of my father’s boots. Leave his good name out of that cesspit you call a mouth, if you know what is good for you!”

The leader slouched forward. “See now, you didn’t ought to talk that way,” he said. “You waltz in here with your big airs, mister, like you was somebody. But you ain’t nobody, mister. You’re full o’ talk, but we’m tired o’ your talk, see. We don’t want no more on it. You’re talking pretty big about teaching manners, but you know what? I don’t see nobody what can do no teaching, not of thirty strong lads all at once. Will I tell you what I do see? I see a small bag o’ piss with a trained pigeon sitting on him, with four scared kids behind him. The kids will scarper if they know what is good for ’em, and then the bag o’ piss will get every drop of it kicked out of him. What do you say to that, hey?”

One of the things Beren’s Dwarf teachers had drummed into him was never to wait for the opponent to finish his say. Life was not a drama, they said; once it has come to a fight, then attack at once. Never wait. But on this occasion he was hampered by Thunderbolt. Beren had turned to the bird. He was about to tell him to fly off now and say they would talk again at some later time, but he never got the chance, because just as he opened his mouth to say it, a stone whizzed past his head from behind and struck the eagle square on the side of the skull. The stunned bird, still gripping Beren’s arm by reflex, swung around and dangled awkwardly beneath it, wings flopping wide.

The furious boy turned toward the thrower, but wherever he turned, he had enemies behind him. The stones lay plentifully on the ground and the ring of youths, whooping with excitement, were now pitching them fast.

Somehow in the hail of stones Beren succeeded in peeling Thunderbolt’s talons from his arm and laying the bird on the ground. “Protect him!” he shouted to the cowering children. He turned then and strode towards the leader. He never reached him though, because whether by accident or intent, a stone came out of nowhere and smashed against his head. There came a moment of blackness, but Beren shook the mists out of his eyes and came on.

“Get him, lads!” cried the leader, and more stones came Beren’s way, and yet more. He raised his hands to protect his face, then sank to his knees. He was still trying to hobble forwards when a large stone got through his guard and turned the lights out.

When he rose slowly to the groggy surface of sense, there was a shadow standing over him. He reached out blindly and encountered a smallish hand, which gripped his firmly, then withdrew.

“Sons of slime,” a cold voice over him spoke, “one stone more, and you are dog meat.”

“Get out of our way!” shouted several of the gang. “We do not know you. You have no business here.”

“I shall not go,” said the voice. “Truly, you are dogs without honour – or wisdom either. Stone me, and my father will hunt you down, one by one; and your ends will not be handsome. Galdor Fire-sword shall not be kind to any pack of yellow, slinking jackals who pull down his son.

“But come! Is there not one among you with pith to meet my blade, man to man? See how it shines you welcome! No? Not one? Then depart from here, cravens, on this instant. And let me not see your stinking hides again – or I swear by the Kindler, they will not be fit to house you afterwards!”

Beren opened bleary eyes and looked up. Standing over him with a bright blade in his hand was the blond boy he had last seen hawking. His head was spinning again though, and he closed his eyes into the velvety dark.

He woke to pain – pain almost everywhere. He groaned and tried to raise a hand to his head.

“Mother,” came the voice he knew, “he is awake.”

Beren opened one eye – the other seemed to be glued shut – to see a slender, dark-haired woman bending over him. She looked anxiously into his eye. “Can you open the other?” she asked.

“It sticks,” he mumbled.

“Wait you – I will try warm water,” she replied.

She sponged his recalcitrant eye gently until he was able to open that to a stab of light. She looked into it and relaxed a little.

“Your head at least seems to have taken no major hurt,” she said. She asked him then where else he had pain.

“Ask rather, where I do not,” he managed to say through bruised and bleeding lips. The woman smiled at that, but made him try his limbs, one by one. While this painful procedure was going on, Beren looked at the boy sitting beside the bed. “Sir,” Beren said to him, “I have to thank you for my life. Alas, I do not know your name. I am Beren, and my father is Barahir, younger son of the Lord of these parts, although that counts for little in these days. But if there is any service within my power that I can do for you, you have only to name it.”

The golden-haired boy stirred and smiled. “You need not thank me,” he said. “It was a pleasure to drive some right thinking into such curs as they, even though there was not much sport to be had from them. I had hoped one or two at least would have stood against me as men. As for my name: I am Húrin, son of Galdor whom men name the Tall, and Hareth my mother here.”

“The not-so-tall,” smiled his mother. “Young sir, I think you have taken no grave hurt; only bruises. If you will tell us where your house, we will send word to your people.”

Beren sat up suddenly, wincing and clutching his head. “What of my friends?” he asked indistinctly.

“They were not badly hurt,” said Húrin. “Only scratches.”

Beren lay back again, relieved, but then he stiffened and grasped at the boy’s hand. “Do not tell me the eagle was only scratched,” he said. “I remember what I saw.”

Húrin’s face showed surprise and concern. “It... but you name the bird also as your friend?”

“One of my oldest, and firmest,” said Beren. “Tell me how he is! Where is he? I must go to him!” He read the reality in their sad faces. “No,” he said, shaking his head. “No. No. Tell me it isn’t true!”

“They stamped on him,” said Húrin bleakly. “The brutes. They dragged your friends away, and they stamped the bird into the earth. I could not protect you both.”

Beren covered his face with his hands and turned to the wall. They could get no more word out of him, and at last they went quietly away.

* * * * *

They took Beren to the Hall. His aunt Hirwen, with uncharacteristic firmness, insisted on it. He saw only his aunts: Bregolas did not come, nor did Andreth.

The bruises on his skin healed quickly, but those on his soul did not. He was not sure Hareth had been right to say there was no damage to his brains, because he had blank moments: short intervals in which he lost his place in the world. Then he would find it again, and go on. But something remained out of step, dislocated.

As soon as he could get up, Beren went back to the place of stones. There he took the broken body of the

eagle and buried it under the trees. He had no marker for the grave, but he needed none. There was nobody else in the world to care.

He could shed no tears. His eyes remained desert-dry all throughout the grim business, and indeed the heart within him felt bloodless too. There was a gap inside him, a gulf where something was missing.

As he stood under the trees, hearing the small heedless birds among the leaves, the terrible realization grew on him that he could no longer understand what they were saying. At first he did not believe it; it was only when he tried to speak to them, and later with increasing desperation to horses and dogs in the town, only to find that his tongue had forgotten how to make the sounds, as his ears had to hear them, that the full weight of his loss sank in. With this tearing away of his birthright, the blank spot, the empty place, reached its tentacles over yet more of his soul.

The growing friendship with Húrin was the one bright part of his existence. The fair-haired youngster had come often to his bedside, and after Beren was able to get up, Húrin would insist that he venture out and walk a little through the streets of Newfort. Beren came to value the boy highly, so blithe and true was his spirit. They talked much together, each listening with admiring interest to the other's experiences.

One day they were walking about the gate square, and Beren was actually laughing at one of his companion's ridiculous stories, when they almost ran right into one of the gang. The lumpish youth turned white and ducked off to the side out of sight.

"Well, we seem to have brought them to a satisfactory state of manners!" said Húrin. "He is not the first I have seen dodge away like that."

"They know that I am going to kill them all," said Beren quietly, "as soon as I am hale. Not many days to wait now."

The younger boy stopped and looked at him in consternation. "Do you mean it?" he said. "Beren, you must not. I beg you, no."

Beren half-smiled and tilted his head. "You value their worthless hides so high?" he lisped through lips which still bore healing scabs.

"No!" said the other. "It is just... well, it just feels wrong. It would be a great mistake, I think. I would gladly have dispatched one or two at the time myself; I would have felt the better for it, and the world too would have been the lighter for their passing. But in cold blood? It is not the same at all."

"My blood is not cold," replied Beren in the same level voice. "They killed my friend."

Húrin was silent for a time. "It is not them I fear for, it is you," he said at last. "You will not bring your friend back, whatever you do. And I do not think you will come to any good by steeping your heart in their blood. On the contrary."

Beren stood still and stared across the square at the busy people. "I must do something," he said. "Or I think I shall die. Truly, Húrin. Things with me are – not good."

The boy faced him and grasped his hand in his own. "Then punish them! Make them pay. That is the way. But not with their blood; I beg you not. You would only wound yourself."

Beren smiled again, winced, and felt his lips. "You are very persuasive," he said. "Well, I will try your way. If I cannot live with it, there is always the other." The two of them walked on.

"So, tell me your plan," said Húrin. "Tell me what I am to do in it."

"Nothing," said Beren. "Your pardon, Húrin, I know you would relish the fight. But it is my heart the blackness weighs upon, not yours."

Húrin stole a glance at him and recognized that there was no use in arguing. He could not resist one last try however. "But, Beren," he said, "they are thirty, you are one. Can you truly manage so many on your own?"

Beren smiled, but his eyes were cold. "Oh, yes. I shall manage."

* * * * *

Beren began his campaign by searching out where each of the youths lived. He could not remember all their faces, but he was patient, and by waiting, he found each one who seemed part of the gang, then trailed him to his house. They in their turn never saw him, never suspected he was on their heels, in the shadows.

An evening came when the leader burst out of his door, whistling, on his way to the outhouse; only to find Beren leaning against it.

The oaf goggled at the boy. His initial impulse was to be wary; but seeing no weapon, he relaxed. He bared his teeth in a mirthless grin. "Well! If it isn't the bird boy, all on his own. No friends here with swords? Oh dear."

"You're alone too," said Beren.

The oaf came right up to him, grinning all the time, and pushed him. "Think I need help to thrash a pissy little streak of sparrow shit like you? You made a mistake coming here, pal. Oh my, yes." He pushed Beren again, harder this time.

"Not me," said Beren, "you." And as the beefy youth went to give him the push that would upset him, Beren lashed out at his crotch. The bully doubled up, face red, eyes watering. It was some time before he could gather breath to speak.

"That's it," he wheezed at last. "You little scum. You're dead meat now."

Beren reached behind the outhouse and took out a stout staff.

"You sound to me like a chap who wants some teaching," he said pleasantly. Then he set about beating the bully black and blue, starting with a solid punch with the butt to the upper stomach, so his victim would not have breath to cry out.

At the end of this, the youth was lying sobbing on the ground. Beren bent over him. "Want some more?" he asked. The bully shook his head. "Still dead meat, am I?" Beren asked, and got another head-shake. When the bully dared to raise his head, his tormentor had vanished.

He dealt with them all so, one by one. The news went quickly around; the gang members became wary, began to go everywhere in twos and threes, but they found it made no difference. Sooner or later they would find themselves alone, at which time the smiling boy would appear as if from nowhere. None of them could lay a finger on him; he dealt with them with insolent ease.

The youths took to taking sticks with themselves everywhere, even to bed. It didn't help them.

The fourth member he visited was a young man of perhaps fifteen or so whom Beren afterwards came to know as Girazôn. As soon as this youth saw Beren, he raised his hands.

"Please," he said. "I had nothing to do with the stones, I swear it!"

His face was not one of the ones branded on Beren's memory. So, perhaps he had not.

"You go around with the others," Beren said. "You're all together. One pays, all pay."

"Look, I can't avoid their company!" said the youth. "It's a small town, I run across them everywhere! I

admit I was there when they hurt your bird. But I thought it was just going to be a lark, I wouldn't have had anything to do with it if I had known!"

Beren curled his lip. "It makes me sick to hear you begging for your skin," he said. "Would you show more fight if I allowed you to team up with a friend of your choice? Or even two?"

The other considered this for a lightning instant, then shook his head.

"I want to be on *your* team," he said. "But if you'll pardon the remark, you're going about this wrong. What's the point in just thrashing the others? Where's it going to get you? Become the boss! Then you can really grind them under foot." He examined the boy's face carefully. "I can help you."

Beren stared at him for a long moment. "I'll think about it," he said, then vanished into the shadows.

The youths got together and tried to work out a plan. They shadowed Beren back to his lodgings, secretly as they thought, but he laughed to himself at their clumsiness. They lay in ambush for him, but unaccountably he was out before they were aware, and had silently taken care of three of their number before they realized. With a cry of fury the others turned to hunt him, but they could never pin him down; so soon as they thought him cornered, he would vanish out of their grasp, and they would retreat to find another of their number lying groaning on the ground.

They knew he still went to the woods where his bird had been buried, so they lay there in ambush, nearly the full number of them, in close circle. Nobody was out of sight of everybody, heads kept nervously circling. Where was the cursed devil-boy? He had been on the path, in plain sight; now he was not.

Suddenly he was there, skipping out of a bush to deal the leader a great blow to the head which stretched him into the grass. The others yelled and thrashed the bushes in that place to shreds in their fury. Then Beren was at them again; he struck and disappeared. Blow by blow he beat the whole gang into a whimpering pulp. They could not touch him, could not find him. At the end of this, hardly a one of them could stand, and they had come to have a lively horror of Beren.

A deputation of angry fathers went to the Hall, but Bregolas shrugged off their complaints. "He is Barahir's boy," he said, "nothing to do with me. Go and complain to him."

"There's such a thing as the law," said a big man hotly. "We'll lay charges!"

"Well, you can do that," said Bregolas, "if you really think thirty stout lads beaten by a single one, several years their junior, makes a case you want to shout to the world."

One by one the fathers slunk away.

The youths asked for a parley, and when Beren granted it, two of them went to grab his arms; but he was not there when they grabbed. They looked around in bewilderment. "Where the fuck did he go?" shouted one.

"Woo-hoo!" came a voice, and there was Beren in an alley. "Oh dear," he said, "haven't you had enough?" But he slipped away before the despairing boys could come near. The same evening, the same terrible round began all over again. But now they all grovelled when they saw him, and wept, and begged for mercy.

And to some he said, "The only way you can escape this is if you fight for me. What do you say?" And each one he asked fell over himself in agreeing to this. These turncoats met then all together, with Beren. Girazôn stood at his side. The traitor bullies looked sideways at each other, and each counted to himself. Ten they counted there who had turned. Against twenty or so holdouts... Their faces began to show glum. But each then looked again at Beren: ...ten, plus him. That was better arithmetic by far. The glum look faded, and they sat down to listen to his plan.

* * * * *

Húrin told Beren that his family had to leave again. His father had wanted to visit Baragund and Belegund – indeed that had been most of his purpose in coming; now he was ready to return to the North. Beren was invited to eat a leaving-feast with Galdor and his family in their tent outside the town.

The horses whinnied at the boy as he went past, but all that he heard was whinny. The secret black despair of it lay on his heart.

Galdor was even more impressive seen close to. However, unlike some large men, he carried his inches with grace. Although his muscled arms as well as his strong face bore scars of battle, his eyes, blue as the northern skies, were mild and merry.

He had almost to bend forward to shake the boy's hand. As he grasped it, wonder came into his expression. "But what is this?" he said, and turned the boy's palm over to examine it. "These are swordsman's callouses, or I am an Orc!" he said. He turned his own large hand over and laid the palm beside Beren's. His hand dwarfed Beren's in size, but the pattern of horny yellow lumps was the same.

"It's true," replied Beren diffidently. "I did learn something of the art, Sir, down south among the Dwarves."

The big man took a half-step back in order to look at him more keenly. "My son told me something of that," he said, "but I would willingly hear more from your own lips."

"Sit to eat first," said Hareth, who was organising the house-girls, plus Húrin, in carrying platters to the table.

Beren was seated in the place of honour at Galdor's right hand. Húrin grinned at him as he sat down opposite. The younger son, Huor, sat shyly on the bench at Beren's right hand. Hareth took the foot of the table, from where she could look after her youngest child Huleth, a baby girl with curly dark hair and her mother's eyes.

Beren looked Huor over, and found himself liking him for no reason at all. He just liked the look of him. He nudged the boy gently.

"How goes it, Comrade?" he said. "Do you bring a good appetite to the table?"

Huor smiled at him shyly and nodded reply.

"No question about that," said Hareth. "They both of them eat like wolves. Why, we had to send back for extra supplies just to feed Húrin alone."

Húrin rolled his eyes to Beren at this.

As the meal progressed, Beren was induced, with some reluctance, to tell them something of his time with the Dwarves. It was ground he had been over too many times already, and time had not dulled the ill memories. Galdor however was mostly interested in the technical issues of swordcraft, and Beren found to his relief that he could discuss these with something approaching equanimity.

"I have not heard of this Dwarf-prince," said Galdor slowly, "so I cannot judge his claim. Indeed I am surprised about the whole affair. I had thought that the Naugrim, the Stunted Folk, preferred the axe."

"Most of them do, Sir, as far as I could see," said Beren. "But is not the sword the better weapon?"

"Difficult question," rumbled Galdor, "since different situations call for different approaches. It is true, though, that I myself would prefer sword to axe in most cases. But, ah, hrrm, well, how shall I say this? The question of height comes in too. I am not troubled for inches, as you may have observed. A tall man can use a long sword to great effect; a short one will not see that advantage. That is why I raise my eyebrows at your prince.

"But that to one side. From what you tell me, you must have gone deeply into the way of the sword. That is

something that will stand you in good stead, without a doubt.”

Beren looked down at the wood of the table. “Sir,” he said, “I am not sure of that. I am half-way persuaded that it was all wasted.”

Galdor leaned back in a chair which creaked under his weight and looked at him in surprise. “Why do you say that?” he said.

In the front of Beren’s mind was the lost Frostfire, but he kept his mouth closed on that. “I have no-one to practise with in this place,” was all that he said. “Whatever skills I learned, I shall soon lose them, if I cannot practise.”

Galdor thought about this for a while, glancing at Beren from time to time. “Have you discussed this with your father?” he asked at last.

“Sir,” said Beren, “I have hardly had an opportunity to, since I came back. But I doubt that he can help me much. Among ourselves, up the valley to the West there, we have not so many swords, so men do not work hard at the art of using them. Our folk there trust rather in spear and shield, or in bows. Here in Newfort there are more who use the blade, but... well, I do not know what to say to you. My uncle is ruler here, or soon will be, and he does not love me. And I... well, the skills I learned do not seem to be the same as men teach here. So I do not know where to turn.”

“Come to us,” said Húrin suddenly. “Father, he must.”

“Peace, Son,” said his father mildly. “Speak not so before thy elder has had his chance to. But the same thought was in my own head, hadst thou but given me the chance to express it. Beren, you would be welcome among us in the North. Truly. We should certainly see to your practice; and you could doubtless earn a blade in time, too, of good elvish steel. Clearly, your own father should have a word to say on this, whether yea or nay. But what is your own leaning?”

Beren thought about it. There had been talk of fostering him in the North for as long as he could remember, and he had never thought much of it. Here, he was in his own land, his own place, and even though he had not been able to find contentment in it, it was at least something. All the time in the South his heart had cried out for the woods and hills of his home; he did not know if he could ever be happy living anywhere else. But he was drawn to these golden-haired folk; they had a freedom, a lightness of spirit which seemed to elude him. He looked up and found Húrin’s clear blue eyes fixed on him in hope.

“Come, Beren, do,” said Húrin. “Even if just for a visit.”

That decided him. He smiled back at his friend, then laughed aloud. “All right,” he said, “I will.” The prospect shone in his inner vision like the promise of a holiday, and made him feel almost cheerful. He turned smiling to Galdor. “I do not know what makes your son so persuasive, Sir,” he said. “He can always turn me to his will.”

“Hah! That is none of my doing,” said Galdor. “Well do I know from whom he gets that!” And he smiled at his wife, who stuck her tongue out at him. The big man settled his face again then and turned back to Beren. “Good. Shall I speak with your father about it on our way home?” he asked.

Beren felt shame, because if it had been left to him, he doubted it would have occurred to him to seek his own father’s permission for such a step. “Yes, Sir,” was all he said though. “If you please.”

The remainder of the evening passed agreeably in stories and song. At last the time came for Beren to return to his lodgings inside the town. The light had gone from the ground, although the sky was still blue in the North-west.

“Shall I have one of my men go with you with a torch to light your way?” asked Galdor.

Beren smiled up at him. "I thank you, Sir, but it is not necessary. I am at home in the dark," he said. He stood tensely inside the opening of the tent for a minute, listening and sniffing the air, while they looked at him curiously. Nodding to himself at last, he took his leave from them and slipped out.

"Hmm," said Galdor. But there was not time to talk further then, not until the dishes had been cleared away and the young ones put to bed. Húrin was then chivvied by Hareth to clean his teeth and to get out of his day clothes. His parents lay back on borrowed cushions and enjoyed a moment of relaxation while they watched their older son at his ablutions.

"Don't just drop your tunic where you stand, Húrin," scolded his mother. "How many times have I told you?"

Grumbling, the boy picked it up and cast it into the proper basket.

"'I am at home in the dark'," repeated Galdor thoughtfully. "I hope those are not words of omen."

"A darkness lies on his heart," said Hareth. "So much is clear."

Húrin had to spit out a mouthful of water before he could say anything. "That is not true!" he said hotly. "I am sorry, Mother. But you do not know him. He has suffered a great grief; and there are other griefs, I am sure of it, of which he has not told me. But never a truer heart lived."

His mother smiled at him. A great pang of love for her son shot through her. She thought to herself: never a truer heart lived? Well, perhaps one. But all she said was, "I said not that his heart was dark, only that it lay under a shadow. I pray that he finds his way out from under it."

* * * * *

Beren had never meant to end up leading the gang. He had wished only to make them suffer; although their suffering brought him no satisfaction. But having once established himself in a position of dominance over them, as a natural if unintended outcome of inflicting that suffering, he now found that he could not easily be rid of them.

They were not easy to manage. What had started out as a loose group of idle youths with little of either sense or morals, devoted mostly to the easy comfort of the pack, eking this out with a little light boasting, thieving and bullying as circumstances permitted, had become a tense hierarchy of suspicion, made dangerous by the very fear that brought them under his command. They were not stable; their impulse to violence needed an outlet.

Never having been in this position before, Beren had no real idea how to proceed. He found himself more and more relying on the advice of Girazôn. The older boy did not push himself forward, and very soon after the beginning of the new regime he had allowed himself to be supplanted as Beren's official lieutenant by another; but often when opportunity gave him Beren's ear he would mutter suggestions into it. By following these, Beren succeeded in riding the tiger, but he had a feeling that the beast was growing larger and less ruly all the time.

Policing their own ranks answered some of the need for outlet. There remained several intransigents at the beginning whose punishment proved very satisfactory. Even after all the former members of the gang had sworn a new and dreadful oath (devised by Girazôn), Beren maintained (at Girazôn's suggestion) a network of informers, and twice was able to unmask a plot via information received, with a savage group beating of the conspirators following. Somehow, though, he found that the path seemed to spiral ever downward. Struggling to find a way out, he was drawn only deeper in. It was just as he had found with the first beatings he gave to the louts: the violence brought no true release with it, it only deepened mutual hatred and mistrust.

The only route away from this seemed to be outward. Guided again by Girazôn, Beren sought to expand the group's operations, territory, and membership through aggression against other boys of similar age. One or

two very satisfactory pitched battles led to substantial gains in numbers and influence. Beren may not have known much about leading, but his grasp of battle tactics was substantial.

One of Girazôn's suggestions was that the group needed some sort of badge or marker. The matter was discussed at a meeting, and someone suggested black shirts. This met with general approval, and suitable shirts were acquired by most members within a few days. Those who were tardy were beaten.

After achieving domination of their cohort, the gang broadened their attention, and began to press on older youths. More battles occurred. Knives were pulled, and three boys were badly cut.

Even more troubling to Beren was the increase in crime. Members of the group were committing break-ins, robberies and extortions. Girazôn, however, counselled him against suppressing these acts.

"But they can't go around doing that," protested Beren. "Look at Greimar yesterday: knocking that fellow down and stealing his purse. We've got to put a stop to it."

Girazôn shook his head. "Not possible," he said. "You have to work with people, not against them. It is vain to set yourself against their natural outlets."

"Natural outlets, nothing," replied Beren stiffly. "A crime is a crime."

Girazôn rolled his eyes. "Powers, listen to him! He has a mighty force under his hand, like a mountain stream, and all he can think to do is witter about the petty anxieties of shop-keepers."

"What mighty force – what are you talking about?" said Beren.

"Look," said Girazôn, "I agree. Robbery is ugly. But consider the facts. It is all about money. We need it; those fat merchants have it. It is a natural law that surfeit flows towards shortfall. You can't stop that; all you can do is control it."

"Control it?" said Beren. "I don't understand. How –"

"All you need to do is turn the thing around," said Girazôn. "We can police this city, clean it up as spick and span as you want – and as I do too of course. We just have to convince the merchants to pay us for it."

"Why should they have to pay?" said Beren. "It seems to me –"

"Look," said Girazôn impatiently, "you don't get anything for nothing. That's universal. Now what you're forgetting is, there was crime before us. Of course there was! All right, there's a bit more now, because the lads have got a bit excited. You're right to be concerned about it; I am too. But before we got going, the merchants paid *nothing*, and what did they get? They got crime. Why aren't you concerned about *that*? I'm offering you the chance to turn the whole thing around, to make things *even better* than they were before, with a nice windfall for us into the bargain; but you won't see it. Sometimes I wonder about you, Boss, I really do."

"Fine, fine," said Beren, making calming motions with his hands, "don't get in a fret. Maybe you're right. I just wonder if the merchants will see it quite the same way."

"Those fat rabbits," replied Girazôn with scorn. "As if they'd know what's good for themselves!"

Inevitably there were complaints. Bregolas puffed and snorted but eventually the volume of protests became so vociferous that he had to take some action. A runner arrived at Beren's lodgings with a written summons to come to the Hall.

Beren showed it to Girazôn. "I was afraid it would come to this," he said.

"Of course," said the older boy. "I expected it. He was bound to take action sooner or later."

Beren was nettled. “Well if you’re so clever, what is your plan for it? It’s not you who has to front before your own uncle to answer for things.”

“Look,” Girazôn said to him with over-emphasised patience, “isn’t it obvious? Play to his weakness. What is the one thing your uncle cares about? You must know it, everyone else in the city does.”

“His troops, I suppose,” replied Beren uncertainly.

“Got it in one! Well done, youngster,” said Girazôn. “Now stretch your brains a teeny bit more and tell me, when you have a man who cares about something, something he has made, what do you do? Do you attack that thing, try to tear it down? No. Do you support it, praise it, build him up about it? Yes! Take the prize!”

“There’s no need to be sarcastic,” said Beren. “Fine. I praise his stupid troops to the skies. I just don’t see where our people come in.”

Girazôn raised his hands to heaven. “Give me patience!” he said. “Look. You just tell him that you want your own men to be a junior cadre of his – a training battalion; a pathway leading straight for his cohorts. That will do the trick, trust me.”

So that was the line Beren took with his uncle. It worked just as Girazôn said it would. Bregolas harrumphed and snorted into his moustache, but Beren could tell he was both pleased and flattered.

“Thought rather you’d be following your father’s opinion,” he grunted, eyeing the youngster.

Beren swallowed. “I don’t always see eye to eye with Father,” he said.

“Hrrmph,” said Bregolas. “Indeed? Sorry to hear it. Yes, well, anyway, it’s all very well, boy, but I have these damned shopkeepers on my back. Can’t you exercise some control over your, ah, over your men?”

“I’m taking it in hand, Sir,” said Beren. “I don’t think you’ll have too many more complaints.”

The way the blackshirts worked it was like this. Two of them would visit a shop. One would drift idly around the stall, watched by the uneasy shopkeeper, while the second would put the suggestion to the man that a small, regular contribution to the youth community chest, nothing in any way substantial or painful, would support efforts to tackle crime in the neighbourhood. The talker would knit his brows at that point and observe that there were many evil chances that could happen to a merchant, standing exposed as he did to fate. Theft, breakages, there could even be fire. The youth of the town were trying to organize a fire brigade. Perhaps the merchant would care to contribute to that? As well?

Most of the shopkeepers saw the way the wind set quickly enough. Few agreed at first, since they were not used to such practices. Breakages among the majority of holdouts increased; but for those who complied, even the existing level of pilferage dropped away to nothing.

The first merchant who complained to Bregolas noticed a column of smoke as he came out of the Hall. Half-way down the street, he broke into a run; too late. His shop, and everything in it, was burning out of control. Blackshirts were leading the bucket brigade; they had even, it appeared, obtained the blankets which wrapped his frightened wife and weeping children as they crouched soot-smudged in the gutter.

All of this weighed on Beren’s heart. How had it come to this? It had started about the sword; but it had been weeks since he had written to his aunt.

The greatest grief to him was the loss of his friends. They had gradually become estranged to him, until one day Halthaldir made it clear to Beren that he did not want anything to do with him any more.

“You are not the person I thought you were,” he said sadly, before shutting his door in Beren’s face.

* * * * *

Andreth took not nearly so sanguine a view of the blackshirts as her nephew, but as the two of them were not in communication, this difference did not weigh upon either. Her feelings were a mixture, but she found that the self-satisfaction of being proven right about Beren, namely that he had gone to the bad – or so it certainly appeared – did not compensate for the sadness she felt at the promise betrayed, the chance lost.

At least the blasted boy had stopped sending her notes, there was that to be thankful for about it.

She went still every day to visit her brother. He never left his bed now. He was sometimes lucid, sometimes not. In his clear spells he spoke little; when sense left him he seemed restless and was constantly muttering, shaking his head and frowning. Andreth came to the conviction that he had something on his mind.

One morning she was shaken awake by a frightened maid. “Please Ma’am, come quickly! It’s the Lord! I think he has gone mad!”

Andreth, trying to shake the sleep from her head, hurried to pull on a robe. At the door to her brother’s bedchamber she found more maids and two men-at arms.

“I wouldn’t go in there, Ma’am,” said one of the guards, “he’s got his sword from somewhere. Pallo has gone to fetch a net.”

“Nonsense,” she snorted, pushing the man aside and opening the door.

Her brother was standing in the middle of the floor under a skylight. The light which streamed down silvered the sparse hairs on his head and gleamed off the hook of his nose, as it cast his eyes into deep shadow. His robe glowed white under it; the liquid light also gleamed off the bright blade of the sword which he held at the salute in front of his face.

Andreth advanced a little further into the room.

“Brother,” she said softly, “you should rest.”

He turned his shadowed eyes to face her. “Rest?” he croaked. “Yet more rest? No. Too long have I rested, as you say, and done nothing. Too long. All the long years, resting, aye, with failure and dishonour behind them. Resting on a cesspool. Ah, no, it will not do to rest, not any more; for the reckoning comes at last. It comes at last. The time for idleness has now passed. Let the lid be cast aside from the cess!”

She swallowed, thinking of old memories. “My Lord,” she said hesitantly, “for good or evil, what is past is past. And speak not so of thyself, I beg thee. It is not just. None of us is made of steel, we each have our limits. Scourge not thyself because thou once wast tried beyond thine own.”

The old man slowly moved the blade down until it was pointing straight at her. “Get thee from hence, Sister who speaks with the father’s voice, and who ever had his favour,” he said with the quaver of age. “Or I might do thee a mischief.”

Andreth took a step closer. “I do not fear thee, Brother. My voice and my favours I cannot help. If thou hast marked those, thou hast also marked how I always took thy cause; always.”

Bregor covered his eyes with his free hand. The sword drooped in his other. “I could never please him,” he said in a choked voice. “Never.”

Andreth came another step closer. “He was harsh to thee, Brother,” she said softly. “Who should know that better than I?”

The old man took his hand away and again brought up the sword. The point of it hovered now an inch or so in front of Andreth’s nose. It was a Dwarven blade, wrought by the cunning arts of the Stunted Folk, those secretive dwellers in far mountain halls. Father had bought it for Bregor when he was sixteen; she remembered the day well.

“I will not do thee harm, Sister,” said Bregor, with a different note now to be heard in his voice. “I beg thy pardon for my weakness. I know thou speakest sooth. Nonetheless, I bid thee come no closer. Indeed, thou shouldst depart from here. A battlefield is no place for a woman.”

At this moment she heard a commotion at the door behind her, and Bregolas’s voice saying, “What in the Pit...?”

Andreth put a hand behind her back and waved him urgently to be still. “What battlefield is that, Lord?” she said to Bregor. “I see no battle, only a bed chamber.”

“Can you not hear the blare of the horns?” said Bregor. “Even so it was on that day of my shame. Look there! Can you not see the ranks of the enemy? The glitter of their spears? See how they lour there, the dark ranks of the foe! Andreth, get thee hence from the field. Thou hast just time. Soon we will charge; and this time I shall not hang back. I shall lead the van, and thou must not be there. Faugh! Get back, you, wait your time!”

With that he took a great looping swing of the sword around his head. Andreth stumbled back out of its way, and her nephew, coming forward, caught her in his arms and saved her from falling. Bregor was taking mighty sweeps with the blade and shouting challenges at imaginary enemies.

“Are you as fey as he?” hissed Bregolas in her ear while he dragged her back. “Fool! You were in a fair way to losing your head.”

“Let me go!” She struggled to free herself from his grasp. “I thought but to stop him before he does himself an injury. Get some blankets!”

“They have a net here,” he said. “Stand aside, now.”

Two men entered with a coarsely-woven net spread between them. They advanced cautiously on Bregor. He caught sight of them and turned on them instantly, the bright sword held high and the light of battle flaring in his eyes.

“Would you?” he snarled. “Would you, though? Come on then, filth. Try my mettle!”

Cursing and dodging the wildly swinging blade, the two soldiers at last succeeded in casting the net over the old man. The sword rang loudly as it fell to the ground. The men bundled Bregor onto the floor and drew the coils tight around him. For a moment the old man thrashed about with a surprising strength; then all at once he collapsed.

Andreth ran forward. “Get that off him!” she cried.

The net was unwound. The old man seemed to have fainted; he was breathing with difficulty and his face had a sunken look.

They carried him to the bed and sent for the leech. When she came, the wise-woman looked in Bregor’s eyes and felt his pulse. At the end, she shrugged helplessly. “I will brew him a draught,” she said, “in case he should wake. But I must tell you, Mistress, I doubt he ever will again. He is old, and he has spent what little strength remained to him.”

Andreth sighed. “Thank you, Frola. Leave us now.”

She sat on, listening to the unsteady breathing, as the unseen sun crept across the sky outside. In the long hours of waiting, pictures of long ago passed through her head – young faces long dead, or grown old, like this guttering candle of an aged man that lay here; all that remained of the laughing eyes and bright face that had been her only brother.

All the time, while these far-off and sunlit days played again through her memory, she kept the eyes of her

body on her brother's face, and her ears on his breathing. There were times when she was sure he was going; then he would rally a little.

Bregolas had come in at some time during the day, and Hirwen and Gilwen were there now too.

Towards evening the old man seemed half-way to wake. His eyelids fluttered and he reached out weakly with a clawed and palsied hand. Andreth leaned close to him and grasped the hand. She could see the bloodless lips trying to form words.

"Be at ease, my Lord," she said into his ear. "Be at peace. A great victory you have won! A great, great victory. You have earned your rest at last, and can take your place with honour among our fathers. Be at peace!"

He squeezed her hand weakly and relaxed. The breathing became even but very light.

Andreth fell into a weary doze as the night wore on. She woke with a start to feel Hirwen's hand on her arm.

"Why don't you lie down, Aunt?" whispered the younger woman. "We'll call you if there's a change."

"No, no." She looked toward the bed. In the dim light of the candles, Bregor seemed little more than a beak of a nose arching out of a halo of fine silver hair. His breathing was now hardly to be heard.

Andreth remembered that face when it was young and the hair dark. He had been a cheerful, handsome boy, good at most things he set his hand to.

They had had fun together, the three of them: Bregor, Beril and she. It had been a happy childhood.

Bregor had had a wooden horse, as a toy, when he was young. Mother had carved it for him. Whatever had happened to that? She couldn't tell. Perhaps it was left behind in the South, as so many things had been.

She remembered her great-grandfather Baran, who used to tell her tales of the Great Trek and of the lands to the East of the Blue Mountains. He had died in the year the People came north, but he had been all over the North when he was young, in service to Finrod. He had only settled down when he grew too old to roam, but you could tell he still had the restless desire for new horizons; it was in his blood.

So many years, so many faces once known, now forgotten. Of all the mortal folk in Middle-earth who had heard Baran's laugh, who had seen him test an axe with his thumb, who knew his narrow-eyed way of puzzling over some check or difficulty, there remained only two: Andreth herself, and the old man now breathing his last on this bed. Once she herself was gone, nothing would remain of her great-grandfather but his name; and eventually even that would go. What, then, had he lived for? It didn't seem to make any sense.

Bregor died in the small hours of the morning. The leech Frola was called, but the body was already cooling by the time she came. People stirred and yawned. Andreth could not remember a time when she had felt so bone-weary.

Hirwen and Bregolas came to her. "Lie you down now, Aunt," said Hirwen in soft tones. "Our girls will see to everything."

"But after you are rested, we must talk," said Bregolas.

* * * * *

Bregolas received Andreth in his chamber of office, two days later. It was a fine, spacious room lit by large expanses of many-paned, knobbly green glass. The walls were covered by vividly coloured hangings depicting the deeds of various semi-legendary heroes of the Folk. So far as Andreth could tell – and she probably knew more of the true history of the Folk than any other person now living – there was hardly more truth in all these tales together than would cover a fingernail; but Bregolas loved to hear songs about them,

about Bram Spear-Shaker and all the rest, and he was by no means alone in his predilections. Most people, she found, preferred a colourful fable to the sombre truth, especially if the fable reflected well upon their forebears. It was a thing which once had irked Andreth intensely, but she had learned since then to fight only those battles which were winnable. It was pointless to lose sleep over those which were not.

She found Bregolas sitting behind his broad desk of polished wood, little of which could be seen under scattered parchments. Andreth examined her nephew critically while he finished the sentence he was writing. He was no longer young, either. There was as much grey as dark in his hair, and his face looked puffy and unhealthy.

Bregolas shoved his quill in its holder and stood to greet her. "Sit down, Aunt, please."

She sat, and the two of them regarded one another. Andreth was wary; she wondered what he had on his mind.

"So, so," he sighed, "the old days pass."

She only shrugged slightly in reply.

"I must say though, I would never have thought the old man had it in him to lift a sword, let alone swing it around the way he did," said Bregolas.

"He was a brisk enough fighter in his day," said Andreth. "Not in the same league as Father, of course; but brisk enough."

"What was that all about, what he was saying?" Bregolas was curious to know. "About shame, and hanging back?"

"My lord," replied Andreth slowly, "I am not persuaded I should be spilling my brother's private affairs to all and sundry."

"Oh come now, Aunt, I hardly count as 'all and sundry'; we are all family here. I knew he did not get on with the old man, with Boromir. I had already guessed there was some shame involved. It is not so very difficult to draw a picture. Is it not worth something to divide rumour from fact?"

She sighed. Rumour from fact. Dared he speak so, with these dotting fables all over his wall. But it was not a point worth fighting over. "All right," she said. "And it was not such a great shame as all that, after all. Only Father viewed it so. He was very hard on him, Bregolas."

"It was the first big battle, and the first time Bregor had seen any combat at all. Father made him lead the left wing. Bregor was only twenty-five, and you may think that was old enough, maybe, but he was very green. Father's hard old veterans handled him like a puppet; it was a sorry thing to see. Father had some hard men, his Wolf-pack he used to call them. Bitter fighters, but some of them were not very nice. They were not soft men, as you may suppose. Anyway someone, one of them, called the charge before Bregor was ready. He needed to screw himself up to it perhaps. But how can I tell what a man feels in such a pinch, never having had to face it myself? Whatever the reason, he was not in front of the charge as he was meant to be, and he wet himself too – as do many in their first battle. But he fought, Bregolas, he fought hard. There was nothing of cowardice about it. He had nothing at all to blame himself about, considered rightly. All it needed was a jest and a slap on the back, and he would have been blooded, over the crest. But Father must needs call him out in front of all the troops and have him bend over in the sight of all men and suffer the flat of a blade on his backside. He was never the same afterwards."

"Wolf-pack, eh?" said Bregolas, clearly tickled by the name.

Andreth felt irritated. Was that all he could think about? "They are all gone now. Time has taken them and scattered their bones."

“What a gloomy old body you are, Aunt, to be sure,” said Bregolas. “I am sorry about Father. But life goes on. The old pass; but the new spring up in their place. Father became Landholder of Ladros in his turn after Boromir. And now the mantle falls to me.” He eyed her intently.

“Landholder for Finrod,” said Andreth drily. “Provided Finrod confirms it.”

“Ah,” said Bregolas, “yes of course. Should I send word to him, do you think?”

“He will know,” said Andreth. “The Fair Folk come to know such things that concern them.”

“How, I wonder...” mused Bregolas. After a thoughtful pause he continued. “Do you know, I am not sure of his title. Is he lord or king?”

“Lord only, here,” replied Andreth. “Thingol is the titular king of all these lands west of the Blue Mountains.”

“Oh, him,” said Bregolas. “Well, he may claim as he pleases, and your Finrod too. The facts generally end up speaking for themselves.”

Andreth sniffed. She understood him. “This will not be the first time we have disagreed on the proper relations between Men and the Fair Folk, my lord.”

He snorted now in his turn. “‘Fair folk’,” he repeated with scorn. “These overgrown children, these carollers in the woods – I do not understand why you cling to their coat-tails so, Aunt, when all you have got from them is pain.”

She shook her head slowly from side to side. “You know nothing about it.”

He was playing with the pens on his desk, running the nib of one over the feathers of another.

“You did not call me here to banter about Elves,” she said after a period of silence.

He let the pens fall and raised his head. “Andreth, I cannot allow you to usurp my position,” he said.

Andreth bristled at that and immediately rose to go. “You mistake yourself, my Lord, if you think I have either power or intent to do so,” she answered coldly.

“Wait a moment, Aunt, can’t you?” said Bregolas. He looked pained. “Give a fellow a chance to finish. I was going to say, can we not work together? Must we always compete?”

She stared at him. “One cannot turn back the clock,” she said at last.

“Confound your stiff neck, Andreth,” said Bregolas. “Can’t you see I’m trying to apologize? Surely if I can swallow my pride to ask your pardon for past words said, you can lower yours enough to accept it. For the good of the House.”

Andreth turned it over in her mind. Her impulse was to throw his apology in his face; but she knew she *was* over-proud. She hesitated while she fought with herself.

“Just what is it you propose?” she asked him at last, standing as stiff as a ramrod, chin high, dark eyes staring at him.

“I’m asking you to rule the Hall,” he said. “Hirwen arranges things one way, then Gilwen comes along and countermands it all. It has become a joke. I can’t get hot food, we’ve run out of yarn, and nobody can find the leather grease. Powers know what those Northmen thought of the circus at that feast we gave for them – I didn’t know where to hide my face. So I’m asking you, please, to take it over again. I promise not to meddle so long as you allow me my sphere, that is, the army.”

“And what of the stores?” she asked him in a harsh voice. “To whose sphere shall they belong?”

Bregolas looked irritated. “One cannot equip troops without spending goods,” he blustered.

“One cannot feed a household if all the goods have been spent!”

“Well then, we shall just have to argue each case on its terms. For heaven’s sake, Aunt, is there not such a thing as compromise?”

She turned without a word and paced imperiously to the door. He watched her uncertainly, ready to curse at her departure. She turned however in the doorway and faced him again.

“Accepted,” she said, then vanished.

* * * * *

Orthir found gate-guard a dull job. Indeed, the only reason he stuck to it was that work on his father’s farm was incomparably duller. A little pleasant gossip was to be had now and then from infrequent travellers, but apart from this, there was little to hope for in the way of relief from the monotony of staring at an empty road than the occasional party of trading Dwarves. The visit by the Northmen at the height of summer had been a rare variation, and had been something of a high point of the season for all the guards, who still talked about it among themselves.

It had been a routine shift today, one of many, all much the same as one another. Orthir was hungry, and was looking forward to the end of the shift. He would take a meal, and a mug of beer or two, and play knucklebones with his pals perhaps.

Here came that girl again – in company with all her friends, blast it. If only she would come past on her own! Fellow might have a chance then, could say a word or two, tease, make a jest, who knew what that might lead to. But when they were all in a girlish gaggle together, forget it!

She knew he fancied her, he was sure of it. She would look at him out of the corner of her eye as she went past, and the friends would stare boldly and whisper remarks to each other which brought them all out in a fit of giggles.

Dang it. He put on his most dignified guard-type expression and looked narrow-eyed out of the gate and along the road. The wary guard watching for intruders.

What he saw there made him forget about the girl. He stiffened, looked more closely, then took the few steps around the corner of the gate to the guard-house door. Knocking with his fist against the frame, he said “Chief, d’you want to come and see what you make of this?”

Garth, the Gate-marshal, came back with him to the opening. He squinted at the approaching party. “Them’s Elves,” he said after a moment. “Can’t be anything else. Ain’t you seen Elves before?”

“Well no,” said Orthir, scratching his head. “Can’t say’s I have. Not up close, like.”

There were six of the riders. They were now not far from the bridge. All the Elves were bare-headed. Their leader had hair which shone bright under the sunlight – except there was no sunlight on this cloudy day.

“Look a bit like them North-folk,” commented Orthir. “Only more so, somehow.”

Garth was still staring at the approaching party. “Orthir,” he said urgently without turning his head, “go and rouse out the other lads. Quickly now! Best gear, smart as they like. Get them out here, on the double!”

Orthir gaped. “What?” he said vacantly.

Garth turned and struck him urgently on the chest. “Don’t just stand there, ninny! Run to it! It’s the Lord Finrod!”

Even Orthir had heard of Finrod, that mighty judge and captain, prince without peer of the bright and deathless Elves, he who had led the Folk here out of the South in the days of Orthir’s father. He turned and scuttled into the guardroom, where Garth could hear him yelling the news. Shortly after that men began to tumble out, tugging their gear into shape. Garth turned, cursing, to the job of getting them into some sort of approximation to a neat turnout. No more time – it would just have to do.

“Leave that,” he hissed. “In line now. Pick your damned spear up, Sarnas. Salute when I give the order. Not there, there, fool!” He pushed the man into place and faced the front again just as the hooves of the horses ceased sounding hollow on the bridge and began to crunch on the stones before the gateway.

“Squad: attention!” cried Garth. “Salute!” There was a satisfactory clash of spear-butts on the cobbles behind him. He looked up into the fair face above him with the same awe he had felt last time – some years ago it was now. Old Narthan had still been in charge then.

Finrod smiled down at him. “Greetings, Garth,” he said. “You are Gate-marshal now? A worthy advance. May we enter?”

“Of course, Lord,” said Garth. “You are very welcome to us. Shall I send a runner to the Hall?”

“No need to on our account,” said the golden-haired Elf. “We thought to look to our horses, then walk up. But send if you think it good.”

Garth had no doubt about that at all, and the lad-of-all-work was sent off urgently with a message for ‘uphill’. Garth turned then to helping the party with their horses – magnificent beasts they were too. A crowd was quickly gathering, all intent to goggle at and take in the visitors. The Fair Folk! Such were seldom seen in Newfort these days.

The Elves were tall and graceful. They were a mixed party: three men beside Finrod, and two women. Apart from their leader, all had dark hair and clear eyes of winter grey. The men carried long swords at their sides, the women shorter blades. All were thickly cloaked for travel; all wore war-shirts of what looked to be a light Dwarf-mail, a glimmering cloth of silvery rings, as fine as salmon-skin. They were Noldor from over the western seas, and their faces bore a light which caught at the heart and made it race. To see them was to desire to follow them.

The party conversed with one another in their musical tongue, punctuated by occasional laughter, as they unstrapped their packs and tended the horses. The crowd of onlookers could only gaze dumbly at the fair faces, smiling every time there was laughter, and trying vainly to understand the words spoken.

The packs and bows of the travellers were stowed in the entry of the inn, where folk wondered at the fineness of their make, and were careful in stepping around them. Once these practical matters were finished with, Finrod led his party up the street. People lined the way, many bowing to their lord as he came along. The golden-haired Elf would smile at anyone he knew, and occasionally he said a few words in greeting, or grasped someone’s hand. As the party climbed higher, however, his face became graver. A feeling was growing in him, a suspicion; by the time he reached the big wooden hall on the hilltop he was certain.

There was something in the temper of this town that was not right. A tension lay in the air, and something which looked very like fear could occasionally be glimpsed flickering in the corners of people’s eyes.

Bregolas met the Elves at the Hall, backed by his aunt and his sisters. Many words were spoken, few with much meaning behind them. Finrod knew Men well, and he knew that they needed pattern in their lives, formulas of words to follow. Personally he found it all so unnecessary. But no matter; there would be time for true words later. And after all, he had all the time in the world – literally so. So he followed form, expressed his condolences at the death of Bregor, and inquired after the health and well-being of the living.

Finrod's eyes held a particular warmth as he greeted Andreth, and she smiled back at him out of the deep well of their friendship. But he could not escape a pang at the sight of her silver tresses, lined face and bowed back. He was long used to this burden of Men, had observed it now many, many times; but the pain of their short lives struck him ever anew.

Bregolas had been reconciled with his sons since the bitter disagreements of the previous year; superficially at least. Reflection had perhaps brought him to realize that even their conditional and partial support was better than none. He had not been able to bring himself to make anything directly recognisable as an apology, but the young men had accepted his grudging overtures with grace, and were once more occasional guests at his board. However, their refusal to countenance his views on the equipment and training of his troops had remained absolute, as had their decision to settle some distance away from Newfort. But since the visit of their common liege-lord was a matter that affected all of those close to the Bëor, the Soldier and the Greencloak journeyed up now to meet him.

The first opportunity to talk in earnest came the following day. All guests and residents of the Hall ate the noon-meal together, after which Finrod met in conclave with the immediate family: Bregolas, Andreth, Baragund and Belegund, as well as Bregolas's unmarried sisters Hirwen and Gilwen.

Finrod had stopped off for a long talk with Barahir on the road east, so he was well informed about the tensions in the family, but they would have been perceptible to him anyway. Bregolas was attempting to disguise unease under bonhomie; Andreth was cold, the sons stiff, the sisters nervous.

"Is Barahir's son Beren not here?" the Elf asked. "I was told he was staying in the town."

"Ah! Well, I didn't think to invite him," said Bregolas. "Perhaps I should have. Did you especially want to see him?"

"I should like to meet the boy, yes," said Finrod.

"It can be arranged, my lord. I'll send for him. Interesting lad, kept some strange company at times but he's come on a lot lately. Runs these Blackshirt fellows now."

Finrod perceived clearly that this was a word which had an emotional weight for everybody there, in varying degrees; and, apart from Bregolas, it was not a good one.

"Blackshirts?" he enquired.

"They're a sort of youth brigade," explained Bregolas with obvious enthusiasm. "They wear those shirts as a sort of uniform. Proud of them too; good to see pride like that, I think so anyway. They keep order in the city, crime has really fallen away lately. Have to hand it to that young fellow, he's taken a band of, well they were just louts basically, and made something really useful out of them."

Finrod turned to Hirwen, who was looking down at her hands. "You don't seem quite to agree, Hirwen," he said gently.

