

Beren One Hand Volume 4: The Blue Lake

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Version 1.0

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Prologue

Of the company of those who descended into Arda when first it was shaped was an ardent spirit. Although of lesser rank than the great Powers, he stood high in their favour, because he was a firm friend in all trials, and ever faithful to his word. Long he laboured at the side of the High Ones in the building of Middle-earth, which he loved; but the perversions and destructions of Melkor he abhorred. The hunting of evil was his greatest joy. He would run in the form of a great Hound at the side of Oromë the Golden as that mighty hunter scoured the lands for the abominations brought forth by Melkor's hand. The very height of life it seemed to this being, when the strong body that was his delight ran faster and yet faster still, and the new-minted air burned in his lungs like fire, while he drew with each bound ever nearer the fleeing prey, ever nearer, until the chase was met. Oh the transcendent joy of the final lunge, the mighty jaws meeting in the monster's neck, the hot blood gushing! Such things he loved; a little too well.

There came the time of the Lamps, and after them the Trees. The Powers rested in Aman, and Oromë scarce rode forth more. The hunting spirit roamed the Island of the Gods, discontent. He rested him in glades far from known spaces and brooded on the times that once had been, and now were not.

There came a day, as he lay there so, when into the circle of his awareness trod a subtle and a wary being. A living thing; but new to him. A more sublimely beautiful creature he had never known. The desire to know it more closely welled in his heart like a sudden spring among the sweet grasses. He stood and made softly towards it, through the woods so green.

The being, aware of him, was shy, and retreated ever as he advanced. The spirit went more quickly, but so also did his quarry. He ran at last, and it was running before him, and he could no wise draw in the separation. The thrill of the hunt gripped him then, and he took his old form as the great Hound of Oromë, who had never been outmatched in any chase. He ran, and the other fled. The wind of his passage tore now past his straining head and shoulders like flames, the tide of life poured through every vein. Joy was his, such joy, because this was the noontide of life, the living spark defying the cold and uncaring universe.

Close now ahead was the rainbow beauty, her hooves thundering; she was running for her life, but she could not match his power. She cried to him for mercy, but he would not heed. In the mad, mindless joy of the hunt he was at her quarters, then level with her straining withers, until at last the plunging neck, the colour of pearl, was there before him, only a leap away. The neck, full of its hot coursing blood of life. The distance shrank to nothing; the leap was made; the teeth met.

When the hound came to his senses, his muzzle was wet with the scarlet blood which gushed and pooled from the thing now quivering beneath him. The ivory horn tore the grass in her death-spasm until the foam stopped frothing from the noble nose. The head shivered, the gushes weakened and stopped. She was dead. And in the same hour it was that the Darkness came to Aman, and the Trees were slain.

When he was cast before Mandos, that one said to him, "Hear now thy condemnation. As a dog hast thou wrought, setting at naught thy given powers of reflection and self-restraint; therefore as a dog shalt thou be clothed, and shalt thou live, until a wolf of filth shall tear the life from thy body. Also thou must now serve, since no longer canst thou be trusted to run free. That service too shall be disgrace to thee. Get thee therefore to these erring Children and seek among them for thy master." By that he meant the Noldor, who were even then setting the fire of rebellion in the streets and harbours of Valinor. "Hast thou last words which thou wouldst say, before speech be taken from thee?"

The erring spirit stood before the Valar there assembled, and self-horror warred in his breast with pride in what he had been. "Not to speak?" he cried. "I, who was with the One in the beginning? Do you forget then, elder Brother, the services I have done in His name, striving in company with you all? Is comradeship come to this?"

"All your past service will not bring life back to the creature that you killed," said Mandos.

The spirit hung his head. “I... I accept that I must be punished,” he mumbled, “but to be condemned to live wordless... even Melkor was permitted to rage against his chains. I beg thee! Not this!”

“Words did not stay thee, words cannot save thee,” said Mandos. “Judgement is passed, and may not now be recalled. Three times only shalt thou be permitted speech before thy death; so shalt thou learn at last, perhaps, its value. Choose thou well the occasions.”

As the Judge spoke, so the change began. The upright shape flowed and changed, until before them all stood a dog; but the mightiest dog they had ever beheld.

The Valar were grieved, because they had loved their companion. They hung their heads, or turned away in sorrow. But Oromë came to the great hound and laid hand on his head in rough sympathy. “Bear up, Comrade,” he said, “it will not be for ever. And for thy comfort, I will tell thee this that I have seen: a lowly mastered hound though now thou be, yet deeds shalt thou work during this thy penance that shall live in glory forever. A mighty hunter of vermin hast thou been indeed, but thy greatest feats stand yet before thee. This too: though by the sentence of Mandos thou must be slain at last – yea, and by a wolf; yet no more monstrous wolf will ever more arise to plague the mortal world; and thou shalt be victor in that fight.”

Huan licked his hand, then turned, and with sunken head and tail went into his exile.

* * * * *

They met on one of the many planes of existence accessible to beings of their order. Mairon appeared as a shining figure robed in white, whereas Melkor preferred to manifest as a brooding shadow.

Mairon launched into a report on the great break-out.¹ He kept it brief, for he knew that Melkor had little patience with such footlings. He touched first with a hint of satisfaction on the complete destruction of the immediate besiegers, then went on to discuss the results on the advanced fronts.

“To the West,” he said, and to both of them an image of the land appeared shining in the ether before them, “although we have beaten back the foe with much destruction, the forts² have not yet been conquered, and the lands behind³ are as yet practically untouched. This flank remains a grave threat, although there will not alas be resources to attempt its reduction for some time.

“In the South,” he went on, “the planned destruction of the forts⁴ was achieved satisfactorily, and at minimal cost.” He paused to allow both of them to contemplate anew a vision of the firing of the towers. “It is believed that no cogent threat remains in this quarter; whatever influence the Dream-witch may retain in the lands behind, she cannot conjure an army out of mist.

“Our design to trap the Elvish incursion from the Island-tower suffered an unexpected failure. Reports are confused, but poor weather and bad luck played a role –”

“There is no such thing as *luck*,” growled Melkor, “bad or good.”

“Poor weather and unexpected factors then,” continued Mairon smoothly. “There are reports of Men taking part, although accounts of their success are no doubt exaggerated. The poor conditions pertaining caused the armies to be taken by surprise by Orodreth’s force, and since we might expect that those units of Mobiles that encountered Elves have not survived, reports from the survivors will naturally emphasize the role of the mortals. In any case we do not think the remaining Men in the area – a scatter of farmers, woodmen – are greatly to be feared. It remains only to report that the legions have been left in the Vale for now to bottle up

1 For details of the battles following the breaking of the Leaguer the reader is, as always, referred to The Silmarillion.

2 Fortifications guarding the approaches to the Ered Wethrin, manned by forces under Fingolfin.

3 Hithlum.

4 The Towers of Angrod and Aegnor on the northern border of Dorthonion.

any further incursions.”

“That island fortress must be taken,” grated Melkor.

Mairon bowed to him and said, “And so it shall be, Lord. We have already begun planning for its conquest.

“Now, in the East, the main thrust has achieved very satisfactory results, admittedly with rather more losses than we would have preferred. The Cold-hill⁵ remains untaken, it is true, but we believe its reduction to be only a matter of time. The remainder of the gap has been cleaned of rebels. The way to the South lies open!”

The shadow which was Melkor moved restlessly. “You claim no substantial threat remains to our front,” he said, “in the approaches to the southern forest; but other tribes of these Men you disparage have cut down very many of our Mobiles in the failed assault to the West. You acknowledge the threat from Men in the West; yet you claim those in the South are none? I think you underestimate them, Mairon.”

Mairon said, “The western tribes have been long under Elvish tutelage, Lord. I believe that accounts for the difference. The ones to the South are simple farmers; poor scratchers at the earth. Also, they are fewer. Even the wild Men –”

“Clean them out,” broke in Melkor, making no attempt to conceal his impatience.

“Lord?” said Mairon.

“Clean the rats out,” said the tall shadow, heavy with menace. “From the southern woods. We can’t risk leaving anyone in our rear, farmers or otherwise. Clean them all out. Next winter I want to be at the southern wall, looking over.”

“Your desire, Lord of the World,” said Mairon with another bow, “is of course my command. Er – which resources shall be allocated to the task?”

“You can hardly need many Mobiles to burn a few peasants in their hovels,” grumbled Melkor. “I suppose you must take a legion or two... I still do not see how you could lose two whole legions in this venture into the Valley, Mairon. From your projections, we should have taken many Elvish captives. It seems that even Finrod, one of the greatest of their chieftains, was within our grasp; yet he has eluded it, by what means is not made clear, and we have lost six thousand of these scum of Mobiles into the bargain. This has not gone well.”

Mairon had no desire to go further down that path. Distraction was the thing. “From where shall I take the two legions, Lord? From those remaining in the Vale?”

“That would leave six,” said his chief. “Not enough. Even ten was a scanty force to hold that valley. We’ve got to keep it blocked. We can’t afford to be flanked until we have dealt with matters in the East.”

Mairon shrugged. “Then where shall I find the legions? We have emptied Central. Shall I pull two out of the eastern battle?”

“No!” said Melkor. He growled in frustration. “All right then. Leave it a while. Cleaning out the farming trash is a pleasure that will have to wait. First priority is to finish the eastern breakout. Tell me again what dispositions you plan for the assault on Cold-hill.”

* * * * *

In hot, uneasy dreams Beren ran endlessly, seeking something that he could not find, striving for something

5 Himring.

he could never quite achieve; and all through that time he struggled to get clear in his head, and all the time failed to discover, what it was he was supposed to seek or do.

After an eternity of time, the dreams faded to whispers, then to nothing. He slept soundly at last. When he woke, he recognized with a surge of joy that he was in his childhood bed, with the familiar small window in the eaves just to the side. His immediate instinct was to turn his head to the other side to seek Hiril.

There was nobody there of course, only the rolls of leather which had been stored in that corner now for... was it truly so many years? Present reality swept over him in a cold wave.

He became aware, from turning, that his neck – indeed, his whole body – was amazingly weak. He wept a little then in his weakness, and also because the expectation of seeing Hiril's sleepy head had been so poignant: her hair ruffled up everywhere in its chestnut-glossy waves in the way it used to be with her in the morning. He missed his sister then with a pang he had not felt for a long time. He wiped his eyes with a hand that he could barely hold steady above his face.

He heard voices somewhere not far off: female voices.

"Is there anybody there?" Beren called, but his voice came out in a whisper. He called again with a conscious effort at volume.

The voices stopped. After a moment the ladder creaked. However, the face that rose above the trap was not, as he had expected, that of his mother, but the rounder face of Caladis.

As his aunt levered herself up onto the floor, he noticed for the first time how thickly her ruddy hair was sown with grey. How old was Caladis? He knew she was older than his mother.

"You're awake then!" she said to him, smiling.

"Seem to be," he admitted weakly. "For a while I wasn't sure. How long's it been?"

"You've slept for four days," she said, sitting beside him and laying a hand on his forehead. "Took them two to get you back here, we put you straight to bed and you were out like a doused candle." She took her hand away from his forehead and felt the pulse in his wrist.

Beren lay and thought about this while Cal counted under her breath. Four days! It didn't seem possible.

"What's been happening?" he asked.

"Ohhh, a mort of things," she replied, "but they can all wait. There's nothing you can do about anything until you're up and about, and that will be a good while yet. Your mother said not to tell you anything, which from a heedless hinny like your mother I thought a good piece of advice; and one I certainly mean to follow. So you just rest and think on your sins, master Beren. It will do you good."

"Hmm," he said, "so I'm to be kept muffled up, with nothing to do, twiddling my thumbs."

"That will do you no harm. To the contrary."

"What about a book?" he said, eyeing her slyly.

Cal's mouth pursed and she shook her head. "Nice try," was all that she replied.

"Well what *can* I do?" he said. "I must do something."

"Contemplate," she said. "Rest. Heal."

“You’re very cruel to me, Cal,” he said. He tried to hitch himself higher on the pillow, but could not manage it. “Do you mean to starve me as well?”

“Hungry, are you?” She helped him raise his head and adjusted the pillow for him.

He smiled at her. “Yes,” he said slowly, “I rather think I am.”

“Well!” his aunt replied with seeming relish, “It will be some time before you can stomach anything with any weight to it. I’ll start you with a little thin soup, and we’ll see how that likes you.” She sat back then on her stool and regarded him with her crisp green eyes. He always thought of Cal’s eyes, in a vague way, that one could cut oneself on them if one wasn’t careful.

Beren found that he did not so much mind being sheltered from hearing the latest news. He feared that little if any of it could be good, and at present he felt that he had no strength to face tidings of threat or loss.

“Where *is* mother?” he asked after a time.

“Both gone east,” replied Cal, and closed her mouth tight on that.

He reached out a hand to clasp hers. “Just tell me one thing – are they both all right?”

“Yes,” she smiled in reply, “they’re both all right.” She squeezed his hand in return, then got up and went to see about his soup.

* * * * *

For all her sharp tongue and brisk airs, Caladis was a good nurse to Beren, her bustling even verging now and then into a sort of covert tenderness. Rarely would the hour go by but that she had popped her head above the hatch to cast her reserved glance over him; and, if he was awake, to ask if all were well. In the first days she would help him sit up for meals; she even fed him patiently with the spoon on the first day of all when his hand was still too weak to hold the spoon steady.

Even apart from Cal, for the first day or two he was not short of company. Everybody wanted to greet him. The men of fighting age were all away, but Methemel, Mari, Parth, Kirimel, Kamorod and Adril all took it in turns to climb the ladder and smile or goggle at him, as their preference lay. Few of them had very much to say, but there was an awareness in their eyes when they looked at him which had not been there before. He seemed to have grown in their gaze. But one or two of them seemed to have more at the back of their eyes, some reserve, which he wondered at.

Even old Hrotha doddered up the ladder to shake Beren’s hand with a deep emotion verging on glee.

“You showed them vermin, young Master, you showed ’em!” he cackled. “Them scum o’ goblins, ha ha. By the tits of the witch’s mother, how I wish I’d been up there with ye! Time was I could’ve cut a good few heads off meself, make not a doubt of it.”

“I wish you had been there too, Hrotha,” said Beren, gazing with affection into the familiar white-bearded face. “We had plenty of Orc-necks to spare for you!”

“Ar, well, we had the fun of a little stave-work here with them in the meantime,” said the old man. He meant bow-staves. “But ’twernt much,” he added hastily. “Just a bit of a dust-up. Naught to make a tale.” When Beren wanted to hear more, Hrotha shook his head gloomily. “Old vixen down below ’d skin me for sairtin, iffen I told you aught,” he said. “She’m got the knife ready and all; I seen the gleam of it, young Master, no word of a lie. No, news can wait. We’re safe as you see us, and if other folks has been not so fortunate, ’taint no mending of it now that nobody can do, least of all yerself.” He patted Beren on the shoulder with a

gnarled paw. “You just eat down your vittles, rest your bones and mend yerself so quick as you can. There’s man’s work to do, soon as yer’s well.”

Later on, Beren was left more to himself. In the beginning he chafed at the inactivity; but he pulled himself up sharply and told himself to remember the lessons in patience he had learned from Nose, many days on the trail, back when he was young. After he had schooled himself in this way, it went better with him.

He tallied his injuries. There seemed to be quite a number of them, including some which he could not remember receiving. He was not in pain from any, although he felt the tightness where he had stitches in his legs and shoulders.

Unable to move about the world, he gave himself to wandering inside his own head. One of his first cares was to feel out the life in the neighbourhood. He found it not so easy to do so from inside the house as in the free woods; everything had a muffled feel. Concentrating and reaching out as far as he could, he was relieved to detect no immediate threat, although there seemed to be an ominous echo running through everything, as though some great danger brooded just outside his range of reception. All the same, he was aware throughout the district of a wide-diffused pain and loss. Clearly not everybody had ridden out the aftermath of the assault so well – or so fortunately – as the people of Sightfoot.

The young man, lying on his bed, looked also back in his memories. The faces of many whom he had once known swam again through his vision. Willow, and Lion Scar. The girl White Teeth. Goracc and Thunderbolt. He thought again of the dead Dwarf, Aeg, and of the marvellous golden necklace she had helped fashion, that had drawn her to her death. Nendilmë, Telchar, what were they doing now? Porin, Akhal, Breshke, Khabbock – all of the close-mouthed and hard-natured Dwarves who had opened their hearts to him and made him their friend.

What had become of the horrible Blackshirts – the victims, but also the children of his revenge? And that snake Girazôn? He had not wanted ever to see them or know about them again, but perhaps it was time to find out just what he had set in motion. He had left the pain behind him now, and had no excuse any more to shirk his responsibilities.

And Húrin – where was he? Surely he was still too young to fight; although remembering his friend’s bright and martial spirit, Beren did not feel entirely certain of that. He would dearly love to see his friend again, and not only for friendship’s sake: he badly felt the need to warm his spirit from Húrin’s courage.

For Beren was afraid. He was afraid not so much for himself as for his entire world, and more acutely and presently for his people. He had heard Arthad’s skin-shivering accounts of the massacres in the North, and had seen for himself how numerous and powerful even the least of the armies of the Enemy were. Against that overwhelming might, all that the Bëorings could muster were a few thousand farmers, patchily trained, unsupported, and armed with primitive and barely adequate weapons. Under sound leadership, with the favour of the ravens, and with great good fortune of land and weather, the force under his father had managed to escape annihilation at the hands of what surely must have been only a minor arm of the Enemy’s total power, in a sideshow; by the grace of the Powers they had been able to kill a few Orcs and to frustrate the capture of Finrod. But considering the picture as a whole, Beren could see no great reason why the Enemy could not simply roll them up in Ladros like a carpet, the moment it pleased him to do so.

He thought with regret of Angrod’s bold and honest face, and of the sadness written on Aegnor’s. Had the latter Elf-lord known, perhaps, of his impending fate? Silmenen certainly had. That slender Elf-maid, so many times his teacher and baiter – of what was she thinking now? Drifting as she must be among the shades thronging the dim halls of Mandos, as they said was the fate of Elves who die in the body. Did she truly remember the kiss? He could feel it on his own lips yet.

* * * * *

Cal and Methemel swabbed him down one day. Beren was inclined to be embarrassed, but Methemel laughed that off. “Goodness, young Master,” she wheezed, “I seen ’e nekkid many’s a time, my duck, when thou wart naught but a tiny jabbert. *And* washed ’e as well. You needn’t be afeared o’ showing *me* aught new.”

Caladis also waved away his feeble objections. “Now don’t be silly,” she said primly. “Firstly, I am responsible for the cure of your body. Secondly, we already cleaned you up when you first came back, although you do not remember it. And thirdly,” and here she blushed just a little, “we are both well used to the sight of the male body, Methemel and I. It will not please your pride to know it, I am sure, but we are perfectly unmoved by such sights. Perfectly.”

Methemel cackled with delight. “Aye! Perfectly,” she affirmed, with a gap-toothed grin.

There was nothing to do but give in. Beren turned his eyes away from their brisk ministrations, and it certainly felt pleasant to be clean. But when some days later Cal appeared to repeat the exercise, accompanied however this time not by old Methemel but by the grave countenances of Parth and Kirimel, the young man sat up in the bed and protested in earnest.

“No!” he said, holding his palms out to ward them off, as Kirimel set down the jug of hot water. “Absolutely not!”

“Oh stop being such a baby,” snapped Caladis. “Methemel has arthritis, she can’t manage the ladder. What are we supposed to do? Leave you to moulder in your own dirt?”

Beren had been sweating hugely in the nights; he had looked forward to having the stickiness swabbed away again. He wavered. “Couldn’t you do it on your own?” he asked weakly.

“No,” replied Cal firmly.

He looked at the younger women, both of whom wore the absolutely neutral expressions of professional carers. “Listen, you two,” he began, although not knowing how he meant to go on.

“What?” said Parth, hands on hips. “I do think you are making a huge fuss about nothing, Beren. Isn’t he, Kiri? Honestly, the airs some men give themselves.”

Cal had sorted out wash-cloths and now stood with one ready. “Are you going to stop wasting our time and cooperate?” she demanded.

The women were brisk and efficient, and nobody smiled or made any wisecracks. However, as Beren lay there, he was grumbling internally, for he had a pretty good idea what was going to happen. Indeed, it went just as he foreboded. The women finished, then helped him to dress in his sleeping-shift. Caladis tucked him into the bed. The three then gathered up the things and made their way down the ladder. Parth was the last to leave. She looked at him, dimpling, just before ducking her head below. “Bye, Beren,” she said archly. Almost the moment she disappeared, he heard the two maids break into helpless gales of poorly-stifled giggles.

He cursed and hit the pillow with an exasperated fist.

A day or two later, he was able to get up, and from then on he could wash himself, and had no longer to run such a gauntlet again. It was a long time, however, before the girls stopped dimpling whenever they met him.

Not long after that, Cal came to him holding pen and paper. She asked him tentatively if he felt like telling her something of the battle. “Gramlach told me a little before he had to go away again,” she said, colouring slightly, “but his tale was in fact mostly about you; he told me hardly anything about what he, well, that is to

say, what he and the others achieved. Perhaps if I ask you, I will hear another side?"

Beren scratched his head. "Well," he said, "Gram's troops didn't actually bear the brunt of the attack – that came more on the right. We weren't as balanced in defence as we might have been; the right was weak, and that is where the weight of the enemy bore on us." Cal's face was far too schooled to show disappointment, but he sensed it in her all the same, and hastened to reassure her. "But Aunt, listen, even if Gram was by the chance of the day not in the thickest of the fighting, nobody there had the chance to loaf. And you should know that we would have had far more casualties had it not been for Gram. He has been training us for this for years. People owe him their lives, nothing less."

Cal seemed satisfied with this. She made ready her writing equipment and wrote down all he could tell her about the long approach, the news from the birds, the savage battle with its twists and turns, and the last dash through the snow to save Finrod. After an hour of this Beren was tired and was glad to stop.

Cal scanned quickly over what she had written and shivered as she came to the end of it. "It sounds... like the most horrible thing I can imagine," she said. "If it feels so, so awful just from reading about it, what must it be like to go into battle in real life?"

"Pretty bad," he admitted, "but you only go into a fight because all the alternatives are worse; and in that case you don't mind so much, somehow. Also, you're kept pretty busy, you know. There's not usually time to worry, or to think about anything at all, really."

His aunt hesitated, trying to find words for something. "Beren," she said at last, "you and I, we have not been much in harmony in the past. I have not thought highly of some of the ways of your boyhood, and I suppose I made no great effort to hide my opinions." He attempted to wave this away, but she would not be deterred. "No, I will say this. The matter is, well, that things look a little different to me in recent days. I have not been very pleased with myself, remembering how..." She hesitated, looked down. "Well. Fate has taken its turn, as you know... and now you, and Gramlach, and you all..."

Beren stood up with some difficulty and grasped her hands. "Please stop, Aunt," he said gently.

Cal's cheeks were flushed, and she would not meet his gaze. "I am just trying to say, thank you," she said in low tones. "Thank you for fighting for us."

* * * * *

Although Beren rapidly gained strength, his limbs at first were appallingly stiff. Climbing down the ladder for the first time was agony. Practice loosened things up, and soon he was able to stump a little about the house and help with small things.

After some days with nobody but the women for company, the sound of horses was heard from the snowy yard. Beren walked stiffly to the door and saw that it was Dagnir, in company with Ormorod and his son Ormalan – Mal, as everybody still called him. Mal had grown into a thick-set young man with a low forehead, much after the manner of his father.

Dagnir dismounted and came over to greet Beren with a great grin splitting his greying beard. "By the Sickel⁶, young 'un," he said, "it does my eyes good to see you up and about again. Flat out and on yer back, you was. How is it all, eh, healing up all right then?"

Beren smiled. "Aye, not too bad," he said. "You come at a good time, Dag. Nobody has told me any news at all, which was well enough to begin with, but I've been getting restless. It's time now to get back into things, I think. I want to know how things stand."

6 The constellation in the northern sky that we call the Great Bear.

Dag exchanged a glance with Ormorod, then shrugged. “Missus said to wait a bit, not bother you til you’re stronger. But with you stirring around as you are, and not looking too bad, why, I suppose we might have a bit of a talk. Let’s go into the house, shall we? My bones are calling loud for a bit of fire, and me innards too, in a manner of speaking.”

They bade young Mal look after the horses, knocked the snow off their boots just outside the door, then made their way into the kitchen, where the wanderers were greeted warmly.

Dagnir sat down heavily on a seat by the fire and extended his hands to it gratefully. “Ah! That’s better. Or leastways, halfway better. Any of that apple brandy left, bechance?” Mari got up and fetched a stone jar, from which she poured him a tiny glass of golden liquor. Dagnir tossed it back with a smack of the lips and a sigh of content. “Ohhhh, that be the stuff to put heart into a man. Thankee, Sister.” He reached out his glass for a refill. Once he had it, he turned to catch the eye of Caladis, who was hanging newly washed dressings out to dry.

“Lad wants to know what’s up,” Dagnir said to her simply, indicating Beren with a jerk of his head.

Cal considered. “I think that’s all right,” she said. “Mel didn’t want him fretting when he was weak, but he’s been over that phase for some time.”

Beren looked from one to the other. “You make it sound pretty grim, with all these hints,” he said. “Come on now, somebody tell me. You had an attack? Many hurt? And how do things look now generally?”

“Well,” said Dag, “as to the second, why, things don’t look too bad, so far as they go. There’s plenty of goblins still where we left them, but so far they seem happy enough just to sit in the Vale and count their toes. Most o’ those who were in the North seem to have gone away again now. There’s garrisons in the towers, o’ course, and patrols, but we think the rest might have got taken away and thrown into the fighting away over East, beyond the Wall⁷. That’s where the big fight ’pears to be. We heard tidings. Them Elves over East-way be hard pressed, very hard pressed; it do seem like the Enemy is throwing the lot at them. Oh my word, yes. But the Dark ain’t walked through them fellows just yet. But to get back to our own business: we folk here in the Pine country don’t have too many present worries, not like some. What future ones we might have, well, your Pa be the best one to know about that.”

“Where is Father?” asked Beren.

“He’m gone to Newfort to have a chin-wag with that brother o’ his,” said Dag.

“Bregolas?” said Beren, amazed. “I thought he had been killed!”

“Seems not,” said Dagnir with a hint of dryness.

“Well!” said Beren, not knowing what to say. His ideas about the future had suddenly been turned on their beam ends. “I suppose they’re arranging a defence,” he said at last.

“I suppose, aye,” said Dag.

“How’s that going?” Beren asked.

“Don’t know,” said the house-man. “We didn’t go with him. Orm and I, we was asked to stay behind and see to matters locally. Brother⁸ went with him, and Gram. Thad too, though he’d ’a done better to bide in his bed, if you ask me.”

7 Colloquial name for the line of mountains that formed the eastern border of Dorthonion.

8 Ragnor.

Somehow the stone bottle had made its way to Hrotha. He held up a glass of the fiery liquor now and gazed into it critically. "Master and his brother eye to eye!" the old man said. "There'd be some fur flying in that get-together, I'll wager." He downed the glass, managing then to pour another before Methemel snatched the bottle out of his reach.

Dagnir moved uncomfortably on his seat. "Wouldn't like to say, Da," he said. "Don't care to speckelate on such affairs."

Beren thought it wise to change the subject. "How is the situation in Hithlum?" he asked.

"I don't believe anybody's heard," said Dagnir. "Road's cut, o' course. News would have to come from the South, over Anach. But Anach's a tricky sort of proposition at the best of times. Man 'd be a fool to risk it at this time o' year. So I doubt we'll hear much before spring."

"Hmm," said Beren. They would have to find out: all sorts of things depended on it. He made a mental note to ask the eagles. He looked up at Dagnir. "Well then," he said. "Tell me how things have gone locally."

"Da there be the best one for that," replied Dagnir. "Him having been in the thick of it and all."

Hrotha sat up. "Oh aye!" he said brightly. But then he sank down again. "Howsumdever...", he quavered, "tired old felly as I be, I bain't sure as I got the strength for such a raw old tale. But mebbe with just a drap more o' that there tonic, happen I could manage..."

"Ivers!" said Dagnir. "Put us all out of our misery and pour the old devil another glass, will you Ma."

Methemel complied, grumbling over the waste of good liquor. Hrotha took a grateful sip of the spirits, looked around at them all, and commenced his story. Shorn of its ramblings and reminiscences, it went as follows. The ones left behind at the farm had kept watch in a rota, as the Mistress had advised them. Four days after the army had marched away, Kirimel had the watch, early in the morning. Some sort of bird had woken her up...

"I *were* not never *asleep!*" retorted Kirimel hotly, seemingly not for the first time.

...and then she had caught sight of goblins slinking along the lane, and had raised the alarm. There were bows already laid handy, so everybody who could shoot had run to their places on the fence. A few shafts had been loosed and the vermin had not pressed the issue, but had gone elsewhere.

"And where," asked Beren carefully, "was elsewhere, when they went to it?"

The faces which had shown excitement and pride now grew longer.

"Some people were less prepared," said Caladis. "There have been losses." She mentioned briefly the farms which had been destroyed, and the people killed. There were several in the district which Beren had known, and the news of their loss hit him hard, even though he had been prepared for something of the sort.

Hrotha stirred in his seat. "There's worse yet, lad," he said, and Beren saw that the troubled look in people's eyes was back.

"Who?" he asked.

Several of them looked at one another. Nobody wanted to speak, and at last it was left to Hrotha to continue. "Well, boy," he said with reluctance, "them Pit-skittlers came from the North, as tha knows. Stands to reason, folks to norther were harder hit."

“Who?” Beren repeated.

“That blacksmith felly. The young one.”

“Gorlim? But Gorlim was with us!”

Dagnir laid a hand on his arm. “No, lad. Not Gorlim. His missus. Eilinel.”

Beren groaned aloud and put his hands over his face. Oh, no. It couldn't be true. The world could not be so cruel. A vision of Eilinel's gentle face came to his mind, and the vivid memory of her laughter and her kindness. And the child she was carrying; no, it couldn't be.

“We could not tell you when you were already laid so low,” said Caladis gently.

“Tell me now,” he said through his hands. “Tell me everything. Is she dead?”

“Well, missing,” Cal said. “The man and the boy were – well, they were dead. Gorlim found them when he... but Eilinel was not there.”

This was terrible. He couldn't take it in.

“Where is Gorlim now?” he asked at last.

Cal looked enquiringly to the others. Parth wiped her eyes and said, “He's up at the house. He won't come away.”

Dagnir sat up. “*Still* at the house?” he said.

“Aye,” said Parth. “His Da were up there, tried to make him come away. But he wouldn't. Angrim says he pulled a knife on him! Says he's not right in the head.”

“We buried the others,” said Dagnir, “and we thought we'd best leave him quiet for a while. But that don't sound hale.”

Beren stood up, ignoring the pull of his wounds. “I must go to him,” he said.

Cal stood up too, facing him. “What are you talking about?” she demanded. “You're not going anywhere!”

But Beren had already hobbled out of the room and was taking his cloak off the hook. “Sorry, Aunt,” he said.

She followed him to the door. “Beren. Be sensible. You can't possibly sit on a horse yet. You've only been up for four days.”

Beren looked past her to Dagnir. “The mare, Summer,” he said to him. “I'll take her.”

Dagnir got up stiffly. “Wait a bit, lad. Let me come with you.” He fetched his own cloak and his bow.

Ignoring Cal's protests, they went out to the stables, where Dagnir helped him saddle the placid old mare. Beren had some trouble getting onto the horse, but managed it at last.

Dagnir looked up at him. “All right?” he asked.

“Not too bad,” said Beren, stifling a wince. Dagnir mounted his own horse and they started off.

It was not much more than an hour's ride to Gorlim, but Beren's wounds were aching savagely by the time

they arrived. There were tears on his face, although not from the pain; but who is to say whether they were pulled out of his eyes by the cold wind or wrung out of his heart by the blow it had suffered. Oh, Neli! He did not know how he could stand it. Powers only knew what Gorlim was going through.

The cottage still stood, although it was blackened by smoke, and the thatched roof had mostly fallen in. Looking over it, Beren thought the raiders' intent to fire the thatch had probably been frustrated by the blanket of snow which had lain on it: the roof looked as though it had smouldered its way slowly to a charred mess, now collapsed, but the rest of the house had not caught.

All of Gorlim's beautiful glass windows were smashed. The animals were missing from the byre, and household articles lay torn and scattered over the yard.

Dagnir helped him to dismount. They made their way toward the silent house. Beren was near fainting with the pain of his legs, but made himself go on.

"Gorlim?" he called, but only the crows answered.

The axe-smashed door lay strewn in pieces inside the doorway. There were faecal smears on the walls. Snow had blown in and lay mixed with the ashes in a stinking grey and white chaos.

"Gorlim?" called Beren again in the roofless front room. He glanced into the shattered kitchen, then looked down the corridor, which was half blocked with ruined thatch and other debris. The roof still covered the house towards the back there, and the end door was shadowed. Beren swung his burning legs once again into action and began to pick his way across the rubbish in the corridor. Dagnir, grim faced, kept close behind.

They stood in the doorway and tried to see in. They heard a scrabbling sound in the dark, and for the third time Beren called the smith's name. Almost as the sound was still on his lips, he made out a figure coming towards them out of the gloom. The creature put up a thin arm against the light, and squinted under it at the intruders. It was hollow-cheeked, caked with filth, and the beard was matted and stained. The room reeked of ordure, but the unwashed stink coming from the man in front of them was like a living thing. The potent smell reached out and scoured stingingly in their sinuses at the same time as it brought the stomach to heaving.

The scarecrow figure was Gorlim.

"Have you news of her?" the smith asked them hoarsely. "Tell me where she is. Take me to her!"

"Gorlim," said Beren, his heart wrung, "we have no news. Do you know me?"

"No news? No news? Then I know not what business ye have in this house," said the filthy figure, turning from them in indifference.

Beren stumped after him into the mephitic room and caught at his friend's arm.

"Gorlim, old friend. Come out of this. You need looking after."

"What?" the mad blue eyes stared at him. Gorlim was skin and bone. He can't have been eating, thought Beren. For the whole time I've been laid up, maybe. Two weeks?

"You must come away with us. You need to eat, to wash. Come to us and we will care for you."

"What? No no no no. Oh, no. I couldn't do that, oh no. What if she came, and I were away? No no, it's not to be thought of."

Beren made his voice as gentle as possible. “Grol,” he said, “you must see. She won’t come now. She won’t be coming.”

He was unprepared for what happened next. He, even he, with his woodland reflexes, and his inner senses, was taken completely off his guard. Before he really knew what was happening, he had landed on the floor with a painful thump, and Gorlim’s weight was keeping him pinned there. The stink of the man was yelling in his nostrils, and Gorlim’s bloodshot eyes were barely six inches above his own.

Beren, turning his eyes down as far as they would go, could just make out the gleam of the long knife which pricked his throat.

“Speak that lie again,” hissed the smith, “and you’re a dead man. A dead man, do you hear?”

Dag had sprung into action the moment he saw the flash of the knife. Quick as lightning he set arrow to string and pulled back the feather to nestle at his cheekbone. “Drop that knife, mister,” he shouted from the doorway. “Drop it!”

“Dag!” Beren shouted to that side. “Hold a second!” He turned his attention back to Gorlim, who gave no evidence of even having heard Dagnir. “Grol,” he said in a quiet voice. “Listen to me now. Do you know me?”

The fierceness faded slowly out of the eyes and a sort of dim recognition grew in them.

“Aye,” said the smith, almost in puzzled tones, “reckon I do. Master Beren, ’ts who it is.”

“Then, if you know me,” continued Beren in the same slow, soothing tones, “you’ll remember all the times we had together. You’ll remember that we’re friends. Do you remember those times?”

“Aye,” replied Gorlim mistily. “Aye, I do. I remember. I remember plenty o’ times. Good times they was. Aye, rare good times.”

“Do you remember Maegam, and the knife you made me? I’m still wearing it now.”

“Oh, aye!” said Gorlim, and actually chuckled. “I ain’t never going to forget that feller. And how he tickled Ma up right proper.”

“Do you remember my Tree-man friend, and how he cleared the trees away when I asked him for you, and got your wood for you?”

Gorlim’s eyes were shining now. “I do! Oh, what a wonder that was! And such a help!”

“Grol,” said Beren, “I am still your friend, just the same. And all I want to do now is help you.”

The man stared down at him, and the knife point had not budged. “Ah,” said Gorlim. “Ah. Well, that do be the thing. There’s friends, you see Ber, even rare good friends such as we was. And then there is my Neli, and the chile she bears. An’ if the one should cross the other, like, why then, a man has to choose. I’m main sorry, but chosen I have, and the long and the short of it is, you must not say things against my Nel, else it is going to be the worse for you. Now there you’ve had it plain.”

“I... see,” said Beren. “Well then. If I take back the things I said, will you let me up?”

Gorlim’s eyes tightened in puzzlement and suspicion. “Mebbe,” he said.

“Then I do take them back. I don’t know what came over me to say such things. I’m sure Neli will be back any time now. Now be a good fellow and get off my leg, will you? I think my stitches have torn.”

Gorlim stared at him a moment, muttered "Sorry Ber," then took the knife away and rolled his weight off. In the doorway, Dagnir gave a sigh of relief and lowered his bow. Gorlim stood up and backed away towards the gloom at the rear of the room.

"Now you just leave me be," he mumbled. "I'm sorry about your leg, Ber, but I can't be bothered with folk right now. I got to wait for my Nel."

Beren's heart was aching for the man, and he hated to leave him, but at least for the present there was clearly nothing else to be done.

"We'll bring you some food, then, Grol eh? You'll want to have something in the house for when Neli comes."

Gorlim's brow wrinkled. "Aye," he said, "happen you've got something there. I hadn't thought o' that. Thankee, Ber, I'd be much obliged to you."

They left him then, and went back disconsolate to Sightfoot. Beren fainted along the way; Dagnir had to climb up on his horse behind him to stop him from falling.

* * * * *

Although forced by the furious and scolding Cal to take to his bed again for some days, Beren in the meantime organized people to take food to Gorlim, while he tried to think of a plan. In the end he only came up with one which seemed to hold any promise at all. Curse this leg! Until he could get up, he could do nothing; he had to leave his friend to rot.

As soon he could stump around the house again, he called Dag to him.

"I want you to hunt me a deer," he said to him.

Dag furrowed his brow. "But we've plenty of meat just now," he said. "Smokehouse is full of it."

"I need it fresh," said Beren. In the end the big man shrugged and went off cheerfully enough to do the young master's will. Beren had risen very high in his opinion since the battle.

When the carcass had been taken, at Beren's request, to the field at the back of the house, he hunkered down under the boundary hedge and arranged his mind and his still stiff limbs to wait. He did not have to wait too long. Two hours later, during which time he had several times had to shoo away magpies and other scavengers from the carcass, the shadow he had hoped to see passed across the field. Shortly after, there came a beating of great wings as the tawny shape of an eagle descended to land on an upper branch of the tree opposite. Beren levered himself up and limped over to greet it.

The sight of the great hook-beaked bird woke evil memories in Beren. He was nervous to begin with, and struggled both to understand the eagle and to form the sounds himself. After a minute or so, however, he grew calmer, and the speech began to come easier to him.

After arrangements about the carcass were concluded, Beren passed to the favour he needed. He first made sure that the eagle knew of the Ents; when that was clear, he told it that he was eager to find a particular Ent, one who normally housed high up the valley to the West. He was able to describe the place well and to assure himself that the eagle both knew it and had taken note, even if only casually, of its usual inhabitant. Only the eagles could have helped him here, for they went everywhere and saw everything.

Here he had some luck, for it seemed that the eagle, whose name might be translated as Bronze-mail, not only knew of Rattlecone, but even had some slight acquaintance with him. In any case the bird was confident

of being able to find the Ent.

“Many of the Walkers bide now in the North,” the bird said, “in the sad forests of dead trees. They walk there, and they call to the dead ones. No answer comes, but still they walk and call.”

Beren bit his lip. He had been so full of his own troubles that he had forgotten to consider what a terrible matter the massacre of the trees would be for the Ents. Well, there was nothing else for it; he could think of no other way to help his friend, now that the Elves were gone.

“If you find him, then I bid you come to me again,” he said to the eagle. “I will have a message for him.”

“What is the message?” asked the eagle.

“First things first,” said the young man. “Only find him, and then we will see.” The truth was, he had not yet worked out what he should best say.

Four long days went past during which Beren could only bite his fingernails and wait. His wait came to an end half-way through the fifth. It was a clear, cold day, on which the pure blue bowl of the sky arched over the glistening, frozen undulations of snow; a day when the air hurt in the lungs, and each exhale was marked by a great rising plume of fog. As the slant rays of the noon sun stretched golden fingers between the trees, Beren heard the harsh cry, and went out to meet his messenger.

“I have found your Walker,” Bronze-mail said to him. “First I looked to the North, among the dead trees, and he was not there. I looked to the South, and to the East where wise men go not; and at last I found him in the last place I expected: in the high woods just a little way above his home.”

“Did you have speech with him?” asked Beren.

“I did,” said the eagle. “I said that I had met you, and that you had sent me to seek him.”

“And what did he say to that?”

“Nothing. Yet he did not seem surprised.”

“It takes a deal to surprise a Walker,” commented Beren.

“Truly,” said Bronze-mail. “Shall I go back now with your message?”

“Yes,” said Beren. “Bid him come to the pool of the springs here, below the farm, at moonrise on the third night from now.”

“Pool, three nights, moonrise,” said the bird, and prepared to depart.

“Shall I have another deer for you on your return?” asked Beren.

“I thank you for your kindness,” said the eagle, “but if you will you permit me to mention it, two coneys a moon, until the grass comes, would serve my needs better.” Without waiting for a reply, it spread its mighty wings and beat its way into a swift, rising flight.

* * * * *

The fine weather did not last long; on the appointed day there was no chance of glimpsing the moon. A sad drizzle fell slowly from a formless, gloomy sky and trickled down branches to drip dispiritedly off bare twigs into the holes which its persistence had bored into the snow. The fine rain had at first frozen to the surface of the snow in a treacherous slippery crust, but there was a thaw on, and after a time the snow itself began to

soften and melt. Beren found it impossible to keep dry in such conditions, since the water percolated into and soaked every surface exposed to the sky, and ran in spiteful rivulets over the tops of boots plunging knee-deep into the slushy snow.

The fur-wrapped man contemplated the pool as the light began to fade. There would be no starlight tonight, and scarcely any moonlight either, although somewhere above the endless layers of cloud the moon, when it rose, should be close to full. He wondered whether the pool would seem more haunted under such conditions, or less. He reflected with a mordant humour that he was accumulating ghosts rapidly in the place. He wondered whether Gorlim's would come in time to join them; then unaccountably shivered at the thought.

The Ent could move very quietly for his size. In fact, Beren saw him before he heard him. A swaying movement in the gloom, a tall dark shape, and then there tall creature was, towering above the man in the sudden stillness of arrival.

Beren found it hard to make out Rattlecone's eyes in the deep blue gloom which by that time had descended over the pool bank. He felt awkward, and did not know how to begin. He could do nothing for the Ent's sorrow, yet it seemed callous to ignore that and to importune the grieving creature with irrelevant requests. But then he thought of Gorlim crouching in his filth, and took courage.

"My friend is mad," he said simply, "and I think you are the only one who can help him."

The Ent was silent a long time; the two of them just stood, as if listening together to the drips falling from the branches.

"Do you know why I came tonight, at your request?" Rattlecone said at last in his deep, slow voice.

"No," said Beren.

"Do you not wonder at it?"

"I do," said the man.

"And why do you wonder?"

Beren stumbled over his words. "Because... because I know that you have lost hugely of those in your charge, of those whom you love," he said in a low voice. "I know it is an open wound with you, a great, gaping, open wound. I wonder that you yourself, and all your kind, are not mad with grief from it. No, I do not know why you came."

"There is yet more than you know," said the Ent in a voice thick with grief. "More than you know. The trees, yes, they are bad enough. They were our charge indeed, and we loved them well, and they are gone in a blow, and there was nothing to be done, nothing we could have done. So many, all lost. You speak of madness, and in some cases you speak the truth. Our chief, who is of the race of the most trees who were slain, is past reason for this time. But oh, oh, there is more than you know. From our young too we have lost. Our Entings, five of them are gone from us. The fathers of those, I will not say their names, since you would freeze in the long nights and days while I was telling them to you; or starve, you soft thing, you light unhardy thing who flits over the earth. Five they were. They went to seek vengeance for the slain, but at the Iron Hells they were checked, far across the murdered plains. They broke themselves there on the cruel walls, until they too were slain in their turn, their lives burnt away with witch-fire, while the Enemy jeered from his ramparts. They are gone. We sing to them, but they will not come back. No, never to come back, never ever in the circles of the world.

"And there is worse yet! Worse yet!" the tall being continued, his voice trembling in passion. "Death is

death, and we could have abided it in time. But the filth of Unlife have taken root among us. That is not worse, it is worst!”

“Unlife? What do you mean by that?” said Beren, but Rattlecone had shut his mouth and would say no more.

After another long silence, the tall Ent sighed. “I do not know what to say to you. I can feel your friend’s pain from here, I know what he has lost. But has he lost more than others, that he should break so under the burden?”

Beren thought about that. “Pain is pain,” he said at last. “Nobody can judge what another feels.”

“He loved too well,” said Rattlecone. “Such bliss is not meant for this world. Thus was his fall the harder. Did I not warn you of it, the last time you asked me to divert the fates in his favour?”

Beren swallowed. “That seems very hard,” he said.

“Hard?” said Rattlecone. “If you shrink from hardness, you should close your ears, close your mind. Your friend can never be any more real use to anyone, least of all himself. He is a rotted branch, that can never be made hale. If you put much weight on him, he will break. You see your friend now in ugliness and pain, and it is natural that you should want to help him. But it is the fate of all things to die, and it is usually ugly and painful. Bethink you that the best course might be simply to leave him.”

“No!” said Beren with a sudden fierceness. “I cannot accept that, I will not. If he is to die, then for all love, let it not be in filth and madness. Better a clean death in battle – which we may all meet soon enough, Powers know. Indeed I cannot think why the Enemy hesitates. We have too few fighters, and no strongholds; Ladros is an open door.