Hirwen glanced nervously at Bregolas, but then said to Finrod in a low voice, "They beat him, most cruelly. Beren. I saw him afterwards. He might have died, if it had not been for that northern boy. And they killed his bird."

"I said they were louts," said Bregolas in irritated tones. "It's all different now."

"Beren's not the only one they have beaten," said Gilwen, casting a dark look at her brother. "Only now it is said that they beat others at his bidding. I've heard stories."

Baragund nodded to this, his face set in sober lines. "We've heard talk as well, even down there by Menelrond."

Bregolas put his hands palm-down on the table and leaned forward. "You should know better than to listen to idle rumours, Gilwen, and you boys too," he said, fixing them in turn with an irritated eye. "The facts say differently, and nobody can argue with facts. Yes, I had complaints about those fellows to begin with; but the complaints have stopped now. They've stopped, d'you hear? The whole town has never been so quiet and orderly. And that's all there is about it."

Finrod changed the subject. They discussed other things for a while – Orc-raids, the crop yields, lads and lasses in elvish service. Bregolas was, as ever, very full of his own forces and their training.

"I tell you what, Lord," he said, "let us have a parade. The people will enjoy something of that sort anyway, and I can show you the quality we have here now. We'll have the Blackshirts too, and any of the townspeople who wish to take part: the traders' unions and such like. It will be a grand show. What do you say to that?"

Finrod agreed politely, if without enthusiasm. More of these dull and pointless formalities!

After the evening meal he sought a private audience with Andreth.

He took her hand in both of his. "It has been a long time, old friend," he said with the affection clear to see in his face.

"Too many years, my lord," she replied. "Much longer, and you might not have found me here at all. You too easily forget that the lives of men are short."

They sat themselves on either side of the fire.

"I never forget that," he said gently, "not for a moment. But I have many duties and demands on my time, as you know. It was easier to visit when you sojourned in the West of this land and I in the great valley, only a day's ride further. But we are far apart now, and the journey takes many days."

She leaned forward and squeezed his hand. "Don't take any notice of me, Finrod," she said, "I am become a crabby old woman. But tell me. How goes it with you?"

"The same as ever," he said smiling, "but I do not wish to talk of my own concerns. It is matters here which seem to have altered, and not for the better. There is evil afoot in this town, I am sure of it. What do you know of these Blackshirts?"

"Not much directly," she admitted, "either for good or for ill. I do not stir much out of this hall, neither do I have a network of gossips like Hirwen. Bregolas says one thing, the sisters another. I do not know what to think."

"And what of Beren?" he asked. "That is a strange story."

Her expression darkened. "Indeed. Barahir has told you of his years with the Drúedain, and then with the Dwarves?"

The Elf-lord confirmed this. "Barahir did not say so in so many words," he added, "but it was clear to me that he is not easy in his mind about the boy."

"Hah!" said Andreth. "Is he not! Well, I am not either. I had hopes of that boy, great hopes. At one time I thought he would become the best of us; now I am not sure but that he could go the other way and become the worst. He is one of those who can carry great weight in the world; the question is on which side of the balance he will lay it. It is, perhaps, early to say; but the indications are not good."

Finrod looked at her. "You speak somewhat without passion, Andreth, as one observing the affairs of another; but I have the feeling that, beneath that, your disappointment has also a more personal flavour."

"And why should it not be personal?" flared Andreth. "I have no children of my own; may I not then invest

my care in those of my nephews?”

“There are things you are not telling me,” he said, “but I do not rate you for that. It is only fair, since there are matters concerning my own folk which I, in my turn, keep silence on to you. So, keep your secrets. But if Beren gives you no joy, may you not at least take pleasure in the sons of Bregolas?”

She wore an expression of frustrated vexation, but suddenly she laughed. “Ah, you are a cunning one, Finrod. You are no fun. You excite me to anger, then take away any possibility to vent it.”

He smiled and shrugged.

“Baragund and Belegund are fine boys,” she said, “and I am indeed proud of them, and pleased with them. They set themselves against my counsel last year, it is true; but I think I know why, and I rather honour them for it than otherwise. But both of them are born followers – they have not so much weight in affairs. Beren could be something special, and therein is the loss the greater.”

Finrod stood. “Well, your account of him is not a promising one, to be sure, but I should like to meet the boy and weigh him for myself.”

“You will at least see him at Bregolas’s parade,” she said.

The Elf-lord sighed. “I have no appetite for such spectacles. But I suppose I must attend.”

“I have not been in the town for weeks – months, even,” said the old lady. “But do you know, I think I shall come too. I want to see these Blackshirts with my own eyes.”

The serving woman, who had been discreetly tidying cups away, being finished, now slipped out of the door. In the kitchen, she spoke to one of the girls washing up. “Janny,” she said to her, “leave that now. Just go and find young Hathaldir for me, would you? I have some messages for him to run.”

* * * * *

The emptiness had grown in Beren until he sometimes wondered if there was anything left of him at all. He felt eaten away, like a hollow nut-shell, dry and empty, just lying there on the floor.

He had not left the Blackshirts headquarters for days. They brought him his meals, eyes averted. The rankers thought the boss was planning something; best let him be. But Beren had no plans, no direction, no volition. He did not know where he wanted to go; he was not even sure who he was any more.

Girazôn was in the room. Beren had not noticed him come in. He stirred himself with an effort.

“What is it?” he asked in a thick voice.

“Bregolas is putting on a parade,” said Girazôn. “He wants us to take part. Then he wants to see you at the Hall afterwards. Some Elf-lord is visiting.”

Beren sat there dully, saying nothing.

Girazôn looked at him speculatively. “Shall I organize the parade, then?” He had over the last week or two gradually taken over all the running of the club, doing everything ‘in the Leader’s name’ of course. But this was a bit out of the ordinary.

“What?” said Beren. “Oh. Yes. Do as you please.”

Girazôn left him. Soon it will be time, he thought; not quite yet, but soon. Let’s get this Elf out of the picture first. Then we shall see about you, master Beren. Oh yes – then we shall see.

Bregolas had been anxious about the weather, but the day of the parade dawned fine. The family breakfasted, then prepared to set out down to the gate. Andreth proposed to come too.

“Should you not rather stay at the Hall, Aunt?” said Bregolas. “It is a long walk for you.” He could not help smirking a little. “Even with your stick.”

She glared up at him. “I am coming!” she said. “That is settled. Now, if somebody can find my wrap – ah thank you Gilwen. So. I am ready. Shall we go?”

“Shall I rather fetch my horse for you, Andreth?” suggested Finrod.

A half-smile tugged at her lips. “I thank you, my lord, but at my age I think a horse, even an elven horse, might cause more damage than it cures. No, give me your arm; that will be support enough. Do you younger ones go ahead; Finrod and I will come at our own pace. Go on!”

The two of them made their slow way down the street. Throngs of people were moving down with them, but the townsfolk allowed plenty of room to the tall, sun-haired Elf prince and the bent old woman.

“It is good to be out in the open,” said Andreth. “I should take more exercise, I know. If only my knees and hips did not pain me so.”

After they had progressed for a while, Andreth became a little uneasy. “The air seems uncommon thick,” she muttered to herself, “or what is it? It can hardly be thunder, at this time of the year.”

“No, it is not thunder,” replied Finrod in grim tones. “It is as I said: something is afoot in this town.”

The oppressive feeling grew on Andreth as they made their way towards the square. People were talking at volume all around them, even laughing; but it was all wrong somehow, like music played on mistuned instruments.

At the entrance to the square a boy tumbled out of the crowd at Andreth’s feet, as if pushed from behind. He looked up at her. “I beg your pardon, Lady!”

“Tsk, young man, take more care. Here, give me your hand.” She peered closely at him. “But surely I know you! You are...”

He stared into her eyes. “No, Lady, you do not know me,” he said firmly, and put his hand in hers.

At the contact with the boy’s hand, Andreth’s expression changed.

She held his hand as he picked himself off the ground. When he was upright, she looked at him with all expression wiped from her face. “No – I was mistaken. I do not know you, boy,” she said distantly. “Be off with you now, and take more care next time!” The boy bowed and disappeared back into the crowd. Andreth resumed the stroll with Finrod, a thoughtful expression on her face. Halthaldir, that was the boy’s name. The younger son of the Hall-major.

She could feel against her clutching palm the hard edges of the folded paper he had slipped to her.

She turned to Finrod. “My lord, you know I am old. But you may not be aware of all that entails. Would you forgive an old woman if she made a quick diversion to the privy? Such matters have more, shall we say frequency, about them these days.”

He bowed his head slightly to her and smiled. Catching his eye, she became convinced that he knew exactly what had just transpired, and what she wanted to do now. He escorted her to the inn. Once in the narrow chamber, she unfolded the paper under the tiny window and scanned its contents, struggling to make out the

letters, despite the help of the Dwarvish glass which she always carried in her pocket. Thank Powers for strong light and large script.

The letter ran: "To the noble Lady Andreth of the House of Bëor, greetings. Lady, we beg your help. We are being pressed by Beren Barahir's son and his band of Blackshirts. If we do not pay them, we suffer. Some such lose by theft; others by damage; others still are beaten. He has informers everywhere, also in the Hall. He knows when people complain; three who did so have had their homes and shops burnt, and now none dare so any more. The payment rises and rises, and now many are in difficulties to find the money. We cannot resist; those who do are beaten, and the beatings become ever more severe. Nobody has yet been killed, but we think it is only a question of time. The Blackshirts take where they will, and none dare protest. Lately they have extended their delinquencies to the oppression of maidens. My lady, we are desperate. We do not know where to turn. Help us, we beg you. Remove these villains from around our necks, this monstrous burden from our lives."

There was no signature.

Andreth found herself shaking with anger. She had difficulty in composing herself before emerging from the inn.

Finrod eyed her curiously. "Everything now in order?"

"No," she said shortly. "You were right. Later."

A raised daïs had been hastily constructed outside the gates. Placed in the centre of this was a single ornately-carved chair, or throne it should better be called. Bregolas had intended this for Finrod, but when the party clambered up onto the daïs, the Elf made Andreth sit on it, then stood himself to one side.

A considerable crowd had already gathered, and more yet were streaming out of the gate. The roar of their combined chatter made it difficult to converse, or even to hear one's own thoughts. Most eyes were turned on the daïs and the golden-haired figure of the Elf-lord, and most conversations seemed to have the same object. Not only was he the most wonderful and impressive thing most of them had ever seen, but they also felt that he held their fate in his hands; and as Andreth had just found out, this was a matter of urgent importance in the present state of things.

As soon as the stream of people began to dwindle, Bregolas's guard chivvied the crowd back so as to leave a broad way free, leading from around the corner of the stockade, past the reviewing stand, then over the bridge.

Around the stockade, out of sight of the mass of people, the various parties were already forming up. The soldiers were to go first and had formed themselves into a glittering column, five men wide and many deep. Behind them came a band of horns, drums and cymbals; after that should come the Blackshirts; and behind *them*, as many civilian groups as cared to take part. There were, in fact, rather few of these.

Beren's daze had worsened. Girazôn had to tell him to do everything. He had been helped to dress himself in the signature black tunic of the unit, together with the other items of an ensemble which had grown with time: a black leather kilt, black gauntlets, dull red hose diamonded with black strapping, the whole topped with a red bonnet with a long black feather. This sombre uniform was picked up by points of silver on the belt and a silver badge at the breast.

He stood there, empty, not even wondering what to do, because there were no thoughts in his head at all. The members had formed up in a block now, and Girazôn hustled Beren into his place at their head. By now the Blackshirts had sensed that something was amiss with their leader, and many looked at him speculatively. Similar thoughts began tentatively to form in several heads. Some of them glanced at their neighbours, trying to guess what they might be thinking.

The parade-marshal had been walking up and down all this time, doing a lot of shouting, but matters now

seemed to be about ready. Girazôn came up to Beren. “When the soldiers start, just follow them,” he hissed. “That’s all you have to do. Follow the soldiers. You can do that, can’t you?”

Beren looked at him and nodded dully.

“What do you have to do? Tell me,” insisted Girazôn.

Beren tried to think. “Uh – follow the soldiers,” he mumbled.

“Right! Good! After that, we’ll go back, and you can rest, all right? Just follow the soldiers. Don’t worry about anything else.”

The band struck up then with a skirl of drums, and they were away.

As the lead ranks of his pride and joy came marching around the corner, Bregolas seemed to grow by an inch or two. He leaned over the chair towards Finrod. “Don’t they look fine!” he shouted above the cheers of the crowd.

And indeed, the soldiers looked most impressive. The high helms gleamed in the sunlight, and the polished swords glittered as they were swung in synchronized swoops and whirls. The troops had practised many routines with these long blades. As they came opposite the daïs, the swords were tossed into the air as one, where the blades flashed and turned before descending and being caught again. Bregolas laughed with pleasure and struck the arm of the chair with his hand.

The band came past next, and the shudder of their drums reached a crescendo where it drowned out even the crowd.

But then a strange thing happened: as the band moved away, the crowd noise began also to dwindle, until in a short space of time it had fallen away to utter silence, leaving nothing to hear but the thump of the receding drums and the distant cries of a baby or two.

Watched by the silent crowd, the Blackshirts were approaching. The crunch of their marching feet could be heard in the stillness.

Andreth, sitting grim on the throne, was aware of Bregolas to her left and Finrod to her right. Bregolas seemed utterly nonplussed by the sudden silence, and was looking around at the silent people in bewilderment. But Finrod was tense: drawn tight as a wire.

She looked up at him, forgetting her anger in her sudden concern. “What is it?” she asked.

Finrod ignored her. His gaze was fixed like a blade of light on the half-grown youth walking uncertainly at the head of the Blackshirts. Andreth noticed to her consternation that the Elf had turned white. Finrod took two stiff steps forward and leaned his hands on the railing.

Bregolas bent toward him. “That’s him there, that’s Barahir’s boy,” he muttered. “Can’t make out what’s got into the folk, though. Why are they silent? They’re giving me the willies.”

The main body of the Blackshirts, arranged in three columns each of twenty ranks or so, tramped past in the sullen silence. As Beren passed out of sight, Finrod turned back to Andreth. His eyes were glittering strangely in his strained, white countenance. “*Ngurunya ’ceniye!*” he whispered, as if to himself. Suddenly, he turned and stumbled off the platform into the crowd.

Some last half-hearted groups of trades who made a dragging tail to the strange procession were now passing. All around the daïs, people were beginning to talk again in low voices. Few as yet seemed to have noticed the disappearance of the Elf-lord.

Bregolas scratched his head in bewilderment. “Well if that wasn’t about the strangest thing I ever

witnessed!” he said.

“Bregolas,” said Andreth, “let us go back now to the Hall. There are some things we must discuss.”

The man gesture helplessly. “But, but – what about Finrod?”

“He’ll come back. He’s just had a shock. Come now, help me up.”

“Well,” said Bregolas uncertainly, “I suppose there is nothing much more to see. Day’s all gone sour, somehow. Can’t at all make it out.” He sighed. “Come then. Take my arm, Aunt, if you like.”

He helped her down off the daïs. He turned to Baragund and Belegund. “You lads go on ahead, I’ll stay and help Aunt. No, go on.”

As soon as the sons were out of earshot he bent over Andreth and said in a low voice, “Do you know what in the Pit is going on, Aunt? Because I don’t have a clue.”

“I believe so, Bregolas. I can’t tell you here though. Let’s get off the street first.” She looked up at him. “You’re not going to like it,” she said grimly.

He glanced back at her, then sighed again. “That at least will be nothing new. But listen, tell me, what did the Elf mutter before he went? Did you understand that?”

“Yes,” she said. “That was the speech he must have learned at his mother’s knee, in the shining land of his birth; in the West, where the gods abide and Death comes not. I have studied it long.”

“Well, that’s very interesting, and if I want to be schooled in the history of tongues I always know where I can find you, Aunt. But what did he *say* in it?”

She returned his look darkly. “He said, ‘I have seen my death.’”

* * * * *

The perturbed and puzzled family gathered again in the same room as before. Finrod had rejoined Bregolas and Andreth just as they reached the Hall. He apologized for his sudden departure, but he did not offer any explanation for it, and no-one dared press the point.

As soon as they were all seated, Andreth drew the letter from her bosom. “Read this, all of you,” she said. “Then we can talk.” The piece of paper made its way around the table, accompanied by gasps and exclamations. Only Finrod said nothing.

“Oh, my,” said Hirwen, hand to mouth. “Oh, my. It is just as I feared.”

“No, worse,” said Gilwen.

“There is no doubt in my mind about what needs to be done,” said Baragund.

Bregolas had been puzzled, and mightily curious as to what the letter might contain. He was the last to read it; as he did so, his expression changed to one of anger. He looked at the others and saw that they were clearly of one mind, and that made him even angrier.

“This is nonsense,” he said, casting the paper back onto the table. “I don’t believe it. How do we know who wrote this, and for what reasons? There’s no proof of anything.”

Finrod leaned forward. “It is all true,” the Elf-lord said quietly. “There is no need of proof.”

Bregolas spluttered, red in the face. “Look – with respect, my lord, but you don’t know the conditions here.

You don't know the town, and you don't know the family. You don't know the plotting that has gone on, the constant traps set beneath my feet." He glared at Andreth. "I'm by no means convinced that my dear Aunt here has not had a hand in this. If you only knew..."

"What about the silence, Bregolas?" said Andreth. "Could you not feel the people's fear? You are a blind fool. Even without this note, it should have been obvious to you – *was* obvious to everybody else who set foot in that town – that something is gravely wrong."

Bregolas stood up, leaned towards her. "I've just about had enough of you," he said in a voice thick with rage. "I've done my level best to accommodate you, Powers know I have. But all I get in return is lies and treachery. Well now I've..."

"Peace!" said Finrod. "Sit down, Bregolas. Calm yourself."

"I will not be ordered about in my own hall," shouted the furious Bregolas, striking the table with his fist. "*I* rule here. *I* rule!"

"As my vassal," replied the Elf calmly. "Should I choose to confirm you. Not otherwise."

Bregolas stared at him. As clearly as if they were written on his forehead, the consequences of rebellion paraded themselves through his mind. He swallowed. "I am the son of my father," he said in a low, choked voice. "I am the Bëor. You would not deny me my birthright."

"But it is not your birthright," said Finrod. "The vassalage lies entirely in my gift. Yes, it passed from Balan to his eldest son, and to his eldest, so down to your own father. But that is custom, not right. I must choose whom I think most fit. Now sit down, I pray you. It is not the time now to go into the matter of who shall become the next Bëor. We have more urgent matters to attend to."

Bregolas sank slowly back down in his chair.

The Greencloak now spoke up. "Father," he said, "when last we discussed the Blackshirts, you spoke of facts. You argued that the facts were the final arbiters of any question; and of course you were right. But is this not what we should now be seeking? As you rightly point out, a single letter is not much to go on. Shall we not rather detain these youths a while, and seek some answers from them? Is this not the common solution to our debate? Let them be but straitly questioned, and surely the truth will emerge."

A servant had come in to top up their cups with wine. Andreth, eyeing the man, picked the letter up off the table and folded it together.

"Well now," huffed Bregolas, "that does sound like sense to me. Why cannot you others speak so, instead of hurling your insults about? Very well. Let them be summoned, or rather, required with due courtesy to attend us, and let us seek to clarify this business. I am sure it will come down to the spite of a few disappointed competitors. That is the usual case in these matters."

Belegund was about to speak further, but a slight but definite hand gesture from Andreth stopped him. She waited until the servant had left the room. "Go on, Belegund," she said then.

The young man glanced at the door thoughtfully. "Yes... well, I was going to say, this won't be exactly easy. We will need –" He broke off at that point to listen. "What is that?"

There was a growing sound of uproar. Baragund, who was seated on the window side, stood and looked. "People are running down the hill," he said. Bregolas pulled the cord at his side, but no-one came. After a minute or so's wait, he got up cursing and went to the door to call; then he went out. After a few moments he put his head back around the door, an excited gleam in his eyes.

"They've caught some Orcs!" he said.

Bregolas's sons rose and hastened out, followed by his sisters.

Andreth stayed seated. "I have seen my share of Orcs," she said to Finrod.

Finrod looked puzzled. "Why the excitement?" he said. "Surely it is a simple matter: kill the vermin, and burn the bodies. There is no use to be had from them. The people may follow what fancies they please, I suppose; but we here at least have an urgent question before us. Why do they set it aside for this nonsense?"

Andreth looked at him with her head tilted. "How many generations of us have you known now, my lord?" she said. "You must be an expert on Men. But nevertheless, you are not one of us. Sometimes that becomes most clear."

He smiled. "Then I lay the fault at your door, Andreth, for not instructing me sufficiently," he replied. "Perhaps we might go into the matter later. But for now, if we are not to consider the Blackshirts further today, as seems increasingly likely, I think I will retire. You may not believe it, but I, even I, am weary. It has been a tiring day."

* * * * *

The excited people carried Beren along in their noisy midst. They poured downhill and debouched into the gate square, where the flow of bodies slowed as it merged with the crowd already there. The gates lay open, and further hubbub was to be heard from outside, from the point where the crowd became most dense, which was presumably where the Orcs were.

Surges of people came and went in the crowd, swaying it like the wind in a field of wheat. One of these surges pushed Beren to the front, where he stumbled and fell to his knees. A space opened before him. In the middle of this space sat a cage, and in the cage was huddled a dark shape, coiled tightly into a foetal knot, shoulders hunched and face turned to the ground for protection.

An Orc.

Some of his Blackshirts had just dragged the cage inside the gate, and just as Beren looked, they were in the act of letting fall the ropes. Pieces of trash and horse-shit were being hurled at the thing in the cage from all sides, and the din from hundreds of yelling voices was unbelievable.

Beren stood there as if in a dream, watching the Orc, and watching the throwing arms and the wide-screaming mouths around him. They looked the same to him, and suddenly he saw the thing in the cage as a person, and the spiteful throwers around him as the Orcs. He could switch them back and forth at will, which he found amusing in a vague way. But it was all as if in a dream.

The Blackshirts were pelting with the rest, but the problem they soon found was, there was not much good material to pelt with, the square being kept clean of handy sized stones. One of the oafs appeared in view with a paving stone which he had levered free, but the others stopped him before he could lob it at the cowering figure. Nah mate, they told him, too quick. The fun would end too soon with that. And it won't go through the bars anyway. They began hammering the cobble on the ground to get some smaller fragments. Sharp ones. Weighty, like, but not immediately deadly.

Two things happened then together. The cobble shattered with a crash, and the crowd began to roar in a different tone. "One's escaped! One's escaped!" came the voices nearest to Beren. As one man, the crowd surged toward the gate, everyone attempting to stream out of it at once. Screams sounded as people were crushed against the gate posts; some fell underfoot.

Within ten minutes the yelling mob had passed through the gate, leaving only a few trodden and dazed people on the ground, whimpering and feeling their limbs. Apart from these figures, who were mostly too occupied with their own scrapes and bruises to pay attention to anything else, Beren was left alone in the empty square, with the caged Orc in the middle of it. The lowering sun pricked his eyes.

He looked at the injured people by the gate and wondered vaguely what he could do to help them. What *could* he do? He was no leech. In any case, there seemed to be none with any crippling injury; most were even now picking themselves up, groaning and cursing, before limping away.

Beren looked back at the Orc. He went closer to the cage, right next to it, and squatted down the better to examine the creature. He saw that it was bleeding from several wounds, and that its dirty breeches and jerkin were almost ripped from its body. Its arms and legs were bound cruelly tight with many cords.

The battered face turned his way and a savage yellow eye regarded him, squinting against the bitter light.

The boy stood up and examined the cage. The door was closed with a lock, but the hinges appeared to be simple pins. Using the blunt back of his knife, he levered carefully at them until he succeeded in nudging and tugging one of the pins out of its guides to the point where it came loose and fell onto the cobbles with a ringing clatter.

“Oi!” a voice came. “Oi, you there!”

Beren looked up and saw an old, old man at the upper window of a house.

“What in blue blazes do you think you are about, sonny?” quavered the man. “That’s a goblin, that is.”

“I know,” said Beren.

“Well what do you think you are doing? Put that pin back! Don’t let the thing loose. It’s not safe!”

Beren stood there, thinking about this. After a while he looked up at the man again and said simply, “It’s what I have to do.” He returned then to the cage door, ignoring the old man’s further cries. At last the door came loose and he was able to twist it away to leave the entry gaping.

He left the door then and came around and squatted again by the Orc’s face.

“Can you understand what I say?” he asked it in Grey-elven.

The creature nodded slightly in reply.

“Well then,” said Beren, “I am going to cut you loose. What you do then is up to you. But if you’ll take my advice, you’ll forget any ideas you may have about trying to take my knife off me. I am still young, but I have hunted and killed eight creatures such as you, one of them with this very knife. You would not find me easy meat. Do you understand?”

Once again the Orc nodded its head.

Beren reached into the cage and laid hold of the cords around the Orc’s ankles. He hauled until the creature was out of the cage and stretched on the cobbles. Watchfully then, because he knew Orcs, he sliced at the leg-bonds until they came free. With even more care, dividing his attention now between the Orc’s hands and its newly-freed legs, he cut carefully at the wrist cords until only one remained. Then, with a single movement, he cut this while springing away, to land on his feet with his knife at the guard.

The Orc rolled painfully over and sat up, holding one paw over its head against the sun while it rubbed its ankles slowly with the other. Both eyes regarded him impassively from their strip of shade.

“Now get out of here,” said Beren.

The Orc picked itself up stiffly and began to back slowly away, limping heavily. Some noise then sounded from the side; the creature looked to see what it was. It was the old man. He had disappeared for a minute, but now he was back, with a bow he had fetched from somewhere and which he was trying, with difficulty, to string.

The Orc grinned at this sight, nodded to Beren, then turned and vanished between the houses.

The boy stood there a while in the slanting rays of the setting sun, contemplating, ignoring the stream of imprecations from the old man at the window. He looked down suddenly and noticed that he was still wearing the black shirt and other regalia of the band of thugs. He had lost his hat somewhere. Slowly, without apparent emotion, he began to undress. As soon as he was completely naked, with the black-and-red clothes lying in a heap at his feet, he bowed to the astonished old man, picked up his belt and knife, and trotted out the gate.

* * * * *

The family had their hands full for several days. The first thing to do was attend to those who had been injured by the crush at the gate. Andreth was furious when she heard about that; angry too with Bregolas, and even more so with his sons, for they had all been part of that crowd, but none had paid heed to the possibility that the hysteria might claim its victims. She felt that they should have known better, and she told them so.

The captive Orcs had been put to death – mercifully enough, at Finrod’s orders.

The following day the family were able to turn again to the matter of the gang, and at that point a curious and rather fortunate coincidence occurred. A young man knocked furtively at the rear door of the Hall in the gloom of dusk and requested to speak with the Lord. He said he had vital information about the Blackshirts, of which he was a minor member. When he was admitted to the company, he told much the same story as was in the letter. He said he was sickened by it all, and wanted to get out; but he feared for his life, and did not know who to turn to. He assured them, shaking with obvious fear as he said it, that if anybody knew he had come here, his life would not be worth a goat.

With the help of this youth’s information, the operation was set in motion. He supplied them with a list of all the members, their names and where they lived. He begged them to make it their first priority to secure the leader, Beren. The boy said he understood that Beren was related to the House; but the great ones here were perhaps not aware of the full magnitude of their young connection’s misdeeds, and what a very dangerous person he was to leave at liberty.

Thus it was that in the dark of the same night, at the same minute in many separate parts of the town, fists hammered on doors, harsh voices demanded entry. The Blackshirts were all taken into custody in this one single swoop. Some struggled briefly, others attempted to slip out of windows; but the guards were there too. By morning the suspects were all locked up, every one of them, apart from a few hangers-on of no account. The only one missing was Beren, the ringleader.

When the informant – who gave his name as Girazôn – heard this news, he cried out in fear and distress. But during the day a strange story emerged. Beren was said to be gone from the town; and before he left, he had freed one of the Orcs. There were witnesses who had seen it all.

Finrod sat discussing it all with Andreth during a break in the interrogations. He was most sad about Beren.

“I cannot believe that a son of Barahir should turn so thoroughly to evil,” he said, shaking his head.

Andreth leaned forward and took his hand. “Are you so convinced that it is true?” she said gently. “Listening to these stories, I have heard very little which implicates him directly.”

“Girazôn says Beren always relayed his orders through him,” said Finrod.

“Girazôn,” repeated Andreth scornfully. “Really, my lord. I thought you were gifted at reading men’s hearts. Tell me then truly what you see in his.”

“Nothing good,” said Finrod, “but that says nothing about Beren, one way or the other.”

“It says that we should not trust a word Girazôn says, not a single word,” said Andreth. “He is lying to put himself in the best light.”

“But what about Beren’s freeing of the Orc?” cried Finrod. “You cannot deny the truth of that. Why should he do such a thing? Could he be in league with them? There are elements in this which I cannot understand!”

Sunlight falls onto a forest, and of the broad swathe of light, only a fraction penetrates the first layer of leaves. The multitude of rays at this point is still however very great. But one by one they are blocked by more leaves, and yet more leaves, and yet more. Very often none remain. But every once in a while, when the angles are just right, a single ray reaches all the way to the forest floor.

In such wise, at some point in the last few hours, the entire situation had become clear to Andreth. The light of understanding had stretched like a finger all the way through the murk and mists until it touched her heart.

That is why she smiled, almost happily, and squeezed again the hand of the puzzled and distressed Elf.

“My oldest and dearest friend,” she said gently, “my brother of the soul. I must tell you again that there are depths to the human heart into which you do not see. You say you cannot understand Beren’s acts; but I, at last, I believe that I do.

“Shall I tell you something strange? This deed of Beren’s which has you so exercised, this freeing of the monster: in my breast I feel not horror, but a springing of hope greater than I have felt for a long time. What do you say to that?”

But Finrod, shaking his head, could find no words.

After everything had been done: after the former Blackshirts had been dispersed to farms in the valley to work out their crimes, and after Bregolas had been confirmed as the Bëor, Finrod took his leave from Andreth.

“My time is surely not far off,” she said to him, taking his hand and looking into his face. “Will you visit me again, before it comes upon me?”

He looked soberly down at her from his golden height, eyes full of the light of morning. “I will,” he said, kissing her hand.

* * * * *

Choker’s replacement squad hadn’t been such a bad one. They’d set off almost cheerfully; they’d done the usual sneak, got to the valley mouth all right, gone just a little way in and then run bang into a patrol. Most had been killed straight off; Choker had been among those captured.

What had happened then was beyond belief. Choker couldn’t understand it; he kept gnawing on it, in the cold barracks in Central where they had thrown him. He couldn’t understand it, no not to save himself. His report on the preposterous events had flat out not been believed at Central, and as a result, the whole business had fallen to bits. The program had been trashed, Scar-face and others disgraced, and Choker had been busted back to the ranks, into some scummy regular legion, chewing its claws off with boredom in the bowels of Central. No more scouting for him.

There was some new scheme in the wind, tunnels or some such, but Choker paid the rumours no attention. He was too busy wrestling with his conundrum.

Why had the kid let him go? Why? Choker had heard people say the Outlanders were all mad; but how did they get through their lives, then, if they were mad? How had they managed to put up such a fight as they had, such resistance, over so many years? No, no. It didn’t make sense.

There was something in all this, something big, which Choker was totally failing to see and understand. It

unsettled him, and he couldn't seem to get right again. Curse that boy. What had he wanted to go and let him loose for?

* * * * *

It was a wet day in late autumn at Sightfoot. Emeldir cocked her head out of the kitchen door and looked with annoyance at the rain drizzling from grey skies. Washing hanging all over the kitchen again was what that meant.

She turned her head sharply, noticing a movement in the mist to one side. A smallish figure... she watched it with narrowed eyes, tensed to pull back and slam the door if necessary.

That was no Orc. It was... it was...

"Beren!" she yelled, pushing the door wide and splashing across the mud to meet him.

"Hello Mother," said Beren, muffled in her embrace. "I've come home."

"But where have you *been*?" she said, standing back and looking him over. Where were his *clothes*? He almost had nothing on at all, just a dirty rag with his metal belt over it. Makeshift bow. Taller, but too thin. Much too thin. "We had word you left Newfort weeks ago!"

"Oh, I wandered around in the woods for a time," he said, "just thinking about things. Breathing a bit of air. Sort of, finding my way back from things. I always meant to come here, but there didn't seem to be any particular hurry."

"Hmm," she said, still observing him – sores on his arms, oh dear and just *look* at those feet – "I have to say, you don't seem to have been thriving on it. But come in. Come in and get inside something dry and outside something warm."

He propped his bow inside the kitchen door and waited while Emeldir fetched a blanket. Others of the farm-folk began to stream in as they heard the news. Hrotha appeared and began pounding him on the back. "Back from the Dwarves! Back from the Dwarves! Eh, boy!" The volume of chatter rose as all the Sightfoot folk seemed to be asking him at once how he was, what the Dwarves were like, and if he was going to stay; in between remarking on how tall he had grown.

Emeldir chased them all out again. "Come now, all of you, give the boy some air! There'll be plenty of time for talk later." She shut the door on the last of them and sat Beren down on in a deep chair near the fire. She put some of last night's stew on to heat, then came and sat opposite him.

"So, boy," she said, watching his face.

He smiled. "So, Mother."

"Papa has gone to see Gorlim," she said, "with Gilach and Dag. A lot of our blasted iron-work has failed at once."

"Oh?" he said.

"Just at the wrong time of year, too. All kinds of things."

He thought about this for a while. "I liked Gilach," he said vaguely.

"He's sound wood, all right," said his mother. She hesitated over a thought that rose immediately to mind, unsure how to get it out. "Son..." she began after a moment. "About the town... we heard stories... and Andreth sent us a letter, too. But what I want to say is that it doesn't matter. Whatever happened to you in that place, it happened there, not here. Here is your home. You can rest here – stay here, as long as you

please. Of course you can! It is your own place. You belong here. You're safe here. Nobody will cast anything in your face here. Do you understand?"

He winced, as if at a memory of pain. "Thank you, Mother. It's good to be home."

She got up and saw to the stew, diverting her feelings into chatter. "The place is much the same. Fréagond passed away, alas. He's missed. Some other old folk in the district too... but we have new ones, always more births than deaths, thank the Powers. Indeed we will soon have one quite close to home. You probably didn't notice, although it is starting to show with her. Methemel spotted it of course, as soon as we came home."

"Who are you talking about?" he asked, a little confused. "Eilinel?"

"Ah, no, alas," said his mother. "Those two have not been blessed, not so far. No, I meant Parth."

"Parth! But she wasn't... she had no... or has she...?"

Emeldir pursed her lips and shook her head.

"Then who...?"

"Some lout back east," said his mother. "She won't say who it was, says she wouldn't want to marry him anyway. Well, it is not much matter. It happens. There are always a few who cannot wait until the feast."

He laughed, then fell silent again, thinking. Emeldir brought him a spoon and a brimming bowl of savoury stew and he began to tuck into it greedily. After a few spoonfuls he hesitated, and looked up to meet her eyes.

"Mother," he asked in a diffident voice, "I hope you will forgive me if this is an impertinent question. But I have often wondered why you had no more children after me."

She stared wide-eyed at him, swallowed, then looked down at her hands. "Many conceptions fail," she said softly. "It is not perhaps widely known; but many do fail. I had two such after you. After that, no more came. Sometimes things can go awry, things inside."

He reached over and clasped her hand. "I am sorry. I should never have asked."

She wiped her eye, but then smiled at him in the old brilliant way. "No, no. It was a fair question. Of course it was a grief to me; but that is no reason for you not to know."

He continued eating his stew slowly, looking at her from time to time.

"I'm blessed if I know what we have for you to wear," she said. "Maybe something old of Mal's, until we can run you something up..."

"It's all right," he said. "I don't mind."

He finished the stew and sat back with a sigh of contentment. She took the bowl into the scullery, then came back and sat down again. He was gazing into the fire and blinking sleepily.

"Shall you..." she swallowed again, "shall you stay long this time, do you think?"

He sat up and glanced at her. Then with a dark look on his face he looked back at the fire.

"I don't know. I know I promised to. But I don't know where I belong, Mother. That's the problem. I don't know where I'm going. I did, once; but I lost it, somehow. I lost a lot of things."

The pain in his voice brought her to the edge of tears again. Almost shyly, she covered his hand with her own. She stayed there with him until he fell into a fitful sleep. Arthad crept in then at Emeldir's whispered

call and carried the lad to his bed.

* * * * *

Beren spent a quiet winter at home. He joined freely in any work around the house that needed to be done, and took pleasure also in sitting with the evening company at their weaving, or carving, or other work of that sort; although he rarely spoke much. He took full part too in all sports and exercises, with the single exception of hunting. That he shrank from.

Another wing had been added to the house at the rear, with sleeping quarters for two couples, which were occupied by Emeldir and Barahir in the one room and Caladis and Gramlach in the other. The old chambers in the main house were used now by Gilach and his spouse Arasenaaur. There were other changes to the household. The boy Adril had come with Beren's parents from the East; as if to balance this addition, Beren's old rival Ormalan was working now on a distant farm.

During the years when he spent summers with the Druug, Beren's relations with most of the people in the household had seemed strained in greater or lesser degree, which had added to his discomfort and restlessness during the winters. Now, although he felt as restless and discontented as ever, in some mysterious manner the former tensions, which had seemed to him at times to verge almost into hostility, had smoothed away. He felt himself now to be not only part of a harmonious small society, but a respected and appreciated part. Old Hrotha held him in open regard, and Methemel showed grudging signs of affection. Gilach and Arasenaaur treated him with honour, and listened when he had something to say. Even Mari seemed somewhat softened from her former disapproval. Taken all together it made a small but welcome warm place in his otherwise bleak interior landscape.

One crisp snowy morning when the hunters were out he went into the yard with scraps for the birds; but they would not come to him, and he could not make anything of their twitter, strain though he might. With an aching and empty heart, he left the scraps. The dogs too were just dogs to him, the horses only horses.

Parth's baby came with the first snows. The house became a strange place, full of wailing and hurrying women. When that was over, a new voice had joined the company – a demanding voice, which seemed to make no distinction between night and day. Beren was glad to retreat to the woodhouse with the single men.

He had seen suckling children in former years and had thought absolutely nothing of it. Now, though, he found the sight of Parth's naked breast strangely disturbing: the soft rounded contour branded itself on his vision and caused a pulse to throb in his head and loins. It gave him an additional reason to stay away.

He went to visit Gorlim already before Sunwending, skiing the long route to the North on legs which had become unpractised in the skill. He found the household of the smith to be happy and thriving. Gorlim had an apprentice in the smithy, and had also taken on a young couple to help in the fields. He himself had filled out and become a tall and strong young man with a shrewd eye in a face bordered by a flowing golden beard. Marriage also seemed to suit Eilinel; Beren thought he had never seen her looking so beautiful and happy. No, happy was not the right word for it either – contented was what she seemed; which is to happiness as the depths of sweet water are to its flashing surface.

Gorlim showed him proudly around the new forge. After they had inspected and discussed every item, Beren took off Telchar's gift to show him. He told Gorlim about the Dwarf smith as the young man sat turning over the belt in his hands.

"Wonderful fine work," said Gorlim at the end, "wonderful fine. 'Twould make me feel right humble, Ber, if I didn't already know there be far better smiths than me in the world. But we can't all live on top of the mountain – 'twould get crowded for one thing, and it's an unsteady sort of place and all. No, we each must make the best of what we're given, and be content. And I do, and I am. What I have is more than enough for me; it is like an overflowing cup of... of... well, cool spring-water, say, on a hot day." He paused, then looked again somewhat wistfully again at the belt. "All the same... 'twould be right grand to work at the side of that feller Telchar for a spell or two. Right grand." He nudged Beren then and looked at him teasingly. "It

were wasted on a clunk-fist like you.”

Beren could only agree.

They feasted him in the firelit kitchen as he tried to forget both his aching legs and the necessity he would shortly be under to use them again on the return journey. It was a merry company at the table, and Beren again was touched and warmed by the regard which he saw whenever a face was turned toward him. He did not feel that he deserved it.

Annag was sitting to his right. She did not say much, and seemed a little worn and shrunken. He leaned toward her. “Do you remember Maegam, Annag?”

Her face lit up. “Oh, yes, how could I forget him? Such a gentleman, a real true one. You may smile, master Beren, but that day when I first saw him, when he came riding up on that beautiful horse and said such nice things about my scones, that was one of the high points of my life. Oh, yes. Forget that? Not in a thousand years.”

“Perhaps you should have taken up his offer,” said Beren smiling, “and gone and baked for the Elves.”

“Oh, now,” said Annag, “now you’re teasing me, young master, as he was too. As if he couldn’t have had three times better at home! No, he were just showing his quality. Elves be far above us, Beren. I know that well. We needs them now and then to add a bit of sparkle to our lives, maybe, which otherwise be pretty much full of sweat and disappointment, as tha knows. But it would frizzle a normal person up to spend much time at all with ’em. I never heard of anyone coming to good what did.”

“Well, maybe you’re right,” said Beren. “They take a deal of living up to, that’s for certain.”

She grasped his arm. “No, but it be more than that,” she said, “more than that. They’re not really our sort at all. People say they are, but it’s not so. Take that dress they spun up for Nellie’s wedding. Did you ever see the like of it? It’s beyond me to say what it’s made of, but it ain’t no mortal stuff, that’s for sure. I takes a peek at it now and then, just to make sure I wasn’t dreaming. Like fire and air it is. I just hope it weren’t too much.”

“Too much?” he looked questioning.

“Too much,” she repeated. “Too much good. You know. More luck than we deserve.” Since the boy still looked puzzled, she leaned closer and spoke softly in his ear. “There’s no child yet,” she murmured to him.

He pulled back and looked at her in surprise. She nodded meaningfully and said, “Everything has to be paid for. Everything.”

Beren was very thoughtful for the remainder of the meal.

Year 450

The thaw came, and the drums began to pulse in the hills, but Beren made no move to leave. There was much to do about the farm, and he lent his shoulder to the ploughing and his arm to the sowing with the best of them. His parents began to wonder a little, as did one or two of the original house-people who knew him especially well, such as Ragnor and Arthad. They remarked on it among themselves, but nobody felt just like bringing the question up with Beren.

The forest was there, as it was always there in his mind; always silently pulling. He would think of it, but straight away he would remember with a wince of pain what he had lost, or rather thrown away – thrown away through his own carelessness and pride. The forest and its peoples were no longer for him. The wilderness called, but he turned his face from it, bowed his head over his work and dripped his sweat into the soil.

There came a day in late spring when the pace of work slackened for a time. Barahir slept late, and the men were sitting idle along the wall of the stables, enjoying the morning sun. The sky was blue and the air warm.

Without knowing really how he came to be there, Beren found himself standing outside the gate, looking over the rolling fields toward the dark band of the woods. In a dreamlike way, he walked slowly in that direction until eventually he reached the trees. The blackthorn was in flower, very much in evidence at the edges of the wood, though it was too dark for it deeper in. Most of the trees were still bare, although the smaller growth had begun to blush with new green.

He wandered on into the depths of the wood until the sun had ridden high up the sky and was glinting down at him through the bare branches on his right. He felt as if he had no volition; his mind was watching idly as the experiences simply came to him. What steered his footsteps he would not have been able to say; nor what it was that made him at length stop walking and sit. He leaned his back against a great, grey tree trunk and gazed up the length of it into the far heights where the branches made a small and distant filigree against the sky.

A flash of something pale made him start up. As he stared to the side from where it came, another came from a different direction. He could feel nothing; no disturbance; but all the same, he was becoming alarmed. He stood up.

A glimpse of silver flicked nearer at hand, and someone laughed.

“Who’s there?” he called. “Show yourself!”

He started mightily as a slender hand slid over his eyes from behind; but then came a voice he knew.

“I thought you were a woodsman,” said Silmenen, “but you are no more aware of your surroundings than a stone. I could have stolen the very hose from your legs.”

He took the hand away from his eyes and turned. Before him stood the same silvery waif with the mocking dark eyes, except that he was taller than she was now.

“I would ask you why it is you plague me so, Fay,” said Beren, “except I already know the answer.”

“And what is that?” she laughed.

“Because it is your pleasure,” he said.

“Ah, pleasure!” she said. “Yes indeed. It pleases my fancy to play with you. Let us play some more. Come, great hunter, master swordsman, catch me! Catch me if you can!” She flashed a wild look at him and flitted into the undergrowth. “Catch me!” came faintly from the distance.

He sat down again and folded his arms. “I’m not in the mood,” he said firmly, convinced despite the evidence that she remained nearby. “I’m not playing.”

He started again as her voice came from a branch above him. There she was, dangling slender bare feet under folds of a lichen-grey dress. “You are no fun since you became all sad and serious,” she said.

“What do you *want*?” he said. “You always *want* something.”

“Come now,” she said laughing, “that is neither kind nor just. I want nothing, nor ever have. Have I not been of service to you from time to time?”

Beren could not but admit that there was some justice in that. “Well,” he said slowly, “that is true. Because of you, I had time closer to the sister whom I since lost; and after that, you broke my mother’s madness over your knee like a dried stick. My words were hasty. I take them back, and give you my thanks into the bargain. I would still like to know what you intend with me today, though.”

Silmenen leaped now lightly down from the tree branch and landed without noise or weight. Crossing her legs under her dress like quicksilver, and she was sitting at rest before him. She leaned forward now, all teasing gone from her eyes. "Tell me your troubles," she said gently.

"Why should I?" he said, still suspicious. "Anyway, you know my heart already."

She hit him on the leg with a twig. "Do not make me guess!" she scolded. "Vexing mortal. Tell me!"

He was silent for a long moment, then bowed his head. "Why do you put me through this torture? Surely you know it already; surely. Why must I repeat what you already know?"

She laid a hand lightly on his knee. "Beren! Because you must," she said, softly, but with a compelling power in her voice.

A tear leaked out of his eye and fell to the ground. "The creatures do not trust me any more," he whispered. "Thunderbolt trusted me, and because of that he died. Now I cannot hear them, and they will not hear me."

"So," she said slowly. "Speaks with Birds no longer."

He shook his head. "I have broken it, and it cannot be mended. I feel as if I have lived my whole life in vain."

"Tsh!" she said mockingly. "All fourteen summers of it. Oof! Like that: gone!"

"I should have known better than to expect sympathy from you," he said bitterly.

She cast him a glance full of scorn and got up. "There seems hardly room for anybody else's sorrow in you, you have hoarded away so much of your own," she said, brushing leaves off her dress. "Enough of this nonsense. Stop feeling sad and sorry, and start doing! Even for you, there is somewhat more of your life still to come. Start deciding what to do with it."

"But what *can* I do?" he said.

"You are a fool," she said. "A very great one. So ask yourself what a fool would do. A fool would say, I have offended the noble ones of the air; I must go to the high places and ask forgiveness." With that she slipped to one side. In less time than it takes to write it, she was gone.

Beren blinked at the empty air where the Elf-maid had been. High places? What high places?

Into his mind then came a vision of the snowy peaks to the West, and the great eagles who housed there; and then suddenly he knew what he wanted to do – whether it were folly or not.

* * * * *

Beren had only patchy experience with mountain country and thus had little idea of the risks he was running. The high places have more ways to kill a man than almost anywhere else on earth. Besides the obvious danger of falling, there are blizzards, avalanches and crevasses. Hunger and cold in the mountains can also kill as surely, if not quite as quickly, as a falling rock.

Nobody in those days had life enough to spare to wish to risk it in pursuits of sport. Nobody climbed mountains for fun; you only trespassed in that airy domain if you had to. The minimum preparations for safety in such travel were clothes and food against cold; a good rope; and a partner. Beren had none of these things.

He made his way up-river and simply headed, not having any better plan, for the nearest and highest of the mountains west of the Pass of Anach.

He was lucky with the weather when he began his climb in earnest – it was a fine, settled day, with little wind. He camped that night at the tree-line, shivering a little from the cold despite his sleeping fur. In his pack he had some dried fruits and meat and a leather bottle of weak beer. He had his knife, but had left his bow behind.

The day following was one of dull and endless labour as he picked his way up one barren slope of scree after another. Despite the day spent in toiling like an ant up that vast grey landscape, the row of white peaks before him seemed to come no closer.

Before evening the high peaks became hidden from view behind the stony cliffs which towered now on every side. There were frequent patches of snow now to be seen, and the air was chill. Beren spent an uncomfortable second night in which he could not sleep at all because of the bone-freezing cold. He had to stand up and stagger around several times during the seemingly endless time of darkness, purely in order to keep his circulation going. The second time he did so, the sleeping fur crackled with frost when he bent it around him. The stars above burned crisp and merciless against a black sky.

When morning came, he staggered on. At the very next turn of the steep valley he was following, he came to a check: a wall of dirty and raddled ice from which water streamed. He could see no way up the ice cliff. He turned therefore to the rock wall to one side and began to scramble up that.

By midday he had climbed his way on the hard rock walls into airy heights. Vast spaces of air stretched to a pastel infinity behind and below him. There was no sound in that place but the wind whispering on every side.

Once or twice his moccasined feet slipped on a piece of loose rubbish. He saved himself from falling only by strength of his grip on the rough stone. Sweating, he laboured higher, with fingers that bled now and left stains on the rock.

Beren took advantage of a tiny crevice in the rock, hardly meriting the name of a cave, to eat some dried plums and to finish the last of his beer. Concerned about drink, he pried some scraps of ice loose and funnelled them into the flask. If only he could make a fire! There was little wind, but what there was of it cut through his clothes like a knife. Indeed it seemed to go right through to the bone. He felt a numbness of great cold in his hands and fingers. As time crept on, this stealthily spread.

The boy's spirit and body were strong, stronger perhaps than we lesser children of a later age can imagine; but nobody is stronger than a mountain, and with Beren it was beginning to win the contest.

Is there such a thing as luck? It is hard to say. Sometimes affairs seem entirely random; at others the pattern seems clear. Whichever it was that saved Beren's life, we will never know.

His rescue came as he struggled wearily higher, and higher still; slipping now on ice. Although the sun had disappeared long since behind the towers of rock and ice to his left, clearly it must now be setting, painting rose tints in the bowl of sky above and a laying a band of shadowed air across the far eastern horizon.

A sudden darkness swept over the rock; a mighty thumping beat the air. Shocked almost into falling, the youth looked up in fright to see a vast creature plummeting from the skies. Before Beren could move or speak, it had made heavy landing on a pinnacle to his right.

It was an eagle; but larger in size than any eagle Beren had ever seen, or yet imagined. The giant bird turned its head to one side and regarded him out of a fierce golden eye set behind a great polished, hooked beak, easily a yard long. Each of the great, curved talons whose bitter points scored the rock they clutched seemed perfectly capable of carrying off a steer.

“Human child,” the creature croaked to him in a deep, harsh voice, cold as the snows, “what do you here in my domain? Do you seek your death?”

“No, Lord,” said Beren, shaking a little from the shock of the encounter, as well as from the cold. “Indeed I seek you, or your people.”

“Us? None have business with us, save we choose it,” replied the eagle. “For what reason do you seek us? Perhaps you think we are some show for empty-heads to gawk at?”

“No, Lord, certainly not,” said Beren, shivering. “I did not climb all this way out of curiosity. I came to seek forgiveness.”

The eagle regarded him in silence for a moment. “Your words are dark to me,” it said at last, “for none has wronged us; indeed, there are few who could. What is this sin that you imagine?”

“I caused... I caused the death of one of your lesser cousins,” said Beren. The shadows of night were reaching further across the sky, and the cold gripping into his bones seemed to him itself like eagle’s talons. He began to shiver now like one possessed. Part of his mind knew that he was in serious danger of freezing to death; another could not help admiring the dark blue band, bordered with pink, which was rising steadily higher in the far emptiness behind the needle of rock on which the bird perched. “He was my friend,” Beren continued. “He trusted me, but he trusted in vain. It was my fault he died. And I have lost... I can no longer... I can’t bring the dead back to life. But I want to find my way back to the way things were.”

The great bird tilted its head and regarded the fading light on the horizon. Then it looked back to the boy. “You will die if you do not go down from here, and quickly,” it said.

“But what, what about... I want to find out what I must do,” stuttered Beren, shivering now so badly that he could scarce keep his numb fingers clinging to the rock. “Will you not tell me?”

“Tell? There is nothing to tell,” rasped the bird.

“What do you mean, nothing?” said Beren. “I don’t understand.”

“Listen to me,” said the mighty bird. “We eagles are set here by the Lord of the Air⁵, the greatest of the Powers who rule this world. He has charged us to keep watch on that Unlord⁶ who would cast all into nothingness, and to hinder him as we may. Boys who throw stones at a bird are a matter beneath our concern. The pressing, present matter just now is your life, which you bid fair to lose in your negligence. Will you keep it? Then cease this chatter. There is no time left; I must carry you down. This is your only chance now. Can you climb to me?”

“Please,” said Beren. “It is not a small matter to me. Speech with the birds, my former understanding. The harmony of my life. What must I do to regain them?”

The eagle sighed: a deep, cold sound, like the rush of snow down a gully. “You have injured only yourself,” it said. “Therefore it is your own self you must sue for pardon. Now will you come at last, or must we wear the mountain away with idle talk?”

The shaking boy managed with some difficulty the scramble across the cliff face to the point where he could reach the eagle’s extended claw.

“Mount,” said the bird. “Onto my back.”

Beren inched his way along the rough and scaly limb, but he could no longer close his frozen hands over the great feathers so as to pull himself up the eagle’s flank. He told the eagle so, upon which it turned its head, opened its horny beak and sent his hair back behind his face with its hot breath. Gradually, in that hot wind, life stole back into his numb hands until he could, albeit with great pain, make them work again. He was able then to haul himself onto the great creature’s back, where he buried himself in the layer of soft down below

5 Manwë.

6 Melkor.

the surface. On the eagle's advice, he gathered as many of the strong quills in his hands as he could. The eagle's body felt wonderfully warm, and it had an exciting, aromatic smell to it.

"Small wonder the lesser creatures shun you," grumbled the eagle, "if you inflict them with similar indignities. Now hold on!"

Beren felt the bird under him make a great leap. His hold was shaken by a few jarring wing beats, but the bird ceased to flap almost immediately. A great swooping calm descended. The boy dared raise his head into the icy gale for a glimpse, and gasped at what he saw. A vast arena had opened beneath him and on every side. To the West, a ragged comb of peaks ranged black against the fiery stripe of sunset. Directly below, dimly glimpsed rock and ice wheeled coldly in a blueish gloom. To the East there was nothing to see but a great gulf of darkness. The magnificence of the sight caught at his breath. But the frigid wind scoured the youth's face and whipped frozen tears from his eyes, and the wheeling airs made him giddy; so he buried his face once again in the warmth of his mighty host.

The air about him slowly lost its chill as they descended. Suddenly he could sense the nearness of the forest; but almost as soon as he became aware of it, there came an impact which almost shook him from his grip.

He raised his head cautiously. The eagle had landed on a dome of rock not far below the tree-line.

Beren levered his way from under and between the now folded wings and dropped awkwardly to the ground. The drop was further than he expected, and turned his ankle. Wincing, he looked up at the noble head of the bird, dark now against the evening sky.

"Do not be such a fool again," rasped the eagle in its harsh voice. "The high places are not for two-legs. If you venture into them another time, I will not save you, but will leave your carcass frozen to the rocks as a memorial to the folly of Men, until the winds of centuries scour it away to nothing.

"Do not seek me again, son of Barahir. I will know when you truly need me, although you may not. I am Thorondor. Now farewell! Until we meet again!"

The eagle unfolded its wings, stretching black across half the world. It swept them down in a stroke which blew Beren off his feet. By the time the youth had clawed the dust out of his eyes, the eagle was nothing more than a shadow against the evening blue, rowing its rapid way into the darkening sky. Soon he lost sight of it altogether. Aching in every part, he hobbled down into the trees to seek water and fire.

After a few days of recovery in the kindly woods he knew so well, he went to seek Rattlecone. He had not seen the Ent since his return from the Dwarves; his friend had seemed to Beren to belong to that part of his life from which he was now severed. But a sudden desire rose in him to see the Tree-shepherd's ancient face again, and to hear his slow, wise speech. The series of changes and losses which the boy had endured had bruised his soul and left him desperate for some sort of stability, some anchor. In some degree he had found that at home, but he felt the need for a deeper serenity than he could obtain at Sightfoot, particularly now that the household revolved so completely around one red-faced, squalling blob of incontinent humanity. Rattlecone seemed the antithesis to all this; he at least could hardly have changed.

He found the Ent not at home. A quick scout around revealed fresh tracks heading up the valley. A mile or so of steep climb brought him to a wide arena under the towering hills. Dark trees ringed its edges, but the centre was an open, flat expanse of soft grass; almost like a lawn it seemed.

He had become dimly aware of presences even before he emerged from the trees, so he was not surprised to find several Ents there, standing in a circle and murmuring to one another. He quickly found Rattlecone among their number. The Ent in his turn registered Beren's presence with a quick flick of his eyes, but showed no other sign.

The boy sat at the edge of the trees at a respectful distance. He had no idea how long he might have to wait, but he was in no hurry to go elsewhere, and he had learned patience among the Druug. He composed himself

to await events, deriving in the meantime what interest he could from observing the Ents.

There were five of them in the group, including Rattlecone. They all looked different, although in broad terms all of the creatures seemed much of an age, so far as that could be determined among Ents. They stood there, all murmuring at the same time it seemed, without any break in the flow, although the volume and emphasis varied and shifted between them. Now and then one would sway or nod slightly, as if in confirmation of some proposition. The voices of the Ents were deep and resonant, although they spoke so softly that the sound scarcely penetrated beyond the clearing. Occasionally Beren could see their eyes move and flash as they looked from one to the other.

The morning turned to noon; then the sun began slowly to sink. In late afternoon, Beren woke with a start; he had gone to sleep there in the sweet-smelling grasses. He sat up. The Ents were still there, murmuring, exactly the same. After watching them for a while he got up and stole away into the long rays slanting through the trees.

He came back in the night, having hunted, cooked and eaten. The Ents held still their conclave, murmuring in the moonlight.

Beren had prepared himself a bed from long grasses and ferns before the light failed, and now he took himself into it and snuggled into the scratchy growth. His last thoughts were of the stars peeping through the treetops before he sank into a deep sleep.

The following day found the Ents still swaying and muttering in their circle, unchanged. Throughout the long day the boy sat there, occasionally wandering through the trees to stretch his limbs. But mostly he sat and dreamed. Strange pictures floated through his head: a wondrous beach of diamond sand; a horn raised to the morning sunlight; towers tall as hills.

By the close of that day he was weary and hungry. He had some cold remains still of the rabbit he had caught yesterday, although he had not thought to eat them so soon. The fact was, he was out of practice with the sort of routine privations he had accepted as natural during his years among the Druug. Eventually he put his chagrin to one side and ate the rabbit.

He curled up again in his ferns at dusk and sank into a fitful sleep, much broken by confused dreams. Suddenly he sat bolt upright, quiveringly awake. The Ent-talk had stopped. He could feel the ground shaking under their departing paces. The young moon had set already and there was only the faint light of the stars to see by.

The ground crunched. A dark shape loomed over him: Rattlecone.

“Come, young one, it will be warmer in my house,” the Ent said in his deep voice. He bent then and lifted up Beren, ferns and all, then carried him carefully down through the gloomy woods, full of the furtive noises of the night. In no time they were at the cliff where Rattlecone made his home. The Ent walked into the pitchy black at its foot with the confidence of long residence and deposited Beren in what felt like the chamber he had occupied in former times.

“Sleep!” said the Ent. So he did.

Beren slept late the next day. He was very hungry when he woke. Rattlecone did not seem to be about, and Beren was not sure what to do. Should he wait a while, or slip off and hunt? While he was trying to work it out, shaking sleep out of his head and picking bits of fern off his threadbare tunic, he felt the tread of the approaching Ent through the earth.

“Good morning!” said the Ent. “Come and greet the day with me. I have watched the sun rise from the hill.”

They went out into the fresh morning. The summer sun was pouring into the open area before the cliff. Puffy white clouds were sailing importantly across the sky, and birds were singing everywhere.

Beren sat on the grass and tried to forget his hunger. Rattlecone stood on the grass and seemed to feel the air and the surroundings as much as he looked at them.

“I sense your hunger,” said the Ent after a time. “Have you food?”

“Alas, no,” said Beren. “I must go and kill something, I suppose. I hate it; but how else am I to eat?”

“Aye, aye,” said Rattlecone slowly, “there is no getting around it. All of you kelvar live off the lives of others. It is in your design. We Ents do not know why; it is just the way things are.”

“I wish I could be like you, and live off water and air,” said Beren.

The tall Ent stood there looking at him thoughtfully, blinking the while. “I had thought to offer you one more draught,” he said at last, slowly. “But I must go carefully. Men are not Ents. Two you have had already; strong waters of their nature. I cannot offer you many more such without the effects starting to become obvious. You would not thank me if you grew beyond the normal measure of your kind. But although your stomach is empty, your deeper needs are otherwise. I have sat by you through the night and traced many of the knots in your spirit. There are two balms I thought to offer you; a draught, a particular brew, a delicate brew, of subtle working, could well be one of those. I must think some more on it.

“But none of this prattle fills a growing boy’s empty stomach. Wait here for me.”

With that he turned on his heel and in five paces he was through the archway between the alders and on his way down the hill. Beren sat on as instructed, wondering mightily what it was that the Ent had in mind to do. He did not have to wait long; after twenty minutes Rattlecone was back, a brace of rabbits hanging from one woody hand.

“How did you do that?” the boy wanted to know.

“Ah, there it is,” replied Rattlecone cryptically. He would reveal nothing more, and after a few fruitless questions Beren gave up. The Ent having shown him where he could make a fire and prepare the carcasses, he set rapidly to work. He spitted several chunks of meat on a stick and roasted them skilfully. Soon he had a mouthful of tender rabbit and was savouring the juices gratefully. He turned his back while he ate: he was embarrassed to display his carnivorous necessities before the Ent.

The boy felt much better afterwards. He had roast meat left over, which he wrapped carefully in leaves and put away for another occasion. After he had had a long drink of spring water and washed his hands and face, he rejoined the Ent.

He stayed with Rattlecone the whole day, but they did not speak much. Rattlecone asked him no questions, and Beren did not feel much like talking anyway. It was peaceful in the Ent’s company, and comradely despite the long periods of silence.

Dusk came early to the deep valley between the mountains. Beren fetched his sleeping fur out and sat with it wrapped around him while listening to the noises of the waning day. When it had become too dark to make out the trees on the opposite slope, and the stars were well and truly out, he bade the Ent good night and felt his way into his nook. Sleep took him quickly.

Birdsong woke him early the next day. He emerged to find the Ent standing under his curtain of water. Beren threw off his clothes and joined him, laughing at the shock of the chill water on his body. Rattlecone looked down at him out of his deep eyes and could not help smiling his affection at the boy. Beren stood under the chilly shower as long as he could stand it, then leaped out. He fetched handfuls of dry bracken and began with vigorous motions to rub some life back into his tingling skin.

“So,” the Ent said to Beren, “have you decided?”

“Decided what?” said the boy, looking up from his work.

“Whether you will accept my offered tonic.”

“Oh,” said Beren. “The draught. Yes, Rattlecone, of course I will. I trust that you know very well what you are about. And after all, third time is the charm.”

“You are confident,” said the Ent, “after the unthinking manner of the young. But I? I am not confident. Indeed, as I grow ever older, I grow less and less certain that I know what I am doing about anything.”

“But what do you mean?” said the boy. “Do you mean there is a risk?”

“A risk that my draught may do you harm?” said Rattlecone, “No, none. Unless some factor comes into play that I am completely unaware of. I do not think that is likely. No, you may rest easy on that score. On the contrary, I believe it will do you good. And therein lies the root of my dilemma. For what right have I to meddle in your fate?”

Beren thought about this for a while. “Well, why do you then?” he asked at last.

“I am not sure,” said the Ent, “and some of the reasons I do have I will not say. But one thing has been clear to me from the earliest days: you have the favour of the Lady. And more besides.”

Beren was amazed, and inclined to be disbelieving. “But – do you mean the Lady Melian?” he asked.

Rattlecone nodded.

“I cannot understand why you would think that,” said Beren. “I have never had anything to do with her.” In the back of his mind, though, scratching at him a little like a prickle, was the recollection of the story Andreth had told about the sword.

“I am sure of my thought,” said Rattlecone, “although I would be hard put to produce a neat list of proofs.”

Beren saw no point in pursuing the matter further. “Where is your drink, my friend?” he said. “Your arguments leave me thirsty.”

Rattlecone sighed and left the water curtain. “Come,” he said. Beren followed him into one of the gloomy store-rooms in the rear of the hollow. There the boy could hear better than see the tall Ent taking the lid off a stone jar on one of the shelves. Beren had expected a show of light like the last occasion, but he was disappointed. There was nothing to see. The Ent ladled out some fluid into a wooden bowl and handed it to him. The boy sipped it cautiously.

“Drink deep,” reminded Rattlecone, “or you will not get the full goodness of it.”

Beren rolled the drop around his mouth. Why, it really *was* just water this time. This was surely some trick Rattlecone was playing on him; some cunning fiddle the old Ent was trying to work on his head. He shrugged internally. So what if it was all malarkey? He was thirsty, and it was tasty water. He tipped the bowl up and swallowed the cool drink until it was all gone, down to the last drop; then he handed the bowl back to Rattlecone with a smile of thanks.

All at once the strangest feeling began to steal over him. What he began suddenly to feel was a sense of time: of a vast river of time, which would dissolve and carry away all griefs at last. He did not feel any immediate relief, but suddenly he found the confidence, from whence he did not know, to trust that he *would* find relief in time. Perhaps the wait would be long, but it would come in the end. It was peace that he had drunk. He felt that he had found his centre again; that he had come home.

Feeling dazed, he followed the Ent back out into the daylight.

Rattlecone examined him. "How do you feel?" he asked.

"I... I don't know," said Beren. "Better, I think." After a little while he added, "Thank you." After a little while further he said, "You mentioned two draughts though?"

"Two balms," corrected Rattlecone. "The second comes as advice. You have overstrained your spirit. Do nothing! Be, for a while. Grow. Breathe the air. Taste the water. Do not think. Just be."

* * * * *

Artanis was restless. The weather was hot, and she could find no appeal in any thing. The pleasure she had formerly taken in the land was vanished, she knew not whence or why; all that she felt was a sourceless irritation.

Elves in general are not like men. We who live short lives must always be planning how to fill them. We are constantly becoming – becoming a child, becoming grown, becoming a lover; becoming a partner and a parent; becoming an apprentice, a journeyman, a master; becoming old, tired, hale, ill, respected, ignored. But for the Elven race whose life is the life of the world, each day is as a Sunday morning when one is eighteen. Elves must not always be doing; they are mostly content simply to be. The world is, and so are they. For indeed they and the world are one.

The Elves of Doriath walked their woods in peace and found their lives in every surrounding, and on every time scale, be it seconds or centuries. One might take joy from the momentary sparkle of a dewdrop, or from a turn in the wind's voice. Another might stand and savour the pulse of leaf in the eternal cycles of the seasons: green, yellow, gone, green, yellow, gone – the slow, year-long breathing of the forest. In all cases it was the same joy. Time for them had little meaning, and every day, every year, every century, was as blessed as the next, or the previous.

Artanis however was suffering a painful absence of heart, as though a dear friend had died. She missed exceedingly the company of the Powers. Born as she was in their land, she had walked from her earliest days with those whose being wove through every corner of her world. She had revered the power and clarity of Manwë, the cold, aching beauty of Varda, the fire and force of Aulë, and the eternal spring of Yavanna. She had run and laughed with Tulkas, and she had never been so merry. She had sung with Lórien, and her heart had never been so moved. Many times too she had treasured converse with Ulmo, Lord of Waters, absorbing always slow wisdom from his words.

Such were the radiant days of her youth; but the dream had been shattered, the wonderful vision quenched. In her grief and unrest, Artanis had fled that land, and she was not yet ready to think of returning. Indeed she felt that she could not return. To what should she go back? To darkness, where once had been Light; to silence and sighs, where had been singing joy unending? But despite the uncrossable gulf that stretched between her and those lost days, Valinor remained, a dream at the edge of vision. She longed to see again the light in the eyes of the Powers, and to listen to the profound music of their voices.

Here in the outer world there was no light, no message. She felt as one who had wandered far from meaning into a dark land of the unliving. Only in Doriath, and in the face and voice of Melian, had she found comfort.

For long periods the shining lady of the Noldor could forget her troubles, and live as her hosts lived. But ever anew she would be moved to cast aside the day-dream, to stride out of calmness, seeking what she knew not. At such times, running water was her solace. There at least she could sense the presence of Ulmo, who alone now of the Powers ventured into the wider world. Almost at times she could hear the murmur of his voice. To Artanis, he was a wise and dear friend whose ear she had always had and whose hand she could almost hold. Sometimes she sobbed with the painful joy of a renewed encounter, but always she came away refreshed, stronger, at peace; the bitter notions born of grief and disquiet washed away for the time.

In her wanderings through the woods and hills of Doriath she had found a secret place of waters. In the hills above Menegroth were many springs, which fed trickling rivulets, winding their ways down through mossy

bouldered slopes, chuckling. One such dived into a cleft and disappeared. Artanis, exploring idly, found at the foot of the slope an entry concealed behind some bushes. The passage to which it led was unroofed, but so narrow at the top that the growth met overhead in most places, permitting only a dim green light to filter down. The crack wound into the rock for a distance until it opened into a small but airy space. There the rock walls overhung; and on each side they were decorated by streams of falling water of every size, from thready drips, to the pouring of an ice-cold freshet that battered the head and left one gasping for breath. Ferns and other lacy growth danced and nodded beneath the flashing drops. At certain hours of the day sunlight lanced down, warming the sandy floor and glittering off the spray. It was a special place, a holy place. Nowhere did Artanis feel the presence of the god more certainly than here.

Artanis, like all Elves, welcomed all weathers equally, and had bathed in the cleft on days when the falls were garlanded with ice. On hot days, however, the waters gained naturally an added charm. So on this present day of heat, she turned her steps thither. As she pushed aside the rustling growth at the entry, immediately she felt the relief of the cool air in the shadowed passage. Eager for the refreshing touch of the water, she turned the last corner; but stopped then in shock.

Somebody else was under the falls. For an instant her eyes took in the sight of the tall, broad-shouldered figure in the water. He was pushing silver hair away from a noble and beautiful face. The hair made a gleaming river down the whole length of his back, reaching to well-formed twin rounds at the base of it. His legs below were shapely and powerful. Muscles played and moved in his shoulders and arms, but his hands were long and graceful. In the first instant of burning vision Artanis thought it was the King; then she knew it was another.

One single glance, then she turned her gaze away, blushing slightly. At the same instant, the man became aware of her. He reached for his robe with unhurried dignity and wrapped himself in it as he stepped out of the falling runnel.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Artanis. "I did not know anybody was here. Indeed, I did not know that anybody ever came here." While she spoke, she was trying to erase the vivid recollection of what she had just seen from her mind.

"I have come here since I was a child," replied the man. His voice was low and full, pleasant to hear. It matched well with his face and figure. "My father first showed me this place. But I have met no other who knows of it."

"I – I wonder then that I have not seen you here before."

The man considered her as he dried himself with slow movements. "I am only lately come back to the court," he said. "I have been in the East." Then he too looked slightly abashed. "Lady, I must confess to you: I have seen *you* here before."

Her eyes widened and her chin came up as she realized the implications of this. He had seen her, as she had just seen him? She felt her face grow warmer.

"But only for an instant, then I turned away," he continued. And she, looking into his eyes, knew it for truth. But she also saw that it was not all of the truth.

"What more?" she demanded.

Now it was his cheeks which reddened slightly. "Since that time, I have come oftener," he confessed. "Until today, in vain."

Artanis, feeling suddenly flustered, had to look aside again. The man took the opportunity to appraise her more fully. He saw a tall, golden-haired woman clothed in a brief white dress which left her arms and much of her legs bare. Although she stood in the shadow of the cleft, her body and hair seemed to glow with a light of their own.

“You are the one they call Artanis⁷, are you not?” he asked. “One of the newcomers?”

“That was my father’s name for me,” she said. “My mother called me Nerwen⁸.”

“I ween the father had the clearer sight,” he said, smiling. “But I have had my own name for you, since I first saw you at the court – and elsewhere.”

Her eyes returned to his face, curiosity warring in her breast with vexation at his boldness. “And what name is that?”

“Alatariel⁹,” he replied. “That would be ‘Galadriel’ when spoken in the modern fashion.”

“Galadriel, Galadriel,” she echoed, pleased at the sound of it in spite of herself. “I do not know that it is right to go around making up names for people. My name is my own to choose.”

“Ah! Very true,” said the tall Elf. He was squeezing the water out of his thick rope of hair. Eyeing her slyly, he continued, “Lady, your freedom is complete; I doubt it not. As is mine, to voice my fancy. But even supposing I spoke my own choice on every occasion – as, indeed, I am minded to do – so that all the court took it up and called you Galadriel; still, you would be free to choose another name to carry in the privacy of your heart.”

“You would not dare!” she glared at him.

He grinned at her cheerfully. “Would I not?”

The intense blue eyes considered him for some moments, her thoughts impossible to read. Suddenly she spoke again: “You are wet, sir. Would you be dry?” She beckoned to him, and retreated out of the passage. Puzzled, he followed her outside. She turned as he came out, and smiled in her turn. “Catch me if you can!” she cried. With that, she set off running.

Artanis could run. She could run as no mortal can run. Strongest woman of her people, pupil of the gods, child in the fresh morning of the world: she could run as few maids have run before, and none since.

The faster she ran, the more power she felt streaming through her body. The earth supported her, the sparkling air lent wings to her feet. She outran the deer, left eagles behind. Trees whipped past her, one after another. The land rose slowly under her flashing feet, then fell again. Laughing, she ducked like lightning under low branches that loomed up, and sprang over chasms that gaped suddenly at her feet. Then she was on the flat land beside the river. The gale of life in her blew stronger, hotter; and she ran faster yet.

Suddenly she became aware of another beside her. The man had caught up. He was running with seeming ease, his silver hair cracking behind him like a flag. And no matter how hard Artanis tried, she could not shake him off.

She turned suddenly, crossing the river in a shower of spray. Thereafter she plunged straight into the forest. Leaves thrashed at her body, disregarded. The path led uphill towards the hilly country in the centre of Region. Artanis put forth her last effort, and ran as she had never run before. The wind became a roaring wall against her forehead, and the clothes whipped and hammered on her body and threatened at any moment to tear off. Sparks of brilliance, torn from her streaming hair, danced in the wake of her passage for a moment before winking out. But exert herself as she might, the man stayed ever at her side.

She skidded to a stop on a rocky height, the man pulling up beside her. Both were panting hard in the sudden silence. The forest stretched behind them, but directly in front the land disappeared. Artanis knew this place, had come here often. They stood on the rim of a cliff overlooking a quiet blue lake curving away between the

7 Noble woman.

8 Man-maiden.

9 Shining crown.

hilltops. The cliff fell some ten fathoms, over-sheer, into deep water with no snags. One could simply step off and enjoy the cool plunge following on the breathless drop.

“Not too much man in the maiden,” said the Elf when he had somewhat caught his breath. “But you run well. What else can you do?”

“You are hot, sir,” she said instead of replying directly. “Would you be cool?” And without waiting for his answer, she whipped off her dress and leaped straight off the cliff. He glimpsed her graceful form briefly before she disappeared. After a second or two, he heard the splash. Wincing a little at the height, he took off his own clothes and took the plunge himself, without daring to spend too long thinking about it. The drop was terrifying, but he was concentrating too hard on his posture to worry about it. Then the cold water smashed at him.

He struggled up from the green depths to find the damned woman already a respectable distance down the lake. Well, no matter – he could swim too.

The story here was the same. Artanis swam so that the water arched in two streams from her head and fell back far behind, but ever the silver-haired man matched her stroke for stroke. Indeed, he began slowly to draw ahead.

By the end of the lake, he was well in front. He turned into a narrow creek and came to rest in a pool carpeted with pale petals, blown in from a densely flowering tree above the bank.

She swam slowly in and joined him. “It seems you know all of my places,” she said with a touch of dismay.

“This is my birth-land,” he replied simply. He ducked under the surface briefly and rose again, snorting. She laughed to see the white flowers decorating his face and head. Disconcerted, he put his hand up, discovering them. He joined her in laughter as he tried to blow petals off the end of his nose.

“You swim well,” he said. “What comes next?”

“No, no!” she laughed. “I know when I am beaten. You are my better, sir, I confess it.”

He shook his head gravely. “Not so, lady. I am only somewhat stronger in the body. And any man who prides himself on the size and power of his muscles need only consider the ape for the complete restoration of his humility.”

“Well,” she considered, “if you do not claim the prize for strength of body, that just leaves mind. And to better me in that measure, sir, were no great undertaking.”

He shook his head. “Not so.”

She frowned. “Must you force me to display my every failing? I am not clever. You are as big a fool as I if you think otherwise.”

“We cannot all be scholars, subtle masters of lore and craft,” he replied. “I know that such is not your nature, no more than it is mine. But mind has other qualities, just as valuable.”

“What qualities?” she asked.

“To see into hearts,” he replied. “To hold many threads, to weigh many desires. To choose rightly.”

“I cannot think you are still speaking of me,” she said. “Choose rightly? That would be a jest if it were not too bitter for one.”

“Look into my heart, as I know you can, and see if I speak my true thought,” he said simply.

She looked into his eyes; then turned suddenly away, blushing slightly.

“You are greater than I,” he went on soberly. “I must own it, for I cannot conceal it. Not from you. I knew your worth from the first moment I saw you, and every word from you today has but graven the wound deeper. And it is a wound; I am not used to being bettered. You lay my pride in the dust. I do not know why I do not turn away from you. I do not understand myself.”

She swam around him for a while, considering. “Must the man always be the better?”

“So I had always believed; until I met you, Galadriel.”

“Do not call me that.” She swam some more through the petalled waters. “Perhaps your pride is less than you supposed.”

He shrugged. “Maybe so. No man can see the back of his own head; he must trust to others to obtain an account of it.”

They swam idly for a time, enjoying the day. “Shall we go back?” she said at last. Together, they swam slowly back down the length of the lake. The air was still, leaving the surface very smooth; a mirror with scarcely a warp.

The lake ended at a tiny beach, at the foot of a path leading up beside the cliff. Artanis looked a little sideways at the Elf. “Having seen my unclothed form now twice already, you doubtless need not see it again,” she said.

He grinned at her. “I could tell you the same story, Galadriel,” he said, “and it would have exactly as much truth in it.”

“Meaning none at all, I suppose. And my name is Artanis. Pray *stop* calling me by that, that... fanciful invention!”

He shrugged again, still smiling. He had a radiant smile which lit up dark eyes, full of humour – humour, and other things. Kindness she saw there, and resolution, and wit.

Infuriating.

“And what is your name, sir? Or shall I make one up for you?”

“They call me Celeborn.”

Him!

“Well, Celeborn landsman of Doriath: just don’t look, that is all! I shall know if you do!”

He turned his back, still grinning. “Whistle when you are ready. Certain I am that you *can* whistle, Man-
maiden.”

A snort was the only reply he received. Before long, a penetrating whistle came from above. He grinned again to himself before climbing out and ascending the path.

She was standing with averted gaze when he reached the top. Trying not to look at what the thin cloth of her dress was revealing of her still wet body, he donned his own hose and tunic.

She turned to face him as soon as he was dressed. “You do not seem to me like a man whose pride lies humbled in the dust.”

“To tell you the truth, I do not exactly feel like it either,” he admitted. “It is beyond all reason.”

“I do not know what you mean by that,” she said.

“It means, my reason tells me I should flee from you. But my heart tells me quite another tale.”

“And what tale would that be?” Suspecting all the time what he was going to say.

“That I would fain speak with you again, Galadriel of the Noldor. Or run, or swim, as you please.”

She looked down, seemingly intent on scratching in the earth with her toes. “We might do that...” she said in casual tones, “some time... to while away an idle hour...” Then she looked up directly at him again, fire now in her eyes. She raised a warning finger to his face. “But only if you cease these silly games, and call me by my rightful name!”

He spread his hands. “Of course!” he said. But while there was nothing but candour in his voice, a twinkle remained in one eye. “Your wish shall be as a command to me – Galadriel.”

Alas, he had neglected to mark how close to the edge he was standing.

* * * * *

Beren spent the summer and autumn doing nothing with great energy. Although now and then he spent a day or two wandering for his refreshment in the forests, he spent most of his time working on the farm. In between there were sports, and once or twice a spell of military training. Despite the physical work, it was a fallow time for him. He thought very little; in the evenings he would be asleep usually as soon as his head hit the pillow.

Changes were happening to him. For one thing, the boy felt himself to be sprouting in all directions. And although he retained or even increased his former great strength, he became clumsy and awkward. He bent as stout a bow as ever but grew exasperated at how often he missed the clout.

He had become intensely aware of girls, and avoided their company. Instead he sought out other youths of similar age. They all played at being confident, one or two even boasting of their conquests, but in reality they were all huddling together in the same hole of callow uncertainty.

The girls were annoying. They were more advanced, in all ways, emotionally as much as physically; and they seemed to know more. For the boys they had nothing but whispered and giggling contempt. The boys all hated to pass in front of the girls’ mocking eyes, but at the same time they could not leave them alone. Uppermost in all their minds was the maddening thought of those flexuous female bodies under all the clothes. Glimpses of the same were not hard to come by in a farming community, and there was not one of them who had not at some time or another, through accident or design, caught a vivid flash, seemingly branded to the back of the eyeballs, of one of those magical, potent shapes. They derived no good from these sights, no satisfaction: once seen, they would not leave a man alone, but returned to torment him in the night-time hours. Each stolen glimpse only intensified the desire for more.

At the harvest festival, all feelings were inflamed by the punches and hot toddies which made the rounds. Some of the girls, with flushed faces and flashing eyes, fell to teasing. One of them sneaked a kiss from Beren, and he could not get out of his hot brain the quick crush of her warm lips to his, or the whisked scent of her hair. In the end he had to dash out and stick his head in the horse trough to cool it off. He ran off then, straight away, into the forest; this time he stayed away two whole weeks.

Barahir took the opportunity to speak with him alone soon after he returned. They were out repairing fences. The grey clouds dropped an intermittent mist of water onto them, but the air was mild, and they did not mind the damp.

“You’re getting tall, Son,” said Barahir. “Almost a man.”

Beren felt no need to answer beyond a smile.

“I guess you will be noticing some changes in yourself? Tool getting a bit wilder? Hair growing? Starting to think about girls?”

Beren leaned back from the post he was working on and spread his hands. “Starting?” he said in tones of despair. “Tell me how to stop thinking about them!”

Barahir laughed. “Aye, it takes you that way at first,” he said. “We’ve all had to go through it. It settles down after a while. You’ll work out ways to take the edge off it yourself, just like every other man does.

“I just wanted to say this to you, though. A bit of fatherly advice if you like. You know what it’s all about, you’ve seen the animals at it often enough, and what comes of it: it’s for making babies. Well, a baby is always welcome, no matter what the circumstances, but there are ways of having one which are a cursed tangled mess, which end up giving everybody headaches and fuss; and there are ways in which everything goes smoothly and in the manner it was designed to. One of these days you’ll see some fine girl and think, that’s the one for me. You’ll settle down then, although doing exactly what trade I’m an Elf if I know, and you’ll want to raise a family. That’s the way to do it. So what I’m saying to you is, hold back if you can. Handsome lad like you, you’ll have lots of temptation, it’ll be hard. But try not to do the same as Parth if you can help it. Understand?”

Beren smiled. “Yes, Father, I understand.”

“Here, don’t twist the peg that way, it’ll break,” said Barahir. They worked on together for a while. The older man looked speculatively at his son from time to time. Clearly he had something else on his mind, and at last he mentioned it.

“Did you think any more about making your peace with Andreth?” he asked.

Beren neither stopped what he was doing nor looked up. “I don’t think I had better show my face in Newfort for a while,” he said in an even voice.

“Hold this here. Brace it. I’ll tell you when you can let go,” said his father. He tommed the peg in tight. “All right, that’ll do for this stretch. Let’s look for the next.” They piled the gear on the sledge, then each pulling on a rope, they dragged it down the line of fence posts until Barahir said to stop.

“This one,” he said, pushing on a rotten post. He looked at his son. “Did you know I went to Newfort while you were away in the woods this last time?” he said.

Beren looked at his father, shook his head.

“I had a long talk with Andreth,” said Barahir. “I think you might find you could repair that breach now. That stiff-necked old lady actually admitted to me that she might have been wrong in the way she treated you, said the wrong things to you. And I think she has come to understand that whole business with the Blackshirts pretty well too.”

Beren flinched at the name. “It doesn’t matter what she thinks,” he said. “I am responsible.”

“That’s not the way I heard it,” said his father carefully. “Nor does it sound like the son I know.”

“Many bad things happened. Much evil was done,” said Beren. “None of it was at my design; but that is no excuse. I set the whole thing in motion, out of a desire for revenge, for an act which would not have happened at all had it not been for my own pride and overconfidence. I was rash, and heedless, and my friend paid for that with his life. Everything else followed.”

Barahir was silent. He did not know how to counter this. “What about the other business then?” he asked at last.

“What business?” asked Beren.

“The sword!”

“Oh, that.”

“Yes, that!” said his father. “Have you forgotten so quickly that which ruled your life for three years and more?”

Beren shook his head. “I think the whole thing was a mistake.”

“A mistake? What do you mean, a mistake?” responded the astonished Barahir.

“I do not think it was meant for me at all,” said Beren. “None of it makes sense to me any more. I am a farmer’s son, and the woods are my other home. What should I do with a magic sword? I can best all the Orcs I find with no more aid than bow and knife. Any kind of sword would just get in the way. I am not Boromir, and we do not live in Boromir’s times. It is all a fable which has outlived its day.”

His father said nothing for a while, as they worked at digging out the post.

“Are you telling me now that all that time with the Dwarves, all that you had to sacrifice, that it was all for nothing?” he demanded at last.

Beren shrugged. “You’ve often said to me that nothing is wasted,” he said. “But those years could have been better spent, yes.”

“I cannot believe any of that,” said Barahir. “Such things do not happen by chance; nor do the Powers make such mistakes. They see further into the future than we do.”

“Then let the future take care of itself,” said Beren shortly.

“You have learned a mighty skill, at heavy cost,” said his father. “I beseech you not to throw that away.”

“Please do not press me any more on this, Father,” said Beren. “I am just now trying to find peace.”

Barahir shook his head sadly, but did not mention the subject again.

* * * * *

On the first day of snow Beren visited the site of the dam. As with many of his actions this past year, he could not have said why the impulse came to him just then.

Wet flakes drifted down out of a leaden sky, but they were melting as soon as they hit the ground. The youth covered his head with his cloak, but the cold and damp soon penetrated. This was the least pleasant weather of the year; snow was much easier to bear later in the season when it fell cold, and thus dry.

He had not been back since Hiril died, years ago now though it was. It was not a place anybody went to any more. There was no apprehension, no whites of eyes shown, nobody had said or hinted to him that there was any suspicious disquiet; it was just sad. And so he found it now – sadness everywhere he looked. The empty pool looked sad, as did the broken dam, and the bare branches of the trees drooping in the gloom. And over everything, the veil of great, wet flakes teetering down out of a cheerless sky. But Hiril was not there.

Why was the dam built? Not even Hrotha knew. His father had been full of such projects, he said. Hrotha said his father was better at starting things like that than at carrying them through.

Nobody had ever found his sister’s remains. They must have been swept far downstream, Beren thought. Nobody talked about it openly, but it was widely known that Emeldir still slipped away now and then to

search the banks and shallows. Although superficially she had returned to her normal self, Beren suspected there was a wound within which had never fully closed.

Emeldir had dyed and woven a shawl of fine, soft wool; a cloudy-coloured plaid of subtle shades. This she had sent to Queen Nendilmë, with a letter of thanks. Just recently she had been touched and charmed to receive a warm reply. Beren smiled at the memory – it was a strange friendship, perhaps; but no stranger than some of his own.

As he sat on a wet log thinking of all these things, he could hear, invisible in the vapours above, the wild call of geese. As the massed but faint voices moved steadily across the sky toward the South, Beren thought of Húrin. His friend was living down that way now, Beren knew. The news was that he and his brother were fostered with their mother's kin, in the woods of the South. With the thought, a great wish came upon Beren to see his friend again. He had promised to visit, before events got in the way. Next summer he would go, for sure. There was nothing to stop him.

As he sat there, wondering why it was that he did not go inside where it was warm and dry, a sudden electric thrill ran through his whole body, making all of his hairs stand on end.

He thought he could make out words in the geese voices!

The birds had flown far away now on their journey, he could no longer hear them. He shook himself with a shiver, and stood up. He did not dare to hope, or even to think about it any more. He turned his back on the empty pool, and the geese; thrusting it all out of his mind, he strode back to firelight and the tasks of the day.

Winter was a hard time for everybody, but there was room for companionship, mead around the fire of an evening, stories, even a certain amount of cheer. It lies not in human nature to be sad for long, and even Emeldir laughed at some of the jokes. Gilach and his wife knew no reason not to be merry, and the baby also did not leave much room for pensive brooding. It was toddling around now and getting into every mischief.

In a calm after the first blizzards Beren ventured out, fearing and expecting only the worst, with scraps for the birds. They sat there at first in the trees, and his heart sank. But first a single one, then another, then ever more, fluttered over to perch on his shoulders. They twittered in his ear, and now he could make out that they were complaining of their cold and hunger. As understanding came to him, halting but true, the tears ran in hot streaks down his cheeks. He could only croak incoherent replies. The tears came to him again that night as he lay in his furs, fervently thanking the Powers in his mind. Not even the sound of Dagnir's snores could put a dent in his lambent joy.

Although it would never again reach quite the depth and fluency it had had in the beginning, his former connection with the birds and beasts progressively returned to him from that time.

The sense of reprieve Beren felt was immense. All that he had believed he was shut away from forever – all that wonderful world, he now saw opening again in front of him. He felt like a life prisoner who sees the harsh stone walls of his cell unaccountably crumble to dust; the sentence forgotten, his world renewed.

Year 451

With the first thaw the boy was out, splashing happily through the woods. He spent a day climbing the granite domes of Foen, remembering how Big Nose had showed him the shape of Dorthonion all those years ago. With some difficulty he found the exact same place again and sat there for a long time, enjoying the spring sun on his back and marvelling at all the details he had missed the first time. The air tasted sweet and the whole world seemed new to him.

Only the three remote but ominous peaks, dark in the distant North, put a momentary damper on his mood.

He had avoided the Druug the whole of the previous year, but now suddenly he could not wait to see them again. He desired passionately to talk with old Nose, his beloved foster father; to see Sunshine's smile; and

to tease and be teased by Long Hair. Had Chases Goats married that girl from the Salmon people? How was Leather's new baby faring?

He shied away somewhat from the burning memory of Long Hair's pert breasts. He would just have to deal with that somehow. He would be bedding down rather with some of the single men, that was for sure.

His body had begun to produce seed, which either emerged of its own accord during the night, at the denouement of some lurid and inflaming dream, or via his own fevered manipulations when the pressure of desire became overwhelming. This novelty was a mess and a nuisance, as was the unwished-for propensity of his member to swell and stiffen, several times a day it seemed, and often at the least convenient occasion. Nobody embarrassed him by remarking on it, but his mother commenced the discreet supply of absorbent moss by his sleeping place, for which he was wordlessly grateful. Of course matters were simpler in the woods, and there was also a blessed absence under the dreaming trees of female figures passing in front of his eyes and dwelling on his mind.

When the drums began finally to sound that year, Beren told them at the farm where he was going, left most of his clothing behind him, and within two days was walking into the encampment of the Holly people.

There is no need to detail again the welcome he received nor the joy he felt in being with his own people again – his other own people. After a time it was as if he had never been away; the altered sleeping arrangements being the only obvious change. He worked hard at his woodcraft and began gradually to regain some of the skills he had lost in the long years of settled life.

The women of the People had always gone about bare-chested, none of them thinking anything about it. During the years Beren had spent with them as a child he had given no thought to it either, and indeed had not even noticed after the first week. Now he found this habit harder to ignore, but the deep sense that it was normal and proper among the Druug remained with him and helped him. It was only with the younger women that some movement, such as laughter, that set their firm young cones wobbling, would send a tingle through his blood, so that he had to look away. He found it natural to spend most of his time with the other young men.

The People were a source of deep comfort for him, as was the forest, and the creatures which lived in it. His memories of hardships among the Dwarves, or of the brutalities in Newfort, began to lose colour and sting. Occasionally he would wonder what had become of Telchar, or Nendilmë, or Porin, or his friends among the apprentices. He was sure he would never see any of them again. None of them any longer seemed quite real to him; what was real was the great forest, the talk of the Holly men around the fire, and the birds and beasts which were again his friends.

* * * * *

Beren's serenity lasted until the high days of spring. A thought came to him then, rising like a bubble out of unknown depths; and once it was in his mind, he could not get rid of it.

He was patrolling for Orcs at the time: drifting through the cool woods along the northern slopes of the land, looking for sign. All of his senses were finely honed to this task, and all of them were intensely engaged in it, focussed to a fierce point of concentration. The higher functions of the mind, being not required for the search, could relax into idleness, drifting in subliminal reverie. At such times, formless shapes of thought would pass through his mind like vaguely-outlined fish oozing slowly by, beneath the living surface of the pond of consciousness.

Sometimes a fish rises to the surface. Thus, in the middle of his hunt, a vivid picture of the Ent-women rose unbidden to his mind. He remembered seeing them after the Drumming in the Valley of Idols; but the memory had lain dormant until now.

Beren pulled up with a jerk, cursing his mind for a fool, because the hunt needed all of his attention. He shook his head irritably and bent again to his task.

The picture came back, more powerfully than ever. He could not shake free of it.

The human mind works on many levels. Usually these parts combine in harmony; occasionally, however, they tug at completely cross purposes. So now. On one level, Beren was exasperated. He had a job to do, and this was getting in the way. On another level, another part of him was no longer interested in the hunt: it was fully engaged with the pictures in his head.

The boy swallowed on a suddenly dry throat, the images passing vividly through his mind. He had forgotten how comely some of the great women had been.

Another idea was rising now in his thought. The sensible Beren, the one that wanted to get back to tracking, instantly recognized the nature and shape of this idea, well before it had fully formed, and was already busy trying to shove it down or off to one side.

“Forget it,” sensible Beren said sternly, shaking an internal head. “Not a chance. Not in a thousand years.”

As the boy stood there in conflict, he turned his actual head away, closing his eyes tight, as if trying to avoid thinking the thought, the terrible, enticing thought. It pulled at his mind as a torrent in the mountains pulls at the legs.

“No,” he said aloud. “No! I won’t think it. It would be stupid, stupid. I’m certainly not doing it.”

But as he spoke the words, he felt himself as one trying to keep from sliding down a greased log. The hands might grip, but inch by inch they slipped down anyway. The hopeless feeling grew on him that he would do it, after all; curse at the folly though he might.

He knew where the Entwives lived. The idea, the slyly beckoning idea, now fully developed, was just this: that surely it would not hurt to go and take a peep at them. At these beautiful, female-shaped creatures.

Beren took himself fiercely in hand and thrust the idea away. All the same, it was clear to him that he was in no temper to hunt Orcs today. Abandoning the hunt, he turned and began to trot quietly back toward camp. He tried to concentrate on the sights and sounds of the wood, but with poor success. Matters were little better that evening, amid the talk and laughter of his companions at the camp fire. The hardest moment of all came that night, after he retired to his sleeping fur. The pictures, the shapes played freely in his mind then, with nothing to distract him. Those wonderfully curved bodies, blazing hot in his memory; some even sparsely clothed. He knew exactly where they were. It was simply a matter of going.

He lay awake for hours, arguing a case that the better part of him knew very well to be foolish. He tried to assure himself that not even an Ent could discover him in his quest if he exerted his woodcraft to the utmost, but his internal censor rebelled at such self-deception. He knew Ents, knew what they could do. All right, all right! he said to his censor, maybe you’re right. But the situation is self-correcting: if the Ent-women are capable of catching me, why then, the Ents at guard will catch me first; so I won’t be able to get in after all. I’ll have walked all the way across Dorthonion for nothing. But that will be all to the good; hopefully, having wasted my time, I will be able to put this whole stupid business behind me and never be plagued with it ever again.

He delayed for a week, hoping to put the thought out of his mind, but it would not leave him alone. He mentioned the idea to nobody – he knew they would call him a fool, and they would be right, too. In his mind’s eye he shrank from the expression he imagined on Nose’s face, should the old Wose find out; it was bad enough thinking about Rattlecone’s response. Although it was probably hopeless to think of hiding anything from *him*, anyway. Even after the fact. Well, he would just have to deal with that when he came to it.

Eventually, cursing himself all the time as an empty-headed want-wit, slaved to his own baser appetites, he slunk away one morning and made his furtive way to the Dwarf road which led south. The road he found overgrown with saplings – they were sprouting everywhere upon it, amid tall grass. He crossed the neglected

trail and climbed through the woods on the far side.

Beren had never been in this corner of the land before; he did not know what to expect, what it was like. He went slowly therefore, as noiselessly as he could manage, wincing at the occasional whispers of sound that escaped him despite his best efforts, and wishing mightily that he could attain again his former mastery of the art of silent movement. Despite his concerns, he in fact drifted through the evening woods like a shadow and would certainly have escaped the notice of any of his farmer kin.

The boy slept in a notch in the slope of one of the many jumbled hills he had found on the far side of the ridge. He woke with the first light of morning. His first actions before moving were to sniff the air and to listen; but there was nothing to detect beyond the normal scents and sounds of a waking forest. With silent caution he rolled up and strapped his fur.

The trees here grew thickly among the rocks. They were pines for the most part, evergreens, which meant an open under-story, but a thick layer of tan-coloured needles covering and hiding a great many angular, dry and treacherous twigs. Most of the trees were not old, but now and again he encountered a true forest giant, its girth wider than the stretch of two men's arms, towering hundreds of feet into the high airs.

It was a quiet forest. There were no deer, and what birds were about stayed in the sunlight, high above. It took Beren all day to negotiate his way through this strange land, with all senses alert. Towards the close of day the terrain began to descend steeply. The downward-falling slopes ahead of him lay already in the shadow of evening, but now and then he glimpsed, through gaps in the branches, a great bowl which lay far below, its colours misted by the distance of air. As the dark began to close in, he again chose a sheltered nook, curled up, and fell instantly into the sleep of exhaustion.

A ray of the rising sun fingered its silent way through the needles, painting his face with secret gold. The touch woke him. He stifled a sneeze and blinked warily in the lazily dappling light. Listen, sniff. A faint music of birdsong rose from down slope, and he scented a whiff of some new air – just the barest trace of something strange. He sniffed and sniffed, high and low, remembering how Nose used to do it, but he could not quite put his finger on the difference.

He could see through gaps in the branches that the sun was rising from behind a distant line of jagged peaks. He guessed these must mark the eastern fences of the land. Beyond those heights, then, must lie the Pass of Aglon: the road he had come by, returning from the Dwarves – was it truly two years ago?

He moved along the slope until he found a larger gap between the trees which allowed him a clearer sight into the great hollow below him. As the valley floor came at last into open sight, the boy involuntarily drew in his breath; for laid out below him, just beginning to be touched by the warm rays of the early sun, he saw a land stranger than any he had seen before. Parts of it were green and densely wooded, but there were places where the trees grew in ordered rows, and others yet which seemed to be ploughed for corn. Some things he could not understand in the least – what were those patches of shimmering silver? The whole made a magic patchwork, a varicoloured quilt, extending in every direction for some miles of rolling country. It was from this deep and broad valley that came the birdsong and the hint of spice on the air.

Beren descended the slope using every ounce of caution he could muster. The ground grew very steep towards the base. Eventually he had no option but to proceed in a kind of controlled fall, sliding and clutching at saplings. He was just beginning to be alarmed at the possibility that the plummeting ground might end in an actual cliff when the slope began to ease back. Soon he was standing at the bottom, at the eaves of the strange forest.

He looked back, and realized what luck he had enjoyed; for indeed there were cliffs in most places.

The air here at the base of the bowl was sweet and mild. Birds of colours and sorts he had never seen before flew from branch to low branch, trilling him greeting. The trees were of many sorts, of which he recognized few. The great boles grew taller as he wandered further in, but their density was nowhere great. The land felt almost park-like: as if it had been planned in this fashion, with much thought; tended over careful years by

the most skilled gardener who had ever lived. The grass underfoot was soft and green, and the prospects opening on all sides were pleasant to the eyes.

He found a tiny freshet which tinkled through the sward, and followed it. Now and then the brooklet tumbled laughing over a miniature fall, not over a foot high.

The strange tang in the air was stronger now. Without really thinking about it, Beren was following his nose; stopping when the scent seemed to weaken, then backtracking until he had found it again. It was a wild smell, spicy and exciting. He had never smelled anything like it before – but no! It made him think of the smell of a hive of wild bees: a touch of honey, pushed under by the sour whiff of its sullenly buzzing and dangerous guardians.

Ahead he glimpsed something white fluttering, high in the air. As he approached, more whiteness came into view. What could it be? After some moments he made out that it came from trees; their leaves were a pale green above, but the undersides seemed to be of a pure, pure white. The leaves turned and flashed as the wind teased them; turned and flashed. Leaves in their hundreds, all blinking white, each keeping its own tempo.