“But all that is not to the point. Rattlecone! I know you can do something for him. You would not leave your own friend in such plight.”

“I would, though,” replied the Ent.

“Would you? Well I, I, I am not so strong or wise as you. *I* cannot. I beg you, do not leave him this way. Anything would be better.”

The Ent sighed again. “He can never be a complete man again; parts of him are lost beyond recall. I can only now give him a little more future by robbing him of some of his past. There is ugliness for you, there is hardness. Is this what you wish?”

Beren swallowed again, then nodded. “Do it.”

The Ent made no move to go, but just stood there, a tall dark shape in the gloom. “Your friend will betray you,” he said. “I tell it to you plain. I have long seen the seed of it in him.”

Beren raised his chin. “You do not know everything about Men, Rattlecone. I think Gorlim has more in him than you know; he may surprise you yet.”

“That we shall see,” said the Ent. He turned then abruptly and disappeared into the gathering night, with little more noise than a swish of snow.

“You never told me why you did come!” Beren called after him into the darkness, but there was no reply.

* * * * *

Gorlim squatted in the dark room and waited for Eilinel. He did not know how long he had been waiting; the

question never came before his mind. He just waited. That was all he had to do. If he waited, she would come; that was the fixed point about which his life revolved.

People left food now and then. That was kind of them. He never ate much of it, because the food was for Neli. Neli needed plenty of feeding in her condition.

After a while the part he had kept for her became no good any more. He couldn't feed her stale bread or foul broth, so he threw that out the door. The neighbours brought more then. They were very kind; he was really touched by how kind they were. Neli and he must certainly do something for them after she came back.

Sometimes in the nights he thought he heard her voice. He went to the door and called at these times. He wanted to go out and look, but he durstn't, in case she came; and anyway he couldn't find his tinder box. It was always dark everywhere these days. He wanted to light the lamps, light the house up so she could find it, and it gnawed at his mind, that he couldn't find his tinder box. It never occurred to him to ask the neighbours for fire.

One day he was squatting as usual, waiting for Eilinel. There was a terrible, sudden sound and the thatch above his head was torn away, all of a piece. When he could see for the light again, there was the great tree-thing standing there looking down at him. The one he had met before.

"Have you news of Neli?" he asked of it. "Have you come to take me to her?"

"I am come to take you back to life," rumbled the tree-thing. It reached out to his head with two great, many-twigged hands.

* * * * *

Barahir and Emeldir on their journey east had ridden straight to Menelrond. When Glifinnath first caught sight of the weary faces of the pair, freshly come from the battle, she had insisted that they go to bed on the instant. No argument could sway her, and since she was backed up strongly by her husband, and more quietly but with equal firmness by their children Gilraen and Gildor, the couple had in the end little option but to yield.

Menelrond rode over Barahir's protests. "Nothing's going to happen in the next couple of days, boy," he said, "so you just rest up. Tell us all about it in a day or two. Come on now, be a sensible fellow, do. You know there's not the least use in arguing." And with that he laid his huge hands on Barahir and gently but inexorably urged the exhausted man toward the bedroom.

Two days filled mostly with sleep did indeed make a great difference to them. As soon as they were rested, a great feast was laid on, and the pair were officially welcomed.

The great room of Menelrond's house was lit with numerous torches, and a fire was laid in the broad stone recess at the end. Three long tables were packed with people: a family table, a friends' table, and a children's table. Menelrond and Glifinnath sat at opposite ends of the family table. Barahir and Emeldir sat on either side of Menelrond. All three of the couple's children were present: Gilach next to Arasenaur, the golden Gildor beside cheerful, ugly Urioc, and radiant Gilraen next to her husband Alagos. On the other side sat Baragund and Rhasûl; after them, Belegund Greencloak beside laughing Faelind, the firelight soft in her hair. Seated last at the table was Baragund's eldest daughter Morwen, who had refused to sit with the children.

The two from the upper valley had not seen the young maid for some time. They looked now at her with interest verging on wonder, for the promise of an unearthly beauty had begun to touch her slender frame, as dawn tints the trees with rose. Morwen's face was Elven-fair; she held her dark head proudly, and a light of challenge glinted in her eyes.

It was not the custom among the Bëorings to discuss serious matters while eating, but when the meal drew towards a close, Barahir and Emeldir prepared themselves to give some account of the battle and of the rescue of Finrod. They were in for a surprise, however, because as soon as everybody had more or less finished, with only a few gluttons still nibbling, Menelrond clapped his great hands together to still all the talk.

“Let us have a song!” he said. At that, a spare, tanned man with gleaming white hair stood up from the friends’ table and went over to the wall to fetch his harp. Barahir and Emeldir recognized Oromar, a bard who used to wander the valleys. They had not seen him for some years and wondered where he had been and what he had seen. The world was wide, they knew; and Oromar as they knew him of old had always had a hunger for distant horizons.

Their surprise was the greater when Oromar struck up, because he began to sing of their own battle! He sung of the alarm, and of the weary trek through the snow and the forest; of the birds, and the battle in the skies; of the great shooting of Orcs on the grassy slope, then of the turn of the battle one way, then another; and of the final desperate race through the storm. They saw again in their minds, as did all the listeners, the shining row of Elves marching to them over the hill; Emeldir shooting the Wolf; the battle at the river. Last of all, Oromar sang of the oath and the ring.

“Show them the ring!” commanded Menelrond, and held Barahir’s arm up high. The great ring on his finger flashed green fire in the lamplight.

“Praise them!” said Menelrond, and he made the couple get up, yes and Gramlach and the other house-men too; they all had to stand there, red-faced, while the rest cheered them.

Menelrond turned Barahir and Emeldir to face him, a hand on each shoulder. His blue eyes twinkled at them solemnly over his great tawny cataract of a beard. “Well done,” he rumbled at them, “O son and daughter of Bëor, who prepared well and patiently in the times of peace, and thus were prepared for war when it came; and who kept the word and honour of all our people. Well done!”

There followed one of those awkward pauses which always seem to occur after a presentation or a speech, when nobody is sure what to do or say next. The celebrated ones sat down again with alacrity and each attempted to divert attention with as much haste as could be managed. Oromar struck up softly with an old familiar lay, and soon people were talking normally again.

Barahir leaned his head next to Menelrond’s shaggy one. “I thank you sincerely, Cousin, of course,” he said in his ear, “but are you not a little premature with your praise? It is true that we have won some skirmishes, but in your private ear, I will confess my fears for the future. The clouds thicken about us.”

Menelrond leaned back and laughed. “Powers love you, boy,” he said, “we are all food for worms in the long run. It is only a roll of the dice whether it is sooner or later. No, a win’s a win, and must be celebrated. The future will look after itself.”

“Maybe,” said Barahir. “We should give some thought to it, all the same. But tell me first how you primed Oromar with that yarn!”

“Come now,” laughed Menelrond again in his deep voice, “my eldest was in the battle too, you know. We have had two days to pump him. But tell me a little more, if you will, of the deeds of your own lad. Gilach told me such uncommon things about him as to make me wonder if my boy got a knock on the head!”

The two spoke on for some time, while the people amused themselves in diverse ways. The children had left their table by now and were running around with laughter between the furniture.

After a time, the company at the family table had rearranged itself somewhat, seemingly without any plan.

Gilraen and her man had left, as had Glifinnath; their places had been taken by Ragnor, Arthad and Gramlach.

Barahir looked around at all their faces. "Let us leave tales now," he said. "I would like to hear some account of matters in the North and East, so far as they are known." With this he glanced into Baragund's face, but the Soldier was giving nothing away.

"Aye, let us so," rumbled Menelrond, but then he looked to the foot of the table. "Would it not please you better, Morwen, to consort with the other children?"

The girl stood. All there wondered again to see how she trembled on the threshold of beauty, the promise or potential of which she herself seemed entirely unaware. Her dark hair was wild, and her slender frame, on which the marks of femininity were only just beginning to appear, was clad in forest-coloured hose and jerkin; dress suitable for a scout or a hunter. A long knife in a plain leather sheath hung at her belt.

The maid lifted her chin. "No," she replied, "because I am not a child. Had not your son, Barahir, at three years less than my age already killed his first Orc? So it is said, anyway."

"You should not believe all you are told, Morwen," said Menelrond with a smile.

"I should like to see the man who would dare lie to me," she retorted.

Nobody said anything for a moment, then Barahir shrugged. "It is true about Beren," he said. "Well, I make no objection, Morwen, if you wish to remain." He looked towards her parents.

"It is as we have spoken before," her father said slowly to Morwen. "It is for you to choose. Only, if you demand the freedoms of your elders, be prepared to take on some of their duties and burdens as well."

Morwen looked at him but said nothing more. She sat down.

Baragund turned his hard soldier's face back to the company. "Well," he said, "where to begin? You had the same shock as we did, I take it: waking with the trembling of the earth, to find the whole North afire." When they nodded, he continued. "I will pass over the doubt and the anguish, since you will have suffered the same as we. We were mustered here by the end of the day following, and had sent messages up- and down-stream. The upstream brought men on the morrow, but our messengers returned from Newfort with no firm news from the Bëor. We –"

Barahir interrupted him. "Just a minute – what do you mean by that?"

Menelrond leaned forward. "It is said that Bregolas refused to believe that the die was cast," he rumbled. "He claimed the shaking and the lights were some natural outbreak, no cause for a muster."

Both the brothers looked uncomfortable.

"Go on," Barahir said to Baragund.

"Be that as it may," the Soldier said stiffly. "We sent messages to Newfort again, with more emphasis. In case the first had been misunderstood. By nightfall of the second day, however, there was still nothing decided, no word from Father. In the meantime we had disturbing reports back from scouts to the North. We also learned that you were moving, in pursuit of your long-laid and well-known plan. We decided to advance some way without my lord, and sent word to him of our intention, suggesting a meeting at the place where the road to Angrod forks from the main path. We set off for that point on the third day; but by the close of that day, we still saw no force from Newfort, whereas our scouts told us that the Enemy was on the move.

“At daybreak of the fourth day, I took it upon myself to proceed north with the greater part of my force. My heart was heavy, because all reports were bad. There seemed little doubt that Angrod had fallen and that the tower was taken.

“At about mid-morning...” Baragund swallowed. “At about mid-morning, Father’s force came up on us from the road behind. His men were mounted, we were on foot. We... had some debate about the proper course, but before that had reached a conclusion, his troops pushed through our ranks, and continued to advance. We lost sight of them. Reports from thenceforth are... confused. It seems that they encountered a body of Orcs, but how large a one is disputed. They fell back on us at the same time as we also came under attack. We thought it best to retire, and we managed that without much further loss. We took up position in our lines at the crossing, and waited on events. There were some alarms that night, and it is known that Orc raiders did penetrate into the valley, although there cannot have been many, at least in our sector. Since that time we have suffered no more incursions, and scouts report few of the Enemy remaining in the northern woods, save garrisons in the towers. And so we find ourselves today.”

There was silence after he finished speaking. “You said, ‘without much *further* loss,’ ” said Barahir. “How many did you lose in the attack?”

The Greencloak now took his turn to speak, his face set in unaccustomed planes of tightness. “Sixteen dead, some fifty injured,” he said grimly. “None of it necessary.”

“Come now, Brother,” said Baragund, moving uncomfortably, “you go too far.”

Menelrond broke the silence. “What’s past is past,” he said. “The question is, what shall we do now?” They discussed this for some time, and all agreed that the first priority was to find out how matters stood in the wider arena. Rumour spoke of a titanic struggle in the East, but little was known for certain; and nobody had any information at all about the situation in Hithlum.

“And I: I must talk with Bregolas,” said Barahir.

Baragund pointed to the ring on Barahir’s hand. “Father will not be pleased about that,” he said.

* * * * *

Sight had departed from Andreth, and now the names had all gone too, but in some ways she was as sharp as ever, if not more so. When the shaking of the earth woke her in the night, only a little after the feast of Sunwending, she had known immediately what it portended, not only for the world at large, but also for her own heart. All that long day she had been with him as he fought, leagues away, first against the poison cloud which had choked and silenced so many of his companions, and then against the swarms of Pit-spawn which flowed like a second wave against the stone walls of the keep, screaming in their lust and hate. She had been at his side during the sally, and had beheld with him the terrible Valarauko, the centre and source of all despair. The desperate and hopeless attack, the candle flaring, his last thought winged to her; and then the bright flame was out. Out – or rather, it had rushed away to an infinite distance, twinkling there now on the edge of perception like the faintest of summer stars, a million miles away. Inaccessible.

Andreth had long known there were only two bonds holding her to the world. He had been one; the sword was the other. She knew she could not die until the question of the sword had an answer. But she was no nearer finding one, and there could not now be many days of wear left in this old carcase. Surely the Boy must come!

Surely I must find the way, she thought: the solution, the hidden certainty.

She felt that she had already half-way left the world. The people around her had become as shadows; they hardly caught her attention. Only rarely was the veil lifted.

That poor girl – she had been inside the veil, she had been real. But the dear girl was long since gone back to the Elves; and now she was dead, Andreth was as certain of that as if she had seen her die. But perhaps the poor body had welcomed it.

Days went by in which Andreth was dimly aware of the moving turmoils of the world, which came to her like inner glimpses and whispers. Faint shouts of defiance she caught, and yells of the dying. The Valaraukar were abroad, and a golden Firedrake raged in the East. Swarms of Orcs carpeted the earth like locusts. Soon they would come here. Not yet, perhaps; but soon.

Not all was dark. Far in the North-west the valour and hardihood of Elves and Men, standing together, held back the flood; and once, where the land of the Bëorings bordered the Vale, there came a blaze of green – a fierce flash of joy in victory, snatched unexpectedly and against monstrous odds.

Not too many days after that, a voice that she knew came through the door, and then the presence itself. And there he was: another who penetrated the veil, another who was fully real. Andreth knew he was her nephew, she remembered everything about him; just not his name.

He was the father of the Boy.

“My dear Nephew,” she said, holding his hand in both of hers, “it is glad I am indeed to see you. I pray you, do not smile at my choice of words. The eyes of my body see you not, but memory has its own eyes.”

“Your true eyes might have found many more grey hairs and lines than your memory,” said Barahir, smiling. “It is glad I am to see you too, Aunt.”

“Come,” she said, “sit beside me and tell me all your news.”

He sat and told her of the great battle, and how at the last they had dashed through the storm and snatched Finrod from between the teeth of the enemy.

“In his thanks he gave me this,” he said, guiding her hand to the great ring he wore.

“Ahhh...” she said, feeling its shape dreamily. “It is his house device. That was a kingly gift. I saw something of it...”

He looked into her lined face without speaking.

Andreth pulled herself back to the present. She released his hand with a pat and sat upright, her dark eyes directed so nearly at his face that he could almost believe they still functioned.

“And what of your boy?” she asked. “You said he was there. Did he fight well?”

So then he had to tell her all of Beren’s exploits. She was particularly interested to hear how the Boy had used a sword in the final raid.

“Good Powers in the West!” she said at the end of the tale. “That is a mouthful of news you have told me. It seems, then, that he has not entirely forgotten everything those Dwarves taught him. The Boy with a blade! And using it to good account, if the father is to be believed!”

Barahir smiled. “Ask anybody, Aunt. They’ll back up my claim.”

Andreth chewed her lips for a moment. “Well, he knows where to get a better whenever he wants it.”

They spoke for a while longer, with affection, more like old friends than aunt and nephew.

At last he stood up. “Well, Aunt, the pleasure of seeing you grows greater every time, but I have unpleasant business which I must not put off any longer.”

Her upturned face, graven deeply by time, wore a shrewd and wry look between the white tresses. “I know. You go to talk with – oh, what’s his name – your brother. Our glorious ruler.”

He nodded, forgetting for a moment that she could not see that, but then caught himself and added, “Yes. There are many things we need to discuss.”

“How do you see it going, Nephew?” she asked.

“Our talk? – oh, you mean generally.” He was silent for a moment. “It does not look good for us,” he said at last, gently. “With the Elvish forts gone.”

“Hmph,” she said. “It will be a strange thing if I, who saw the conquest of Ladros, should also live to see its loss. I had no other thought than to leave my bones here.”

“Maybe you will yet. It is impossible to tell.”

She shook her head. “No. I can tell. I know.”

He left her then, with a promise to visit again before he left.

* * * * *

Barahir found his brother at a desk covered in a disorder of documents. In the greenish light streaming in through the many-paned window, Bregolas looked tired and drawn. There was more grey than black in his hair now and his face looked puffy and unwell.

Bregolas looked at his brother with no very friendly light in his eyes. “Ah,” he said, “is it you. Tell me, Brother, why is it that the sight of your face always fills me with dismay. It is ill-bred of me to own it, I know, but truth must out: your solemn visage always seems to be the harbinger of some petty irritation or other. It does not seem to be the way things should be between brother and brother. But perhaps it is the same for you? Nay, to the Pit with ‘perhaps’, I know it to be so. Does the fault lie with you, do you suppose, or with me?”

“Perhaps both,” said Barahir, pulling a chair out and seating himself without being asked. “But since neither of us wishes the other ill, can we not find a way to work better together, particularly in these times which are so grim?”

“Ah now, you see, I knew you would say that,” said Bregolas. “We diverge even at the very start. At the very start. The fact is, Brother, that I do not find them to be so very grim as all that.”

Barahir was so greatly astonished that he had difficulty in hiding it. “Do you not?” he said. “I believe I... would you care to explain, why not?”

“Turn it around,” said Bregolas. “It is you who makes the claim. Tell me why you think they are grim.”

Barahir waved his hands helplessly. “The siege broken, the Leaguer utterly destroyed...”

“You do not know that,” broke in his brother.

“Well, for the love of... what other interpretation can you make on the reports!”

Bregolas shrugged. “I do not wish to pick at details. You may be right. I only wished to emphasize that it is

not known for sure. No argument built on other than firm facts can stand.”

“May we then assume it for the time?” asked Barahir, and his brother shrugged again. “Well,” Barahir continued, “passing on from that... Angrod and Aegnor are gone, and their strongholds are taken, will you concede that at least?”

“So it is reported,” said Bregolas, with yet another shrug.

“The land then lies wide open,” said Barahir. “There is nothing to prevent the Enemy simply scooping it up. Or, very little. Our part, then, should be to —”

“Why should he wish to?” broke in Bregolas.

“What?” said Barahir, confused by the interruption.

“Why should the so-called Enemy,” Bregolas spoke slowly and distinctly, “wish to ‘scoop us up’? We have nothing that he desires.”

Barahir opened his mouth once or twice before he succeeded in speaking. “Because we are his foes,” he said helplessly.

“I do not know that,” said Bregolas. “I know that he has a quarrel with the Elves. I do not see that we need mix ourselves in with that. Indeed, it seems to me most inadvisable for a weak entity, such as we are in this world, to make cause with a strong one against its foes, when firstly the foe is the strongest of all, and secondly when there is no assurance, none whatsoever, that the stronger partner will come to the aid of the weaker.”

Barahir could only shake his head from side to side. “Brother, I think we can never agree on this question.”

Bregolas leaned forwards. “You have been influenced by the Elves. Naturally, you believe what they tell you. But Barahir, do not deceive yourself: the Elves have no concern for Men. They only care about themselves. Oh, there may be a few whose pleasure it is to toy with us to while away an idle hour – or a year or two, it is much the same with them. But they will never spend their own blood to save a hair of us.”

Barahir was still shaking his head. “You are wrong. I have this ring itself in very token of just such a promise from Finrod, one of the greatest of them all.”

“Fine words,” sneered Bregolas. “Come to me again when you have more proof than a piece of Elvish glitter. But that will not happen. And believe it or not as you please, Brother, but it will give me no pleasure to be proven right when I stand with my feet in your blood.”

There was silence between them for a while. “What say you then of the Orcs?” said Barahir at last.

Bregolas met that with one of his shrugs. “The Orcs are a nuisance,” he said. “But they have always been so, and always will be. Nothing has changed.”

“There are eight legions of them sitting in the Vale, to the West, just outside our borders. Is that nothing to you?”

“Ah yes,” said Bregolas, leaning back in his chair, “I have heard this tale, of these ‘eight legions’. Tell me again what proofs you have of their existence.”

“My own eyes,” said Barahir, keeping his temper now with difficulty. “The bodies of several dozen of my soldiers – neighbours, friends. Does that suffice for you?”

“You grow hot, Brother,” replied Bregolas. “Pray cool yourself. Take a cup of wine. Passion sounds well, very much after the Elvish fashion; but only cool heads can argue policy. Now, I have heard somewhat of your battle – though surely not an accurate and clear account, for some of the reports pass belief. Be that as it may, none of my informants claim that there were more than two legions involved. Very creditable on your part, I am sure, and from the point of view of thinning the numbers of Orcs, quite praiseworthy; from the view of wider strategy, somewhat less so. But nowhere is it claimed that you met more legions than two. Even there we may, perhaps, close an eye and remember that such estimates have a tendency to inflate in the turmoil of combat. One attacker becomes three; and blows struck by three on the same foe become blows struck on three separate foes – by that I mean that each claims the kill which was the joint work of all.

“But for the sake of the argument, let us say two legions. You say there were two, but you also claim to have wiped them out. Therefore they do not add to the count. Now you say there are eight, and undefeated?”

“I do,” said Barahir. “They were the remainder whom we did not meet.”

“Did you see them yourself? No, do not tell me anything else for the moment. Just answer the question. Did you?”

“Only those few in the snow, at the river,” said Barahir slowly.

“Even you will not claim to have foughten your way through eight full legions of Orcs,” said Bregolas. “So your answer is ‘no’, you did not see them. On what grounds, then, do you base your claim that they exist? Or, to be more exact, that they existed, where you claim they were, a week ago.”

“The Elvish captain told me –”

“Ah!” said Bregolas.

“– and so did my son,” finished Barahir.

“Your son,” repeated Bregolas in a neutral voice. “And tell me, how did *he* know?”

Barahir was silent for a moment. He could see where this was going. “He had his ravens spy over the land,” he said at last.

“And so we come to it,” said Bregolas. “You have warned me against insulting those nearer your blood than I, Barahir, and it is no doubt proper in you to do so. Thus, I shall not. But just consider: you ask me to move armies on the word of a, a wood-struck youth, on his claim that the witless sounds coming out of a raven’s beak not only have meaning, but paint a true picture of four and twenty thousand of Orcs whom no man – no *man* – has ever seen. Would you do so in my place?”

“Knowing the youth: yes,” said Barahir.

“Then you are even more of a fool than I had supposed you were,” said Bregolas.

Neither said anything for some time.

“What do you propose, then, to do?” asked Barahir at last.

“Nothing,” came the answer he now expected. But Bregolas was not finished. “I know well this answer will not please you,” he said, “but what you have to decide, Brother, once and for all, is where your loyalties lie. Are you loyal to me, the chosen leader of our people, or are you loyal to some lord of another race? Because you cannot be both.”

“It was the lord of that race who chose you,” said Barahir quietly.

Bregolas stood up at that, his face red. “Custom chose me, and the will of our people. I am the eldest son of my father. I do not need some Elvish prince to say yea or nay to my rule!”

“The root of that custom was an oath of fealty to that very lord you wish to disclaim,” said Barahir, standing in his turn. “It is you who break faith, Brother, not I.”

“It is always the way with you, *Brother*,” fumed Bregolas, “that first come the fine words – oh so fine, so noble! But under the blanket of feathers hides ever a poison fang. I see you move to deny me. But mark how true is your enamoured prince: at once his whim is to name me vassal, at twice it is you. Who will be third? You will be a fool in the sight of all if you hitch your cart to the mad train of this inconstant Elf. But I, I will not suffer it. *I* rule this land, not you; and no flim-flam ring can change that. Wish you to dispute it? Then speak the word now, if you have backbone to match your pretty tongue. For I tell you truly, one such word from you, with you yet in my power, and your neck will stretch before the day is out.”

Barahir, although deeply flushed in the face, kept his own temper. He bowed. “My lord, you mistake me,” he said. “I do not dispute your lordship of our people. I am your loyal servant, as ever. And you mistake the purpose of the ring: its message was a personal one, to me and my house.”

Bregolas sat down again. “Spineless after all,” he sneered. “Do not expect me to credit your claim of faith when I have seen so many clear proofs to the contrary.”

“I see no purpose in further conversation,” the big man continued. “By your deeds shall I judge you. And take clear warning, Brother: the noose awaits. Our shared blood will not hold you from it for ever. Take but one step outside my law, and see how well your ring will save you then, favourite, when you stand upon the scaffold with the prickle of hemp heavy about your neck. Mayhap you will learn then, over-late, how little weight is to be placed on the thistledown promises of Elves.”

Barahir bowed to him again and left the room. Bregolas sat on, gnawing at his knuckles in vexation.

“Eight legions?” he snorted. “Pah!”

* * * * *

Barahir’s party returned to Sightfoot on a misty evening in late winter. Beren was outside at the time, fetching some wood in a barrow, and heard the approach of the horses. He was at the gate to welcome his parents. When he recognized his father sitting there tall in the saddle, he thought of the many threads this man held in his fist. The trust of all the people in Upper Ladros ran up to this single man and rested on his strong shoulders. But Barahir looked as though he were up to the task. The ring gleamed on his bare hand in the mist with a cold light, and some trick of the swirling vapours brought a momentary flicker to his brow. For an instant he seemed not like a humble farmer, bent with years of toil over earth and beast, but like a king: a centre of faith and power. The moment vanished away, and there was his father again; stocky, travel stained, his rough beard salted with grey.

“No watchers?” said his father as he dismounted.

There was no need for watchers so long as Beren was about, but he avoided saying so. “Nothing to see in this murk,” was all he said.

His mother reached him then and flung herself on her son and held him close. She released him after a long squeeze and looked him over as she held him at arm’s length.

“It is good to see you up and active, Son,” she said, eyes sparkling, relief and love all but glowing out of her.

He smiled into the dear face he knew so well. Looking a little lined and worn now; but still the face of his mother.

“Come inside, Mother,” he said. “This mist is chill.”

The sound of horses had brought other people to the door, but they all went in now to the warmth, where the chatter usual to such occasions was soon in full flow. In the kitchen the new arrivals were provided with hot food and ale and were soon warming their toes at the fire.

Beren had seated himself next to his father and over the course of the evening heard most of the news about the northern expedition, its far from honourable denouement, and of developments since then. On his side, Beren told his father what news he had gleaned from his birds.

“It is not a very favourable season for flying,” he said, “but the eagles have ventured over the Fence in the East, and across the Vale to the West, into Hithlum. They tell me that Hithlum stands –”

“Powers be thanked,” muttered Barahir.

“– but that matters are beyond bad in the East,” his son continued. “The attack there seems to have been of terrible weight: Orcs in uncounted numbers of course, but other creatures of terror too. I quake to think what would happen to us under their wrath.”

“It is bootless to fear the foe before you see him,” chided his father.

“I know,” said Beren, “but all the same, it is hard not to think of it. Well, the eagles say that the pass of Aglon has been forced, but they think that Maedhros, or others of the Sons of Fëanor, may still hold fast further East. They do not know for sure. In any case, someone still seems to be fighting, because there has been no let up.”

Barahir mulled this over. “And nearer at hand?”

“Not much has changed,” said Beren. “The northern towers hold garrisons, and nothing more. To the West, the same eight legions, or thereabouts, lurk still in the Vale.”

Barahir glanced at him. “Bregolas did not believe me when I told him about them.”

Beren heard this with a wry face. “We must pray then for his sake that he never receives the sort of proof it seems he might demand.”

They went on to discuss the preparations that might be put in place. Beren nodded after he had heard the plans described.

“That may work even better than you think,” he said. “I must tell you that the destruction of the northern woods – virtually the whole of the Forest of Drûn is gone – has hit the Tree-shepherds, the Onodrim, very hard. Now, they have never been friendly to creatures which go on legs, particularly if they do hurt to trees. Most of them are sensible of the difference between Men and Orcs, indeed some of the Onodrim used to help the Druug in keeping raiders out of Dorthonion in the old days; but just now I think they are so shocked and furious that the distinction is perhaps no longer so greatly to be relied upon. We would be wise to keep out of the woods ourselves, except at last necessity. But more to our present point, I think any Orc who ventures in is due for a nasty shock.”

“You are thinking... we may use the woods to protect our flanks?” said Barahir slowly.

“I believe so,” said Beren. “At least until the Ents’ anger cools. And that may be as slow to fade as it is to

rouse.”

“That makes a difference,” said Barahir. “That may make the whole thing much easier. I will need to think about it, and maybe discuss it with Baragund. But you say the people must also stay away from the woods? I do not see how that is to be achieved.”

“Some of these other plans of yours sound equally difficult,” replied Beren. “This flight you speak of. Plenty of people will prefer to die in their houses than to leave them, and live. You will see.”

“Well, we will just have to try our best to persuade them,” said Barahir. “On both counts – to stay out of the woods, and to plan to seek refuge.”

“Wood for fires is always needed, I know,” said his son. “But hunting and other idle woodland pursuits they can and should forgo. And if they must go to the forest to take wood, put the word out not to cut the living! There is plenty of fallen growth, if they look. They will just have to work a little harder to get at it.”

They spoke around this topic a little longer, then fell silent. On the other side of the kitchen, Hrotha was telling some unlikely yarn to a chorus of uproar and laughter.

Barahir darted a speculative look at his son in the middle of the racket. “I visited Andreth,” he said, leaning closer so that his voice would be heard.

Beren returned the glance. “Oh? And how was she?”

“She is ninety-four,” replied Barahir. “I found her no worse than one might expect from that age.”

“I suppose you are going to mention the sword,” said the other.

“I am indeed,” replied Barahir firmly. “It is your sword. Why don’t you go and take what’s offered? It was made for your hand, and you need a sword now. The time for playing woodland waif is past. How many Orc-heads did you take at the river with just a borrowed blade?”

Beren smiled ruefully. “I was a little too busy to count them,” he said.

“Beren,” said his father, “a blind man could see the path before you, that you cannot. Must I drag you to Andreth by your collar and thrust the thing into your hand?”

Beren shook his head. “No, Father. It is true that circumstances have changed. This outbreak of open war changes things, and I will admit that I see now more use in a blade, speaking generally, than I did in those times when all we had to fear was the occasional goblin sneaking through the woods. I admit that I was wrong before; when I did not see my way clear. But all the same, I will not take Boromir’s sword. Not while you are living. It would not do.”

“For the love of Aman, why?” asked Barahir in exasperation.

“Because it is more than just a common sword,” said Beren. “People would see it as a symbol. We have but one leader here, Father, and that is you. At present, the people are well united behind you. We will not survive unless we stay that way.”

Barahir chewed his lip in frustration. Damn the boy, he had a point. “Well can’t you at least go and fetch the thing,” he said at last. “I don’t ask you to wear it. But Andreth is very old. What will happen if she dies still in possession? Must we bury it with her? Just go and get it, and keep it somewhere.”

“Perhaps,” said Beren reluctantly. “Somehow my heart speaks against that. But you are probably right. Let

me think about it a little longer.”

“Well, don’t wait too long, that’s all,” said his father. “Otherwise events will decide for you. There is nothing Bregolas would like better than to cast that thing into the deepest hole he can find.”

They talked of other things then, touching on many matters far and near. Eventually the fire burned low; people stirred themselves to prepare for bed. Just before father and son rose to go up, Barahir laid a hand on his son’s arm.

“Son,” he said, “I cannot tell you of what pride, and hope, and pleasure I feel to have you at my side. It almost makes this horrid business seem worthwhile.”

Beren smiled at that, and squeezed the rough hand with his own.

“How are your wounds?” asked his father as they stood. “You limp still?”

“They are stiff, yes,” said Beren. “It is not easy to stretch oneself in winter. But come the spring, and I believe I will soon be lively enough.”

“Spring is not far off,” said Barahir. “I can smell it in the air. It will soon be the time for ploughing.”

“We must hope it is only of earth, not flesh,” replied Beren. “Good night, Father.”

* * * * *

The great, slow world turned, indifferent to the mites which spawned and wandered over the wildness of its face. Betimes the creatures would come together in their secret conclaves; or they would creep hither and thither in swarms, or fall to hacking at each other until the corpses lay piled in heaps, sticky with spilled fluids. The great, slow world turned, indifferent; and the sun crept a little higher with each noon.

The thaw came, the rushing waters, the sweetened air, and the crocus. It was the same delight every year. Sun-flashes leaped gladly from the running waters, bees and butterflies awoke. The birds busied themselves, with a new spirit to be heard in their voices. The people of Ladros emerged from their smoky houses and went into the wet fields to labour. Teams were hitched to ploughs, and the work of spring began. But there was other work now also under way, with many comings and goings across the land.

Merezum, the grizzled farmer sitting across from Barahir and Beren, scratched his head. He didn’t like new things, and here was a reg’lar passel of ’em, all come at once.

“Well now, I takes yer meaning very well, young ’un,” he said. “What you d’tell me o’ them Tree-Men. Do seem like good rede to stay out o’ the woods for a spell. I understands that very well. We won’t nor take no harm from it – that is to say, not for a whiles anyroad; firing wood’s in a fair way just at present, and we don’t need to go chasing after no deer, not as if we had time for it, choose how. But all the same, ’t must be said, we can’t keep on that way forever. We’ll need mending wood eventually, same as every man in this valley, and plenty of it. What’s to come then, when we’ve no option but to lay axe to tree again?”

“It won’t be forever,” said Beren. “Let’s see how things look by shieling-time.”

“Mph,” grunted the old man. “Fair enough. We can see our way clear as far as that, I reckon. Right enough. We’m done with that item. Now, what were the next thing? Never had so many things to think about at one time since I were married. Oh, right, you wanted help wi’ digging and carrying. Well now, dunno ’bout that. Can’t really spare Son, not this time o’ year...”

“I’ll go, Da,” said his oldest daughter, a large, sturdy young woman. “I can dig. ’Strell can help Ma, same as

before.”

“Well, Pipsie, all right,” replied her father doubtfully. “I won’t stand in yer way if you’ve a mind to set hand to it. Now master,” he said briskly to Barahir, dusting his calloused hands together, “that one’s sorted. That were about all, I b’lieve?”

Barahir shook his head. “You’ve left out the most important thing,” he said.

“Mph.” Farmer Merezum looked as though he had found a sudden sour taste in his mouth. “Kind of hoped we wouldn’t come to it. All right. Let’s see now. ’Vina, you been listening?”

His wife, who was kneading dough next to the stove, had not so far made any comment. “Aye,” she said now.

“Well don’t be backward, woman. Tell us what you think about un!”

Rovina stopped kneading and faced the others, floury hands by her sides. She shook her head. “No,” she said slowly, “it’s no use, I can’t be getting around that one at all, choose how. Just don’t seem nat’rel. *Leave* the place? Where would we go? This is our *place*.”

“Mistress,” said Barahir, his voice hardening, “there are four-and-twenty thousand goblins just the other side of that hill. If they decide to come over this way, there is nothing we can do to stop them. If they come, and you don’t leave your farm, you’ll die in it. It’s really that brutally simple.”

Rovina looked defensive. “All very well for you to say, Master. All very well for you. You say, ‘go or die’, but what about *go and die*, eh? That’s more the size of it if you aks me.”

“Aye,” agreed Merezum. “Well said, ’Vina; same as what’s in my own mind.” He leaned forward then and pointed to Barahir with his pipe. “And with respect, Master, if I didn’t know better, I’d call that craven talk, what you said about nobody stopping ’em. You stopped ’em yourselves just a little while ago, over t’ward Vale, didn’t you? Ha ha, didn’t you just! Childer were there, Son here and Pipsie too, both stood behind their shields like good ’uns. They tole me all about it. No no, Master, running’s not the thing. I druther trust in the shields and spears of the land folk, what did that work in the Vale. Them vermin won’t never get through the Whitewater men!”

“*Nor* women!” put in Pipsie. She glanced under shy lashes at Beren. “Ain’t never seen nobody shoot the way you did that day, young Master. I’d’ve called it for a brazen lie, less’n I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes. Reckon I’ll remember that so long as I live.”

“Ar!” agreed the lumpish son with sudden animation, who had sat torpid until then.

Barahir argued with them a while longer, but he could not persuade them. It was not the first vain argument of the week. As Beren had predicted, the feeling was a general one in the valley. People mostly recognized the danger; but they simply could not imagine a life away from their homes.

* * * * *

“I’d be no good anywhere else,” said another old man. “I’d just be a drain on somebody’s care. Well, I’ll not be that.”

Emeldir stood up in impatience and paced about the room. “Father,” she exclaimed, “this is about the stupidest thing I have ever heard!”

“You shouldn’t speak to your father that way, dear,” put in her mother mildly.

Emeldir turned to her mother and spread her hands in exasperation. “It’s his *life* he’s proposing to throw away. And you want me to be *polite*?”

“Yes it is my life,” rasped the elder Beren. “What little remains of it. Mine. Not anybody else’s. And I choose to spend it here, where I have lived since I was a boy.”

Emeldir’s voice rose to an anguished pitch. “*Fa-ther*, there are *Orcs* coming, they’re going to *kill* you!”

“I’m not afraid of Orcs,” said the old man.

His daughter made an inarticulate sound and raised her hands to heaven. She turned back to her mother. “How can you take this so calmly?” she demanded.

Surith remained composed. “We talked it all through long ago. Mel, dearest daughter, it is you who are not seeing things clearly. We know how things stand; we understand that the end has come, the end to everything we knew. But your father and I have lived our lives. It is not so much fun, you know, this business of being old. There comes a time to go, an end to the tale. We all must come to it; and in the end, as you may find, one may come to it not unwilling. But willy-nilly, end we must. The only choice given to us is *how* we end.” She turned and smiled at the bent old man sitting next to her, who smiled his love back to her. How strong her Beren had been, how handsome! Withered now by time; but his beautiful eyes were the same fierce blue as ever.

The old man sat up straight. “Daughter, it’s decided,” he said briskly. “Pollo’s⁹ had built for us the little redoubt you saw. Come the alarm, there’ll be three of us – two of the older chaps have resolved to stay with me. We can all still bend a bow. That’s how we’ll end. Those scum won’t take us alive, have no fear of that. You’re wasting your time trying to persuade me otherwise. Mind’s made up. Su and I have talked about it since years. Sorry, Mel, but that’s how it is.”

Emeldir recognized that there was nothing she could say that would move him. With tears of frustration in her eyes, she turned to her mother. “But *you* are not staying,” she said.

“Of course not,” said her mother, raising her eyebrows. “I have you and Caladis to look after; not to speak of the grandchildren. That’s *my* duty, what *I* am called to, and I’m not going to shirk it either.”

* * * * *

The sun climbed, the air grew mild, the grass grew; but still there was no alarm. Beren was stretching his body now, shooting and running every day. He was slowly working the stiffness out of his sinews. One day he sprang out of bed, stretched to touch his toes, and laughed. He felt as good as new again.

The smaller trees were in bud-break, and still there was no interruption in the seeding or the lambing. Then one wet day came that which they had all feared: the sound of a rider splashing break-neck up the lane. Beren went out with the others to meet him. It was young Will, the publican’s son; but his news was not what they had expected.

“The Lord’s riding west with fifty men,” he panted. “Father thought you ought to know.”

Barahir was nonplussed. “Bregolas?” he asked.

“Yes, Master.”

“But no alarm of Orcs?”

9 His grandson by Belegon.

“Not’s far as I know, Master,” said the boy.

Barahir scratched his head. “Come in out of the wet,” he said.

“No thank you Master,” said the boy. “Pa needs me back.” With that he hopped nimbly back onto his horse and manoeuvred out of the gate.

Barahir turned to the others – Dag and Gramlach were there as well as Beren. “Well, what do you make of that?” he asked them.

Beren laughed suddenly. “I know,” he said. “He’s going to prove those Orcs aren’t there.”

“But they *are* there,” said Barahir, still not quite on top of the news. “Hell’s whiskers,” he went on with dawning alarm, “if that’s true, then he’s going to get himself in a stew. Damn, damn. We’d better get after him, and with as big a force as we can scrape up. *Damn* the man for a pig-headed fool!”

Galvanized, they ran to gather weapons and to sound the alarm.

* * * * *

Barahir had been able to gather sixty men; he would not wait for more. Their horses were fresh, and they pushed the pace. The marks of hooves in the mud were clear, so they knew they were close, else the rain would have washed the trail away.

Arthad leaned down from the saddle and inspected the tracks as they rode along. “They ride heavy,” he said.

Beren spotted a crow and whistled it down. After a short conversation with the bird perched on his saddle-bow, it flew off with vigorous strokes of its wings. Crows and ravens were always eager to spy out a battle, for obvious reasons.

They passed the place where people were labouring to fortify a choke point, at a narrow neck between deep woods. Stacks of tree-trunks were laid by; heaven knows how the people had obtained them, with the woods being so hostile as they were now. A ditch showed where the line of poles was to run. Some at the end had already been erected.

People stopped their labour, gaped. Only a few of them waved. Two armed parties passing in such a short time? It made them uneasy. Barahir, however, had no time for them. After his party slowed briefly to pass single-file over the only causeway left across the ditch, they left the muddy workers with few greetings and no explanations.

The party had nothing to do after that but to canter on through the wet, as each turn in the road emerging out of the shrouding rain showed still no sign of the riders ahead of them.

The crow returned and spoke again with Beren. After some back and forth between the two, the young man turned to his father.

“Bregolas is paused at Ingold,” he said. “We’ll be up with them in a quarter of an hour.”

Barahir stood in his stirrups and addressed the column of riders. “Did you all hear that?” he said. “Ease up on the horses. There’s no sense in wearing them out if we’re going to come up with him anyway at Ingold’s.”

“Prarak hasn’t had time yet to check on the Orcs,” went on Beren, meaning the crow. “They were quiet there up until yesterday, but we need to confirm that. He’ll go and look now.” He spoke briefly again to the bird, which flew off.

They had been riding steadily uphill for some little time, and now Ingold's fields were slowly taking shape before their eyes. Shortly the steading itself loomed into view: several high-thatched buildings nestling inside a sturdy stockade.

The yard was filled with the snorting horses of Bregolas's men. Most of the men were also standing; from their activity, it seemed as though the party were about to start again.

As Barahir rode in through the gate with his house guard around him, Bregolas himself came out of the door, wiping his mouth.

"Well well," the Bëor said, putting his hands on his hips. "Visitors."

"Greetings my Lord," replied Barahir. "I expect you will be wanting to know what we are doing here."

"Not particularly," said Bregolas. "So long as you keep out from under my feet, I don't care where you go."

"Do you ride to Rivil?" asked Barahir.

"Now come, Brother; I give you the freedom of the road," said Bregolas, "surely you can extend to me the same courtesy? My purpose concerns you as little as yours moves me." He turned to his men. "Mount all, then form up outside the gates!"

The Newfort soldiers were solidly decked out in Bregolas's favoured flamboyant armour, with polished black and silver panels much in evidence. The Fist troops began to heave themselves into the saddle, and soon Barahir had to back away and clear the gate ahead of the stream of riders now moving to pass out through it. The mounts were all magnificent great chargers, far larger and grander than most of the common farm horses his own party were mounted on. Bregolas's cavalry sat high in the saddle and wore high polished helms with white plumes at the crest. Some of them ignored Barahir as they passed, others flicked a scornful glance over him and the disorderly parcel of wet farmers milling outside. The glittering troops formed up on the path with practised ease and soon shaped themselves into a uniform body in neat ranks.

Bregolas's own plume was red. As he took his place at the head of the column, Barahir rode up to him, followed closely by the same handful of his house-men.

"Brother," he said, "is this wise? We have recent reports of enemy, not far beyond the ridge. A legion, maybe more. If you must go, at least let us come with you."

Bregolas leaned toward him and bared his teeth. "Get out of my way," he said.

The crow Prarak chose this moment to return. It flapped onto Beren's shoulder, eyeing the crowd of men nervously while it poured a stream of croaks and caws into the youth's ear, under the fascinated gaze of every man there.

When the bird had finished, Beren turned to his uncle. "My Lord, my friend here has just been over the hill to look. He says the Orcs are still camped around the well. Very many of them, he says, perhaps more than before."

Bregolas leaned back in his saddle and laughed loud and long. "Nay, boy," he said when he was composed again, "save your tricks and moonshine for more gullible ears. I fear they are wasted on mine." He turned back to face his men. "Couch spears all!"

With one deadly, unified movement, the entire company lowered their lances to the horizontal, the sharp blades pointing up the road, right at Barahir and his comrades.

“Advance at the walk, and cut this rabble from your path if they will not scuttle out of it!” ordered Bregolas.

Barahir, his face red from chagrin and fury, hurried to knee his horse out of the way, as did the others. The Fist troops passed directly in front of their faces, many with ill-concealed sneers showing beneath their helmets.

The Sightfoot party watched the column as it splashed up the track and out of sight. They turned then and rejoined the main body of their own riders.

Barahir looked around at the stony faces of his men. They were not at all pleased by what they had seen and heard.

“I’m sorry,” he said to them, “this looks like being a frightful mess. But there is no help for it; he is our lord.”

Karrack, a sour old neighbour with whom Barahir had a long, dismal history of dogged disputes over landmarks and wandered sheep, spoke up. “We’re with you, Master, whatever you think best to do.” A chorus of grunts and low-voiced “Ayes” showed that the sentiment was general.

“Well,” said Barahir, “I’m for going after them. We’ll stay back out of sight. Powers send we can stay clear of ambush ourselves and still be able to help them if they get caught. I pray they won’t.”

“But they’ll run into the Orcs,” said Emeldir. “What are we going to do then?”

“Haul Bregolas’s chestnuts out of the fire,” replied Barahir grimly, “as best we can.”

The ride up over the ridge was undertaken with careful haste. Arthad rode bent over, scanning the prints keenly, and holding a hand out from time to time to judge the strength of the drizzle. Twice he indicated with a word to Barahir that they were falling a little behind, and once that they were drawing too close.

Beren rode beside his father, directly behind his friend the Horse-breaker. He closed his eyes and sent his senses over the ridge just ahead of them. Yes, there they were... the Orcs... an inchoate mass of wrongness, still some way in front, but getting nearer with each fall of hoof. He strained harder, trying to pick out smaller islands of the stuff; there, and there... and there. Not many, not very near.

With the woods close now on either side he could sense, too, the anger of the trees. It was a visceral, undirected, animal thing; a sullen heat.