He no longer had any doubt that this forest was a product of design. The white-flickering trees stood in long ranks, a straight way leading between them. The moss of the path shimmered in a restless pattern of light and shade as the leaves swept their pale beams back and forth across it.

Wondering, the boy trod the noiseless moss of the path, dazzled by the flashing leaves. The silent way seemed to go on for a long time. The further he ventured, the stronger grew the smell. As he finally reached the end, passing through an archway in a high hedge of dark-leaved trees, he laughed, because the source of the odour was suddenly clear to him.

The great round space in which he found himself was filled with May-blossom. Tall bushes of it grew wildly and in no order all around him, all packed with gleaming white blossom, filling the air with its sour-scented power. The low hum of working bees in their tens of thousands rose to his ears on every side.

The path continued through the white blossom and the bees. At the end of the path, at the centre of the round enclosure, Beren perceived now a high throne of knotted wood; and upon the throne there sat a great lady robed in cloth of a white almost too bright to look at. She was aware of him from the first.

Beren hesitated at the inner edge of the plantation, but the lady smiled at him and beckoned him forward.

As he approached, step by wary step, so his picture of her became clearer. The shape that grew and took form in his eyes was that of a beautiful queen. There was no doubting she was a queen. Her height was about twice that of a man, but the woman was so gracefully proportioned that one hardly noticed her size. The beauty's loose waves of hair shone with the colour of corn silk in the sun, framing a well-shaped face, with fine, very fair skin. As Beren drew close, he could see that the Queen's eyes were a dazzling blue in colour; bluer than his own eyes, bluer than the heavens; a bewitching, heartbreaking shade of blue.

The Wood-queen's arms were soft and rounded. Beren also could not help noticing – because the bodice of her robe was low and scant – the milky swell of a generous breast.

He stepped forward, still with hesitation. As he cleared the last masses of bee-buzzing flowers, their sour scent shouting in his nose, he noticed another woman standing beside the throne: equally tall, this one, but she had midnight-dark hair and eyes. She was clothed from neck to ankle in a dress that looked, beside the dazzling raiment of her sister, somehow faded, as if past its best. This midnight-haired wood-woman had a sharp nose and an even sharper glance. She looked to Beren more like a witch than a queen. The dark woman's expression was sour, which was perhaps not to be wondered at, because she made but a poor comparison next to her radiant blonde sister.

The corn-haired Queen beckoned to him, her wonderful blue eyes smiling welcome. A little to one side of the

approach to the throne he noticed now a kind of stile or pulpit made from hawthorn. The Queen opened her white hand toward this in a movement of transcendent grace. Following her direction, Beren scrambled up, until he found himself at the top, looking directly into the beauty of the womanly face smiling back at him, not so far beyond hand's-reach.

Her unutterable loveliness caught at his breath. The face he drank in with his hungry eyes was softly rounded, but perfectly balanced. Her smile, folding dimples into her velvet cheeks, broadened and curved the perfect lines of her lips, parted now slightly to reveal a hint of even, pearly teeth.

His gaze rose to her brilliant eyes, and he saw in their knowing sparkle, and in the slight tilt of her head, in the cant of a perfect brow, that which set his blood suddenly to pounding. In her look there was an awareness of – of what? Of the needs of man and woman; of how simple it all could be, when both desired alike, when each one was drawn equally to the other; the hot need of the man, and the enclosing sensual comfort of the woman. She looked candidly into his eye, and he knew her thoughts, and she knew that he knew. He swallowed a hard swallow and tried to keep his knees from trembling.

At this height too her breast was exposed to his gaze, the twin rounds spreading the restraining cloth. He dared not look down, but he could see in the bottom of his field of vision how the soft-swelling curves moved gently as the Queen breathed. Despite himself, he could not help darting them a single quick glance; but as he did so, somebody snorted.

It was the dark sister, who was looking at him scornfully.

The blonde Queen leaned forward slightly and smiled.

“Welcome, stranger,” she said, and her voice was deep and velvety.

He did not know what to say. “Are you the Onodvisse?” he asked, feeling like a fool.

Was there just the slightest pause? Perhaps not. The Queen laughed gently, and the sound made his skin tingle.

“We are ourselves,” she said. “But what brings you to our land? Have you come to admire its wonders?”

“Are there wonders?” he said, feeling foolish.

“But yes!” she trilled, a woodwind fluting. “Here you will find growing things of their art like nothing else in Middle-earth. For we are their designers and creators. Power is given to us to shape all things that live. Some of our sisters in this valley cultivate the fruits of the earth; nowhere will you taste berries so sweet, apples more delicious, or bread from corn more wholesome. You smaller, quick-living ones have learned from these sisters already, I think. Here, in this place, we favour – a wilder growth. It is an older art we practice, with older needs.

“But talk is idle. Come! I will show you.”

She stood then, the tall graceful shape of her, and descended from her throne. With a turn and a laugh, the great woman beckoned Beren to follow. He jumped down from his twist-wood pulpit and found himself walking just behind her, his eyes level with her hips. These had a womanly curve which swayed in time with her strides. Under the skirt, the two broad rounds of her behind alternately bunched and tilted, bunched and tilted. The throbbing of blood ached in Beren's head, matched only by the ramrod-hard swelling in his groin. A red mist hovered before his eyes and all he could think of was how very badly he desired to run his hands over the firm, rounded flesh under the cloth.

The lady had been talking the while, pointing out plants on either side, but Beren had paid no attention either to growth or words. His entire mind was focussed on her physical beauty, so near and so overwhelming. And all the time, the hot, sweet-sour blossom scent was thick in the air.

“Look!” she said, turning suddenly, “here is one just starting.” She pointed down to a young sapling just to the side, hardly a foot tall, with a handful of new green leaves.

The fair Queen dropped to her knees in front of the boy, her heavy breast swaying on a little after the end of the movement. She was bent forward facing Beren; a large expanse of her milky curves was exposed to his gaze. He could smell her now, and it was the same sour, wild scent as the May-blossom; only far more maddening and intense.

Suddenly she stretched back and reached behind her with one hand, the great rounded cones on her chest lifting and jostling softly with the change of posture, right in front of his eyes. Beren swallowed on a dry mouth and the tightness in his head and groin grew hotter and denser. Beneath his kilt his erection was swollen hard and aching.

“I have an insect down my back,” said the May-woman softly, her wide blue eyes on his face. “Of your courtesy – could you reach in and catch it for me?” And she bent forward in front of him. Her loose bodice fell forward so that the whole curving outline of one firm but deep-hanging breast could be made out in its shadows, terminating in the exciting knob of a womanly nipple. The great, soft shape of the breast swayed slightly with her movement.

Tearing his eyes away in shame, Beren reached his hand tentatively down the back of her light tunic, hardly knowing what he was doing in his confusion. The woman’s skin felt silky warm under his fingers, and so soft that he could not really tell exactly where it started and where the air left off. Her great golden head was right next to his, and the warm, animal smell of her filled his nostrils. A surge of unstoppable heat seemed to be building in his loins. He fumbled blindly for the insect, her skin blood-warm and soft under his shaking fingers. Before he could do anything to prevent it, before he could even think what to do, a heat began to build within him. Something deep inside, some centre of aching need, was gathering now quicker and quicker, picking up pace like a runaway cart on an ever-steepening slope. A great light grew in his head. A roaring filled his ears, and he gasped under the mounting wave of pleasure and growing tightness in his loins; a wave which waxed at the last to an intensity indistinguishable from pain as the thing inside his loins commenced to squeeze like a vengeful giant’s fist, in white-hot clenches, again and again and again, in gasping fits of ecstasy which shook his whole body.

Only after the last drop of burning pleasure had been achingly wrung out and expelled from his body did he return slowly again to awareness of the external world: the white May blossom all around him, the blue sky, and the great, hot-musk-scented woman he was almost embracing.

Beren’s knees were so weak, he could hardly stand. He withdrew his shaking hand in shame, but the woman caught it between both of her large, warm ones and looked him full in the face. Her blue eyes were full of sympathy.

“Such a mishap,” she whispered, “when the young body’s seed is spilled untimely. But perhaps we can amend that together, you and I.” She bent forward so that he felt her warm breath on his ear: “Come, lie you on my couch over there, and let us see what may be done.” And under the overpowering stimulation of her nearness, even though his loins were aching, their cisterns having been with almost brutal force pressed dry of their last moisture, he could already sense the steady flow of new springs flooding in to refill these secret reservoirs. His tool, which had been sagging towards damp despondency, twitched now also and began slowly to warm and expand again.

The enticing mood of awaking lust was broken by a voice, cold as a shower of water. “Fool,” it said.

He turned and saw the dark woman standing a little way behind them with folded arms. In his excitement he had forgotten her entirely.

“Sister,” said the blonde one of the pair, with just the slightest edge in her voice, “have you not business to tend to in your own domain?”

“No, none,” replied that one rudely.

“Ignore her, my lord,” said the blonde Queen to Beren. “Come.” She pointed into the glade, where he saw a low green bower that lay between flowering bushes. “Take your ease there,” she murmured into his ear, “and let our bodies speak to one another, skin to warm skin.” With these words, her warm eyes never leaving Beren’s face, the queen raised slow white arms behind her head to undo the clasp of her bodice. Her breast rose and thrust forward with the movement.

Beren drank the sight in avidly. He was hard again already, anticipation of delights to come making his mouth dry and raising the pulse in his head.

“It were not wise to savour the fruit before knowing its price,” commented the sour twin.

The blonde woman left her bodice and whirled on her companion. “This is my time, and my domain!” she hissed. “Your season is past, Sister, and this place is not yours. Leave me to my affairs and tend to your own!”

“I am her elder,” said the dark woman past her sister to Beren, “but she never will acknowledge it.”

“Why must you always mix yourself in my affairs?” said the infuriated Queen. She turned back to Beren. “Get on the couch!” she ordered, pointing to it with full-stretched arm.

“Do not!” countermanded the dark woman.

The May Queen took a step towards Beren, reaching out a clutching hand; but her movements froze in mid-step.

Beren could not understand what was happening. The great blonde woman stood there, immobile; but by the flash of her eye, she was still aware, could still hear and see.

He swung to the other, to the dark sister, and saw that she was holding a commanding hand high in the air.

“What is happening?” the boy asked her. “What have you done to her?”

She gazed down at him from inscrutable dark eyes. “Look to the couch,” she said softly.

Beren turned to look in that direction, then recoiled in horror at what he saw. Before his eyes, cruel claws of thorns grew out of the sides of the couch, all along it, and arched in over into the space where he was to lie.

“She would have drained the life’s blood from your body even as she received your seed into her own,” said the Dark Queen.

“But, but,” the boy spluttered. He looked back to the White Lady, saw the savagery written now plain to see on the fair countenance. The great blonde woman was caught in mid snarl, and her eyes flashed hate; but she was frozen and could not move. “But *why*?”

“Such is her need,” replied the Dark Lady quietly. “Now boy, by my advice, you will depart from this place, and not slowly.” She gestured to the surroundings with her other hand. “I can hold my sister, but not these others,” she said.

The dazed boy looked where she was pointing, but could not understand. There was nothing to see but the close-planted trees of the great ring that fenced in the bower. Suddenly, and to his added horror, he saw that the trees were stirring. They were tearing their roots free from the ground. Branches waved like arms, and he noticed now that there were vicious thorns among the leaves.

“Run, if you would live,” said the dark sister. “Run!”

The boy shook free of his daze. He picked up his legs and ran headlong for the gap in the hedge, now closing before him as the tree-creatures heaved themselves into motion.

Behind him, he heard the dark woman laugh. "Seek me if you dare," she called after him. "Seek me in the blackthorn! For I have a further gift for you."

All senses at hyper pitch, the frantic boy dodged the grasping thorns and managed, he knew not how, to escape from the ring. More plants were stirring outside it: the whole plantation seemed roused against him. Beren accelerated to top speed and ran for his life. He did not stop until he reached the foot of the slope where he had first entered the valley, and even then he continued, clambering up the slope, clutching at the earth, heart pounding and lungs gasping for air. He had to stop eventually and pant with thumping chest lest he collapse entirely, but the terror of pursuit, still thick in his throat, drove him on again after a short time. He staggered back through the pine wood, crashing now through the dry junk on the ground, all caution forgotten. At the fading of the light the exhausted youth clambered at last high up into the sticky branches of a tall young pine. He crouched shivering in a high fork, watching as the light faded. He detected no pursuit, but there was no sleep for him that night.

With the coming of daylight, Beren continued his flight. He only began to relax when he was back in the forests he knew. It was weeks before he ceased to jerk awake in the night, sweating with remembered terror.

However, to his chagrin and self-fury, he found that he could not forget the blackthorn sister's last words. What gift had she meant? He hungered to know. If he never ventured back, he never would know.

Don't be a fool, he told himself. A fool *again*. Was one brush with dreadful death not enough? You escaped only through luck, and by the narrowest of margins; why run again into the wolf's mouth? Leave it alone!

But he could not. That is why, some weeks later, and almost despairing at his own folly, he found himself once again in the pine forest.

This time he came around more from the South. He spent several days lurking among these rugged hills, sniffing out the lie of the land. Remembered fear made him extra careful, and he crept his slow and silent paths through the woods like a wary beast. Blackthorn, she had said – how to find blackthorn? Not for any price would he again approach the May-woman's domain.

He ventured at last with trepidation into the valley. At first he found himself in cultivated areas, and he marvelled at the scented orchards, the tall corn just turning with the season to gold, and the vines laden with purple fruit. He dared taste none of it. All that he wanted from that land was answers to his questions. Why had she saved him? What gift? She had given him his life. What more could there be?

He glimpsed at times tall Ent-women working among the crops, but he slunk well out of their paths. Whether they were aware of him or not he did not know; but nobody molested him.

Finally he found what he was looking for: a deep grove sown with great bushes of blackthorn, on which the blue-bloomed sloes already were waxing. Carefully, on the lookout ever for movement, he crept into it deeper and deeper.

It went much the same as before: again there was a throne. The second sister sat on it, her hair like a river of night streaming down onto her lap. Beren checked most carefully to make sure that she was alone. As the youth emerged at last from the screen of thorns, the dark-haired woman fastened her black eyes upon him and smiled, revealing milky-white teeth. The smile broadened, turned into a mirthful laugh.

"So you have come!" she said. "Do you know, I did not think that you would!"

He glanced around a little fearfully. "Your sister is not here?"

She shook her head, amused. "No."

He wasn't sure how he should begin. "I wanted to thank you," he said. "You saved my life."

She made a dismissive gesture. "That is not all you have to say," she said. "You have questions."

"Yes," he said. "I do. My first question is, why?"

"Why did I save your life, or why was it in danger?"

"Well – both."

She laughed then, abandondly, as if she found him funny. It made him uncomfortable to hear it.

"Do you know what I am?" she said.

"Only guesses," he replied, trying to sound bolder than he felt. "I think you are of the people I know as Ents. I know one of your menfolk; indeed I count him as a dear friend."

"Menfolk," she repeated slowly, as if savouring the taste of the words. "Friend." She smiled mockingly. "You guess well. Do you have more guesses concerning us?"

"I have been warned against you," said Beren, "and now I know there was good reason for that. Guesses? All right. I guess that all of you, male and female, are charged with the care of some growing things. The men have their trees, and the women have – well, what I have seen here. Some grow fruit, or grain; others are custodians of wild things. Your sister's special plant is the May. Yours, it is no guess since you have said it yourself, is the blackthorn. How well do I guess?"

"Well enough," she said, smiling still. "But I am forgetting my manners. Will you not sit a while?" And with a wave of her hand she conjured out of the ground a woven wooden seat facing her. It was like her own, only smaller. Beren went to sit on it, but something made him hesitate. He looked at the woman, but her face showed no expression.

"Sit," she said again gently. "I will do you no harm."

He sat in the chair. Straight as he did so, fingers of wood whipped out of the sides and back and clung to his arms and legs. Beren was held fast. Instantly a black cloud of speechless fury fumed up to choke him. He was furious at himself, for being such a gull; and furious at the betrayal.

The great woman was reeling in a fit of helpless laughter. When she could at last bring herself under control, she wiped tears of mirth from her eyes.

"Oh!" she gurgled, "oh... I would never have believed it. Had someone told me, I would never have believed it. The fool trusted me! Oh, my." And here she had to laugh again.

After the first terrible shock, Beren's rage rose through that white-hot region after which there is only calm. He said nothing; cursing would be pointless.

The Sloe-queen collected herself at last. She leaned forward and inspected him coldly.

"You empty-headed fool," she said with scorn. "You walked blindly into my sister's trap; now you do the exact same thing with me. The *exact* same. The stupidity of it passes belief. Did you think, perhaps, that the one was evil, and because this one opposes, therefore she must be good? Oh, you infant. Are we not sisters, she and I?"

Beren opened his mouth at last. "What are you going to do to me?" He was faintly surprised at the calmness of his own voice.

She stared at him. "I could do the same as my sister," she said. "Would do, in another time and place. If I do

not kill you now, which I have not yet decided yea or nay, then it will be for reasons of my own.”

“You called me a fool,” he said. “Do you despise me because I do not expect to meet foul murder behind every bush? I have not found the world so unkind. Why, even Yg would not stoop to trick me to my death, killer though he was.”

“He would, though,” said the Queen, “and maybe he will yet. But you say ‘murder’. It is not *murder*. Do you call it ‘murder’ when you feast on the meat of some creature you have killed, or shelter from the rain beneath planks you have cut from a living tree? We are different sorts, you and we, as the beasts are from you; and as their death is life to you, so is yours to us.”

“Maybe so,” replied Beren, “but I do not lie to the beasts I kill. They know the rules of the game as well as I.”

The Queen waved that away. “Sophistry,” she said. “You have your traps and lures. Where is the honesty in those?”

The young man shook his head slowly and curled his lip in scorn. “My father says that self-deception is the most ignoble emotion,” he said, “and I think he is right.”

That stung her. She brought her face next to his and glared. “Shut your mouth, boy. Did you know? We view you people as so many fat May-flies. You hatch, you make some small buzzing in the valleys, and then you are gone. We hold you of no account, save that you batten on the quiet woods and gnaw them away, which distresses our menfolk. It is mostly our pleasure not to squash you, although now and again we make an exception. But you? I think I will just step on you, in payment for your insolence.”

The fury burned hot in Beren. “Why don’t you then?” he sneered. “Lying witch. Is that what you brought me here for? But I know it is not. You are lying mostly to yourself.”

Her face contorted. “You *know*,” she hissed. “What can you *know*? You miserable earth-worm, you do not *know* anything. I was alive when your kind were first woken from the mud. As for you, I do not care whose favour you be under. Do not presume to tell me what you *know*.”

“Tell me then what *you* know,” said Beren, “or take my life, if that is your plan. Either way, let it be quick. It does not amuse me to bandy mealy-mouthed words with a faithless tree-witch.”

The Queen drew herself back and stood up. For some moments she stared blankly at the youth. “She spoke truth,” she muttered to herself at last. “He *is* different.”

“What are you talking about?” said Beren in a loud voice. “Get about your business. Kill me or let me go. I am tired of your riddles.”

The Queen sat back down on her throne and regarded him meditatively. “Boy,” she said, “I know who you are, and from what line of petty farmer-folk you come. Time was, when I did not. Time was, when had you come to me at a younger season of the year, when my folk are blooming, I would have had the life out of you to feed those of mine, even as my sister tried to do, without giving it a second thought.

“But a new wind blows in the world. The balance changes: those who once were mighty fall into the dark, while the lowly rise up. So speaks knowledge. You ask what I know? Out of the despair in my heart, I know this much.

“I am charged to give to you, Man, you who name yourself Beren of the line of one Bëor, what gift lies within my power. I had thought to play with you a while longer, mortal, but you have taken the spice even out of that idle pastime. So I will straitly discharge my vow, the sooner to be rid of you.”

“I do not understand your words,” said Beren. “What charge? What gift? Speak more clearly!”

“I will not,” she said. “My gift you will have; my mind you may not.”

“Well what is it, then, this gift?” he said.

The Queen waved a hand, and the chair began to tilt back and unbend. In a short moment Beren found himself, bound as tightly as ever, lying helpless on his back.

The Queen approached his side. A strange light now showed in her eyes. “My gift is a true one,” she said, “although you may not hold it so. Look you, boy, your body is blooming now; you are coming into your manhood. You know already what that entails, the need and the rut. But there is more. Have you never asked yourself, why should this thing which was made for the generation of your race, and which has been further blessed by the Creator into a balm, a bond of sweetness, a never-failing spring of comfort between man and woman; why should this wonder, this welling source of joy, why does it go so oft awry? Because everywhere among your people the distortion is clear to observe. How many of your men are consumed with lusting and with warring – swaggering, boasting cocks, who brawl on the beery rushes, before staggering out to force, maybe, some hapless maiden behind the nearest bush. Bullies to the weak, and breakers of troth. Why, there are even those among you, like evil weeds among the corn, who defile the innocence of children. Yes, even that!”

“Why are you telling me this?” demanded Beren. “Get to the point!”

“Ah,” she sneered, “patient as ever. He wants the point. Well, master Beren of the line of Bëor, do you know something? I saw your people born, even as I told you. But earlier still, in the quiet dark times, we already found you Aftercomers, while you lay sleeping, waiting for the sun. But we were not alone. Alas, no. Others also had this knowledge. That Power whose heart is blacker than my sloes gathered you Men early, even in the bud. Some of us saw it. He had you then at his pleasure, and he marred you as he could. Some faculties he wrested from you, some plagues he visited upon you. And this,” here she touched lightly Beren’s groin, “which should be for love and for children, the sweetness of life, he bloated to a cancer growth. Here is too much. And therein lies my gift.”

“What do you mean?” he said, the fear rising in him again.

“I mean to take out the warp,” she said, “to straighten the knot, to drain the abscess. I will return your drive of generation, as best I can, to the pattern laid for it by the One.”

“You would not dare,” he ground out.

She laughed helplessly. “Ah me,” she said at last, wiping her eyes again, “I am not repaid for my trouble, but you do lighten the task with your foolish words. Did I not say that you would hold it no gift? But listen, son of Man. Do not fear. I will leave you enough and ample for the loving of woman and the making of children. I do but return you to that state which the Maker intended. You shall be as manly as any, and more than most; and your full pleasure shall you have, when you come to take it. Only, this here,” and again she touched him lightly, “which should work at your command, but mostly does not, will no longer rule you. Oh, and this strange fungus,” here she went to stroke his cheek, dimpling when he jerked away from her hand, “which likewise was not in your design, will also not appear. As an Elf-lord you shall seem to other Men – for a little while.

“But enough with words now,” she said. She reached with both hands toward his lower body.

When it was done, she released him. He stood up and glared at her.

“Now get out of my sight,” the Queen said to him, looking at him coldly from her full height. “If ever I see you again, I will kill you.”

* * * * *

Mairon glanced around at the faces of his army commanders, assessing their mood as best he could. There were, of course, neither Mobiles nor renegades among them; every one was an eternal being from one of the numerous minor orders. Supposedly this assured one of their loyalty, but the policy made Mairon uneasy. He preferred subordinates he could more easily read and control.

The God Himself had addressed them all briefly, before handing the meeting to Mairon. "The hour we have long awaited is almost upon us," He had said. It was certainly an hour Mairon had long awaited; in his innermost depths, on planes of his mind most cunningly hidden from his master's probings, he expected to reap much advantage in the manoeuvrings which would necessarily attend the invasion. Great leaps forward would become possible which had been unthinkable during the long, static time of siege.

But enough of this. There was much to prepare. The Maia stood, opened his mental display, and commenced to describe the pre-battle plan in detail, one front at a time. At the end of this lengthy exposition, punctuated by only an occasional question from the commanders, Mairon moved on to general matters. "Security of information," he reminded them towards the close of his instructions, "is, more than ever, essential. We believe the danger of rank treachery is small, but the potential has always existed for captured scouts to blab what they should not know, but which the loose talk which always occurs in the warrens has nonetheless revealed to them. For this reason, scouting activities will from henceforth cease. The capabilities and dispositions of our foes have been static for some time; we do not greatly fear that they will change in the short time remaining before the invasion.

"That is all. Go you all and prepare."

* * * * *

Beren had gone straight to Rattlecone. He found the Ent not at home, so he sat down on beside the alders to wait. Late in the evening, the familiar tread came up the hill.

Rattlecone stopped when he saw him, then came on more slowly. He passed the boy without a word and went to stand in the middle of the open area.

Beren got up and went over to him. "You know, don't you," he said.

Rattlecone looked at him solemnly, then made his stiff approximation to a nod. "Aye," he said slowly. "I know."

"How does everyone *know* these things?" asked the youth. "Every person I speak to *knows* about me. I climb half-way up a mountain and meet an eagle, and he *knows* of me. Sometimes I think everybody is listening to a story I cannot hear, despite the fact that I seem to be playing the leading role in it." He looked up impatiently at the height of the Ent. "Can you not lift me up so I can talk to you properly?"

Rattlecone obliged. Beren could see into his deep eyes from this vantage point, and he saw that the Ent looked troubled.

"If you will have to do with creatures who have lived since the days of the Lamps," remarked the Ent, "then you must expect them to know a thing or two more than a mere sapling who sprouted only yesterday."

"Yes but they all seem to know about *me*," said Beren. "It is as if I had some great destiny. But what nonsense it all is. How can I possibly alter the world one way or another? I'm a farm boy, all I know how to do is live in the forest, with a bit of ploughing on the side." He looked with vexation at Rattlecone. "None of them leave me *alone*. Not even you, with your advice, and your protection, and your... and your draughts."

The Ent said nothing.

"Go on then," sighed Beren. "Chew my ear off. You know you want to."

The Ent looked puzzled. “Why should I wish to eat your ear?” he asked.

Beren rolled his eyes. “It means, to chastise someone.”

“Oh,” said Rattlecone. “No, I had not thought to say anything of that nature to you. That does not mean that I approve of what you did: no, most decidedly not. But firstly, what has happened has happened; and secondly, I am fairly sure that no words of mine could hold you back from any folly, once you had decided to mix yourself up in it.”

Beren was hurt. “Oh come, I value your advice more than that,” he protested.

Rattlecone set him down. “Do you?” he said. “It did not hold you from the Onodvisse.” He walked then over to the curtain of gentle drops and stood himself under it with a sigh. He closed his eyes.

Beren came over to where he stood. “Is it true, what she said? Did she do that to me?”

“I think so,” said Rattlecone without opening his eyes. “I will need some time to be sure.”

“And is it true what she said about it, that men have too much, you know, too much urge, and that the Morgoth made it so?”

“Yes, that is true,” said the Ent.

Beren thought about this for a moment. “Then why have you not told me before, or done something about it?” he asked at last.

Rattlecone opened his eyes at that. “You should know the answer to that, or be able to guess at it. Firstly, because Men are not my business. I am a custodian of trees; I am not charged with the care of Men, and indeed, there might be cases when I should feel obliged, on behalf of my true charges, to act against Men. And secondly, because only the One can know all ends. A well-intentioned action can go awry, have as bad a result as an ill one, unless great thought go into it. For example, I am still not sure I did the right thing in treating your malaise, last year when you were sick at spirit. Great caution must be exercised before one does a ‘favour’ for a friend. I think even you know this now.”

Beren sat down with a sigh. “You don’t need to bring that up again. Well, I don’t know. I suppose I should be grateful that you put up with me at all, although it seems you are like all the rest: you only do it because you seem to think I am someone special. Beren Barahir’s son, world-shaker, hero in the making.”

“Only partly,” replied Rattlecone mildly. “I also like you for yourself.”

Beren chewed his lip for a time. “Why can’t they all leave me *alone*,” he burst out again. “Silmenen makes me climb mountains, strange Ladies have me in their eye, Ent-women go near to cut my tool off. I didn’t *ask* to be special.”

Rattlecone did not reply; after some time, Beren realized that he was not going to. He sighed again and walked away, leaving his friend standing under the water.

He rejoined the Holly People as furtively as he had left them. Nose and Sunshine both privately searched his face. Although they made no remark to the youth, they had some quiet words together – they were not fooled, they knew something disturbing had happened, if not what. But most of the People were used to his comings and goings and noticed nothing amiss.

Beren found, whether to his relief or mortification he was not sure, that the predictions of the Blackthorn-woman were true: the pert, mobile cones of the laughing maidens no longer teased his blood. He could look on them with equanimity. He found pleasure still in female beauty, but it became a thing he could take or leave at will. After a time, he decided that he liked the change.

The waxing summer brought with it only one further thing of note: no Orcs came. After many weeks had gone by without alarm, the Druug gathered to talk, with Beren attending. Many words were spoken, but it was a thing which nobody understood. Everything else seemed the same, except the Orcs did not come. Beren visited both Aegnor and Angrod, and heard the same story from them. The raids had stopped; nobody knew why.

Nose took to prowling the northern hills, sometimes alone, sometimes in company with Beren. He would stop now and then and lift his nose into the air, seeking for some hint, some note of change.

The birds and animals were also uneasy, although none of them could say why. The airs and waters seemed the same as ever, and yet...

There being nothing that could be done about it, life went on. It was a busy, laughing summer, full of work and play both in forest and field. Beren was as strong as a man now and began to compete in the men's class at the wrestling. His deadly aim with the bow began to come back to him, and nobody could come near to matching him with the quarter-staff. His looks and his competence, as much as his ready laughter and easy manner, won him many hearts among the maidens, and he had much temptation trailed before his eyes; but he refused even the boldest and most unmistakable offer with a smile and a shake of his head. But many a pillow was wetted with tears on his behalf.

In the military exercises he led a group of ten now, and was learning more about tactics.

Toward the end of the year he went to speak with his father. Barahir lifted his shaggy, salt-and-pepper head and smiled at him.

"What can I do for you, my son?" he said.

"Father, you know I have often wished to go south with the People in winter," said Beren.

Barahir's smile faded, then came back with some sadness. "And is that your wish now?"

"Yes, Father. I have come to ask for your permission."

"Oh," replied Barahir, "I think we are beyond that now. But go with my blessing. We shall miss you, though."

Beren struggled to explain himself. "I am happy here, now, Father, and would have no wish to go otherwise. But I thought to see Húrin again. I promised to visit him, indeed I desired to greatly, and I have never done it. So I thought it would be a good opportunity, with him living now in the South."

His father thought about that. "Life is often full, even for heedless boys," he remarked. "I think your plan is good. It will do you no harm to see a bit more of the wide world, and it would be hard to imagine a better companion than young Húrin." He looked wistful then. "I only wish I could come with you," he added.

Nose made no comment when he heard the news, indeed looked faintly surprised that Beren saw fit to mention it at all. To his way of thinking, if you wanted to do something, you did it; there was no need to advertise. Nor could he give a definite answer when Beren asked him when the People planned to depart.

"Plan?" he said, scratching his head, now streaked heavily with grey. "I don't know about any *plan*. The woods don't plan, the weather doesn't plan. We should get some salmon, I know that. We'll see how the air smells after that."

So Beren went with them to the upper river, where the salmon were running. It was a familiar procedure for him now. He cut fish for a time, but when he saw he was getting in the way of Sunshine and Long Hair more than he was helping them, he went and caught for Tireless Dancer while her son and daughter helped her cut and smoke. Big Belly, the son, was an old friend of Beren's; and Plays with Beetles, who had been a giggling

pixie when he first met her, was grown into a sturdy, capable girl with a pair of fine dark eyes. People had started calling her Carver because she was growing very skilled at such hand-work.

There was a big dance after that, with some other tribes drifting in to take part. There were new songs to learn, as well as stories to hear of strange trees and beasts from far corners of Beleriand and even beyond. Beren was induced many times to tell about the war he, Thunderbolt and Goracc had conducted against the Crebain of Morgoth. The memory and mention of his lost companions caused him pain, but time had softened the worst of the sting; he could bear to think of them now with no lasting shadow on his spirit.

Several days followed without much happening, but one morning as Beren rose, Bashful poked his head out of his skin where he was huddled beside the other young men. The Druug squinted at the light, sniffed the air, and said, "I am tired of these northern woods. The weather will change soon. I am for going south."

In the strange way of the Druug, most of the people seemed quite independently to have arrived at the same idea; and strangest of all, it felt natural to Beren, a satisfying condensation of a formless restlessness which had been latent in the back of his own mind.

The camp was busy that day with sorting and packing. They stayed one more night. Early the next morning, the migration began. They went down-river first of all. Late that day they crossed the tributary of the White River which, Beren knew, led up past his grandparents' house. He had not seen the old couple for some time, and would willingly have stopped to visit, but the excitement of new lands drew him on. He resolved to turn aside on his return.

The next evening found them camping in the thickets above the Rock Water. Beren felt his excitement mount – next day he would see country new to him. And how different it felt from his journey with the Dwarves! Instead of dismal company and like weather, he enjoyed the fellowship of all his own woodland People, and had the fine, warm sun of a last touch of summer to stroll through. That evening he gave a sigh of contentment as he rolled himself up in his fur.

The journey south took them several weeks. Encumbered with travois as they were, and in a company which included both very young and very old, their pace was necessarily slow. Nor was it possible to be entirely discreet; but although wary scouts sniffed out the ways on either side, the lands appeared to be quiet.

Their course paralleled the line of the Dwarf-road for several days, but they left it eventually to cut through some low hills. Bashful told him there was a great swamp a little to the North which their short cut was designed to avoid. "Too many biters," he grinned, making a motion of slapping at a mosquito. After they descended some steep slopes, they found themselves in a deep-cut valley with a vigorous, frothing river wending its way down the middle¹⁰. The others told Beren that this was the same Rock Water, much swollen now by many streams from the hills. Already here too strong and wide to cross in safety, the river grew, they said, to become a great water. Far to the South, it passed between the Forest of the Lady on one side and the country of the Cave-Digger on the other, until it crashed at last over mighty falls; beyond that was a wide, unpeopled land where a man could wander in peace. That was where they were going.

Beren's ideas about geography were hazy, but he had assumed that the folk Húrin was staying with housed not far south of Dorthonion. He had no design to travel further than that. When he raised the subject with Nose, the old man understood straight away where he wanted to go.

"Ah, you want Horse-breaker's people," he said. "I know them well. Many of our folk live close to them. I will show you where they are when we come near. Indeed, we often rest there a few days."

"Tell me, Father," Beren asked, "who is this Cave-Digger they talk about?"

"He is a Speaker," said Nose, using the Druug word for Elves. "He is brother to those in the North of your land – Firehead, and White-stone Victor¹¹. You know them, you have met them."

10 The upper Sirion.

11 Aegnor and Angrod. The Druug names approximate the meanings of the Sindarin ones.

“That must be Finrod then,” mused Beren.

“He has a huge dolven city in the South,” said Nose. “I have never seen it, and I do not want to. But he built a tower as well, and that we will see in a few days time, weather and gods permitting.”

They turned south down the valley and went then openly on a well-made track which wound its way beside the loud and foaming water. The hills on either side grew rapidly nearer and higher as they progressed, until the cleft became hemmed in by steep slopes rearing up to rocky heights. Snow lay low down on their sides.

“We will be out of the cleft before the weather breaks,” said Nose.

After some days of travel they turned a corner early one morning to find the valley widening ahead of them. The river where they were tumbled down over some low rock shelves and then split, a mile or so downstream, into two streams embracing a rocky island, perhaps a bowshot in length and a little less in breadth. As this vista came into Beren’s view, the sun emerged from behind a cloud, to shine on what was built on the island. It was a sight to take one’s breath away.

Perched on the island was a tower, set behind strong walls; and the whole of the structure returned the sunlight in a blaze of fire, as if it were covered with polished, white tiles – which Beren found on closer inspection was indeed the case. He was looking at Minas Tirith, the Tower of the Guard, renowned for its beauty as much as for its strength. It reminded him of the fortalices of Aegnor and Angrod; but this was a work far greater and stronger. He who held this tower grasped in a mailed fist the keys to the South.

A moving glitter of mirrored steel showed the presence of soldiers on the ramparts. “They will have seen us already,” remarked Nose. “Little escapes the eyes of the Speakers!”

The People wended their slow way down the long slope, and as they drew near to the island, the pearly walls began to loom over them higher and higher. Figures on the ramparts could now be made out individually. As the troupe came to the place where the river split, a flash of gold was seen on high. This was horns being raised in unison to many mouths. The great blare of the horns shook the air around them: deep-throated, challenging. The sound faded at last to leave only far echoes from the hills. Three times the many-voiced horns sounded, and three times the echoes came back.

Nose nudged Beren, and grinned at him. “They know us, and blow welcome!” he said. “We have long been friends with the Speakers. Even though they do not live as we, still, they can see things truly. We understand one another.”

As they drew nearer the castle, Beren saw that there was a bridge across the river, spanning it in two great, glassy-tiled arches. The midpoint rested on a small islet in advance of the main one on which the the fortress was built. Entrance to the fort seemed to be via a great gate on the small isle.

As far as he could see, the path on this bank led to the bridge and no further. “Do we have to cross?” he asked.

Nose did not bother to answer such a pointless question, so Beren had to be patient and find out for himself. Indeed, it seemed that they did.

The path ended at a fortified gate, standing open, with tall guards on either side. Nose addressed the one to the right. “Hail, Farseer,” he said. “May we pass?”

“Now that is but a poor greeting to old friends,” remarked that guard to his companion, speaking fairly fluently in the Druug tongue. “The whole summer away, and he has but five words for us!”

“We should make him swim the once,” replied the other. “So might his haughty temper wash away in the good waters.”

“No, no,” said the first. “An ill-conceived notion, Tasarion. Think how his nose might grow after such a watering! Any larger and it would not fit through the gate.”

Nose was laughing, and at the free, joyous sound of it, the world was fresh and young.

“Cruel words to an old man in a hurry!” he said, when he had breath for it. “If the rains of sixty winters have not made my nose grow, Farseer, I doubt your river could. I humbly beg your pardon for my short greeting! But the weather will soon turn, and we wish to be out of the narrow land as soon as we may.”

“You pile disappointments upon us, Father!” protested the one whom Nose had named Farseer. “Will you not, then, share a cup and a bite with us, as is your wont? Standing at this gate is dull duty, and we had hoped to hear some news of the North from you. Have you word of our cousins in that land?”

“We have seen them,” admitted Nose, “but I must beg your indulgence this time. We who cannot live snug under stone rooves have scant protection against snow, and so must flee before it. In two days it will come. Can you not smell it on the wind?”

Still jesting, the guards ushered them through the gate. The Elves greeted many of the People personally as they filed past. As Beren came abreast of him, Tasarion remarked to his companion, “Here is a tall Drúadan, Palantirar¹²!”

“And that on only sixteen summers,” replied the other. Then to Beren: “Greeting, child of Bëor! May your present journey south be happier than the last one!”

Beren thanked him and moved on, climbing the arch of the first bridge. That descended onto the islet, where a stoutly fortified gate led to the main castle via a drawbridge. The long train of People went past this, calling good day to the guards there and exchanging the usual good-natured chaffing.

Beren ran his hand over the breastwork of the bridge, marvelling at it. This surface, along with all the other walls of the fortress so far as he could see, was covered with opalescent, glassy tiles, polygons of all sizes, laid out in patterns pleasing to the eye. They shone pale even in shadow and threw back sunlight with a pearly fire.

“I am sorry you are not to see more of the stone-house,” said Nose to Beren. “It is a beautiful thing of its type, to be sure. We wood-folk can recognize that, even though we would not care to live inside it ourselves. It is ill luck with the weather – I had looked forward to merry company, and good things to eat and drink. They are always kind to us here.”

“Perhaps on our way back?” said Beren.

Nose gave only the briefest shrug to that. He had no interest in speculations about the future; his mind, as ever, was fixed firmly on the present. “Cave-Digger, were he here, would have come out to greet us, and brought a stoup of wine with him,” he remarked further, “but he is in the South. His kinsman, this Booknose¹³ as we call him, since that is usually where his nose is to be found, is not so friendly. Indeed he seems not to be much of anything. Cave-Digger would have done better, I think, to have given the stone-house in charge of his sister¹⁴. There is a woman with some fire in her!”

“I did not know Finrod had a sister,” said Beren.

“Aye, she spends her days with the Lady,” said Nose. “I saw her once, and I have never forgotten the sight. We call her Sunhair; but do you know, Speaks with Birds, although I do not know her, I would guess that her hair is the least remarkable thing about her.”

12 Sindarin: Far-seer.

13 He means Orodreth.

14 Galadriel.

Conversing in this pleasant way, they continued over the second bridge.

People say, when one shivers for no reason, that somebody is walking over one's grave; and perhaps it is so. But knowledge out of time must be a fickle thing, that comes and goes when it pleases, and it surely often happens that the grave is tramped upon without its future inmate being troubled by the least awareness. So it was now. Beren's only emotion as he admired the white tower sparkling in the sun was regret at the missed visit; he had no inkling that he was to see the inside of the place twice in his lifetime, and on neither occasion as an honoured guest.

As Nose had predicted, they had one more fine day, but on the morning after that the wind turned and brought heavy grey clouds sweeping down from the North. Showers of sleet began to funnel down the valley, chilling the backs of the toilers dragging travois. The children and old people were riding now, and the labour was thus all the harder for the able-bodied remainder. The People were used to all weathers, however, and did not mind it.

They did not have to pull for long before the land opened out before them into a wide vale, its further dimensions dimly to be made out between the showers. On the following day a mild air came out of the South and blew the veil of clouds away, so that the shape of the land could be more clearly seen. It seemed to Beren to be an undulating bowl of a country, treeless for the most part, but greener and milder than any country he had known since the far-off days of his trek with Yg. What trees remained about them still bore some red and golden leaves. It was a wild, trackless land, with no hearths of Men to smudge the crystal air.

To the South, the vale fell away in gradual slopes toward a blue infinity in which the gaze was lost. Behind their right shoulders stretched a line of greenly forested hills, clotted here and there with clouds. However, it was to the left that the eye was constantly drawn. The course of the river lay close under the hills on that side, as could be judged by the winding line of denser growth. Above that line ranged forested slopes, and above them came rock; and higher still, and yet higher, towered a great line of snow-covered giants, blinding white under the sun. Beren guessed that he was seeing the Mountains of the Eagles now from the other side. These snowy peaks must have been ten leagues away, but so clear was the intervening air that they appeared almost close enough to touch.

The People journeyed on for several more days. They crossed several foamy streams which came tumbling out of the hills now falling back on the right, but only one of these waters was of any size. At the end of that time they came again to a wooded country, the trees blazing still in the colours of autumn. Once inside the forest eaves, the People stopped and made camp. That evening they unpacked the drums, and soon their sombre music was thudding out into the dark. Faint answer came quickly from several points.

Nose came to find Beren the next morning. "We will stay here for a while," he said. "There are many of the Folk here, as you will have realized. We have much news to exchange with our friends and relations. What is your wish? Do you want to seek your friend? I will ask if someone will show you the way. It is not far."

It was White Teeth who volunteered. She had so far held back from any attachment among the People, and several coarse and pointed jokes were made about the two of them going off alone together. "Watch out for those teeth, Speaks," they said to Beren, "or they might catch you in a tender part!" and so forth. Beren did not mind, and neither did Teeth. They were old friends. There were no currents of that sort between them, and both knew it.

Beren was happy to be exploring new woods, and Teeth was perfect company in which to do it. The trees were all broad-leaf, oak and beech and maple, with never a pine or a birch to be seen. The scent was different, the feel was different.

"It is beautiful here in spring, especially when the cherries flower," the young woman told him, "but I can barely remember it. We have been summering in the North since I was young! I think I will skip a year soon and stay the summer over in the South."

"It is beautiful now," he replied. "Such colours!"

Teeth instructed Beren in the particular ways of the land; the sorts of game to be found, and its habits. There were a hundred other details to learn. She had not time to teach him everything, because the way was short. They spent on the journey only two days and the night between. On the second morning they began to smell wood-smoke, and in the afternoon Teeth, peeping cautiously out between bushes, showed Beren a broad path curling under the trees, with some houses to be seen at no great distance.

“Why do you hide?” asked Beren. “I thought these people were your friends.”

“They are,” said Teeth, “but if a person blunders out like a calf, they cannot then un-blunder. A cautious approach hurts nobody, and leaves the way open to creep back again, should things turn out ill. You should know that.”

They sat then for a while to discuss things. Teeth told him he would find the centre of the settlement if he followed the track. Of more concern to Beren was how to meet up again in the spring.

White Teeth did not see it as a difficulty. “The Holly People mean to go far to the South,” she told him, “into the quiet lands, the willow country, where there is peace and game in equal measure. The winter scarcely touches us there. I will come to you when we return, and if it is your wish at that time to come with us, why then, you will.”

He embraced Teeth then and left her, receiving a last gleaming grin before she vanished into the greenery. He followed the path past the houses, feeling self-conscious, particularly when he began to meet people. A woman chopping kindling stopped and stared at him; shortly after he met a man on the path with a donkey. The man bade him good-day in some strange tongue, then took a second look, eyes widening. Beren guessed that he did not look much like either a Druug or any local.

“Is this the way to the settlement?” he asked the man in Grey-elven.

The man answered him in Druug. “Sorry, I don’t speak that jabber too good. Are you one of the Woses? You look a bit like one, but then again, you don’t.”

Beren scratched his head. “Well, yes and no,” he replied in the same language. “I’ve lived with them for a long time; but rightly speaking I am of the Folk of Bëor, away to the North.”

“You don’t say!” said the man. “That’s a powerful long way to come. Still, we have a few of you North-folk among us, for all that; some of the fair-heads too. Couple of their young lads just now fostered with the Warden, matter of fact.”

Beren was excited. “That sounds like my friend, who I’ve come to visit,” he said. “Are their names Húrin and Huor?”

“Aye, that do sound like the ones,” said the man. “Well this is a turn-up, such as I never heard. You wouldn’t care to come have a sup with us, young master, I don’t suppose? Missus and brother, and his missus too, would like fine to hear some new tales. As I would as well, I won’t hide it from you.”

Since it was late afternoon and the light was showing signs of fading, Beren refused politely and went on his way. The houses were thick on either side by now, and the way was climbing, as towards some gentle eminence. A turn in the path revealed at last its height, on which was built a large wooden hall on a low hillock inside an earthen wall, itself surrounded by a ditch.¹⁵

There was a cleared area to the right from which shouts were coming. Beren saw that several boys were playing some sort of game with a bladder. He came closer and leaned on the wooden-railed fence to watch them. Just as he did so, a tow-haired youngster of twelve or so swiped the bladder out from a scrum of struggling boys, ducked under an arm stretched out to stop him, and ran weaving like a hare between slow-footed opponents towards one end of the field. Taller bodies converged on him, and for a moment the issue

15 Amon Obel.

was in doubt; but he reached the goal just as several of them laid hands on him and brought him crashing but triumphant to the earth.

It was Húrin. In the flood of the warm remembrance the recognition brought to him, Beren raised fingers to his lips and whistled. The boys all looked over to him. The blond one stood slowly, puzzled for a second; then he started running. Beren swung himself over the fence just in time to meet the shock of his embrace.

“Steady on,” he said mildly, “I’m not one of your opponents.”

“Beren!” shouted the other, almost springing up and down in his excitement. “What in Middle-earth under Heaven to the Gates of Creation brings you here?”

“Oh, just a visit,” grinned Beren. “Just wandering here and there, you know. Was passing, heard you were here, thought I’d drop in.”

“Nonsense,” said the other, his eyes gleaming. “You came to see me, don’t deny it!”

“Well, you did invite me,” said Beren.

Introductions were made among the boys, after which they all set off for home, since the evening was drawing in.

“Did you see me score?” asked Húrin. “Did you? Come and play tomorrow! It’s a simple game.”

“I’m maybe a bit big for you chaps,” objected Beren.

Húrin looked him up and down. “Well, that’s so. You’ve certainly grown, you’re not much short of man-size. It’s stupid, I know, but I didn’t recognize you at first, because I never expected you would have grown. I looked over, and all I could see to start with was this tall young wood-wose with nothing on – aren’t you cold, by the way? – whistling and grinning at me. But there’s something about you I’d know anywhere.”

The other boys went their ways, but one of them stayed with them: a dark-haired lad only a little shorter than Húrin.

“This is Handir,” said Húrin to Beren. “He’s my cousin, or some such. Huor and I are staying with his family.” Handir grinned shyly.

It was Beren’s turn to feel stupid, because he had never thought what he would do after meeting his friend. Húrin’s father had invited him; but the boy’s parents were not here. It would be bad manners to simply waltz up to a strange household and expect them to put him up.

“Listen,” he said, hanging back, “maybe I had better go off and sleep in the woods. We can take up again tomorrow.”

“Nonsense,” replied Húrin in firm tones. “Stay with us! Unless you’d really rather not?”

“It’s not that,” said Beren, “it’s – well, it just wouldn’t be polite.”

“Don’t worry,” his friend said. “You’ll be my guest. It will be all right.”

“Mine too,” affirmed Handir. “We wouldn’t dream of letting you go off like that! Why, it would be an insult. You *must* stay with us.”

So Beren let himself be persuaded. They entered the fenced enclosure through an open and unguarded gate. Húrin led Beren up to the hall.

“Handir’s grandfather is Halad, that is, the Warden,” he said, “but we had better see Aunt first. She’ll know

what to do. Er... you won't mind if we find a few more clothes for you? It is sort of customary here."

Beren grinned – he had experience of that one. "Not at all," he said. "I'll probably be more bearable after a bath, too."

His appearance created something of a nine-days' wonder among the Hall people. Much as the man he met on the road, they did not quite know what to make of him. This open-mouthed reception began in the entry and continued into the kitchen, where a tall woman with a river of shining hair stood up to greet him. Beren could see the likeness between her and Húrin as the latter poured out his tale. The woman looked back to Beren at the end and smiled warmly at him.

"You are very welcome, Beren, kinsman from afar," she said. "My name is Glóredhel. Your grandfather Beren and mine were cousins. I have not seen your father and your mother since my youth, but I have heard nothing but good of them since; and of you I have heard glowing accounts from my nephew here. May I offer the shelter and comforts of this house to you, as if it were your own, for so long as you are pleased to stay with us? Would that please you?"

Beren felt a little overwhelmed by her beauty and grace.

"Mistress Glóredhel, you do me too much honour," he said, his tongue stumbling a little. "I should like that of all things. I beg your humble pardon for imposing such a sudden burden, with no warning, and... and... I believe my appearance is not very fitting for polite company, so I must beg your pardon for that as well."

She came forward then and took his hand. Close to see, she was very beautiful. "No, no, speak no more so, I beg you. You are welcome! And you have had no opportunity to change your clothes, so you need not apologize for what you cannot help. Come now, what can we do for you? Are you hungry?"

"Er," stuttered Beren, "well, I would gladly eat a sup, mistress, but perhaps, if I might first beg the loan of some clothes, until I can find some elsewhere, somehow; but even before that, I suspect that a bath might improve the pleasure of my presence substantially, if that might be arranged."

She laughed at that, eyes twinkling. "I doubt not that Húrin spoke against the last," she said, glancing teasingly at the blond youngster.