The party was over the watershed now. They were trotting as quietly as they could manage down the winding muddy path which coiled down towards the spring. Beren could feel the wrongness grow closer. Suddenly the crow, which had been scouting ahead, reappeared in dodging flight through the trees. It cawed a single word to Beren, then disappeared to the rear.

The boy cursed under his breath. “Crebain,” he said to his father. “They will have sighted Bregolas for sure. If we are lucky, they will be drawn down by that and won’t spot us for a time.”

“Is there anything we can do against them?” Barahir asked him quietly.

“Not really,” said the younger man. “They’re hard to hit, and we’d need to get them all. The real damage they do is as scouts. If we hadn’t to do this in such a cursed hurry, I could have gathered the ravens again.”

They rode on in watchful silence for another minute. Suddenly Beren laid a hand on his father’s arm. Barahir raised his hand and the troop came to a halt.

“They’re near,” said the youngster in a low voice. “Another bend or two, bowshot or two, and there are

scouts who will see us.”

Barahir turned to the company, who had gathered round as close as they could. “Did you all hear?” he said, trying to pitch his voice so it would carry just to them. “Two bends in the road ’til the first scouts of the enemy.”

“They will have Bregolas just about between the jaws of the trap,” said Beren. “We should be prepared to go quickly. I don’t think we should waste an arrow on any scouts we see.”

“Right,” said Barahir. “Arrow on the string, every man.” He caught Emeldir’s eye. “...And woman. Keep the noise as low as you can until we’re spotted; after that it won’t matter. Don’t shoot until we’re shot at. At my word, spur to gallop. All clear?”

They nodded their assent. Barahir raised his hand again and they were off, walking the horses now. They had not even got past the second bend however before a distant uproar broke out in front of them.

“That’s it!” said Barahir. “Come on, lads and lasses, spur up and into them!” The horses were kicked into activity and the ragged column shot around the bend in a splatter of mud. The grade levelled out in front of them and clearings opened out on both sides of the road. They spotted one or two shocked goblins, open-mouthed, before thundering on past. Great dark birds poured skywards out of a tree and commenced a frightful racket; some winging their swift way down towards where shouting and the clash of blades could now be clearly heard, others circling and shrieking over the new column as it rocketed between the last trees.

The scene opened out in front of them. Below them lay Rivil’s Well. Beren had an instant to recognize the rocks around it before the swarming goblins wiped that impression away. The focus of the melée was Bregolas’s group of riders. His men were being hacked to bits before their eyes. One after another was unhorsed, or shot down, or pulled down, while the Sightfoot men urged their horses to a last effort. The fight grew rapidly larger in their vision; the distance shrank, vanished.

With an impact, their column was in among the Orcs, trampling and slashing. They reached the tattered remnants of the Fist squadron and spread on both sides to half-way enclose them. Their bows commenced singing.

Beren loosed. Another arrow; loose. Another arrow; loose. He could do it quicker than it takes to say, but there were hordes and hordes of Orcs. Instinctively he was picking off the bowmen, but there were always more. Arrows had begun to flit through their own ranks now and he was dimly aware of men falling here and there in the corner of his eye.

“Let’s get out of this!” bawled Barahir in his ear while Beren drew and loosed, drew and loosed. “Look for Bregolas!”

Where was he, though? Fist troopers carpeted the ground. A glimpse of a red plume – there. Draw and loose, draw and loose. He nudged Father to the place, pointed. There were men down from their own party. Where was Mother? There: shooting like a mad thing.

Some of them had hold of Bregolas now. It was the usual muddle. Come on! Else we’ll all die right here. Draw and loose; again and again. Each twang sounded loud in his ear, immediately before the fainter, meaty thud of the strike. And everywhere, pressing on the ears, the constant animal roar of the battle. There were not many arrows left now in his quiver. He had no sword; what to do? Sell your life with the knife. Gorlim’s knife.

A man lay groaning on the ground at the foot of Beren’s horse. Quick as lightning the youth was down, had slung the man with Powers knew what strength right over the pommel of his horse, was up again and shooting. Six arrows. Five.

They had the chief over an empty horse now. At last! Let's go!

"Get them out!" bellowed Barahir. "Back! Every man!" They muscled the bucking horses back out of the scrum. The Orcs were pouring in, so many that they got in each other's way, tripped each other, shot each other. It didn't make much difference. Some of the Fister troops who were still horsed managed to stream along with them; others were left running or hobbling behind. Not for long; in a short instant the despairing runners were one by one covered in goblins – screaming, hacking goblins.

Nothing to be done.

Unbelievably now the tattered column was free of the goblins. How had they managed that? It didn't seem possible. The birds were swirling and shrieking overhead, but the running masses of Orcs were left behind. There were a few arrows from the scouts at the bend which claimed another rider; then they were through.

* * * * *

The scene in Ingold's yard was indescribable. Wounded men lay everywhere, groaning or crying aloud. Most of them appeared to be as stuck full of Orc arrows as hedgehogs. Those still hale, and the people of the farm, were running desperately between the wounded, trying with inadequate means to stem the flow of blood and keep life in failing bodies.

Ingold himself, a thick-set man with a mess of rope-coloured hair and two broad blond wings of moustache, was beside himself with horror and amazement.

"But they only went for a look," he kept saying. "Just for a look!"

Barahir grabbed the farmer by the arm and shook him. "Pull yourself together!" he shouted. "There's no time for whimpering. Those Orcs are only just over the hill. Get some of your men on the stockade, man that gate. And I need some fresh horses for messengers. We have to set a guard on that pass, as quick as we can, and then get the wounded away. Horses, man, horses! Three at least."

With a fixed task to concentrate on, Ingold steadied down and jogged off to arrange it. Barahir looked around, cursing. He had himself escaped with only cuts; Beren, standing at his side, seemed to have suffered no injury at all.

"Where is Mother?" Beren said. She had been with them on the withdrawal, he knew, but he could not see her now.

They found her sitting on a barrel by the stockade, keeping out of the way. She was bent over her leg. She turned a white face to them as they came up, and they saw that she had two arrows sticking into her thigh.

Barahir immediately fell to her side and cradled her in his arms. "Oh, Mel!"

"It's not too bad," she said faintly. "There's not much bleeding. Poor Storm is much worse off. I wish someone would look after him, but they are too busy with the men I suppose."

"Beren, can you fetch a blanket?" asked Barahir of his son, and the young man dashed away. Barahir turned back to his wife. "Mel, old love, we have to get you out of here. It's not safe." He examined the arrows carefully. "They're both glancing shots," he said. "It won't be a problem. We can cut to the heads and pull them through all right."

Beren came back with a musty blanket which had traces of hay on it. "They're a bit in demand right now," he said. "I'm sorry."

Emeldir smiled her thanks at him and pulled the blanket taut around her shoulders.

“I must see how it is with Bregolas, and our own wounded,” said Barahir, “and organize some messengers for help.” She squeezed his hand and he left then in haste.

“Are you hurt, Beren?” his mother asked him as soon as they were alone together.

“Not a scratch,” he replied cheerfully, squatting by her side. “I ducked between the arrows.”

“What a stupid, stupid business,” she said with a grimace. “We must have lost ten at least, and as for Bregolas’s men... such a waste of lives. But do you know,” and here she smiled at him, “I don’t think there is anybody else in Middle-earth who could have pulled that off, except your father. And you. You with your crows, and your shooting.”

“And you too, Mother,” he said with affection. “I saw you at your ‘stave-work’, as Hrotha calls it.”

She smiled again faintly at that. “You must go and help,” she said then. “I’ll be all right here until they can move us out.”

“Are you sure? All right. I’ll just check Storm quickly then, shall I? After that I’ll see if Father wants me to go and keep watch on the ridge.”

She squeezed his hand. “You don’t think they’ll come over tonight, do you?”

“Not all of them, I don’t think,” Beren said. “That army as a unit won’t move until they’re ordered. But we stung them pretty thoroughly, and they’ll be extra angry because we got away. I’d expect a few raiders at least. I’d better find some more arrows, I’ve shot all mine.”

“All right, Son,” she said, “go on now. But take care.”

Gradually the chaos in the yard subsided. Local healers arrived, and wagons came, and yet more wagons; armed and armoured men and women also streamed in from all sides. At last the wounded began to be moved, and by midnight the last wagon had rolled along the miles of road and into the yard at Sightfoot.

In the village, the boy Willy was sobbing. His publican father had gone with the posse, but he had not come home.

* * * * *

Beren was given charge of fifteen bowmen, the most woodcrafty who could be found from among Ingold’s men, the immediate locals, and the unwounded remnant of Barahir’s posse. They were men who knew how to be patient, how to be silent. They were to guard the pass that night against vengeful raiders.

The gloom of dusk already lay over the land by the time they reached the ridge. They had ridden hard, and now they hastened to find a place for an ambush. The horses were first tied up some way short of the crest, then the men walked warily up the path to the top, looking for a likely hide.

For Beren, the choice was quick and easy. Long practice with such things meant that he did not need to consciously assess fields of view and the way the wind would turn; he just knew the place when he saw it. While the others were still peering along the track in the gloom and testing how the air drifted, he went straight down, about fifty yards along, to a bend in the track. This was the place.

They took up their positions on one side of the road and prepared to wait. They were all thinking of the night to come: the long hours of silence, stillness and vigilance which lay ahead. They were hardy people, used to

discomfort, but some were already weary from the day's hard fighting, and there were few who did not let out a silent sigh at the prospect before them. There was no help for it though, it had to be done. At least the rain had stopped, and it was not very cold.

The clouds had thinned somewhat and a little faint light pervaded the scene, enough that they could just make out the lighter shade of the path winding down the hill. Vision was grainy and uncertain, with objects only to be seen if one looked at them a little obliquely.

The line of silent watchers was bound, wrist to wrist, by a thread which could be easily broken at need, but which could serve as a wordless alert to the approach of the enemy. And so they sat there, huddled in their fleeces, for hour after hour. Now and then one or another would knead an itch, or slowly and noiselessly ease a cramped limb.

Beren was the first to detect the approach. Evil was approaching; he was suddenly sure of it. With all senses tuned to their highest pitch, he scanned the ghostly suggestion of path ahead of them, straining to hear any unusual noise.

Was that a shadow? He flicked his eyes across it, then back again. To one side, then the other.

The shadow was moving. Just a little, but he was sure. He twitched the thread tied to his wrist and felt rather than heard the line of men spring to tense alertness. After a few seconds the twitch came back up the line; when it reached him, as had been arranged among them, he silently cut his own link of thread so as to have no hindrance to his movement. He had his arrows planted in the ground ready and he moved his arm slowly now to collect one and set it on the string.

He noted with satisfaction that the changing weather had, as he had expected, brought the light breeze now almost directly into their faces.

There were more vague shadows now to be made out, and they were closer. The watchers heard the faint crunch of a careless footfall.

Aiming was very difficult in the dim light of night. If you looked directly at things, they tended to disappear; but how to shoot looking sideways? Beren had experience with night shooting himself, but he could only hope that at least some of the others were also practised at it.

It was nearly time. The line of furtively moving figures had stealthily grown larger, and now they began to pass directly before his eyes. He had to let the first few of them get down the line a way. Just a little further; a little further.

Now.

Beren drew the string back, reassured as ever by the trusty power of the bow. Sight in the way he had been taught – a little sideways back-and-forth movement of the eye, making sure of the target. Loose.

His bow twanged loud in the stillness. An instant later a whole chorus of *thungs* shook the night air as his companions followed his lead, but Beren had nocked, drawn, and was already seeking his next mark. Several of the shadows fell; at the same time, a pandemonium of yells broke loose.

The men were shooting quickly now, picking off the enemy one by one. The goblins rushed around, falling over each other, cursing and shouting. One or two crashed off into the bushes. One by one the others fell, and fell, until suddenly there were none left standing.

Groans and curses were coming from the vague dark blotches which marked the forms lying now on the road.

Beren listened both with his ears and internally. What had happened to the ones who had run off the road? He could neither hear nor feel them any more. Nosing down the life-web of the wood with his mind, he seemed to run into a closed off end.

He stood up cautiously. "I think that's all of them," he murmured to the next of his fellows. They stood up stiffly and gathered in close to him. After a whispered exchange they went among the stricken enemy and silenced them one by one in the usual way. The bodies were hauled off to one side.

After some more whispers, the companions tied another thread, then settled back into the bushes; but the remainder of the night passed without further alarm.

* * * * *

Emeldir had to wait until the evening of the next day before she had her turn under the weary physician. There were many who were in a much worse case than she, and the healer had worked hard the whole day since the dark hours before sunrise, saving whom he could.

The physician was Elf-trained, so he knew where ran the vessels and nerves of the body that one should avoid while cutting. He knew the herbs which could lessen pain, and he knew about the hordes of tiny, unseeable imps of Morgoth which could cause havoc in a wound unless they were cleansed away.

Emeldir was given a bitter potion to drink and soon fell into a stupor. She only groaned a little when the healer began to cut. It was as Barahir had said: the shots had been glancing, and the barbed heads both lay in plain flesh, not far beneath the surface. The arrows were removed before long, the wounds were carefully cleansed and then sewn with a quick and expert hand. The grey-haired healer left her then in the care of her sister and turned to his next patient.

Barahir came to his wife after she woke the following day. She asked first after her son and her horse, and after being reassured on those points, she said, "And how is it with Bregolas?"

"Alas, he lies near death," said Barahir. "He fell under his horse it seems, and his leg is badly broken, and his head too. They cannot yet say how it will go with him."

She lay silent, absorbing that news. She knew that she could not speak her secret hope to him. He would not share it, that she knew.

"What will you do?" she asked at last.

"This changes matters, of course," said Barahir. "I must talk with Baragund first of all, and then with leaders in Newfort. I would have gone today, but... well, I wanted to see if you were all right."

She smiled at him. "Foolish. It's just a couple of scratches. Go on, be off with you."

"Now don't be hard on me, Mel," he said. "It's too late today; I'll go tomorrow. You wouldn't begrudge me one quiet evening with my family, surely?"

So that is what they had. Beren woke in the afternoon, and the two men took their evening meal up to Emeldir's bedside and ate with her. They spoke of light matters, past times, old jokes; but behind everything loomed a dread of what was to come.

* * * * *

Baragund heard Barahir's report of events in a stony silence. Barahir knew that he would never say a word against his own father, yet at the same time he was pretty sure he knew what the Soldier would be thinking

about the whole wretched debacle.

“And so,” said the older man when he had finished his tale, “the Bëor being indisposed, temporarily as all men hope, I am come to place myself under your command.”

Baragund was startled. “*Mine?*” he said.

“You are next in line,” replied Barahir simply.

“Oh, no,” said Baragund. “No, Uncle, it is not to be thought of. You are the senior, that has always been clear to us. You must take charge.”

“I... do not know that I could do that,” said Barahir slowly. “It would not feel loyal.”

“Plainly, someone must be in charge,” said Baragund. “If everybody felt the same as you, we would be leaderless. And that at a time when we need direction as never before.”

“Your Father might not share your view, should he recover,” said Barahir drily. “You know he suspects me of plotting to usurp him. What better proof than my doing exactly that when he is not able to defend his position?”

“We would stand by you,” said Baragund. “This is no usurpation. I would not allow even my father to condemn you, knowing what I know.” He stood up. “Uncle, you are called to this. You *must* do it. You are the only one who can unite us. I place myself under *your* command, and I know Brother does too. You cannot change that decision, no matter what you think and say; we will defer to you, will ye or nill ye. So I say to you: what are your orders, Sir?”

Barahir was silent for a space of time. “Pray sit down, Nephew,” he said. “Very well, I accept. But the instant your father is hale again, you will wonder at the speed with which I vacate this most unwelcome post.

“Now to business. We need to confer among the heads of the forces; but first I must go to Newfort. There are those who may not see the matter the same way you do; they will have other ideas about a suitable lieutenant. But we must somehow all be agreed, otherwise we will fall at the first hurdle.”

* * * * *

Barahir’s first call in Newfort was on the Guard-major of the town, a peppery old man named Mithbrûn. After the reign of the Blackshirts had been broken, the citizens of the town had taken it upon themselves to organize a town guard as a deterrent against anything similar happening again. The Guard served primarily as a police force, but in those rough times its members were trained as a matter of course in military discipline and the use of weapons, in order that they could function as soldiers at need. In recent times, Barahir knew, they had come under pressure from Bregolas to merge with his own forces; a pressure they had so far resisted.

Barahir did not know Mithbrûn well, but what he knew he liked and trusted. After he had told the Guard-major what had happened at Rivil, the older man sucked his moustache. He eyed Barahir. “So who’s in charge?” he asked.

“Good question,” replied Barahir. “You may know that my brother and I do not see eye to eye on many things. He suspects me of trying to usurp him. This ring does not help. I turned to his sons, whom I think you know, but Baragund would not take command.”

Mithbrûn grunted. “Good lads,” he commented in neutral tones. He cast an impassive eye at Barahir’s hand. “Fine ring.”

“We need someone to organize things,” went on Barahir with reluctance. “I don’t want to do it. But the boys refused. I know little of Bregolas’s men in his so-called Fist; but I have to tell you, I have no confidence in their training or their attitude.”

“Cazimek,” said Mithbrûn. “He’s their captain now. He’s the one you’d have to deal with.” He looked speculatively at Barahir. “Wouldn’t be my choice of war-chief. Not at all. Son, it looks to me like you’re in the hot seat.”

“What about you?”

The Guard-major met this with a laugh and a shake of the head. “You’re the obvious choice,” he said. “Won a battle already. Heard about that; we all have. People respect it. But it’s only fair to warn you, not everybody’s going to be of the same mind as me.”

“Who won’t be?” said Barahir.

“Cazimek, for one,” grunted the older man. “Folk from the valley mouth, maybe, too. They never paid much heed to the rest of us, hard to see them changing that now.”

“I’ll have to try to persuade the Mouthers,” said Barahir. “We need everyone who can fight, we must stand together. What is your advice, how should I approach Cazimek?”

“Don’t,” said the other. “Leave him out of it. He only has sway in Newfort – he’s nothing elsewhere. And you won’t get any use out of those ninnies of his without retraining them. The folk are the thing. And the folk will be behind you. Most of ’em, anyway.”

* * * * *

Barahir made his headquarters at the crossroads inn, which stood in a more central location than Newfort. Beren joined him there, and every day the young man would climb a nearby hill and receive news from his eagle and raven comrades. The birds had been very active since the thaw, and so far had kept Dorthonion pretty clear of Crebain and other spies. Backed by his father’s authority, Beren had arranged a constant supply of sustenance for them; as active troops in the land’s defence, they had surely earned such a subsidy.

The news continued clear. There was no sign of build-up to the North, or troops diverted from the East; whereas the legions in the Vale gave every indication of sitting where they were until they rotted. However, neither Beren nor his father fooled themselves with the assumption that this peaceful situation would continue forever.

Bregolas’s life hung for days on a thread. Even when he was at last declared safe, it was long before he woke, and still longer before he knew where he was or what was happening around him. In the meantime the spring opened out like a flower. The weather grew warm, the blackthorn came into bloom, green blades poked above ground in the fields. The folk were as busy as bees, and to their accustomed farm work was now added the task of preparing the defences. A thousand and one matters were referred to Barahir for attention, and it seemed to him sometimes that every man and woman in Dorthonion had a complaint or a problem that only he, Barahir, could solve. He held his aching head in his hands and dealt with them as best he could.

Almost first of the things he set in train was to extend the project of fortification. Should the forests ever tolerate the passage of Orcs again, the land would become undefendable – the enemy could attack when and where he pleased; flight would be the only option. At present, the case was far more favourable. Barred from the woods, the Orcs could only enter Dorthonion at four points: the Dwarf-road to Rivil, the Elvish paths to the lost northern Towers, and the open mouth of the valley to the East. This last they could do little about, but the other entry ways were narrow and defensible. Barahir had weeks ago set in motion work to fortify the

Rivil entry with a stout palisade; now, with the resources of the whole land at his disposal, he set parties of volunteers to work building similar walls on the northern approaches.

Another of the things to be done was to make arrows: thousands and thousands of arrows. Every fletcher was working around the clock, and feathers became more precious than gold. Smiths too were hard at work casting the heads. Gorlim helped with this. He washed and cared for himself now, but he had become a silent man, volunteering no words, and replying in monosyllables when questioned. He functioned, and that was about all that one could say of him. When he found the time for it, he cleaned out his cottage and set it in repair, with a new thatch and new windows. He did not live there now though, but in the village with his parents.

A messenger from Hithlum came over the pass of Anach and confirmed what they knew of the situation in the West. In the East, reports indicated that the conflict was at last dying down. Hardy mountaineers, crossing the Fence over paths frequented usually only by goats, reported that the Elves had won back Aglon and that Maedhros held fast at Himring. However, the other sons of Fëanor had, it seems, been swept away from their stations further east like straws in the flood; the Gap of Maglor lay wide open. Nobody had news of matters further south. And still there was no sign of enemies gathering around their own land; men wondered what it portended.

When the word finally came, it was received with a feeling almost like relief. At last the waiting was over. It happened at dawn of a fine morning, as Beren stood on the hill. Bronze-mail cupped his wings to beat his way to a landing on his usual branch. After he had settled his feathers, he turned his fierce eye on the boy.

“Send out the call,” he said. “They are moving in the Vale.”

* * * * *

No Louse expected much from life. The acme of desires was a sequence of negations – not to be whipped too much, not to starve, not to be murdered, not to have your soul sucked out and shredded, either before or after your body died. If you succeeded in fending these dangers off for a reasonable length of time, that was about the best you could expect.

Choker had had a good, long run. He couldn't complain. Even at the moment, he wasn't doing too badly. As a high ranker, he could look after his own comforts: wangle a decent billet, get clean water.

They had been sitting here in the middle of nowhere for literally months, forbidden to go raiding, kept out of the war. It was pretty boring, sitting here on his arse – but why would that be a worry? Pit take it, they could bore him as much as they liked! Because *not* being bored meant running the gauntlet of some danger or other. A lot of the lads complained that higher-ups had forgotten them, that they would sit here until they rotted. Choker didn't mind at all. To be forgotten was just fine by him.

He was all right, he was sitting pretty, but the legion he was in, the 89th, was in poor shape. Their numbers had steadily fallen away until they were several hundred under strength. A lot of it was due to fighting, Louse on Louse, but some was poor food, bad water. There was punishment all the time of course, he dished out enough to his own boys, God knew. You had to. But it stands to reason that if you knock off one in a hundred every time something goes down, and a lot can go down in a bored cohort in four moons, then you'll pile up a lot of bodies. Welcome in the stew of course, but dead Lice weren't going to be any good when it came time to fight.

Choker didn't actually believe they had been forgotten. Rumour had it that the big effort in the East was only just ending, and he could well believe that the chiefs had their attention fixed on that one. He thought they would probably mop up these farming types over the hill here as soon as the big battles were sorted.

He was just a bit worried about that though. People said the farmers were only soft-skins, that there was

nothing to worry about, that there were no filthy Elves about. That squared somewhat with Choker's own experience, but he had only to think of his long history of terror and close-in runs with death in these forests to be wary of venturing into them. Perhaps if they could stay out of the woods they would be all right. Higher-ups assured them the brown men had vanished from the woods, but things in there didn't seem to be any better than years ago. Lice who ventured in for a coney or a bit of wood had a nasty habit of disappearing. No way you would catch Choker going in there under the trees, he'd had more than his share of that business.

The other thing to ponder over was the big battle that had happened in the snow-time, right after they got here. He still didn't know the rights of that; it had been hushed up, and it was unhealthy to enquire. Choker had heard it whispered, though, that a bunch of those big soft-skins armed with nothing more than bronze arrows – bronze! – had chopped up four or five times their number of Lice. Others said to that, rubbish! it wasn't the Softies what done it, it was those shit-spawn Starry-eyes.

His final worry was that nobody seemed to know what was going on over the hill. Normally you'd expect all sorts of spy reports, but they just weren't coming in. Spies were being sent out all right, so far as Choker knew, but they didn't seem to be having much success in getting back. But that was the thing with this bit of country. They'd never had any luck with spies here, birds or any other kind, right from the start. It was all a bit of a worry.

The burning sun rose every day higher and higher. The snow melted away, which was a bit more comfortable at least, but the stink of growing stuff was everywhere now, that sickly putrid green smell that flooded your nostrils and made your eyes water. At least too in the cold time there was plenty of cloud to keep off the pitiless sun, the ominous moon, the stars that cut at you like knives; but now in the changed season there were days and nights which were hard to endure. The troops cowered in the basic scrapes and holes they had dug for themselves, and even Choker and the other cohort and troop commanders had an unpleasant time of it. Because, let's face it, the only light a Louse really felt comfortable with was firelight.

As time went on, Choker began to wonder at the delay. The war in the East had tapered down to a halt, or so they said. As for the ground, it had dried out long ago; and even in this cursed clearer weather you could pick a thick night to creep through. So why wait? He heard rumours though that there was argument at higher levels: some wanted to start, others said to wait.

In the middle of it all there had come this crazy attack. Nobody could work out just what the Pit that had been about. A handful of riders, soft-skins – well in fact *two* handfuls of them, the one five minutes behind the other, and what kind of sense did *that* make? – had simply waltzed right into the middle of Ugly's cohort and had started laying about them. They'd left a lot of their own behind them when they ran away again, but *two hundred Lice* had choked on a bone in the space of five minutes. Ugly's cohort was cut in half, they had to fill him out with drafts from the others. But *why*? Everybody said the Softies were crazy, and this seemed like the proof of it. It was like that boy who had let him go, years ago. There was no understanding it.

Choker often thought about that time, trying to puzzle it out. Sometimes he thought too about the breeder girl of long ago. As always, he couldn't escape the feeling that there was a key to the puzzle somewhere; some aspect of the whole picture he was missing, which if he could only find it, would make the things which seemed crazy come together and make sense. But he thought and thought, and never got any nearer to it. It seemed to leave a dry patch in his innards, an emptiness. Sometimes when he lay awake at night he thought the patch was growing.

More days went by, more and different stinks. Some of the Lice made a joke of collecting them, would go and stick their noses in a flower for a buzz. They were that bored.

Finally the word came down. Choker realized when he heard it that he had in fact been bored himself, because he found himself looking forward to a bit of change. Well, the danger for a cohort leader wasn't so

great anyway – you stayed at the back with a whip, let the troops face the danger, that was what they were for. No problem.

The night after that, one of the legions which had been sitting further down the valley marched up to join them. The 157th. There was of course the usual scrag when two different units met. Choker and the others laid about a bit with the whip but you couldn't really expect otherwise from the lads, particularly when they had been going out of their minds with no action, no entertainment. Anyway they settled down after a while; well, that is to say, as much as two units in the same camp normally did. The 157th accused the 89th of fouling the water, and there were fights over access. Choker would have parked them a bit further back down the track, but nobody asked him for his opinion, and who cared anyway?

They had three days of dicking around, and then finally at the third sundown they were away. It was overcast, nice and dark, easy marching in the cool. They formed narrow columns to file up the road. Every Louse had a torch; it made a fine sight. The plan was basically to get over the ridge and then just play it by ear. No need to tell the boys what to do when they found a farm.

For a while things went pretty well. They got over the ridge all right, no opposition, and a short time after that they got among the first farms. Some were deserted, but they made some captures at others. Orders were to keep captives alive and unharmed but you couldn't stop the boys having their fun. Choker knew enough to turn a blind eye to such activities – you had to work with Lice nature, give the boys a bit of rein, no commander who tried to work against it would last long. He sent back a trickle of captives, enough to keep the chiefs happy.

Suddenly it all turned sour. They were marching down the road, singing away merry as larks, farms they had just fired lighting up the sky behind them, when the lead cohort comes around a bend in the road, and what do they see? A bloody great palisade behind a ditch, that's what, all the way from the stream to the trees. Choker took one look at it when his cohort jammed up around the bend behind the others and realized that now was the time when every wise Louse would be thinking of edging to the rear. That wall was going to be tough to get through. He would whip the troop leaders into it, and the troop leaders would hang back and whip their squads into it. Then the squad leaders would try their best to hang back while whipping on their men.

The only fly in this particular soup was that Choker's superior, the legion commander, would be viewing the situation in exactly the same light. He would want to be the whippiest and hindmostest.

* * * * *

It was the red glow which first announced the Orcs. The Bëorian army had reached the palisade late the previous day, and as night fell they were mustered and ready along the breast-work. On the instructions of Baragund's chief artificer, the line had been built in a zig-zags. When the soldiers first looked through the firing notches, they realized just how cunning this was, because there was no piece of ground in the approaches which was not in the field of fire of at least two sections of wall. In addition to all this, the labouring farmers had dug a deep trench in front and had lined the foot of it with sharpened stakes.

The people were nervous, waiting in the dark. They were mostly bowmen up there, although there were plenty of pikes lying ready at need. On orders of the commander, each archer was cloaked in dun or brown, and each piece of armour had been carefully blackened. They had no lights; they had just to wait in the dark, with nothing to see but the dim shapes of the landscape looming around them, the dark trees under the night-blue sky, and nothing to do but sniff the cool air, and wait, and be silent.

Someone thought they could see the glow of fire; soon it was beyond doubt. It was coming from the road to the pass. The glow spread until here and there above and between the trees, where the angle was favourable, they could see the far-off glimmer of the flames themselves. There was nothing to be heard but their own low-voiced curses and lamentations, for they all knew what was burning.

Flames sprang up nearer at hand. Soon a glow appeared at the head of the long valley; this resolved itself into wavering lines of torches, steadily approaching. The numbers of torches grew and grew as ever more marching columns appeared at the head of the valley and took their turn trooping down around the loops of the road. The enemy were coming in ordered blocks of light, each group arranged in three files in a score or so ranks. The torches of each marching body made a thick, solid, bespeckled snake of wavering orange light. More units appeared, and more, and yet more, until the whole open path of the stream as it led back and up was filled with uncountable numbers of points of moving, angry light.

Harsh voices could now be heard braying out some boasting tune in savage unison, keeping time with the tramp of feet. The torches were by now so near and so numerous that a man on the rampart who glanced sideways could make out the grim faces of his fellows touched by the fiery light.

Barahir strode along the parapet, giving a word here and touching a shoulder there. His deep blue cloak appeared black in that light. Whenever his ring caught the light of the torches it flashed as a flickering band of vengeful fire. Doubting men and women looked into the Master's face and found new strength in it.

He raised his voice to address the archers in their shadowed, waiting line. "You stout ones of Ladros who crushed the foe in the Vale, in the open field, after a week's march in the snow: have courage! Today there are more of us, we are protected, we are fresh. And best of all: we know our worth now, we know what we can do. Have courage!"

The enemy came on. The whole winding length of the valley in front of the defenders was filled now with countless torches, and still more poured in at the far end.

Suddenly the singing in the van petered to a halt, and the lines faltered. The leaders had glimpsed the wall. For some moments there was confusion below; the ranks broke, amid much shouting. In the middle of this Barahir stepped onto the ledge and leaned over the edge of the parapet.

"What do ye here who trespass in my land with fire and sword?" He called in a ringing voice which brought the mob below to silence.

For a moment there was hush. Then came a gravelly voice in reply: "Aw, we woz just having a picnic, like," it said.

"Yer, a barbecue!" shouted another, and jarring laughter broke out all around, harsh as the sound of stones poured into a pail.

Barahir held up his hand, the ring on his finger a gleaming orange band, shining with more than reflected light. The sight of it stilled them again.

"He who would not leave his bones in this field," he said clearly, "let him depart. Go now, and live. If you stay, you will die. That is all I am going to say to you."

A chorus of jeers broke out at this and a few far-reaching arrows rattled against the parapet.

"What's he want to go on like that for," muttered Karrack from where he crouched in the darkness behind the parapet. "They're *Orcs*, what's he think they're going to do, say sorry and head for home? Tch, just shoot the beggars."

"Mucks up their heads, dunnit," said the wizened man next to him cheerfully. "An' it don't hurt us none, him given 'em a bit of lip. We'll be shooting 'em soon enough, don't you worry."

There followed something of a pause during which the tide of torches withdrew a little way. Messengers could be glimpsed running back and forth. Then the susurrations of harsh voices rose to a clamour. Great

figures wielding whips of fire could be seen striding around and marshalling the columns to the accompaniment of yells from the maddened victims. The noise rose to an indescribable pitch as the rankers began to crash blade on shield, thump shields onto the earth, with screams of pain and rage blending into the cacophony. A bull-voiced horn blared above the din, and suddenly the lines of torches were streaming towards the barrier. The whips plied, the Orcs howled.

As the pelting columns came within range, the lines of bows on the wall began to sing. Torches in the ranks below fell like ears of corn before the reaper, but the enemy came on, and came on. Hastily cut brush-faggots, hurled in their hundreds, made rough causeways across the trench. The first rank reached the wall and the masses of frantic goblins blackened the palisade as they clawed their way up the timbers.

The first attack almost succeeded due to its sheer weight and fury. Bows gave way to axes and pikes as goblins began to reach the top, and for a while the fighting became desperate. Here and there the attackers won their way over the crest and began to cut their way out along the walkway. Barahir had reserves for this eventuality however and he threw them now into the fight. Soon the beachheads were repelled; the defenders once more lined the wall and thrust back the desperate scramblers.

The field in front of the palisade had become a cauldron of sound and fire into which the razor-edged bronze rained down like summer hailstones. The arrows flashed in the light as they streaked down into the packed Orcs seething below, beating against the wall in impotent waves. Every throat down there was screaming, whether in fury or madness or pain made no difference; the combined result was an inhuman din that shivered the very air above the valley.

The attack ebbed slowly as the bows chopped steadily into their numbers. Only when the meadow before the fence was thickly carpeted with dead and dying Orcs, the whole dreadful scene fitfully illuminated by hundreds of dropped and guttering torches, did the remaining attackers turn to run. The remorseless bows sang and sang; the attackers continued to drop until the darkness hid them or they ran out of range.

The Orcs withdrew far back to the turn of the path. They seemed to be attempting to reform into fresh, whole columns. From the amount of whip-play and the accompanying screams, this did not seem to be going well. Order was eventually enforced however, and when the torches began again to move, there seemed to be twice as many of them as before: both more across the front, and more in depth.

The roar of the second attack seemed to shake the fragile fence of piles. The bowmen shot until their shoulders were on fire and their aim became unsteady. The mounds of the dead Orcs mounted higher and higher, while streams of black and foaming blood ran together across the lower ground in a horrid death-tree, seething down to foul the stream. Goblins hacked at the logs of the palisade and tried many times to set it on fire, but Barahir had thought of this as well, and had men ready with water to douse anything that caught. And all the time the deadly bows cut the enemy to pieces, cut them down by the hundreds.

An awful hush fell at last. The weary bowmen leaned their heads against the wood as they one by one found nothing more to shoot at. Almost a full legion of the enemy lay below them in heaps. Some goblins were still living, but were stricken to death, gasping and bubbling their feeble way out of life. Others lay open-mouthed and stark, already cooling. Few had survived to creep back out of range. Those columns not yet engaged, who looked to be about another legion in strength, stood back silent at the bend in the valley.

The pause this time was longer. Barahir used the time to have the wounded carried down out of range, to take water along to the weary fighters, and to replace them as he could with fresh troops. Suddenly there were shouts raised on the parapet: the enemy were coming again. Barahir ran up to see for himself. He saw a single, long column of Orcs coming at the run. Just before they came within bowshot, however, they turned off the side towards the woods. His heart came into his mouth at that because there was no fence at all on that side – the woods themselves were the only protection, if protection indeed they were. He had only Beren's word for that, and that word seemed to him now a fearfully thin shield to keep the enemy from

slashing into their heart.

Well, this is the test of it, he thought numbly.

The column of torches reached the eaves of the forest and passed within. Their crashing progress through the trees could be heard, and now and then torches were glimpsed through gaps between the trees. But as the column progressed further, making its steady way around their flank, Barahir began to be aware of a curious thing: a fraction of the torches had ceased to move, and glimmered simply as fixed points in the woods; dropped on the ground. This fraction grew steadily until only a few points were left winking their way around in the curve. These few halted one by one until there was no movement at all to be seen any more; only the stationary lights. They, too, began then, one by one, to wink out. The watchers heard no cries or noise of any kind; all that could be seen were the lights which first stopped, and were now vanishing. It appeared like a leisurely affair, with no sort of haste about it.

The men and women on the parapet were craning their heads, mystified. The last torch winked out; the forest rested again in darkness.

Some hours passed with no further attacks. Some of the defenders napped, wrapped in skins. On the ground behind the wall, cooking-fires were lit and cans of soup were passed along. The enemy made fires too, about half a mile down the valley. Grass-fires started by cast-down torches still smouldered in the nearer field.

A horseman rode into the camp from the rear. Barahir came down and heard his message: Baragund's men were approaching, and were not far off.

"It is well that they come," Barahir said in answer, "but perhaps we shall not need them after all. Powers grant that it will be so."

But the night still held one more trial for the defenders. The cocks were crowing when the word was passed down from the watchers: the enemy was on the move again.

Slowly the winding columns of torches approached. Despite their grotesque losses, the numbers of the enemy remained dauntingly high.

The columns approached to just outside bow-shot, where they halted to arrange themselves. It became clear that the Orcs had used the time to construct some items from looted timber. Each foot-soldier now sported a rough shield, high and wide enough to shelter behind; the column in the centre was also equipped with several ladders.

The attackers had drummers with them, and as soon as everybody was in formation and ready to proceed, the drums struck up a savage, steady beat. With shields held high, the goblins advanced, no longer in a mad rush, but steadily. Arrows began to find the shields, but Barahir passed the word along to shoot only at a fair target, not to waste arrows and strength. Thus the enemy reached the wall almost unscathed, although here and there an arrow would claim an incautious Orc who slipped, cursing, as he clambered up the windrows of bodies. The goblins were shooting back, but they could see little of the blackened defenders, and thus found few targets.

With a shout from many harsh voices, several ladders were heaved vertical and clapped against the wall. At the same time, the goblin archers let loose a blizzard of arrows at the parapet. Some climbers were shot from the ladders by defenders, but more poured up, and more still, until the first one reached the top, then another after him, and another. It was hand-to-hand fighting at the ladder-heads now and for the first time in that night of battle the defenders found themselves at a disadvantage. Those who risked the storm of steel flying up from below to lean over and take a shot found that goblins had man-handled some of their shields up to line the sides of the ladders.

Shouting with fury, Barahir leaped up to the parapet and drew his sword, but he found he could not get at the enemy. Only one at a time could face the foe on the narrow walkway, and his tired men – few of them skilled at close-quarter fighting – were being cut down by Orcs who were fresh, who had not yet been fighting. A press of frightened and harried men were stumbling backwards and forcing him to retreat.

The goblins held many yards of parapet now and more of them were pouring unhindered up their ladders all the time. Barahir, still not able to engage, pressed backward by the desperate men in front of him, sought wildly for a point of leverage. There was no room to do anything. The struggling defenders would begin to be pushed off the parapet soon; also it could not be more than a matter of moments before the massing Orcs descended into the camp below and began to cut their way through the wounded.

Suddenly he became aware that the darkness below him was full of horses – he could hear the thunder of their hooves. At the same moment, he heard the great gates in the palisade shudder and groan as they were thrown wide. The dark riders below began to stream out, and as he listened further, he heard the character of the battlefield roar begin to alter. Its volume did not diminish, but orkish cries of savage triumph in the field before the fence began to be replaced by howls of surprise and fear.

No arrows were coming up now, so Barahir jumped onto the step to try to see what was happening. Below him he saw a scene of indescribable slaughter. Streams of riders were pouring into the field and cutting down the enemy like a scythe through hay. Barahir saw the torchlight gleam on blades as they rose and fell, rose and fell, chopping at the necks of the horrified and fleeing Orcs. The vigour of the butchery took his breath away.

The goblins on the parapet realized that the tide had turned against them. No further reinforcements were flowing up from below, and the defenders on the ledge were pushing back upon them with renewed heart. Bows were singing now also in the camp below and the invaders were losing fighters steadily, exposed against the light as they were. They backed up slowly, seeking the ladders, but these were already toppling, pulled from below. Then there was no escape more and the survivors turned back snarling to sell their lives as dearly as they could. But the men in front of Barahir were growling now and moving forward. Soon there was only a knot of struggle on the parapet, and then nobody was fighting any more. The Orcs all lay dead, their bodies strewn along the ledge, or cast into the darkness behind.

Once the immediate field had been swept clean of enemies, the columns of horsemen spurred their way onward towards the remaining parties of torch bearers. These, terrified, began casting their torches aside. Soon they were fleeing in disarray.

Barahir realized that he could dimly make out the stream of riders even at a distance from the fitful light of the flames. He swung around and saw that the East was grey with the dawn.

Dawn was in full flow by the time the cavalry returned down the valley, the blood-darkened horses having to pick their way carefully over the piles of bodies in the last stretch. Barahir was at the foot of the wall to meet the riders. At the head of the horsemen rode Baragund, the iron-handed Soldier, with his merry brother the Greencloak riding beside him.

“Well met, Kinsman,” laughed the Greencloak. “I think you owe us some wine for this night’s work.”

“No wine in this country,” said Barahir. “Would a hogshead of my best ale meet the case?”

“Ugh, no,” replied Belegund. “Come, Uncle, stir yourself about. Use some initiative. Our sally must be worth ten bottles of best Elvish vintage, at least.”

“Aye, at least that,” said Barahir. “I don’t mind admitting we were hard put to it at the last. Never was nephew more welcome!”

“Ten bottles it is then. Fetch it from Finrod, or something. And do not think again to palm your foul suds off as honest grape, so long as you wish us to chop Orcs’ heads off on your doorstep.”

His brother the Soldier dismounted and petted his steaming mount. He was never comfortable with such jesting talk and usually avoided or ignored it. “I think we accounted for most of them,” he said in his sober way, “but some rats always escape the terrier.”

Streams of ravens and other birds of plunder were already flocking into the steadily lightening valley.

Beren had been on the parapet during the battle. He had discarded an earlier plan to lurk in the undergrowth to one side and play a role similar to the last occasion; he had felt that this would be too restrictive, afford too poor a view of the fighting, and would offer only a doubtful retreat should the tide turn in the wrong direction. On the parapet, however, he was only one of many. He had been obliged at least in some measure to rein in his greater range and power and shoot with the rank. At the last throw of the Orcs, he had found himself in real danger of being cut down by the insurgents. In the end he had jumped from the ledge and had joined the new archers from Baragund’s force shooting up from below.

He found himself standing next to Morwen. At the close of things, his fair young cousin was beside herself with glee because she had accounted for three of the Orcs.

“I am on your track now, Cuz,” she said to Beren, her eyes gleaming in the dawn light. “I will not rest until I am up with you!”

“Good luck to your arm!” he replied, smiling.

“Only, you must teach me the way of living in the woods,” she said, grasping his arm. “There are no Drúedain here now to whom I can turn, and it is not fair, I think, that you had this chance, and so young too, and I not. Surely now it is my turn.”

“I will teach you anything I can, Morwen,” he said, “as soon as affairs permit.” And with that she had to be content.

Her father had arranged for a bodyguard to accompany Morwen and shield her from accidents. This man, whose name was given to Beren as Urthel, came forward now to be introduced. Beren eyed him with interest, because he was unlike any other man he had ever seen, by virtue of his skin, which was a rich loamy brown in colour, several shades darker even than any of the Drúedain attained.

“I am sure everybody asks you where you came by your tan,” said Beren to Urthel, “so I shall not.”

Urthel laughed, his teeth showing very white in his dusky face. He was a small, lean man with cheerful features, unremarkable except for his skin colour and his wiry black hair.

“Since you omit to ask with such courtesy,” he said, “I will provide the explanation the more willingly. My mother came from far southern lands, where the sun is so hot that all the people are toasted brown by it. Further south again, they grow indeed so black that the sweat on their faces glistens blue.”

It appeared that Urthel’s mother was a princess who had heard there was a Light in the West and made a long journey up the coast to seek it. It sounded a curious tale in Beren’s ears, with far more in it than a quick few words on a battlefield could convey.

The broad-shouldered Bëoring and the swarthy Southerner spent only a few minutes talking, but by the end of it each found a great liking for the other planted in his heart. The two new friends had to separate then for the time, because there was a great deal of tedious and unpleasant work to be done, but they promised one another to spend some more time in company, as soon as – to use Beren’s phrase – affairs permitted.

* * * * *

With that small part of his mind that was not dashing frantically to and fro like a cornered rat, Choker wished most passionately that he could die. Anything to escape this tide of terror that washed over him again and again. The fear pressed on him, pressed again; he moaned and writhed, powerless to escape it.

Another one, another mental shock. In concert with the other Rrrk there waiting, he jerked from it, whimpering with terror.

Some there in the waiting line had broken already under the mental pressure – there were smears on the floor where their twitching carcasses had been hauled away.

At the head of the row, in the great chamber... it was unspeakable. God was there. God was angry. God wanted answers from the Rrrk. One after another, in remorseless series, their minds were being torn out of them and ripped into pieces.

Disgusted and furious, Melkor gave up at last. These miserable Mobiles were no use. He bellowed orders. Underlings ran to sweep the remains away, whether living or dead or witless in between. He summoned then Mairon to appear before him.

“Farmers!” he grated to his lieutenant. “These ‘farmers,’ with no elvish help at all, have cost me two more legions. Two legions! *Another* two legions! How do you explain *that*?”

Mairon dared not allow his own chagrin to show. A bold front was the thing, always.

“Clearly,” he said smoothly, “we have underestimated some of our opponents. This happens in war, as of course you know. They planned well, they fought well. We had no prior reason to expect that they would – indeed rather the contrary.

“I have not forgotten that your Magnificence desired this area to be cleared, and I make my humble apologies for the delay in accomplishing that order; but looked at objectively, in the context of the entire campaign, I would nonetheless suggest that this is nothing more than a minor setback, a temporary defeat in a side-theatre of small importance.”

Melkor leaned forward. “You say ‘delay’,” he said, and there was menace in his tones. “What then is your plan, your timetable, for fulfilling my expressed desire in this matter?”

“Reinforcements will of course be necessary,” replied Mairon smoothly. “Given the fresh information we have, five legions should suffice. Matters are easier in the East now, Mobiles can be spared. Grant me five legions, and we will have the task accomplished by the winter, as you ordered. We have the measure now of these Men.”