Húrin looked suitably exasperated. "It is not the washing I mind," he protested, "but when one is clean, it is so difficult to stay clean. I never can have any fun then without it leads to a scolding. But if I stay dirty, why then, it is no matter if I become still dirtier."

All the people in the kitchen laughed.

After Beren had scrubbed the dirt of the outdoor life out of his skin and hair, and had dressed in some more substantial clothing, he was introduced to Halmir, the present Warden, or Halad as this office was known here. Halmir was an elderly man with iron-grey hair and the intensely weathered face of one who had spent the best part of his life outdoors. Beren was reminded strongly of the People, and indeed the old man addressed him in that tongue.

"Do all of your people speak this tongue, Sir?" Beren asked him.

"More than speak the Elvish," replied Halmir, "although that is changing, as the times change. But the Druug have always lived beside us, from earliest times. None of us knows why; it has always been so. We belong together, you might say."

Haldir his son turned out to be a dour, dark man with deeply lined, hollow cheeks and just the first sprinkling of silver in his hair. He was often out and about, and over time Beren came to understand that he undertook the bulk of the duties of the wardenship, although his father retained the title.

They told him the name of the forest was Brethil, and the central settlement on the hill was known as Amon Obel.

Halmir's was a solid, pleasant household. There were no sourpusses or shirkers; everyone contributed. Beren was very willing to help with chores in any way he could, although Húrin often dragged him off on various boyish exploits. They did everything together, and their mutual pleasure in the companionship was deep. Some things they both knew how to do, such as shooting; other things they had to learn from each other. Thus Húrin taught him the local games, and falconry and proper riding, while Beren showed his friend the rudiments of woodcraft.

The first time Beren spoke to a horse, Húrin's eyes grew so big they looked to be in danger of falling out.

"They told me you could do this," he said in a hushed voice, "but I did not believe it."

Thereafter any matter involving an animal grew complicated, since Húrin insisted on having a translation of every conversation.

The snow came, but not in such quantity as Beren was used to; and once or twice there were thaws. He could ski as well as Húrin, perhaps even a touch better, and the two of them competed fiercely to come first in races.

There were only two things Beren would not join in: he would not go hunting for sport, which everybody could understand, considering his strange gifts; but he also avoided ice-skating, which they could not understand at all, since nobody doubted his courage. They could not know that it always made him think of Hiril.

There was a Hiril here too, Haldir's younger sister, the elder sister being Húrin's mother. The first time her name was mentioned to Beren, it gave him a shock; but this wore off with familiarity.

Beren was always perfectly comfortable when out doing something just with Húrin, or even if Huor came along. The boy was young, it was true, but he was a doughty companion, and the things he said often made them laugh. However, the moment Húrin wanted to involve the other boys he knew, Beren felt himself to be something of an outsider. The problem was that he was older than any of them. By one of those chances of life, there were no youngsters of his own age of either sex among the close relatives of Haldir.

He did meet some of the Bëorings who, for one reason or another, usually because of connections by marriage, were living among the Haladin. He was surprised to find a close relative among them: his cousin Beldis, who had married a spare, cheerful man of the Haladin named Enlas. The couple had several children, all of whom had left home except the youngest, a dark-haired, quiet girl of about Beren's age, also called Beldis.

As soon as Beren could remain with some dignity atop a tall horse, Húrin was hot to show him some of the more distant territory. "You must see Neldoreth – you must!" he said. "I promise you, you have never seen anything like that land." So they rode one fine, cold day down into the narrow 'gore' where a river called Taeglin roared in to join with Sirion, which Beren still thought of as the Rock Water in his private thoughts. Huor came with them. The boys were laughing from the beginning, as they tried to make their horses do tricks. Beren stayed out of this – he had his hands full just with the ordinary business of riding. Being able to talk with a horse, he found, did not necessarily make the job of staying on it any easier. His legs and behind were also beginning to complain at the unaccustomed exercise.

When they arrived at the river, they stopped on the sandy bank and gazed across in awed silence. The Sirion here was an easy shot across. The trees on the far side were clear to see in every detail, every branch; almost the leaves themselves.

It was hard to say what the difference was. When Beren looked to the far side, he felt he was looking from darkness into light; but it wasn't actually so. He looked back to his own bank, and everything seemed dull

and vague, almost unformed. But it *wasn't*. It was the same trees, the same light.

The forest on the far side was simply more real. What the ideal of a forest might look like, is hard to say; but whatever it may be, the Forest of Neldoreth came closer to it than anything in any of the boys' experience. Standing there at its edge, they felt they had taken a step, even if only a single step, towards that great spring of creation from which all things came: the bright source of life itself. It called to them.

"Can the horses swim?" Beren said in a low voice, almost a whisper. In the quiet of that holy place he was loth to raise his voice.

"It would be no use," answered Húrin in similar quiet tones. "Nobody can get in. I heard of a man who tried once, and was lost."

"I wish I could," whispered Beren.

"Come away," murmured Húrin. "If we stay here any longer, we're going to have to try. And what would happen to us then, only the Powers know."

They turned away, although each of them found it hard.

"I never knew there were places like that," said Beren after a time.

They were all sober for a while, and thoughtful; but they were young, and could not stay serious for long. Their spirits recovered quickly from the awe. Soon they were laughing again and playing tricks on each other with snow-laden branches. Only the memory stayed bright, shining within, like an unguarded glimpse of the sun.

When the weather allowed, they explored other parts of the forest. Haldir permitted them to roam, but had exacted from Húrin the promise that he would stay within the bounds of Brethil; and Húrin was one who kept his promises. Thus he led Beren to the Rainy Stair, beautiful falls where a forest stream poured among skeins of mist into the Taeglin; and a little further downstream from this he showed him an exciting place called the Stag's Leap, where the young river flowed roaring through a deep ravine, whose vertical walls nearly met at the top.

Beren eyed the gap. "I bet I could jump that," he said.

"Oh, oh!" scoffed Húrin. "Such a boast! If I were a mean sort of fellow, I would make you try. But doubtless old Thingol would complain if we polluted the good waters of Taeglin with your foolish carcass. We will mark out the distance on the ground beside it, where you may be shamed at leisure with no danger to anyone."

When he came to do that, though, he was puzzled as to how to get the distance right. He and Huor argued over it for some time, drawing diagrams in the earth. Beren could not see what they found difficult about it. Finally he took a hand. "Look," he said, "first we make a square of twigs, like so. Tie those ends together for me, Huor, there's a good fellow. Now we push in a stake on our side here, so. We choose a mark opposite, on the far side – that pale stone there will do. Do you see it? We take the square when we have it – not finished yet youngster? Tsk, come on – we sight down one edge to the stake, and walk back along the bank, keeping the edge pointing to the stake, until the diagonal points to the mark on the opposite side. Then we have it." He took the bound-up square from Huor with thanks.

Húrin looked blank. "I don't see it," he said. Beren scratched some further diagrams as a proof of concept.

Húrin was admiring when he finally grasped the idea. "How do you *think* of these things?" he asked, but Beren could only shrug in answer.

After they had paced out the distance, Beren eyed it with secret dismay. It looked as if he might have to eat

his words after all. In good humour however, he retreated until he could get a good run-up. With Huor observing at one mark and Húrin marshal of the second, the tall youth set off running as hard as he could. He gathered his muscles and sprang with all of his coiled-up strength in a mighty leap just as his foot hit the first mark. He sailed a phenomenal height through the air like a swallow and landed, just short of the second, but with enough impetus to throw himself in a sliding heap over the line.

The boys were amazed and delighted.

“I don’t know whether you would quite have survived that for real,” said Húrin laughing, “but I for one will forgive you your boast all the same. I thought you would fall far short, and had thought to see you humbled a peg or two, master Beren Beast-talker! But it seems I must wait on another opportunity for that.”

Later Húrin led them upstream, past the falls, to where a wide ford of gravel allowed easy crossing of the Taeglin. There he halted his horse with a wistful air, mindful of his promise.

“That is the road that leads to Nargothrond,” he said to Beren. “Have you heard tales of that place? Oh, such tales they are! I have never seen it, but I would give much to do so. I tell you, I have seen King Fingolfin in his glory; but of all the Fair Folk who came back over the sea, the one I honour most is yon Finrod. Warrior, scholar, he is the mirror of all courtesy. He was meant for a nobler world than this.”

Beren looked at his friend with affection, and thought to himself that the same could be said of him. There was not a mean or a cowardly bone in Húrin’s body. His spirit shone out of him with a light that was strong as well as pure. Indeed, Beren often felt quite shabby and ordinary beside him.

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So the winter passed. There came a day when the sun shone and the snow melted. Bunches of snowdrops had sprung up everywhere, and the crocus would not be far behind.

Beren knew the time for parting was close at hand. He was torn in two. Part of him did not want to go, but he missed his family – both his families: the farmers and the wild folk. He wondered whether he would ever have a single place he could call home, and if so, where it would lie. Perhaps nowhere. Silmenen’s words came back to him, not for the first time: a hard road, and a lonely one. With glory at the end of it. But Beren had no hunger for glory and would have traded all there was for the feeling of truly belonging somewhere, perhaps to someone.

The mutter of Druug drums made a constant background to life in Brethil, such that Beren rarely thought about them, although part of his mind registered what they conveyed about the movements of the various clans in the neighbourhood. One morning in early spring though he sat bolt upright in bed as soon as his mind had gathered together the threads of wakefulness.

Drums were sounding that he knew. The Holly people had come north!

He was thoughtful at breakfast, and at the end of it he took Húrin aside and told him the news. The fair-haired boy looked at him soberly.

“Words are no use,” he said to Beren, “so I will not waste many on leave-taking. Just come again as soon as you may!”

Beren made his preparations and thanked Glóredhel and Haldir most heartily. Three days after the first news there came a light knock at the door as the family sat at the table eating porridge. Young Handir went to see who it was, and they heard him speak in Druug. The boy put his head around the kitchen door: “Somebody for Beren,” he said.

Everybody got up and went to the door. It was a foggy morning, chilly still at that early hour. Standing shyly on the damp earth outside the door were not only White Teeth, whom Beren had expected, but also a stocky

young man with a shock of straight black hair and a firm-featured, intelligent face. Unusually for a Druug, he had a sparse growth of chin hairs which were woven together into a stubby plait.

Beren came down the steps and embraced his old friend. “You know, I am stupid,” he said to her. “I forgot that I would know from the drums. You had no need to come.”

Teeth smiled. “I know. But I wanted to come.” She turned to her companion. “This is Beard, of the Frog People.” The young man smiled welcome at Beren. Beren raised his eyebrows to Teeth, who looked a little embarrassed in response. Ahah! he thought. So that was the way it was!

Introductions were made to Haldir’s household. The Druug politely turned down an invitation to come inside for a mug of small beer and a bowl of porridge.

This was it then. Beren took a deep breath and turned to his hosts. “I had better change. I won’t be a moment.”

Húrin came with him to his room, turning his head away politely as Beren shucked off his tunic and hose and wound again around his waist the short leather kilt which was all that most Druug wore from day to day. He bound belt and knife over that and gathered together his bow, arrows and sleeping fur which he had packed and stowed ready to hand. He turned then to his friend.

“I often wish I could be in many places at once,” he said to Húrin.

“I too,” the fair boy replied. Then he hesitated. “Beren,” he continued diffidently, “I always wanted to ask... and then after a time the answer was in any case fairly obvious. But when we met, well, as you remember, the circumstances were not of the best. I did not want to leave you, the way things were with you at that time; indeed after we returned home, I was angry at myself, because sometimes the needs of a friend should outweigh any other consideration. I did not see that until too late; should have stayed, but did not.”

Beren stopped him with a hand on the shoulder. “It came out all right,” he said to Húrin. “There is no cause to be angry. Yes, things were bad with me then, but I got over it. Others helped me through the time.”

“You are happier now?” said Húrin. “That was what I wanted to ask. The look on your face when we left has stayed with me many a night.”

“I don’t know about happy,” said Beren. “I am not sure I know what that is. It seems too superficial a word to me. But I am at home in myself again, and that is what truly matters.”

“Then I am content,” said Húrin. He came forward then and embraced his friend with strong boyish arms. “I would that we could stay in this winter forever,” he said sadly.

“Alas,” answered Beren, “time moves on; the present becomes past, and is lost to us. I am beginning to understand that it is one of the great griefs of life.”

Then it was time to go.

* * * * *

There is no need to describe the journey north, nor the homecoming, nor Beren’s re-entry into the humdrum routine of farm and forest.

No Orcs came to Dorthonion. This was the second summer now.

At the time of the first storm of autumn Nose took Beren to one side. Beren observed the old man with something not far from alarm; for the first time in his experience, Nose looked ill at ease.

“My son,” the old man began, “I do not know for sure – but it is possible that we shall not come north next

spring. Nobody can know what will happen so far off, but it is possible. I thought I should tell you that.”

“But what if the Orcs come again?” asked Beren.

Nose shrugged. “It is not our allotted task to keep these hills free of Orcs. We came here to hunt them of our own free will. If they come back, we may hunt them here again; then again, we may not. Are you concerned for your farming-folk?”

“Well, yes,” said Beren. “Few of them know how you have kept them safe. They would not be prepared, should the Orc-raids start again.”

“If your farmers cannot defend what is theirs,” said Nose, “they should not stay here.”

“Those are harsh words,” said Beren slowly.

“But true ones,” said Nose.

Again there was silence. “Shall I see you again, Father?” asked Beren at last.

“Who can say?” answered Nose. “But there must always be a last meeting. And rarely can one recognize it at the time.”

Year 453

The winter turned to spring, and the spring waxed; but the hills remained silent, and Beren knew finally that Nose’s words had come true. The Druug would not come.

Since the blessed time of his renewal two years before, Beren had been accustomed to spending most of the summer months with the Druug, only visiting his farm family at scattered intervals, staying each time for no more than a week or so. He had been content with this life, had not particularly chafed at the restrictions of farm life over the small count of days he had spent there. Only now that his forest people were absent did he come to a full appreciation of how very much he preferred the free life among the People to living in a box, among rough-cut and simple farming folk.

He found their way of life, and too often their outlook as well, narrow and stuffy. The exchange of brief kilt for ‘proper’ clothes, and the bounty of the woods for heavy farmers’ fare, eaten at a coarse wooden table, with few but coarse faces to look at across it, struck him lately as a poor bargain. There were times when he felt he could not properly catch his breath. He tried his best to stick to it, but now and then he felt he could not stand a minute more of the fug, of Mari’s prosy remarks, of Dagnir’s coarse guffaw. He would flee at such times, shucking everything off to run cleanly in the woods. Only there could he find space and air.

His still-beardless chin had begun to attract curious glances. Not that its smoothness deterred the maidens, who continued to swoon in heaps in his steps. He in his turn found them nearly always uninteresting. Indeed often he felt himself repelled by foolish words, too much flesh, and the hint of stale sweat imperfectly masked by crude scent. He missed the lean, brown girls of the Druug, who at least smelled honest, and were solid companions on the trail as well as at the hearth. He worried that he seemed to find all the farm girls unattractive, and sometimes – even though Rattlecone had confirmed her account – he wondered if the Blackthorn Queen had not lied to him. When his time came, would he be able to function as a man, like other men?

Beren had shrunk from telling anyone else about this incident – least of all his parents. The only exception he made was Gorlim; perhaps because the smith, too, had received an unusual gift from one of the Onodrim. Gorlim’s first reaction was outrage on his friend’s behalf; then he became thoughtful. Indeed Beren felt in the months following his revelation that the smith kept the story on his mind – he could see it behind his glance. There was no constraint in Gorlim’s manner to him, they remained as close as ever; but all the same, there seemed to be something about the matter which would not leave the smith in peace.

Beren had always got on well with his father, and had no reason to expect that this would change; but strange to say, this was no longer the case. The pair of them now often came to short words. Beren came to realize that his father was impatient with him, and wished to draw him more into his footsteps. Beren dutifully took his part in the military exercises, despite growing doubts about the worth of this pursuit; but Barahir had urged Beren also to begin leader training, and that he would not do. The terrible time with the Blackshirts had cauterised any desire he might have had ever to lead men again.

He had not visited Newfort since that bad time, and this too was despite his father's almost constant urging. Andreth wanted to talk with Beren, he said. She would give him the sword. He could not refuse! Beren could, though, and did.

"Son, have some pity, for Powers' sake," said his father when this finally came to a head. "I understand your reluctance to return to the town. But can you not put your feelings aside to humour an old lady?"

"I have no wish to be cruel, Father," said Beren, "but in fact I have no way of being un-cruel. It would not relieve Andreth if I were to visit. She wants to give me the sword, but I will not take it."

"Well, why not, for the love of heaven!" said his father.

"Father, how many times have we been through this?" Beren said, in matching exasperation.

"That is not an answer!"

"Because," said Beren, throwing up his hands. "Because I choose not to. Because I have left all that behind me. Because there are no Orcs now in the woods, where I could not anyway use a sword against them even were they to come again. Because it is clearly a mistake. Because there are no heroes any more. Because! I am sorry for Aunt, Father, and sorry that you are disappointed. But you are both of you mistaken, and the sword is too. And in the end, it is my life, and I will not allow it to be dictated by others."

Barahir shook his head. "It is you who are mistaken, Son, so I deeply believe, though I could not tell you why. But I know you, and I know I cannot change your mind once you have set yourself on a path. But I would still say, visit your aunt. It can do no harm; and who knows if it might not be for the last time. She is very old."

But Beren remained obdurate. "The Daernem¹⁶, my woodland father, said to me not long ago, that there must always be a last meeting. Suppose I go as you desire. Then should I go again? And again? Just so as to have a 'last time'? It makes no sense. One should meet someone with other purpose, unless they lie on their actual deathbed. No, I shall not go. Aunt and I have nothing to say to one another."

"It is hard you are, Son," said Barahir with deep regret in his voice. But Beren would not discuss the matter any further, and changed the subject.

During the winter, when the cold drove him indoors, Beren was unable to stay aloof from discussions of tactics. These were meant rather as classes than discussions, but he grew irritated by what he saw as the teachers' ignorance, and tended to question every point. The leaders in turn grew exasperated with him. All these things had been most thoroughly chewed over and settled a generation ago. Who did this young upstart think he was?

Matters soon came to a head. Beren had listened with ill-concealed impatience to an exposition from Gramlach about ways to communicate between bodies of troops. His father, who had been watching him narrowly for some time, placed a hand suddenly on Gramlach's shoulder to bring him to a halt.

"Beren, you don't seem to agree with any of this," he began mildly enough.

"No, I don't," said Beren, with an out-rush of breath.

¹⁶ Sindarin: 'Big Nose'.

“Then would you mind telling us why? If we discuss your concerns, then perhaps Gramlach will be better able to proceed. He doesn’t like to say so, I know, but your sighs and moans are putting him off.”

Beren compressed his lips. “All right, let me see if I have this straight. Overall strategy. In the event of major Orc-alarm, the worst we can imagine, we gather the levies and march to the West in support of Orodreth at Tol Sirion. Correct?”

His father looked around at the others, not sure where this was going. “Yes,” he said.

“This while Bregolas marches to the North, and nobody marches east because we have nobody left to send. Correct?”

“Well – yes. With the proviso that we should be ready to change plans, to deploy anywhere in the land at need.”

“ ‘Anywhere in the land’, ” echoed Beren. “I’ll come to that in a minute. But tell me, have you seen Minas Tirith?”

“Yes, I have,” said Barahir with a touch now of impatience. “Where is this leading?”

Beren ignored the question and turned to Gramlach. “Have you?”

“Well, no,” admitted Gramlach.

“Who among you has?” asked Beren. The men and women there looked at one another; it turned out that the only two among them who had seen the fortress were Barahir and Emeldir.

“Well I have seen it,” Beren said to the others, “and it is my firm opinion that no conceivable army could take that place by assault; and any that could would be great enough to swamp your puny shield-wall. There is simply no point in sending an army west. Or north either. As for...”

Barahir, who had been growing red in the face, interrupted him. “Would you then counsel that we sit on our backsides and do nothing? And how do you know what armies the Enemy might send? Once in the valley, we would follow the course that seemed appropriate. Of course we would not take on the entire might of an army at once. But any army is composed of units, and the units may be brought to combat individually. It is called tactics. I thought you had learned some, but it seems I was mistaken.”

Emeldir leaned forward. “Come, let us cool our tempers,” she said. “There is no reason to be hot! These are matters of fact, and can be debated as such, coolly.”

Barahir took a deep breath, and glanced under his brows at his son. “I beg pardon,” he said.

Beren nodded stiffly in return.

“Well go on then,” said his father in controlled tones. “You still have the floor. ‘As for...?’”

“I was going to say,” said Beren, “as for fighting inside the bounds of Dorthonion, your army is utterly unfitted for it. The only possible battle it is suited for is a defence against moderate numbers of Orcs on the plain beyond the northern fringes of the forest. But such an attack will never come, not while the Eldar remain undefeated; because there is no way through Dorthonion. Morgoth is not interested in our herds of sheep, he wants to break through to the South. That he cannot do through Dorthonion; and he will never do it along Sirion. Not by force of arms alone. Any great assault, if it ever occurs, will be directed at the eastern marches. A child can see that.”

One of the other men there leaned forward and said in angry tones, “And just what would you know about Orcs, boy?”

“More than you, Tarias,” replied Beren coolly. “I am perfectly sure I have shot more than you have seen in your entire life.”

The leaders looked at one another. “What do you mean?” his father asked.

“Just what I say,” said Beren.

“But – how many Orcs have you killed then?”

“I have lost count,” said Beren. “More than twenty.”

They sat back and stared at him.

“I don’t believe it,” said Tarias.

“For Powers’ sake,” said Beren, looking disgusted, “you none of you have any idea, have you, that the Drúedain have been protecting your barns and byres for the best part of the last fifteen years. I shot my first Orc when I was eight. If you send your army into those woods, the part of it that doesn’t get lost, or drowned in bogs, or caught by its shields in brambles, would get pecked to death by any Orcs it ran across, gleefully. Whereas a hundred Drúedain have shown they can keep the whole of Dorthonion clean.”

There was silence. Emeldir broke it. “But what do you suggest we do then, Son?” she said gently. “We are not Drúedain. It takes a lifetime to learn those skills, you have told me so yourself. Suppose we agree that the North is not so important, and that in the East we can be of little help. What then? We who live here can and should take first thought for our own response, and we live in the western valleys. Because of this, we look west. What others of our folk do elsewhere is not under our control, will we or nill we. We had not, perhaps, fully realized the debt we owe to the Drúedain, and that speaks also to some ignorance on our part about the dangers we had faced in their absence, and perhaps face now; and this is something we should go into in greater depth at another time. But you mistake, I think, the present question. The question is not, how best could one fight a war in the ideal case; it is, how shall we best make use of what we have. And think too, that ‘best’ refers not only to the protection of our own lands and people, but also to our duty.”

“Exactly,” put in Barahir. “Go on, dear, you are saying it better than I could.”

Emeldir flushed. “I had nearly finished. Beren, we hold these lands in fealty to Lord Finrod. That means we have a duty to defend him and his; even before we think of our own. And the only part of his estate we can easily reach is Tirith.”

“We have gone into these questions long ago,” added Barahir, “and settled everything the best way we know how. We do not claim it is perfect; just the best we could do with what we have. All your comments are to say, that best is not very good. Fine. We must accept that, unpleasant though it is to hear. But nothing I have heard you say persuades me that we should change anything. The fact is, we cannot do anything differently. We are committed to defending our lord with the strength of our arms, and that is what we must attempt, should the necessity arise.”

“Powers send that it never does,” said Emeldir. “We all know that the peace will not last forever. But it has held in our time, and in our fathers’ time, and in theirs before them, back into the dim past before ever our forbears came into the West. So we prepare on the one hand, as is our duty, but we go about our lives on the other, with good hope that we may continue so, and our children after us.”

“Praise the hope,” sighed Barahir. “Now, for all love, let us have some mead and forget this angry coil!”

Year 454

The year turned; the sun stayed in its southward journey, and once more began the slow trek north. Four hundred and fifty three such cycles it had made since climbing new-wrought into the sky. Intermittent battle

had flickered and flared over the wide fields of the earth in that time, each year's blood fertilizing the next year's flowers.

The winter had been hard. Andreth did not sleep well these days, and often would wake in the night to lie unseeing in the dark. She was cold at such times, despite warming pans. Cold during the day too. Always cold. The mind got cold, and it was hard to think. Hard to breathe, hard to eat. Dear Powers, when was this all going to end.

She had got it wrong, all those years ago.¹⁷ She wanted to tell Finrod. It was all wrong. Death wasn't the burden of Men; it was ageing – this long, long gradual loss of everything that made life at least bearable. Stars above, she had thought she was old then; she had felt old, and had been afraid of dying. Old! With scarcely a touch of grey in her hair.

She had no fear of death any more – indeed, it had come to seem welcome to her; but death did not come. Had she been forgotten? Perhaps she had been forgotten.

It was all such a bore.

The girl came in again. What was her name? It was so stupid – Andreth remembered everything else about her, remembered when she was a sturdy young thing, good at games, but clever too. Whenever she wasn't out riding or shooting she would have her nose in a book. Andreth had always liked her. And there had been all that fuss about a baby one time – Bregolas had been furious, the great fool. As if such things really mattered.

Since then the lass had been away with the Elves. Andreth wasn't sure when she had come back. That belonged to the near time, the vague time, when it had become hard to keep things separate.

Whatever had happened to Bari's boy? He was a likely one, too. But wait now... suddenly the memories came flooding back, and the vexation. Oh, confound it. The sword. What was she supposed to do with it if the boy wouldn't take it? Should they bury it with her? That would be a waste. But perhaps it was meant so. Who could tell?

Beleth, that was the girl's name. Of course it was. Pleasant girl. Bregolas's eldest. Andreth turned to speak to her, but she had gone again. Andreth thought so anyway; it was so confounded hard to see these days. They didn't light these rooms properly any more. The old woman peered to the side, but anything could be hidden in the misty gloom. "Beleth?" she called.

Ah, there she was again, smiling at Andreth's side. How quickly these youngsters moved!

"Was there something, Aunt?" asked Beleth.

Was there something? Confound it – had she wanted to ask something?

"Is Finrod there?" Andreth asked somewhat at random.

"Alas no, Aunt. It is some time since he was here."

"Oh," said Andreth vaguely. "I thought we had been talking only a little while ago... How long has it been then?"

"Oh, a long time, Aunt. Several years even. It was before I came back."

"Several years..." muttered Andreth. "Oh dear heavens... what a nuisance it is to be old. Nothing works right any more." She clasped the girl's hand in her own and peered at her. The light from the window lit the girl's face and Andreth could make her out unusually well for recent times. Such nice eyes the girl had.

¹⁷ See 'Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth'.

(Blast, what was her name?) They were clear and honest eyes, full of strength. They reminded her of someone, she could not now say who. She looked again. Was there hope in those eyes? It didn't look like it. A young girl should not look so flat, surely.

"You should be with your young man, dear, not spending your time with an old stick like me," she hazarded.

The girl smiled a little sadly. "There is no young man, Aunt."

"Well why not?" said Andreth fiercely. "A beautiful, clever girl like you, you should have them lined up at the door. Should be knocking them away with a stick. What is the matter with you?" Suddenly a dreadful thought came to Andreth. "Wait – you were with the Elves, were you not?"

"Yes, Aunt." (Beleth, Beleth, that was the name.)

"Oh dear. Oh dear. Hmm." Andreth mumbled at her gums. Teeth all fell out some time ago, confound the things. And now she had trodden on this girl's feelings. Stupid, clumsy. When would she learn to keep guard on her tongue? Mother was always ticking her off about it.

"Leave me now, Beleth." she shook the hand she held. "I must think about a thing or two."

She had got it wrong, all those years ago.

* * * * *

Beleth was reading to her. This was a joy to Andreth, who had not been able to read for a long time now. She could not think how long, but it was a long weary dull time, and it had left a great gap in her life. Now Beleth was here, and Andreth loved the girl, most of all because she would give up her time to read to her, and bright stars above! the girl even knew Quenya. What a jewel she was.

Andreth had tried hard to concentrate her mind on Beleth's circumstances in the intervening days, and had prepared something to say. No point in waiting any longer, or wasting time in dressing it up. She raise a hand and stopped Beleth in mid flow.

"Lass," she said, "I have something to say to you. Maybe you know it anyway, but I'll say it all the same. A long time ago I fell in love; and the fellow loved me back. A sweet story, you may say. But he was of the Eldar, his body would not decay with the years, whereas mine has become the sad spectacle you see before you." Beleth stood up suddenly, but Andreth, who had been prepared for this, seized her hand. "No! Please. Hear me out. You confirm my fears, but please, hear me out.

"Anyway, he thought to spare me pain and shame, and he went away. Maybe he did right at that, but I tell you, what I think you know anyway, that no woman could have judged so coldly. Our hearts are not made that way. But I do not blame him; he was burnt just so much as I. Dear niece, what I am trying to tell you is that I understand. I am perhaps the only person outside of the two of you who does understand. We two races are thrown together, and we are like enough that one can fall for the other, but that is no source of joy as it should be, on the contrary. On the contrary. It is as if we both have razors for fingers and the gentlest caress by the one can only cut the other. Best if we two sorts stay apart.

"Go now and weep in your chamber, for I know that is what you must do. We need not ever speak of this again. But I wanted you to know. It is no consolation – who should know that better than I? – but I wanted you to know." She shook the girl's hand gently. "Go now."

The girl ran out, and Andreth leaned back, weary and sick at heart. Would this never end.

Some days later she was musing in the gloom of her chamber when a moving shadow told her that someone had come into the room. "Who is it?" she called out sharply.

A servant bent over and came somewhat into focus. "There is someone to see you, Ma'am." Then he stood

again and disappeared into the formless murk.

There was someone else there; she could see a patch of sunlight. Was it sunlight? A golden patch of light, coming nearer.

Suddenly she knew. The brightness filled all her eyes as the person knelt down in front of her and grasped both her hands in his own long, warm ones. Then she was looking through the curtain of dimness at the sun-topped face she knew, so like to the one her heart was bound to. It was Finrod. A glow of pure happiness washed through Andreth. She smiled at him with all her face, and although she knew it not, for a moment she looked again like the girl of eighteen he had first known.

“I knew you would come,” she said simply. “I knew it.”

“So, Andreth Saelin¹⁸,” he said gently, “what shall we debate today?”

“Oh, debate,” she said. “I am not feeling contentious today. Need we debate at all? In any case, that is no way to begin. You should start by apologizing for your long absence, or asking me how I am. That would be polite. Where are your manners, Elf?”

“But I can see how you are,” he said. “What need to ask?”

“It would give me excuse to complain,” she said. “Do not Elves love complaining? No? Then they are strange folk indeed. But enough of this. I have so many things to tell you. I have saved them up.”

They sat there together for some time, happily chatting. Suddenly Finrod asked her, “When was the last time you were outside, Andreth?”

“Oh...” Her voice became plaintive. “How should I know? Don’t ask me such things! My head will not keep numbers these days. A long time!”

“Then would you not like to come out? It is a beautiful spring day.”

Andreth was confused. “Well, I don’t know... maybe. I should ask Beleth. Did you see Beleth? She is home from the Elves.” She looked at him suddenly, stricken by the memory. “Oh dear... Brother, I am afraid she is a moth who has burnt herself at the same candle as I. I do fear it.”

“Let us not speak of it,” he said gently, and she became filled with the feeling that he knew everything already.

“Such a good, clever girl too,” she mumbled.

Finrod left her then, and she heard voices in the corridor. Thank the One, her ears still worked. At least fairly well.

Beleth’s clear eyes loomed close. “Do you wish to go out, Aunt? That is easy. I will wrap you up, so. So. Now, shall we stand? Good. Now take my arm if you will.”

“It is a strong arm, Beleth. Do you still shoot?” said Andreth.

“Yes, Aunt, I like to use my strength,” said Beleth. The two of them stepped slowly along a dark way.

“Where is Finrod?” asked Andreth, feeling her way.

“Here,” came his voice from behind, calm and strong as the summer sun.

A patch of blueish light appeared and grew larger. Andreth felt a fresh wind on her face, and the warmth on

18 Sindarin: wise woman.

her skin as she stepped slowly into the sunlight.

“Ah, that is good,” she said. “That was a good idea of yours, Brother. Just let me sit down, though. Is there somewhere to sit?”

The two of them guided her to a seat, and she sank down gratefully.

“Would that that was the last door of all!” sighed Andreth. “The freshness and the light: so have I always imagined it.”

“It cannot be long now,” said Finrod softly.

Andreth mused a while, blinking in the glad sunlight. “Beleth, are you there?” she asked after a time.

The girl’s face loomed near. “Yes Aunt, what would you like?”

“Only to tell you that I am very well here. Should you like to follow your own affairs for a time? There are matters I must discuss with Lord Finrod. Perhaps he could fetch you again after we are finished.”

Beleth smiled and disappeared. Andreth thought for a while longer, then turned her head stiffly.

“Where are you?” she said. “Come sit next to me where I can see you.”

He did so.

“Finrod,” she went on, “I have something on my mind. Some unfinished business.”

“I can probably guess,” he said.

She turned to look up and down at what she could see of him. “Oh really! Suppose you tell me your guess.”

“Well, Andreth, I guess it is about the sword which Boromir found in the pool. I know it is in your keeping, and I guess further that you are puzzled how to dispose of it.”

She was utterly confounded, and for some moments could only open and close her mouth, with nothing coming out. “How long have you known?” she asked at last weakly.

“Oh, since about that time,” he said.

“Did Father tell you?”

“No,” admitted Finrod, “but you must remember I have been reading men’s hearts for some time now. It was not hard to piece it together. Also I had other sources of information.” But what they were he did not say.

Andreth was trying to adjust to the new reality. “Have you told anyone else?” she asked.

“No,” said Finrod. “Boromir clearly wished to keep it a secret, so I kept it so myself.”

“I believe you are the most vexing creature that ever walked the earth,” the old woman said. “All those years I brooded on that thing. I often wished to discuss it with you, but I did not, since Father wished it not so. Why did you never tell me you knew!”

“For the same reason,” he said. “But why have you told me now?”

“All such things lose importance so close to death,” she said wearily. “I cannot bring myself to care any more. Also, I have nobody else to ask.”

He looked at her kindly. "Ask away then, Andreth. Or shall I guess again?"

"No, no..." the vagueness seemed to take her again. She sat a while, blinking in the sun; when she spoke again, it seemed to be about a different matter.

"You remember the last time you were here," she said. "I think it was the last time. When Brother died."

"I remember," he said.

"Well, but Finrod, there is one heart you did not read at all well. I grasped that affair better than you for once, hah! Yes, I did." She turned to look at him sharply. "I am speaking of young Beren, Bari's son." When he did not reply she went on, "Have you nothing to say?"

"I have never met the boy," he said slowly, "so you can hardly accuse me of reading him wrongly."

"You saw him, though."

"Yes."

"I saw your reaction. You never explained it. Just what is the boy to you?"

He turned to Andreth. "Let me answer in somewhat circular fashion. You know who I am, Andreth, and you know my history, and that of my people. Much of it, anyway. You know that we Noldor returned hot-foot from Aman; that some came for vengeance, and to reclaim their own; whereas others sought an escape, an adventure, or I know not now any longer what it was that we sought. And you may have guessed, or heard whispered, that our venture was against the wish and counsel of the Powers; most decidedly so. Another voice would whisper that we Noldor are not all of one mind, again rather decidedly so. All of us, however, see the need to keep the Enemy in strait leaguer, and we all, more or less amicably, work toward that end. Therefore my life over the past four centuries has been like some giant board game of matching power with power, seeking for openings, blocking attacks. Many of the pieces on the board are mighty ones, and it has at times been a hard struggle. Now, a long time ago as your folk count it I met you Men. Do not take it amiss if I say to you that, if I have made friendships among you, and kept you close to me, it is not solely because I was charmed by your special nature and gifts, but also because I felt that in this small, humble game-piece lay the seed of a much greater one. You Edain of the Houses have so far played but small role in the great affairs; and I will not hide from you that many among us hold that it will ever be so. I think they are wrong, but time has not yet put it to the proof.

"Now, some of these small pieces scratch the earth in a valley in the North. There was a woman among them, a learned woman, not too kind perhaps, and she had a nephew who we shall not say more about, and another nephew who was the best of fellows, but low in rank even among the woman's kin. This lowly man, a small farmer, had a small son, a wayward boy of no account. All this in a small valley in the remote wilds of the North.

"Now I am a great piece on the board. I have no false modesty; this is truth. But out of all the numerous remaining pieces on the board, the few mighty ones and the many, many lesser, it is not from among the powerful, nor even from the next rank, or the next, but it is rather the smallest, most meagre piece of a piece of a piece of them all, that I look into the eyes of, and see that he will bring about my death. My death. How comes that?"

"So I say to you that no, I do not know the heart of Beren the son of Barahir. I have never met him. But I know that his fate and mine are woven together like the snakes of my ring." He held his ring, which Andreth knew well, close in front of her eyes, so that the sun gleamed off the silver snakes and flashed green off the great jewel.

"I am sorry for you, my dear," said Andreth, "I truly am."

Finrod waved this away. “No need. We all have our role on this stage, and I cannot complain of mine, taken as a whole. It is a pity to have to leave the game so soon, but there is no sense cavilling against the course of fate. But you were speaking of this boy. You know now what he is to me, but what is he to you?”

“He is the heir of the Sword,” said Andreth simply. “It chose him itself.”

Finrod sat back. “What do you mean?” he said.

“Ah. Ah! You did not know!” crowed Andreth. “Oh, my joy is complete. I have found something the great Finrod, reader of hearts, does not know. Oh happy day!”

“Do not jest, Andreth, this matter touches me too nearly. Please tell me what you mean: that the sword chose him. How can a sword choose?”

She grinned wickedly at him. “I will do better than that, Finrod Finarfin’s son; I will show you.”

With some difficulty she got up and, leaning on his arm, left the warm sun with regret and made her way back to her chambers. Once there, she left the support of his arm and fumbled under her bed. “Now where is it,” she muttered. She found the chest she sought at last and tugged it out, puffing with the effort.

“Can I help?” asked Finrod.

“Whisht!” she exclaimed. “I nearly have it. Sit you down.”

Feeling her way more than seeing, she brought the wrapped shape of the blade onto her lap. How many times have I done this? she thought to herself. How many times have I waved this wretched icicle at people? My life just is one long repeated circle.

Unwrapped, the blade filled the room with a blaze of rainbow light. Even Andreth could see it. She could not see Finrod though, and he said no word.

“Take the blade,” she said cunningly to the air, “and then you will understand.”

His voice when it came was subdued. “I will not. I do not need to. Andreth, it may be that this is a greater matter than you know.”

“You might be surprised at what I know, or at least guess. But I ween it is a greater matter than *you* suspected,” she said.

“I will not deny that. So: now I understand some things a little better, I think. I speak of the board game. So what is to be done now? What was your concern? That at least I can now guess at, but do you wish to tell me straight?”

Again she answered him simply. “The boy does not want the sword,” she said.

“That was indeed my guess,” he said.

After some moments in which he said nothing further, she said “Well?” rather sharply.

“Well what?”

“What is your advice!”

“Oh,” said Finrod. “No, I have none.”

“Vex me not, Elf!” she cried. “I have not time for it. Explain yourself. Are you suggesting I should do *nothing?*”

“Yes,” he said. “Lay your concern aside. Andreth, you mistake the matter to this extent: you imagine that you are a mover in this, that the responsibility lies on your shoulders. Dear Sister, it does not. You are but a piece on the board, moved by other powers. Nay, do not bridle at me; a piece on the board, yes, but no mean one. You were not chosen to bear the blade for nothing. But I tell you this: when the Power behind this affair needs you to do something, you will know. Set your mind at rest! The weight lies on other shoulders, stronger and wiser than yours, or mine either.”

Andreth thought about this for some time. She peered and tried to see him. “Come and sit nearer, where I can look at you,” she said in irritated tones. “Wait, let me put this object away first.” She put the sword back in the chest, then patted the bed beside her. “Come, Brother, your reputation will suffer no harm if you sit on a lady’s bed at this stage of life. Not this lady, anyway.”

He would not do that, but made her lie down, propped by several pillows and covered with a blanket. Then he sat down close to the bedside.

“It was lovely out in the sun,” she smiled to him. “We must do that again.”

“Andreth, I cannot stay,” he said gently.

She held his hand. “It is such a strange world,” she said. “Do you know? I believe that lass, mm nm now what was – Beleth! Beleth. I believe she could have been the one; the Heir. But she was born at the wrong time, in the wrong place in the pattern. She is one of the best that we have, we Bëorings. When it was her turn with the sword, she held it longer than anyone. The thing was in the balance at that point, but she lost. She will not last, Finrod. Her heart has been mangled in the trap already, and she will not last. Don’t ask me how I know, I just do. I shall live longer than she. Now think on that, and tell me if it is justice.”

He did not reply.

“Finrod, Brother, I doubt I will see another spring,” she said.

“Then it will be long before we see each other again,” he said.

Now it was her turn to stay silent.

“Do you still hold by your doubts?” he asked.

She squeezed his hand. “Oh, Finrod, I do not know. We went over all this long ago. Are things any different now? I am staring into the same abyss. You ask that I just jump into it, trusting that everything will work out.”

He leaned forward with a fierce light in his eyes. “Yes! I do. Otherwise none of it makes any sense. If I can go forward with hope, nay with confidence! having looked my own death in the face, then you can do it too. I do not know why hearts are broken, or high nature wasted; except that nothing is wasted. But if I did not believe that the Heart of the One has a place for us, then there would be no point to Beleth’s fate, or to any of it. And there *must* be a point.”

He sat back then and regarded her. She had listened almost yearningly to his bold words spoken into the dark, and her faded old eyes were shining.

“Adanel always spoke so,” she whispered.

They sat for some time in silence.

“Dearest of sisters,” he said at last, “I must take my leave.”

“Then let it be quick,” she said. She stirred herself tiredly, and tried to hitch herself higher on the pillows. He put his arm under her and helped her.

"I have been proud to know you, Andreth," he said. "Always proud." He kissed her then, and left the room.

Beleth stole in after a moment and saw the tears on Andreth's face.

"Is aught amiss, Aunt?" she asked softly.

Andreth reached out to her. "Oh, Beleth, I am lost and alone," she cried. "Please hold me a while."

The girl held and rocked her aged aunt in her strong arms, staring at the lamplight flickering on the wall.

* * * * *

The advent of spring came as an intense relief to Beren. He had spent much time during the chafing winter in thinking about the course of his life, and he had decided that it needed alteration. He was not looking forward to breaking the news to his parents though.

When it came time to go, he discarded his heavy farmers clothes with relief and gathered his few possessions. The air felt chilly on his naked skin, and he was irritated at how soft he had become during the previous year. It simply would not do.

He went to find his parents. He was as tall as his mother now, and had an inch on his father; was probably stronger than him too, he thought privately.

"Mother, Father," he began awkwardly, "I have something to say to you, and I do not quite know how to put it."

"You are leaving us," said his mother dully.

"Not *leaving*," said Beren, "meaning for good. I'll be back. Just, perhaps, not so often."

His father scratched his head and looked puzzled. "But where do you mean to go?" he asked.

"Oh, probably nowhere," said Beren. "I am not yet sure what I will do."

Barahir turned to his wife. "Is this making sense to you?"

Beren sighed and sat down on the chopping block. "I am going to live in the woods. I am not a farmer, and I never will be one. It is time to stop pretending otherwise. The forest is my home. In answer to the next question I see on your lips, yes of course I will be lonely; I miss my forest-people. I could follow them south, but this is my country here. I would rather live at home and suffer loneliness than pay exile for company. But next winter I may go south for a time." He smiled wryly. "For a holiday."

His father eyed him steadily. Beren could see that the news had hurt him.

"But Beren," said his mother, "what about the future? Do you mean to live in the forest forever, doing nothing but following the simple life of the Drúedain? And that on your own? Will you not want to have a family, and children?"

"I am content to leave those things to the future," said Beren. "The only thing that matters at the moment is that I am, at last, back on my right road. I wandered far away from it, but now I am back. And being back on it, finally, I mean to stay on it."

"And what about your army duties?" Barahir asked quietly.

"It's wasted time," said Beren with some emphasis. "I would be far more use as a scout and hunter than ever I could be as spear fodder, stomping along in the ranks with all the other chickens to the chopping-block. I am sorry, Father, but it is just shoving a square peg into a round hole."

Emeldir moved and clasped her husband's arm.

"It's no use, Bari," she said. "Can't you see he is decided?"

Barahir squeezed her hand briefly. "Well, Son," he continued to Beren in the same quiet voice, "this sounds like farewell, then."

"Not for good, Father," said Beren. "But a time comes when every bird has to fly free."

Barahir came over to him and crushed his son in his arms. He stepped back. "Fare you well then, my bird, wherever you fly to," he said in sadness. He turned then and went into the house without looking back.

Now it was his mother's turn to embrace him. "It is hard for fathers sometimes," she whispered in a choked voice, "but I think I understand. Go with fortune at your feet." She kissed him then with wet cheeks and ran into the doorway herself.

Sighing, he picked up his things and trotted out the gate. He knew it was hard for them, but he had quite simply reached the limits of what he could endure. Staying in the farmhouse had come to feel like jamming himself in a cage with room neither to move nor to breathe.

* * * * *

It has been told elsewhere how the silence of the Noldor concerning their journey into exile became filled with malicious whispers; and how Círdan of the Havens, troubled by rumours of killings and other crimes, sent a messenger at last to inform King Thingol. By a chance evil or otherwise this report arrived at a time when the sons of Finarfin were visiting Doriath. Hot words were spoken and bitter, and when the truth emerged at last the King was with difficulty dissuaded from launching open war against the Fëanorians.¹⁹ On one matter he was immovable: he refused to hear any longer the Noldorian speech in any part of his realm; any who spoke it would be held to have condemned themselves out of their own mouth as a murderer and a traitor.

Since they were Celeborn's kin too who had fallen under Noldorian swords, he was equally outraged. As early as he could he took Galadriel (as all called her now) by the arm and pulled her away from the audience.

"Why have you never told me this?" he hissed at her as soon as they had privacy. "Is this your faith? That you of all people should fail me! I cannot believe it!"

Galadriel was anxious, apprehensive. Truth to say, she had gnawed in her thoughts through many a dark night at this very question. Turn the matter as she might, however, she had never arrived at any course better than the one she had decided on. She did not feel that she had anything to apologize for; nevertheless, her partner's anguish and fury were not to be dismissed.

"The secret was not mine to tell," she said to him now in some discomfort.

Celeborn waved this aside with an impatient movement of his arm. "That is but to say, your highest loyalty is to others, not to me. Worse yet: you would cleave to any murderer, be he only of your own tribe, rather than to your professed beloved, who is of another."

"That is not true," she said quietly. "I am no friend of those who killed – and the victims were my kin too, you might remember. How should I be friend to him who betrayed us, who made us walk the deadly Ice?" She shook her head decidedly from side to side. "When you spend cooler thought on this, my love – nay, let me finish – you will realize how you wrong me in this.

"How, then, shall I explain to you my silence? I hold it not honourable to bear tales – Celeborn, I beg you, let

19 For a full account of the crimes committed against the kinsmen of Thingol by Fëanor and his sons, see *The Silmarillion*.

me finish! – but this alone would not have kept my candour from your private ear. It is natural for lovers to share secrets, and you have heard all others of mine. You have said that I have other loyalties; well, I do. I own the fact. But this is natural. You too have other ties, which may pull you away from me.”

“Nonsense,” he snorted, red in the face from suppressed fury. “I put you first. I always put you first.”

“Tell me then, heart’s-bond,” Galadriel went on softly, “what would you have done, had I confided to you this sorry tale?”

“I would have told the King,” he replied. “I am –” There he stopped.

“Duty-bound?” said Galadriel. “Is that how you would continue your sentence? And would you still have told the King, even had I begged you not to?”

Celeborn did not speak for some moments. “That is different,” he said at last. Then, because he was a fair-minded man, he said, “Well, perhaps it is not.” He looked at her, torn in his mind. “All right,” he said. “I accept the point. You have other loyalties. But you have not said which of them kept you silent.”

“My brother asked it of me,” she said.

“I see,” said Celeborn. “And what was *his* reason?”

“He thinks on the Enemy,” replied Galadriel. “Perhaps more than any of us. He knows if we Eldar cannot unite, we are lost. The blood that was spilled cannot be recalled; if we quarrel over it, we will but do ourselves more harm.”

Celeborn chewed his finger. “You have me boxed in with your arguments,” he growled. “I cannot say that your reasons are bad.” Flaring up again, he continued hotly, “But not all your sophistry will wash that blood from the stones!”

“No,” she said sadly, “nor from my heart. Even though I shed none of it, I hold myself complicit. We were fools to listen to Fëanor; blind fools, drunk on fiery words. Bitterly have I since rued all the steps along that terrible path. But it is done; past. There is no amending it any more. So the choice before you now, Celeborn of the Teleri, true-heart, is whether to leave the bonds of your love to me undisturbed, or to cut them.”

He looked down from his full height at her, amazed. “Cut them? What nonsense is this?”

“No nonsense,” she said, in a voice which she could not hold entirely steady. “Love must be full-hearted, or given up. Any lingering worm of resentment will, in time, eat away the apple. If you forgive me, it must be entirely; given with both hands. If you cannot do that, then we must part.”

He knew her, this woman of his. He knew her worth, through and through. He saw now clearly what it had cost her to say these last words, and the bright mettle of her high nature which made her say them nevertheless. Love for her washed through him, together with a recognition of the honest truth behind her words.

“Take time, and consider!” she said, her voice trembling now in earnest.

He reached out and took her hands. “Nay,” he said, and all his heart was in his voice. “I need no time. I absolve thee, my beloved, yea full-hearted, even as thou hast said. And I beg thou wilt forgive me my hasty words, spoken as they were in my first grief.”

She shook her head, wordless with tears. They clung to one another, and there was then no more need for words.

* * * * *

The waxing moon shone brightly in the blue dome of heaven in which a few stars were also sprinkled, although they glimmered meek and faint in the presence of their mighty companion. Galadriel's present perch, high in a tree near the great river, offered a wide view across the water into the shadowed outlands beyond. The tree, a lofty and noble one, was of that sort known to the Elves as Ithirillorn²⁰. Even in those times, these grew only in such sanctuaries as Doriath; they are not found in the modern world at all. The Elf-woman was nestled in a broad crown of dark, slender leaves which reflected the moon in a million shimmered gleams. Countless flowers among them glowed small and white, phosphorescent; tiny moons themselves, each no larger than a peppercorn.

The branches twitched as another climbed the ladder: Celeborn. When his head appeared above the branches, the woman turned to smile at him – a deep lover's smile. She then returned to her former outward gaze.

"I thought I might find you here," murmured Celeborn in her ear. "It is a place of rare beauty at this time of the moon."