“And what of this other danger we have newly heard of, the death that has returned to the forest?” growled his chief.

Mairon tried not to show the unease that he felt. “We do not yet know its nature,” he admitted. “I doubt it is the brown men – we saw them leave, some years ago, and they have surely not come back. There is no way in for them. At least, we believe not. I doubt they could make passage over the mountains that fence this Pine Land to the South.”

“You *doubt*,” sneered Melkor, his voice laden with scorn, “but you do not *know*. Those mountains have remained out of your reach; you have never managed to find out much about them. You do not even *know* if they are passable, and by whom. It is useless to send beasts or Mobiles as spies, as you have wasted much time in trying. Mairon, you have mastery of much petty witchery. Why can you not use some to *look*?”

The last thing Mairon wanted was to waste hard-won power on pin-pricks like this. This notion of his chief must be quenched, and quickly. “Master,” he said, loading his voice with decision, “the key to all of this is the farmers, as you said. Whatever may lurk in the woods is no threat to our flank. Having annihilated the farmers, we can deploy at our leisure many powers to harry every last enemy and traitor out of these woods. It is simply a question of addressing the problems in the correct sequence. We have started well: we hold the former Elven forts. But we have long known the Eldar and had the measure of their mettle. Our recent problems arose simply and solely because Men, at least of this southern breed, are new to us. Now we know that they can fight; so, we adapt our tactics. We use more force, and more cunning. We are wary now for traps; and we stay out of the woods – as, I emphasize, do also the farmers. There is no concern that they could flank us.”

Melkor brooded at him long, his thoughts impossible to read. “Take your five legions, then,” he said at last. “But this had better suffice, Mairon. It will go ill with you if you fail me again.”

* * * * *

Bregolas had been moved to the inn because Sightfoot was beginning to feel a little too exposed, a little too near the front of action. One day soon after the Battle of the Torches, as people were calling it, Barahir was told that his lord was clear in his mind at last and had asked to see him. He found his brother lying abed in a comfortable, airy room on the upper story. A nurse was in attendance, and some pages. Also in the room was the new House-major, a young man named Girazôn. Barahir glanced at him, not having seen him before. He took in a good-looking, open-faced young man of middle height with well-groomed dark hair and eyes of a rather melting blue. He looked like the sort of man women might delight in.

Barahir turned his attention then to the figure lying in the bed. He had been dreading this interview, even though he had known it had to happen some time. Baragund had offered to come with him, but Barahir had declined this; he did not wish to begin by appearing defensive. If things went awry there would be plenty of opportunity later for Baragund to step in.

What he saw did not look very alarming – indeed he was shocked at the appearance of his brother. The beef seemed to have fallen away from Bregolas’s bones; his face looked bloodless, lined and hollow, and his nose rose starkly like a beak above the other features. His hair, now fully grey, streamed in a mass over the pillow.

His brother saw that he had entered. He raised a bony hand and beckoned Barahir closer with two crooked fingers. As Barahir approached to sit on a stool by the bedside, he became acutely conscious of the comparison between the two of them. Bregolas’s long figure lay there powerless and wan, flattened by his trials, brought seemingly almost to the doorway of death; whereas he felt himself to be a potent figure, three-dimensional, full of colour and strength. He wondered if Bregolas had the same perception.

“Brother,” Bregolas acknowledged him in a hoarse half-whisper.

“It sorrows me to see you brought so low, my Lord,” said Barahir, and he meant it. “All your people hope for your speedy recovery.”

Bregolas made flicking motions of his hand to still these pleasantries. “Tell me how it goes in our land,” he said weakly.

Barahir spoke then for a minute or two, summarizing developments since Bregolas’s accident (as he preferred to think of it). He finished with a sketch of the recent crushing triumph. When he had finished speaking, Bregolas grasped his brother’s hand and squeezed it.

“You did well,” he husked.

Barahir was taken aback by this; it was the last thing he had expected. “Your sons saved our bacon,” he said.

“I think we might have lost in the end, had it not been for them.”

Bregolas nodded a few times at this, hmphing slightly in his throat. Barahir was reminded of their father. After a moment or two Bregolas said, “You were right about the Orcs.”

Barahir shrugged, not knowing what would be good to say in reply.

“Should’ve listened to you,” continued Bregolas. He fastened his pale eyes on his brother’s face. “Owe you my life too, so I’m told. They told me what you did.”

Barahir could still think of nothing to say, so he just sat there in discomfort and returned his brother’s gaze.

“You’ve led our people well,” grunted Bregolas. “Appreciate it.”

Barahir could reply to this. He leaned forward and fixed Bregolas with his eye. “My Lord,” he said, “I thank you for your kind words; but I do not forget that I am merely your regent. They chose me during your indisposition only because the Folk would follow no other; but their trust was rather in the House of Bëor than in me as a person. As soon as you are able to take your rightful place again, I will yield it to you with the greatest alacrity. I take no joy in the role. As your lieutenant I have found only trouble and worry.”

Bregolas grunted, faintly amused. “No holiday, eh?”

“No, my Lord, decidedly not,” replied Barahir. “Believe me, nobody wishes more fervently for your recovery than I.”

Bregolas let his hand fall at last and lay back, the lines of exhaustion deep in his face. “Thank you for coming,” he husked. He closed his eyes.

After a moment the young man Girazôn came forward. “I think my Lord should rest now,” he murmured in respectful tones. “That is, Master, if you agree?”

Barahir nodded. He looked over his brother once more, nodded again to Girazôn and the other attendants, and withdrew.

* * * * *

At the time when the trees were joyous in new leaf, Barahir gathered the leaders of the land to a conference.

There were twelve of them seated around a table in a room at the inn. The House of Bëor was represented by Barahir, Emeldir, Baragund in sober black, and lastly by the cheerful face and broad figure of Menelrond. The big man’s white teeth glinted over his river of beard as he laughed at some jest from his neighbour Mithbrûn, the grey-moustached Guard-major from Newport. On Mithbrûn’s other side was seated one Úmelchar, who represented the traders in the town. Úmelchar was a smooth-featured man whose superficially candid gaze did not quite seem to fit with the exaggerated elegance and richness of his attire. Next to him was a group of three representing the farmers of the valley mouth: the wary and cynical face of Taenthîr, their leader, flanked by two lieutenants. On the far side of Taenthîr’s little group loomed the large, over-muscled figure of Cazimek. The beefy man, the representative of Bregolas’s Fist of Ladros troops, had shot a poisonous glance at Baragund upon entering – clearly the sting of his one-time humiliation had not diminished. The man’s bulky figure almost eclipsed the final representative, a diminutive older woman with grey hair bound into a homely bun. A casual glance would take in hair and size, would rest then an instant on her modest, almost domestic attire. The glance would be ready to move on, indifferent, only to be caught by the woman’s fierce blue eyes. There was spirit in those eyes, and a hardy strength. This was Lainwen, who was there to represent the scattered crofters of the moor; folk who preferred the free air of the southern highlands to the richer and easier living in the valley plain.

Last of all at the table, immediately to the right of Barahir, there sat a tall, powerful-looking man whom nobody knew. He had a northern look about him: blue eyes which measured the figures around him with interest, and thick yellow hair worn clubbed neatly out of the way behind his head. His kilt and tunic were well cut but appeared stained and travel-worn.

Zalta appeared with two helpers, bringing flagons of ale, as well as cups for all those seated. Barahir thought she looked not much changed – the figure perhaps a little fuller; but her hair seemed as black and unruly as ever.

“Thank you, Zalta,” he said to her with a smile. “Gentlemen, ladies, shall we begin?”

Grunts and nods around the table indicated acquiescence.

“First of all I should introduce our guest,” said Barahir. He indicated the fair-headed man. “This is Erlan of Hithlum who has lately braved the pass of Anach to bring us news of the North.” Further nods and becks from the Dorthonion folk conveyed their welcome to the Northerner. “Shortly I will ask him to give some account of how matters stand in his homeland. Many of the rest of us are known to one another, but for completeness, and for Erlan’s sake, I would ask you one by one to tell us your name and a one-breath tale of who you represent.” Barahir led off then with his own name and place, and the rest around the table followed suit in their turn.

Barahir turned then to the meat of the meeting. “Comrades,” he said, “by fortune or whatever means, we have so far defended our land against assault and kept it out of the Enemy’s hands. This is known to you all, so I do not need to say any more about it. Our purpose here today is to decide what to do next.”

Menelrond rumbled deep in his chest. “I would fain speak more of your victory in the affair of the torches, your glorious and *fourth* victory,” he said with emphasis, “but since I know you would not think well of that, I shall not. What I say is, before we can decide what to do, we would need to know what the Enemy intends. And what man can do that? We are not in his counsels, and we have no spies to creep under his table.”

“Ach,” said Mithbrûn, puffing at his moustache, “no need to tie ourselves in knots. Intend? He’ll attack again. What else is there? When he does, we’ll defend. That is all there is to it.”

The smooth-faced merchant Úmelchar leaned forward. “Ah, but do we know that?” he said. “*Do* we know that he will attack again? He is not a fool. At some point he must weigh his losses, surely. For what can be the gain?” he looked around at the others, trying to gauge their mood. “We love our land, of course, but we must acknowledge that it is not of the richest. Our climate is cool, our soils mostly poor. Nor do we bar his way to the richer lands to the South. Perhaps he thought us easy meat, and sent some forces in an idle moment, on a whim almost, to mop us up. But now that he has found the egg is not so easy to crack as he thought, why should he not give it up? I should, in his place. It is so obviously a poor bargain.”

Baragund the Soldier tried not to allow his disdain to appear on his face. “There are more motives in the world than simple gain, Úmelchar,” he said.

Úmelchar glanced at his critic with a flash of irritation. “Yes of course,” he said. “You do not need to teach me that. To take but one counter-example, there can be no question of gain in the feud this Melkor has with the Elvish folk. But I do not see why we should involve ourselves deeper in a fight that is not our own. Indeed, although what’s past is past, I could have wished for a little less rashness and more wisdom in our dealings so far with this powerful Vala. I was not consulted; had I been, I might have suggested some parley, some attempt to find common ground, before swords were drawn.” Baragund snorted at this, which earned him another dark glance from the merchant. “After all, foes are made, not born. We should ask ourselves if we have not made a rod for our own backs; and if we have so, how the situation might be retrieved, or at least not worsened.”

“Have you finished?” asked Baragund with some warmth, but before he could continue, the beefy Cazimek struck his hand flat on the table.

“My turn to speak!” he cried. “I see four of the House of Bëor here today, but no-one to speak for my master! So I must do the work which others shirk.” Baragund stirred, a look of fury on his face, but Barahir held him back from speaking. Cazimek continued. “I do not agree with all of our good merchant’s words,” he said, “but in some things he speaks sooth. In my opinion, this campaign has been very ill conducted. If you give somebody a bloody nose, it is only natural that he should become enraged. This Power to the North of us had no reason to be our enemy until certain elements,” here he looked meaningfully at Barahir and Baragund, “*certain elements* rashly took it upon themselves to poke the wasps’ nest with a stick. Had we left matters alone, this Melkor would never have looked near us, of that I am certain. He has quarrel only with these smoothies... with these limp-handed Elvish wights – these prancing poppy-cocks with their, with their, their fine words and their oh-so-gracious contempt. It is beyond me to understand why we need to mix ourselves in the affairs of such folk. But some people seem to need to fawn by nature, to lick the...”

Baragund stood up. “Enough!” he said with a face like thunder. “I have warned you on this once before. Hold your tongue about your betters, churl, if you want to keep it.”

Cazimek stood up as well, red-faced, but whatever retort he was about to make was interrupted by a sharp elbow in his side. Nonplussed, he looked down to find himself caught in the hard blue eyes of the old woman.

“Young man,” she said sternly, “sit down. Learn some sense and some manners before you open your mouth in council again.”

Purple in the face with chagrin and fury, Cazimek cast a wild glance around the table. There he found but little support; even the eyes of the merchant slid away from his. Utterly thrown out of countenance, he could find nothing else to do but sit down, where he sat steaming and fuming like some great pot about to boil over.

Barahir now stood. In his face was no anger, only a kind of sadness. “Cazimek, you are very ignorant,” he said, “and like most ignorant men, you are ignorant of the fact of your own ignorance. Knowing nothing, you imagine there is nothing to know. You clearly know nothing of how the world was made, and you know nothing of our own past. You have not searched for the truth of things, and thus you have never learned to tell truth from lies. Well, for what it was worth, you have had your say; and as you are a free man, it is for you to decide whether to stay and listen to wiser council, or to take your folly elsewhere.”

“Are you throwing me out?” growled Cazimek. The man had a dangerous glint in his eye.

“You did not listen to what I said,” said Barahir. “You may stay or go as you will. Only, if you stay, then you must hold your tongue, until the close of the meeting anyway. We have neither time nor mind to hear any more of your empty-headed prating.”

“So, I am to be muzzled then!” cried Cazimek.

“Oh, fling yourself into the cesspit,” growled Menelrond. “Puffed-up turkey-cock. Or must I throw you there myself?”

Barahir put a hand on his arm. “Peace, Cousin.”

“I have pimples on my arse with more wit than you,” said Menelrond, but he subsided then at the repetition of his leader’s chiding.

Barahir turned back to Cazimek. “Well, what is it to be? Leave, or stay in silence?”

Cazimek stood up, knocking his cup over. "I shall not suffer any more of this," he cried. "You may take yourselves to the Pit, all of you. I spit – nay, *shit* on your meeting. As for you, Barahir – I will see you hang as a traitor, and the sooner it happens the happier all men of sense will be." He turned and stamped out of the meeting, calling loudly outside the door for his lieutenants.

Mithbrûn leaned forward until he could see past Menelrond to Barahir. "Told you it was pointless to invite him," he said.

"Think you that means trouble?" Menelrond asked him.

Mithbrûn shook his head. "Not now, not here," he said. "He would not dare. He knows well enough how few follow him, and how many do not. In the City it might be a different story, but he has not the numbers here, and it would take him all day to fetch them."

"Are you sure of that?" said Barahir.

"We of the Guard keep a pretty close eye on those mollymops," said Mithbrûn. "Yes, I'm sure."

Barahir turned away and tapped on the table with his cup. "Well then, let us not waste further time. I will call first on Erlian to tell us how the fighting went in the North."

Erlian stood up and launched into his account. He told a tale which bore some similarities to their own experiences: the wave of poison fire, the swarms of Orcs. There were also some differences. For one thing, the attacking armies appeared to have been more organized, or at least better prepared, than any the Dorthonion people had so far faced. They had also been differently equipped. Erlian said the Orcs had deployed machines of destruction, of a type not before seen, which had wrought immense damage before they were neutralized. Lastly – and this was news which brought a shadow to the hearts of many there listening – he said the armies had been led by a Fire-demon, a Balrog.

When Erlian had finished his account, Barahir was first to raise the subject at the front of all their minds. "This Balrog," he said, "you say the High King drove it off?"

"Oh, did he not!" exclaimed Erlian, his blue eyes lighting up. "I doubt I will ever see a more wonderful or terrible sight. None of us could stand before the creature, until Fingolfin rode up with some knights of his house and gave it battle. That was a sight to lift the heart! The King like a ray of morning; his fearless challenge to this horror, this burning beast, this uncoverer of the mind's darkest corners. But even while we cheered, the horror was also upon us, for nobody had any hope that even Fingolfin's brightness could prevail against this, this black scorcher of souls. We thought it would be too much for him, as it was too much for anyone; and we dreaded at every moment to see his valour burnt away to nothing, like a piece of tinder thrown into the furnace.

"Well, his knights baited that thing, but for a while they could not come at it. They were in a ring, shooting at it, but the piles only burned up in the air and did the creature no scathe. The King attacked from the front, but he could not get past the whip of fire; he could find no opening. The King stood high in the stirrups at last and called on the Powers of fire and air for aid, and on the very stars themselves. I am not so well versed in that old speech as some, being no scholar, but only a simple man of arms, but even I knew the meaning of it. Such a power was in the King's voice that all felt the summons. And the Powers answered him, as they surely would not to you and me! His sword, held high to heaven, blazed with a white fire, of a brightness impossible to describe, or to forget; and so did the bows of the archers. A volley of arrows carried the fire of Heaven to the creature of darkness, and it screamed, a scream to split stone. Men fell dead at the sound of it, and I have the fearful echo in my ears and dreams yet. Those are my scars, that rob me betimes of sleep and ease; I who suffered no wound to the body.

"But enough of that. The King seized then his chance and smote the thing on the thigh with his glaive. It

sought him with its whip, but his noble mount Rochallor was too swift. Three times the arrows volleyed, three times the King struck. Perhaps the power to bring such a thing to death is not in even such as him, but he dealt it such pain that in the end it retired. It turned and ran from the field, can you believe it? Can you imagine our joy, and the red wave of our returning fury? We turned on the Orcs then and cut them to ribbons. So we held through; and some of us saw a new morning, as free men still.”

The listeners sat as if spell-bound. Then they all one by one drew breath, and it seemed to each of them the first in some while. They looked at one another, wonder written on all their faces; even on the unwilling faces of Taenthîr and Úmelchar.

Baragund was the first to speak. “The King was not hurt?” he husked.

Erlian’s face turned grave. “Of that I cannot be so confident as I could wish,” he said. “We all of us feared from the start that the King was matched against a foe beyond his powers. It may be that it has done him some scathe – not in the body, you understand; but we fear it may have wounded his spirit. As we learned the full tale of anguish: the Leaguer vanished, the younger sons of Finarfin¹⁰ cast into darkness, the breach in the East; so has his mood sunk. He does not come among us any more, but paces to and fro in his room. We do not know what he may do in his rage and despair.”

Nobody knew what to say to that. Talk then turned to the machines Erlian had spoken of. Barahir and Baragund in particular wanted to understand what they were capable of, and how they might be destroyed or countered.

“They are like to great slings,” said Erlian. “They can throw rocks or arrows, mayhap against a fortress, but also to smash great holes in lines of men. Shields are no use against them.” He said that the men of Hithlum had found that the best tactic was to bring battle to the machines. “They were made of wood, and took fire with some ease,” he said.

It being then past time for the noon meal, the meeting adjourned for it, breaking into smaller groups to eat and talk. Barahir sat with Baragund and Erlian, Menelrond guffawed with his crony Mithbrûn, Emeldir and Lainwen found things to converse about together, and Taenthîr sat sullenly apart, muttering with his own house-men; but Úmelchar the merchant slipped out to meet and talk quietly with some of his peers.

When they came together again, Barahir stood. “Although I am only a farmer,” he began, “I have twice now, by force of circumstances, been called to lead an army of my fellows against the enemy. Fortune favoured us both times, but I have no training in the soldier’s art and I am only too aware of the mistakes I made. Baragund here has much knowledge that I lack; you all know however, at least I hope you do, that he refused the command himself, would not hear of it but that I lead both his men and mine.”

“That’s right,” said Baragund, and Menelrond and Mithbrûn nodded their heads approvingly.

“However,” continued Barahir, “if I have not the expertise myself, I at least know how to consult those who do. I have already discussed the defence of our land with Baragund, with his brother the Greencloak, also with sundry others of my followers who have experience in these matters. We have hammered out a plan, now augmented after hearing Erlian’s account, which in order to shorten proceedings today we propose to put before you for comments.”

Taenthîr rapped on the table at this point. “Here, hold on a minute,” he said. “No hustling if you please, master Barahir. There’s no plans going to be agreed to at *my* end of the country until we’ve chewed ’em over thorough, and had our own say to boot. None of us even said a word, yet.”

“Taenthîr,” said Barahir, “you may have as much say as you please, provided it is pertinent. Equally, if there

10 Angrod and Aegnor.

is something in our proposals which is not clear to you, then please ask. Nobody is being hustled; but time spent in talking should not be over-prolonged. Enough of it has been wasted as it is.”

Taenthîr made a noise in his throat and looked even sourer than usual. “Get on with it then,” he said gruffly.

Barahir spent some time outlining his conception of the challenge facing them, and the general strategy they should adopt to counter it. Many grew a little restless under the dry weight of his words, Mithbrûn among them. Eventually the Guard-major interjected.

“Need we go into all this fiddly detail, Master?” he said. “Plans never hold up in practice. Principle’s the thing. My old war-master Gethric used to say: be flexible; be bold; attack small forces with big. Anything else is fluff.”

“In the teaching I had, it’s more of a balance,” put in the Soldier. “What you say is fair enough; but the meaning is that we should adapt our plans at need, not that we should neglect to make any at all.”

“We have to make *some* plans, Mithbrûn,” said Barahir mildly. He continued then with a discursion on the value of birds to their cause, both to gather information and to deny the same to the enemy. He mentioned Beren in this connection. Most there present, Erlian excepting, already knew something of the young man’s strange gifts, but their eyes widened all the same at some of the details they now heard.

Finally Barahir came to the point. “What we are proposing,” he said at last, “is a rapid response. Flexibility, Mithbrûn, as you advise. We have means to find out when the Enemy masses his troops. As soon as we get that news, we should muster, as many fighters and as quickly as possible, and strike at his throat.”

“Won’t he likely strike from the West again,” said Mithbrûn, “where he’s still got all those legions?”

“Most likely, yes,” agreed Barahir, “and we’ll continue to strengthen the fence at that end. But it would not be wise to leave other avenues unprotected.”

“*All* other avenues?” asked Taenthîr, with some emphasis.

“What do you mean?” said Barahir.

“What I want to know,” said Taenthîr, “is just what – or who – gets protected. In plain words, supposin’ the Black One strikes at us, in the valley mouth, will you Westies be coming to help us out? That’s what’s on *my* mind.”

“Of course we will,” replied Barahir with a touch of impatience.

“Just wanted to get that clear,” said Taenthîr sourly. “Hasn’t often been the case. If ever at all.”

There followed some argument about the need to leave some people in defence, so as not to leave any part of the land exposed to the unexpected. At last, however, the broad details of policy were thrashed out.

Once all these practical details had been settled, Barahir paused, wondering if he should voice some of the concerns in his mind. He decided to do so. “This is all well and good,” he said, “but these machines worry me, also other matters. I had not heard of these slings of war before, although Baragund tells me that the Enemy has made use of similar devices in the past.

“My greater concern is the unknown. The Enemy may deploy other weapons which we do not yet dream of, and which we will need to counter as we meet them.” He looked around their faces, uncertain as to how they would receive his next words. “There is one thing it would be well to understand and accept right from the beginning: that the Enemy has arms, powers, allies, which we cannot easily meet. Balrogs are one example;

this Worm we hear of from the eastern battle could well be another. We are simple farmers. We have nobody among us of the calibre of Fingolfin; and he in person cannot come to our aid, he has cares and labours enough of his own. Comes a Balrog to the field, we must simply flee, and hope that it will tire before laying the whole length and breadth of Dorthonion to waste.”

There was a silence while the company absorbed these sobering words.

“This brings me to a final matter that I wish to lay before you,” said Barahir. “We have done well so far; we have fought off our assailants. By the grace of the Powers who made this world, we will continue to do so. It is only sense, however, to plan for all cases. I should like to see as many of our people who cannot fight brought as far from the likely lanes of attack as possible. In short, they should evacuate to the South. I have been urging this course among my own people for some time now – with, it has to be admitted, only partial success. But my people are mostly very simple folk, who consider themselves bound to the soil. I am hoping that the inhabitants of Newfort at least will have a broader view, and thus be more easily persuaded.”

Several of the company started speaking at once, the moment he finished.

“One at a time, please,” said Barahir. “Shall we go first around the table? Only a brief remark for the moment, if you please. Emeldir?”

She smiled at him. “You know my view.”

“Yes,” he said, “but the company does not.”

She shrugged. “It’s necessary. In the short term, it’s possible. The longer term we must leave to look after itself.”

“Thank you,” said Barahir. “Nephew?”

“I am a fighting man,” said Baragund. “These kinds of things are more in your province, Uncle. All I can say is that it would ease my mind greatly if my wife and children were somewhat further from the business end of things than they are now.”

Barahir turned to the barrel-chested man next to him. “Any thoughts, Menelrond?”

The large man had a stubborn look on his face. “I ain’t leaving,” he said.

“I had not imagined that you would,” said Barahir. “Your wife and daughter might wish to, however. Mithbrûn?”

The Guard-major scratched his moustache. “Where are you proposing they should all go, Master?” he said.

“Away,” said Barahir. “South, as I said.”

“Up on the moors?” asked Mithbrûn, and Barahir shrugged, and nodded. “Well,” the older man said, “to be sure, we was all there before, in my grandfather’s time. But from all I heard, pickings was slim. And there’s more of us now. What are they all going to eat?”

“We can store food to last a length of time,” said Barahir. “I don’t put this forward as any kind of permanent solution; indeed, as Emeldir hinted, all it really does is postpone a problem. It just seems to me to be better to have to deal with food questions tomorrow than to risk sword and fire today. Taenthîr?”

“Well,” answered the lantern-jawed Easterner grudgingly, “I suppose it’s all right. Just so being as it’s not only Mouter-men who must leave their farms and goods unguarded. There’s them who might be tempted to

make free of the same, if you catch my meaning.”

Barahir did not dignify this with an answer. “Mistress Lainwen?” he said.

The wrinkled old lady laughed. “I was wondering all along why you invited me to this parley, Master,” she said. “You want my opinion. Well now. Do I think it a sensible idea? Yes I do. Will we crofters help where we can? Yes we will. Can we feed half Newfort? Not by a long sight. Good will is there, but that ain’t enough, Master. Just you keep that in mind.”

“Thank you, Mistress,” said Barahir. “Can you suggest a good place for a settlement?”

“Aeluin,” she replied promptly. “The Blue Lake. Got to be.”

“Why, particularly?” Barahir wanted to know.

“You’ve never been there,” she said, “or you wouldn’t ask. But if you want practical reasons: it’s easy to get to, there’s places for huts, it’s sheltered, and it’s hard to find for those who don’t know the way. There’s other reasons, but those will do for now.”

“Hmm,” he said. “What say you, Úmelchar?”

“I am sorry that you ask me last, and not first,” the merchant replied. “It would have saved much bootless talk. What you propose is, quite simply stated, an economic impossibility. The disruption to trade, indeed to affairs of all kinds, would be, well I struggle to conceive of a word capacious enough. Catastrophic perhaps, or disastrous. I am afraid the merchant community, of which I am honoured to be spokesman, could not possibly countenance a plan, if I may dignify your proposal by that word, of so ill-grounded, so rash a...”

Emeldir interrupted him. “Just how catastrophic do you feel it would be compared to, let us say, your town burned to the ground, with half of its inhabitants put to the sword, and the other half led into slavery?”

“Really, Mistress, such wild speculations cannot...”

“Enough,” said Barahir. “I understand your concerns, Úmelchar; I do not think you understand mine. I know it will cause disruption and hardship. Nevertheless I think we must attempt it, for the simple avoidance of babies spitted on Orkish spears. The time to set this in motion is now. If we wait until the threat is at our door, it will be too late to escape. So, I say to you all, so long as you wish to keep me for your leader, so long will I continue to push this forward.”

“I believe we have covered now all topics. I purpose to bring this meeting to a close. Are there any further comments or questions?”

“You did not ask me what I thought of your evacuation plan,” said Erlan.

“Your pardon, Erlan,” said Barahir. “I did not think you would feel that it concerned you.”

“We are kin,” replied Erlan. “How could it not concern us? We of the North would aid you in all ways if we could, but most ways are not possible to us, for the present anyway. But in this matter can we not help? I was not given authority to make promises on behalf of my rulers, but speaking as one man to another, I am sure that a request for sanctuary in Hithlum would not be refused.”

Barahir turned this new thought over in his head. “That would be – gracious in your chiefs,” he said slowly. “I must think on this more. It is a long road to Hithlum. Orcs block the Vale; and as you have no doubt found out for yourself, our back door, Anach, is no road for the old and weak.”

Erlan bowed his head and said nothing more. But before the company could move out of their chairs, Úmelchar put his hand up.

“I have just one more question,” he said. “In this meeting, ideas have sailed past us as if shot from bows. Some have seemed to me acceptable, or at least as offering a basis for negotiation; others perhaps not so much. But there has been scarce time for sober consultation and discussion. My good friend Taenthîr has mentioned the word ‘hustling’. I am not myself so familiar with the vernacular, but there is perhaps much in that word to ponder. Despite assurances of time to discuss and object, we find ourselves, here at the close of the meeting, almost coerced into agreeing to a raft of notions and proposals which...”

Barahir now held up his own hand. “This does not sound like a question,” he said.

A trace of irritation flitted across Úmelchar’s smooth features. “Well then, if you insist on a brutish celerity, my question is simply this: has the ruling Bëor had anything to say about your explicit proposals?”

“My lord Bregolas is still far from well,” replied Barahir.

“That is no answer,” said Úmelchar.

“My lord has approved my stewardship so far,” said Barahir. “I spoke briefly with him some little time ago. I took his remarks as support for my continuation of it.”

“Very subtly expressed, Master,” said Úmelchar. “Well done. But in the circles I move in, that would amount to a ‘no’.”

“The moment my lord requires me to resign, I will do so,” said Barahir stiffly. “Petition him thus yourself if you wish. I am not holding him prisoner. But until that time, I take it upon myself to make the decisions. He cannot have it both ways, and neither can you.”

No-one having anything more to say at that point, the meeting broke up. Menelrond stood with Barahir and Emeldir. Mithbrûn also lingered; the rest filed out the door.

Menelrond’s eyes had followed the departing merchant. “‘A brutish celerity’,” he minced, before reverting to a growl. “Slimy bastard.”

“We have to work with him,” said Barahir wearily. He turned to Mithbrûn. “Was there something else?”

“Well, this plan of yours,” said the Guard-major. “Of getting the folk to head south for the duration. Doubt I can put it over by myself. Can you come to the town again? Meet with some of the senior people? That sort of thing.”

Barahir heard this out in silence. As if there weren’t enough things to do! But the older man was right; people in the town would need to be set moving. “All right,” he said at the end. “I’ll come as soon as I can. If I send you word, can you arrange a meeting?”

The elderly Major nodded assent, withdrew.

Menelrond stretched his shoulders, cramped from sitting. His blue chips of eyes regarded Barahir with admiration. “Cousin,” he said, shaking his massive head, “not for a sack of gold would I take your job. Farming, fighting, these I understand. But this endless, nightmare wrangling with thankless human snakes! No, I know my limits. Glad I am, more than glad, that you have taken this upon yourself.”

Barahir did not answer, just laid a hand on his kinsman’s broad shoulder. “I’ll come and see you this evening,” he said.

Menelrond nodded to him and lumbered his way out of the room, the floor boards creaking under his tread. A wordless glance passed then between Barahir and his wife; she, understanding him, also went out. Barahir was left alone in the room with Zalta and her two girls who were gathering up the plates and cups.

Barahir addressed the innkeeper. "You must have heard a lot of what we said, Zalta," he said.

She stopped bustling and stood straight, returning his look. "Aye, Sir," she said, "with one thing and another, a fair bit I reckon."

"What do you think of it?"

She blew the hair out of her face in the gesture he had come to expect. Without answering, she turned to the girls. "Take that off now," she said to them. "I'll come fetch you again directly. Ask Irma where she wants the wine put." As the young women passed out of the door, Zalta added, "No, leave the door open." Seeing Barahir's raised eyebrows, she grinned at him. "So's I know they're not listening behind it," she said to him.

When she was sure the two of them were alone, she turned back to him. "Well, Sir," she said to him, "I don't know nothing about fighting, save what I pick up behind the bar. All that what you said, what I heard of it anyway, seems sensible enough, so far as I would know, which is not too far perhaps. But I reckon you know what you're doing, well enough. There's one thing, though. You spoke a powerful lot, Sir, all kinds of considerations and angles, but there's one thing you didn't tell them at all, not straight-out like, and I wondered at it. Well no, 'wonder' don't fit it quite, because it's no wonder in a way. But I just kind of stubbed my toe on it, you might say."

"Something I forgot to mention?" said Barahir. "What was that?"

"You didn't tell them we're going to lose," said Zalta.

Barahir said nothing. He looked down at the floor.

"I heard about them fights you won," Zalta continued. "The Grassy Slope, in the winter, and the big one with the torches. Heard a lot about 'em, from the men what comes in, you know how it goes. Now it's not for me to say yea or nay about the business of my betters, but since you ask me direct, it seems to me that the first was a chance encounter and the second was the Enemy's mistake. I don't count that little business in between where you rescued your brother, which was plain foolery. No, there was only one real attack, the torches battle, and the Enemy misjudged matters in that. He saw a little rain-worm on the path, like, and he went to tread on it. But it weren't no rain-worm, it were a little snake, with a little tooth, and it stung him on the bare foot. Are you with me Sir?"

Barahir nodded.

"Well," she continued, "that were all well and good. It were a brave little snake. Uncommon brave. And maybe now it's even grown another tooth beside the first. But the thing is, the thing is you see Sir, he's only got to pull his boot on. Do you follow?"

There was a heavy silence. When Barahir broke it, he did not allude directly to what she said. "Well, Zalta," he said, "what will you do? Will you leave with the others?"

"No," she said slowly, shaking her head. "No, Sir. Don't reckon I will."

"May I ask why not?"

"Well," she said, thinking it out as she spoke, "this is my place. Oh, Pa owns it formal-like, but he's old now, I run it all myself. It's mine in all but name. Now, supposing I was to leave all this, where would I go? What

would I do? Start again, from scratch, somewhere I don't know, at my age? No, no. This is my place, and no gang of rats is going to push me out of it. I don't know how to fight, not soldier-like, and I don't want to die; but I'd be lost somewhere else, that's the long and the short of it. Dying here is the best thing on offer."

Barahir gathered his cloak and sword in silence from where he had placed them along the wall. He looked to Zalta. "That's just how I feel myself," he said, before turning and going out the door.

* * * * *

Barahir rode into Newfort a week later at the head of a squadron of cavalry. It was his first visit to the town since winning the Battle of the Torches, and people flocked down to the gate square to catch sight of their new hero. Few had thought much on Bregor's younger son in the old days, but his fame had grown immensely since the start of the year.

It was a fine spring day; the sun shone, and the air was warm and full of birdsong. The thronging people saw the man of a hundred tales come mounted on a tall bay stallion, his deep blue cloak flicking out behind him in the fresh breeze. The people began to cheer as the horse's hooves echoed on the cobbles under the gate arch. When the man emerged into the sunlit square within, he paused his horse, prancing and snorting a little at the bit, and lifted his hand in greeting to the jubilant crowd. The great ring on his hand caught the light: the band flashed silver, and the jewels rayed coruscating flashes of green around the square.

"Barahir! Barahir!" the people shouted. The noise was deafening.

With some difficulty, he dismounted in the middle of the crowd. Mithbrûn was there to meet him with some soldiers and the usual stable attendants and serving men, but people were banging Barahir on the back and trying to shake his hand. It was hard to make oneself heard in the din, but he managed to arrange for the care of his horse before turning back to Mithbrûn, who was being buffeted by the surging waves of people.

"Shall I get some spearmen to clear a path?" the Guard-major asked Barahir, raising his voice above the din.

"No, no," the war-leader shouted, "don't do that. They mean no harm. Let's get inside though, where we can talk." They urged their way through the welcoming people and at last managed to shut them gently but firmly outside.

Barahir stood with his back resting against the door, from behind which the shouts of the crowd could still be heard. "Phew!" he said. "I never expected that!"

"Your victories have made you famous," said the old Guard-major, looking at him with dry amusement. "Didn't you know?"

"'Victories'," repeated Barahir with a grimace. "You don't know what mistakes I made, nor what luck we had."

Mithbrûn blew dismissively through his stiff moustache.

"Nonsense, boy," he said. "All fights are like that."

They stood there a moment, listening to the crowd. "Two thoughts occur," said Barahir. "One: it is going to be difficult to get about Newfort if they're going to crowd around me all the time. It's nice of them, but I have things to do."

"They'll wander off," said Mithbrûn. "They've got things to do too, most of them anyway. Have to say though, it's not the nuisance aspect I worry about."

“What then?”

The old man scanned his face. “You didn’t know that most of them love you,” he said. “Did you know that some of them hate you?”

Barahir was nonplussed. “But I... Well, I...” He stared at Mithbrûn. “What are you talking about?”

“A crowd can hide assassins,” the Guard-major said briefly.

“You can’t be serious,” said Barahir. “*Assassins? Me?*”

“I was never more serious in my life,” replied Mithbrûn. “You’ve trodden on some toes lately. And this city hasn’t been exactly safe of late; there’s rumours of the Blackshirts reforming, among other unwelcome developments.”

“Well...” Barahir rubbed his head. “Assassins, though? I don’t know what to say.”

“Stay out of the crowd as much as you can, would be my advice,” said Mithbrûn. “I’ve got good men, and ears all over the City. But nobody can hear all of what’s going on. Just you watch your back, Master, that’s all I’ve got to say. And wear your mail shirt.” He watched in some sympathy as Barahir grappled with the concept, clearly a novel one to him, that one of his own folk might want to kill him.

“You said two thoughts,” said the Major after some moments of silence. “What was the second?”

“Second...? Oh – that it would never do for Bregolas to see the kind of reception I had,” said Barahir.

Mithbrûn grunted and eyed him keenly, but ventured no comment.

“What time is the meeting?” asked Barahir.

“Right after the noon meal,” was the reply.

“Good,” said Barahir. “I’ll feel better facing them with a bit of ballast in my stomach.”

“You won’t after you find out who’s in it,” remarked Mithbrûn, looking sour.

“What do you mean?”

“Úmelchar stacked it,” the Guard-major said. “Squeezed me out.” He looked apologetic. “Sorry son – he was one too many for me.”

Barahir mulled over this unwelcome news. “He’s not who I’d hoped to meet with,” he said at last. “Can’t we sort of, I don’t know, duck around him? You must have a council here, of leading citizens. That’s the kind of thing I thought you were talking about, when you said about coming here to talk to people.”

“They’re in Úmelchar’s pocket,” said the older man. “Didn’t use to be that way. But money talks louder than sense with some people.”

Barahir thought over it some more, sighed. “I’d hoped to avoid having to argue with him again. Oh well. Now that I’m here, I suppose I had better make the attempt. After lunch, though.”

* * * * *

The meeting lasted for four hours and broke up at last with no agreement reached. Barahir leaned against the outside of the door, weary beyond belief; hours of struggling with the same wordy, false, stupid, cunning,

greedy folly as it emerged out of mouth after mouth had left him almost too exhausted to think.

Mithbrûn met him there. Cynicism glinted in the old man's eyes.

"No good?" he asked.

"No," said Barahir. "They simply won't see it. They won't give an inch. They don't see the need for an evacuation, and they won't help. No grain or labour without compensation, from funds which we simply don't have."

"You have an army at your call," said Mithbrûn. "You could just take what you need."

Barahir shook his head firmly. "No," he said. "Nothing like that is going to happen while I am running things. If people don't agree with my ideas, then I'm not going to force them into it at spear-point. No. I must find another way."

"Well now," said Mithbrûn. "Happens I'm with you there. Bad precedent; wouldn't serve you in the long run. In fact I admit I asked you just to see what you would say to it. Liked your answer. But look now boy, you've tried reason at the top, and found that to fail. Doesn't surprise me. There's always bucket-loads of fools who won't see disaster looming until they run their noses into it. But we've got to get this done – you've got to find some way to ride right over Úmelchar and his misers. There's just no nice way to do it. So how are you going to work it?"

"I don't know." Barahir slumped onto a stool and put his head in his hands. "I don't see anything I *can* do."

The old Major laid a scarred hand on his master's shoulder. He had a fierce gleam in his eyes. "Lad, lad," he said, "pardon me for saying it, but you're as blind as a bat. Are you forgetting already the reception you had today? The way the people cheered for you? There's power, if you can find a way to use it. You want to do right by your folk; well, tell them your plans! It's their lives that're at stake; get them on side! They'll roll right over Úmelchar and his gang of snakes, if you put it to them right; yes and Cazimek as well."

Barahir looked sceptical. "Isn't it the same thing in the end?"

"Not at all. One's force from above; the other from below. We're a free people. It wouldn't do for any leader to try to push the folk around; wouldn't do at all. But if the people decide to take matters into their own hands, well, that's a different matter."

They were interrupted by a young man in Guard uniform, who hurried in and muttered something in Mithbrûn's ear. The Guard-major nodded and sent him out again.

"What is it?" asked Barahir.

"Trouble," said the other curtly. "Change of plan. We have to get you out of here, and that sharpish. Come with me; I know a place."

"But what?" said Barahir. "What trouble? Tell me!"

"Cazimek is planning to arrest you," said Mithbrûn. "Curse him. Come on! There's no time to lose."

* * * * *

Dusk came already late to the city in the approach to summer. Those waiting for darkness grew impatient, but they had their orders: there was to be no unnecessary fuss.

At last the night arrived. The streets were unlit, and few were abroad at that hour. In former times the people

came and went more freely; they trusted one another, and even women felt safe on the streets. Lately, however, there had been a feeling of unease abroad. People now preferred to lock the door on the dark and keep to their houses at night.

Shadowy figures crept up to the marked door from both directions. They paused a moment, listening, but no noise came from within. The leader knocked lightly. No answer. The shadows stayed motionless for a minute, listening still. One came then silently, close up to the door. He worked at something for a minute, accompanied by the muffled creak and splinter of tearing wood. The door swung back, and all but two of the burly shadows jostled their way inside.

Muffled thuds were heard within the house, then silence.

Cowled figures streamed out again into the gloom. "Gone!" came a harsh voice.

The black shapes appeared to consider. "Go fetch that old fool Mithbrûn from his den," the leader whispered. "The rest of you, divide up; search the stables, search the inns. One of you enquire at the Hall. Ask for Rûno, he is one of us. I will report to the Captain."

* * * * *

Cazimek glowered at the messenger. The night was not going well. "What do you mean, he won't come?" he growled.

"Just that," said the messenger. "Said we have no jurisdiction."

"Jurisdiction? I'll give him jurisdiction." He stood up, shoved past the hapless messenger and banged on the frame of the inner doorway. "Mabbas! Round up six guards! Half-armor, short swords. Couple of torches, set of shackles. Meet me outside in five minutes. Jump to it!" He buckled on his own blade and strode into the dark alley in front of the barracks. Men with torches came running shortly after and formed up quickly behind him under the command of the orderly sergeant, Mabbas. After a short further exchange of words with others about reliefs, they set off marching down the alley. It did not take them long to reach the headquarters of the City Guard. Cazimek barged in through the door without knocking. He found the Guard-major sitting behind his desk, working at some papers by the light of a lamp.

"Where is he?" asked Cazimek.

"I'm not going to tell you," replied Mithbrûn.

"Right then," said the beefy man, narrowing his eyes viciously. "That's your tone, is it? Get up. You're under arrest."

"You can't arrest me," said the old man.

"Friend," sneered Cazimek, leaning over the desk, "Eight swords says I can."

Mithbrûn got up silently and walked to the door.

"Ah, see?" said Cazimek. "Even your sort can be sensible. Sar'nt Mabbas! Bring the fetters!"

But Mithbrûn stayed standing in the doorway, looking over the neat squad of soldiers. The torch-light wavered redly off their gleaming armour. The sergeant came into the light, bearing chains and shackles, but something in the way the prisoner held himself made him hesitate. Something wasn't right here...

The Guard-major looked past him, up the street into the dark. "Captain Dairuin?" he called. "Can you bring

your men forward a little, so we can see them?” He turned his head to face the other direction. “You too, Lieutenant, if you please.”

There came a rustle and a chinking of mail-rings, and at the edge of the sphere of light a curtain of glinting reflections appeared slowly out of the darkness. Cazimek shoved past the Major and peered at them. After a few seconds the picture came together in his mind. Men surrounded them, many men, perhaps twenty or more. The torch-light flickered on the freshly sharpened edges of spear- and arrow-heads. Behind the weapons, here and there, grinning white teeth could just be made out in the gloom.

Mithbrûn turned to the beefy Fister beside him. “What about your sort, Captain?” he said. “Can you be sensible, do you think?”

* * * * *

The mood in the city the next day was tense. Messengers had gone around early to convey that Barahir wished to address the populace at noon in the gate square. In the course of the morning, this intriguing news had been augmented by the shocking rumour, running through the city like the wind, that elements of the Fist had been trying to arrest their paragon. People were astonished by the news at first, but that feeling gradually changed into outrage. They all had long known something of Barahir. Since his early manhood he had been widely known as a man of sense and honour; but just now every man, woman and child in the city was full to the brim with news of his wonderful military exploits. Nothing remotely like them had been known since the far-off days of Boromir; they were the talk of the town. This was the man who had, with very little help, annihilated certainly at least three full legions of Orcs; had surmounted odds of ten to one in doing so, and brought most of his troops home to boot. They had heard too of his dashing raid in the teeth, the absolute teeth of the enemy, to rescue their liege, the fabled lord Finrod Cave-delver. Was this, their hero, to suffer arrest, to be hauled off by his collar, like some grubby criminal, and by one of the despised Fister bullies to boot? It wasn't to be borne.

A crowd is like an animal: it has a single mood, and the mood can best be judged from the volume and tone of noise from its throat. The people of Newfort assembled early in the square, and their anger could be felt in the low throbbing growl of the crowd-beast.

Mithbrûn had not dared fetch Barahir from his hiding place himself, for fear he would be followed. He stood now on the stage, waiting anxiously, flanked on each side by a row of his own men. They were armed and wary, and some had strung bows. Others could be glimpsed on surrounding rooftops.

Mithbrûn scanned the crowd with unease. He could read their mood, but wasn't sure he trusted it. Crowds were fickle. He could detect no sign of Fist men among them, either open or covert, but there had to be some. And where was Barahir? He should have been here by now. Powers send he had not been taken.

A messenger ran to the side of the Guard-major and muttered hurried words in his ear. Mithbrûn cursed quietly at what he heard – it confirmed, if not his worst fear, then something else he had been dreading.

Just then there was a stir among the packed people to one side. A hooded man was making his way toward the stage, thrusting through them, without undue violence, but with an irresistible quality which suggested great strength of body. Behind him Mithbrûn recognized the lieutenant he had sent to escort Barahir. He reached a hand down to the hooded man as he reached the stage. “Get up here!” he growled. The man stood up next to him and doffed his hood. The sound of the crowd-beast rose slowly to a roar as they recognized Barahir.

The Guard-major leaned towards Barahir. “We should call this off,” he hissed. “You should get out while you can.”

“It was your idea to talk to them,” said Barahir, “and you've got Cazimek. What's changed since yesterday?”

“That puff-chest was smarter than I gave him credit for,” said the old man. “He called in his levies before he moved against me. I just got the news. They are mustering now in the practice field.”

Barahir looked around the square. “I can only see your troops here,” he said.

“They’ll come!” said the old Major, “and I don’t have the numbers to hold them. Even if I had, I would be loth to raise sword against one of our own people. Very loth. Swords are for enemies. Lad, I’m thinking it might be better if you gave this away for the time. They’ve won this round.”

Barahir hesitated, but then his expression firmed. “No,” he said. “I won’t get another chance if I let this one slip. It’s worth the risk if I can put it over now. Come, lend me that horn at your belt.” Raising the horn to his lips, he blew a rousing run of calls. The people cheered; but he raised his hand, and they gradually quieted.

“Countrymen!” he cried, as soon as he could be heard. “You all know me.” This was greeted with a roar which again gradually subsided. “You know the fix we are in,” continued Barahir. “The terrible things which have happened. The Leaguer broken, the protecting forts to the North smashed. Our land lies open, like a fair house with its door wide to the robber. Now so far, with the fortune granted to us by the Powers who shape this world, it has been granted to us to throw back the Enemy’s first advances.” Once more his words became submerged in a rising roar of sound. People were waving their arms and calling his name ecstatically. Beside him, the guards, arrow on the string, warily scanned the windows and roof tops.

Barahir had to blow the horn again to regain relative quiet. “It is natural to celebrate a victory,” he bellowed over the noise, “but we do not fool ourselves that this is the end. No! It is not the end! It is only the beginning. Only the beginning! The Enemy will come again!” The crowd-beast gradually grew quieter as people took in these sobering words. Barahir was able to continue without now having to use the top of his voice. “Do not fear,” he cried. “There are stout hearts yet in the Pine Mountain, and strong arms, and spears and bows for them to hold. Our fighters will not run. But what I want to say to you is this: there are many who cannot fight – the old, the young, the sick, or simply those not gifted by nature with a strong arm. They cannot fight. These people need to go. They are too close to the spear’s point here! All those who cannot fight should leave Newfort for this time, until things are decided. Go south! Go to the moors! There you will be out of harm’s way.

“What say ye? Shall the weak seek refuge in the high country?”

The voices had fallen subdued, but gradually the volume gathered again as people took in what he was saying to them. Now they were crying their assent; they had hold of the idea.

“This is the course of prudence!” continued Barahir when he again could hear his own voice. “We will help, help with labour, help with guides. But you must move in this yourselves. Take control. Your Lord remains unfit, your merchant captains are unwilling. There are many who will try to stand in your way. Do not let them! Together you are strong! Take charge of your own safety, of the safety of those who cannot bear arms.” The voices were roaring again.

Suddenly there came a different note: the crowd-beast boomed, the masses of people swayed. The gates to the square had swung back, and black-armoured troops were shoving their way inside. Voices howled; the crowd seethed like a field of wheat in a gale.

The soldiers were shoving fiercely, attempting to clear a path to the podium. A jostled woman screamed, “My baby, my baby!” Hearing that, the mood of the crowd turned ugly. In deepened voice, the beast bellowed now, fit to shake the gate-stones.

Barahir pointed to the struggling soldiers. “These thugs would keep you here to be slaughtered by Orcs!” he shouted. “Will you let them?” The beast roared anew, and sticks began to rise and fall at the gate. The soldiers were stumbling back now; one fell, was not seen again. Now another was pulled down. A third

soldier drew his sword in desperation and laid about him, and the crowd went mad. Soon there was nothing to be seen of any of the soldiers but a thrashing movement among the people where they had been, and a rising cloud of dust, seemingly thickened by the volume of noise.

Mithbrûn pulled at his arm. “Now’s your chance to get out!” he yelled in Barahir’s ear. “You’ve done all you can for now. Man alive, just listen to them! But get out now, lad. My boy here will show you the way.”

* * * * *

Barahir managed to slip out of the town without incident, and made his way as swiftly as he could back to his headquarters at the inn. The few men he had brought with him to Newfort remained in the town; there had been no opportunity to let them know of his movements. They would have to be recovered later.

Barahir’s first intention after he arrived back at the inn had been to speak with Bregolas, but in this he was frustrated: the guards at the door would not let him in. The Lord had no desire to speak with him at this time, they told him. Barahir pressed the issue until the two guards were showing their teeth, and an inch of sword; at which point he gave up, fuming helplessly.

What to do about the Fist? He had hoped to persuade Bregolas to call them off, but since he had not been able to engineer that, or to lay down his regency either, what to do? He realized that unless he did something, events would run away from him: Cazimek would come and root him out of the inn.

Cursing Bregolas – since armed dispute among his own folk had been the one thing he had most been hoping to avoid – he sent out his own call: muster at the inn. Having done that, he rode away and took refuge in an anonymous farm belonging to one of Menelrond’s many connections. Cazimek arrived at the head of his army two days later to find Barahir vanished into the landscape. The wrathful captain had to content himself with upsetting Barahir’s desk and stamping on the papers. Later that day he received news which caused him to withdraw in some haste back to Newfort. Barahir’s army was on the move; reports claimed that he had three thousand men under arms, with more rallying to the call all the time.

A short few days after that, Barahir was camped in sight of the palisade of Newfort. The fields all around were thick with his men. Numerous campfires flickered redly in the gathering dusk.

Barahir had not immediately attempted entry, and he kept some little distance. He wanted to feel out the situation in the town. There did not seem to be anyone manning the parapet, and soon messengers were passing to and fro freely between army and town.

The first of these brought sad news to Barahir.

“Mithbrûn, killed?” he said, shocked to the core. “Why?”

The man’s mouth turned down. “Pure spite, or so we imagine,” he said. “No-one knows who did it – it was a knife in the back as he stood at the door of his house. His daughter heard his cry and came out to find him gasping his last in a pool of his own blood. His own daughter!”

Barahir could only pass his hand across his face. He had no words.

Later there were other envoys. After hearing what they had to say, he formed up his men and marched toward the town. They met no opposition. The gate was opened by stern-faced men in Guard uniform. After muttered discussion with some of their officers, Barahir led his column toward the Guard headquarters. Their marching feet rang loudly on the cobbled streets. People were all around, at doors and windows, but this time they were silent.

Barahir looked over the desk with its lamp and its neat piles of papers, then sat down in the chair. He turned

to Gramlach, standing in the doorway. “Bring him here,” he said. “The Guard-captain will show you where. If he is not there, enquire house to house.”

Cazimek turned up after a short time, his burly form flanked between two of Barahir’s men-at-arms. His captors were not so large as he, but somehow looked a lot tougher.

Barahir looked the Fister up and down. The man seemed calm.

“I’m surprised to find you still in the town, Cazimek, to tell you the truth.”

Cazimek grinned. “Why should I worry? You don’t dare touch me. And your goose will be cooked soon enough, Farmer. You won’t get away with this.”

Barahir stood up and walked over to the armour hanging up on the wall. “I should like to know,” he said slowly, inspecting a breastplate, “just what it is you think I want to ‘get away with’. Do you think I am here to take your place?”

Cazimek sneered. “Sure looks like it from where I’m standing – barging in here. Your plough-boys traipsing cow shit everywhere. Well, you just enjoy your little barn dance, Farmer. Your time will come.”

“You know, you’re not actually in charge of the town, Cazimek. The Guard is.”

“The Guard!” Cazimek spat on the floor. “That bunch of amateurs. Shop boys and dodderers! They couldn’t run a card game.”

“If that’s the way you think,” said Barahir mildly, “why did you just cede them control? After going to the trouble of wresting it out of their hands in the first place?”

“Do I look stupid?” the big man sneered. “You turn up, with your herd of hayseeds. Like I’m going to run my head against thousands of bill-hooks? No, Farmer Jim, time will do my work for me. See, there’s only one boss of this country, or this town, and you ain’t it. I’m his vice until he comes back to it. And when he does, he’ll run *you* out of it.”

“You’re mistaken,” said Barahir. “In fact you have it backwards. Bregolas approved me as his lieutenant. *You* weren’t mentioned. Apart from your role as commander of your own troops, you have no authority in this town. If you’re unwilling to listen to reason, I could have my men take you out here and now and cut your head off. And what’s more, it would be perfectly legal. Because what you’ve been doing, and what you’re doing right now, is treason.”

Cazimek, hands on hips, sauntered over to Barahir where he stood near the wall. He leaned forward and sneered into the older man’s face.

“Just one little flaw in your plan, Farmer,” he said with a curl of his lip. “You don’t have the balls for it.”

Barahir looked past the man for Gramlach. Having caught his captain’s eye, he jerked his head toward his adversary.

Gramlach ran over straight away with four burly soldiers and pounced on Cazimek. They muscled the shouting and struggling man out of the door until they had him in the middle of the street. By the time Barahir reached the doorway, three of his men were trying to hold the bucking Cazimek bent over, while the fourth stood in front, legs braced, hauling the man’s head out straight by two fistfuls of hair. Gram positioned himself to the side and drew his sword.

“Hold him still, can’t yer?” Gramlach complained. He raised the heavy blade high above his head, trying to

sight on Cazimek's frantically jerking neck.

"Stop!" cried Barahir, just before the sword fell. He walked over to the group and bent over to inspect what he could see of the captain's sweaty face. "What was that about balls again?" he asked.

"You bastard," came the muffled reply.

"Are you going to be reasonable?" asked Barahir. "I'd almost as lief cut your head off anyway and have done with it. Nobody here would miss you. I can deal with your next in line just as well. So, what's it to be? You've wasted a great deal of my time, and I'm just about out of patience."

Cazimek ground his teeth together. "Just tell me what you fucking want," he said.

Barahir squatted down to bring his face next to the man's bulgy features. "Well now. It's like this, Cazimek. I'm working to defend my country, and to keep my people safe. Working at it hard. *You're* getting in the way. I'm past hoping for any help from you, for anything constructive, but I want you, and your men, to stay out of my way. That's all. Do you understand? I want you to get off my neck. And let me tell you, and I do hope you believe me, if I have to hang every one of you, every single one of you bloated, useless, puffgut boasters, I'll do it. If you push me to it. I'd advise you not to push. I don't want to take your place; I don't even want to run Newfort. I don't have time for it. But you – must – keep – out – of – my – hair. That's the offer. I won't ask you if you accept it or not; I'll know that by how you behave. Either you'll stay in my face, buzzing like a fat blowfly, or you won't. If you persist, you'll get swatted. That's all there is to it." He stood up. "Let him go," he motioned to the men.

Cazimek stood up, blowing hard and looking at the ground. His shoulders sagged and he looked like a beaten dog.

"Go now," Barahir said to him, "and think on what I said. Just keep out of my way. That's all I require. If you do, I'll keep out of yours. Everybody will be happy, nobody will get hurt, and we can all save our sword's edges for the Orcs like sensible people. You hop along now and think about it."

The man stood there looking stunned. "You're letting me go?" he asked.

"That's right," said Barahir.

Cazimek passed his hand over his brow. "You came here with three thousand men under arms, just for that?"

Barahir sighed. "I'm not interested in bumping chests with you, Cazimek, like boys in the farm yard. There's a storm coming, I'm trying to prepare for it. If you had any wits in your miserable carcase, you would see that."

* * * * *

Things were quiet for a while after that. There was no further move from Cazimek. The men who had answered the call to arms went home again, hurrying to get back to their interrupted shearing and hay-making.

Barahir thought it wiser to stay away from Newfort, but plentiful informants told him that his words had stirred the people, that they were buzzing like a hive of bees. A constant stream of townsmen began passing back and forth between the town and the Downs as they worked to construct a refuge at the Blue Lake and to carry stores and stock there. Barahir could not help laughing out loud when he learned that a determined crowd, sick of arguing with Úmelchar about access to grain, had simply shoved his feeble attendants aside and helped themselves to his store.

Barahir's greatest concern was his repeated failure to secure an interview with Bregolas. Others were admitted to the chambers, even on one occasion a scowling Cazimek, but Barahir was told by the grim-faced door guards that they had specific orders not to admit anybody without the approval of their lord.

Once or twice Barahir tried to buttonhole Girazôn as he slipped into or out of the chambers. The House-major was always courteous, but Barahir found it difficult to pin him down, and got very little out of him. Barahir was not sure what to make of the man – he had heard one or two rumours about Girazôn lately which made him wonder.

The only person from whom he could obtain any useful information was Zalta, who was often in Bregolas's rooms, supplying his food and other wants or arranging for cleaning.

"Oh, he's up," she replied in answer to Barahir's question about his brother's fitness. "Gets about on sticks now, but he hates 'em. Doesn't like to be seen with them."

"They won't let me in to see him," said Barahir, "and I've wondered... well, you know... I'm worried that he is not, well, not in free command of his actions."

Zalta laughed. "Oh no, he runs things just how he likes," she said. "Did you think they might have him on a leash, like? Ha ha, no Sir, not a bit of it."

"I suppose that's good news..." said Barahir. "But blast it all!" he bit at a fingernail, "why won't he see me? That's what I don't understand."

"Well Sir," said Zalta, "he don't confide in me, so I can't rightly say. And I haven't heard anything that might pertain. But I do wonder if he's just trying to get off them sticks before appearing. Or maybe he wants not to think about anything until he can do something about it. And that won't be until he looks strong and whole." She pursed her lips. "Men like Bregolas set a lot of store on *looking* strong."

* * * * *

Beren spent this time of waiting wandering over the face of the land, feeling restless and ill at ease. Part of it of course was tension over the battle which he was sure was imminent; but it seemed more than this. A wind was blowing over the land, and it seemed to be trying to tell him something.

He quite often visited with Barahir's guards at the inn, yarning with them or playing at knucklebones. The men sometimes wrestled for enjoyment, but they quickly found Beren to be an unbeatable opponent at this sport, and from that point refused to allow him into the normal bouts. He was also obliged to accept a considerable handicap in contests of archery.

On one of Baragund's visits to confer with Barahir, Beren was delighted to find Urthel's dusky face among the company. The white teeth flashed him welcome, and the two sat down to compare notes of recent doings. Beren soon found that there was more to the brown man than his odd-coloured skin and unusual history.

"You want to get him to show you his tricks," said one of the soldiers who was passing them on his way to fetch a jug of ale.

"What is this?" said Beren, turning to his companion. "What tricks?"

Urthel shrugged, grinned. "Nothing very exciting," he said. "But look, showing's better than telling. Lend me your knife?" Mystified, Beren handed it over. Urthel examined it with interest. "Elven?" he asked.

"Not exactly," replied Beren. "Long story. Tell you some time."

Urthel looked around. They were lying in the shade of a group of tall lime trees near the inn. Urthel indicated a tree in the opposite direction from their companions, standing something over twenty paces distant. "You see that pale patch of lichen, about as high on the trunk as a man's heart?" he said.

Beren nodded, wondering what this was all about.

The spare brown man held the knife by the tip, raised it high, sighted carefully on the tree, then threw. The spinning blade flashed in a curving path which ended with a 'thunk!' The knife was sticking, still quivering, in the tree about a hand's breadth below the pale patch. The watching men whistled and clapped.

"I'd need to practice with that knife to do better," said Urthel. "I'm used to my own." He pulled his own knife out and repeated the performance, except this time the knife landed square in the middle of the lichen.

Beren was impressed. He had never seen anyone throw a knife before. "What's the trick?" he said.

"No trick," said Urthel. "Just many foolish hours wasted practising."

"Could you teach me?" said Beren.

The dusky man grinned. "Happy to," he said. "You'll find it difficult to begin with, but then, so is playing the viol." He reached into his bag, brought out several darts. "The knife is just a play; these are for serious work."

Beren inspected the darts with interest. These were slim things with a vicious five inches of needle blade mounted in a somewhat longer handle made from tough, flexible withy. The handle was small and tubular at the join with the blade, but widened and flattened to a wedge at the far end.

"The broad handle acts like a rudder," Urthel explained. "Stops it tumbling. A child could learn to throw one."

The moment he finished speaking he whipped around, and in the time a man needs to take a breath he had thrown all the darts he held at the tree, his hand moving quicker than the eye could follow. Beren walked with him to the tree and saw that the seven darts had landed so as to make a neat circle around the edge of the patch of lichen. Urthel levered them carefully out, pulled out the two knives, and handed Beren back his blade.

"Can I look at those darts?" Beren asked.

"Of course you can," said Urthel. "Try them if you want."

Beren took one of the darts and examined it. It balanced well in the hand. The blade was heavy enough to drive deep into the wood – or whatever other target – on impact, but light enough to allow a very quick, whipping throw; or so he guessed.

"How did you come up with this?" he asked the brown man.

"Oh, it's not my idea," replied Urthel. "My mother's people use them."

Beren looked with curiosity at his companion. "Do you never get homesick?" he wanted to know.

"Homesick?" Urthel frowned. "I was born in the North," he went on, with a lift of his chin. "You can't be homesick for what you don't know." He glanced to the South and his expression became more thoughtful. "I do sometimes wonder what it's like, though," he said. "Down there, in the hot countries. Mother tells me stories, but it's not the same. Maybe I'll go and see for myself one day." He was silent for a moment. "Just to

look,” he said. “I couldn’t stay. I’m a Northerner. What would I do down there, among people whose speech, whose ways I don’t know?”

“You’d look like them,” suggested Beren. “Wouldn’t that be something?”

“That’s not important,” said Urthel. “Not to me, anyway. I admit I get tired of being stared at, like I was a calf with two heads or something. But once people get to know me, they forget the strange colour. A man’s not brown inside. That’s what matters, not the skin.”

He laughed then, gestured at the dart in Beren’s hand. “You ever going to throw that thing?”

Beren looked around for a suitable target. There was another tree not quite so far away with a satisfactory patch of lichen a little above head height. He indicated this to Urthel, then grasped one of the darts in his hand by the paddle end, as Urthel had done. Judging it as best he could, he threw it overhand with some added flick of the wrist, and was delighted to find that he had hit the trunk, not too far from the patch he aimed at.

“You see?” said Urthel. “You’ll need practice to improve, but that’s true of anything.”

They spent most of the rest of the day at this pastime, and at the end of it Beren was pleased to note that his aim had improved significantly, and that he had also taken some steps along the road to acquiring Urthel’s lightning speed.

On one of Beren’s visits to the inn he ran smack into Girazôn. The other shrank from him, a look of horror on his face.

“What are you doing here?” asked Beren, surprised.

Girazôn collected himself and recovered a half-step forward. “I have a perfect right to be here!” he said.

“In what capacity?” asked Beren.

“Don’t you threaten me.”

Beren rolled his eyes. “I’m not threatening you, Girazôn. I just want to know.”

The other drew himself up stiffly. “I am House-major to the Lord Bregolas,” he said.

Beren considered this. “Up to your old tricks, then,” he said with a turn of the lip. “Poisoning his lordship’s ear, eh? Told his lordship all about the old days, have you? I’m guessing not.”

Girazôn flushed. “Those days are past,” he said. “We all do stupid things in our youth. You were not entirely blameless, as I recall.”

“There was a difference,” said Beren. “I do not believe such a viper as you could change his ways.”

“I’m sure it looks that way from your side,” said Girazôn, “but I hold a respected position here. A respected position! Whereas *you*, what are you? Merely a bravo, an itinerant archer. Which of us has made more of his life?”

Beren considered. “What became of the other Blackshirts?” he asked at last.

“How should I know?” replied the other defensively.

Beren, realizing there was no profit in the conversation, shrugged and turned away.

Since many of the Sightfoot men were kept busy running Barahir's errands, there was a shortage of labour at the farm. Beren helped out at times, although he had little aptitude for the work and found it dull. Mucking out cows was a deadly boring job, but somebody had to do it, and a strong arm made lighter work of it than a weak one.

Shearing was one of the difficult times for the farm. Hrotha's hand was now too unsteady, and his back too stiff, to make anything but a token contribution to the work. Bremund was the only one present who rated as an experienced shearer; but even he could not reach the same level of prowess as in previous years. He had nearly died from the wounds he had taken in the winter battle, and had climbed but a slow road back to convalescence. Beren pitched in, trying to improve his speed under Hrotha's tutelage. Adril also had started as a shearer this year, but a lot of the work was in fact done by Kirmel and Parth. They were husky girls, well used to labour, and were quickly able to adapt their existing skills of hand to the close clipping of a sheep's wool.

The unaltering routine of the farm should have been the very stuff of normalcy, but there was a hollow feeling to it this year. It was more than just the lack of labour. They were shearing the sheep, and to be sure, if you have sheep then you must necessarily shear them; but nobody seemed to know what was to be done with the wool. The Elves who used to buy it were gone, and no Dwarf had come into the valley since the disaster. Nobody knew if they ever would again. In the meantime the wool was baled and the bales stacked at the end of the barn.

The halt in Dwarvish trade had other unwelcome effects. Iron was in short supply, and bronze even more so. Word had already gone around asking for donations of bronze mirrors and basins, but the supply of these had its limits.

Hay-making came. The weather was hot. There was talk now at Sightfoot of moving to the refuge at Aeluin. Gilach and Arasenaur had been there for some weeks, helping with the myriad details of creating a new settlement, but had come back now to report that it was now more or less ready for occupancy.

Opinions at the farm were divided. At one end of the scale of views, Hrotha and Methemel flatly refused to consider moving. As with many of the older farming folk, they could not imagine being torn from the place in which they had been born and spent their whole lives. Death, if it must come, seemed to them a lesser evil than the limbo of dislocation. They were prepared for death, provided only that they could await it at home. The young folk, Parth, Kiri and Adril, were on the other hand definitely of a mind to move, although Adril would have preferred to go off to the wars.

Mari and Caladis, although for different reasons, both wanted to put off the decision. Neither had the least inclination to die at Sightfoot, but whereas Mari simply had great difficulty in seeing herself in any other environment, Caladis's instinct to remain in the place was centred on Gramlach.

In between times, Beren fulfilled his promise to Morwen to teach her some woodcraft. He found this to be something of an uphill struggle. His beautiful young cousin could be prickly company for one thing; for another, she was deaf and blind to the delicate web of life of the forest, of which Beren was sensitive to the least tremor. The girl tramped through the woods like a farmer, and she could not learn patience. A quarter of an hour on a game trail was sufficient to bring her to fidgeting. Beren fell back on teaching her something of how to make simple snares and deadfalls, and of some of the plants and roots one could find to eat. Morwen seemed happy enough with that. Once or twice they stayed out overnight, and his cousin thrilled to the romance of waking at first light to the sound of birdsong – even while she complained about lumps in her bedding.

Morwen was an abrasive companion – she said exactly what was in her mind, regardless of anybody else's feelings. One day she asked him why he was beardless, a topic nobody else but his father had ever felt bold enough to raise with Beren.

“It is a long story,” he replied.

“Well, we do have all day,” said Morwen.

Beren tried to suppress feelings of exasperation. “Morwen,” he said, “people sometimes have private matters which they do not care to discuss, or to be questioned about. It is not exactly manners to persist in trying to find out about them.”

Morwen was nettled. “Why did you not say so?” she asked. “I only asked once, that can hardly be called persisting. This is a private matter with you then?”

“Yes,” he said shortly.

“Powers!” she said. “You do make me curious!”

Beren badly wanted to roll his eyes, but held the impulse in check with some difficulty. He thought to himself, not for the first time, that given a free choice, he would prefer slightly more quenchable company than his beautiful cousin.

Morwen had touched him on a sensitive area, because he had lately been spending a deal of uneasy thought on the same issue.

It had been hot at the time of shearing, and neither Kirimel or Parth had worn more clothing than strictly necessary. Kirimel, to be sure, had grown into a rather unlovely young woman; but Parth, although nobody would praise her bony face as more than cheerful, had a comely figure, adorned with full, rounded breasts. Her sweat-dampened blouse had done little to hide these alluring curves in the shearing shed, and the swing of her breasts in response to the rhythmic motion of her shearing hand had brought Adril at least to a state of flush-faced goggling. Methemel had had to bid him sharply to mind what he did with his sheep.

Beren, for his part, had noticed the display, but had felt no fire in his own loins, such as he was sure Adril was feeling.

Had the ‘repairs’ done to him so cavalierly by the Blackthorn Queen perhaps cut too deep? Would he ever feel desire for a woman? For some years past he had been perfectly content with his own company, but lately things had seemed different, somehow. It was not exactly that Beren longed for another state of being, or that he felt any definite lack of a partner; it was more that he could now conceive of such a change occurring, whereas before he could not. Somewhere in his future he would like to think there would be a partner, and perhaps children; but he was gnawed by the fear that he had not now enough fire left in his ‘manly equipment’ to fulfil that remote but still conceivable goal.

Parth, of course, had been well aware of Adril’s confusion at the shearing. Beren had caught her winking at the boy, and had wondered if another unsanctioned infant was not some time soon to be expected.

Helping at the farm and teaching Morwen took only part of his time. He spent most of it wandering the woods on his own, restless for he knew not what. Of all things, he missed the Druug. He would at times dream of hearing drums, and wake with a glad shout; only to realize as the dream faded that it had not been real. His loneliness at such times was acute.

Some consolation he found in the birds who visited him often to report and confer. R’raag represented the ravens on her own, but among the eagles, there were three with whom he had dealings: Bronze-mail of course, but lately another named Farsight, together with his wife Fairfeather. They were none of them a replacement for Goracc or Thunderbolt of old, but conversation with them eased his loneliness.

Midsummer arrived. Beren was wandering far from home, in the woods to the south of Foen. He had found

his way to a place not far from the centre of Dorthonion, a wild area where the farming folk never came.

It was a baking hot day. Beren bathed in a tinkling stream, enjoying its coolness; but no sooner was he out than he felt hot and dusty again.

The cloying scents which filled the air and seemed almost to thicken it gave Beren a headache. There was an unpleasant taste in his mouth, and he wondered if he was ill. But since he could not remember the last time he had been ill, he had no ready comparison to judge by.

The sun circled lower. Although the hour was now late, the air had grown hotter than ever. Insects had been dancing in the sunbeams, bees zooming from flower to ripe flower, but now all living things seemed to pause for rest.

Beren too fell into a doze, nestled into a shady corner between whispering birches. He slept, and in his sleep he dreamed. There was fire in the dream, and a voice he thought he knew, shouting. It was all confused, in the way of dreams. Suddenly he was aware of something he had heard about in many tales, but never seen: the sea. Long combers of surf curled and crashed whitely on a sandy shore. A stiff wind tugged at his hair; his nostrils were filled with tang, a living excitement. As Beren stood there, on the beach of his dream, feeling the sand beneath his toes and the bluff salt wind in his hair, a tall figure he could not properly see rose out of the murmurs of time. With a voice like steel it raised a great hand over the salt shore and spoke words that rang like swords.

“Out of the Great Sea to Middle-earth I am come. In this place I will abide, and my heirs, unto the ending of the world.”

The picture broke then and flowed into other channels. He heard fierce drums, and he thought he could see lines of torches, running up to a steep wall of stone. But, and without changing at all – but changing utterly all the same, in the way of dreams; the drums were no longer drums of war, but the secret drums of the hills; the drums he knew. In his dream he started up, gladness welling up to fill his heart.

It was midnight in his dream. The northern horizon was touched with a deep, pure blue, but the remainder of the sky was dark. The full moon stood high over the glade. The air was warm as wine; night scents floated past his nose, and tiny white moths danced in and out of the moonbeams. Where the moonlight shone, all was silver, bright as day; but the shadows in between were inky black. In the deepest glades of all he glimpsed the waver of fireflies.

Beren began to run in the dream, towards the far-off drum, and it seemed as though his legs had wings. Running was effortless, timeless. All around him the forest was full of life. Wolves glanced at him in his passage with cold intelligence. Pigs paused in their rooting to grunt at him, bears greeted him. Hoarse beast-voices whispered his name from shadows beside the way.

He ran, and still he ran, on tireless legs, and his speed was like the wind. The ground fell under his feet, rose again. He reached a crest, leaped laughing into the air, to land and tear on down the downslope. A stream flashed cold beneath his feet, then he was climbing again, ever faster. The moonlight lent silver magic to his limbs, and the living air of his passage streamed blue sparks in his wake which danced for a time before fading and winking out, one by one. The trees were whipping past, the land flowed around him, the sky sang his name, Beren! Beren! Hills loomed slowly up in his passage; grew to high, rounded shadows; fell slowly behind him into the past. Ever closer now in front of him came the pulse of the drum, drawing him on, drawing him deeper into the midsummer dream.

The man slowed to a walk as the last hill loomed before him. He climbed the slope, dark before the moon. Its height was the centre from which the deep drumming came, the beats shaking the fragrant midnight air.

A shape loomed up before him on the slope, black against the sky. It was a shape he knew. His nose told him

it was stone – yet more than stone.

A Watch-stone.

Quietly he trod the last few paces up through the trees. The drumming, close now, pounding in his chest. Firelight flickering ahead on the trunks of trees. Now at last he could see figures; figures he thought he knew. He came into the circle of light, and the stumpy people ceased their dancing and turned towards him. He went straight to the one with the sparse white hair, and the great nose like a beak, and embraced him. The familiar, strong scent filled his senses.

“Welcome, my dear Son; welcome, welcome,” Nose said to him, arms tight around his middle.

“Father,” replied Beren. He laughed, a little shakily. “I thought it was a dream!” he said.

Nose released him, smiling. “Perhaps it was,” he said. “Dreams and reality are brother and sister.” He looked Beren up and down with pleasure written on his weathered face. “Speaks with Birds,” he said, “the sight of you is as sweet to me as the taste of wild honey to a hungry man. But oh, it is wide and tall that you have grown! Ah, you must excuse me. I am an old man now, I talk too much, and much of it is nonsense.”

Beren smiled at his woodland father with an affection so acute it was almost painful. He looked around to take in the other grinning faces around him. They came forward now to embrace him and to thump him on the back in their turn. There were his old playmates Matted Hair, Big Belly and Noisy; and a full-breasted, wide-hipped young woman, holding back a little shyly, whom he recognized with some difficulty as Plays with Beetles, or Carver as they called her now. Thrusting through the bodies was Owl’s grinning face and welcoming hand, and on the other side there was Talkative thumping him, beside a woman Beren did not know; and behind them all he glimpsed the smiling features of Made Bean Soup next to her stocky husband Story-teller.

He had forgotten how brown the Druug were, and how broad and stocky their bodies. (Also he had forgotten quite how strongly they smelled.) They in their turn wondered at his height, and stroked with their fingers over his freckled skin and his straight nose.

Everybody seemed to be talking at once. Talkative introduced the new woman as his wife Bearskin, of the Elk People. Soup told him that White Teeth had badly wanted to come, but she had two young children to look after. There was a great deal of other news of people passed away, new matchings, new children; hunts they had been on, mishaps, jokes.

Eventually things settled down, people drifting away in the moonlight to sleep a little before the dawn. Beren was left alone at the fire with Nose.

“You do not tell me how it is with Mother,” he said, dreading the answer.

Nose took his hand, and he knew his fears were true. “She is in the other country,” Nose said very gently. “Since last summer. I do not know what happened. I woke one morning, and she was cold beside me. But we People do not stay long in this country, as you know.”

Beren’s eyes stung. He wiped them with his hand. “And Long Hair?” he said after a while.

“She is well,” said Nose.

“Married?”

“No.”

“But how...?” said Beren. “She did not want to come?”

“It is complicated,” Nose sighed. “She did and she didn’t. She stared too long at the sun, Speaks.”

Beren could not make head nor tail of this. “I do not understand,” he said at last.

Nose laid a hand on his arm. “Son,” he said, “there is no man for her after you. She will never marry.”

Beren was appalled. “But...” he stuttered, “what do you mean? I am her brother! There was never anything like that between us!”

“Even so,” said Nose.

“But that’s terrible,” said Beren.

Nose patted his arm. “No, Son, it is not,” he said. “Do not be foolish about it, like a box-dweller who wails over nothing. It is just the way things are. We all have our path to tread in life; that is part of hers. Long Hair accepts that. Why should you not?”

Beren knew that guilt was an emotion foreign to the Druug, also that they did not believe in wasting time in feeling unhappy; but all the same the news stabbed him with a pang that did not think he would forget in a hurry. He did not want to talk about it any more, and sought for a different subject.

“I wonder that you made so open a fire,” he said.

“There is not a single monster in the breadth and depth of the land,” said Nose. “All is empty, waiting. Also the trees are very angry.”

They both stared at the fire for a time.

“Which route did you take?” asked Beren.

“The same as always,” said the old man. “We had good food and drink, and much talk, with the Fair Ones in their stone-house on the island. The Cave-Digger was there; I was pleased to see him. Before we reached it, we met many of the Fair folk going to and fro on the road to the South.”

“Weren’t there any Orcs in the Vale?”

“Oh yes,” said Nose, “very many. They have been there a long time.” The old Druug made a grimace. “I wonder that they do not choke on their own filth.” He looked at Beren. “I have also seen where you farmers killed them in heaps, like rats.”

“We have killed some,” Beren admitted, “but there are always more.”

“Yes, more will come,” said Nose soberly. “Just now there are none here; but more will come, and soon.”

“Father,” said Beren, “why are you here?”

Nose looked surprised. “Because I wanted to be here. What other reason could there be?”

Beren had no answer to that one. He shrugged.

Nose touched his arm again. “You have been away from us too long, Son,” he said gently. “Your thoughts have become foolish, and very like a farmer. We must stay with you a while, and set you on the true path again.”

Beren found his eyes stinging again. He had no words, could only nod.

“Let us sleep now, my son,” said the old man. “It grows light already. The coming day will be hot.”

* * * * *

Barahir and his staff had taken over the entire upper floor of the inn. Most of the girls were gone, nobody knew how or when. Their chambers, still smelling faintly of scent, were a fertile source of jokes among the guards who were billeted in them.

Barahir was going over supply lists with Emeldir and two clerks. The day was hot. The windows were open, but there was hardly a breath of air. It was a dusty day, dry, with no promise of any break. Everybody was sweating. The lists did not tally, and Barahir was irritated.

Their attention was diverted by a thunder of approaching hooves. Emeldir glanced out the window. “Fisters,” she said. They all crowded over to look.

“I hope this is not Cazimek trying something stupid,” said Barahir.

The party, some twenty riders strong, halted in front of the building. The riders dismounted, most of them tying their horses to the rail provided. They had brought a spare horse: a tall black, saddled already, with trappings that glinted in the sunlight.

Several people emerged from the inn. Barahir recognized Girazôn among them. Some word came then from inside the building, and as Barahir saw the soldiers snapping out of their relaxed poses and hastening to form ranks, he realized what was happening. “Bregolas is coming out!” he said, and dashed out of the room, the others close on his heels.

When they reached the base of the stairs, they found their way barred by a guard holding a sword. Behind him, they could see that Bregolas had emerged. The lord was making his way, haltingly but without a stick, down the hall toward the door. The guards outside the inn had formed into lines on either side of the door, and when their lord emerged, their officer brought them to attention; they saluted by clashing their arms to their breastplates, and a ringing cry of “Hail!” sounded in unison.

The swordsman lowered his blade and stood aside. Barahir and his party advanced to the door, where their passage was again blocked, this time by crossed spears. They stood there looking on, together with some others who had come out of the common room, curious to know what was happening.

The black horse was held next to a high mounting stair. Bregolas hefted himself slowly up this, clutching the rail, until he was high enough to swing a leg over the horse. He took the reins from the hand of the guard captain and the horse took a step or two away. Bregolas turned then and made a sign to the guards at the door. The spears were withdrawn, the onlookers streamed out into the sun-baked yard.

Barahir came up to where his brother sat on his horse and squinted up at him. “I am glad to see you healed, Brother,” he said. “May I lay down my trust?”

Bregolas, looking down at him, nodded. “I thank you for your service,” he said shortly.

“Shall we sit to talk, my lord? Much has happened in your absence.”

Bregolas eyed him. “No need. My men have kept me informed,” he said.

“Then do you have orders for me?” Barahir thought that his brother’s cheeks looked thin and withered still, and the sunlight made it very obvious how white his hair had become.

“I do,” said Bregolas. “It is time to bring some order into our affairs. This shameful flight to the hills must stop. You will make your way to this settlement I have heard of and supervise its demolition. The people are to return. Do it without delay.”

Barahir swallowed, but bowed his head. “Anything else?”

“Many things,” replied his brother. He eased himself on the saddle with a suppressed grimace. “We will untangle them in time. I require you in the meantime to muster your followers. Our forces are a mess: too many independent commands. All must come under one. Bring your people to the town. We must start training them.”

Barahir spread his hands. “But Lord... it is a busy time on the farms. My people have much to do.”

The horse snorted and backed a pace or two, restless at the inactivity. Bregolas jerked savagely at the rein.

“That did not stop you bringing them to menace my captain,” he said with a dark look under his brows. “If they can leave their ploughs for that, then they can leave them again to obey their lord’s command.”

“But...” began Barahir.

“So it begins,” hissed Bregolas. “It is always the same. You baulk me at every step. But I *will* be obeyed. Bring in all your private armies, or face the consequences. You have three days.” He jerked the horse’s head around and raised a hand to the guard-captain. “We ride for Newfort,” he said. As soon as the guards had unhitched and mounted their own horses, the party moved off.

Emeldir stood watching the dust subside, her hands on her hips. “Orders?” she spat. “What a staring parcel of absurdities. Even were it sense, no man could ride to Aeluin *and* bring the upper valley to Newfort inside three days.”

Barahir sighed. “Let us pack,” he said. “We must be away.”

Emeldir turned to her husband. “Surely you are not going to attempt what he says?” she demanded.

Barahir shrugged, helpless. “He is the Bëor,” he replied.

“By the consent of the people,” she said angrily. “But the people do not want him. They want you.”

Barahir’s face closed; he pulled himself erect.

“I must ask you not to speak in that fashion,” he said stiffly. “Loyalty is loyalty.”

“But loyalty to whom, Barahir? Loyalty to whom? To your people, who stand in the greatest danger they have ever faced, or to your want-wit brother? That is what you have to decide.”

* * * * *

Emeldir had some privy words with Menelrond soon after they met with the big man on the following day.

“Comrade,” she said to him fiercely, “this cannot go on. This cannot go on. Are we to dance empty-pated behind this lunatic into the fire reserved for fools and lackwits? Are Boromir’s shining deeds to drown in a jest not fit for the bleariest soak in the grimiest tavern? We must *do* something!”

Menelrond was more sanguine about the business. “Aye, Bregolas’s head is cracked,” he replied, “but what of it? I have shrugged that fool off, I spend no more thought on him. Nor will the people follow him, as you have said.”

“Barahir will do his best to,” she said bitterly, “and the sons.”

Menelrond’s broad brow wrinkled. “Aye, maybe they will at that,” he admitted. “I had forgotten their nature. They do not see the matter as we do. They are better than us, maybe.”

“Better, worse, what does that have to do with anything? A pox on this family and their stiff necks! So we must meet the enemy with many contending minds and voices. We should be one. One! And Barahir is the only leader who can unite us. The only one. He must be brought to see it! You must help me make him!”

“You will never persuade him from his allegiance,” said Menelrond. “You had the right of it first off. Barahir is as true as steel. It will take more than his leader’s folly to turn him from obedience.”

“He and Baragund are both in the same case,” Emeldir went on. “Neither will ever play the traitor outright, on that I am as clear as you. But at bottom, they are both men of sound sense. I think they both might be brought to ignore Bregolas, just as you do, and continue to arrange the defence in his despite. That would be the best we could hope for.”

Menelrond scratched his head. “And just how would you accomplish that?” he said.

“I think their eyes will open in time, if we work at it. If you help me.”

“It might not be so easy, come the day of battle,” said Menelrond. “Two voices shouting different orders is an ugly picture.”

“We must deal with that when we come to it,” she said.

The big man turned it over in his mind. “Well,” he said, “I am with you. All right. I will argue with your man, try to get him to close an eye. He listens to me, although he may not be so wise in that. Let us see what can be done.”

“Do not think badly of me for it,” she said, grim-faced, “but I have wished that Bregolas had finished the job in that fool raid. We would not now have these griping problems.”

“He may yet come to grief untimely,” said Menelrond, squinting at her sideways, his bright blue chips of eyes almost hidden beneath his wild and tawny brows. “Battlefields are dangerous places.” At the widening of Emeldir’s eyes, he went on, “Nay, nay! Look not so slant at me. I would not sully my honour by shooting the cur, although I own it is a powerful temptation. In any case, evil is not thrown back by evil. But there may be others among our folk who are not so particular.”

“I do not hope for any man’s death,” she said slowly, “but I hope for competence and coherence in command, however they come. We stand in grave need of them.”

* * * * *

By the end of the following week, Bregolas was fuming. Barahir had gone to earth, and there was as yet no sign of the churl’s followers. More irritating still, the work at Aeluin continued, and a slow trickle of people were still leaving the town. Bregolas had tried to stop them with his Fister guards, but people had ignored the prohibitions and had found ways around any barricades he had set up. Attempts to dismantle the booths at the lake had excited a determined resistance. Unless he wanted to begin slaughtering his own people in heaps, it seemed that he had no option but to put up with what they were doing.

Curse that Barahir! He had started all this. He had been ordered to stop it, and had not. Well, he had gone too far this time. There were no excuses any more. The Fist would root him out, and as soon as they did, he must stand trial.

He would give orders to muster also to Baragund – and to that sour-faced valley-mouth churl, what was his name? Taenthîr. They must all bring in their men, they must all come under one command. Division, disorder, these were the worst enemies of all.

His sons had many men under their banners – very many. Bregolas was surprised at the numbers his sources estimated, seeing as how the brothers had returned from Hithlum with only a couple of hundred in their train. Clearly, they had recruited many more followers from the rich farmlands in the open part of the valley. How had they squeezed out so many? Those ingrate peasants had not cared to rally to *his* standard. Well, it was all one. It didn't matter who the clod-prodders thought they were following. His sons could cavil all they pleased, but they would do his bidding, or he would know the reason why.

Curse this weak body, and this leg which still throbbed so savagely! The healer said there was stuff left in it still, centres of poison. They had wanted to cut him again, but he hadn't allowed it. He must stay visible and active, he could not allow the reins to fall to others again. It was enough of a task trying to repair the damage done already.

Time to act. He called in his secretary. "Ask Cazimek to come by," he told him.

As soon as the burly captain had been ushered in, Bregolas came to the point. "Captain," he said, "I have let matters slip. It is time to seize back control. I am going to muster every man I can get hold of; I want you to lead them up the valley, and winkle out this brother of mine from whatever barn or low pot-house he lurks in. Bring him back here to me. Then we shall see."

Cazimek grinned. "With pleasure, Sir."

"Get your men ready to move, and send a messenger to fetch Baragund. Oh, and while I think of it, send someone to tell Mithbrûn I want a word with him too."

"Mithbrûn's dead, Sir," replied Cazimek woodenly.

Bregolas turned to him. "Oh? How unfortunate. How did that happen?"

"Er, altercation I believe Sir. Stab wound."

"Mithbrûn?" exclaimed Bregolas in disbelief. "Stabbed in a brawl? I wouldn't have thought he was the type." He scanned the captain's bulgy face suspiciously. "Not something you would know something about, by any chance?"

"Nosir," replied Cazimek, staring straight ahead of him.

"Well," said Bregolas, "it's regrettable, but for present purposes it doesn't matter. Who replaced him?"

"Name of Dairuin, Sir," said Cazimek.

"Well, send for him. Look lively, man! Don't just stand there like a dummy!"

Dairuin, when he came, proved to be a well-built man of middle years who sported a full, sweeping black moustache, partially hiding a humorous mouth.

Bregolas, looking over his stout frame, said to him, "A man like you should be wearing Fist livery."

Dairuin only raised his eyebrows in response.

"The thought does not please you?" said Bregolas.

“A man cannot serve in two companies,” replied Dairuin. “I have been with the City Guard since its beginnings. There would seem little sense in changing horses now.”

Bregolas stared at him a moment, then waved the issue away with his hand. “There are many things to be discussed,” he said. “My congratulations on your succession, my commiserations on the death of your predecessor. There may be matters to be gone into there, enquiries to be made. My present concern is more urgent. I require you to muster your force and place it under command of Captain Cazimek. Temporarily, of course.”

Dairuin looked stunned, and momentarily at a loss for a reply. “Might I ask, to what purpose, Sir?” he said after a moment.

Bregolas glanced at him sharply. “You should not require to know. A command is a command. But to assuage your curiosity: my brother has thrown off his allegiance. I do not need to tell you how serious this breach is at this present time, how entirely inopportune. I propose to send Cazimek with a force to arrest the man. The force must needs be large, since it appears that this runagate has cozened many of the simple folk of the upper valley to his deluded cause.”

Dairuin hesitated. “Sir,” he said at last carefully, “I stand of course ever ready to obey your orders. I would just counsel you, if I may make so bold, against this particular proposal of yours. You will no doubt recall that the City Guard was constituted, not at your order, but by the folk consulting among themselves. They are loyal followers of the Bëor, but their consent —”

Bregolas cut him off, red in the face. “I do not desire your counsel, Guard-major, nor to hear this womanly quibbling. You have your orders; set about them.”

Dairuin bowed stiffly, without replying.

“Dismissed,” said Bregolas curtly, and the man bowed again and left.

Baragund arrived later in the day. He had not seen his father since the time of his mishap, and the younger man was struck now at how old and unwell the elder appeared.

He bowed. “You wished to speak with me, Sir.”

“Sit you down, Son,” said Bregolas. “Although in sooth, the matter is quickly disposed of — I wished principally to know how many men you can place under arms.”

Baragund considered. “I take it you mean all the forces together, including those under Belegund and Menelrond?”

Bregolas found his prosiness irritating. “Naturally.”

“That would come to six thousands of foot,” his son said slowly, “with maybe another thousand horse.”

“And Cazimek has something like twelve hundred, mixed,” said Bregolas, rubbing his hands together, “and the Guard likely the same. Good! That’s enough to make this rebel think twice. Even if he has succeeded in cozening the Moulder churl to his cause.”

“Which rebel would that be, Father?” asked Baragund carefully.