Galadriel sighed. "It is beautiful," she said, "although I can never look on the moon's scarred face without regret for the Light I once knew. That is lost to me; I have only memory, and the blemished moon."

"I have never been in Aman, nor seen that Light of which you speak," said Celeborn, "or at least, only as it is reflected in the eyes of the King and Queen – and indeed, in your own. For my part, I am content with the moon, and I do not know whether you in your discontent are to be envied or pitied."

"Oh, I am not discontent," said Galadriel. "Say not so. The moon is indeed fair – or so I am learning to find it. But for me it must always be like peering at a glory through smoked glass."

Neither spoke for a time. Galadriel continued to gaze into the dark; he watched her, enjoying the way the silvery light caressed her face.

He tried to sense her thoughts, but they remained opaque to him.

"Are you troubled by the past," Celeborn asked her quietly.

A glance at him, a smile. "Ah! No," she said, "rather by the future." He made no reply, but it was clear to her that having spoken so, she must go further. She attempted to marshal her cloudy misgivings into words. "My brothers, as you know, have been delving and building these past years," she said. "Great towers they have raised, and strongholds dug beneath the hills. These are mighty works against our common enemy. And you: although in your modesty you make little of them, I have heard from others of your deeds of valour in the wild lands to the East, hunting with sword and bow the foul creatures of Morgoth. But what do I? While others toil and set their lives at chance, I loiter here in this paradise and take my leisure!"

"You were sick at heart, and sought here your healing," he said. "That is the pith of the tale, as I have understood it."

"Have it as you will," she replied. "But healing must at last be accomplished, or abandoned. I am restless. I was restless in Aman; and what have I done but flee from one trammelled bower to another? Both were beautiful and full of delights; but that is not the point."

"I know you must be free," he said in a quiet voice. "I, too, have tarried overlong – for reasons which you will easily know. But I am not either made for leisure. What, then, shall we do? Do you have an outward wish, beyond your inner disquiet?"

"No," she said. "I do not know what I am good for. I long to join this fight, but I have no skills to bring to it, nor power to wield."

"Then come with me," he said.

20 Sindarin: moon-mirror tree.

"I would in any case," she replied. "That needs no discussion; clearly, your path is mine from this time. But it brings me no nearer to an answer."

"If you have not found one from the mouth of the Queen, then I am sure there is no-one in Middle-earth who could help you," said her tall companion.

Galadriel sighed. "I shall never find the answer then," she said.

"I said not so," said Celeborn. "Have some faith! You were not made in vain."

"That is also what Melian says," said Galadriel.

"Well then!" said Celeborn. "It seems to me that you have only one course: to throw your fate to the winds. Trust the future. Strike out into it! Rede will come to you."

She took in all his strong face, the beautiful lines of it; his eyes full of love and concern. His hair under the moon glistened like something more than material: like light itself. She stroked the side of his face with her hand. "Could you not have found some less troublesome woman?" she said gently.

"I have the best there is, anywhere," he replied. "What is your decision?"

Galadriel was silent for a moment, her gaze once again directed outward. "We must leave this haven, and go into the shadow," she said sadly.

"Then let us do it," he said.

"Not yet," she replied. "Not for some little time. Oh, I may come and go betimes, but of my own will I will house here for a while longer. Some things have become clearer to me. There is much still that I need to learn for one thing, patience not the least. But more than this: I wait on some stroke of doom. Something will occur that I should witness. I have no notion what it might be, but I know that I will know it when it comes."

* * * * *

Beren wandered much through the empty land, and tried to forget his loneliness in the beauty of the woods and waters. He was grown now to his full height, if not yet to his full strength, and although he knew it not, as he ran singing through the new green, it was as some woodland god that he appeared, with flowers woven through his long hair. The birds came to sing with him on his finger, and he was friends with all the beasts, but there was an aching place in his heart all the same. He missed his wood-people at first exceedingly; later he became more resigned to the emptiness of the woods.

Over the course of the next few months Beren explored the length and breadth of Dorthonion more thoroughly than he had ever done before. Few of the forest inhabitants now noticed him come or go if he wished to be private; he knew he had at last brought his skills of quiet and discretion to a pitch which few even of the Druug could match. It was a pity, he sometimes thought with a wry smile, that there were none here now to match himself against.

To set against this, the humbling thought intruded that there were still eyes and minds he could not elude. No man could hope to best an Elf at woodcraft, and he thought the same was probably true in respect of the Ents. After a while too he began to suspect that the woods contained other presences who could detect and evade his coming; secretive presences. Just once or twice he picked up a hint of them. One time there was a quick flash of red in the bushes, followed by a high-pitched laugh. He found no trace by nose or eyes of the creature on that occasion, whatever it might have been, but some weeks later a trace of red just flicked again in the corner of his vision. In the bushes where he thought it had been he found the faintest of faint trails – nothing so crude as depressions in the ground, but a leaf brushed here, a twig out of place there; the kind of thing which would entirely escape anybody not practised in reading the forest floor. Beren followed this trail quickly but with no more noise than a mouse. His senses, bowstring-taut, felt carefully ahead of him,

receptive to the least sign of his mysterious quarry. Entirely focussed on the trail as he was, he paid little attention to the rest of his surroundings, until some vague sense of wrongness percolated into his consciousness. He stopped then and looked carefully around, and then straightened up to his full height with sudden astonishment. He had come around in a full circle! The point was underlined by a just audible snigger.

Huh. Somebody wanted to play games. Well, he had been fooled one time, but not again. For a moment he thought of Silmenen; but he did not believe she would wear red. He shrugged his shoulders and turned away, putting it down as another mystery of the forest.

There were others. High on a granite peak he came across a great carved writing, in a corner of the cliffs and thus out of sight of casual gaze: two lines of some message, in letters man-high, but in no script he had ever known. He could not reach the cut letters either from below or above, but they looked old – the rain streaks of years wound down through them, and a chunk at one corner had fallen away.

Good or evil? There was no particular feeling of either about them.

He never went near the country of the Ent-wives again, but over time he did discover the homes of several more Ents, and now and then he saw one about his business. The Ents glanced at him usually with scant interest, which made him wonder again at the attention Rattlecone devoted to him.

He saw Rattlecone too from time to time. He found the Ent restful company. Sometimes they would talk, but at other times Beren was content simply to be with him in silence.

He asked Rattlecone about the script on the cliff, and was surprised to find that the Ent had no knowledge of it. Beren found that vaguely disquieting – he had thought of Rattlecone as omniscient, at least so far as affairs in the forest were concerned.

One time he was on his way down the valley toward Rattlecone's house when something the Ent had said to him years ago, soon after Beren had first come to know him, came suddenly back to his mind. "I live right up among the roots of the mountains," the Ent had said, "further up even than the hill of the Little People."

Little People? Rattlecone had not wanted to tell him any more.

"A kinder person would never have mentioned them at all," Beren grumbled to himself. But what could be the reason for the mystery? Was there some danger involved, which the Ent was trying to protect him from? Beren did not think so. Was it rather the Little People, whoever they were, whom the Ent wished to protect? That seemed more likely. But Beren had no intent to hurt anybody, and he did not feel he could do any harm just by looking.

He had hated the sneaky feeling of deception he had felt when he trespassed on the Onodvisse, and since he was motivated now not by lust, but by curiosity, an altogether less demanding emotion, he decided suddenly that he would put the whole matter before Rattlecone before venturing on anything. The Ent could hardly forbid him, but if there were sound reasons for Beren to let the matter rest, he would surely hear about them.

"Rattlecone," he said to him at the next opportunity, "who are the Little People?"

"You are always asking these 'who' questions," replied the Ent in his careful way. "What you really mean is, please satisfy my curiosity about them. But as your curiosity is insatiable, I have as great a difficulty in answering your implied question as I do your open one."

"Oh come, you're evading the point. If you don't want to tell me anything about them, just say so."

"And what if I don't?" said the Ent.

"Fine." Beren shrugged. "Your privilege. All the same, I mean to look for them. Do you have anything to say

to that?"

The Ent's eyes twinkled. "Only to wish you good luck," he said.

Beren's sole clue was the original remark of the Ent, which hinted that the Little People lived on some sort of hill near the headwaters of the White River. That still left many possibilities. For weeks after that meeting he quartered the ten leagues of ground in the valley above the approaches to Anach, even venturing as far as the source of the White, a gush of turbid water spewing from the base of a mighty grey glacier high in the mountains. He grew familiar – too familiar – with every gully and ravine leading either north or south. He thought he had known Dorthonion well; but there was always more to discover.

To the South, the small valleys usually terminated in a high wall of rock. A long arm of the mountains paralleled the river for miles in that district. It would be possible maybe to climb onto it from the Anach end, had one some errand in the hills, but it was sheer and frightful along its winding northern face. Rattlecone had said 'hill', but whereas Beren had been all over the rolling land north of the Whitewater, the ridges between the south-climbing gullies were all narrow, rocky crests, offering neither concealment nor possibilities for sustenance.

One day Beren was cooking up some stew in a little nook, fairly high up on the north side of the river valley. He had by that time just about given up the southern side as a dead loss and was quartering, once again, the lower but more intricate valley system on the northern side.

The youth was admiring the vista laid out before his eyes while he waited for the stew to heat. The broad curve of the Whitewater Valley in front of him was mottled by all the fresh greens of the forest in high summer. Beyond that space of air the crumpled hills rose, fading in serried outlines; further beyond them still, the snowy piles of the great mountains reared, showing white and clean under the sun. All that high terrain found its near border in the grey line of cliffs which wound from left to right as far as he could see. They formed a wall that closed off so many of the small gullies running up from the White in that direction.

Almost gradually the young man became aware of a rather curious thing. He observed a stretch of much lower cliff which extended out a long way, almost to the White. It was not unusual for the ridge ends to be punctuated by cliffs; but here the V of raised land behind was much broader. The valleys to either side of it were angled away, leaving a sort of mini plateau between them, rather than the usual sharp and winding line of ridge.

Why had he never noticed that before? The question was answered as soon as it formed in his mind: from the depths of the side gullies one would notice nothing. All the side cliffs looked alike. It needed height and distance for the plateau to become visible.

At this point, a hissing intruded into his thought as the crude bark pot of stew began to boil over onto the fire. Beren burnt his mouth gulping it down. As soon as he had finished, he left the gear lying and ran hot-foot to the river.

Towards sundown he limped back across it from the far side. He was hot; he was scratched with brambles; and he had turned his ankle. What he had not done was find a way up the cliff. He would have to try again on the morrow. Defeated for now, he returned to the camp where he had left the rest of his things.

The next day his ankle was as good as new. After once more crossing the river, he made his way slowly along the whole border of the V-shaped plateau; as much of it as he could reach, anyway. At last he spotted what he thought was a possible way up. This in fact proved to be the case; and after a difficult and at times risky scramble, he succeeded in making his way to the top.

There *were* people up here; suddenly he was sure of it. Was that not a hint of wood-smoke on the breeze?

He proceeded as discreetly as he knew how, using all of his skills – which, as we have already observed, were considerable. Beren in his present high pitch of woodcraft was quite capable of circling and observing a

group of ordinary hunters without them having the least notion of his presence – a piece of cheek that he had, in fact, actually performed.

The land at the top, which was well wooded, seemed to slope gently down into a shallow valley. After a time the light grew greater ahead of him as the trees opened out towards the valley floor. He began to hear the tinkle of a stream, and he could smell smoke now for certain.

When the view into the open area at last became clearer, the wary stalker could not at first make sense of the picture. But since there was no movement, nobody to see, he crept silently a little further, and then a little further, until he understood clearly what he was seeing.

The open area, some tens of yards broad, formed a shallow notch, down the centre of which wandered the brook he had heard, chattering quietly to itself. In the face of the broad sandy bank on its far side Beren could see a row of large holes. These puzzled him exceedingly. Were these people some sort of giant rabbit?

On a flat area by the brook somebody had built a fire – which rabbits certainly could not have done – and hanging over this was a large black cooking pot which, like Beren's stew of yesterday, was just now coming to the boil. Gouts of liquid were splattering into the fire, which hissed furiously in response. Low wooden tables and benches were scattered over the turf on both sides of it.

There was not a soul to be seen.

Pursing his lips, Beren stood up straight. Clearly, whoever lived here, they had detected his approach, despite all his care. Yet more people whose woodcraft was better than his own! It was downright exasperating.

Where were they? They must have retreated into the bushes, and probably into their holes as well. Hmm. Well, if they chose not to be seen, there did not seem to be much he could do about it. It would be churlish to harass them, purely in order to satisfy his own curiosity. All the same, it was vexing to have gone to all this effort with no clear result.

Abandoning caution now, he stepped out from the trees and began to examine the ground. Tracks were to be found in plenty, and they were not the tracks of rabbits – indeed they looked most like the footprints of children, albeit somewhat broader than usual. Children, or Dwarves? No; whatever the Little People were, he was sure they were not Dwarves.

The tables were strewn with crumbs and other scraps, but the people seem to have snatched up the bulk of whatever food they had and taken it with them. Beren stirred the crumbs with his finger. Here was bread, here was cheese. From further up the valley he thought he could now make out the faint baaing of goats.

He came to the cauldron, whose seething contents were now in a fair way to putting out the fire entirely, and with some difficulty lifted it off the fire and placed it on the ground near by.

The instant he released it and straightened up, a stone whizzed out of the bushes and smote him on the side of the head.

Beren stiffened with a jerk. This released some very bad memories. But clearly his presence was unwelcome. He put his hands in the air straight away and began to walk slowly away from the pot in the direction from which he had come.

“Do not throw, good people!” he shouted into the emptiness. “Do not throw! I am going now as quickly as I may!”

He reached the trees with no more stones. After that, there was nothing for it than to beat an ignominious retreat. He scrambled back down the way he came and went immediately to seek Rattlecone.

The Ent looked amused at the story. “You had more success than I thought you would,” he said.

“Come on, Rattlecone,” pleaded Beren. “Can’t you at least tell me what sort of creature they are? I never even clapped eyes on one. There were great burrows there, such as rabbits make, but the tracks looked most like those of children.”

“Well, they are like to children,” said Rattlecone. “Or to undersized Men. They dig those burrows to live in. They are shy creatures. I have seen them now and then over the years, in different places, but I don’t think I have ever spoken to one.”

“Do the Elves know about them?”

“No-one can say what Elves know and don’t know,” was all the answer the Ent would give to that.

Beren had to give up the subject in the end. “You are harder to get information out of than a Dwarf,” he said.

“I do not know any Dwarves,” said Rattlecone, “but perhaps their reason is the same as mine: to pass a piece of knowledge, or even rumour, to somebody is to change the course of their life. Do you not know by now how grave a thing that is for us? The conveyance of knowledge is not something to be done lightly, in the way of flapping of the mouth to fill an idle minute. We feel that if a person needs to know something, then they will learn about it in one way or another. Nothing is wasted in this world, nothing is done in vain.”

Tell that to Hiril, Beren thought darkly in the privacy of his own mind. But there was no point in pursuing the matter.

There was always more of Dorthonion to explore. Another time he ventured into the rocky heights on the southern border of the land; with caution, because he remembered Nose’s words of long ago. He had never found out why these peaks were to be feared, but if he was to know his land, he should learn this.

As he made his way higher, so the land grew more desolate. Gradually the lush grasses were left behind, and the plants became dull, grasping and harsh. Saw-edged grasses and dried thorn-bushes blocked the gullies and forced him to scramble sideways on slopes of sharp-edged scree. His feet were bruised and his mouth dust-dry before he reached the crest.

When he did so, he met with disappointment. The ground fell away steeply in front of him, but there was nothing of the far Southlands to be seen: thick clouds lay like a blanket over the whole space.

Moving cautiously, Beren looked for a vantage from where he could see into the depths. He crept at last out along a jutting nose of stone. From here he could see the cliffs falling away on either side, and giddily below in warped sheers of dismal rock. The vertiginous planes found their base at last among cruel stone spires. At the foot, far below, a barren gully led ever more steeply away. He could not see what lay behind the curvature of the descent, but it seemed to lead into a darkness.

A coldness lay on his heart, he knew not why.

Beren decided to venture no further, to seek no way down; and it may be that he never made a more fortunate choice. A time would come when he would be driven to pass through those dark lands, with death at his heels, but he would ever after be loth to recall that journey. In the meantime, although he had not learned any more than he knew before, the desire to explore further in that direction had withered within him. He concluded that it would be better just to ask the Elves about it.

Later that moon he explored the Pass of Anach. This he found less oppressive to the spirit, but all the same, there was no cheer in that place. Clearly, the pass had its own perils. It offered a route through the mountains to be sure, but the way led far above the snow-line before descending. Towards the crest, the chill wind howled between towering masses on either side. Beyond an occasional crevice in the rock walls, there seemed to be no shelter at all. To be caught by a blizzard on that height would clearly be a desperate affair.

For the whole of that summer, in that 454th year of the sun’s rising, Beren was constantly on the move. He

took unfailing joy in new scenes, new airs; but this was all his own land, the fragrant Pine Mountain, with its sombre-wooded slopes breathing mist in the dawning, its long valleys patchworked by shadows of drifting clouds at noon, and its sharp-toothed peaks touched with the red of the last sun of the dying day. Sometimes the youth would wake in the dark hours, and would strain his ears to hear the night-creatures as they crept beneath the stars, wishing in his heart that his eyes would work as theirs, so that he could creep at their side. Other times when the moon was high he would run, as one in a dream, through the silvered landscape. But that was hardly easier; as all who walk beneath the moon find out, moonlight is deceptive. All may seem as bright as day, but even large bodies are hard to see at more than a few tens of yards' distance. Beren nearly ran into a wild-bull once, and had to turn and run away from the snorting beast just as fast as his legs would carry him. He found a tree and flew up it so fast he could not remember touching the branches. Even then the huge animal would not leave him alone, but stayed pacing and snuffing until the early light broke in the East. Only then did it wander off, leaving the stiff and scraped young man to jump awkwardly down and go his way in rueful relief.

Passage was difficult, even impossible, in many parts of the moors. There were bogs in places, deadly traps covered with a deceptive carpet of gay flowers and green growth. On many of the slopes and ridges the ground was composed of boulders, something under a yard across, their leg-breaking holes and gaps disguised by a spongy layer of heather. Perhaps the worst terrain of all was dotted with clumps of coarse grass, between which were mud-holes. Step in a hole and it would swallow up your whole leg, yielding it again only reluctantly, to the accompaniment of sucking smacks, and at the cost of any footwear you might have been wearing.

Beren was picking his way one day though just such difficult country when he stumbled upon Tarn Aeluin. He found it in a nondescript fold in the high moors, one of many such. What had looked to be a shallow declivity fell away suddenly to reveal a deep, cliff-fringed valley with a long lake down its centre, blue and serene. The rocks around its edge extended also to craggy islets which broke the mirrored surface in several places.

Beren straight away knew what lake it was. He spent most of that day wandering about it, alert for any signs of the numinous properties he had heard people tell of. But he felt nothing; it was simply a beautiful lake tucked away in the hills. Any spirit in the place was either hiding or asleep.

A splashing stream flowed out of the lake at its western end. He found an open grassed area near the mouth, ringed around by alders. It was a favourable, sheltered space for camping, and gave abundant signs of having been used for that purpose. There were turf walls scattered over the sward which showed where booths had been erected in the past. The most recent traces were some ashes and burnt bones, perhaps a week old; probably hunters, Beren thought. He spied them in the land in ones or twos from time to time, although they never saw him.

A curious appearance about the nearby slopes drew him over. He found that the rising ground was striped with a seam of some crumbly black stone, the like of which he could not remember seeing before. It stood out to the eye because neither heather nor grass would grow on it. Nosing along the seam, the youth saw that people had been digging at it here and there. Now why would they do that?

He stood, scratching his head, looking over the level of this stuff where it looped across the heathered slopes. No solution to the mystery being forthcoming, he shrugged and turned away. Much later, he would come to understand the uses of coal, and its advantages for people overwintering in that treeless land.

Beren left the lake by the outlet, scrambling down the narrow rocky gully beside a series of low waterfalls. Movement in the other direction would have been difficult; several times he had to drop off an overhang more than the height of a man, there being no way around. After he had gone a little less than half a mile, the gradient at the bottom of the ravine levelled out, and it was possible once again to walk more sedately. He glanced back at this point, then stood still and examined the country behind him with some care. It was astonishing! There was nothing to show there was a valley there at all; the burn seemed simply to wind back into the whale-backed hills like countless others on both sides. He wondered if he would be able to find the Tarn again. That made him wonder how the hunters had found it, and the others who had camped there.

The young man was alone in his country, but not lonely. Sometimes he wondered about that. Didn't he need people? Despite his brave words to his mother, he worried about his future. It felt right, what he was doing; but he could not see where it was going to lead. A small voice in his own head echoed the words of his mother back to him. Did he mean to stay in the forest all his life, living the simple life of the Druug? And what about love, and children? What if neither the Holly people nor any of the others ever came back?

He often thought about Húrin, and wondered what his friend was doing. He could easily have run down south to visit him, and he was not himself sure why he did not. It was not as if he was immovably bound to the land – after all, he had experienced no difficulties in leaving it before.

He knew that part of the problem was his smooth chin. He felt uncomfortable about that. It was all very well to return a fellow to the pristine state of man, and it was certainly a relief not to be plagued all the time by burning thoughts of female bodies, but it was unpleasant to him to stand out from his peers. Húrin would be coming into his own manhood about now, with all the stirrings and growth that that entailed, and could not fail to notice and remark upon the differences in his older friend. Beren worried that he would be considered not quite a full man. Nobody who knew him had ever thought that of him, but the phantom gnawed at him all the same.

Strange to say, he felt no such compunctions in visiting Gorlim and Eilinel. Perhaps because he had known them longer? Or that they were older than he? He could not say. Whatever the explanation, he looked in on them whenever he was nearby, and looked forward to these occasions.

For some time now, it had been fairly obvious that Gorlim had something on his mind. Beren knew it would be useless to quiz the smith about it; he would come out with it in his own time. This happened on a hot day at the end of summer. Gorlim urged the younger man out of the house on the pretence of showing him how well the beans were bearing – a transparent subterfuge which Beren viewed with an indulgent eye. Once between the tall beans, well out of hearing of anybody else around, Gorlim eventually, via many long-winded excuses and circumlocutions, came to the point.

He and Eilinel had no child. Red-faced, Gorlim gave him to understand that all relevant fixtures on either side seemed to work just dandy, so there was every reason to expect a child; but none had come. They both dearly wished for one. Apropos: he knew that Beren had been 'fixed' somewhat in that area by the tree-woman. Perhaps... might his friend the tree-man look at Gorlim, did Beren think?

Beren found himself placed in something of a quandary, because on the one hand he had gradually seen more and more weight and worth in Rattlecone's policy of non-interference, and had felt guilty about his previous well-intended actions to the favour of Gorlim, none of which had turned out entirely fortunate; on the other hand, he felt a strong sympathy for his friends' wish to have children of their own. They would make ideal parents: full of love, but with a gentle firmness when needed. He had often thought how unfair it was that they had no issue.

He played for time while working out what he was going to do. "Would you mean to bring Nellie with us?" he asked.

Gorlim shook his head decidedly. "No. I don't even want her to know."

"But Gorlim," said Beren hesitantly, "what if the problem, you know, lies with her? My mother told me there are many things that can go wrong."

"Well," said the smith, "if so be it ain't me, well, we'll just have to cross that stream when we come to un. You can't make a job all in one go; you have to do a little bit here and a little bit there."

Beren stood there thinking. If he agreed to help, he would have to put his own doubts aside and give full-hearted support. Rattlecone, he knew, would take a lot of persuading. It would be neither easy nor completely honest to argue strongly for a position he himself did not entirely support.

But that was what one had to do for friends. No half-measures were possible; either you helped or you didn't.

"All right," he decided, "we'll go and see him." Gorlim relaxed visibly. He covered Beren in thanks; it was embarrassing.

The practical business of preparing the smith for the journey took on a magnitude which staggered Beren. He himself was used to sleeping rough in the forest, accepting with pleasure any weather the world chose to cast at him; he had forgotten that Gorlim would view the matter very differently. To begin with, Gorlim had assumed that the journey would be undertaken on horseback. Beren had vetoed that proposal, since he knew that no horse could penetrate far into the wild country at the headwaters of the Whitewater. To his way of thinking, they would have to walk a considerable stretch in any case, so why not just walk it all? He could have done the trip himself, *had* done it often, in a couple of days, carrying little more than bow, fur and pouch. Gorlim, however, found it necessary to assemble a great pack. When it finally came time to go, he hoisted this monstrous baggage only with difficulty onto his back. He was wearing heavy boots and thick trousers and carried a great staff to assist his passage.

Gorlim's excuse to Eilinel, that he planned to do a spot of hunting with his friend, caused her to raise her eyebrows. She had not the least belief in the truth of this statement, but she felt it was best to let the men do whatever they had in mind in the way they were comfortable with. No doubt the true story would come out in time.

They were some days on the journey, and Gorlim was weary and footsore by the end of them. He was a strong young man, fit to work all the daylight hours in forge or field, but this hike was not work of the sort he was used to. Beren trod lightly at his side in silent sympathy. There was nothing he could do to help his friend but to choose the easiest tracks he could.

The pair arrived at the rushing headwaters of the Whitewater on a hot, close day. The early sun had been dimmed by thickening vapours, and Beren's weather sense predicted thunder. He counselled his friend to leave his pack beside the water, so as to climb the few miles to Rattlecone's home unencumbered. Even so, after the long plod uphill, Gorlim arrived red-faced and thoroughly done up.

Although the air at ground level lay hot and still, the vapours overhead had thickened by that time into a broil of dense grey clouds. Every now and then a faint tremor seemed to come though the earth.

The Ent was not at home.

Gorlim was lying flat on his back and panting on Rattlecone's lawn, his eyes closed. Beren observed his friend with a mixture of sympathy and concern.

"Maybe I should have let you take a horse," he said. "As far along the track as we could get one, anyway."

Gorlim made no comment on this. "Got any water?" he croaked.

"Give me your bottle and I'll fill it up at the stream," said Beren. He danced down the slope, happy to be released from Gorlim's plodding pace. Singing softly, he filled the skin in the chattering water, relishing the clean smell of it and the snow-chill on his hands. Finished, he ran up the hill again.

At the alder gateway he stopped: Rattlecone was there, standing in the gathering gloom. Beren glanced down at his friend the smith, but he seemed to be asleep.

He laid the full skin down and turned to face the silent Ent. "I want to tell you something about my friend," he said, and went on to explain Gorlim's longing. When he had finished, still the Ent said nothing.

"Could you sense this kind of problem in a human body?" asked Beren carefully.

"Yes," admitted Rattlecone.

“Can you sense it in him?”

The Ent hesitated. “Yes,” he said.

Beren considered how to frame his next question. “Could you – if you wished – repair whatever might be amiss, so that he could have children?”

“There may be many barriers to conception,” evaded the Ent.

“That is not an answer,” said Beren gently.

Rattlecone swung one way then the other, as if he would avoid the question. “Yes, then. I could. If I wished. Since you insist on knowing.”

There was now an almost continuous low mutter of thunder coming from the low-pressed roof of cloud.

Beren turned to one of the alders near at hand and clambered upwards by a few branches. He had cleaned these natural rungs of twigs long ago and would often climb up so as to be nearer the Ent’s eye level. It was dark there under the roof of close-leaved branches.

He looked now into Rattlecone’s eyes, which he could see clearly despite the gloom. The Ent looked troubled.

“You are wise, Rattlecone,” the young man continued, “wise with the centuries; I have learned much from you, and have much yet to learn, I am sure. You have often said to me that you hesitate to act, because every action changes a life, and nobody can know whether for better or for worse. But not acting is also a decision, and also has consequences. Have you considered that?”

The Ent did not answer.

“Is it not better thought of,” Beren went on, “not to avoid action for fear of its consequences, but to strive always to choose wisely. To choose to act, or not to act. Many times in my life I have not chosen wisely, I know. I think I was born a great fool, and much of my short life has been spent in trying to get out of the habit of it. I make no claim of great success.

“You have power to grant this man his deepest wish, and that of his spouse too. From your answers so far, I am sure you could do it. The only question remaining is, would it be wise? Is the balance of the benefits, so far as knowledge and wisdom can tally them, on the side of acting, or not acting? This is what I ask of you. If you make that choice as carefully as you know how, I will accept it of you, whichever way it goes; because you are wiser than me by far. But do not come back to me with this story about all actions being wrong. I may be inexperienced, I may be a great fool, but I know cowardice when I see it.”

A flicker of blue light lit the clearing and the prone body of the blacksmith at its centre. Seconds later came a throb and mutter of thunder, like the labouring of great engines.

“You are wasted in the forest, with a tongue like that,” remarked Rattlecone dryly.

Beren would not be distracted. “Choose!” he said.

“Men are not my business,” said the Ent. “My business is with trees.”

“All living things are connected,” said Beren. “And tell me this. Have you children of your own?”

The Ent did not answer.

“You do, don’t you?” persisted Beren. “Then tell me what you would have said to me, had somebody come to take them from you, and I could have prevented it, but did not. Because ‘actions have consequences.’”

Whose business would *that* have been?"

There was a sudden blinding flash and an almost simultaneous boom, of shattering loudness. A little way up the slope, a stricken pine flamed and toppled over with a crash. Beren could not help jumping a little at the suddenness of it.

"You had better come down out of that tree, and come under shelter," said Rattlecone.

"I shall not come down until you tell me your decision," said Beren. "So if I fry like a piece of bacon, my death will be on your head."

The Ent sighed. "All right. I will do it. Just come down, will you? I do not enjoy the smell of frying bacon."

Beren slipped down straight away and ran to bend over his friend. He woke the smith with some difficulty and at last got him to stand up and stagger under the overhang into the blackness behind. The flickering of light and the rolling of thunder had in the meantime become menacing and continuous, but by the time he had got Gorlim moving the sound had been joined by a new one: a roar which grew ever louder and ever nearer. Great cold drops smote them on the head as they ran the last few paces; then they were under the cliff. And not a moment too soon, for balls of ice the size of hazelnuts began now to pelt down thicker and thicker, until the lawn was covered with them. The men had to retreat to escape the ricochets which bounced and clacked wildly into the overhang.

"There is not only wisdom to be consulted in affairs, but instinct also," said Rattlecone from where he stood in the garth, impervious to the ice which pelted him. He had to pitch his deep voice loudly to carry over the storm. "I have agreed to thy wish. But every voice of my heart tells me that thou dost but store up griefs for thy friend."

Beren and Gorlim had to stay there for three days. Rattlecone could not at first achieve what he wanted. He said the waters were not right, somehow; that things were out of joint; that it was a bad season. But in the end he said it was done.

* * * * *

As the year waned, Beren began to give thought to the winter. He had for some time had vague plans of travelling south, a sort of one-man Druug migration; but in one of those sudden swerves of thought which seemed to come from nowhere, all of a sudden he thought, why should I? Why should I do the accepted thing? Why should I let the weather drive me out of my land, make up my mind for me? To the Pit with that!

And after all, why not stay here in the North? Caves could be found for shelter, food supplies prepared. Another part of his mind called him a fool, rushing to punish himself on a principle. But threading through all his thought was curiosity. What would it be like, to spend winter in the forest? Could one survive, perhaps even thrive? There was only one way to find out. I can always retreat to Sightfoot if it gets too bad, said the sensible part of his mind, but the other parts booted that thought down and lined up to give the sensible part a kicking.

He knew of several caves which might suit, and ended up choosing one on the skirts of Foen, not far in fact from his home. The thought of being so close tickled his humour. He would be able to observe his family, and in some obscure degree feel close to them, without the odious necessity of cooping himself up for months in the closeness and stink of the farm buildings. He would stay free.

He was kept busy throughout the autumn in stocking up on supplies – smoking salmon, jerking meat, baking stacks of biscuits of the coarse rush-bread the Druug commonly made. There was a tiny spring at the back of his chosen cave, so he would not lack for water. He gathered firewood, and overhauled his stock of tools, weapons and furs.

Winter turned out to be not too bad. The worst of it was being confined to the cave for days at a time during

blizzards; but in between times he could get about and enjoy the winter world as he had always done.

Not long before Sunwending he skied down to see Gorlim. He found the smith in a state of suppressed but high excitement. He pulled Beren into the smoke-house the moment he arrived.

“She’s in kindle!” he whispered. “Powers eternal be praised to the skies, she’s in kindle!”

“How long since?” asked Beren.

“Three months,” said the smith. “Not long after – you know.”

“Gorlim,” said Beren hesitantly, “it doesn’t always – you know, er, follow through. Don’t get your hopes too high.”

“I know, I know – but still, after all this time! Oh, glory be – I don’t know if I’m coming or going. After all this time! Your friend done the goods all right. I tell you, boy, I ain’t never going to cut down a living tree ever again!”

Beren hoped it would turn out all right. Somehow he had a hollow feeling in his stomach about the whole affair. He could not get Annag’s words from years before out of his head. Must good fortune always be balanced by bad?

For the feast of Sunwending he broke his isolation, spending it with his family. It was a happy occasion, with differences set aside. The mirth flowed as freely as the mead and the mulled ale.

Year 455

Beren did not know what woke him. Had somebody called his name? Whatever it was had pulled him from sound sleep to wakefulness in the blink of an eye.

There was no sound now anyway, nor light either. Feeling his way, he crawled down the cave until he could make out the entrance, the black edge showing sharp against the night-blue sky. The air nipped his nose as he poked his head out and looked around cautiously, the smoke of his breath hanging still on the night air.

As he crouched there, the warmth of his sleep seeping slowly away, he wondered why he did not go back and snuggle again into his fur. There was nothing to see; everything lay peaceful under the diamond-strewn canopy of the starry sky. But as he hesitated, a feeling began to grow in him that he must not go back, but must indeed go further out. His ears could hear nothing, but he became convinced that someone, somewhere, was calling his name. He was being called, and he must go.

He had believed that he was awake, but as he emerged from the cave, on skis and wrapped in a heavy fur mantel, he was no longer quite so sure. The silent world was not the world of wakefulness; and he seemed in his own perceptions to be walking beside himself, watching his own mind and body obey a compulsion outside of reason. He had no thought of future, nor past, had neither hopes nor fears; there was only the now – the black masses of trees, the luminous glimmer of the snow, the glorious jewels of heaven above.

The frost-glazed snow crackled under his skis as he skimmed down the slopes of Foen. He knew the country here like the back of his hand. He realized in a detached way that his body was making for the farm, choosing an economical line which looped around the ridges, so as to avoid the necessity of climbing out of the intervening valleys.

He skimmed into the cleared fields on the flat. The dim landscape opened out. Buildings glided by, then more trees.

He was at the empty pool above the broken dam. He slid to a stop, but heard nothing then in the stillness. The stream was silent, locked in a grip of ice. A dark emptiness filled the hollow, in the formless black beneath the trees.

Further. Working his way down. The ground became too rocky for skis, so he stopped and took them off, leaving them where they lay. He stumbled on through deep pockets of snow between the boulders.

He came at last to the wide pool between the close-huddled trees, the one that had the springs. It never froze. Children played here in summer, but it was cold and lonely now under the stars.

He was no longer alone. He saw a pale figure, child-sized, gliding noiselessly towards him across the snow. Every hair on end, Beren watched it approach.

As the apparition came right up to him, he sighed and relaxed.

“Silmenen,” he said in a low voice that shook from the release of tension. “Is it you? I thought I was seeing my sister.”

“Not yet,” said the Elf-woman, “and she is not here.”

The pool was full of stars; a thousand miles down.

Although the two stood in the shadow of the trees, he seemed to detect a faint glimmer of starlight on the snowy blanket all around them, centred on the dainty feet of the Elf. There was not a sound to be heard except for their breathing, and nothing moving except for its mist.

“I have summoned you here,” she said in her light voice.

Beren was still not sure everything was not all a dream. “What is it you want of me?” he whispered.

She laughed softly, a ripple of silver sounds.

“Do you fear for your life, or your manhood?” she said. “No, no – I am not one of your Tree-witches. Have no fear. Although she did you a great good, the black one. She is my sister in the heart. But I have no such gifts for you: only two, and those small ones.”

“And what are they?” he said, in the same dreamlike tones.

“The first is my farewell,” she said.

That jerked him awake. “That is a surprise!”

She gave him a wry half-smile, then looked away. “To some, yes.”

“But where are you going?”

“Far away. You will not see me again.”

He was puzzled. “But Silmenen! What change is this? I had not heard anything.”

She looked back at him. The smile had gone and he could not make out the expression on her face, in the darkness beneath the trees.

“Few know,” she said, “but soon all shall know.”

The cold was creeping into his bones and making him shiver. He looked at her slight figure, standing on the snow. She had walked on it right up to him, making little imprint in the soft surface.

“How do you *do* that?” he asked. “There is easily a foot of snow here, yet you ride on it like – like a thistledown.”

She laughed. "Very apt. I have always trodden lightly on the earth. So will all my people, in time; I am only a forerunner." She stepped even closer to Beren, and now he could see the starlight in her dark eyes. "Also it helps me to my second gift," she added softly.

"What is the gift?" asked the young man.

"A kiss," she said. "A first and a last kiss. A kiss for memory's sake: my memory, for memory is soon all I shall have. And a kiss for you to remember, when you have greater kisses than mine at your call. A woman's kiss, to disturb your dreams. An Elven kiss, to put sparks about your head and a butterfly in your stomach. Come; it is time."

There was no thought in his head, no dream of refusing. Clumsily he stepped next to her slight form, his own feet sinking deeply into the snow. Even so, he had to bend his head down to meet hers.

A part of him was surprised to find her lips warm. And he had never felt anything so velvety soft in his life. They were small lips, and they trembled against his.

The kiss went on for a long time. At last she broke away, her chest rising and falling with her breath.

"Enough," she whispered, eyes on his face. She turned then and ran lightly away. In a moment she was gone, leaving him alone with the slow mists coiling over the pool, and the starry sky glimmering miles down under the water. Where she had been there was only a cold place, and in his heart a great emptiness.

Day 1

The woman sat bolt upright and cried her daughter's name into the darkness. "Hiril!"

Half-woken, her husband beside her patted her flank. "'S all right, Mel, 's only a dream," he mumbled. But then he too sat up in a cold shock, all sleep forgotten.

The whole house was trembling.

Through the whole of the Northlands, people were waking in fright. Zalta and Irma sat up in the quaking darkness, hearts in their mouths. Andreth in Newfort, struggling out of a doze, cried out in alarm. Menelrond started up, and the Brothers. In the Tower of Guard, as well as those of Angrod and Aegnor, Elves were blowing the alarm and rushing to the battlements. Far, far to the North, Fingolfin stood up at his desk, eyes blazing.

There was a hatch in the roof above the loft where Barahir and Emeldir slept. Tossing off his fur, Barahir felt his way to this and lifted it cautiously. He put it on the latch then, as Emeldir's head joined his own in poking out.

The pine-clad hills miles away to the North stood out sharp and black against an orange glow which was spread across the whole northern horizon. The continuous tremor in the earth was disturbing the hens, and now the dogs were barking.

"What is happening?" whispered Emeldir.

Barahir face was grim as he took in the whole fiery expanse of sky. "I don't know," he said. "Nothing good."

They both stood there a while, taking in the fiery light and the shaking of the ground; and gradually the awful realization arose in them of what it must signify.

It is impossible to describe the despairing course of their emotions during the following minutes. All their lives long they had been aware of this thing, had known that it might happen at any time. But the possibility had been remote, theoretical, because the Enemy had been contained and quiescent for an inconceivable length of time – hundreds and hundreds of years. Barahir and Emeldir had nevertheless prepared for a

breaking of the Siege, had practised for it, all of their lives, because to do so was their duty; but without in the slightest ever believing that it would happen. They had pictured how it might unfold, dutifully, without believing in it; but the grimmest pictures in their minds had not encompassed this ground-shaking fury that lit the whole northern horizon in a livid band. They did not believe it; but looking to the North, they could not help but believe it.

They felt that their lives, their whole lives, were being slowly wrenched out by the roots and cast away, before their eyes. Nothing less.

There were tears. Emeldir cried out in her loss and despair, striking the edge of the hatch again and again, until her hand bled. Barahir for his part looked as grim and fell as a wounded bear.

Neither failed of their mettle. They swallowed this bitterest of pills.

“What are we going to do?” asked Emeldir dully at last.

“Fight,” said Barahir.

“Fight? We can’t fight that,” said Emeldir, indicating the flaming North.

“I am going to,” he said grimly. “You will too. I know you. What else is there? But enough of this. We must gather the folk.”

There were voices in the yard now, and torchlight. Barahir turned to her again, his expression softening.

“Come on, old sweetheart,” he said gently. “They’re waiting for us. This is the call; the one we hoped would never come. Let’s make a start.”

She stayed to pull some on clothes while he slid down the ladder and ran into the snow-covered yard. Arthad was there with a torch, a sleepy Dagnir at his side. Lights showed also in the main house. Barahir walked quickly past the two men without a word to where the big iron triangle hung on the side of the barn. The clangour as he beat this excited the dogs into a renewed frenzy of barking. He left off striking the iron when people began to stream out of the house into the yard, and went back then to Arthad and Dagnir.

“Didn’t know we had a drill planned,” mumbled Dagnir. “S as well, I suppose – once in a while.”

Arthad glanced at his companion sharply. “Drill?” he said. “This no drill. Can you not feel?”

Barahir took the big man by the arm and led him wordlessly around the lodge, to where the northern sky could be seen.

“Oh, lordy,” said Dagnir. “Oh, lordy. Then it’s Him. Now of all times.”

Most of the household had gathered in the yard now and were exclaiming and chattering, their alarm plain to hear in their voices. The flickering light of the torches gleamed off many pairs of frightened eyes. They looked uncertainly at the trembling ground beneath them, and some also now began to notice the northern sky.

Barahir came to stand in the middle of the people and called firmly for hush. Emeldir had come down now, and stood behind him on one side, with Arthad and Dagnir on the other. “My dear friends,” Barahir said when the people had quieted, “I am sorry to call you from your beds into the cold. As you know, we have done so from time to time, for practice in case of war. Well, I am very much afraid, I am very sorry to tell you, that I fear this time it is no practice. This time I think it is different.

“The purpose of practice is to prepare, so we should not be too surprised if what we have prepared for comes home to us at last. It is uncomfortable, I know, and a wicked bad stroke of luck; but together we can see it through. We *have* practised, we are not caught like a lot of frightened rabbits, faced with the ferret. We are

not rabbits, we are hounds: peaceful in peaceful times, but fierce as wolves in time of war. So stand with me now! It is time for us to show our teeth, all of us together. Let us show a line of stout hearts and sharp steel to the enemy. We must now put away sleep, and make the preparations we know so well, and as quickly as we can. You all know what to do. Let us set about it.”

Some of the listeners looked blankly at each other. “What does he mean?” murmured somebody.

“It can’t be,” muttered another. “Must be a fire, or something.”

“That’s no fire,” said Barahir firmly. “It’s an attack. Look at it, feel the shaking. The Enemy is on the move. We can feel this in the ground, see it in the sky. I know it in my marrow. We must respond. We have planned for it, and now we must do it.”

Gilach stepped forward. “We will do all that you say, Master, and with a good will,” he said. “But a quick word before we start: do you have any ideas as to what exactly is happening?”

“No, I do not,” said Barahir. “I do not know how this will unfold any more than you. But we have prepared for the worst, we have trained for it, and we shall not go far wrong if we keep to that course. We will keep to the plan that we made long ago: march west, to the Vale of Sirion, and look to join our forces, if need be, to those of the Fair Folk from the Tower of Guard.”

Gilach bowed his acknowledgement.

Barahir took another look around the frightened faces of the people he knew so well. “I say this to you all: do not think to yourselves, alas we do not know what we face, therefore we must be afraid. We do know one thing, and we know that indeed as well as anything can be known: we know ourselves. We know that we are ready, and we know that together we are strong, strong as a rock. Hold that thought, and smash your fears on that rock like, like a broken pot!” Not the most potent metaphor perhaps, but it was all he could think of.

The people were quiet a moment, then began slowly to move. Groups set about the tasks they knew, with few words. “But I am not finished smoking the hams!” came Mari’s voice in protest, but she was shushed and carried along with the rest.

There were a thousand things to do. One of the first was to spread the word, so Arthad busied himself preparing horses while the rest of the household hurriedly dressed themselves. Adril and Kirimel were given mounts and were set to rousing the immediate district, with the message: muster at Sightfoot at daybreak. Kiri was sobbing, but she mounted her horse all the same.

After the young people had galloped off into the darkness, Barahir took Arthad aside. “We need to find out what is going on,” he said to the Southerner. “You are quick in the saddle, Thad, and you know the woods. Can you ride to Aegnor and find out how it is with him, and how things look to the North generally?”

Arthad grinned, teeth gleaming in the torchlight. “Trust me, master. But where meet, and when?”

“Ingold’s farm,” said Barahir. “You know the place. As to when... hmm. Shall we say by the third sundown from now? I doubt we can get there sooner.”

“Is good,” said Thad, and turned to go; but Barahir stopped him.

“One more thing,” he said. “Be careful of your life. Not just for your own sake, but for ours too. It is no good to us if you find out many things but then don’t come back at all. Do you understand? I know you are brave, Arthad, and in time I may call on that mettle; but what I want from you at present is not courage, but caution.”

Arthad nodded to him, eye to eye, then hurried to make his preparations. Shortly after that the thud of hooves told them that he was away.

The muster presented endless difficulties. Most of the people had known nothing but peace, all the days of their lives; few now were left who remembered the battles of Boromir's time, and even the last Orc-raid they could recall lay now several years in the past. There were many who flat-out refused to believe there was cause for alarm. An earthquake and a bit of a fire: what were they? An attack meant Orcs. No Orcs, no need to worry.

Barahir, with Gramlach at his side, grimaced with frustration as he surveyed the scanty numbers of locals gathered in the yard in the dull light of an overcast day. Only a very few more could be seen scattered down the approach road, although the short winter day was already far advanced.

"Why don't they come?" he burst out. "We had more the last time we had a drill!"

"That's mebbe why," said Gramlach in a grim voice. "They know, all right. Just don't want to face it. Reckon we'll need a few fellows to go and stir 'em up a bit, Master."

"As if we didn't have enough to do," Barahir fretted. He wished his son were there. He was to wish that many times in the following days.

By evening, stern words from Sightfoot emissaries had succeeded in mustering something close to the strength of the district. Other riders had been sent out during the day to carry the message to the remainder of the upper valley. Barahir hoped fervently that they would have quicker and better success – otherwise this business would simply descend into chaos.

He had then to argue with the doubters among the assembled locals, of whom there were many. Emeldir, hiding her own doubts, was a wonderful help here: few could withstand the fire of her tongue, and she shamed both men and women into compliance. By nightfall the company had found something approaching unity of purpose and were preparing to march west on the morrow along the trading road. The work continued by the light of several bonfires. Supplies of all kinds, from food to weapons, were being gathered and packed. Lists were tallied, war-shirts were rattled out, arrows apportioned. Too many things to do, and never enough people to do them. If only Beren were here! thought Barahir again as he settled with brusque words an argument over saddlebags between two weathered farmers, then turned to the next task.

The shaking in the earth had subsided during the day, and with the onset of evening the glow was also no longer to be seen. In the brief moments he had for thought, Barahir found it increasingly difficult to believe in the alarm. Was it mistaken? Was it all for nothing? There was a hollow space within him into which such doubts steadily dripped their acid. All very well to say that no harm would be done, that it would be no worse than a live drill; perhaps so, but he thought that Mel and he would have to go and live somewhere else in that case. Harsh words had been spoken, prides had been injured, fears aroused; people would not easily forget.

Accusations about oat-flour had begun to fly back and forth, so Barahir had to put his worries aside and deal with that.

Day 2

Few people had much sleep that night, but by the following morning they were ready to march. The weather was no better, and threatened more snow, but there was nothing they could do about that. At last the horses were saddled and loaded and the shivering column got under way. At least the exercise warmed them up.

It was not a difficult day's march, something like five or six leagues, along a made road. The muster point, long planned, was to be Ingold's Farm, which lay just beneath the shallow ridge which separated Ladros from the upper watershed of Sirion. Under the plan hammered out long before, the army would descend into the main valley of Sirion and seek to join with any Finrodian forces pushing north from the fortress.

Although the apprehended snow began soon indeed to drift down in large, wet flakes, which continued off and on during the day, they reached their goal before the light began to fail in mid-afternoon. Everybody was damp and uncomfortable from snow seeping into the crevices between clothing and skin, but tents, fires and

food soon improved the general mood. Only Barahir, surveying the scattered fires, felt exhausted and despondent. They were so few! And if he felt tired to death now, how was he going to hold up until they reached the valley, let alone fight when the time for that came? If it came? Once more, his thoughts turned to his son. He had half-expected, and certainly had hoped, that Beren would appear from wherever he had been hiding himself and would join with the army. He could not help remembering the scorn in his son's voice when he had spoken of their plans the year before. But surely Beren would recognize that, however they might differ on tactics, the cause was a common one. Son, Barahir spoke in his imagination, you need not pick up a shield, but we could use your gifts! We need you. *I* need you. Please come, and let it be soon.

At the back of Barahir's mind niggled a fear that he had not yet openly admitted to himself: the fear that his son might be cowering in a hole somewhere, afraid to come out.

Emeldir tracked down her husband late in the evening, when most people were settling down to sleep. She bore a small leather bottle which steamed gently in the firelight.

"I want you to drink this and lie down," she said.

"A sleeping potion?" snapped Barahir in a voice which was beginning to sound raw – ragged at the edges. "Don't talk nonsense. There's still far too much to do."

"Then it will have to remain undone," said Emeldir firmly. "I will not be gainsaid in this, Bari. You must husband your strength, otherwise you will have none left for when you need it. If you will not see sense in this, then you are no leader for us, and I will have you tied up, and take your place. The house-men would support me."

Barahir turned on her with a dangerous glint in his eye, appearing for an instant not unlike his brother. However, the hardness in his gaze softened after a moment and then slowly relaxed into a smile.

"You mutinous harpy," he said. "I believe you would, too."

"Drink!" was all that Emeldir replied, thrusting the bottle at him. He took it, but paused before he took a swig.

"Only if you do, too," he said. "You are not made of stone either."

She smiled at him and took the bottle out of his hand when he had finished.

Day 3

"It's all nonsense," blustered Maethor. "A bit of an earth-tremor, and you are all running around as if the sky is falling."

"And what of the fire in the sky?" said Gramlach.

"Trick of the light," said the other. He was a striking-looking man of forty or so with vigorous, carefully tended dark hair, and dashing eyebrows and moustache.

"The entire army is gathering by Ingold," said Gramlach.

"Just proves my point," said Maethor. "You want me to rush in to join the other fools; well, I won't."

"I think 'Pengorn'²¹ would be a better name for you than 'Maethor'²²," said Gramlach scornfully.