Bregolas turned on him. “Don’t you play those games with me,” he growled. “I well know whose favourite you are. But you are my son, not Barahir’s. I don’t want your word-games, I want your obedience. My present order to you is to place yourself under Cazimek’s command and march to arrest this defaulter,

wherever in Ladros you may find him.”

“Father,” said Baragund, grim lines graven in his face, “we have had this matter of obedience out before. I make you the same answer as the first time: I owe you my fealty, but you do not command my honour – nor my sense. This, this claim of yours is purest nonsense. Barahir would never rebel. Had he wished to, he has had ample opportunity.”

“Do you give me the lie, to my own face?” Bregolas shouted.

“Father, Barahir is doing his best to defend our land and people,” replied the Soldier bluntly. “You, frankly, are getting in his way. All this nonsense about musters, and preventing the refuge. It is you who is in the wrong.”

Bregolas was furious, red in the face. “I curse the day I permitted you and your wine-head brother to go off with the Elves,” he shouted. “Nothing has come of it but trouble. What will satisfy you, then? Must I lie on my back for this usurper to walk over me? Will I have your apology then, when you and I hang side by side in irons? Much use your honour will be to me then! You doting fool. Wake up to reality!”

There was a dangerous glitter in Baragund’s eye, but he held his own temper in check. “I have no wish to insult you, Father, but I find it hard to press any juice of sense out of your words. There is no question of your hanging in irons, and never will be. And with all respect, Sir, it is your own present actions which seem to me not well grounded in reality. ”

“Do you support me, or not?” barked Bregolas.

“I do not. Indeed I must tell you – and I surely never dreamed I would be saying this to my own father – that in the name of honour, I cannot further give my countenance to this lunatic course.”

Bregolas placed his hands on the table and faced down at it. There was a heavy pulse in his forehead. He felt short of breath; tried to bring it under control. “And just what would your burnished honour have me do in its place?” he said thickly.

“Leave the man alone to do his work, who knows best how to do it.” The Soldier’s voice was hard. “Indeed, you have little option. The people will not support you, should you attempt otherwise.”

* * * * *

The corn was browning towards harvest, but Beren was wandering the lonely moors to the South. Keeping him company were his childhood friends Big Belly and Carver. It was new country for them; he had much to show them.

It was the young eagle Fairfeather who found him. Beren spotted the eagle only long after she saw him; she was already descending toward him in long curves out of the high air.

“What news, Fairfeather?” he said to her as she landed with a thump on his wrapped and braced arm; but the moment he asked, he knew in his stomach that the news was bad.

“Something which I do not understand,” the bird said to him. “I have seen large things, larger than any beast, but I think they have no life of their own. I think they are made things. There are many of them today in the Dead Lands to the North. They sit there and do nothing; yet they were not in that place yesterday.”

Beren tried to think what this could mean. “Just things?” he asked. “No sign of Orcs?”

“There are Orcs with them,” said the eagle. “Many, but not an army. They cower from the sun in holes they

have dug.”

“Hmm,” said the man. “Things. Large things.” He looked to Belly and Carver, who both shrugged. Beren turned back to the eagle. “Can you say of what material the things are made? Are they wooden? Or maybe stone?”

“I do not know,” said Fairfeather. “I will look more closely and tell you tomorrow.”

Beren chewed his lip. “I wish we had one of your great cousins here, so that I might ride on his back and look at these things for myself,” he said.

“Hah!” said Fairfeather. “They would not stoop to this small bickering. The Eagles of the High One reserve their attention for matters which shake the earth, nothing less.”

“I know.” Beren thought some more. “Suppose a man were to creep to the edge of the Forest,” he said, “where should he go, to have the best chance of glimpsing this phenomenon?”

The eagle thought that the best place for that would be a little to the West of Angrod’s lost tower. The memory flashed into Beren of a magical time: looking out across the grassy valley from the edge of the wood. Then the night crossing, the thrill of the God in the waters, the wonderful music, and the light in the fair faces.

Now the trees and the grass were surely withered, the faces were lost, and the music silenced. Well, he would go. It would be painful; but he must find out what this was.

“Can you come to me again when I have reached that lair of which you speak?” he asked Fairfeather. “Say, at sunrise tomorrow.” The bird was agreeable, and left him then.

He parleyed with his Druug companions. They were eager to come, but Beren’s legs were longer. He knew he would make better speed without them. In the end they shrugged and let him have his way.

He had far to go: perhaps twenty leagues. He set out in the easy lope that ate up the miles. Over the rough moorland he scrambled, through the hours. The sun sank lower as he ran, warming his left shoulder. Over lonely whale-back ridges he climbed, vast against the sky, with only the curlews for company; then after breasting each one, down again into the following glen. Past the occasional croft; splashing through burns, avoiding areas of bog; then climbing again over the windy roof of the world.

He came down from the moors at sunset. The going was easier after that, since his way now lay across the well-tended plain of Ladros. There were made lanes now to speed his passage. The occasional late farmer on horse or cart scratched his head over the swift runner who sped by him, with a cheery greeting, through the blue twilight.

Beren swam the river in the first dark of the night, tugged blindly sideways by the cold current. Midnight found him high in the sad heights of Drûn. He had avoided that place since the disaster at the start of the year, and he felt uneasy in it now. The night seemed blacker here under the dead trees. He gradually became possessed of the strong feeling that something was not right in these murdered woods – that there was something here worse even than the shadow of death. Rattlecone’s words from earlier in the year came back to his mind. That was exactly what the Ent had said: that there was worse than death afoot. What had Rattlecone called it? Unlife.

There was a cruel new growth under the dead trees, blacker than black, that scored his flesh and snagged at his clothes.

Sometime after midnight, shivering, he found at last the place on the shoulder where Nose and his people

had camped so long ago. It was grim and forlorn now. The grass in the valley was vanished into dust as he had foreboded, and the stink of the dead plain lapping in from the North filled his lungs and made him choke.

High on the facing shoulder, a single eye of fire showed where the garrison laired in the ravaged tower.

Beren had to force himself by an effort of will to stay in that place. It was not just the sadness of besmirched memory; some power had laid its shadow over that land. He thought with a shiver of Arthad's description of his encounter with the Fire-demon. Coming here now, he was able to understand truly at last why the Southerner had never been quite the same man since.

His determination kept him from running away, which it was his fervent wish to do, but that night remained in his memory as one of the most unpleasant he ever experienced.

Towards dawn there came a distraction from the long, soul-grinding hours. A faint glimmer of torches became visible far off on the dark plain to the North. Beren, straining to make out any details, realized that his chosen observation point was too far back. After a moment of indecision, he started running downhill. He had to have a closer look, even though it meant leaving the mournful cover of the dead forest.

Some quick miles over the bitter dust brought him suddenly quite near, as he ascended a low rise in the ground to find the shadowy tableau spread beneath. Beren skidded to a halt before stepping quickly back and laying himself flat just behind the ridge. Even so close as he now found himself, however, he could make out little in the darkness. The intruders bore only two torches, front and rear; the wavering pools of ruddy light they cast served only to deepen the puzzle. He could hear whip-cracks, and shouts from Orc-throats, but what were those deep groaning sounds, as of some huge cattle? Also there seemed to be a sort of constant dragging noise as background.

A harsh horn-call blared out from the tower, making Beren jump. More lights appeared on its heights, and shortly a party bearing torches had issued from the tower base. They streamed down the slope, and when they reached the flat, they gathered around the place from whence the noises had come. As Beren beheld the object now lit by flickering torch flames, he suddenly understood.

Erlan had sketched for them some of the engines he had seen at the siege of Eithel Sirion, and Beren recognized the pattern in what he now saw. Great beasts were hitched to the device, with whip-wielding Orcs to drive them along.

As soon as Beren had taken everything in, he inched back behind the ridge to where he could stand. Silently he retreated back over the gasping dust, then finally up the hill. He ran into the forest until he found a clearing, well out of sight of any enemies, where Fairfeather could find him when day came. There he waited.

As light grew slowly in the forest, he contemplated with disgust the twisted black growths which infested the spaces between the bare, dead pines. He must press Rattlecone, find out more about this.

Fairfeather found him shortly after sunrise. "You have seen the thing?" she asked him.

"I have; and I understand its purpose," said Beren. "It is a machine for throwing stones and fire. This one is certainly made of wood. Now Fairfeather, I would ask of you two favours: firstly to fly to East and West along the borders of the forest, to see if any more of these things can be found. And secondly, wherever you find any, count them, and if you find any made of metal, I pray you, count those apart. Can you do that?"

"I can," said the great bird. "By close of day I shall have these reckonings. Where will I find you?"

"Far from this place of evil," said Beren. "Meet me at sundown on the shoulders of the Mountain of Sight,

not far behind my home.”

“Until then!” cried the eagle, and rowed its swift way into the sky.

* * * * *

“They are in three places,” the young eagle told him, when she met with him again in the last golden rays of the day. “There are none in the Vale to the West. Four approach the Tower of Aegnor, that which lies directly north from here. At the place where we spoke at dawn there are now ten; and perhaps five or six more approach still, from out in the plain. Five my brother has seen far to the East, at the valley mouth, where the river cuts its sad way through the gasping dust. It could be that these last are held up at the crossing. All, in all places, appear to be constructed of wood.”

“No iron at all?” said Beren. “Then that is the only good part of the news.” He pondered for a while, until the eagle interrupted him diffidently.

“Have you more commissions?” it asked. “It grows late; I would roost. I am of no more use to you until the sun comes around the world again.”

“I beg your pardon, Fairfeather,” said Beren. “You have served me very well. Take your rest now, and come to me tomorrow. But we will all be busy soon; because where these things of yours now sit, I would guess, it will not be long before there are Orcs too, as thick as maggots in a dead sheep.”

The eagle flew off. Beren left the place himself and made his way to the farm. The sky was still light when he slipped into the house.

Barahir heard his son’s news with a frown. “Approaches from three sides,” he said, “none of them the one expected. Not good. But your birds saw no armies?”

“No sign of them, anywhere on the dead plain,” said Beren, “and that seems strange to me. Why not send them with the machines?”

“Well,” replied Barahir, “let me tell you something I have wondered about. When the Outbreak came, this winter past, the Orcs were a mere step behind the wall of fire which swept across the land. Yet that wave of fire must have come quicker than a horse could gallop. Now, it would take foot-soldiers three days at least, nay more like four, to cross the plain from the Hells of Iron. So how to solve this riddle? I have wondered if they made burrows, in secret perhaps, long before the fire; then lurked there during the outbreak, to swarm out as soon as the poison blew away and the earth cooled.”

“Burrows?” said Beren. “But no, you mean tunnels! All the way from Angband? But it must be all of forty leagues!”

“Well, ask yourself, what else have the Orcs had to keep themselves busy with over the years? Do you think they have spent them knitting?”

Beren turned this new idea over in his mind. The more he thought about it, the less he liked it. “But that means we might get hardly any warning at all,” he said.

“Exactly,” said his father. “I think I had better pass the word for people to be ready, and get myself to the inn. Can you arrange to send me immediate word if anything changes?”

Beren considered. “I didn’t think things could be quite so far advanced,” he said. “Tunnels... ugh. Sending word: well, the easiest way to get reports to you will be if I come with you to the inn. The birds can find me there. But I had in mind to go first to my people – by that I mean, the Drúedain who have lately returned. I

have a thought concerning these machines that I wish to put to them.”

“What do you have in mind?” asked the elder man.

“I thought we could sneak close, and set fire to them,” answered Beren. “Any Drúadan could manage to evade the guards, I am sure.”

“And come away safe again?”

Beren’s brow clouded. “I hope so,” he said bleakly. “I trust so.”

Barahir glanced at him, thought about it for a moment. “Don’t do it straight away,” he said at last. “They’d just bring up new ones. And they’d keep a sharper watch on those. Best wait until they’re committed.”

They quickly touched on several other questions, but before Beren turned to go, he cocked an eye at his father. “Would it be impertinent of me to ask what you mean to do about Bregolas?” he said. “I heard about your latest encounter.”

Barahir looked uncomfortable. “He’s put me in a truly impossible position,” he said. “I never thought to play rebel – good Powers, such a thing. It is not something I ever wished to have any truck with. But what am I to do? Half of the things he wants me to do would work directly against the people’s safety, and the other half are flat out impossible. So I’ve decided simply to keep out of his way. Baragund and Belegund are behind me, thanks be to heaven. I’m going to keep working on the defences, in the way that seems best to me, and for so long as the people continue to follow my suggestions.”

Beren heard this out with an expression of interested but neutral attention. When Barahir was finished, he made no direct comment, only said, “I will be away now. I will meet you at the inn in a day or two.”

The following morning, Barahir and Emeldir made ready to leave. Gilach and Arasenaur were to come as well, as were all the fighting house-men.

Barahir took Caladis aside as the horses were being saddled. “The time has come for those who are leaving to leave,” he told her. “Can you arrange it?”

“For Aeluin?” she asked with wide eyes, and he nodded.

Caladis seemed uncharacteristically flustered. “But, but, so soon? There is no alarm yet, is there?”

“I don’t think it will be long in coming,” he said. “Get Parth and Kiri moving, at least. They’re not responsible. You and Mari can decide for yourselves of course, but I would strongly advise you not to wait. Can you carry that out for me?”

“Yes, all right,” said Cal, with a hand in her hair, still trying to catch up with the concept. Leaving? Now? But how? And what could she take? What about all her papers? She ran to look for Gramlach, feeling foolish in doing so, because she had taken leave from him only a little earlier. She found him pulling tight the straps on his bulging saddle-bags. “Gram,” she said, out of breath, “Bari says we all should leave. The women, I mean.”

He straightened up. “By the Kindler,” he said, “I hadn’t thought o’ that!” He looked at her, rubbing his short-cropped beard. “It’s not come to the thick end yet. Else p’raps I would have thought on it myself... but no, he’s right. Better early and sure. Can you manage?”

“Well, I suppose I must,” she said. “I can pack the girls off, anyway. But Gram, I don’t want to leave. Can’t I come to the inn? I want to be with you. If I go to Aeluin, I’ll hardly ever see you.”

He still rubbed his stubble, undecided. Someone called his name from the yard. “Look, lass, there’s no time now,” he said. “I’ll get back soon’s I can get away, and we’ll make some arrangements. All right?”

“All right, Gram,” she said, smiling up at him. “Take care, now.”

“You too, lass,” he said. He kissed her tenderly, lifted the bags, and went out.

* * * * *

The following weeks were difficult for everybody. Barahir did not know whether to call up his levies or not. On the one hand, if the Orc troops appeared very suddenly, as he feared they might, the Dorthonion people risked being caught unprepared if they were still dispersed; on the other, the people could not afford to stand to for an unknown number of days, perhaps weeks. That would be difficult enough at the best of times, but the harvest was approaching, and every pair of hands would be needed.

Barahir discussed it often with Baragund and his brother. They had the advantage of having spent years among the Elves, and had taken in much of their lore about the Enemy and his Orcs.

“Orcs will not fight in sunlight,” Baragund assured him, “and they love not the moon and stars; yet they cannot see in full dark either. Firelight or the dull light of a winter’s day is what they stand best.”

“It seems a curious thing,” replied Barahir, “that they should need light, yet abhor it.”

“You have said it,” put in the Greencloak. “They are warped creatures, and everything in their nature shows it. The Enemy would make his own soldiers if he could, but he can make no living thing – only twist those of his Master.”

“Then he can twist very far,” said Baragund drily. “I wonder much at this Worm they have, which is said to breathe fire. Out of what beginnings did Morgoth twist that? What clean creature of the One has fire for breath?”

“I do not know of any,” replied his brother, “but that does not mean there are none. Ignorance is no proof of absence.”

“These are interesting questions,” said Barahir, “but they wander from the point, which is tactics. If this Worm comes, I think there can be no debate: we must flee before it. The issue we have to decide here is what to expect from the Orcs.”

“If I were at their head, I should be slow in coming again with torches,” said the Soldier. “Therefore I would say: look sharp if the day is cloudy.”

“There is no guarantee they will see the matter as we do,” said Barahir, “but I expect you are right.”

After further debate, they decided eventually to go part-way: to call up a thousand men in a roster which changed every seven days. These men would be quartered near the inn, ready to rush to where the threat was heaviest.

Before they parted for the day, Baragund raised the issue which had been troubling all of them since the break with Bregolas at midsummer.

“Have you heard aught from Father?” he asked.

“Nothing,” said Barahir. “I do not even know if he received the news about the siege machines. I sent it through many channels, as you know; but had no word in reply.”

“We have tried to see him, but he will not admit us,” said Baragund. “His own sons, and he will not admit us!”

“Could you not perhaps ask Hirwen to intervene?” asked Barahir.

“Father stays now camped with his Fist troops,” said Baragund. “He keeps no contact with the Hall. Hirwen says she has not seen him in weeks.”

“Well,” said Barahir heavily, after thinking about that, “perhaps it is for the best. So Menelrond and Emeldir have been at pains to persuade me, at any event. So long as he keeps aloof, so long are we spared the pain of choosing whether to keep our faith with his nonsense or ignore it. Let us not spend any thought on him until we must, but rather plan this defence as seems wise to us.”

Some days later he received an unexpected visitor: Dairuin, the new Guard-major of Newfort. The Major’s left arm was in a sling.

“Mishap?” asked Barahir as he ushered him to a seat.

Dairuin smiled under his abundant moustaches, but with little mirth. “You might call it that,” he said drily. “They tried to serve me the same way as they served poor Mithbrûn.”

“Good Powers!” exclaimed Barahir, sitting up straight in surprise. “I am glad they did not succeed.”

“I was better prepared,” said the Guard-major. “We caught the fellow; and it is on his account that I am here today.” He took a tankard from Zalta, smiling his thanks.

“What do you mean?” asked Barahir.

“You have not heard the news?” asked Dairuin. “Nothing about affairs in Newfort?”

“Nothing recent,” said Barahir. “Why, what is happening?”

“There has been fighting,” said the other, after taking a pull at his beer. “Ten are dead that we know of, and many more injured. The man who knifed me is an officer with the Fist, and he was in company with two likewise whom we have also detained. We sent a party to complain to Cazimek, and with one thing and another, it came to blows. That seems to have been the pebble which set off the avalanche – within the hour, the Fist had attempted to take over the Guard. Again. They have been repelled, and the people also rose to fight against them. Their mood has been hot all summer because of the attempts to prevent the movement to the Moors. Well, not to prolong the tale, the town is up and with us; the Fisters have been expelled. Some of us were for graver punishments, but the consensus was not for that course. So here I am.”

“I do not quite understand,” said Barahir. “What are you here for?”

“Master,” said Dairuin, “I am declaring for you. Both Guard and Town are behind me.”

Barahir shook his head. “You were wrong to do so. I am not the Bëor, nor am I a rebel. My brother is leader of our people, not I.”

“So I have heard you say,” said the Major. “But leading is a question of fact, not title. And the fact is, your brother does not lead; you do. You may bestow the title on him if it please you, but the facts say otherwise. There is only one man who has brought Dorthonion together to resist the Enemy, and that man is you.”

Barahir was silent for a while, turning things over in his mind. “What is your plan now, Guard-major, may I ask?” he said at last. “Will you stay with me, here at the inn?”

Dairuin looked faintly surprised. "I had no present thought of it, Sir, unless you so command. It seems to me that my place of duty, at least until any general attack, is in the town."

"But," Barahir looked at him with some concern, "is that safe for you?"

Dairuin grinned, his teeth showing white under his great black moustaches. "No," he said. "But nowhere seems very safe these days."

"Well," said Barahir doubtfully, "if you are sure. There would be room for you here. You may have expelled Bregolas's soldiers, but I doubt the town is clean of spies and assassins. I leave it to you, though."

"I agree that your officers are most needed in the town, at least for now. But did you have another thought for when the alarm comes? As come it surely must, and soon."

"Well, Sir," said the Major, "it is not for me to move the pieces on the board for you. But this piece called the Guard would in such a case be most willing to emerge from behind our walls, and join the general fray."

"More fighting men and women would always be welcome," said Barahir. "How many are you?"

"The list strength of the old Guard was three hundred," replied Dairuin. "Lately we have been somewhat under that. But now we find that people are keen to enrol. I think we could muster as many as two thousands in a week or two, should we choose to accept them. So far I have been loth to turn away anyone fit and full-grown; but I fear it will not be long before we run short of gear for them."

"Speak to Emeldir about that," said Barahir. "We may be able to help with supplies. As for the number, it sounds excellent, but we must keep in mind that they will have had very little training. Still, used with discretion, and officered by your Guards, two thousands may do much."

"I thought the same, Sir," said the Guard-major.

Barahir grinned suddenly. "The Guard and Town with us. Do you know, Guard-major, I begin to have hopes of this fight."

"Powers grant you are right, Sir," said the other. They shook hands heartily and Dairuin went to the door.

"Keep a sharp eye out!" said Barahir to him in parting. "The left arm is too close to the heart. And wear your armour at all times!"

The man smiled again, and left him.

Day One

One can prepare for unpleasant news. One can expect it, have the measure of it, know all about it – but it is still a shock when it comes. Thus Beren could not keep the dismay from his heart while he listened to Fairfeather's tidings.

As soon as the eagle had departed, he sought his father in the inn. He found him with Baragund and Emeldir.

"The Orcs have come," he said to them. "One legion each by Minas Aegnor and in the far East, and three with the main force under Angrod's tower. They are all digging in as fast as they can, to get out of the sun."

"Only five legions?" said Barahir. "That is not so bad. Not nearly so many as I had feared. No fire-demons or other monsters?"

"No, Father, the birds have neither seen nor felt any," said Beren.

“No movement from the legions camped in the Vale?”

Beren confirmed this also.

“Come!” said Barahir, almost cheerfully, “that is not so bad at all. Why, we may even outnumber them!”

The dour Soldier now spoke. “Perhaps so, Uncle,” he said, “but don’t forget the catapults. And as the saying goes, one should not sell the bearskin before catching the bear. It will be time to celebrate after we have won.”

“But at least the tension of waiting is over,” said Barahir, relief showing in his voice.

“There was one more thing,” said Beren. “I heard this on the drums this morning. The Drúedain say the weather will break in three or four days.”

Barahir cursed. “Ah!” he said. “Now we see the sting. Clearly, the Orcs will come with the clouds. I had hoped for a little more respite – the people are all so busy with the harvest at the moment. It will break their hearts to leave the corn. Also, it will do us no good to win this thing if we all starve in the winter. Even another week would have seen us in the clear.”

“They cannot harvest in the rain, whatever the state of the corn,” said Emeldir. “Can they not work while the sun holds, then start when the Orcs do?”

“Yes, but look at the map. This main mass of Orcs here in the North-east are a bare day’s march from Newfort and all the valley; but most of our people will need three, or even four just to gather to muster.”

“You must man both northern palisades with those in the present rotation,” said Baragund, “with some of the Mouths to fend off the eastern force. With the blessing, they will all hold until the main armies can be assembled.”

Barahir could not help remembering the attack on the night of torches, and how difficult the defenders had found it on that occasion to hold the barrier even for a single night. But what other course was there? It had always been going to be a desperate business.

But there was nothing to be gained by giving voice to such grim thoughts.

“Aye,” he said, “you are right. That is the best course. We will alert the others to be ready to gather to Newfort the moment the rain comes. And send word to Taenthîr. And to the cursed Fist, that being the only route we know to Bregolas’s ear!”

“Taenthîr may not be eager to leave his home unguarded,” remarked the Greencloak, “not with that legion sitting on his doorstep.”

Barahir chewed his lip. “We will just have to be as persuasive as possible,” he said. “But somehow I think he will come. It will seem very lonely out there at the end of the valley, facing a force greater than his own, and with no good ground to fight on either. I think he will find more comfort with the rest of us. Also, out there on his own, who would he have to complain to?”

Everybody laughed.

“What about the engines?” said Beren. “Is it now time to attack them?”

“Yes, I think so,” said his father. “Can you arrange it? Can we help?”

“As for help, I do not think so,” said Beren. “We shall do better on our own. But then again, we are few. We

can only attempt them one site at a time. If we tackle the central and greatest force first, it will be a day or so – well, say a day to Aegnor’s, but then perhaps three more days needed to get all the way to the East to tackle the machines at the valley mouth.”

“That is too long,” said Barahir. “You had better let us tackle the eastern force.” So they settled on that.

“Who shall be sent to the palisades?” Emeldir wanted to know.

“I thought, Menelrond to the main approach from Minas Angrod, with three parts of the standing force,” said Barahir, “and Hannas to the western route with the fourth.”

On that they were all agreed.

Day Two

The Druug had gathered to the inn by noon the following day. Beren came out to meet them where they crouched in the undergrowth, peeping warily out at the great building and at the tall, loud people camped around it. He greeted everybody and squatted down to talk with them.

“It is as was said on the drum,” he told them. “If these machines be not destroyed, they will cut through the shield-lines like a hot knife through fat. We People are best able to tackle them. Are you with me?”

“We should first go and look,” replied Nose. “Then we will see. If it can be done, we will do it.”

They agreed on this. Beren went back to the inn and asked for some skins full of lamp oil.

“How many do you need?” asked Emeldir. Barahir had gone off to Newfort the day before.

“There are sixteen machines at Angrod’s tower, and four by Aegnor’s,” said Beren. “We should take some spares. Say twenty-four?”

They had to take the oil from Zalta’s stores, over her vehement protests. “That’s nearly all my oil!” she wailed. “What am I supposed to light the rooms with? How can I get more oil when the Dwarves don’t come?”

“You will have to use candles, or rushlights,” said Emeldir. “I am sorry, Zalta, but we cannot do this any other way. Never fear, we will organize a caravan over Anach next spring to trade with the Dwarves. We also have our own needs to fulfil.”

The skins were delivered to the Druug by porters who goggled open-mouthed at the strange physique of the forest men, whose scanty attire in any case left little of this to be guessed at. The skins from the pile, glugging heavily with strong-smelling oil, were distributed two or three each to the Druug carriers, after which the party set off.

Days Three and Four (with the Druug)

The Druug found the dead forest of Drûn as oppressive as had Beren. Their pace through the scarifying growth was slow in the dark, and it was only towards noon of the following day that they finally arrived at the northern edge of that vast woodland charnel house. There the People had to stop and gather their spirits before they could go further. The woods had been bad enough, but the sight of the murdered plain stretching away before them under the cruel light made them gasp.

On the far side of the shallow valley, some five miles off maybe, they could see the escarpments which marked the start of the opposite rise. The blackened tower on its heights could be clearly seen.

A feeling of oppression had been gathering on them all that forenoon. Nose now gave voice to the feeling shared by all.

“This place stinks of death,” he muttered. “There is no luck here.”

Beren, alone among them, had in some measure been prepared for the desolation, both material and spiritual, but even he found it hard. Conditions were worse than he remembered.

“Luck or no luck, I mean to destroy these machines,” he said firmly. “It is for you all to decide if you will help me.”

Nose grunted. “Where are they placed?” he asked.

“I think, near the base of the slope there,” said Beren. “Too far to see from here. We must wait on Fairfeather’s report.”

Nose glanced at the dead slopes, measured the poisoned plain with his eye. After he had taken it in, he turned to Beren. “Come, let us withdraw.”

They climbed back through the serried pine corpses towards the crest. The dry growth rattled in the mournful wind. There was little cover overhead, since most of the dead needles had now fallen from the skeletons to make rustling piles under foot. The Druug were uneasy under so much naked sky.

The young eagle glided down to meet them as the sun was sinking toward the ragged tips of the dead growth. She and Beren had much talk in the eagle tongue to which the others listened with an interest tinged with awe. They had witnessed Speaks with Birds at this business for as long as they could remember, but none of them had ever grown quite used to the sight.

As soon as he had finished with the eagle, Beren turned back to his People. “Fairfeather has told me many things!” he said to them. “Let me show you how matters lie at present. Come, gather around me.” He took a stick then and, with occasional clarifications from the eagle, drew a rough map in the dirt of the clearing.¹¹

“The machines are still where I thought,” he said, “here. The Orcs have carved a great road straight up the ridge from there. There are three legions in the area, but all are camped on the bare ridge-line, roughly here,” and he illustrated with crosses scored in the dirt. “Fairfeather thinks there are smaller camps at the edge of the treeline, here.”

“That does not look good,” said Nose. “If we crept around and down, we might get through those lines, but we could never get back again. As soon as we set fire to these things, all these camps will be buzzing with angry Orcs like so many wasps’ nests.”

“My thought was rather to come from the West,” said Beren.

Nose scratched his head. “I don’t understand. Wide around, then along the base of the cliffs?”

“No,” said Beren. “Straight across the plain, keeping distance from the forest. Then back the same way afterwards.”

Nose sat up straight in astonishment. “You cannot be serious,” he said. “There is no cover at all. This is some farmers’ nonsense you are speaking.”

“Listen, Father,” said Beren patiently. “These are Orcs we are dealing with. The brighter the sun, the safer we are. So: we leave the forest edge here at dawn. We reach the machines when the sun is morning-strong, and

11 http://www.beren-one-hand.com/images/map_catapults.png

before the day's clouds have begun to gather. Approached from that side, there are no goblins between us and the machines. Those beyond will all be in their holes, hiding from the sun. The present movement of air should be in our favour. If we can fire the things of wood quickly enough, we can escape back to the West and South, into the open plain. The monsters will not be eager to follow with the sun near its height."

Nose considered. "It is true what you say, that they hate the sun," he said slowly. "The question will be whether they hate it enough."

"Think also that they will be very busy trying to put out the fires," added Beren. "The legions might have other ideas, but they are a mile further back, on top of the ridge."

Nose thought about it. "It is a bold plan, Speaks with Birds," he said at last heavily, "and it ought to succeed. But a stone lies on my heart."

Beren asked the others what they thought. None of them liked the idea, but nobody had a better plan, and it was clear that they weren't prepared to go back without trying.

He said goodnight to the eagle then, since the sun was getting low.

"Did you tell them what I said to you?" Fairfeather asked him. "That there is a new, evil presence in the tower, a will that presses us away? How we birds can no longer approach?"

Beren was silent. "No," he said at last. "There is nothing to be gained by telling them that. Either we can do this thing, or we cannot. We will find out which tomorrow."

Night came, and uneasy sleep. They rose with the dawn. The plain looked no more inviting under that grey light, and it took an effort of will to leave the cover of the dead trees, scanty as it was, and venture into it.

Their sense of unease only increased. There was no cover at all on the empty ground: the sweet grasses had been burnt to nothing, and the scorched and discoloured earth stretched bare away on all sides. The sun, rising over their right shoulders, threw their furtive black shadows a long way out to the left. It felt horribly exposed.

There were nine of them in the raiding party. Soup and Stories had been left to guard the surplus oil-skins and the other bits and pieces. Beren had tried to persuade Nose to remain as well, but the old man had been obdurate.

"If I had rope," said Beren in vexation, "I would tie you up, just as you wished to do to me, long ago."

Nose just shrugged. His son knew there was no rope, so why mention it?

The plan they had made was simple. Six of the party – Beren, Owl, Matts, Belly, Noisy and Carver – carrying three oil-filled skins apiece, would attempt to soak as many of the devices as they could. Talkative, Nose and Bearskin would remain a little way back and shoot fire-arrows on a given signal. They had prepared some ember-pots the previous evening and were carrying these now, along with some wisps of stuff to take the flame.

They were an hour out now across the plain. The catapults could be clearly seen. The quietly padding raiders felt the sun warm on their sides, but the dark tower ahead was growing in their eyes. Each step towards it seemed harder than the last. Most of them, probably, would not have held out, had they been alone; but they were together, and the comfort of company kept each to the path.

The cliffs grew steadily in their eyes until at last they eclipsed the dismal Tower on the height. As soon as the forbidding black shape was hidden from view, each of them felt an inexplicable lightening of their heart.

They turned east then, directly towards the great engines which grew now ever larger under their gaze. No Orc had yet been seen or heard, but Beren knew very well how many were massed now ahead of them, since their black weight pressed on his forehead like a wound.

But ever the worst pressure beat on his mind from the left. What was this great presence that sat now in the Tower? And how long would it remain unaware of him? He gnawed his lip in unspoken anxiety.

Wisps of clouds had appeared in the hot sky, and these were slowly growing. The catapults also grew in the vision as they trotted warily nearer: great grey structures, made of timbers gathered in who knew what distant forest. The machines had been placed in three columns of five each.

The Druug halted in a shallow trough through which a rivulet had flowed in former days, now dry. Dead willows stood here and there along its course, skeletons on which a few dried and mournful leaves still clung, but their bare shapes afforded the raiders little cover. From there, the nearest of the catapults reared up before them, a short stone's-throw away.¹²

The party looked furtively around and put their heads together.

“Here is close enough to shoot?” whispered Beren, and the archers nodded. Further muttered words arranged the plan. Five would creep to the leftmost column of catapults, one to each. Beren would go to the furthest machine, that nearest the start of the slope; nearest the Orcs. Then Carver, Matted, Belly, Noisy, in that order, to the other four machines of that sequence. Owl, who was surplus, should begin on his own at the right-most column. The archers were to wait until the oiling was done, then set all the fires at once.

The oil-carriers crept down the inner line of the column of catapults where they could make the most of the cover and of the shadow. Beren paused at the far end of the last machine, crouched in the shadow under the rough-hewn timber frame. He looked carefully around, also using his nose and ears. To the left he could make out a pen at the edge of the trees in which numbers of the large draft-beasts jostled and grumbled. He could smell their rank odour in the imperceptible drift of air towards him. These were the only living things he could see; the Orcs were hidden from sight, although he knew from his inner sense that there were many of them nearby – indeed, less than a hundred paces away. Too close for comfort. He turned his head slowly, eyes closed, searching them out. There... and there... and there.

Apart from the beasts, there was not a sound to be heard. But no – a whisper of noise behind him, with something of glugging liquidity about it. He knew what it was: it was Carver was pouring out her first skin of oil. He had better get busy with his own.

Beren concentrated on making himself unnoticeable in the way Willow had taught him, and stood slowly up. The base frame of the catapult came up almost to his shoulders. He bit his lip. He would have to climb onto it to reach the central arm, now laid straight out at rest.

It felt fearfully exposed on top of the frame. From that vantage he could even make out Orc-holes. No alarm so far. With hands that he could not prevent from shaking, Beren took the bung out of the skin and began to pour the light oil glugging along the length of the machine. The oil stink rose in his nostrils and blended sickeningly with the harsh smell of the poisoned dust.

Done. He laid the empty skin down and let himself slip silently onto the ground. He looked back up the lines of machines and could glimpse Druug as they slipped across between the columns. He picked up his two remaining skins and moved to the end machine of the second column. Again the impossible climb. Pull the bung, pour. Sharp smell of oil in the nose. Try not to look at the Orc-holes.

As Beren was distributing the oil, his mind was smitten by a sudden blow. He almost fell off the carriage

¹² http://www.beren-one-hand.com/images/map_catapults_detail.png

with the shock. Some mighty presence had become aware of him.

Who are you? the mind demanded. *WHO ARE YOU.*

His own spirit cowered back beneath the force of it, but refused to reply.

In the two or three seconds this interchange had taken, the former silence had been replaced by yells from hundreds of throats. The Orcs were alerted.

Throwing down the skin, Beren leaped from the carriage and scooped up the full one remaining. Owl had soaked the machine ahead of him; he dodged and ran to the next. Owl had done that one too.

Orcs were swarming out of the ground behind him now, and one or two of their arrows zipped past.

“Fire them!” he bellowed in Druug. “Nose, Talks! Shoot!” Almost as soon as he called, he saw the first of the lighted arrows curving towards him through the air.

At the third catapult now. The arrows from behind were whipping past in a wicked rain. He saw Carver running ahead of him. The ’pults in the middle column were all dark with oil. He glimpsed Owl on the left, trying to clamber onto a frame, caught sight of him the instant he was hit by an arrow in the neck. Owl fell. Without breaking stride, Beren slung his own last skin at that machine; it burst on the frame in a wide splash of oil. He reached Carver; he was running at twice her stumpy-legged speed. Without thinking about it he simply gathered the woman up and tucked her under his arm. No arrow had hit him yet – he couldn’t understand it, they were flying in from all sides like a blizzard.

Most of the machines had caught flame now. The shooters must have been firing like mad. The two machines just behind him bloomed into sudden fire. Instant impressions: heat on his cheek and back. Mats on the ground, full of arrows. Orcs streaming in from the right like angry ants.

He reached the hollow, saw the three there, still bending to the pots, then standing up to fire. Belly and Noisy now helping, shooting like mad men. Nose and Talks had arrows sticking out of them, but had not stopped shooting.

“Leave it!” he shouted at them. “Run for it!”

The Druug dropped their things, turned and ran.

They had been running for several hundred yards before they realized that there was no pursuit. Beren set Carver on her feet, his shoulder cracking with relief at the release of weight. He straightened up, panting hoarsely, heart thumping in his chest, and looked back.

The Orcs were swarming over the catapults, most of which were by now blazing furiously. The creatures were frantically shovelling dirt onto the fires, using their hands and anything else which lay to hand. The sun was pouring directly onto their heads, but Beren could feel the steel will that kept them, moaning, under its scorching rays and which drove them to work at such a manic, impossible pace. Indeed, the goblins were themselves being burnt in the fires they were trying to extinguish.

Beren turned to examine his comrades, who were similarly gazing back while they panted. What he saw brought a grim look to his face. Of all of them, only he and Carver were untouched. Bearskin had escaped with grazing shots which seemed to have pierced only flesh; Talkative had an arrow in the meat of his bottom and another in his shoulder. Big Belly and Noisy both had arrows in the leg. But worst off was Nose: he was stuck with four arrows, the two worst hits being two arrows low on the right of the chest, and one in the stomach.

There was nothing to be done. "Come," he said, and they marched as quickly as they could into the stinking desert, directly away from the roaring pyres which were all that remained of most of the catapults. Still there came no pursuit. The sun was in their eyes for a time, but shortly, following their own tracks, they reached the point where they could turn south.

If the approach had been oppressive, the return was a trial of pain. Nose was breathing with the sound of a wounded bull, and every now and then he had to stop to cough up blood. The badly wounded ones were all beginning to stagger. Beren was supporting Belly, and Carver had lent a shoulder to Noisy. Nose had refused any help with a shake of the head. He was walking as if he were made of iron and could walk until he reached the Last Ocean and fell off the edge of the world.

Beren had not picked up Matted Hair, he had not weaved left to check on Owl. But he knew that they were dead. Even as he glimpsed them, he had known. As he knew what would happen with Nose.

"Father, you should rest," he said.

Nose shook his head. "Not here," he said hoarsely, and Beren understood.

They reached the mournful shelter of the dead forest at last. Made Bean Soup and Story-teller came running to meet them.

"Help my father," he said to them. The two of them supported the white-faced and gasping Nose from both sides.

Stories looked them over, fear on his face. "Our son, and my brother?" he asked.

Beren shook his head. "But quick and certain," he said. "Time to mourn when we are out of this death-place."

The sun was sinking as they struggled over the sear ridge of Drûn and at last again found themselves in the cool shade of living pines. The clean scent of a million, million growing needles was a balm to the soul.

With the last rays slanting amber between tall trunks, the party reached a tiny hollow. A trickle of water played there among tender mosses. Nose's legs sagged from under him at that point and his two supporters let him gently down. The others dropped exhausted to the sward; some slurped water gratefully from little pools in the rocks.

Beren squatted by his foster-father. Nose was breathing now with difficulty. He could no longer cough, and his lips were white beneath the bloody foam.

"I knew it would be today," he whispered to Beren. "But I am glad to go. I have missed my Sunshine."

"Father," said Beren, "forgive me. You were right. We should have tried something else."

"Forgive?" husked Nose. "Farmer talk. Wastes time. I go. Good hunting, Son."

"Good hunting, Father," whispered Beren, his throat constricted.

The old man closed his eyes. He kept up the struggle for breath for upwards of an hour afterwards, as the evening drew in and the fit busied themselves taking care of the wounded. The stars were out and bats were flitting through the trees before the old Wose breathed his last, laying down the burden of life, in that peaceful place.

The Druug were weeping, but Beren could feel nothing. Why is my heart empty? he asked himself. Have I

truly become so hard? His throat was tight, but it felt like something physical, a reaction against the caustic dust of the plain perhaps; but there was no particular emotion, only a dullness.

The catapults at other fort remained to be done. He could not ask his comrades. "I am going to the other place," he said to them. "There are four more machines to be fired. I will do it."

"I will come with you," said Carver, and he was glad. He went to Nose and touched the man's withered cheek, and the great nose which rose like a tower out of his face; but there was nothing there, the pallid flesh was already growing cold. "Goodbye, Father," he said, but in his heart was only emptiness.

The pair of them loped through the whole night without pause, but when they reached the other tower, they found their journey had been without purpose, because the morning sky was thick with cloud, and Orcs were everywhere.

"What will you do now?" asked Carver of him, when they had retreated to a place of more safety.

"I will go to my father," Beren answered, "my farmer-father. This cloud has opened the gate which lets out the bull. Swords will be gathering to his standard."

She smiled at him with sadness in her eyes, and came to embrace him.

"Good fortune go with you, O tall, blue-eyed companion who no longer clumps," she said.

Days Three and Four (in Ladros)

On the evening of the day on which Beren had gone off with the Drúedain, Andreth was sitting with her nieces Hirwen and Gilwen, desultorily trying to hear their conversation. In between times, her thoughts would range over the world and deep back into the past. Scenes from her own life would play themselves in her head, and she could see again the faces she once knew, and hear the life in the voices. It was a peaceful, dreamy state, one that she often indulged in.

Such was her life these days; it ran evenly, with few disturbances. She knew that matters in the land were moving toward a desperate conclusion, but so far only a few ripples of this conflagration had reached the Hall.

Someone had come into the room, doubtless one of the maids who came and went. Andreth could not tell their flitting shades apart in the vague darkness. The young were so uninteresting, so without any substance, so like to one another! She was sure it had not been so in her day.

But what was this? Something out of the ordinary was happening, she could hear it in the tones of the voices. Her elder niece came over to her then – Andreth could remember her well as a girl: a tubby little thing, running around in the newly-built Hall – and laid a hand on her arm.

"Aunt," said Hirwen in her ear, "you have a visitor."

Andreth sat up. "Who...?" she said, but then the person himself was there; and he was a presence she knew, one of those who could penetrate the veil. Her young nephew! She smiled blindly in the direction of his voice and grasped the hand that was laid on hers. "Nephew!" she said warmly. "It is long since I saw you last. Do not ask me when that was, but I know it must be many weeks!"

Barahir knelt by her. "Too long, Aunt," he said, "but they keep me busy nowadays, you know."

"The hour is late," she said to him. "We were just going to bed. But tell me about everything. I want to know what is happening, and these girls never know anything. What is happening with the war, and with your

brother?”

“Aunt,” he said to her, “I’m afraid there is no time right now. I am not here just to visit; I want to get you all away. Have you heard about this haven we built at Aeluin?”

“The Blue Lake,” she replied vaguely. “Oh yes, I remember it well. I used to love the free air, I always think you could breathe better up there. And I met him there, you know. At the beautiful lake. But the folk couldn’t stay: there wasn’t enough to eat.”

“Andreth, listen to me,” Barahir said into her ear. “I am talking about now, not times past. We need to get you back to the high country, at least for a time. It is not safe to remain in the town. I have arranged for you all to travel there. I will send Gilraen, the daughter of our kinsman Menelrond, with you to see that everything is done for your safety and your comfort. There is a place already prepared for you. It will not be so comfortable as the Hall, I am afraid, but you will be safe there.”

“You want me to leave the Hall?” She was bewildered. It took him several minutes more of patient insistence before she really understood what was afoot. The sisters had already gone with Gilraen to their chambers to pack, in what fluster can readily be imagined.

Patiently, Barahir went again over the necessaries. Andreth grasped it at last. “It is not safe here?” she said, peering into the vague, changing glow that was all that remained to her of sight. “The Orcs are coming?”

“They are not coming this instant, but they may easily come soon,” he said. “Battle will come in fewer days than a hand has fingers, of that I am certain. Rise now, Aunt. You must help us tell over what you need to take.”

She grasped his arm convulsively. “The sword. I must take that. Do not bundle me off without it!”

“I have not forgotten. I will see to it,” he promised. “Is it still under your bed?”

“I trust so,” she said. “Nay, I know it is. I cannot easily bend so far to reach now, but I would know if it were absent. I can feel its presence, you know.”

“I can well believe it,” he said. “Come now, stand with my help.”

She would not yet let go the matter of the sword. “Your son,” she said, still clutching at his arm. “Will he come for it?”

Barahir hesitated. “In his own time, I believe yes,” he replied.

She thought about that, then sighed. “Eh, dear. What a strange world it is. Come then Nephew, help me up. Aeluin, is it? I look forward to having the high air in my lungs again, there is that to be said for it.”

At the inn, the following day was a day of waiting. The raids on the catapults must be taking place, or so it was hoped, but news of their success or failure could not be expected before the morrow. The body of troops on rotation had been divided between three palisades – the one in the far West already fought at in the spring, at the affair of the Torches, as well as two in the northern valleys leading up to the former Elven towers. They had all set out on the same day as Beren and the Druug. No word had yet come back from any of them.

No word: nobody sent messages, not Bregolas or Taenthîr either.

Barahir arrived back at the inn towards midday, having ridden hard since before dawn. Despite the lack of news, he found no shortage of things to do, of matters to discuss and arrange. In the short interval between one meeting and the next, he wondered if Boromir had also been plagued with this mountain of words, this

great over-toppling pile of arguments and assignments. The songs made warfare sound almost easy, and certainly simple; according to them, all that one needed was a glamorous sword and a battle-fey charger – impeccably groomed and bedizened, of course. Barahir had neither, but what he did have in their place was the promise of fifteen thousand sturdy farmers, most of whom had some training in war. He rather believed he had the favourable end of the bargain; but the resources he had in hand, although of more practical fighting use than the single horse and blade of the songs, admittedly required a deal of organizing.

However, as had been the case from the beginning, he was also acutely conscious of the fragile establishment of the forces at his disposal. The farming folk of Dorthonion had to work hard to feed their bellies, and there was never a great amount left in excess. Just the food alone to maintain a large fraction of the entire adult population of Ladros for any length of time was a ruinous cost, one which would lead to widespread starvation if prolonged for more than a few weeks. Indeed, he thought the Enemy could win the fight without a stroke simply by keeping them in a state of alarm for that length of time. He could only hope that the mind behind this wave of filth and fire remained unaware of some facts of life faced on a daily basis by peasant farmers.

All now hinged on the harvest. In fields everywhere, men and women had worked frantically cutting and gathering the ripe ears, working from the first grey light of day until the last blue of the evening. It needed only a few more days until all could be safely stacked under covers, but it was clear from the towers of puffy cloud which had been building higher each day that the fine weather needed for the work would not long continue. Wet fields would dry again, but Barahir believed that the war would be decided long before that happened. A sudden vision of Orcs laying the fields to waste came to him and made him shiver. We must not let that happen! he said to himself. But to prevent it, he needed fighters, doughty fighters, and many of them.

Barahir was heartened to see how many had already arrived. Word of the approaching siege machines had travelled the length and breadth of Dorthonion; there was hardly a living person in the whole land who had not realized the game was up. Now they were gathering: the early finishers, the shepherds and orchard workers. When he went to his rest late that evening he took a last glance out the door and was cheered by the numerous camp fires winking in the open lands down beside the river.

Day Five

The day following dawned overcast, a layer of cloud that thickened as they watched. Barahir looked out on it, together with Emeldir and his nephews.

He turned to the others. “This is it,” he said. “They will come. Send out the messengers. Our people must leave the harvest and come to muster.”

“The levies will know,” said Emeldir. “They will have started already. But I will send swift riders, as we arranged.”

The remainder of their day was full of work. As the light was fading towards the close of day, councils at the inn were interrupted by the sound of horses. It was the party Barahir had sent east, a body of some twenty horse under Gildor’s bosom friend Urioc: a stocky man with a pleasantly ugly face, very broad and round, with cheerful dark chips of eyes sunk deep under bristling brows.

Barahir cast a quick glance over the horsemen. Few were wounded, all seemed full of cheer. There were two horses without riders.

“Your faces carry a hopeful message, Captain,” he said to Urioc, “unless I mistake matters?”

“Sir, you do not,” bubbled Urioc. “We destroyed all five machines, and wreaked fearful carnage among the goblin scum as well. Had there only been more of us! We might have won this war at a toss.”

“I rejoice to hear it,” said Barahir. “Your own losses seem slight?”

“No dead,” said Urioc, dismounting. “We left four wounded at the settlement. I think they will recover. Can someone of their kindness please fetch my men some drink? The dust has parched us.”

“Come in out of this gloom,” said Barahir. “You have not long beaten the rain, I think. Come into the inn, put yourselves at ease, and tell me your tale over a crock of Zalta’s fine beer.”

When all were seated over the promised drink, Urioc commenced his report. He said that they had come upon the machines out in the plain, a little way beyond the south road which curved around the horn of land at the mouth of the valley of Ladros. It was bright day, the sun shone hot out of a cloudless sky, and the Orcs were all huddled sullen and sleepy in their flimsy burrows. The catapults had been torched without resistance. The horsemen turned then on the cowering vermin, who were caught between blade and the blazing sun. Still, the Orcs were there in their thousands, and twenty horsemen could do no more than put a dent in their numbers.

“We had to come away in the end,” laughed Urioc. “We could not lift our arms any more!”

“They didn’t resist?” asked Barahir. He was having difficulty quite grasping the situation.

“Plenty of arrows from cover, as they could, but they would not abide the sun at all,” replied the cheerful man.

Barahir looked thoughtfully at Baragund. Returning his glance, the Soldier said to him, “Are you thinking that we might have dealt the same with these to the North?”

“Aye,” said Barahir slowly, “something like that. Actually I was thinking of Mithbrûn. What was it he said? Be bold? We have not followed that advice.”

“Neither did we choose the weakest force for our target,” said the Soldier. “Well, I do not think we can alter our plans now. They seemed good enough at the time we hammered them out.”

“All the same,” said Barahir, “it is a pity. And it is not a matter of good or bad plans: we simply didn’t think of it.”

They spoke a little more with Urioc, and at the last, Barahir asked him if he had seen anything of Taenthîr and his army.

“They come,” the ugly man reassured him. “They will be at Newfort tomorrow. A thousand foot, perhaps half that number mounted.”

Gildor was waiting for his partner when the leaders had finished with him. The two embraced with rough tenderness, then the younger man led his bond-friend through the pelting rain to where he might sleep.

* * * * *

The Orcs at the western tower were all acutely conscious of Mairon’s presence over to the East – many miles away as the Rrrk runs, but nevertheless a brooding presence in their minds. Exposed to that perilous scrutiny, nobody wanted to be seen as lacking in enthusiasm. Therefore they set off as soon as the sun was well covered, in a great show of battle-eagerness. Beren had scarcely left Carver in the dawn of that day before she witnessed, from her hiding place up the slope, the great wrinkled beasts being hitched into teams of six in front of each machine. When all were in place, they were whipped, with many snarls and tossings of their blunt heads, into starting the heavy wooden frames into laboured motion.

Carver watched morosely as the column formed up and headed up the path. The way led into a narrowing space of cleared land which climbed steeply up in a defile towards the ridge beyond. The winter's frightful wave of fire had not reached this far, so the trees densely sown on either side of the road remained thick with foliage.

The Orcs on the road glanced with suspicion and apprehension at the dark walls of trees which pressed in upon them on each side. There was something lurking in these forests that was hostile to them, so much was clear. Those few foraging parties which had ventured in had not returned.

Stories and Soup joined Carver in the bushes some time after midday. By signs, Carver told them of her arrival with Speaks with Birds in the dawn, and of how Speaks had decided that an attack was impossible, and had gone off to his farmers. Soup in reply reassured her about Big Belly, her brother, and the other wounded. They let signing lapse then in their listless fatigue, and for a long time they just monitored the progress of the army, wondering numbly what it was all going to come to. They kept pace with the convoy, creeping silently just inside the forest, flinching at every bellow of the strange haul-beasts as they muscled the machines step by step up the hill.

Carver suddenly shook herself from her torpor. With a strange, vehement gesture she motioned the other two to come back a little, further from the road.

"Why are we doing nothing?" she asked them fiercely. "We could be shooting some of them. We could shoot those beasts, anyway."

Story-teller shrugged his blowpipe loose from its sling. "I have this," he said, "and Soup and I have our bows. But we cannot kill many of the Orcs."

Soup was looking thoughtful. "I may have a better idea," she said. "You did not use the oil skins you brought?"

"There was no chance to," Carver replied.

"Well, there is plenty of chance now," the grizzled woman observed.

Carver looked down again towards the steep path between the trees. She saw how narrow it was; how dispersed the Orcs were. Suddenly she realized that the older woman was right. "Wait, wait here, I will fetch the oil!" she said, and she set off running back down the hill. She was back inside quarter of an hour, carrying a charcoal pot and four gurgling skins. "The fifth one had leaked," she panted.

"Here, give me two," said Stories.

"Should you not rather shoot the fire-arrows?" Carver said. "You are the best shot, and the quickest. Soup and I can take two skins each. We will throw them from the bushes."

They agreed on this, but then Stories held up his hand to stop them. "How if I first put darts in the beasts in front?" he said. "The convoy will halt, and the guards will all run forward to see what is wrong. Thus you will have more chance. One cannot throw those skins far."

"Good," said Soup, "but one more thing I would suggest: that you cross now, ahead of the first soldiers, and fire from the other side. That will lead them that way, away from us."

When all was settled, they dispersed to their places. Stories slipped across the track a little further up the valley. He drifted back down through the trees like a ghost and laid the fire-pot down in the place that seemed best. A twittered, false bird-call or two to alert the women; then he waited for the best moment.

Carver and Soup crept and hid themselves on their side a little way up and down from where they knew Stories was placed with the pot.

The column seemed to take forever to come up with them. Carver began to feel stray drops falling from the bulging grey sky. Please, Water God, she prayed, not now! Hold off just a few minutes more!

The time ran off at last, the rain remaining thankfully in the clouds. Carver, watching the leading beasts dragging their great load up the hill, heard and saw no sign of the dart, but suddenly one of the animals lay right down with a groan. The teamster laid his whip in savage strokes across its hide, but could induce no movement in the twitching carcass. Before anybody could do anything about it, another stricken beast collapsed; then another.

By this time the Orcs were almost off their heads with bewildered rage. Just as Stories predicted, the teamsters and guards behind had rushed forward to see what was happening. They were crowded together now screaming at each other.

The second catapult stood right in front of Carver, and for the moment it was unguarded. With her heart in her mouth she stepped out and swung the heavy skin. With a fierce rush of joy, even as the sack was still curving through the air, she saw that she had judged the throw well. It burst on the timbers with a wonderful splash of oil, but by that time Carver was already slipping back into cover to grab her remaining skin. Shouts from the gully told her that someone had seen something, but as yet she heard no pursuit. A sudden angry roar of voices sounded from further down the track. Soup? No time to worry about it. The Druug girl crept uphill, parallel to the track, as quickly as she could. She could make out details of the train through gaps in the leaves. There was a great wagon to pass, filled with curious pots, round like great gourds; then she reached the foremost catapult. This one was going to be difficult, since the open path in front of it was thick with gesticulating, arguing and in some cases fighting goblins. She would need almost to be standing on their toes, at the very edge of the undergrowth.

No time for fear, she told herself, although unconsciously she was sobbing with it. Heft the skin. She could *smell* the goblins. Dash in, ugly heads turning, as if in slow motion. A mighty heave: yes! Yes! A lovely splash of oil over wood, the dark runnels spreading swiftly down. Turn, run! Run! Hard as you can. She was already doing it. She ducked into the bushes, just eluding the grasping hands of outraged Orcs.

Carver was weaving, panting, trying to confuse the crashing pursuit by every art she knew. Twist, duck, twist!

Magically, somehow, she had done it. She had disengaged, had sneaked up the hill, leaving the yelling goblins thrashing in the undergrowth below. Heart thumping madly. Heaving breath, trying to draw the air in quietly. Now she could relax a little, take her own time to withdraw. But Soup?

Just as this thought came to her, another roar came from the Orc throats, and the red glow of fire bloomed through the trees. This was the front catapult, the one she had just left. A second pyre sent its flames into the air, down the line; then a distant third. Stories had found three of his marks.

Where was Made Bean Soup? Carver turned and ran to where she had stowed her bow, swept it up, and fitted an arrow to the string without breaking step. She ran down, her eyes sweeping this nightmare fringe of land that she could never, ever in her life think of again without her heart pounding with the memory of fear, without the stinking sweat of it breaking out again on her body.

There! A parcel of Orcs, two of them dragging something limp between them. The group was splitting up, those not encumbered running now toward the fires.

Still only three fires. Where was the fourth?

Quicker than it takes to mention it, Carver put an arrow through the neck of one Orc, then the other. Scrambling down. Soup lying motionless between the dying, blood-messed bodies; the woman bleeding from a great blunt wound on the head. Without stopping to think what to do, Carver got an arm under the older woman, half-hoisted her, and dragged her further back into the forest as quickly as ever she could. The amazing memory of being carried under Speaks's arm only the previous day flashed through her mind. Under his arm, at the run! Such strength was not in her own stumpy body, but all the same, she was half-carrying the stricken woman quicker than a man could walk.

When she could climb no more, she laid her burden down and stood breathing in great gasps, her heart thumping in her chest as if it wanted to burst right out of it. Had she come far enough away? The turmoil and the fires were still to be seen, down the slope. But Carver could detect no pursuit; the Lady of the Woods be thanked, oh be thanked. And the Water God too; for still the rain held off, and the roaring fires towered high.

As soon as she had her breathing a little under control, she squatted to examine Soup's wound. The woman moaned and fluttered her eyes. Carver could not tell for sure if the bone was broken, but she did not think so.

Soup's eyes opened a little more. She focussed first on Carver's face, then looked to either side.

"Where is Stories?" she whispered.

Even as she spoke there sounded a twitter of no true bird in the middle distance. Carver trilled in answer, and in a few breaths Story-teller had slipped through the undergrowth to them and was squatting down anxiously next to Carver at his wife's side. Soup smiled through the pain at the face of her man and held hands with him tightly.

A sudden concussion shook the air, causing all three Druug to start. Stories and Carver, looking quickly down the hill to where the road ran, saw a great red glow blooming there. The glow faded again, leaving a dense knot of black smoke rising into the air. A faint cacophony of yells from the Orcs reached their ears.

None of them understood it, no-one had anything to say. The two fit ones turned their attention back to the injured woman.

"We must take her further away," said Stories. With Carver's help he picked up his wife and began to carry her up through the mighty trunks which reared up all around them. Gradually the tumult and the flicker of the fires diminished behind them. After some laborious climbing they made their way around a small spur. There Stories found a spot where the great uplifted hand of the roots of a fallen tree offered some slight shelter. The rain was coming heavier now and drips began to fall sparsely onto the forest floor around them. The fresh smell of it pleased their noses, and the peaceful splat of drops onto dead leaves.

"What happened?" asked Stories as soon as they were settled and listening to the slow pat-pat of the drops.

"I missed the first throw," whispered Soup. "I do not know if the shame of it will ever leave me. I came close for the second, to at least make sure of that one. Too close."

"No shame, my joy," Stories soothed her tenderly. "Indeed, it is a great hero that you are. Now you will have your very own story, to be told by the fire, wherever the People gather. I will make it of you. 'Made Bean Soup and the Burning of the Trap.'"

She made a moue and pushed at him weakly.

"Story-teller," said Carver to him, "my head is telling me things. It is telling me that Speaks with Birds should know what we have done here. And since we have no drum, someone must run with the word."

He looked unhappy at this. "I had rather hoped you would stay and help me with my woman," he said.

“I will come back,” she said. “I am thinking just to run to where the farm-men have newly built their wall of trees, over the hill from here. They surely will have messengers there with horses who can carry the news further, even to Speaks.”

“All right,” he said. “I will leave sign if we must move from here. But I do not think that we will.”

It was several hours journey to the palisade, and as she started loping towards it, in the easy pace which eats up the miles, Carver tried to remember when she had last slept. Not last night. Was it the night before? It was all a haze in her head. She kept fixed in her mind the need to alert the farmers. As the hours went by, as she ran, the day darkened to night, and the rain fell steadily on her head. The mist in her head thickened, and the desire to lie down and rest became ever more demanding. In the end it was only a passionate aversion to letting down Speaks with Birds which kept her going.

She reached the palisade a little before midnight. She walked straight out of the forest toward the first people she could see, this being several archers sitting under canvas around a pot of something fragrant which simmered on their fire. Their astonishment at seeing this half-naked, stubby girl trudging up to them can scarcely be imagined. They leaped up as one and stood goggling open-mouthed at the maiden.

“Please,” she said to them, “is there one among you who can hear my words? Please, I have news for you.”

“I’ll be switched if that isn’t a Druug,” said one of the men.

Carver stood before them, repeating her plea, urgency plainly to be seen on her tired face.

“I’m betting she’s got some word of the enemy,” said one of the others. “There’s something up, you can see from her face.”

“I’ll fetch Sarge,” said the third. “Why don’t you give her a blanket, Monar, and see if she wants some tea, maybe.”

Carver wanted neither. All she wanted was sleep; but first she had to complete the task she had set herself. “Is there someone who can hear my words?” she pleaded.

The sergeant soon arrived, and many other curious spectators were gathering. “Druug all right,” said the sergeant, looking Carver up and down. “Anyone know that lingo?”

“Chap in C company might,” came a laconic voice from the ring of onlookers. “Southerner.”

“Well don’t stand there gawking,” said the sergeant, “hop along and fetch him! Here, Monar, Barlas, can’t you get a blanket around the young lady? Haven’t seen so much tit since I left off milking.”

“Offered before, Sarge,” said Monar, “but she didn’t want it. Looks fair tuckered out if you ask me.”

There came a bustle of hurried steps as a short, brown-haired man approached the fire. He stared in disbelief at the Druug girl for a second, then addressed her in her own language. “What brings you here, Sister, so far from the woods and hills of the South?”

“Oh, blessed one,” she cried, “you do not know how glad I am to find one who can hear me. These others are as deaf as stones. I am here in these northern woods this season with others of my people – but I am too weary for the full story, forgive me. I came here with these short tidings: many of these small spawn of the Pit approach now down the path there toward you.”

“Sit you down, Sister, and rest,” said the man. “We know this of the Pit-spawn, it is not news to us. It grieves me that you have tired yourself just to tell us that.”

“No, no,” she said, still standing. “That is not all. They drag with them great – I do not know what to call them: knots, frames, huge traps made of wood. One told us that these things have great arms to fling stones or fire at fighting men, and that we should by all means in our power destroy them, lest the Enemy use them to beat down you, his foes – with whom we People stand as one family in this dire pass. There were four of these things; we have burnt three. I am sorry that we could not manage them all; but as it is, my elder sister has nearly paid with her life. I do not think we could have done more, and still all walked the earth afterwards.”

“Wait, wait!” said the man. “I must tell all this to my, to my, uh, to my uncle here.” He rapidly relayed the startling news to the sergeant.

“Someone go and fetch the captain,” was the sergeant’s response.

Hannas arrived shortly afterwards. He listened to the report from the Southerner while gazing in wonder at the exhausted Druug.

“They burned three out of the four catapults?” he exclaimed. “Are you sure?”

The Southerner quizzed Carver again, then turned back to his officer. “Yes, Sir,” he said. “I’m sure of it.”

Hannas scowled at the girl, looking over her dirty and stubby figure. “It doesn’t sound very likely to me,” he said.

The Southerner, whose name was Ēanoc, straightened up stiffly. “With respect, Sir,” he said firmly, “if a Druug tells you something, you can trust it. They don’t lie. I was just concerned to find out exactly what happened. They’ve got no word for catapult, that’s what complicates the thing.”

“Hmph. All right. I suppose we’d better get a message off to Barahir. Thank her then, and send her on her way, before these young bull-calves wear out her chest with their stares.”

Some more Druug speech passed back and forth while Hannas tapped his leg impatiently. Ēanoc turned back to him at last. “Seems one of the company was wounded, Sir,” he said. “She’s asking for salve, and something warm to wrap her in.”

Hannas turned testily to the sergeant. “Look after this, Balan, can’t you? Must I do everything? Fetch the leech along, give her some salve and a blanket, and send her on her way. We’ve got a war to fight.”

The master of healing took one look at the Druug girl standing shivering in the rain outside his tent and said, “This woman needs to rest.” He ushered her with Ēanoc under shelter of the canvas, and listened while the Southerner explained the matter.

“She won’t stay and rest, though,” concluded Ēanoc. “One of her companions was hurt, she wants to get back. She was asking if we could spare some wound-salve and something warm to wrap the injured in.”

The master considered. “I can provide her with that,” he said, “but how far is it back? I said it before: she looks ready to drop.”

Ēanoc repeated the question in Druug. “She says about half the night, Sir.”

“Hmm.” The master asked some questions about the location and nature of the wound. He went though a partition and they could hear him moving about, opening chests and so forth. When he came back he was carrying a warm blanket, bandages, a box of salve, and lastly a small leather pouch. He opened the last of these and took out a pellet of compressed and dried leaves.

“She should chew one of these,” he said. “Only one, not more. Tell her not to swallow it, but to lodge it in the side of the mouth, so. She’ll lose feeling in her mouth for the time, but it will keep her going until she gets back to her companions. Afterwards she must sleep, perhaps for a full day. Can you tell her that?”

After all was relayed, the girl turned grateful dark eyes on the healer and smiled with her whole broad face at him, neat white teeth showing. She said something in Druug.

“What does she say?” asked the man.

Ēanoc grinned. “She thanks you from the bottom of her heart, Sir,” he said, “and she wishes you many laughing babies.”

After the visitors had left, the grizzle-bearded healer sat down in his tent. There was much to prepare for the coming battle, which he dreaded, knowing well what awful fruit it would bear; but he allowed himself this short moment of idleness, listening to the rain and thinking about the strange encounter. “Babies?” he muttered to himself, shaking his head. But then his lips twitched. Beset with worries as he was, it brought a welcome touch of warmth to his heart.

Day Six

Beren arrived at the inn in the dawn, a day after he had left Carver looking out at the swarming Orcs in that place where Aegnor’s folk had once sung, spun and lived in beauty. He had curled up to sleep for a couple of hours on the way, but despite the nap, he still felt tired. His heart was dull; he felt nothing over Nose’s death. He could only think of the immense series of hard tasks to accomplish which stretched away as far as he could see into the immediate future.

He arrived not long after the horse-borne messenger from Hannas, thus found his father in the act of receiving the news of the successful Druug attack on the second cluster of catapults. Beren listened to this report with a wonderful lightening of his heart, mixed with grateful amazement. Great Powers – three out of the four machines destroyed! Had Carver really managed all that on her own initiative?

Barahir, his face also alight with the news, turned to his son. “Did you have a hand in that, Son?”

Beren laughed. “No!” he said. He gestured to the retreating messenger. “That girl he speaks of can only have been Carver. I left her at first light yesterday. We thought the Orcs there too hard a nut to crack. The other two unwounded must have joined her later in the day, and together they somehow found a way. That is fine news!”

“It is indeed,” agreed Barahir. “But what of the main group of catapults, under Angrod’s tower? We’ve heard no word.”

Beren told him then all of what had occurred in the first raid. Barahir listened to him with wonder and sympathy written on his face. “You all did wonderfully well,” he said when Beren had finished. “You and your wild friends have fought for us like heroes. Such daring! You pulled the very whiskers of death. It grieves me to hear that some of your people paid the price of it. We must never forget their sacrifice, and we never will.

“But for now we must stick to dull business. How many machines do you think remain?”

“Father,” replied Beren, “I don’t know for sure. From the main group, we failed to fire two; but the Orcs may have rescued one or two more. Only time will tell. But do you know, I think we would have got them all, despite your whiskers. But something found us out: some being, some presence. It alerted the goblin guards, and from then the fat was in the fire, well and truly.” He went on to describe the powerful and ominous presence he had felt in his mind.

His father heard him out, all delight now vanished from his face. "I had feared we might have to face more than Orcs," was all that he said at the end. "Well, it is the fortune of war. We must do what we can."

A little later that morning, as the sun rose higher in the sky, the birds found Beren and told him all that they had seen. He relayed this to Barahir. "Both the northern palisades are under attack," was what he told his father, "but so far they hold. Still no movement in the Vale. The Orcs to the East, in the valley mouth, approach but slowly. The birds describe a body of men, which seems likely to be Taenthîr's force, camped under the walls of Newfort. Other groups of our fighters are massing to the South of the town."

"That last may be Baragund," said Barahir. "His people have nothing like so far to come as ours. Is that all their news?"

"One more thing," said Beren. "There is war in the skies again, as it was some years past, and also last winter. This time it goes less well for us. The sky is no longer ours over a wide area centred on Angrod's tower. The spies of the Enemy are contained within those limits for the time, but our side cannot push them back. My birds speak also of this same power I felt myself. They say it blinds and blunts them."

Barahir had no comment. Beren thought he looked old and tired. "When did you last sleep, Father?" he said.

"Me?" said Barahir. "I sleep every night. Besides, I might ask the same of you."

"Just now there is no sleep in me," answered Beren. Nevertheless, after half an hour spent listlessly watching wagons full of fighters roll in from the West, he found a tree set back in a thicket and curled up to sleep under its whispering canopy. Just for the moment there was nothing for him to do.

Barahir had not told his son quite the truth. He did indeed lie down to rest every night, but in fact received little. A host of worries consumed his mind. There was no clear path, and so much depended on what he decided. He was an amateur at this, with experience now of only two battles, and neither of them had anything useful to say about the present dilemma. When to move? That was the vital question. The wagons and riders were streaming in, his people were gathering; but as yet not one half of them were here. If he advanced into Ladros too soon, he would not have all his force; yet if he left it too late, the Enemy could already have conquered most of their heart-lands by the time Barahir's men reached the plain.

He went to look out the window at the traffic rolling past on its way to the vast camping place which had been hurriedly prepared half a mile downstream. He sent then for some of the camp-marshals, and lastly spoke with Emeldir. "What do you think?" he asked her.

"I think, go," she said. "Considering the numbers we have sent to the two fences in the North, we can never have more than three thousands, so we are now only one short. And remember that Baragund is expected to bring six thousands, the Guards two, Taenthîr one, plus another two thousand mounted. Our contribution is not much; but we have further to go, and if we do not start now, we may not arrive in time. The palisade on the main approach cannot hold for long against three legions, armed with catapults."

"You are right," he said with relief. "I have been too close to the matter to see it clearly. Good – then pass the order to move out one hour after the noon meal. We will camp where nightfall finds us and hope to be at Newfort tomorrow. The remainder will have to join us as they can."

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The assault on Hannas's palisade had begun with the dawn. The attack was heralded by a great stone which sailed over the fence and landed in the camp behind, killing two horses. The mighty thump on the earth and the screams of the wounded beasts woke every person with an electric jolt. In a very short time the whole camp had pulled on its leathers and mail, clapped on a helmet and run to its post. By that time two more stones had sailed out of the drizzling sky. One had clipped the top of a pale before smashing its way through

several tents in the ground behind; the other hit the ground in front of the barrier, bouncing to strike the fence with a shuddering blow.

“Damn that catapult!” shouted Hannas. “Where is it? Can anybody see?” But nobody could; the air was too thick with misty rain. The captain cursed. “We’ll have to nobble that, and quick,” he continued, as another stone whizzed out of the grey air and struck the fence-base with a thud. “Get a squad together! Fifty! With axes, fire and oil!”

As quickly as could be achieved, the squad and their equipment were assembled. The aim of the unseen catapult was improving; already by the time the raiding party had set off, two of the stout poles of the barrier had been broken, the pieces only remaining vertical by virtue of the ropes which tied them to their neighbours.

The raiders set off, but quarter of an hour later they were back, with the news that there were too many enemy around the catapult. The Orcs had set it up in the clearing, a few hundred paces uphill, that surrounded the cottage some in the company knew as the home of one Gorlim – the Mad Blacksmith as they named him among themselves. The machine was unapproachable.

“ ‘Hold for two days,’ they told me,” muttered Hannas when the baffled squad had finished reporting, that having been the latest order from headquarters. “I’d like to know how. All right, get the people off them sticks. Spread ’em out behind, thin as they can. Nothing we can do but wait.”

So that is what they did. Throughout the long morning, the rocks fell. These gradually smashed the whole centre of the palisade to splinters. An occasional projectile sailed over and took one or two lives behind. The glum defenders were not to know how much worse they might have had to endure, had Carver not inadvertently fired the wagon carrying the fire-bombs.

Hannas walked around, trying to keep the people’s spirits up under this brutal bombardment. The gruff old captain was worried nonetheless. His troops stood firm still, but the whites of many eyes were showing. None of them had imagined, let alone experienced, anything remotely like it before. Hannas did his best to sooth their fears.

“Just be patient, lads and lasses,” he urged them as he walked among them. “It do look spectacular, but he can’t touch us where we live with them rocks, and he can’t dig us out neither. Sooner or later he’ll have to leave off and come himself; and then we’ll serve him out. Just be patient!”

The expected lull came at about noon. Hannas looked up from where he had been sitting on a stump. “Eh up!” he said, and listened for a moment. Yes, the rain of rocks had stopped. He stood up on the stump, took a horn from his belt and blew it. “Up, soldiers!” he cried. “Now’s the moment! Back to the barrier, before they reach it!” His people scrambled up hastily, picking up their weapons and shields, and began to run back to the line of the palisade. A gaping hole had been smashed through the middle of the structure, but the earth mound on which it had been raised was relatively untouched, and the broken posts made a good if disorderly cover. As the fighters reached the line and scrambled up the bank of dirt they could hear drums and wild yells as the attackers ran down towards them.

The Bëorings formed up with their shields as they had been trained, archers at the gaps. As soon as the enemy came in sight, the bows began one by one to sing out with their single, savage notes. It grew to a strumming chorus. The enemy were surging across the open ground, but many were falling beneath the deadly hail.

The leading Orcs struggled through the tangle of thorns and stakes in the bottom of the ditch and scabbled their panting way up the slope. The first of them reached the shields and began to hack at them with swords. Spear points jabbed at the enemy through the gaps, swords rose and fell, and all the time the arrows flew. The whole line of defending fighters became a bloody, yelling, clashing *melée*.

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The Orcs on the eastern route did not succeed in forcing their catapults over all of the obstacles in the narrow path until later in the day. Menelrond's people had sat disconsolate through a wet, grey morning, taking what shelter their dripping tents provided. The opening of battle for them was announced also by a missile, but in this case it came trailing a tail of flame. The fire-bomb burst directly beside a tent containing six sleeping soldiers. The tent and the ground around it were instantly concealed behind a wall of fire; screams of burning men filled the clearing, shockingly loud.

People started up; some ran blindly around in a panic. The horrible sounds had unnerved them entirely.

Menelrond arrived quickly on the frantic scene, just as another shell landed and burst. "Get some water on that!" he roared in a voice like a bull. "Buckets, to the stream! You, you, you, you! The rest of you, stand to! Stand TOOO!"

Inside a quarter of an hour, the situation had settled down. The people were all marshalled; half-clothed in some cases, but all were standing in something approaching orderly ranks, some way back behind the fence. The bombardment had increased in frequency, and each new explosion of fire caused some among the troops to flinch; but the aim point for the fire bombs was clearly the palisade. Already flames were standing high over it in several places.

"Well bugger this," growled Menelrond, hands on hips. He turned to the troops. "All right, all those of you without your equipment, go and fetch it! Be back here, fully dressed and with all arms, in fifteen minutes, if you know what's good for you."

After they had assembled, looking now much more like a disciplined body of soldiers, Menelrond stood on a barrel and addressed them. "Ladies and Gentlemen!" he bellowed. "I don't know about you, but I'm buggered if I'm going to sit here and be barbecued. I've got a sword, and by damn, I mean to use it. Will you come with me and find some goblin heads to cut off?"

They roared their assent at him, some thrusting their blades in the air. With a stroke, their fear had been turned into outrage. Their mood hardened, and they remembered their training.

"We'll go through the woods to the path ahead, and form up there," shouted the big man. "Once we get ahead, we'll soon get inside the range of these things. Then we'll see!"

His men formed up quickly in front of the burning palisade, the heat of the flames hot on their backs and cheeks. "Up the path and quick about it," their chief shouted. The column moved off with a steady tramp of feet. A few more bombs whizzed just over their heads like comets, bursting to one side, but shortly thereafter the bombardment ceased. They were almost out of the fire-zone of their own palisade now; a steep bend in the road hid what lay ahead.

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Towards the close of that day, Menelrond's force had fought their way far up the path until just short of the catapults. The survivors, some five hundred, now formed a dense arc of shields across a wide clearing. The ground in front sloped up, across a space which seemed to be carpeted with screaming, sword-waving Orcs, toward a bare granite ridge on which the now motionless machines had been arrayed. This ridge terminated in a knoll on which a tall figure in shimmering armour was standing.

The troops had been attempting to inch higher, to approach a little closer to the goal which stood now so close, so clear to see, but they were checked now by a step in the ground. Orcs lined the top of this and fired down into their ranks if they approached.

Some way back in the open ground behind the line of fighters the wounded were laid in rows. Their healer and his assistants were working like mad things: tying, cutting and sewing.

Menelrond was lying there, his son Gilach sitting by his side. The big man had been hacked about. He had two arrows broken off in his gut, and deep wounds in left arm and leg, but what had laid him flat was a slung stone to the head. Gilach had his own right arm in a sling and a rough bandage about his head and jaw. A sword-cut to the face had damaged his jaw; he could no longer form words to speak.

Menelrond came slowly back to consciousness, groaning the while. He shook his head and focussed with some difficulty on his son. "Ho, Son," he said. "Still alive?"

Gilach shrugged.

"I didn't expect either of us to be," groaned Menelrond. "Oh, my head. I don't warrant it to be in one piece still." He opened his eyelids again, the blue within glinting at his son. "Get yourself out of this, lad. We've done all we can. We here will go with the sun. No sense you throwing your life away with us."

Gilach, one hand supporting his jaw, shook the index finger of the other in firm negation.

Menelrond grunted, eyeing his son. He patted the boy's leg with affection, then began then to examine his own body, so far as he could crane his neck to see it.

"I'll be damned if I'm going to wait on that healer," he growled. "Bring me some spear-hafts, boy. And find me my axe, if you can."

Gilach levered himself up painfully and went to fulfil his father's command. He did not have far to seek, and was back within the minute.

"Good," grunted Menelrond. "Now help me sit up." As soon he had levered himself up, he bade Gilach trim two of the staves and bind the lengths on either side of his shield arm.

While Gilach was doing this, the healer ran up. "What are you doing?" he demanded to know.

"Never you mind, healer," growled Menelrond. "If I can stand on my legs and hold a glaive, I'm no care of yours." Gilach was finished. "That's good, boy." The big man flexed the arm, moved his fingers. "Good! Now the leg. Two or three staves, tight bound, the whole length. Nothing fancy, just so it will take my weight."

"If you stand on that, you'll bleed to death in a minute," said the healer. "There's only a bandage and packing in it."

"Tie off the vein then, curse you!" said Menelrond. "'Tis no matter if the leg has no blood to it, so long as I can keep some in my heart."

"You're mad," said the healer, but the big man only laughed. Swearing, the medic bent to do as he asked. Gilach then laid three stout lengths of stave along the whole leg and tied the whole tightly.

"Good," said Menelrond when all was finished. "Now help me up, the both of you." When he was standing, he got them to bind a light shield on a sling about his neck to take its weight. His left hand could then grip this and turn it well enough. "Ha!" he exclaimed, "Now give me that axe. That will suit me well!" Fully equipped thus, he turned to his son and said, "Will you come with me, Gilach my son, to guard my back?" The young man nodded solemnly, and the two of them clasped hands. Menelrond set off then, stumping on the reinforced limb. He reached the wall of sweating fighters, who made way for him. A momentary lull had come in the fighting. The Orcs were reforming and were only peppering the ranks with desultory arrows.

Menelrond turned from the sight of the enemy to grin at his son. "What say you, Son? It is such a pleasant summer afternoon, shall we take a stroll up the hill?"

The maimed young man clapped his father on his broad and solid back in answer. He drew his own sword.

The big man turned back to face the front. "Orcs!" he bellowed in a voice like brass. He raised the axe and commenced to whirl the heavy steel above his head. "Make way! Make way! Or I will lay your heads in the grass as thick as hailstones in a summer storm!" Then, with a strength that amazed the watchers on both sides, he began not to limp, but to run; with a twisted, jinking motion, yet still running, up slope toward the appalled ranks of Orcs. Gilach his son kept close at his back.

The arrows came like angry wasps. They whacked into the man, more and more, until they were standing out of Menelrond's body in tufts; but nothing slowed him. He reached the goblins, and a terrible slaughter commenced. Still roaring like a bull, he commenced to cut through their ranks as the reaper slices through ripe barley. Gilach behind his father fended blows from his back. On and on cut the bull-like man, nearer and nearer came he to the shining figure on the mound. An arrow was sticking out of one of Menelrond's eyes, another had pierced his jaw. Spear-points jabbed into his ribs, but each time he cut the spearer down and pushed on. Father and son were deep inside the enemy ranks now, and the defenders they had left behind could only mark their progress by the disturbance among the Orcs and the flash of the great axe above the heads of the foe. Menelrond was wielding that deadly piece of steel as few have wielded an axe before or since.

Gilach was down, the end was near. As the axes and swords hacked at him, Menelrond glared up toward his adversary with his one remaining eye. The shining figure was close, but not close enough. *The time will come when one of us will mark you*, the man spoke to it in his mind. *The time will come*. The Lice pulled him down then, and the axes and spears rose and fell in the place where he had stood; rose and fell.

* * * * *

Beren woke after midday in his sleeping hide, aware that something was up. There was noise and shouting coming from the direction of the temporary camp. He went into the inn, but there was nobody there but Zalta and her maids, busy clearing up.

"They're all off," she told him, "but only just. Your Da was looking for you. If you run, you'll probably catch him."

Beren ducked to kiss her quickly on the cheek, then ran out the door, calling his thanks on the way.

"Well!" Zalta said, looking after him, hands on hips. She felt her cheek, then inspected her hand, almost as if she expected to find something on it. "Now what do you suppose he went and did that for?"

"Wish he'd kissed me," sighed one of the girls.

"Enough of that," said Zalta. "Go and pack now, we're finished in here. The wagon comes tomorrow."

Beren found his parents indeed at the head of the convoy, among the usual guard of Dagnir, Ragnor, Arthad and Gramlach.

"I have no horse, Father," he said as he slowed down to a jog beside his father's walking horse.

"You can ride in a wagon," replied Barahir, "but if you really want a horse, Lorinis has a string of spares, a little way down the line."

"I think I need one," said Beren. "The eagles will not like to report to me in all this uproar. I can see one

hovering already, hesitating.”

He found Lorinis and begged a mount from her. After asking the horse’s permission, he swung himself onto its back, then asked it to trot some way out of the line of march. The eagle descended to him then. It proved to be Farsight.

“What is all this?” asked the eagle, turning its beak to look along the stream of Men and wagons.

“The folk of Dorthonion go to war in the plain,” replied Beren.

The eagle looked up and down at the dusty line, but made no further comment. “Here is my report,” it said. “Of the two barriers to the North, the westerly holds, although it has suffered greatly from these machines: it is almost smashed down from stones. We cannot approach the other, but since the place we are excluded from has not moved in several hours, one may guess that your folk hold also in that front, although we cannot say this for certain. As for the Orcs coming from sunrise: they advance still, although slowly. They do not seem very eager. In the great valley to sunset, nothing has changed. We see no new enemies, anywhere. That is all my news.”

Beren thanked the handsome bird, then relayed the news to his father. Twice more that afternoon he received reports, and twice more it was the same story.

By the time the sun went down on the army, they had halved the distance to Newfort. They camped that night by the road. There was no disturbance, and no news. Latecomers continued to trickle into camp until well along in the night.

* * * * *

In the end, Mairon had spent a taste of his power, just the smallest taste. It went against his strong inclination, but he had needed some way to cut the whole sorry business short. The campaign had to get on! This overcast weather would not last forever.

But now – at last! – the defence was smashed. The digging parties had made short work of clearing away the smouldering remains of the palisade; now they could move forward, the way was clear. However, the night was well advanced by the time the road was brought to order, so Mairon called a halt. These scurrying Mobiles needed some light to find their way, and any who carried fire would only serve as aiming points for remaining defenders lurking in the dark.

These Men! They were simply amazing. He, Mairon the Admirable, the Deep-knowing, would never have believed the gangrel creatures could show so stubborn, so dauntless. Why, they had never been so in the beginning! The Maia knew Men inside out from their birth days; or so he had believed. Weak, soft creatures he had held them, with no strength in them of mind or spirit; fragile growths which withered in a handful of seasons, to be swept away in the stream of time almost as soon as they had matured. Not finding any use in them apart from breeding, Mairon had been accustomed simply to grinding these contemptible excrescences under his heel whenever he encountered them – which, admittedly, had not happened often in recent times. But either something had happened to Men since those early days, or he had not explored every corner of their natures as thoroughly as he had believed.

He fervently hoped there would be no more unpleasant surprises. At the beginning of the year, he had thought two legions ample to mop up these peasants; now he was concerned that even five would not suffice. He dared not go to Melkor to ask for any more.

Day Seven

Farsight found Beren in the first hour of the following day. “Both barrier forces resist still, but perhaps not

for long,” he said. “Those to the West appear to have fired the remaining catapult on that approach, but the defenders have nevertheless been driven far down the valley. They hold a line still at a makeshift barrier, but they are now few. And on the eastern road, where the main force is concentrated: he who shuts us out now approaches, but as yet slowly.”

Beren digested that sobering news. “And what of those Orcs who approach from the valley mouth, where the sun rises?” he asked.

“They have halted their advance,” said the great bird. “We guess they are waiting until the main forces engage.”

Beren lost no time in relaying the latest report to his father.

Barahir mulled it over. “The barriers have done better than I feared, if not as well as I had hoped,” he said. “But events are moving quicker now; I think it is time I got to Newfort and sought out Baragund. We still have to work out what to do. I will ride now ahead; let the force come behind as it can. Beren, will you come with me?”

Before the second hour the party was away on fresh horses. This was made up of Barahir and his wife and son, their house-men, with fifty spearmen to ward against accidents. They trotted down the steadily opening valley, past the empty Dwarf-hold and the road to Menelrond’s steading; past fat farms scattered over the tawny-stubbed fields; until at last the walls of Newfort came in sight at about the noon hour. The riders splashed over the broad ford of the Elfwell and came soon in sight of the bridge.

For some time they had been aware of the smoke of many cooking fires on the north bank ahead of them. As they drew nearer they saw an army camped there, their tents forming neat rows.

“Look at those neat tents,” said Barahir. “That will be Baragund, or I’m an Orc.” And so it proved; for the Soldier himself came riding out to greet them.

Baragund cast an eye over their small party while greetings were spoken.

“But Uncle,” he said, “where is your army?”

“They come,” said Barahir. “They will arrive towards evening. Have you been long in the field?”

“Two days or so,” replied the Soldier. “We called the muster when the clouds covered the sky, since we knew the game would be afoot. Yesterday we came north of the river. I have spoken with Taenthîr; I have spoken with Dairuin. Come, let us go to parley and I will tell you how things stand.”

As soon as Barahir, Emeldir, Baragund and Belegund were reclining on great cushions in Belegund’s tent with beakers of a refreshing cordial in their hands – “because,” said the Greencloak, “there is nothing in Brother’s tent but a knobby bunk and a pitcher of cold water” – Barahir turned to the Soldier. “You have said nothing of your father,” he said.

“That is because we have heard nothing from him,” said Baragund. “He will not see us. Every attempt is fended off with smooth words by this Girazôn, and his coiling tongue is backed up by swords.”

“It is a strange business,” said Barahir, shaking his head. “Well; perhaps it is for the best. We might have done something with his men, but we cannot brook his madness. Let him do what he wills.

“Now, we have a war to plan. Will you tell me what you know, or shall I first call in Beren to pass on his eagle-borne reports?”

Baragund passed quickly over the state of his own force – strength, supplies, morale – and then Beren was called in. After they heard what he had to report of the wider situation – information greatly appreciated at least by the Soldier, who knew how difficult it was to gain anything even approaching a strategic appreciation of an impending battle – they discussed what to do next. It was apparent to all that the other force leaders would need to be part of any more detailed planning. Messengers were therefore sent to Taenthîr and Dairuin proposing a meeting on this side of the bridge in the evening. “With apologies particularly to Taenthîr,” said Barahir, “for making him come to me; but I do not think I ought to show my face too near to Bregolas just yet.”

As the sun sank lower in the sky, dust clouds began to rise in the West. Soon the first riders from Barahir’s following army could be seen making their way across the Elfwell ford. Barahir himself rode back to meet them. He bade them take back his order to camp near the Whitewater, a mile or so back from the ford. “We will need the space to manoeuvre,” he told them.

The war council took place that evening in a farm house on the north bank of the Whitewater, not far from the bridge. Dairuin rode up with Taenthîr just at sunset.

The last rays must have been touching the cloud tops high above, because strange red glows suffused the overcast. The sky seemed full of omens; whether good or bad could not be determined. Carrion fowl were gathering. The trees and roof ridges were punctuated by numbers of their dark-winged, cawing bodies, and more were flying in from every quarter.

Emeldir and the sons of Bregolas were of course present at the meeting, as was Urioc, the cavalry leader, and finally also Erlian, the emissary from Hithlum. Barahir had asked for him to be there so that he could bear witness after his return home.

The first part of the council was taken up with exchanging information, so that everybody was equally apprised of the situation. After hearing the reports, all there agreed that the main body of the enemy, comprising some ten thousand Orcs backed up by a small but unknown number of siege engines, was likely to approach from the North on the following day. One by one, then, the force-leaders gave an estimate of their numbers under arms, either present or expected. Baragund had five and a half thousand foot soldiers and a thousand mounted under Urioc. Barahir expected to have three thousand foot and five hundred horse. Dairuin said he had two thousand troops armed and fit for battle. Taenthîr admitted to a thousand foot troops and half that number mounted. “They’re main weary, though,” he said. “Marched all the way from home, they have.” Since it was less than ten leagues to the valley mouth, nobody felt much inclined to offer sympathy.

“That comes to eleven thousand and a half foot,” said Barahir with satisfaction, “and two thousands of horse. We ought to be able to do something with that.”

The talk then turned to how to meet the enemy. After much discussion (part of it, involving Taenthîr, becoming heated), they thrashed out a plan. Barahir and Baragund would advance along the west bank of the Elfwell, Dairuin along the east. The stream was fordable without much difficulty, but could be a significant check if the far bank was defended; thus they hoped to be able to move their own forces from one side to the other at need, but to prevent the enemy from doing so. Taenthîr, reinforced by a square of Barahir’s soldiers, would form up under the walls of Newfort to resist any approach by the fourth legion.

“Your role,” Barahir told him, “is to prevent the main force being attacked from the rear. If you are hard pressed, then retreat towards the bridge. I will give my people orders to defend it; I hope you will do the same. At last necessity we will pull it down, or burn it. Remember, you can always retire within the town walls at need.” Taenthîr nodded grudging assent to this.

They discussed then the disposition of reserves, the state and flow of supplies, plans for evacuation and care of the wounded, and other dull but necessary concerns which are rarely recorded in the histories of battles.

The council did not break up until well into the night; even then, the leaders had individual matters to take care of. Most of them managed to snatch an hour or two's rest, but a sound night's sleep is a rare thing in war.

In all of the camps, men and women were wakeful. Some went over their gear, putting a final edge on their spears or waxing their arrow-heads; others sat in silence with their companions around a fire.

"How do you think it will go?" Barahir muttered to his weary wife, as they curled up to rest, a scant two hours before the dawn. The cocks were already crowing.

"I am past thinking," she replied drowsily. "It will go as it goes. Hush now, and sleep. You will need it."

Day Eight: the Battle of Ladros

Barahir was woken by Arthad as the light was growing. "Time to start, Boss," the Southerner told him. "Rider here, message for you."

The messenger was one of Baragund's men. "Bregolas is coming out," he told Barahir.

"What?" said Barahir, trying to shake the fatigue out of his head. "Bregolas? Coming out where?"