Maethor jumped up, red in the face. "You watch your tongue, shit-sweeper," he shouted. "Who do you think

21 Coward.

22 Warrior.

you are? You stinking serf. One piece more of your insolence and I'll have you whipped from the hall."

Gramlach also stood up. He was taller and stronger than the other, and his face had set itself into grim lines which might have surprised one or two of his friends. "I was sent here by my lord Barahir," he said steadily, "who as Master of Upper Ladros is your lord too. Added to that, in time of war I command a hundred, which is more than you can say. So all your talk of insolence don't amount to nothing." He turned to address some burly men who were standing around uncertainly. "Gaeruin, Carrag, Limlug: you know me, and you know my master. You know full well this ain't no joke, nor no foolery neither."

"Don't you try to cozen my men from their fealty," shouted Maethor.

"You shut your mouth," said Gramlach to him. "Time enough to speak o' fealty when you are ready to hold to your own." He turned back to the uneasy followers. "I ain't a-going to waste any more words on a dastard. But you fellows, you think on what I've told you. You've got heads; use 'em. I don't ask you to be traitors; but if you all of you get together, maybe you can make this fool see sense."

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Emeldir was relentless. "My lord, you are called. We are all called. Called to our duty. Will you answer, and so lengthen the massed shield-wall, strengthen our defiance, add your bitter points to ours; or will you cower here like a rabbit in its musty burrow?"

Thindur, the grey-haired master of the hall, writhed under her stern gaze. He could not meet her eyes for long. "Tsk, tsk," he fretted, "such poetry sounds very well, but cool heads must put such overblown stuff to one side. The question here is one of policy."

"As to that," said the red-headed woman, "if you fight, why, you may win; but if you think to cower in your hole and thus weather the storm, bethink you, there is no hole deep enough but that Morgoth will find you in it. Resistance *is* the best policy."

"Look," protested the withered man, "all this must be taken under advisement. What you request of me simply cannot be done in the time you propose. And in any case, nothing done rashly can ever be done well. I do not see Orcs at our gates; surely, then, there is still time for counsel, for thought and debate."

"No," she said, shaking her head, "there is no time. Battles are not won by people who stay to debate. Either come now, or die later. Life will not wait, and neither will I."

"Why must you press me so," the old man whimpered, hands to his head. "I cannot do what you ask."

Emeldir came even closer to him, and held him in her gaze. "Thindur," she said, "listen to me. You are too old to fight, I know that. If you will not come, then so be it. But that is not what I require of you. What you must do is release your people, so they can hear me. You *must* do that. You *must* let them decide for themselves. Your lord commands it. *I* command it, as his lieutenant."

"But what if they all go away, and leave me unprotected?" cried Thindur.

"Then, my lord, they will have showed honour, courage and sense – while you have not."

* * * * *

Towards the close of day, the preparations were at last gathering towards a single point: the advance in force over the ridge towards Rivil, which was planned for the break of the next day.

Barahir had risen refreshed, and even after the remorseless day now behind him he felt that he had still some reserves of strength. Great numbers of men had in addition poured in during the day, and since their preparations and baggage also seemed in most cases at least adequate, the force at his command had at last risen to something like a respectable size. He thought now that, given luck as well as carefully chosen

ground, they might not acquit themselves badly against a moderately numerous enemy.

However, as the tide of tasks slacked off, so had Barahir more time to think. He was badly in need of information. He had sent a few scouts into the valley ahead, but none had yet returned. Neither had Arthad, although the light of the day of their appointment was failing now as the hidden sun sank towards the horizon.

Equally, there had been no sign of his son; and the fear formerly hidden had now emerged onto the stage of consciousness. Barahir had not dared mention this gnawing worm of shame to Emeldir, nor had she spoken her own mind to him since the first night. He did not know what she was feeling now, could not guess her thoughts. All he could do was numbly pray to what Powers might be listening: please, please, do not let my son turn out a coward.

The first cook-fires were beginning to flicker in the darkening field when a figure appeared from the lower bound of the wood. It was on foot, moving slowly, and leading a lame horse. Barahir sprang up; it was Arthad.

They led the weary figure to the fire and somebody put a bowl of stew into his lap and mug of mulled beer into his hand.

“Can somebody see to my horse?” asked Arthad, warming his hands around the stew. The horse was led away, and Barahir turned to the onlookers.

“I want to talk to Thad alone,” he said. “Could you others give us some distance? You’ll hear all about it later. Mel, Gram, Brem, you stay please.” As the crowd began slowly to disperse, Barahir turned back to Arthad where he sat slowly spooning stew into his mouth. There were lines in the man’s face which he could not remember seeing there before. Clearly Arthad was exhausted; but by the hollow planes of his face and the slump of his shoulders, it seemed more than that somehow.

“Can you tell us something of what you saw, Thad?” Barahir asked softly. “Details can wait.”

Arthad looked up, and there was a darkness behind his eyes. “Master, when you hear what I have to say, you sorry you born.”

Despite himself, Barahir swallowed. He looked at the others, who returned his gaze wide-eyed.

“Tell, then,” he said dully to Arthad. “Tell us the worst.”

“Don’t want to,” said Thad heavily. “Don’t want to remember it.” He gathered himself. “Well, Master, it went like this. Rode pretty quick at the start, horse fresh. Rode towards fire, stopped only to tell Gorlim about muster.” The smith, who had ridden in early in the day, had already reported the encounter. “Was careful near head of valley, like you say. Good advice, saved me riding into Orcs. Got around them in daytime, got so could see valley, Aegnor’s tower. Open plain beyond.” He swallowed. “Master, I think grasslands, all of them maybe, all in North: all gone. Burnt, killed. Fire came along ground, not just fire but I think poison too. Stink of it made me sick, trees there all dying.”

Barahir held his head in his hands. This was terrible. “*All* of it?” he said.

Arthad shrugged. “Have been only that place, little bit more maybe, I tell soon. But was like wave of fire. Come south, come everywhere.” He looked at Barahir. “Is not worst news.”

“Tell on,” said Barahir thickly.

“Tower is taken,” said Arthad simply. “I think maybe, most Elves die in smoke, flame. Not all: some came down. I saw it. Oh Master, made me want to shout. So brave, so bright. They was cut through Orcs like hot knife in butter. Think Aegnor was there. I want to join. But then... but then... don’t want to tell, don’t want

to think about.” He shivered. None of the others said anything, but Bremund reached a flask over to the Southerner.

“Have a drink of that,” the fair-haired man said quietly. “It will warm your heart a bit better than beer.”

Arthad swigged, choked, swigged again, then wiped his mouth.

“Thing came,” he said in a choked voice. “Tall, fiery, but I say that and you think: well fine. But you don’t know. This like... like... like all the bad things you ever do in your life. Like all the dark thoughts you have in black hours. Like you be mean, coward, petty, nasty, sick. All wrapped up. Don’t want to think of that ever again, but I will. Won’t escape that till death, maybe not even then. Orcs? Pah. Can cut off heads till they pile over me, sing all time while do it, then laugh when they kill me. Would feel good. But this thing, make a man feel dirty, spoiled. Never get right again.”

They listened to him with horror in their hearts.

“Aegnor’s Elves couldn’t beat this bad thing, the fire-creature,” continued Arthad. “It eat them all up. Came up to tower after, went into tower, then after some while whole tower lit up with great fire, glow hot all through, flames roaring up into the sky. But a filthy fire, dirty. Could hear roar across valley, and was more too, because thing *knew* I was there, was laughing at me. S-sorry...” He leaned his head down and covered it in shaking hands.

After a time Barahir leaned over and placed a hand on Arthad’s shoulder.

“Thad,” he said gently, “we need to know. Where did the fire-creature go?”

Arthad raised his head and made a visible effort to pull himself together. He took another pull at Bremund’s flask. “East,” he gulped. “I go, I went south. Didn’t want no more. But got angry with self next day, went on a bit then east through Drûn. Had to stay high: most of Drûn is dead, caught in poison fire.” He paused for breath. “Everywhere dead, drooping, turning brown. Miles and miles of it, dead. Saw Walker, you know him sort? Tree-shepherd. Wailing over dead trees. Couldn’t stand to hear it, so I went on. Don’t know how. Crazy maybe. Anyway, end of day, was closer to Angrod, still too far though, had soon to turn back.” He looked soberly at Barahir. “Met Elves then, wounded Elves. Angrod gone too, Master. They all tell me, weeping. Fire-filth creature was at his tower, Elves see it. They call it ‘Balrog’.”

The listeners shifted uncomfortably. Some of them had heard that name before, muttered in dark tales of battles past.

“Anyway,” continued Angrod, “Elves and me go south together. At inn that night. People there say, Bregolas and also his sons went to fight for Angrod. Nobody hear what happened, though. Sorry, boss. Couldn’t find out any more. Been riding since dawn; all quiet, not many people out. No Orcs, no... nobody else.”

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After Arthad had been sent to what rest the painful impress of terror would allow him, Barahir assembled the leaders to his fire. He saw his own sense of unease reflected in the flame-lit faces hunkered in circle around him. But they had the luxury of allowing their fears to show; for him there must be a harder road. That is why, when speaking to them, he spoke with firmness, hiding his weariness and apprehension.

“You’ve all heard the news,” he said shortly, looking around the circle. “I don’t need to comment about it. I’m sure you all feel it as sorely as I do. What we have to do now is decide what to do. Our whole strategy, out here in the West, has been based on those forts protecting our northern flank. None of us in our wildest dreams imagined that we could ever find that flank uncovered. Well, no use moaning about it, but that is the fact we are now facing. So the question arises, whether to continue with the plans long laid down, or to turn back. In defence of our homes.”

The others stirred, looked at each other, hesitating. It fell to Emeldir to reply. Gazing at him clear-eyed, head held high, she said, "Husband and leader: I counsel to go on. It is the right thing to do; and it is what we have prepared for."

"Aye, well," said one of the farmers sceptically, "that do sound very well, Mistress, but what about my young 'uns, and my missus? And she'm expecting again, as it is. 'Do right' do sound very well, an' I'm sure we would all want to do it, matters being otherwise; but they at home 'm left bare and unprotected, and there's the fact of it."

A chorus of nods and 'Arrs' of assent greeted this.

Gramlach spoke up. "Captain," he said, a trace of his normal diffidence showing still in his voice, "I don't have no young 'uns, nor expecting 'em neither; so I know 'tis not the same for me. But I just want to say, to point out like, that a proper defence takes time. We need to plan, to see where we can fortify. Can't do it for every homestead in Ladros, no nor in the upper valley, neither. You got to pick your places. You know that, Captain; I'm just speaking, cos maybe some of you other fellows may not."

"Gram, you know fighting matters," said the farmer who spoke first, a youngish man known as Harban. "I'm not denying it. But you're asking us to leave our women and childer unprotected. That's a stiff kind of proposition, choose how you look at it."

"I'm no keener on it than you, Harb," replied Gramlach earnestly. "But what would you have us do? We're fifteen hundreds, give or take. Together, we can maybe do summat. Spread over the Valley, little bits here and there, a few spears at each homestead, what could we do? Just die in patches, that's what."

"That's a grim kind of tale you're telling us," said an older man, from further around in the circle; but the tension in the faces of all there present, and the flicker of firelight in their uneasy eyes, showed that they shared this thought.

Barahir had a thought which he had hesitated to give voice to, but he brought it to light now. "I don't want to raise any kind of hope, where maybe, if we look truth straight in the face, there isn't actually very much," he said, "but I also want to remind you all of something, and that is that we don't stand in the Enemy's way. His principal objective, so far as one can guess it, is to break out to the South. He can't do that through Dorthonion. So it is just possible that we may have a little time. If you want my view, I think we here should carry through what we started: make our way under what strength of arms we have gathered into the Vale of the Great River, to discover how matters stand there, and to render what aid lies within our power to the Fair Folk. That is our duty, as vassals of Lord Finrod. Powers permitting, we will do that; and having done what we can, we will come back, and tackle the next of the the difficulties which those who rule Arda have lately seen fit to strew in our path. It is a throw of the dice, in a grim game; but all of our comfortable certainties burned away to ash that night when we saw the mark of fire in the North."

Glum looks greeted this, and there was more discussion; but in the end they all agreed.

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Barahir was stumbling from one camp to the next through a black night which mirrored the state of his heart. A cold wind had got up and was dragging out all the fires into long, uneasy flares which produced much smoke but little warmth. Around each uncertain blaze hunched a group of farmers, trying vainly to extract a bit of heat from the wind-tormented flames. Cloaks and skins were not keeping much of the wind and damp out of their bones, and in the pestilential manner of fires, no matter on which side they crouched, the flag of stinging smoke would swing suddenly to engulf them anew. Most of the people were trying to heat and eat a meal, but there was low talk going on all the time. As Barahir appeared out of the dark at each fire the people around it would stop what they were muttering and look at him opaquely. Garbled rumours of Arthad's report had circulated quickly, but nobody asked him for further information. Barahir took this as a bad sign.

Talk in the army had also touched on whether it would not now be better to go back, but the sentiment had

petered away. Unity of purpose prevailed – or rather, common recognition of an unpleasant but unavoidable necessity. They had still to go into the valley in the morning and find what awaited them there.

Some of the scouts had at last returned, but none of them had seen anything amiss. Others were still missing.

Barahir reached another fire, another group of shivering farmers. These were two men and three women. They looked up at him in the same blank way when he came into the circle of fitful light. He crouched down and tried, for the hundredth time it seemed to him, to bend his stiff lips into a cheerful smile.

“How are you all faring,” he said. “Everything all right?”

“Aye, Captain,” their leader said. “Bit cold like, but not too bad.”

“Good, good,” said Barahir. “Get some sleep if you can manage it. We’ll be off early in the morning. The scouts are back, everything seems clear down below.”

Nobody spoke.

Barahir clapped a hand on the shoulder of the nearest and prepared to get up again. “We’re in good shape,” he said with a firmness that he did not feel. “Things are a little uncomfortable just now, but it will all look better in the morning. We are a great body of spearmen, and we know how to use them. Keep your blades dry and your spirits up!”

He levered himself wearily up then and left them. He never felt warm at any of the fires, but as soon as he left one, the difference between the temperature near a fire and the temperature away from one became stark. He found it an ever-increasing difficulty to drag himself away from the state of mere discomfort to be found around a fire and to push out again into the deadly chill of the wind. His fingers were numb from it already and his lips were slowly cracking in the cold.

Later, the night seemed to become darker. Barahir tried fitfully to sleep, but he kept waking from a doze into a start. From her restless movements, Emeldir beside him was in no better state.

He got up and shoved some more wood on the fire. They were running out of fuel here, but that did not matter; there would be more to be had, down in the valley. They must try to make a long march of it, right to the edge of the trees if they could.

He could not keep his thoughts from the awful news of the North. The entire Leaguer, snuffed out, just like that. Aegnor and Angrod swept away. No news of the flower of their own people, marching behind Bregolas, but was it sensible even to hope? Could any man survive in the North right now

And how had the defences to the East and West fared? Impossible to know, pointless to speculate. And what awaited them below? Had the poison wave reached so far? Were they simply marching into the wolf’s maw? In the darkness of the night he was nagged by the thought of the scouts who had not come back. Lost, taken? Who knew.

Ever and again he came back to the same gnawing question – where is my boy? He might even be already dead – who knew where he had been at the moment of attack. Perhaps they would never know. They might simply never find him – his burnt bones lying lost on a hillside somewhere. That would kill Mel. But even that would be better than the other thing... please let it not be that he had run.

Barahir could not swallow the idea that his son would turn coward. But if not, then where was he? The thought nagged and nagged at him. He turned over wearily, conscious of the grateful warmth of his wife on one side, and tried to sleep.

* * * * *

Somebody was shaking him. “Master! Master! Wake up!” He rolled over and sat up. Their fire had died

down to coals: it must be late at night. He peered blearily at the shadow bending over him. "Gram? Is that you?"

"Aye, Master. You must get up. It's Beren, he's come."

The rush of sheer joy at the news woke Barahir more thoroughly than a dash of cold water. He turned to Emeldir huddled up beside him, feeling a stab of pity for disturbing her weariness at the same time he was shaking her gently. When she half-woke and turned her head up, he whispered "Beren has come," into her ear. She sat up then and peered eagerly into the darkness.

Gramlach's outline moved to one side to allow another to enter the tent. Barahir knew the shape, the movements and even the scent of his son; would have known them instantly, anywhere. He crushed the boy in his embrace.

"Powers, Papa, leave off," protested Beren. "I'll need my arms, you needn't break them."

Then it was Emeldir's turn. "My son," she murmured in his ear, arms tight around him, "oh my son. You have come to us at last. I had almost given way to despair. You will never know how close."

Barahir had been clouting his son on the back the while. Beren, succeeding at last in dragging himself free of his mother's embrace, caught his father's hand to stop him.

"Mother. Father. It is glad I am to see you too. But we have not time for this just now. You must tell the men to douse their fires, now, immediately. The Enemy is afoot, and we are in grave danger."

"Fires?" stuttered Barahir. "But... but, the men cannot do without fires in this weather."

"They must. The more time we waste in talking, the closer comes the danger. Please, Father, I speak of what I know. Only give the order, now, so that it may begin, and I will explain to you as we go."

Barahir still made no move. Beren reached out and took his hand.

"Father. Trust me, please."

Emeldir reached and touched him too. "Do it, Bari," she said quietly.

Barahir turned then slowly and sought Gramlach's shape by the tent opening. "Gram? Are you there?"

"Aye, Captain," came his voice.

"Did you hear?"

"Aye, Captain. Set about it, shall I? All fires to be doused?"

"And they should prepare to move," added Beren. He stood up then and went immediately to the close-by coals and poured water on them. A stink and a steam hissed up and total blackness invaded the tent. They heard his voice then close by their ears.

"Thank you for your trust," he said. "I hope it will be in time. Before I tell you what I know, let me tell you something I guess: you have scouts who have not returned. Is this not so?"

"Yes, not all of them have come in yet," replied Barahir.

"Then I can further guess where the absent scouts were sent. Direct down the road towards Rivil, no?"

"As it happens," said Barahir slowly, "yes. What do you know?"

“A legion of Orcs is coming up the valley,” replied Beren. “Just one, I think; but they outnumber you even so, and you cannot fight them in those woods. There is nowhere to form up. Here there is space, but the slope is against you.”

“But what do you suggest we do?” said Barahir. “We cannot just run away.”

“Be clever,” said Beren. “You should choose your ground and your opponent with care. I must tell you, Father, Mother, I suspect there are more Orcs in the Vale than you could conceive of in your darkest nightmare. You could not take on a tithe of them. You must accept that, and decide your course accordingly. Orodreth will probably send some force north from the Tower; if you will take my advice, you will seek to join them as soon as may be.”

“So had we always intended,” said Barahir. “But you speak of ‘suspect’. Are you simply guessing?”

“About those near Rivil, no,” said Beren. “I have some information about matters in the Vale, but it is as yet scant, for reasons I will explain. I have not yet explained about the fires; and it is all connected.

“You both know how I can speak to the creatures; perhaps you may guess that they bring me information. What you probably do not know is that the Enemy can use the same resource, or one similar. He has spies in the air now, over the whole Valley below. By day he has Crebain, a sort of evil crow; by night I am not certain, but I fear bats, and evil owls, and other creatures with no names. If once these spies find you, you are finished. Dousing the fires was a start, but you must all move. If you move away, I can arrange to hide your tracks. I hope so, anyway. But move you must, and just as quickly as you can.”

“In the dark?” Barahir’s doubt could be heard in his voice.

“Yes,” said Beren.

“But where do you want us to move?”

“I can lead you by paths through the forest,” said Beren. “I hope to bring you all down into the Vale undiscovered. There are other plans afoot which will help with that, but for the moment at least you must get under cover and stay under it.”

Barahir was having difficulty taking this all in. “You seem to have a lot of plans afoot,” he said into the darkness.

“Yes,” came his son’s voice, and there was a hint of dry humour in it. “I have been busy.”

“Well. How do you know we are outnumbered by the Rivil force?”

“Because I know their numbers, and yours,” came Beren’s patient voice. “You have perhaps fourteen, fifteen hundreds; they have more than thirty.”

Blast it! It was certainly a good estimate of their own numbers. Barahir considered some more. “You think the missing scouts were taken?” he asked.

“I fear so, Father.”

“Will they not, then, betray our presence and numbers to the Enemy, as you feared his spies might do?”

“It is a risk we cannot do anything about,” replied Beren simply. “Luck is also needed in war.”

“So it seems,” said Barahir heavily. He turned to the warm breath at his side which was Emeldir. “How say you, Comrade?”

“I think we must do as he suggests,” came back Emeldir’s cool voice. “Can you think of another option?”

“No.” He sighed. “You should be leading this army, Son,” he said. “I am too old for it. There is no time now for blame, but I will say only that you *could* have been leading it, with the sword of Boromir held high in the van, had you not chosen other courses.”

His own hand was grasped by one strong and warm. “Father,” came his son’s voice, “not so. Only you can lead. You look at me, and you see, perhaps, someone whose whole life has been honed for one purpose. I had not thought it was so, but many things have happened in the past three days. Some things have become clearer to me. But this purpose of mine, if there is one, may not be the one you suppose. And you do not see that you, too, have been honed for a purpose. And it is exactly this: to lead the men of Ladros into war.” Sounds indicated that he had risen to his feet. “Come now, let us quickly pack. It is time to be out of this place.”

Day 4

There is always some light, even on the darkest night, but here and now there was only enough to distinguish the dim loom of land from the faintly lighter sky above them. A careful eye might in addition, with difficulty, pick field from forest.

Barahir never afterwards knew how they managed to get the whole army formed up and moving in the dark. All of his captains and companions had taken strong roles in getting the troops ordered and moving, but it had needed all their strength. Pure concerted will had turned the scales of persuading cold and sleepy farmers to leave the faint warmth of fire and fur, to tear themselves from the oblivion of sleep and the comfort of dreams, to face a biting wind in confusion and darkness. Beren also was everywhere: persuading slackers, guiding the van, collecting the lost and wandered from the rear. He also found time to speak more with his father, giving him a little further insight into the many movements which Beren seemed to have conjured up from the obscure and secretive ranks of his animal connections.

His voice came out of the darkness just as Barahir detected the loom at his side.

“Father,” said Beren, “your men may encounter deer, particularly in the rear. Can you give the order to them not to shoot? To leave the creatures alone?”

“Yes, if you say they must,” said Barahir. “But what is it all about? What undertaking is this?”

“Our tracks,” replied Beren. “I told you I had taken thought for it. If all goes as planned, the path of our army into the woods should be hidden from at least casual gaze before daybreak.”

So the long night wore on. Barahir and Emeldir were staggering arm in arm through the trees at the last, each supporting the other. Would the weary march never end?

Slow daylight began at last to filter greyly through the trees, but still the march went on. The forest killed most of the wind, and little snow was falling; the break of day also made it easier to keep together. But the whole army was exhausted, in fact was moving more like a shambling crowd of old and ill than an ordered body of troops. Barahir wondered how long they could keep going. He wondered how long he could keep it up himself; or Mel, trudging iron-faced beside him, who had not spoken these last two hours and more.

At last Beren ran back towards them. He ran everywhere, but so silently it was beyond belief.

“I think we dare go no further,” he said to Barahir, while barely breathing faster than normal. “Here it is sheltered at least. I think we have come far enough to be reasonably safe.”

“How far do you think we have come?” wheezed Barahir. He was breathing harder than the boy.

“Perhaps four leagues,” said his son. “Grandfather’s farm lies a morning’s walk in that direction.” He pointed with his hand up the slope to the South.

The order was given, and the grateful troops sank down where they were. It was thick pine forest; very little of the sky could be seen, and there was not much snow lying.

“No fires?” asked Barahir despondently.

Beren shook his head sympathetically. “No fires,” he said. He busied himself then in helping people do at least the minimum to make themselves comfortable: sweeping snow from sleeping places, fetching brush to lie on, tying up horses. It was a marvel where he found the energy. Even the captains were creeping about now like old men. Nobody else had any enthusiasm left at all.

Most of the troops rolled themselves up in damp furs and went straight to sleep. Barahir was nodding as he tried with Emeldir to unpack their own gear when Beren came back to them. The younger man quickly had matters in order. He stopped his father, though, before the man could lie down and give himself up to the sleep he so desperately craved.

“A moment, please, Father,” said Beren. “There are one or two things I must tell you of, just quickly. We must do something about the spies. Indeed, we must destroy them, and replace them with our own. Only if the Enemy cannot see us, but we can see them, have we a hope of doing anything with our people. If they can find where we are, and find out how few we are, then we are done for – it is as simple as that. But if we can see where they are, and what they are doing, while we ourselves remain unseen, then we have a chance to strike a blow, and to escape afterwards into the bargain. This is what I hope to arrange this day. Do you have comments on this, or orders for me?”

“Why do you ask?” said Barahir thickly. Emeldir was already fast asleep at his side, little visible of her but the faded red plait dragging out next to the sleeping fur. “You have arranged it all on your own, it seems.”

“Because you are my captain,” said Beren. “On my own I can do, have done, much. But you have command.”

Barahir smiled with painful lips and squeezed his son’s hand. “Then I command you to arrange these matters of the spies at your discretion. I trust your knowledge and your sense.”

Beren smiled in his turn. “Sleep now, Father,” was all that he further said.

* * * * *

The tunnels had been one of those ideas which look brilliant on paper but turn out to be monsters when put into practice. Choker had no way to know how many lives they had cost, but at least half of his own unit had copped it, one way or another. And that was even before the big breakout, mind.

The tunnels had been years in the digging, and most of the Lice in Central had been co-opted to the job at one point or another. There were three tunnels: East, West and South. People said that the surprise of the attack was worth the cost in lives; and maybe that was true elsewhere, but in Choker’s own sector – South again, curse it – things had begun rather quiet to begin with.

In the years since the scouting débâcle he had slowly worked his way up the ranks again. He’d taken his time, been careful. Hadn’t stood out. He led a cohort now, just like old Two-dicks had, that time when Choker had worked that stroke against him. Choker often thought about that time. He watched his own troop-leaders now pretty closely.

The big breakout had come at last. Finally! How long had they all been waiting? How many weary years? Anyway they’d sat jammed up together in that dark tunnel, listening to the rumbling going on in the rock all around. The ground had shook, near continuous. There had been roof falls, luckily not too bad near Choker. It had sounded and felt like the end of the world. No-one had briefed the Lice in what was going on, they just had to cower there and wonder, whites of their eyes showing. When they got the go-ahead at last, and emerged into a choking, ruined landscape, Choker had been amazed, almost frightened. It nearly did seem

like it was the end of the world.

There was other horrors too, things Choker didn't like to think about. He'd heard about Firelords, but he never thought ever to see one, let alone be near one. The terror of that brushing encounter was laid on his mind like whips of fire. Thank fuck the thing had gone off to the East, while his own legion made its way south and west.

They'd come up not far from the western end of the Southwood. Choker remembered the lands from his scouting days. It looked very different now. The flood of poison, or fire, or whatever it had been had washed right up the forested slopes he remembered and had torched them into a black, smoking ruin. There was vapours all around still and it hurt to breathe. You had to stay out of hollows, where the gas collected, otherwise you were trashed. Quite a few Lice choked out their miserable lives that way.

The fire had swept away all the damned Star-eyes who had camped in that plain. Well, that was a flying start. They wouldn't be missed. Maybe the fire had caught some of those little brown fuckers, too. Ho, ho, ho – Choker wouldn't be weeping about that, either. Them and their fucking little darts.

They had orders to march to the West, along the edge of the ruined forest. There was a big river somewhere in there²³, Choker knew, which funnelled away toward the South. They said it was a narrow gorge down there, a choke-point. There was a Star-eye fort on an island in there somewhere.²⁴ Choker expected that the army would be sent to attack the fort, but it seemed the high-ups had other ideas. The legions, ten of them, all came to a stream which ran from the East.²⁵ Five legions stayed on the near side; the others, including Choker's 89th, splashed over the ford, and then they spread out. The 89th made its way to a broad hill not too far beyond the ford, and there they pitched camp and waited.

It was freezing cold, middle of winter of course. At least now they had marched beyond the extent of the poison gas and were among live wood again. They had cover, no stink to choke the lungs, and most important of all, they had wood to make fires with. There they sat, and shivered, and waited. A few days went by.

Some of the other legions saw action enough. Choker heard about it later. Seems they were all lying there in wait for some sally from the fort. It all went wrong though, somehow. It started when the Spies all were killed. Birds, these were, most of the Spies, great big black ones. Enemy birds had swarmed up from fuck knew where and mobbed the bastards. There wasn't a spy left. Choker's legion commander had scowled when he heard the news, but he'd said then, "It won't matter. Let them have their little victory. We've scouted all this land already, and everyone knows what he has to do." It had mattered, though, because the snow came down, and nobody knew what was happening. By the time they had worked it out, it was too late.

* * * * *

Dreams surged back and forth like waves on the shore he had never seen. Vague faces swam before his eyes, voices out of who knows where. A woman laughed, a baby cried. Then into his dream came cries of birds: the scream of eagles and the harsh voices of many ravens. There was battle in the heavens. The very sky itself was shaking with the ferocity of the combat; in fact the whole world was shaking to its roots.

"Father! Father! Wake up!"

Someone was shaking him vigorously by the shoulder. Climbing out of the well of sleep was a hard, slow business. When at last he unglued his eyes and could focus, he saw that it was Beren kneeling over him. The boy looked strained and tired. Barahir looked past him at the sky; there was some daylight still, but not much.

He sat up and rubbed his head. When he looked around, he got a shock. Looming there to one side was a

23 Sirion.

24 Minas Tirith on Tol Sirion.

25 The river Rivil.

squat dark figure which for an instant he took for a Druug. He peered at it, but it remained motionless. He turned back to Beren.

“Just what in the Pit is *that*?” he said.

“It is a stone figure, a Watch-stone,” said Beren. “The Druug make them.”

“Don’t remember seeing it last night – or earlier this morning, I suppose I should say,” said Barahir with suspicion. But Beren only shrugged in reply.

Tearing his eyes off the thing at last, he turned back to the youngster. “What hour is it?” he said.

“Close to sundown,” said Beren. “You slept maybe five hours. I’m sorry to wake you, Father, but I think we ought to move on.”

“Did you sleep at all?” asked Barahir.

“There’s not been time,” replied Beren. “But the news is good, Father! My friends are winning the battle in the skies. I hope that we will soon have the mastery; and then things should go much easier for us – Powers permitting.”

“I am glad – but should we not rather wait here until we are rested, then go on by day?” said Barahir. “I do not know how long I can persuade this army to keep on stumbling through the forest in the dark.”

“Well, Father, it is for you to say,” said Beren. “In my mind is just the thought that it is a long way still to the plain. You cannot hope to win any fight until you get there. Also, we are still closer than I like to the Orcs by Rivil.”

“But even you need to sleep some time,” said Barahir.

“I know,” said Beren. “My thought was to go on now for several hours, then all to sleep in the last of the night. That should see us to – wait, look you, Father, I will draw a map in the dirt.” He proceeded to do so. “So. There is the Well, here is the line of the ridge; this pine scale is us. Our path should take us gently downhill to the bottom of this valley. There are no Orcs anywhere near there so far as I know. We might even risk some careful fires; there are caves we could use for shelter. Depending on what my scouts report, we could climb then some few miles over this last ridge – here – after which we should find ourselves looking down into the Vale.”

Barahir thought it over, eyeing the rough map as he did so. “Son,” he said at last, “I know who the true leader of this force is, whatever you may say.”

Beren smiled and shook his head.

“Your advice sounds good to me,” continued Barahir. “Shall we make a start?”

“Just one more thing,” said Beren. “It may be possible to use skis for a good part of the way.”

“In the dark?” objected Barahir, eyebrows raised as high as he could push them.

Beren grinned. “It’s not so hard; it’s mostly downhill, and there’s quite a good trail. Also, the moon is up, and the cloud is thinner tonight. You’ll be surprised how well you can see the path.”

Barahir shook his head. “I never heard the like of this. Battle? It all sounds so simple when you hear how Boromir did things. Not this endless struggle even to get there, with no sleep, and all these impossible makeshifts. Birds fighting for us, for Powers’ sake. Stone Druug guards, and I don’t know what.” He looked at his son. “All right, I’m game if you are.”

They woke the captains then, and gave them simplified orders to pass down. Start in half an hour; put your skis on; eight leagues or so downhill; then sleep, and maybe even hot food.

Thus encouraged, the troops managed it fairly well. Beren led them in cunning ways which followed chains of more open glades. In these at least a little light filtered down from the hidden moon, enough to pick out one's way along the ground. Skiing blind in the occasional intervals of denser trees was unpleasant, but even here they found the forest floor was open and even enough to keep spills to a minimum. They made good time. Everybody was tired and hungry already at the start, but the few hours sleep had killed the worst of their blind fatigue from the previous night's march.

As on the previous night, Beren seemed to be everywhere, zipping tirelessly back and forth to guide and marshal the long stream of skiers. A line of pack-horses trotted in the rear.

The woods seemed to be full of owls. Barahir heard them constantly, and wondered what they found to hunt in the tall pine-woods. Occasionally too he heard the bark of foxes.

In one of the rare moments when his son was skiing by his side, Barahir found opportunity for some quiet talk. He told the tall young man, with reluctance, the weight of the heavy news brought by Arthad; was somehow not surprised to find that Beren already knew some of it.

"Aegnor's people at least were marked for death," was all the comment the youngster made. "And I was too stupid to see it."

Later in the night, Barahir remembered what Beren had said about bats, and other spies in the night. He asked his son how matters stood there.

"Don't worry," said Beren. "Owls are on the job." Only the increasing curtness of his answers spoke to the extent of his tiredness.

* * * * *

Barahir came to with a start and realized that he must somehow have been skiing in his sleep. He shook his fuzzy head, trying to drive out the creeping tides which threatened at every moment to submerge his consciousness once more.

The night was darker than before, and he did not know how long they had been travelling; it had seemed like an endless passage through hell, tormented by the twin devils of cold and fatigue. The army had stopped moving, but Barahir just stood there stupidly, wondering what was happening, but unable to muster the mental energy to go and find out. More than anything he simply wanted to drop where he was and sleep.

A figure loomed up out of the dark. "That you, Captain?" came Gramlach's voice, now hoarse with exhaustion. "Reached the water, have to get across." Making a titanic effort, Barahir gathered himself and staggered forward.

It was only a small stream, something to be crossed in two hops by a fresh person in daylight; but the effort of dragging one's stiffened limbs through the freezing current, in the dark at the end of a long journey, was proving to be a task which lay at the very limit of what his people could now manage – and in some cases even beyond. During that endless crossing by the straggling line of wordless and weary farmers, more than once some dim figure stumbled and fell into the dark water and was swept weakly away without even a cry.

Beren found Barahir on the far side where the men were crowding. His son was now visibly staggering too.

"We won't make the hills," said Beren. "Woods close by. Camp there. Here's no good, they must get further up."

His father clasped his shoulder wearily. "Can I speak out loud to them?" he asked.

“Yes,” said Beren. “Safe enough I think.”

Barahir turned toward the huddling dark mass which his dark-adapted eyes could just about pick out from the snowy background. He took a deep breath so as to project his voice.

“Men and women of Ladros!” he called to them. “This is your captain, Barahir, who speaks. You have all held up wonderfully. Rest is very near: just in some trees close by. We will go there now, and we will sleep long, and in the morning we will make fires and eat hot food. So, hold on just a little further. Wake those who lie on the ground. They must go on just a little more. Don’t give in now, after coming so far and holding yourselves so wonderfully well. I am proud of you all. But one last short effort now. Help your neighbour, stir yourselves. Up now and come!”

He turned away and found his son there, supporting his mother. Barahir took her other arm. “Come on Mel, come on old love,” he said to her. “Last stretch.” He turned to Beren. “All right lad, now show us this wood.”

Day 5

Despite the welcome hours of rest, the following day found most of them in not much better condition than they had been the night before. They had all got wet crossing the stream and nobody had had any option but to lie down in their wet clothes. In the meantime the snow had started again and a freezing wind was curling between the trees. Cold and hunger on top of exhaustion had driven some of them beyond their limits of endurance; many were suffering from exposure, and a handful of people had outright died in the night.

Beren had not dared to let them sleep much beyond daybreak.

“Get them up, get them up,” he urged Barahir now. “Otherwise they will all die here.”

“But where are we to go?” replied Barahir thickly. Despite all his furs he was shivering, and snow was frosting his hair and eyebrows. Even Beren had retreated from his usual indifference to the weather and had wrapped himself in a stiff piece of leather.

“That way,” said Beren, pointing into the snow-filled air. “An hour’s brisk trot to the hills, then shelter, and warmth.”

With difficulty, the message was conveyed down to the hundreds of people who Barahir hoped might somehow, magically, rise up soon to fight. Just at the moment he didn’t see how that was to be done; but saving them from the weather was first priority.

The country was more open here and the thick weather made it unnecessary to keep to cover. The soldiers could thus be formed up properly in their companies and hundreds. The tough old sergeants even managed to shout a bit of discipline into the ranks. Soon they were off. The steady marching pace seemed to ease the load of all. If only the wind would let up! They might even be able to warm themselves by the exercise then. As it was, it was just plain unpleasant. Everybody was tired and hungry, nobody got warm. Only the lure of shelter and hot food ahead carried them on.

It was a marvel how Beren knew the way. Nobody else could make out a thing in the white wilderness of driving snow; the millions of flakes which seethed through the air blunted all lines of sight after a few tens of yards. Visibility was so short that the troops had to bunch up close to maintain contact.

It was indeed not much more than an hour until their trudging passage across the flats brought them suddenly into broken and rising ground. The forest began again here and they had once more to pick their way between massive trunks. At least the trees killed the wind. The snow still fell, but instead of a steady rain of small flakes, it came mostly in the form of infrequent rushing cataracts as the crystal mound piled on a given branch became too heavy for it to bear.

They came at last to a bare rocky apron, behind which stretched a long line of cliffs; and in the cliff face they

could see a series of dark openings. The caves!

The party organized itself with relative alacrity. They lit some fires in the depths of some caves, and although there was nothing even close to room enough for all beside the fires, or even inside the caves, they could at least give the sick some relief; and cooks set about brewing soup in great cans which the horses had been carrying. Everybody eventually had a mouthful, and then, when their turn came around again, another; and then still a third. It was wonderful what effect a bit of warmth in the stomach had. People began to talk again, and even laugh. Socks were changed, and some attempt was begun to dry the wet ones.

The only person who seemed unhappy was Beren. Through cracked lips, Emeldir asked him why.

“My scouts can’t fly in this weather,” he explained. “We need to know what’s happening on the other side of this hill.”

“Well, worrying won’t fix it,” she said. “Can we light some more fires, do you think, here in front of the caves? Most of the people are still very cold, and some are still in wet clothes.”

Beren bit his lip, but nodded finally. “I suppose nobody is going to notice us in this murk,” he said.

The snow petered out at about midday and it began to get lighter. Most people were rolled up in their furs asleep, feeling warm and comfortable for the first time in – was it really only four days?

Beren eyed the lightening heavens and began to pace about. He went to Barahir. “They’ll have to douse those extra fires now I’m afraid,” he said. “You can see how the smoke begins to carry.” And indeed tall smudges were now quite plainly visible in the air above their camping place. Barahir said nothing, but went to set this in motion. You should have thought of that yourself, he told himself.

All of a sudden his son stood stock still, gazing up the hill to the West. Barahir, turning in that direction, saw a black shape rocketing down through the air. Beren whistled, a piercing note. There was a rush of darkness, and a great black bird landed on his outstretched arm with thumping beats of its wide wings. Only after it settled and had folded its wings did Barahir recognize it for a raven; one of great size.

Everybody in sight naturally stopped what they were doing and goggled at the tall young man with the bird. Each of the sleeping furs which carpeted the ground like dark pupae seemed suddenly to have sprouted a pale and astonished face.

Beren beckoned his father to him, so Barahir approached cautiously. The boy had squatted down and set the raven on the ground, so Barahir squatted also when he came up to them. The great bird eyed him with an intelligent look in its gleaming black eyes. Barahir had not seen a raven so close as this before and he was struck firstly by the size of the bird; then by the beautiful sheen of the feathers; and lastly by the brutal curve and thickness of the dull black beak.

“This is R’raag,” said Beren to his father. “She is the grand-daughter of one of the greatest and most loved friends and teachers of my youth. She understands the Grey-elven, but she will not speak it.” He turned to the raven and exchanged some remarks with her in raven croaks. Barahir marvelled to hear such sounds coming from the human throat of his son.

“R’raag has news of the Orcs, and more,” said Beren. “Perhaps the captains should hear?”

Barahir gathered in to him Emeldir, Gramlach, Bremund, and a tough little man called Hannas who had joined them late. The five of them sat in a circle around Beren and his bird, and there was not one of them who was not uncomfortable at the strangeness of the situation.

After another exchange in raven-speech, Beren changed to Elvish. “Perhaps we need a map,” he said apologetically. “I’ll need your help, R’raag, for I am not very familiar with this country.”

Eventually the two of them had scratched out something intelligible in a cleared patch of dirt.²⁶ Beren set himself to explaining. “So,” he said. “The stream which comes from Rivil flows down here and joins another coming from the North. Together they make Sirion, and he flows on then down to the South, into the start of the Vale, here. The join is difficult land: there’s a lot of marsh. We are here,” – he placed a pebble – “separated from the Vale by this line of low hills. Now, R’raag, the Orcs.”

They had fetched holly-berries from somewhere – Barahir thought he saw Beren take them out of a little bag he had by him – and R’raag now placed these carefully, one by one, with the tip of her great beak. When the bird was finished, there were two berries in the Vale a little to the South of them; one on a hill some leagues to the North; the one towards Rivil which they had skirted around; and six more spread around the bight of the young Sirion where the valley opened out to the North.

“Each one of those is a legion,” said Beren. “That is, each represents three thousand fighters, possibly a bit more.”

“Ten of them,” said Barahir pensively.

“It’s not so bad as I feared,” said Beren. He turned again for a brief exchange with the raven. “R’raag’s people are pretty sure that’s all there is,” he said, “in this immediate area anyway.”

“It’s enough,” put in Bremund in rueful tones. Some of the other captains also wore wry looks. Thirty thousands, against their scant one and a half!

“Is it,” hesitated Barahir, “is it, um, *only* Orcs?”

“R’raag saw none of these fire-devils,” said Beren, and several of his listeners let their breaths out in silent relief. “There are some animals among the Orcs, though,” he continued, “although of what kind it is difficult to make out. Ravens do not so much discriminate. Four-footed, dangerous; that was all I could learn.” While the others turned that over in their minds, Beren turned again to R’raag and said to her in Sindarin, “Show me now where you saw the Elves.”

All the human listeners stiffened to attention at the sound of these words.

R’raag made some croaking demand, and Beren fetched more gewgaws from his pouch: a flint arrowhead and a tiny jade figurine. The bird took the figure – a little frog – and placed it on the road a little to the South of the two legions deep in the Vale. Then she took the arrowhead, and placed it much further north, not far from the marshes, and more or less in the middle of the scattered ring of Orc legions. She spoke then what was obviously a commentary to the boy. As she finished, he turned to the listeners.

“This here,” he said, indicating the frog, “is a small army of foot-soldiers, maybe five hundreds. I would guess it is Orodreth’s men. R’raag thinks it almost certain that they will clash with these Orc armies today. And this,” indicating the arrowhead, “is a mounted party, a hundred or so. I don’t know what they think they are doing there, but it does not look like a good place to be.”

The others examined the map thoughtfully, and from their own tactical experience quickly came to the same conclusion.

“The only matter not yet touched on is communications,” said Beren. “R’raag and her people, and the eagles too, now have control of the skies; at least for the moment. And this is important – I’ve thought so all along. It means we know where the Enemy is, but that he cannot easily find out where we are, nor what we are doing. Indeed, I believe our presence here is still unsuspected. This allows us the possibility of striking some shrewd blow.”

“Indeed,” put in Hannas, “but where? That’s the question.”

26 http://www.beren-one-hand.com/images/map_rescue.png

“That is for Father to say,” said Beren.

Barahir leaned forward. “I think we must try to help the Elves coming from the South,” he said. “We could come at the two legions that threaten them from the rear, maybe.” The others grunted agreement with that. They debated the pros and cons a little more, and finally settled on the plan to march to the end of the spur to the immediate north of them, which would position them not far behind the possible point of conflict between Orc and Elf. The dark would be upon them by then, but depending on the look of things the following day, they might hope to come to battle before the second sundown from now.

None of the captains cared to give voice to the thought which had occurred to all of them: that they might have to face five-to-one odds on that day.

Day 6

They camped that night on the northern spur of a nameless hill in the opening of the Vale of Sirion. First light on the following day revealed the thick woods in which they hid, the darkness of tent and trunk showing stark against the thin cover of snow on the ground. The weather had cleared further during the night. With the slow advance of dawn, the entire East caught flame, until the sun itself rose behind a mist in scarlet splendour.

Barahir had risen with the earliest light and had busied himself with his captains to assess the state of the army. The cold was biting deep again but the previous day’s rest and warmth had allowed the people to regain most of their strength, and had restored their spirits. Rumours of the probable situation awaiting them in the valley had circulated, however, and there were more grim faces to be seen than cheerful ones.

There had been no sign of Beren or his birds, but not long after the long rays of the sun began to turn from red to golden, his tall figure came running lightly through the trees, with three ravens keeping pace with him in the tree tops.

“What news, my son?” asked Barahir.

Beren was out of breath. “We need to get moving,” he panted. “Everything has switched direction. The Elves coming from the South have maybe won their battle; it’s difficult to know what is going on. But whatever the reason, those Orcs that went south are streaming back north. We need to move either forward from here, or back. They could find us here, easily; and this is no place for a fight.”

The ravens swooped down now and beat their way with thumping wings to land on the ground beside the panting boy. Barahir eyed them. “Do your scouts say how many Orcs remain?” he asked Beren. “Could we bring them to battle?”

“They say, most of the two legions,” said Beren. “They are not keeping order. There is maybe good ground not far down the slope, where the trees give out on the hillside. But you will know better than I what the troops can and cannot do, and what ground suits them best.”

Barahir thought about it. “Facing down a slope is a strong position,” he said, “but should we not rather think of placing ourselves in their way? Strength is no good if the enemy is elsewhere. Seems to me, they’ll be wanting to stream on up the valley. Why would they come up the slope?”

“Yes,” said his son. “We’ll need to trail our coats. I don’t think we ought to give away the advantage just to go to them. We don’t need to.”

Barahir was doubtful. “But why would they come up at all? I wouldn’t, in their place.”

Beren grinned. “That’s the beauty of Orcs. If once they see you, they’ll attack. That’s how they are made. Trust me, Father – there won’t be any problem bringing them to battle. The only question is whether we want to do that.”

Barahir turned the proposition over in his mind. They must fight some time. Fifteen hundreds against perhaps four times that number... but the enemy would be coming uphill, undisciplined... He looked to Emeldir, and found his answer in her bright eyes. He turned again to his son. "There are good positions? They can't get around behind us?"

"I don't think so, Father," said Beren. "It is not my sort of fighting, as you know; but I think the ground should be good. It is steep and bare along there, hollow swards between rocky spurs."

"And how long do we have now before the crunch?"

"It is difficult to be sure," replied Beren. "My friends have their own ways to measure time and distance. Perhaps two hours?"

Barahir smacked his hands together. "Right." He turned to the captains. "Let's get them up! Get them mustered!"

They dared blow no horn, but the word ran through the troops like a flame flickering through straw. In less than a minute the whole area was seething with men and women rising out of their sleeping furs and hurrying to stuff belongings into packs. The prospect of action had acted on them like an electric shock. All complaints and discomforts were now thrust aside; battle was coming.

Low-voiced musterers got them onto skis and formed up. It wasn't long before they were gliding in a silent mass through the trees, with Beren in the van, leading them along a winding path which curved steadily downhill.

The slope became gradually steeper, until at last the trees began to thin. Barahir called a halt just before they reached the edge of the forest. The snow-covered Vale of Sirion stretched open and white below them, rising a dozen miles away into the dark wall of the Mountains of Shadow.

Together with Beren and the captains, Barahir scouted a little along the contour of the slope. It was as his son had reported: the ground to the West fell away to the Vale in scalloped shallows between difficult, rocky spurs.²⁷ A little to the North of where they had emerged, a great rocky bastion guarded the right-hand side of a long grassy slope which fell down to the South-west. Tussocks poked their heads up through the thin layer of snow on the hollow incline, which swept down in a great curve, the steepening slope hiding its foot.

The left side was also protected, if not so decidedly. The open ground stretched not quite two furlongs from one side to the other.

Barahir turned towards his most experienced man. "What do you think, Gram?"

Gramlach looked it over with a measuring eye. "Aye..." he said slowly. "Can't see naught against it... good width, and they'll never get round us on the right at least." He turned to cast an eye up-slope. "Easy retreat... might have to put some bowmen up on that leften hill though."

"I thought, form up in three corps across the width, reserves with the horses *there*," said Barahir, pointing.

"Good enough." Gramlach grinned suddenly. "Good place to give them a bloody nose, Powers willing."

Barahir turned to the other captains. "The rest of you?" But everybody agreed: they had found a place where they could make a stand.

On being called to advance, the troops emerged from the trees, blinking in the light. The early promise of the day had failed, and the sun was hidden now behind a layer of cloud which became thicker, lower and greyer almost as they watched. It seemed likely enough that more snow was on the way.

27 http://www.beren-one-hand.com/images/map_grassy_slope.png

It wasn't long before the fighters had been shepherded into three masses across the curve of the valley. There was as yet no sign of the enemy; time still to bring gear into order, and to snatch a quick bite to eat, and for the captains to finalize their plans. The spearmen would be formed up in their separate regiments, each of three ranks. Each shield wall was to be buttressed at each end with a wedge of bowmen. The bowmen could thus enfilade the approaching enemy, but could retreat behind shields whenever the game became too hot. It was a formation they had practised often and understood well.

Birds had been dashing to and fro, and now R'raag herself rowed up the slope in quick beats of her great black wings. She landed on a rock by Beren and croaked a message to him which he relayed to his father standing nearby.

"The van of the enemy has almost drawn level with us!" he said.

"The two legions? Down below on the flat?" said Barahir, and the youth nodded. The older man thought for a moment. "Can we entice them up?" he asked his son.

"I'd be amazed if we couldn't," Beren replied. He was excited. "Shall I take some bows down and prick them a little?"

"Your coat-trailers," Barahir smiled. "Go on, then."

Beren ran to gather some volunteers, and found a handful or so among the young people who could both shoot and ride well. In a short time they had thundered off down the defile on hastily-saddled pack horses. The army watched as their figures shrank in perspective before they disappeared over a slight swell of the land towards the point where the slope washed out into the flatter country over the breadth of the Vale.

Not ten minutes later the figures appeared again, riding quickly back up the slope. Pensive eyes counted them, breathed out in silent relief at the untouched total. That relief lasted only a few moments, because more heads began to appear over the swell... In a short time, the whole width of the valley became filled with a horde of dark, seething figures. They were still too far off to see clearly, but were certainly squat, not the height of a man; and the actions of running somehow made one think of elbows. At this sight of their enemy, hearts began to pound all along the lines of spears.

The plunging horses at last arrived back at the top of the slope, steaming and blowing. Beren whinnied some words to his mount, patted it on the neck, then jumped to the ground at Barahir's side. He was puffing as well, and there was a general sense of letting out of breath among the other salliers.

"Brought them on all right," he said to Barahir between breaths.

"Did they press you hard?" asked Barahir, eyeing him closely.

"They kept us busy," admitted Beren. "Some of the Orcs were riding on things like – well, like wolves; only bigger and horribler. We didn't expect those. If they'd had more of them, things might have got a bit tense."

A tall, well-built girl named Heledir, who Barahir knew came from further up the valley, turned her head to them from lifting the harness off her snorting mount.

"Your son saved all our lives, Master," she said in decided tones. "I've never seen anyone shoot like that in my whole life."

Others of the party said "Aye!" and nodded their agreement.

Beren looked embarrassed. "Well, it's over now anyway," he said quickly. "Where do you want me, Father?"

Barahir looked at his tall son, and took in anew the strength in his shoulders, as well as the thickness of the bow-stave he carried. "Where do you think you could best be used?" he asked in his turn.

Beren turned and looked back at the slowly climbing mass of Orcs. "I think on the left," he said. "But can I get more arrows? I've shot all the ones I had."

Barahir sent him to the stores master, then turned back to the wider situation. The Orcs had streamed half-way up the combe now and seemed to be filling its whole lower reaches. They had halted as soon as they got a good look at the three thin lines of troops spread across the breadth of the valley above them. Their leaders could be seen conferring as the mass yelled and drummed blade onto shield.

Most of the Ladros people had not seen a goblin for some years; many had never seen one at all. Few of them now escaped a shiver as they looked over the ugly crowd waving sharpened steel below them. Everybody gripped his or her shield a little tighter and settled their spear in their sweating hand. Glance at your neighbours; silent hope that they would do their bit, not let you down. Hold steady, just hold steady.

Gramlach had the left division. He rode slowly along the front, sitting high in the saddle as he addressed his troops.

"All right, you beggars," he shouted. "I know most of you, and you all know me. Here we are together. Now, you're all of you wondering, how's it going to go? What are our chances? Let me tell you. The Master has worked things a treat. He's picked you as good a place to stand as you could find in a week. But he's done more than that: he's picked you an enemy within your reach; someone you can beat. Last of all, he's done his best to bring you here in the pink, circumstances allowing. And me? Well, I've done *my* level best over the years to shout some sense into your dull heads. We've done all we can to tip the chances in your favour; the rest of it is down to you.

"Now you may look down at all these coves and think, by the Powers, there's too many. But you know me, and I know Orcs, and I tell you: there's not too many for you to deal with today. Just about right, in fact. A rat-catcher don't think that way, now, do he? Swarm o' rats don't bother him none. So oh yes, they swarm down there all right. But *we* have the shield wall, and *we* have each other; those poor rats don't have naught o' that. *Them*'s the ones what don't have chances. Just keep your line, hold fast, and by the Lords of sky and water, you will cut them down like the rats they are. That's all you've got to do. So stick by your mates; trust your leaders; and don't make me ashamed o' you!"

Bremund on the right flank was on foot. "Countrymen, kinsmen!" he bellowed. "A week ago I was warming my feet at the fire and drinking my wife's mead. The year was ahead of us, a pleasant year of working the land, *our* land, in the same quiet way we've done since my grandsire's time. Now we are here, far from home in this strange wild country. We are all tired, dirty, hungry, cold. But who did this to us? None of us asked for this. These filth down *there*," pointing at the surging masses of Orcs down the hill, "*they* did it to us. *They* tore up our lives and drew us out into the snow in these foreign parts. *They* took us away from our children and our homes. Now look you down at these sons of maggots, these diseased get of the worms that coil in Morgoth's stinking turds, and tell me now, are you going to stand for it?" The troops answered in a roll of sullen mutters. "Well *are* you?" roared Bremund, red-faced, in a voice which echoed off the rocks. "NO!" they shouted now in full-voiced answer. "And are you going to pay them out?" "YES!" came back the massed answer. "Well," continued their leader, pacing back and forward like an impatient tiger, "there they are, just down there. There's not a thing you have to do. In a moment they'll be coming. They will come to you. Just stand there like the rocks you are and cut these vermin to bloody scraps." He turned back to face his troops, drew his sword and held it high for all to see. "That's what this is for! Are you with me?"

"YES!" roared the troops. Some of them began to bang spear to shield in a rhythm, and it quickly caught with all of them. "Bre-mund! Bre-mund!" they shouted in time with the thundering blows.

Barahir had the centre division. He walked up and down in front of the line. Every pair of eyes was fixed on him. He in his turn looked at their faces: he knew every one. Manchar. Birniel. Rismach. Dagnir, who had a grin and a wink for him. Meruin. Galdemar. What to say to them? Gramlach and Bremund had found words enough, to judge from the shouts coming from right and left.

"Men and women of Ladros," he began quietly enough, "we have been pitched out of our lives. There's not

one of us who isn't trying to come to terms with that. We've had to open our eyes very wide. Before, our days were lived in a narrow circle: some of us had never been more than five miles from our homes. Now, though, we are caught up in a battle for the very world itself. But we are not titans. We cannot stride over mountains and wield a sword like a vengeful comet. We cannot even fight like the Fair Folk, with the light of the Gods in our eyes. We are simple folk, who have lived far from the light."

Now his voice grew firmer. "But when I look at you all, all the faces I know, I would not have it any other way. You are my people, and I want no other. Were it given to me even for this one day to tower over this field like one of the elemental Powers, to wither the hosts of evil with bolts of fire from heaven, I would not want it, I should reject it. I would want to be here, with you, together.

"And I tell this to you: we are not here for nothing. There is a Power, the One of whom we should speak but sparingly and with awe, who sees and knows all things, the small equally with the great, and who gives to each the task which he or she alone can perform. Nothing is wasted; our lives shall not be wasted.

"We are called here today to deal a blow to the Enemy. Do not concern yourself with worries as to whether it is or is not a winning blow, or with speculations about the future course of things. We are called, and we must answer; that is all. The course of things is not ours to control.

"But we can win this fight today, we simple folk, if we hold firm, and do our best, as we have been trained to do. We your leaders who have studied these matters are as sure as we can be of that. We have done our part; now do your part. Keep the line, deal your blows shrewdly, and each support his neighbour. Thus shall we win this fight; and after we have won it, why, then we will pass on to the next challenge, and deal with that in its turn. That is all I have to say to you."

He cursed himself internally as he went to fetch his horse. Was that not the great orator! he sneered to himself. Such fire, such eloquence! You'll be lucky if they don't all run away and go home.

People nodded to him as he made his way through them however, and he was surprised to see resolute looks on their faces.

Not five minutes had gone by since the Orcs paused. Now, just as Barahir mounted, a roar from below indicated that the enemy's consultation was ended. His horse pirouetting, Barahir looked over the row of defending shields in the down-slope direction and saw the mass of enemy begin to move. The Orcs were climbing rather than running, but the distance was not great.

"Here they come!" cried Barahir. "Hold and strike! Hold and strike, defenders of Ladros!"

The oncoming mass of sharpness-waving, yelling horrors parted suddenly here and there to admit great leaping forms into the narrowing space between the armies. Wolves! But twice the size of any normal wolves. Their wicked eyes and long white fangs could be seen already as they bounded up the hill pell-mell towards the waiting ranks. Suddenly one of the horrors was down; then another; then another. Someone was shooting! But from where? The range was fantastic – well over a furlong, more like two.

The creatures were dropping now like flies; mostly from the left. The bowman must be over there. Beren! Barahir could not see him, but he guessed. Others were shooting now, and their arrows began to skip among the beasts. No wolves at all remained on the left, and the remainder were veering across ranks toward the right to avoid the deadly hail. They were close now, the slaver could be seen flung from their mauls in the plunging motion, each leap carrying them closer, and yet closer. The range was narrowing, and now the massed bowmen on the right opened up in volleys of arrows which criss-crossed the field. There were many misses, but the creatures were stuck quickly as full of shafts as a hedgehog. Their numbers thinned. The bowmen were shooting wild, though.

"Take your time! Aim!" bellowed Barahir. Mel's on the left, blast it. Wrong side.

There was no more time. Most of the wolves had fallen, but there were still three up, the Kindler knows how,

since they were bristling with shafts. The distance shrank to nothing; then the monsters were crashing into the ranks of shields, thrashing and biting. Spears could be seen rising and falling, but when the disturbance ceased at last, fearful holes could be seen in the disordered ranks. Too many prone, motionless figures lay there.

Barahir chewed his lip in the agony of command. Call down the reserves? No, not yet, he decided. They have a brief moment to recover, let's see how they shape. They've drilled for this.

It was hardly a moment at all, because the yelling Orcs were upon them. Dashing to a sprint, the foe closed the last distance. Suddenly the bows in the home ranks were singing in reply. The massed archers shot a deadly volley of arrows, and then another and another. Barahir let out a whoop – the shooting was mowing the enemy down like a scythe in new grass. What had a moment ago been a screaming crowd of ferocious goblins was now a bloody shambles. Great swathes and piles of groaning figures lay now strewn over the slope. Some were feebly trying to crawl; others, lying blank-eyed in extremis, scrabbled still at shafts lodged deep in their vitals.

As he looked over the whole scene, head switching from side to side to try to take it all in, Barahir realized there were streams of enemy as yet unscathed. They had been driven towards the middle of the shields by the flanking bowmen. Now they poured up against the brunt of the shields like a flood of water against a dam. Barahir tried to shout commands, but no voice could be heard above the din. The yells of the furious and and dying merged into one mighty roar, as if somebody had shaken a gigantic hive of bees.

After an indeterminate time, Barahir realized the noise was growing less. He became aware of his own voice, shouting the gods knew what; his throat was sore from it. He stopped and tried to take in what was happening.

In fact the first attack of the Orcs had failed, and they were retiring in sullen dismay to reform and rethink. Great windrows of their dead lay in front of the shields, which merciful heavens! still held on all sides.

Once again Barahir was angry with himself. He had done nothing to help; his soldiers had managed it all on their own. Come then, he said to himself, seize control while you have this moment granted to you.

He rode swiftly down to the right-hand division, where he found Bremund, covered with blood and holding a rag to a wound in his side. There were many dead and injured here and the people were just now hauling them behind the line, making a rough sorting between the living and the dead. Barahir looked them over: maybe twenty dead, twice that number wounded.

"It was the damn wolves did for us," gasped Bremund.

"No time for that," said Barahir. "Do you need more men?"

"We can manage," said the other.

"Good man," said his chief. He sat up on his horse and looked over the fighters. "You paid them out, the swine!" he shouted to them. "You gave them a bloody nose! Now get ready to give them another!"

He was answered by a roar of savage enthusiasm, and swords waved in the air. He was satisfied; they would do. He spurred the horse then to the group of archers on the far right. Their leader was very young, he knew him, from up Mel's way. What was his name? No matter.

"You did well!" Barahir encouraged him and his pale-faced contingent. "But take your time, make every shot count. They won't run away before you can loose!" Scattered laughter answered him. "You see how you've cut them down. But keep calm, breathe deep. As long as you keep your cool and keep shooting straight, they can't possibly come at you. Just shoot them down like rats in a barrel." He galloped over to the middle division then for a few words of encouragement, then finally to the left division. He left the bowmen on that side until the last.

“How goes it, Comrade?” he called to Emeldir.

She turned to him a face full of the fierce joy of battle, blue eyes flashing. She kept her voice calm though as she said, “We can hold them. I don’t think they can budge us from here.”

“Where’s the boy?” he asked her. He was scanning the ranks but had not been able to find him.

“He’s out on the ridge there,” she said, pointing to the spur that faced them in that direction. Barahir, looking along it, could detect several bowmen crouched among the bushes and rocks, at no very great distance.

“He took some of the strongest shots out there with him,” added Emeldir. “I gave him permission; but draw them back if you think it better.”

Barahir chewed his lip again. “I doubt there’s time,” he said, glancing in the direction of the seething masses of the enemy. “We’re a little weak on the right, but the ground’s against us here. No, leave him where he is. But, did you see how he tackled those wolves!”

She smiled at him in shared pride. “He was magnificent.”

The noise suddenly increased, a joint shout from many voices. “They’re coming again!”

The Orcs were coming with a steady march this time, in a more ordered formation. Barahir noticed there were bunches of goblins in front of the main line of advance, and wondered what they were. In a moment he recognized them for archers. Hmm, he thought – that didn’t look so good, maybe.

However, his fears proved groundless. The Orcs received a nasty surprise. Long before the foe-men imagined they had come within shooting range, their bowmen on the south end of their line began to fall, one after another, each gasping or gurgling with a long arrow lodged in head or neck. The Orcs were infuriated. Yelling with rage, they turned, and attempted to rush the line of bowmen on the southern ridge; but stumbling over the rocks, they were cut down without mercy by a hail of razor-sharp bronze. The archers in the defending division facing them up the slope were picking further numbers off with high-lobbed arrows. Very few of the Orc archers even loosed a shaft on that side.

After a time there was not much active movement any more on the left – the enemy on that side had either slunk away toward a more rightward line, or were hunkered behind what meagre shelter they could find among the tussocks and stones, or were dead.

Some attempt was made at an archery duel on the north side, but the humans had the range of them in any case, and the deadly archer on the southern ridge – curse him! – continued to pick off their bowmen with unbelievable shots, the heavy arrows whipping in on impossibly flat trajectories to punch down Orc after Orc.

Frustrated, the Orcs could see nothing else to do but charge the ranks again. Yelling themselves into a frenzy of hate and rage, they dashed in to batter anew at the shields. The heavy slope however put weights on their legs, and the ranked archers of the defenders cut them down in windrows. They could not beat their way through the shields, and the spears came through the gaps and stabbed and stabbed. Slipping on snow-mushy, blood-soaked grass, stumbling over bodies, blinded by their own sweat, the survivors persisted for a few minutes, then broke and ran. The arrows took further heavy toll of them until they had scrambled down out of range.

Both sides paused for breath. The Bëorings looked around: they had a few white-faced wounded, currently being carried or helped to the rear, but not many. On the other hand, the numbers of the living enemy were perceptibly fewer, the orkish dead lying about in mounds. Among the chest-heaving farmers of Ladros, a murmur began, which grew to a roar from many throats. They were beating them! Hearts rose as they all began to realize that the day could be theirs. It could be theirs.

Barahir was weighing the merits of a cautious advance down towards the enemy when a disturbance on the left caught his eye. The archers there were fleeing in bounds down the slope towards the ranks! As they streamed down, the first ugly heads broke the ridge line behind them.

Heart sinking in sudden despair, Barahir raised his horn and blew the signals long practised. Wheel left; retreat. The soldiers stopped their cheering and looked around in confusion. The captains, grim-faced now, shouted orders, and slowly the left division began to retreat. Keeping their formation as best they could, the three divisions angled around and backed up slowly, keeping spear-guarded front toward the new threat. Orcs were streaming now over the ridge on that side, and the roaring crowd from below was pouring back up to join them in the space now opened out.

Barahir could see Beren, running straight towards him. As the figure of his son came nearer, Barahir wiped sweat out of his eyes. What was this? It couldn't be. Beren was *laughing*.

His son reached him and caught him in a wild joy at the knee. "Leave go, fool!" shouted Barahir, trying to shake free, as the horse pranced its alarm. "What is it?"

Beren pulled him around, horse and all. "Look and see!" he shouted back, pointing the while at the ridge line.

And there, wonder of wonders, Barahir saw that the running Orcs on the ridge were thinning away. A light took their place; a light made of many swords which glittered white under the gloomy sky. Tall figures in silver helms climbed into sight, until a long rank had marched over the top of the ridge. The newcomers halted there in a gleaming line, high above the field. They were Elves, obviously Elves. A great horn sounded music from within their ranks, and Barahir took his own and blew in answer: a wild melody of challenge and triumph which echoed faintly back from the rocks.

"Forward, soldiers of Ladros!" he bellowed in a voice like thunder, and blew the matching call. Slowly the divisions commenced again to march forward, back down into the hollow.

To say that the Orcs were amazed and dismayed is much to understate the case. One moment they had been howling for joy, the smart of defeat having swung swiftly to vengeance; but their savage joy at the prospect before them was quenched in a heart-beat, ripped away from between their very teeth, it seemed by a stroke of the direst magic. Now they shrank from the glitter of the swords of the advancing Elves on the one hand, only to recoil on the other from the deadly gleam in the eyes of those whom they had not long since scorned as fools and bumpkins, rustics of no account. As the withering hail of arrows began again to fall, they cursed and tried to elbow their way out of the throng. But they were jammed in together with scant room, and even that was shrinking. Terror and panic began to add to the tally of the arrows.

Barahir, higher on the northern spur, could see that the trap was not perfect: there was a funnel which needed to be closed off. He called the reserves straight away, and the eager men poured down. "To the right! To the right!" he bellowed at Hannas, and saw him raise his hand in acknowledgement, and shout his men into a swerve towards the right-hand division. But that division must also move forward. Barahir blew the calls: right wing, file right, advance. He blew to them to speed up, and saw with savage joy how they responded. Indeed, the deep satisfaction of seeing long training pay off is one of the unnamed joys of the world.

The Elves had extended their line to fence in the Orcs to the South and West, but they had hardly to lift a sword now; the howling, surging mob of Orcs were trapped in the killing ground, and the bows were doing the grim work of execution. It was pure, steady butchery.

Eventually it was over. No standing enemy was left in range; only a few fled downhill to the West. The bows faltered and fell silent. Every soldier rested his weapon or shield on the ground and drew in deep breaths of the sweet air. Deep breaths. Oh lord, how good they tasted. Backs and arms were aching savagely, only now noticed; and people found wounds on their bodies which they stared at in amazement, wondering just when they had occurred.

There was no rest yet for the captains. Barahir rode first to the left division and sought out Gramlach.

Gram raised a grimy face to him and grinned. "We did it, Captain!" he said, shaking his bloody spear in the air. "By gor, but we served 'em out, ha ha!"

Barahir leaned down from his mount and clapped him on the shoulder. "It's your victory, Gram," he said. "They wouldn't be standing now except for you." Gramlach made a rude noise at this, but Barahir cut him short. "You know what the reward for competence is," he said smiling. "Another job. We used a lot of arrows; but we haven't run out of Orcs yet in these parts, not if those ravens have the right of it. We need to salvage as many piles as we can. Can you organize a party? It'll be weary work I'm afraid. You know the drill with dead Orcs: stick 'em first to make sure. All right?"

Gramlach smiled. "Right-ho, Captain. Leave it to me."

Beren had come with his father, and they were joined now by Emeldir. Barahir dismounted and held first his wife in a long, tight embrace, her head tucked closely beside his own; releasing her, he turned to his grinning son and dealt with him likewise, pounding him on the back the while. "You young rascal! You young rascal! Where did you learn to shoot like that?"

Beren pulled himself loose and shrugged, still grinning at them both. "From Mother, of course," he said.

The crunch of marching feet came to their ears. They turned to see that the Elves had arrived. Barahir went to greet their captain, a striking figure with dark hair bound out of the way behind him in a thick, clubbed plait. The Elf clasped Barahir's hands in both his own and shook them with obvious emotion.

"Well met, Captain," he said, "very well met indeed. I could hardly believe my eyes when we advanced over the ridge and saw your host there beneath! I do not know which was the sharper, my joy or my surprise. You are a gift to us from heaven, and I do not jest. But I would willingly know who you are, and what brings you here in this fortunate hour! As for myself, I am known in these younger days as Celevir, and I am Warden of the Third Company of the Tower of the Guard."

"My own pleasure at seeing you is likewise," smiled Barahir. "I am Barahir, son of Bregor, son of Boromir. We are Men of Ladros, vassals of the lord Finrod Cave-Hewer, whom you know. We came here desiring to aid him in whatever wise we might against this present incursion."

Penetrating grey eyes regarded him with interest from under deep brows.

"A scion of Boromir?" said the tall Elf. "I might have guessed as much, but knowing is better. I have not met your father, but I knew Boromir."

"Shall we have a parley later?" said Barahir. "There is still much to be done. We must look to our wounded first of all."

"I can send a leech to you, if it please you," answered Celevir. "He may be able to help with your wounded. But as to your parley, I must tell you that we are in great haste, and must be away. Our King, even that Finrod of whom you spoke, has ridden in advance of us with few at his side. We fear now greatly that he is enmeshed in these hosts of Orcs and cannot return or escape. We must go to his aid as quickly as we may. We dare not stop for rest or talk."

Barahir's brows knitted as he heard this news. "We knew somebody had ridden north," he said, "and might perhaps have guessed it was Finrod, although we did not." He looked undecided for a moment. "Now I am torn. Very loth am I to dally while my liege-lord is in danger. But I cannot ask more of my people just now; they need rest, warmth and food." He gestured to the low, leaden clouds now driving in from the North. "The day is far advanced, and more snow is coming. I had thought to camp the night on higher ground, under the trees. It pains me to say it, but I think we must keep to that. Tomorrow we will all be better prepared to do what we can."

Celevir looked troubled now in his turn. He paused a moment before answering. "I... see that you speak the truth," he said at last, slowly, looking with his keen eyes over the weary figures clustered across the battlefield. "I had not perceived at first that your people were so weary. I had hoped we might march together; but duty is stronger than the fellowship of camp and trail, and those who can, must still answer the call. I think my own troop must now go on. I can only regret most exceedingly that our meeting was so short."

"Warden Celevir," said Barahir, "you speak truth in your turn: duty cannot and must not be denied, while the body remains able to fulfil it. But I do not think the matter is so clear as you seem to see it. There are two courses here, and it is not clear to me which is the better. A little time spent in thought may save much. It will not help Finrod if you throw your lives away, and his own not rescued. You are, what, four hundreds?"

"A little more," replied Celevir, "but call it so."

"Well," continued Barahir, "I do not know what picture you may have of the enemy's numbers, but our estimate is that at least eight legions remain on the road ahead."

Celevir raised his dark brows in surprise. "What!" he said. "So many as that?" He chewed his lip for a moment, then looked keenly again at Barahir. "And how do you come by that number?" he demanded.

Barahir turned to Beren and drew him forward. "This is my son, Beren," he said to the Elf. "He has ways to obtain information. Tell him, Son."

"I can do better than that," said Beren; "I can show him." He turned then toward the ridge behind the ranks of Elves, put his fingers to his lips and whistled at a painful pitch. The others turned then and saw that many ravens had gathered and were sitting as scattered black dots on the boulders of the slope. One of these birds now took flight and beat its way toward them.

"R'raag?" enquired Barahir of his son, who nodded in reply.

The great black bird mantled to a landing on the ground beside them. She turned to the surprised Elf and bowed low before him, croaking what was clearly a greeting. Celevir squatted down in courtesy and the others all did likewise. After the necessary exchange of greetings and explanations, Celevir turned to look Beren over with a wondering eye. "I had heard stories of you, master Beren," he said. "Clearly they have not embroidered the truth!"

They heard then R'raag's latest description of the disposition of the armies. Celevir's face grew ever graver as he listened. "Alas!" he said at last. "Now what am I to do? We are outmatched by such numbers. Four hours would bring us to Finrod in straight march; but if we go on in daylight, these hell-spawn will have us in their fist." He sighed. "Captain Barahir, you spoke of two courses. What is your second?"

"To rest your men with us tonight, then go on tomorrow, together," said Barahir. "And that under cover of snow, if the gods will it."

"And if Finrod cannot hold out so long?"

"Aye, I know," replied Barahir soberly. "It is an ill choice."

The dark-haired Warden was silent for a while, considering. He looked then at the clouds gliding towards them in their sad grey ranks. "Night would shield us," he said slowly, "and we who were born before the Sun do not need her to see by. But this night will be as dark as a tomb; too dark, maybe, even for Elves. I think we must take your second course, much as it pains me to wait."

"Come then," said Barahir. "There is much to do. Will you call your leech?"

He met then with the captains and parcelled out the necessary tasks. Gilach was placed in charge of the 2nd

company, in place of the sorely wounded Bremund. An after-party was chosen to look to the dead, and to continue the work of salvage; the rest would retire north and east. The scant daylight was waning towards a gloomy dusk before the ranks were marshalled. Single flakes of snow began to whirl down the cold winds as the weary soldiers picked up their shields and marched slowly back towards the tree-line.

Shortly there was nobody left in the valley but the after-party. These camped that night in a huddle a little to one side. In the morning they set about their work again, cloaked whitely by the newly falling snow. They left the Orcs to the hordes of feasting crows but gathered and laid out their own fallen, arranging their bloody limbs with honour, and heaping stones on them to guard them from the indignities of scavengers. When all was done, they too departed. The quarrelling flocks of birds remained for a time, but the easy flesh was soon consumed. What remained became soon too corrupt even for them to stomach, so they too drifted away at last, leaving the field to the worms and the mournful winds. Lonely days and nights passed, and more days and nights. Rain came betimes, and sun; the bones ceased to stink after a while and lay there whitening in their heaps, the iron claws forged for the rending of living flesh written rusting among them like a vicious indictment. Rank grasses grew up between the bones in the silent days, and drooped with chill dews in the nights, there among the uneasy dead.

Few came over the years to disturb that nameless hollow in the hills, save the occasional wandering goblin scout. These would generally bare their teeth at the bones before slinking away. But none of the people of Bëor set foot there ever again; so it remained, a grisly memorial to savagery and valour, until at last the world was changed and the salt wave came and washed the place clean.

* * * * *

The captains held their parley beside a welcome fire, high in the hills. There was laughter to hear from fires scattered over the hillside, where the Elvish soldiers mixed freely with the people of Ladros, and even song. With Elven help there were good things to eat, and matchless wine. The Bëorings were tired, but spirits were high; they had won an immense battle against high odds, and that with scant loss on their own side. Their faith in their own abilities was strengthened many times over, and their confidence in their leaders was become a live thing, almost with weight and body.

Celevir brightened on hearing that Emeldir was the grand-daughter of Adanel, and looked at her with renewed regard. "Ah!" he said. "I spoke much with your grand-dam when she was young, there in the wide lands away to the South. Many of us had pleasure in conversation with her. I remember her as a wise and noble lady, who could see clearly into things."

They spoke then of what they knew of the calamity which had befallen them. Celevir grew grave when he heard Barahir's relayed description of the fire-devil Arthad had seen. "Valarauko," he said, grimacing, his eyes glittering in the firelight. "Aye, we know of them. I will not willingly say more; but already you know more than you desire to, I guess."

He told them that Orodreth had sent the Third Company out to gather news after the terror of the fire and the earth-tremor. "He has ten times our force in the Tower, but he would not send them all out," he said, "and in that I think he did right. We will not advance in this war unless we all act in concert; and that will take time, and talk. The first thing is to find out how matters stand."

They had set out, he said, at the third daybreak after the fire, and had proceeded with caution. The next morning they had been overtaken by Finrod's mounted party, hastening from the South.

"He told me that his brothers were dead," said Celevir. "Angrod and Aegnor; but we had already felt it. A fey mood was on him, and he would not wait on our cautious advance, nor listen to counsels of prudence."

He said they had picked up the first indications of Orcs the following day, and had resolved to attack any they found, hoping to draw attention from Finrod's party, wherever they now found themselves. They had indeed encountered a great force of goblins, and had beaten them back after a hard fight.

“It seemed to some of us, though,” he went on, “that the victory was too easily gained. There were very many of those filth, as you know now quite as well as we perhaps! And we are but few, as you have also seen. We sniffed a trap. Thus we followed not where the foe opened up before us, but veered right, climbing the slope and then over the ridge, thinking to come unawares at the main body of them. But there we found you! The wonder and the glory of it has not left me yet.”

He listened with close attention to Beren’s description of the victory of the ravens over the Crebain. “Ah,” he said at last to Beren, “that explains much. We were watched at the start; but later we saw only the good birds. Finrod lives yet, I know it in my heart; but if what you report of the legions is true, he may principally have your ravens to thank for that.”

They bedded down at last for the night, in tents against the snow, which had begun to fall now in earnest.

Barahir tossed and turned. He had spoken decisively to Celevir, and had won him to his point of view, but in his own heart he was far from certain. Could they not have made a last effort, a quick dash to the North? What if Finrod could not hold out until the morrow? The birds had not been able to find him yestereve in the murk, but last report had him circled by many enemies. What if he died, sore beset? What price then prudence?

And supposing he was still alive tomorrow, could even two thousand foot hope to survive out there on the plain, among five and twenty thousands?

He fell at last into uneasy sleep, and remained so for some hours. Towards morning, he sat up with a jerk, an idea lighting his mind with fire. Oh sweet Powers, that was it! That was the solution! He hurriedly pulled on some clothes and went to seek Celevir through the falling snow. He found the Elf not far away, gazing into a small fire. The Warden had not slept: he was still clad in his war-shirt of gleaming silvered rings.

The Elf looked up as Barahir appeared. Sadness was written in his face. “He cannot last,” he said. “I can sense it. Many have died now.”

“Perhaps just long enough,” said Barahir fiercely, squatting by the fire. “I have the answer! The horses!”

He explained his plan: to mount volunteers on the pack horses and make a dash north at day-break. The snow would shield them; with luck they would not be caught. What two thousands of plodding foot might scarcely hope to manage, a hundred riders possibly could.

Celevir listened, and as he listened, the sadness faded out of his face, and he sat straighter. “That is a *good* plan,” he said at the end, striking his palm with a fist. “Certainly better than any my slow wits have lit upon. Yes, that way you may be in time; but you will need one of us to come with you, else you will not find him.”

“I can find him,” came a voice from the side. They looked. It was Beren, who had appeared like a ghost, and was squatting just at the edge of the firelight.

Celevir turned to look at him with the full of his gaze. “I see,” he said at last, nodding slowly, “I perceive that you can indeed. It is a bundle of wonders that you are, master Beren, to be sure.” He turned back to Barahir. “But may we not take any part?”

“Your pardon, Celevir, but no,” said Barahir firmly. “Our oath, our risk. But I thank you for the offer.”

“If you grudge me a horse, then I must needs come on foot,” said the Elf. “We will march after you as quickly as we may.”

Barahir woke some of the afterguard and they, under his direction, quickly gathered the horses from their pickets and prepared them as best they could. They had few saddles suitable for riding; blankets would have to suffice for the rest. Well, thought Barahir to himself with grim amusement, we are not doing it for our comfort. Others were directed to gather lances, and what bucklers or targes they could find, as well as some

swords belonging to dead or wounded fighters. When all was prepared, there was nothing to do but wait dozing for daybreak.

Day 7

The air was thick with falling snow, but some light from the risen sun did eventually manage to trickle through the vast cold blanket of cloud to relieve the gloom. When the shapes of the trees at last began to stand out from the white background, Barahir had his horn sounded. On every side, people started into wakefulness and poked heads out of tents to see what was afoot.

“People of Ladros!” cried Barahir. “You have done much; but more is needed. Our sworn lord, Finrod of the Caves, is cut off to the North of us. I ride now to his relief. Who will come with me?”

A roar of voices came in answer, and what looked like the entire army was struggling out of its furs and tents as one and was coming to him. Laughing with the pure pride and joy of it, Barahir made motions with his hands to push them back. After a minute or two the captains fought their way to his side.

“Gram, Gil,” he shouted, “Hannas: marshal them! We need one hundred and seven, that is how many horses we have. Choose each of you thirty-five from your company. Choose the best riders, the doughtiest warriors. Swordsmen, horsemen for preference, rather than shield-wall stalwarts. I give you a thousand heart-beats, then muster by me!”

“Will you take no archers?” asked Emeldir, who had come to stand beside him, wrapped in a fur.

“Some bows, yes perhaps,” said Barahir. “But everybody should be capable with close arms.”

“Well I am coming,” she said, and he knew better than to dispute it.

There was a confusion of shouting and jostling, but slowly matters were organized. Barahir had Bremund’s sheathed sword in his hand. He turned, and finding Beren still beside him, tossed him the sword.

“Can you use that?” he asked.

Beren looked at the sword he had caught, then back at his father. He nodded, and Barahir turned away to the next matter.

Left alone, the youth turned his gaze again on the sword. Oh, the memories that came flooding back! *Could* he use it? The harsh lessons under Yg seemed so long ago – part of his childhood. He examined his hands: the calluses had long since disappeared.

He drew the blade slowly from its sheath. It was of elven make, that was plain to see. He hefted it once or twice, and long-dormant sinews seemed to wake in answer. Beren suddenly laughed aloud and wove a net of swishing brightness in the air around him with the wicked blade. Well! Something seemed to remain indeed. Perhaps they had not all run to waste, all those lonely years. He returned the sword to its scabbard and fastened the whole onto the armoured belt that Telchar had given him, smiling the while to think of how things came together.

It was daylight. They were away, trotting down the slope. The falling snow blotted out the ranks behind them in a moment; soon they were riding down in an isolated white world, the air dotted thick with flakes near and far. All sound save the dull drumming of hooves on snow was muffled to nothing. The steam-snorting horses were tossing their heads, glad of the exercise.

Barahir looked around. He spotted Dagnir bouncing along. Further along, scar-faced Ragnor grinned back at him. And there was Arthad, looking pale but determined. On the other side, Emeldir sat high on her proud Storm, fiery son of Foam. Just past her, Beren was lying flat on his own horse’s neck, whispering to it. He had put on a leather jerkin at least, saw Barahir with a wry smile on his lips. The boy had belted on

Bremund's sword but also carried his mighty bow – and what a thug's bow that was! thought Barahir. The damn thing was as thick as a log. His son had gleaned some arrows from somewhere and their feathered heads poked in a cluster out of a saddle-bag. Further down he spotted Gaeruin and Carrag, Maethor's men; and Ingold, whose farm they had camped at – how many nights ago? And Karanis, tall maid from the lower valley; and so many more familiar faces. They smiled at him and nodded as they caught his gaze. Barahir felt glad to be alive.

As the slope petered out they came to a halt, unable to see the direction they ought to follow, since the silently falling snow obscured any object more than a hundred yards away. Barahir sidled his horse over to Beren.

“Which way?” he asked.

Beren closed his eyes and concentrated, shutting out the blowing and stamping of the horses and the muttered speech of his comrades. The inner world: Willow had shown him the way, all those years ago, when he was a child. He was a man now, but the way was still familiar. The awareness of the other world rose into his attention: all the vast net of living things, near and far.

He could sense shifting clouds of wrongness – but there, in the middle of them, far off but clear, a single bright ray.

He opened his eyes, still maintaining his hold on the far brightness. “Over there,” he said, pointing with his extended hand.

“Go in front,” said Barahir to him, so he moved off in the van, and the rest of the group started out after him.

So they went on. It was a punishing business, sitting a trot with no proper saddle; and the cold began to bite into their bones. Twice they had all to dismount and pick their way across rocky streams, leading the horses. Increasingly often, too, Beren would hold up his hand and bring them to a halt. He would sit there silently for a span of time while the rest of them shivered and tried to scrape the snow out of their collars. The youngster would start them going again then, sometimes with a change of direction, sometimes not.

These halts grew more frequent, and Beren passed the word back now for silence. “There are enemies all around us,” he whispered.

The ground was growing swampier in nature, and more and more often now the hooves rang suddenly on ice. Barahir gave silent thanks that they were not having to do this in summer. And all the time the snow fell.

Then came a halt which was different, for this time Beren came back into the middle of the group and nudged his horse up next to his father's.

“We are very near,” he whispered hoarsely. “Less than a mile. Finrod stands at bay on an island of clear ground, just across the river. He knows we are near, I think. There are some Orcs on the near bank, many more on the far, but the snow has blinded them pretty thoroughly: there are great forces nearby which have not found their goal. If we dash in and destroy the forces on the near bank, the King may be able to come to us. But I do not truly know how it is with him. Probably not good. We may have to cross right over and engage.”

Barahir thought about it. “How wide is the river here?” he asked. “Can we ford it?”

“I don't know,” said Beren. “I have never been here.”

His father chewed his lip. Well, they had no choice – they would just have to find it out the hard way. “I have to give orders,” he muttered. “Can I raise my voice a little?”

Beren shrugged. “Have to risk it. Try to keep it as quiet as you can.”

Barahir stared at him, then turned to motion the watching riders into him. They huddled their horses in close. "Listen up, everybody," he said in low but carrying tones. "Can you all hear me? Good. We are close; within a mile. Finrod's across the river; whether he can come to us, or we have to cross first to him, we don't know. Anybody know this country? No? Well then, it's also an open question whether the river here is fordable or not. We'll just have to find out."

The warm clouds of the horses' breath; the falling snow; the faces of the riders, dirty and grim.

"We'll set lances at the ready, but we'll start off at a walk," Barahir continued. "Beren will lead us, as before. Any smallish bodies we meet, say ten or less, we'll leave be unless they attack us. Let's save a charge until we have to. But everybody must be ready for it. All clear?"

Nods and grunts told him this was so.

"I want a moment to talk to the horses," said Beren. He got off his mount, stood in front of them all, then commenced whinnying and nickering in a way which was strange to hear coming out of a human mouth. But what he said must have been effective, because the horses all at once jerked their heads up and whinnied in response. Their ears all turned in unison first flat back, then pricked forward. Barahir would have found it comical if the situation had not been so deadly. His own horse had come alive under him and he was having difficulty in keeping it still.

"The All-Father be with you all," he said to his riders, and led them forward at a walk. Beren had strung his great bow. He rode on the left van; Emeldir on the right.

They had covered the ground in silence for a while when all of a sudden a troop of Orcs materialized through the snow-beaded curtain of air ahead of them. The goblins were marching sullenly in three files, in the same direction as the riders. In the muffling snow, the enemy were not aware of the strangers creeping up behind them.

Barahir met the eyes of the riders on either side of him and found instant, silent agreement. Every man and woman couched their spear and kicked their horse into a gallop. In less time than it takes to tell it, they were among the astonished Orcs. They rode through the shattered troop then wheeled back to finish the work. There were cries of rage and pain from their foes, but the swords were out now and made short work of the remnant.

"Come now," said Barahir, "that won't have gone unheard. At the trot."

The next alarm was one of the great twisted wolves. It ran silently out of the wall of snow, straight at them. Almost before anybody else could think what to do or even react, Emeldir's arrow took it in the eye, and it crashed to earth, ploughing a long furrow in the snow before coming to a twitching halt.

"Keep your eyes peeled!" called Barahir. "There'll be more!"

They dealt in the same way with three more wolves before they began to be aware of a faint animal noise ahead of them. They had all heard it only the day before: it was the many-throated roar of battle.

"Spears ready, and pick up the pace!" called Barahir. The horses were cantering now, and the roar was coming closer. Lines of Orcs came dimly into view in front, facing away, towards a darkness of water; and buried still deeper back in the layers of snowy air, the riders became aware of occasional flashes.

Barahir urged them to full gallop. The Bëorings were yelling now themselves as they spurred their horses to the charge. Some few of the enemy turned at the last, gaping, but in the main the impact of a hundred spears on their ranks caused total surprise and utter destruction.

The front of the cavalry passed through the lines on the bank, leaving a great hole in their train. The hooves splashed now into the shallows of the icy river.

“Don’t stop!” cried Barahir. “Full on and across!”

They plunged on into the current. Now the horses were thrusting through up to their breasts. However, the stream here was not many paces wide, and soon the animals were heaving out into the shallows toward the far bank.

They saw now on the far side what remained of the Elves. All their horses were dead, the bodies having been laid in a ring around a slight rise in the ground. Behind that wall of flesh, the survivors were crouched. The horses protected them from the worst of the arrows, and they were still just able to repel the attacks of the Orcs who swarmed on the far shore. The piled bodies of goblins all around wrote a vivid history of the battle.

All this was taken in in a flash as Barahir led his men clattering and heaving up the bank. The Orc archers became aware of them, and arrows began to zip through their ranks; but the mighty bow of Beren began to utter its *thung!* on the one side in answer, joined immediately by the lighter note of Emeldir’s.

Amid the yelling confusion Barahir searched for the King, saw the golden head swing around to him. “Finrod!” Barahir bawled to him. “Get your men up behind us!”

But now the Orcs had swept round to the Bëorings and were all among them. Barahir drew his sword and cut down goblin after goblin; all the riders were hard at it. A shout rang out! The Elves had risen up, were clambering over the mounds of dead flesh and flinging themselves onto the rear of the Orcs. Their bright swords rose and fell, rose and fell, and then they were through and among the horses. “Up!” cried Barahir, and the Elf-lord himself swung himself up behind him, his body slamming into Barahir’s back. The outraged horse pirouetted under the suddenly doubled weight and screamed in its rage and fear. With a corner of his mind, Barahir saw Beren with sword in hand, doing mighty work with it on the side. The arrows were coming in thickly now, and people were falling. Suddenly there came a wolf: it skittered in from the side and threw itself, snarling, at the wildly surging riders. It pulled down one man, leapt at another; but Beren appeared as if out of nowhere and smote its head from its steaming flanks with a single mighty sweep of his blade.

All the living Elves were horsed now. “Back!” cried Barahir, and slowly they tore themselves free of the hordes of clawing, clinging Orcs. The horses were gasping back through the water, and still the arrows were taking their toll. The enemy had reformed on the far side and were now many ranks of jeering, howling Orcs thick. No chance for spears; they could not charge out of the water, up the sticky bank. It would have to be a hack job.

Hack is what they did. But half of the horses carried two swords now, and it made a difference. Slowly the rescuers made ground, although rider after rider was pulled down and clawed to pieces on the spot.

At last they managed to fight their way into clearer ground. As they picked up the pace, the running Orcs began to be left behind. The deadly rain of arrows thinned away to a trickle, then to nothing. The last of the enemy was left behind them in the mist.

The tired horses wanted to halt, but Beren, smeared all over with blood, whether his own or someone else’s was not clear, stood up in his stirrups and cried, “Whip them on! The enemy is upon us!” He cried then aloud in the horse-tongue, and the animals started up as if electrified and began to gallop in the direction he led.

He led them a wild chase, jinking across the meadows, following some inner, shifting map of his own. In this wise they made their way through and around the main bodies of the five Orc legions which were now in the field around them, but several times they had to battle their way through bodies of enemy, and they were twice attacked by the wolf-things, at grievous cost on both occasions.

After what seemed an eternity, Beren said cautiously that he thought that most of the enemy were now behind them, out of immediate reach. They could perhaps take a short pause to breathe and tally their condition.

“Are you hurt, my Lord?” Barahir asked the Elf behind him. It was the first time he had been able to draw breath to ask.

Finrod eased himself painfully. “Every one of us,” he said. “But if we breathe, we will heal.” He looked around and counted the survivors, a grim look on his face. “How many did you bring?” he asked. When Barahir told him, he winced. “Seventy of my people, and over twenty of yours, has my folly cost,” he said.

“Say not so, Lord,” replied Barahir. “We do not blame you, and if I may be so bold, you should not blame yourself either. I fear they will not be the last to die in this war, which was of Morgoth’s making, not yours.”

Finrod was silent behind him, then he sighed. “A madness of grief was upon me,” he said. “My brothers are burned to nothing.”

“We know,” said Barahir. “We rue their loss also. I know it is not the same – a brother is a brother, and not to be replaced.”

“And your own brother?” asked Finrod. “Have you news of him?”

“Alas! I fear he fell at Angrod’s side,” said Barahir, but it was not so.

“We should get on,” broke in Beren apologetically. He had made use of the break to borrow some arrows from some of the others, having used up all of his own. They spurred the reluctant horses again to a walk, and then to a sort of half-hearted trot. Beren talked to the beasts constantly, urging them on. It was a long, weary road back, and the snow now was falling heavily enough to make breathing difficult. It lay soft and thick on the ground now too and the horses at last had to fall back on a sort of wading walk. The snow at least however seemed to have hidden their scent as well as their tracks; they had no more trouble with wolves.

After an endless time in the hypnotically falling snow Beren appeared again at his father’s side. “I think,” he began hesitantly, “I think... our army is not far off.”

Finrod stirred and brushed the cold powder from his shoulders. “Yes,” he agreed. “It is a pity we dare not sound a horn. We will just have to walk into them.”

Shortly after, that is exactly what occurred. Long lines of trudging soldiers appeared towards them out of the wilderness of snow-laden air. Leading the party was Celevir, who was expecting them. There was great joy at the meeting. The Elves’ reverence for their recovered leader was a noble thing to see, and nobody could praise Barahir enough.

After the jubilation had died down a little, the three leaders went into a huddle together.

“So, what now?” said Finrod.

“Lord King,” said Barahir, “it is of course for you to command. But I cannot but admit that my people have had enough for the time being. Also they are anxious for their homes; with the towers of your brothers thrown into ruin, such a stroke of disaster and dismay as no-one expected, the whole land lies exposed to attack from the North. On top of all, we are running very low on provisions. With your consent, I propose to take them home for now. I would wish to discover the situation in the rest of my land and to consult with others as to our best course of defence.”

Finrod smiled. “I think such talk of consent has been rather overtaken by events,” he said, “but for what it is worth: I concur with and support your plan. Indeed we must do likewise among our own folk. We must think first how to defend that which remains to us; later, Valar willing, we can concert an attack.” He turned then to Celevir. “What think you, Warden? I am ready now to hear your sober counsels, and I most humbly beg your pardon for my earlier over-mood.”

Celevir stirred. "My Lord," he said, "it is bootless to rue past deeds, or to debate whether they were good or ill. As for the present, I too think we must withdraw. We of the Third Company have for our part fulfilled our mission."

"Well then," said Finrod, "shall we march back first to the hills? Your son has guided us to perfection, Barahir, but although we have evaded our enemy, we have not yet escaped him. I would put some country between him and us before attempting anything else. This cover of snowfall will not last much longer either. What say ye?"

The other two agreeing, they all returned to their troops and began the march back. The sorely wounded stayed on the horses; the others now walked, and glad they were of it too. Trotting for miles with only a rough blanket between oneself and the horse's back is no recipe for comfort.

The snow lasted all the way back to the hills. The lines of troops had already climbed high on the final slope, following back the broad beaten path of their passage hither, when the light began to strengthen behind them. It grew steadily to a blinding intensity, until the last flurries of snow were swept from the weary marchers and they emerged from a wall of storm into bright sunlight under a clean blue sky. They stood there on the height below the trees of their last night's camp and almost swooned for joy of the sun, and of their escape, and of each other. Their enemy was far off on the plain below; they had their lives and their honour, and they were going home.

Finrod stood on the height, the mild wind from the West drawing his hair out behind him in a fluttering golden flag. He spread his arms wide and laughed aloud, despite his losses and his wounds, for he had been given back his life quite unlooked-for; also the fire of the young world ran yet hot in his veins, and his lungs remembered the living air of Valinor. He turned then to address the ranks of Barahir's army, who were drawn up nearby.

"People of Ladros!" he cried. "My valiant comrades! In these late days you have shown a valour which none could command; and in future, by Elbereth Kindler, none *shall* command it. Be ye and all your folk from this day vassals no more, but neighbours, and friends too if ye will it. Ladros is given to you to hold freely, for your own." He turned back to Barahir and laughed anew. "But thou – thou hast given me my life, so there can be no talk of mere friendship between us. We have both of us lost brothers, but now we have each found another. For my brother shalt thou be from this day; and like any brother, thou must just accept it, wilt thou or nillst thou."

Barahir laughed now in his turn. The two embraced, the sun-haired Elf and the grizzled dark man. "So let it be!" answered Barahir.

Finrod released him and took then the silver ring he wore and showed it to Barahir. "I pray thee, Brother, see this device," he said. Barahir looked at the ring and saw that it was wrought into the likeness of two serpents which had green gems for eyes. Their heads met beneath a crown of golden flowers, which the one supported and the other devoured.

"This ring I had of my father, Finarfin, at our parting," Finrod said. "That is the symbol he devised for our house. Take it now in token of our bond." But instead of handing Barahir the ring, he held it up high, so that the westering sun caught it. The silver shone under the rays, but the jewels wrought in Valinor flamed into a green fire which blinded the sight. Each person standing there received a sudden vision of a fair land beneath a holy light; each heart was wrung by the conviction that there were higher, nobler things than this life of dust and sweat – that somewhere, not far away, there lived a bright hope, and a joy purer than any had ever known; somewhere around some nearby corner of the world. The vision faded then, and the people sighed. But many there remembered it as the high point of their whole lives.

Their sight cleared at last, and some wept. But there stood Finrod still beneath the sun, with the ring in his hand. He cried then to them all together: "Ye Elves and Men, bear witness! In the sight of the Sun of blessed memory, under clear heaven, and by the Powers of earth, water and air, I, Finrod, eldest on this shore of the house of Finarfin and Eärwen, swear to give whatever aid lies within my power, at whatever need, to my

brother here Barahir, scion of Boromir the Renowned, and to all his house who follow, until the ending of the world. And thereof let this ring be the token!" He gave the ring to Barahir.

As he spoke, he shivered slightly, as if the dark wing of fate had passed over his head. Was he aware that he had wrought his own death with his words? Or had he a presentiment that most of the people he spoke to would be dead by the end of the year? Nobody can know.

The time for parting was now upon them, and it was a sad affair, for fast friendships had sprung up between Elves and Men, of that temper which only those brought together in shared toil and terror can know. Barahir and Celevir sought each other at the last and embraced.

"It grieves me that we have not drawn sword together, as I had hoped we would," said Barahir. "And I forebode now that we shall not see each other again."

"Oh, we may meet for all that," smiled Celevir. "There are other lands than these we know, and other times. Although I had liever sing a catch with you, and draw a stoup rather than a sword. Swords are ugly things; the tools only of necessity." So they parted in sadness, but also in hope.

Beren experienced all this through a fog of utter weariness. He was more tired than he had believed possible, and there seemed to be no part of his body which was not painful. His shoulders felt as if they had been wrenched from their sockets; his hands were raw, he had deep sword cuts on the one leg, and two arrows in the other. He had lost a lot of blood and could scarce keep from fainting. He staggered and would have fallen, but hands caught him through the mist. He looked up and saw that it was Dagnir. All around him were the familiar faces. Ragnor, with more cuts to add to the scars he already had; Arthad, hobbling but looking more cheerful than he had for some days; Gorlim, grinning and becking; Frohar and Tahar, the sons of Bremund, covered in blood and wounds, but still whole and upright; Camlaf, looking slightly shocked by his recent experiences, but almost ready to play the fool again; and lastly his mother.

Emeldir came to her son. One arm was tucked in a sling, and she limped. She had dried blood on her face, and a blood-stained rag bound around her forehead, but her eyes were clear and blithe.

"Come on, old warrior," she said to him tenderly, putting an arm around him. "Let's go home."

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