"His Fist troops have emerged from their quarters," said the man. "They were marching across the bridge when I left."

Barahir cursed in the privacy of his own thoughts. "Does Baragund know?" he asked after a moment.

"Yes Sir, of course," replied the messenger. "He sent me. There was a rider for Dairuin too."

Barahir questioned the man a little more, mainly to confirm that Dairuin had by now brought his guards into position on the far bank of the Elfwell, as had been arranged at the council. "All right," he said finally, "please give your master my thanks for his message, and tell him I will meet with him within the hour." The man bowed and withdrew.

Barahir and Emeldir dressed with haste and stepped out of their tent to sniff the air. The early light was spreading over the wide, flat country which extended across the river in a chequer of mild fields to the South and East. A clean wind blew fresh from the West. The overcast was lighter, but a gloom of cloud seemed to persist in the North.

All around them in the camp, people could be seen slurping down a hurried breakfast and preparing themselves for the battle which would surely come that day.

"Are we going to beat them, Master?" called a lean farmer from the next campfire.

"I do not know, Bartolac," replied Barahir. "We shall do our best to, I am sure. But I *do* know that we are going to give them a bloody nose; a very bloody nose indeed."

There were many matters demanding his and Emeldir's attention, but he tore himself away from them as soon as he could. "Look after everything," he said to her. "You know what to do. Get them formed up and across the brook as soon as you can."

Beren had come to them by this time. Barahir turned to his son. "Can you come?" he asked him. "I will need your bird reports." He jumped onto his horse, which Arthad had brought up ready, while Beren ran for his own. The two of them then cantered east towards the ford.

The sun was rising behind the overcast by the time they crossed the Elfwell. The day already promised to be

a warm one. They found Baragund's force already under way, marching towards the ford in neat columns. To one side of it, nearer the river bank, Fist uniforms could be made out. Barahir knew that his brother would be down there, but first he wanted to see Baragund.

They found him riding with the Greencloak at the head of their army. Just as the pair drew close, a horseman in black and silver Fist livery galloped up to the group.

"My lord orders you to clear the way for the Fist of Ladros," said this herald to Baragund without salutation.

The Soldier shot the man a look from under his dark brows. "Indeed?" he said. "Need throws over courtesy, it seems. Where particularly does your lordship desire to go? He has neglected to inform me of his wishes."

"He informs you now," said the man in unmistakably insolent tones. "He wishes to cross the ford. Your people are in the way."

"Does he so," replied Baragund drily. "Well, it seems to me that the quickest path to clearing the ford will be for me to take my men over it, after my present design."

The herald could think of nothing to say to this, and after a moment he pulled his horse's head around and rode off.

"This is a fine pickle!" said Barahir to his nephew after all had exchanged greetings, "I had not reckoned on the Fist taking any part. What are we to do now?"

"Oh, I knew he would do it," replied the Soldier. "I knew he would come out. We had better go and find him, I suppose, and find out, if we can, just what he means to do."

They left Belegund to supervise the crossing. Beren stayed behind as well, since he expected some reports from his airborne scouts.

Arriving at the Fist troops, Barahir and his nephew made their way around the steel-glinting columns. They found Bregolas without difficulty. The tall lord was moving restlessly about on a great white horse which danced and snorted, seemingly in sympathy with its master's irritation.

Barahir had not seen his brother for two or more months, and was shocked at the change in him. Bregolas's eyes burned pale in a haggard face, and his long, now straggly hair was growing out white at the roots.

"Get those peasants of yours out of the way," shouted Bregolas to his son as soon as they came within earshot. "Clear them out of it! Didn't you get my order?"

"A good morning to you, Brother," said Barahir pleasantly. "May we know what you intend?"

Bregolas bared his teeth to him. "I have no word for you, oath-breaker, betrayer of trust." He spat on the ground, then turned back to his son. "Did you hear what I said?"

Baragund's face showed his disgust at the whole predicament. "I may as well tell you from the start, Father," he said, "that I am not going to waste any time listening to abuse from you. We have a war to fight. Your best course will be to consign these men to our command, and to return to your bed."

Bregolas rose up very tall in his saddle, and his eyes glittered. "You scorpion," he hissed. "You filth, you worm. Long have I borne with your insolence; but now you have cast the gauntlet in my face with a vengeance. Well, to every rash course comes a reckoning. Reap what you have sown then, my young viper, reap what you have sown. I cast you out; yea and your wine-sodden brother too."

“What, again?” returned Baragund with scorn. But Barahir grasped his exasperated nephew by the arm. “Come away,” he said quietly.

The pair of them turned and rode back to the ford, where the columns were now crossing. Belegund joined them, looking anxious. He could read his brother’s face.

“‘To every rash course comes a reckoning,’” echoed the Soldier grimly. “I fear that will prove all too true – only not in the way he meant it.”

“Curse this disorder!” said Barahir. “He must have full two thousand soldiers in his train. We could have used those numbers; but how we are to make advantage of them now, it passes me to say.”

“We have two choices,” said the Soldier. “We can either ignore him, march around him as an impediment; or we can await his dispositions and attempt to adapt our own to his. It is all one whether he be grateful for it or not – our only concern should be, how best to fight this day.”

“Time passes,” said Barahir. “Let our armies follow our plan for now. I see Beren approaching, and there fly his birds away. We shall have his news.”

Beren’s face was sad. “Farsight reports that both barriers have been swept away,” he said. “The main force of the enemy approaches now direct from the North, but a short legion has broken through Hannas’s defence into the upper valley. Farsight can see but few survivors, of either defending force.”

“They fulfilled their purpose,” replied Barahir grimly. “And what of that legion of Orcs from the East?”

“They are on the move again,” said his son. “If they keep their present pace, they will be up with us within the day.”

They met Emeldir on the far side of the ford. “We are formed up,” she told them. “I left Gramlach leading them across the brook that flows from the end of the forest. More were still coming.” Her face was lit with a fierce delight. “We may have greater force than even we hoped.”

Barahir briefly told her of the encounter with Bregolas. “Can you go back and bid Gram to turn them north, then halt a half-mile further,” he added. “We must see first what the old fool means to do. I just hope he shows us quickly.” He looked to the North, where the sky was now darkening with what looked from afar like circling swarms of birds. Birds, or something else? The black specks were too far off to make out.

The following half-hour passed slowly. They watched Bregolas bring his long column of troops across the ford, then turn them to the right. The soldiers kept wonderful formation, and the rhythmic flash of polished metal was pretty to see. However, the day was grown humid, and at one point Barahir leaned to his nephew and said, “How is it that he does not use wagons? Those men have marched a mile in this fug, and under all that weight of padding and tinsel as well.”

“Aye,” replied Baragund, “I wondered the same. They must be cooking.”

“He would scorn to carry his fine peacocks bouncing about in a wagon,” said the Greencloak. “It would spoil the look of the thing.”

His brother grunted.

“Well, not even Bregolas can march them much further,” said Barahir, “else they will be dropping. This will be decided soon.”

Indeed it was. A bare quarter mile north of the ford, Bregolas halted the onward march of his column. The

watchers saw the line of men wheel to the left. A short time later the whole column had passed through the wheel point and was marching west, away from the Elfwell. Several men on horses were spaced along the north side of the column, and the watchers noticed now that these horsemen were carrying flags. The riders each now waved a blue and white flag, keeping well in unison, and as one man the column of foot soldiers came to a halt. Now the flags flashed out were red ones, and in response the men all turned to face north. The officers spent several minutes then in dressing the line. The soldiers were clearly chosen such that men of similar height stood together; the end result was two perfectly spaced and aligned ranks of men, about half a mile in frontage, all facing towards the enemy. More flag commands saw the soldiers unship their shields from their backs and bring their arms to flashing order.

“No-one can doubt that he has them most wonderfully trained,” said Barahir.

“Aye,” growled the Soldier, “but can they fight?”

“Shall we ride over and inspect them while we decide what to do?” said Barahir.

“All right, but we should take some blades with us. That old fool is not safe to approach.”

They rode over with Barahir’s house-men, making a company of seven, all conspicuously armed. The riders turned their mounts at the end of the formation and passed a little way down its length, inspecting the ranks of armoured men. The nearest officer glowered at them but did not dare raise protest in the face of the swords and bows they carried. Cazimek, mounted on a large bay horse near the centre of the line, also turned and looked toward them, but he was too far away for them to make out his expression.

“Beetroot faces, and some have fainted already,” observed the Greencloak. “Do you see where men are carried away? There, and there.”

“But where are their archers?” exclaimed Emeldir.

“Never Bregolas’s favourite weapon,” remarked Barahir.

“No bowmen? He’s mad!” said Emeldir.

“I hope those shields are stouter than they look,” said Barahir. “Well, Nephew, what is your thought? Leave these to stew here and pursue our original plan?”

The other looked along the Fist troops, then to the North, where the ominous cloud of fliers was perceptibly nearer. He stood up in his saddle and gazed all around, taking in the position. “I do not think we have any more time,” he said. “I think we should abandon our plan to advance, and rather form up beside Bregolas. Dairuin can stay on the east bank, he is well placed there to guard against an attempt to turn our right flank; and we can always call him back if we have need. Nor is there need to change aught with Taenthîr, I think. How would it be, Uncle, if I formed up my ranks just to the West, there, and you beyond me? I do not think we have time to advance them further than that.”

“Good,” said Barahir. “And the cavalry? On the left flank?”

“Yes,” said the Soldier, “but we should send a few squadrons to Dairuin too.” He perused again the ranks of encased and sweating men in front of them, a sceptical look on his face. “I have little faith in these. Shall we position a strong reserve to my right rear?”

“Also good,” said Barahir. “Shall I send over a diamond to it?”

They agreed on that and quickly settled one or two other matters. “Let us now set our people in the order we propose,” said Baragund. “We have no time to waste.”

And that is what they did. It needed another half hour before everyone was in place, but at the end of that time Baragund had five thousand fighters ranked in their orderly cohorts, approximately extending Bregolas's line to the West; Barahir had arranged his men in a formation of seven diamonds, extending the frontage even further.

These diamonds were of Barahir and Gramlach's devising. Each was formed from four centuries of shield-toting spearmen, each century occupying one side of the diamond, three ranks deep. The century included twenty or so archers who could shoot over the heads of the ranks at distant targets, or come forward to shoot between shields. The formation had been named as diamond rather than square because, when several took the field together, they met at vertices rather than sides; in this way the archers from adjacent diamonds enjoyed an overlapping field of fire. Wounded could be cared for inside the diamond, soldiers could be quickly moved to shore up weak areas, and the dimensions could be shrunk to accommodate losses.

Barahir and Gramlach were proud of their invention, but at the same time anxious, for they had not yet tested it in battle.

By the time everything was arranged, it was mid-morning. The sun could not yet be seen, but the cloud cover seemed to be thinning. The weather was sticky, and there were many flies. Strangely, the crows and ravens had all disappeared again; the trees scattered about were bare.

Barahir turned to his son. "Why have the birds gone?" he asked.

Beren pointed to the North. "Because of those," he said.

Barahir turned his eyes in that direction and saw that one of the great flocks of black creatures was heading directly towards them. The flock grew larger and larger in their sight until it wheeled directly overhead. Barahir observed that these birds – if indeed birds they were – were as black as crows; but they were not like any crows he had ever seen. These were large, ugly things, with red eyes and cruel hooked beaks. The creatures looked dirty, their black appearing unkempt and sooty rather than the glossy black of ravens. They made no sound at all except for the rush of wing beats and a single harsh croak.

"These are the same as we saw when we rescued Bregolas, are they not?" asked Barahir, trying warily to keep all the vermin of the circling flock under his gaze at the same time.

"That's right," said Beren. "Crebain. Only many more of them this time."

"They did not harm us when they were few," said his father, "but will they be bolder in these numbers? Will these attack us?"

"Crebain?" said Beren. "Not on their own, I think. They may sneak in while the Orcs attack, to stab and claw from behind."

Now at last the enemy ground force came into view. The foe appeared first over the swell of a long, low ridge; thereafter his black ranks advanced slowly down to darken the near side of it. The faint pulse of drums began fitfully to be heard. Shortly after, the looming shapes of catapults could be made out behind the marching legions of Orcs.

"Four," counted Barahir.

"I am sorry, Father," said Beren. "The raid cost us three lives, but we could not have done more, even had we spent them all."

"Good Powers, Son, you have no reason to ask for any pardon. It was an amazing deed; nobody could have done more. No, not even Fingolfin himself."

Beren smiled. "Well I can't do any more here either," he said. "If you'll give me leave, Father, I'll fetch my bow and join a diamond." After they had exchanged luck-wishes, the tall young man rode off.

Emeldir sighed, looking after her son. Then she gathered herself. "I also should take my station," she said. A quick kiss and she was away.

The main body of the enemy halted now, perhaps not quite two miles away. An influence had been growing all the time which depressed the people's spirits. Men thought of death, and felt ashamed, like callow boys caught in men's clothing; women looked amazed at their spears and bows and wondered what in Middle-earth they were doing there among the men, pretending to be strong, pretending to be brave.

There was a mind behind this army of foes.

Barahir, who felt its pressure acutely, rode down the diamonds, crying "Remember the Field of the Grassy Slope, how we left the foe rotting in windrows, while we came home again to hearth and love! Remember how we cut down uncounted numbers at the Battle of the Torches! You stood firm then, men and women of Ladros; they could not defeat you in their swarms, in their masses. They will blunt themselves on your diamond hardness today. Resist this creeping weakness! Throw it off, for it comes from without! Stand in your earned pride! Show your mettle!" People raised their heads again as he passed, glanced furtively at their comrades on every side. Tentative smiles turned into laughs; they clapped one another on the back and took heart again.

Beren had found the diamond which held Gorlim. He approached the smith with diffidence, having seen little of him since the time of his madness.

"How is it, Grol? All right?"

Gorlim glanced at him, shrugged, then turned back to watch the enemy. Beren, observing the look of indifference on his former friend's face, felt sadness well up in his heart. He was not certain Gorlim had even recognized him. Perhaps Rattlecone had been in the right after all.

Something was happening. The main body of the enemy's army kept their stations, but off to the side, movement could be seen. As the crawling mass came nearer it resolved itself into three bodies of Orcs, each perhaps a hundred strong. They marched nearer and nearer, and now they were separating. Their ranks came within a long bowshot of the defending line and then halted. One of the three formations had placed itself in front of Bregolas's troops, the second in front of Baragund's, and the third faced Barahir's. The goblins stood there in silence, motionless.

"What is this?" muttered Barahir to his nephew.

"A probe perhaps," replied the Soldier. Along his line and Barahir's, archers had long since strung their bows and stood now, tense, with an arrow nocked and resting on the thumb.

Something on the right attracted Baragund's attention. He looked in that direction and gasped.

"Oh, he cannot be serious," he said. "What does he think this is, a parade?"

Barahir looked towards Bregolas's troops and saw to his amazement that the officers had again come to the front of their troops and were busy with their flags. A synchronized twirl of flag, and the massed line of men, all as one, raised and lowered their flashing swords before striking the bosses of their shields, at the same instant raising a mighty shout. Two thousand deep voices and two thousand blows made the air shake. Three times they did this, and as a finale they tossed their great round, polished shields in the air in gleaming array and caught them as they came down.

The small body of Orcs to their front made neither sign nor sound.

“Ware left!” exclaimed Baragund suddenly. Barahir swung his eyes in that direction. He saw that the Orcs in front of his own people were moving. The foe were marching straight at his diamonds, although their thin frontage barely extended across more than two. As their line came within near bowshot, the defending archers began firing. Goblins began to fall. Thicker and thicker they fell, but still they came on, and still they came on; like machines. Great, ragged gaps were growing in their ranks. As the now tattered line came within the region of crossfire, those remaining began to drop like grass beneath the reaper. In a very short time there were no live Orcs standing; only dead and dying, carpeting the ground in front of the diamonds.

Parties lost no time in leaving the ranks to extinguish any remaining life and to perform the messy butchery of salvaging arrows and arrowheads.

“Good lads and lasses,” muttered Barahir. “Now let’s see if that gives the others pause.”

It did not. The middle formation was already marching. As these approached Baragund’s neat lines, his own archers began a fusillade. Since they were shooting mostly from directly in front at foes who carried stout shields, their success was less rapid than the archers in the diamonds. Some Orcs reached the line of spearmen, and a brisk and savage affray broke out. However, the men of Ladros had the better of it. After the sharp but brief fight, the defenders had a handful of wounded to be helped to the rear, but their own opponents were lying also now in a bloody and lifeless carpet across the field.

The third body of Orcs, that opposite the Fist, was now in motion. The silent Orcs marched forward, and as they came, Bregolas’s men went through their routine of throw, clash and shout again. They cycled through it faster now, almost with a touch of desperation. The Orcs paid no heed. Now they were well within bowshot, and still they came on.

The mounted officers began to show alarm at the approaching mass, and one or two turned and forced their way through the lines of foot-soldiers. These few cowards were the only officers of the Fist of Ladros to survive the coming debacle.

Suddenly the marching goblins halted, within stone’s throw of the ranks and of the capering horses trapped in front of them. The creatures had spread themselves out in a thin line, extending across the whole width of the armoured masses in front of them. The enemy troops all carried slung bows, and now they shrugged these loose. Each Orc reached behind himself for the first arrow. The arrows were nocked, their bows were bent; then they all loosed at once.

The first hail of arrows brought down the defiant officers and their horses like felled trees. The steadily shooting Orcs then turned their attention to the standing ranks, and men began falling there like ripe figs.

“Oh, good Powers,” said Barahir. “Oh, good Powers. We must send up the reserve.”

“No,” said the grim-faced Soldier. “We cannot save them now. It must run its course.”

They watched as Bregolas cantered forward from the rear. The lord was shouting, and appeared to be blowing on a horn, although they could not hear him above the appalling cacophony of the battlefield: the yells of the living blending with the shrieks of the dying in an infernal roar.

Bregolas appeared to be urging his men to charge. Some near to him heard him, and these made tentative movements forward, but many more had only eyes for the hail of arrows which was hacking gaping holes in their neat formations. More were running now, having thrown down their arms, and the movement looked likely to grow into a rout.

Then a miracle happened: the shooting stopped.

Baragund nodded with grim satisfaction. “Run out of arrows,” he said, nodding his head. “Saw they weren’t carrying many.”

“Well, they know now where to concentrate,” said the sweating Barahir. “We’ll have to do something for these men. How many spare shields do you have? I can probably get hold of one or two hundred.”

“I’ll send for what we can spare,” said the Soldier. “We’ll trundle around and give them out individually – some honest mail and helmets too. I would guess those men will not be too eager to hold on to their flimsy finery after this.”

Runners were sent with orders, and in a short time some wagons approached. Two were piled high with wicker shields and other subfusc gear of war; several were empty.

“For the wounded,” Baragund told Barahir.

“I wish I knew how you think of these things,” said his uncle. “That business with the arrows, too.”

“Training,” replied Baragund shortly.

The two of them joined the wagons now bumping towards the disordered ranks of Bregolas’s finest. The black-armoured men were milling around in confusion. Some looked dazed, others were shouting. Among them the dead and dying lay scattered like discarded toys.

“I do not see Cazimek,” said Barahir, looking warily around.

“Dead, or run, maybe,” replied his nephew laconically.

The pair left their horses and took control of the situation near at hand. The tones of command in their voices calmed the soldiers and brought them to do their bidding. Some took charge of the dole of shields and arms, others were organized to carry wounded to the empty wagons.

They had only a minute’s grace until Bregolas rode up. He was so furious, he was almost foaming at the mouth; his eyes were rolling about and showing the whites. He rode up to a soldier who had cast down his polished silver shield and was hefting a wicker one. “Throw that trash away, and pick up your shield!” he ordered.

The soldier looked up at him sullenly. “Not fucking likely,” he said. “These silver things might as well be made out of fucking paper. I’m for a decent shield, me.” Voices around him were raised in growls of agreement.

Bregolas began to beat the man across the head with his whip. “You insolent churl!” he screamed. “Obey me! Obey me! Lest I have your arms torn from your body!”

At the first blow, a great shout came from all those standing nearby. Many there came towards their erstwhile lord with menace in their faces.

“Get out of here,” they growled at him, “or we will pull you down. Make yourself scarce!”

Bregolas gazed at them with a wild, unbelieving look on his face; then he looked towards his brother and his son, who were still by the wagons.

“Watch yourself,” Barahir warned his nephew. “He’s on the far side of reason.”

Bregolas rode up to them, his mad eyes fixed on them. “You have done this!” he screamed, dragging his sword out of its scabbard. He raised the blade to strike, but an arrow from behind pierced his lower arm with

a horrid meaty sound. Bregolas gave out a shriek and dropped the sword, which fell clanging to the ground. He grasped his stricken arm.

“Next one’s in your neck,” came a calm and steely voice from behind them. They swung around and beheld Emeldir, sitting high on her horse Storm. She had another arrow already on the string.

Bregolas bared his teeth like a stoat and hissed at them before spurring his horse and galloping away.

“I fear he will not live out this day,” said his son quietly. “I wish we could have parted better.”

Barahir went up to his wife and clasped her hand wordlessly.

“You’d better speak to these men,” she said to him. “You’ve got the touch for it.”

He found his horse and swung himself up. Emeldir had brought further wagons loaded with war-gear; many of the Fist soldiers now crowded around to share them out. Already numbers of them had pulled off their absurdly padded finery in favour of a simple ring-sown leather war shirt.

“Men of Newfort!” Barahir called to them, sitting high on his horse. “Hear my words! You need archers, you need officers. We can spare you some of the first, but touching the other, it would be better that you choose from your own number some men of sense whom you can trust. As for your lord, well, some of you have seen what disturbed state he is in. I do not call on you to rebel. You must make your own choices; but I remind you that we are here today to fight Orcs, and to defend our homes, and you must ask yourselves how best to do that, and whether proper fealty should be laid to one side for a time. We outside your proud corps have stayed with you on the field, at your side, as you see. We will do so yet; we are all men of Dorthonion, we stand together. Do not listen to voices who would draw us apart. I must leave you now to tend my own army, but we stand here with you as one. Organize yourselves! Show your courage! Stand with your fellow, and he will stand with you. May good fortune attend your arms and keep you safe!” He raised his hand in the air, showing the gleaming ring. A mighty cheer broke out from many throats, and men crowded around, attempting to shake his hand or touch his thigh for luck. With some difficulty Barahir manoeuvred his nervous horse out of the throng and rode away, with Emeldir and Baragund at his side; the wagons full of groaning wounded trundling after.

Baragund rode up beside him. “I couldn’t have done that,” he shouted above the wind of their passage.

“Of course you could,” said Barahir. “All it is is blather.”

His nephew contented himself with shaking his head and sharing a smile with Emeldir.

They soon arrived back at the makeshift command post, in the middle of the line behind the armies. Messages awaited them, but Barahir’s first concern was to see what the enemy was doing. The surviving body of goblin troops had returned to the main mass, which could be perceived now to be advancing steadily.

Behind the foot-soldiers the four catapults made square notches in the horizon. After squinting at them a while, Barahir beckoned to a runner. “Compliments to Erlian, and could he attend?” A short time later, the big fair-haired man galloped up on a borrowed horse. “Greetings, Erlian,” Barahir said to him. “What range have those things, do you know?”

Erlian stood high in the saddle and peered at them in his turn. “Of size such as these... mm, five hundred paces?” he said. “A little less perhaps, a little more. I cannot say for certain.”

“Hmm,” said Barahir. He turned to Baragund close at hand. “What do you say to taking Mithbrûn’s advice, Comrade?”

“To attack before they attack us?” replied the Soldier. “Aye, I think well of that plan. Let us prepare. Only, I would say, let them come on a little further, until those machines have nearly come into their range. Mark you how light the sky grows. The airs are clearing. It cannot be long before the sun shows himself. The brighter it grows, the less keen these Orcs will be to fight. So the longer we can spin this yarn out, the better.”

“Very good,” said Barahir. “Let us wait until they get close, then give the signal. Pass the word.”

During the tense wait, a hundred or so archers rode across to strengthen the ranks of Bregolas’s shaken unit. These were led by Heledir, the young woman who had gone with Beren to the base of the hill in the winter battle. Her group dismounted behind the line and reported to the nearest of the new officers.

“All right,” the man replied distractedly, “glad to have you with us I’m sure; but who’s in charge of you?”

“I am,” replied Heledir.

The man stared. “Look,” he began, scratching his head in confusion, “I don’t think that’s going to work.”

“Why not?” she answered.

“Well,” he said, “no offence ma’am, but you’re a woman.”

“Well spotted,” she answered drily, “but I don’t see what that has to do with it.”

“Look,” he said, “it’s just not on. The lads won’t have it.”

“Why not?” Heledir repeated, with a patience that was beginning to sound a little strained.

“All sorts of reasons!” the officer said, raising his hands.

His men were listening, and some of them nodded. “Yeah,” one or two of them said.

“This is war, sweetheart,” put in a hulking, blue-chinned type standing nearby. “It’s not a game of dollies. Best you girlies stay back out of it.”

Heledir had had enough. “Listen, you,” she said hotly to the blue-chinned man. “I was in the battle over West last winter, and so was Limloth there, and Dannica, and Karanis. Did you hear about that maybe? That was no game of dollies. We had fewer than you have here, facing as many Orcs. Do you want to know how many I killed myself? Eighteen, that’s how many. I don’t count the ones I stuck afterwards cutting arrows out of their guts.” She walked up to the man and poked him in the stomach. “Were *you* there? I don’t think so. All you swaggering he-men have done is parade today in your ridiculous gear, just about sweated your clackers off in it, and run away from a tenth, no a twentieth your numbers Orcs. So you can just shut your mouth. We will stand with you, we men and women both, and you will like it, because we will keep these filth off your necks. And if anyone has any objection, he can just piss off back and hide in Newfort. Well? Well do you?” She glared around at the uncomfortable looking men.

One of the onlookers laughed suddenly. “I reckon we’ve made pretty good fools of ourselves,” he said. “Handsome is as handsome does. Welcome, ma’am. I heard about that fight, even if others haven’t. I’m proud to have you with us. Come on fellows, do the decent thing: thank the lady.”

The men looked sheepishly at one another before nodding and grunting their assent. A few remained stubbornly surly but nobody dared say anything more as Heledir’s archers were spaced out along their ranks.

Back at the command post, Barahir and Baragund soon found that their plan for a pre-emptive attack was not

going to answer. The enemy made a cunning deployment: the four catapults came to rest facing only their own troops, but a large part of their foot-soldiers was massed a scant bow-shot in front of the former Fisters.

Baragund cursed. "Damn him," he said, "that's no good. Those polished fools won't move forward, and if we on our side do, we'll have those Orcs behind us before you can blink. We'll be flanked."

"Couldn't we sort of slide across in front of the Fisters?" said Barahir.

"No, no," said the Soldier, "that would just lead to an unholy mess. Let me think a minute."

"They're deploying," said Barahir, and indeed the Orcs were busy about the catapults, getting them ready to fire.

"He's going to pepper us while he blasts through on our right," said the Soldier. "They'll turn us anyway. Hell! We'll have to prepare to wheel back left, it's the only thing that can save us."

"What about Dairuin?" said the older man.

"They'll hold him on the bank," said Baragund impatiently. "We'll have to wheel back."

"None of this does anything about the catapults," said Barahir.

"First things first," said the other. "We mustn't be turned. We can worry about the 'pults later."

"Well all right, but what about using the cavalry on 'em?" said Barahir.

His nephew pointed left, toward the western end of the enemy's ranks. "Have you seen what's over there?" he said, his eyes glinting. "Wolves, huge ones, hundreds of 'em. Our cavalry is all that is keeping them off our necks. Let me be now, I've got to give some orders."

The first missiles came over even as the runners were sent out: four of them, sailing over together. They were fire-bombs which exploded where they hit in sheets of angry flame. The two machines opposite Baragund's troops both scored direct hits; the diamonds were luckier, only a few of their people being hit by splashes of fire. The sound of howling cut through the thick air as figures covered in flame could be seen running about for a little, before falling writhing to the earth.

"We can't stand this," exclaimed Barahir. "We'll have to pull back."

Another barrage of missiles came over. A diamond was hit this time and descended into chaos. People ran here and there, frantically trying to beat out their burning clothes.

Barahir was busy rattling out orders to his frightened runners, but somebody set up a shout: "The cavalry!" He looked up and saw that Urioc had taken matters into his own hands. His whole army of a thousand horse and more was charging the giant wolves. The momentum and the spectacle were wonderful and terrifying. The wolves met them, and the *melée* dissolved into a seething cloud of dust; but a short moment later the horsemen rode clear. They had left fully one half of their numbers dead or dying behind them, but they had ridden most of the monsters into the dirt.

The horsemen were picking up momentum again now, and the whole army was cheering. "Urioc! Urioc!" Orcs were running back to the machines, arrows were flying, but the mounted men reached the first machine, they were surrounding it, they had cut down the guards and were busy on the framework itself, hacking at everything, smashing it. The remainder spurred on, but more were falling now. The second machine was reached and dealt with in the same wise as the first.

The horsemen were battling through crowds of foes now; they no longer had room to charge, but still they came on. The third catapult had a fire-bomb loaded, ready to fire. Those watching from the command post with their hearts in their mouths could see the lone figure which climbed up to it and smashed it with his axe. The brave man straight away disappeared from sight in the bloom of flame which covered the whole framework.

Only a handful of riders were left now, pushing slowly on. Their numbers dwindled, and dwindled. They were around the last machine, trying to beat their way to it; but there were only thirty of them. Then twenty-five, then twenty. A desperate throw, an axe whirling through the air, and the fourth machine erupted in flame just as the last horsemen were pulled down into the seething crowd.

The watching Bëorings slowly let out their held breath, but there was no time for them to work out whether they were feeling triumph or grief, because the surviving wolves had regrouped and were moving. Keeping well out of reach of the archers on the left flank, the great grey creatures loped past the left-hand end of the army. Soon it became apparent that they were circling around behind.

“They’re going to come up behind Bregolas,” shouted Baragund and Barahir almost simultaneously. The Soldier tore a horn from his belt and blew into it with all his lungs. They had no arranged calls with the Fisters, so he just blew a commonly-used alarm call. Heads turned towards him from the whole army, but the call achieved its purpose: the Fist men noticed the wolves now. There was some confusion, since some of them wanted to turn, others not, but with the help of the archer contingent they arrived at a tolerably settled bi-facing order before the creatures drew near.

However, the death-dance of fools that had dogged the actions of the Fist had still a few steps to perform. “Oh, no,” moaned Barahir, and covered his face with both hands. Baragund stood there with his mouth open, appalled at the unfolding spectacle.

In the distant field they had spied Bregolas, high on his white horse, prancing out from the southern edge of his line of men. Behind him followed, in neat lines, those of his men who had preferred to keep their high polished helms and their gleaming black armour, their shiny but thin shields, their absurd shoulder points, and all the rest. As the giant wolves loped nearer, this glittering body formed themselves into a line facing south.

The helpless onlookers could only watch as Bregolas raised his sword and shouted, his words lost in the intervening distance. His line of troops commenced their war-dance, and these shouts could be heard, lagging after the unified flash of movement. Again the flourish, and now the men were singing: a deep-voiced song of defiance.

The loping creatures poured on without a pause. As they neared the line of shining men, they gathered pace. The wolves charged into them then without even giving voice.

The singing dissolved into yells, the yells into screams; the screams fell into silence. In a space of four breaths, there was nothing to be seen where the shining lines had stood but a tangle of bodies. The wolves moved on, red-muzzled, picking up speed again to attack the main body of troops.

But now the bows were singing their own far more deadly song. The bitter arrows met the wolves and cut them down like ripe plums in a gale. Few of the monsters reached the ranks. Those who did chewed great holes in it for a time; but before long there were no wolves left alive.

Barahir and Baragund looked numbly at each other. There was nothing to say, and no time to say it anyway.

The Soldier was the first to recover. “Come,” he said, grasping his uncle’s arm. His eyes were suddenly blazing with enthusiasm. “This changes everything, don’t you see? We’ve trounced the ‘pults, the remainder is badly placed, and now they have spent all their wolves this side of the stream. It’s a battle of foot now.”

“I don’t understand,” said Barahir. “Are we not to wheel back like you said?”

“Wheel, yes,” replied his nephew, “but forwards. And then we press! We will have them! Quickly, we must send word to Dairuin.”

“But...” said the older man, still uncertain.

“Barahir, Barahir!” said the other. “They’ve spent their wolves, we have the numbers of them, and we have them between our two jaws!”

“All right,” said Barahir, catching his eagerness. “I’ll signal our side. They should be ready.” He now pulled his own horn free and sounded the two calls: advance, wheel right.

“Is there news of Dairuin?” Baragund enquired of the waiting messengers.

One put his hand up. “Sir,” he said, “he too has had wolves to contend with. But he was holding well when I left.”

The diamonds were under way now. Gramlach understood the business very well: the right-most remained almost stationary, the left-most was marching out at full pace. On the left, they had already reached the thinly-spaced Orcs to their front, and the bows were cutting the foe down in heaps.

The enemy commander, who had clearly not expected any of these developments, seemed for a moment at a loss. Then he gave the order Baragund had secretly been hoping for: to carry through with the attack on the poorly-prepared troops nearest the stream.

Horns were heard. The whole formation of Orcs on that side let out a roar and charged into the ranks of Bregolas’s men. The backwards-facing troops had just barely turned back to the front to meet the charge, but it soon became apparent that they were in trouble. The fight itself was rapidly hidden in the usual crowd of dust, but men could soon be seen fleeing out of it towards the rear.

Baragund was shaking his fists in the air. “We have him, we have him!” he crowed. “Oh, the fool! I grieve for the men, I do – but he has put himself squarely in our jaws!”

Even Barahir could see it now: the main body of the enemy forces had come almost directly between their own fighters and the stream – and on the far side of the stream, Dairuin’s formation could be seen advancing.

“Press! And bring up the reserves!” barked the Soldier. “Now’s the time! Box them in!” Barahir turned and gave the order.

Events were occurring very fast. The trickle of fleeing Fisters turned into a stream, and before anybody could do anything about it, into a rout. Goblins emerged from the dust cloud, cutting and stabbing at the terrified crowds of scrambling men. Barahir looked on at this white-faced. On the left, the diamonds were doing famously, steadily rolling up the enemy flank; but the right, moment by moment, was turning into a butcher’s shop.

Of the reserve, the small body of cavalry had now ridden up, and the foot troops were close behind. The screen of riders brought the rampaging Orcs to a halt, while battered and bloodied survivors from the Fist streamed between the horses towards the rear.

The diamonds pressed on. The Orcs began to look about them wildly. They had no more room. They gathered their ranks into what order they could and began, step by step, to retreat in the only direction now open to them: towards the Elfwell.

Clouds of dust hid the defeated remnant of the Fist, but Baragund spent no more thought on them. They were finished, of no more use. After a minute or two, however, a small ordered body of troops could be seen marching steadily out of the confusion towards the advancing commanders. As the clouds of dust thinned, Barahir exclaimed, "Why, it is the archers."

There were barely thirty of them left, still led by Heledir. Her right hand was bound in a cloth, dark with blood. Tears were streaming down the woman's cheeks, but as she came close, they saw the anger written plain on her face.

"Those useless puff-guts," she cried as she came up to them, her voice trembling. "They ran! Those useless wall proppers, braggarts, wasters of good food." She wiped her face angrily. "One of those bloody swords cut my hand short, cut two fingers clean away. That stupid, useless bastard just dropped it on me and ran. What am I supposed to do now if I can't shoot?"

"Get yourself to the rear, Heledir," said Barahir, his heart wrung for the brave woman. "You can learn to shoot with your left hand. But just now we have a battle to win."

The Orcs had no more room to retreat. They turned snarling to meet the advancing Bëorings.

"Press, press!" yelled Baragund, beside himself with excitement.

There was a fell light in the eyes of the Dorthonion spearmen as they advanced in their ordered ranks. Now they were only twenty paces from the yelling Orcs; now ten. With a shock like mountains colliding, the ranks met.

The whole field became suffused with the insensate roar of battle. Blades flashed in the light as they rose and fell, but in a short while the dust began to make it difficult to see what was happening. There was no time to gather news from riders.

"Look!" cried Baragund, pointing to the southern sky. "The sun! The sun! They fail!" The light had been growing; weak shadows now appeared. The enemy wavered, wincing under the glare. They had backed until they were slipping down the muddy bank. Some turned from the stabbing steel, tried to run, but they met the deadly spears of Dairuin's troop advancing now into the stream. The Elfwell frothed red.

But even as the light strengthened, even as hope rose in every heart, as strength waxed in each arm; even as their enemy began to panic; the sweet cup of gathering victory was snatched cruelly from the defenders' lips.

A darkness eclipsed their minds, like a hill falling. The blow bowed the defenders of Dorthonion from the waist. All over the battlefield men and women cried out, lost in a fog of blindness and despair. It was the late frost which kills the flowers, the untimely gale which strips the buds from the trees. Weapons fell from nerveless hands. Some cried out in their loss and beat at the choking miasma; others stood where they were struck, gasping for breath, half senseless.

Barahir was fighting with all his heart and will to throw off the horrid weight on his mind and soul. Through clouded vision he peered to the North, to the source of this tide of despair. He saw there a tall figure in shimmering armour, sitting high on a mighty, arch-necked horse the colour of a thundercloud. The figure raised a baleful sword straight above its head and cried a word which washed the world away. Barahir felt as if all his loves and dreams were dissolving in a vast, empty ocean of indifference.

No! he shouted, a tiny spark in darkness. Unseeing, he clenched his fist. He felt the ring, cold and fierce beneath his hand. The instant of contact with the elvish band lanced a blaze of lightning into his mind, burning great gaps in the dark. With a tearing effort of will, Barahir thrust aside the clinging black remainder and forced his way back to the world. He opened his eyes.

All across the field before him, a dreadful tableau was unfolding. His people stood everywhere, nerveless, unseeing, and they were being cut down in their rows as he watched. The Orc-folk were racing to take their revenge for the arrows of Dorthonion. Their steel was flashing through flesh all along the front of battle, like some nightmare reaping machine.

Pausing only to give the dull-eyed Baragund a blow across the face, Barahir spurred his horse towards his disintegrating diamonds. He drew his sword as he galloped towards the carnage and brandished it high. The sun caught his ring, and the green fires blazed out in a tower of light. People shook themselves awake at his passage and opened their eyes. Blanching with shock at the sight of the enemy eyes and teeth coming right for them, bare paces away, they jerked up spear and shield. Some were in time.

Now the bows, in ones and twos, began to sing their song of defiance once more.

“Fear no darkness, people of Ladros!” cried Barahir in a mighty voice, pirouetting the horse. He was in agony; his people were dying, he could not reach them all. “Fear no darkness! Your salvation is in your own hands! Lift up your heads and fight!” He rode on, waking as many as he could.

After a time he realized that the fight had subsided. The Orcs, denied the quick victory they had thought to seize, had fallen back, wincing under the steadily strengthening sunlight.

In the brief pause granted the Bëorings, Barahir tried to see what was happening in the rest of the field. To his right, the force under Baragund had essentially ceased to exist. Small disciplined bodies were trying to fight their slow way out of the chaos, but most of the former neat blocks of thousands of hardy troops had disappeared beneath a howling flood of Orcs.

He lifted his eyes to the far bank of the stream, but all he could see there was a cloud of dust. Dust also hung over distant Newfort.

The pressure mounted again in his head. The Orcs were working themselves up to charge again, in despite of the weak sunlight. There was very little time. Barahir looked quickly over his own people. He saw that the diamonds were in a fearful state of disarray – by the flashing estimate which was all the moment allowed, he had lost fully three quarters of his numbers.

Shouting orders, he made his troops bunch up, reform. They were dragging the wounded without ceremony to the insides of the diamonds. Thank the Powers, his people were responding. Barahir felt a flush of relief. Second by second the troops were reforming, regathering their strength.

Only then had he the chance to think of his son, his wife. Had they survived? He could not see them.

A howl came from the front as the Orcs attacked again.

* * * * *

Beren had been in the second diamond from the end, which he had chosen because it had the most people he knew in it. Gorlim was there, and Dagnir and his brother Ragnor, and several others from his district. Ormorod stood side by side with his son Ormalan, Beren’s childhood *bête noire*. Beren passed Camlaf too on his way to his position.

Camlaf caught his eye. “What do you say, Ber, shall we have us a nice fat Orc for tea?” he quipped. “Should roast up a treat. Better than goose, they reckon.”

“I know who’s the goose in this neighbourhood,” retorted Beren. “Just you keep your eyes open, my lad. You make sure they don’t have *you* for tea.”

The bowmen had not had many targets until the turning movement began. After that, Beren, as with all the others on that marching front, progressively chewed up, cut down, however you want to call it, a long tally of goblin soldiers. It was not an effort for him, nor was it exciting. His mind sat to one side as he reached, pulled, and loosed; reached, pulled and loosed. He was observing the goblins he shot, how each one was different; and as he watched them, his mind was watching him. Is this all there is? it asked him. To kill, and kill, and kill? An endless row of Orcs stretching into the future – each one to be wearisomely butchered, its blood let out to run over the ground, its brains to be mangled by the rough passage of an arrow, ditto heart. Others to drown in their own blood, or to gasp out their lives, curled around a spear in the guts. To kill and kill, what kind of a life is that? And is that how your own life will end? For to these creatures, you are just the same as they are to you – an object to be processed, to be rendered unliving and then forgotten. Your life and memories, so colourful and complex to you, to be thrown away, discarded without interest; in ennui, in dull succession, as the life and memories of the creature before you in the row were thrown, and those of the creature after you will be, and so on, until the end. Will the rows ever end? If so, when? And if not, then what purpose was there in it?

And all this time it was reach, pull, loose; reach, pull, loose. The twang of the bow, the thump in the flesh. They had been stepping over fallen creatures this long time, the spearmen being careful to stick them again, because you could never be sure with goblins. Blood was everywhere, it was sprayed on people. Hordes of flies covered every wet surface in a shimmering blue carpet, feasting and feasting. Then there was the stink: the metallic, cloying smell of blood, with shit smell mixed with it, for the dying often shat themselves, either that or it was the foetid gas released when their guts were sliced open.

The onset of the Darkness smote Beren at the same time as all the others, and a tiny part of his mind was relieved, almost glad in a way, because it felt right; it chimed; he thought he was being punished for the row of deaths. But he recognized straight away the Power he had met some days before. Also, he knew this mental landscape: Willow had shown him the way, it held no fears for him. Holding the black pressure from him, he unbent his body from the crouch he had been smitten into and opened his eyes.

Only a few seconds had passed; the Orcs were only just beginning their charge, the Crebain were still in mid-dive.

Quick as thought, Beren bent bow and picked off the five goblins nearest his section – thung, thung, thung, thung, thung. The monstrous birds sheered away at the sight of his ready bow. As soon as he had cleared that small space, he ran down the back of the row, slapping peoples' bottoms as hard as he could. "Wake up! Throw it off!" Dagnir: he grabbed the man by the shoulder and shook him. "Dag! Come back to us!" The man straightened, opened bleary eyes, managed to focus on Beren. Beren leaned past the house-man and shot down some more goblins. No time! He could already hear them chopping into the far rank. Dagnir suddenly shook off his daze, looked around him with wild eyes and grasped his spear. "Get them woken up!" yelled Beren at him. He left Dag and slapped two more bums. Stop and shoot. Uh-oh, they were coming in from the side. Some more mad shooting; thank heavens, that quelled them a bit. "Wake up, you bastards!" screamed Beren. "Throw it off!" He shot down an Orc that was just about to stick Ragnor, then plugged another with the same idea, then another. Reach the big man, shake him. Nothing. Rap him on the head with the bow – oh Powers, shoot, shoot, shoot, shoot. Damn these quivers, not enough arrows. "Wake up Rag, man, we need you! We need you!" screamed Beren in his ear, as the man shook his head and slowly came back to light and life.

People were shouting and laying about them everywhere now. There was Gorlim, swinging a pole-axe like one possessed. Heaps of Orcs at his feet, had he even gone under? No time for it. The box of arrows, ten paces away: damn, no time for that either. A glimpse of Camlaf down, red at his head; no time even to feel anything. Shooting like a mad thing. They were all fighting now, those who hadn't fallen. It was the Orcs who were falling now.

The flash of the Ring came then, and they felt their hearts lighten, but Beren's diamond was already fighting

hard. They were holding their own now, and Beren took the chance to dash to refill his quiver. He suddenly thought of his mother. She had been behind the diamonds, keeping the supplies flowing, getting the wounded out, but he could not see her now. (All the time of this thought, he was shooting.) Oh no – there was Storm, with nobody on his back, covered in his own blood and screaming, running away madly across the field. Beren suddenly wanted to be sick; he saw that the horse was tripping in loops of his own intestines. Storm was done, finished.

But Mother? She must have been... there, or thereabouts. Pushing his way through the gasping fighters, who were now resting on their spears – for the Orcs had pulled back – he frantically scanned the ground. There! The sky-blue cloak she had been wearing. He dashed to her side. A quick look around: a line of Orcs was glowering, not far off. He picked up his groaning mother – she was alive at least, thank Powers – and started running from the field as fast as he could.

Wait. This was stupid. There were Orcs in the place he was running toward; they were everywhere. Inside a diamond was the only safe place. Beren looked wildly around, found the nearest formation and staggered his way to it. The ranks parting to let him in, he laid his mother beside other mangled and moaning wretches in the middle. The Orcs were working themselves up, he could hear them yelling, banging their shields. In a few seconds they would charge. He had to get back and fight, but in the few seconds he had, he stroked his mother's white face, pinched her ear lobe. "Mama, it's me. Can you hear me?"

The blue eyes fluttered open, focussed. She smiled at him. The smile vanished suddenly and she tried weakly to rise.

"It's not over," she said weakly, "I know it's not. I have to get back. Where's my bow?"

"Mother, I have to go. Rest up for a moment." He could not spend any more time on her, left her and raced back to the front, unslinging his own bow as he went. At the same time there was a roar from the Orcs; they charged anew.

The bows were singing now, but so few, so few. Beren had a stuffed quiver full, but at the end of a time he could never afterwards recall the length of, whether it had been long or short, he came out of a daze to realize that he had almost emptied it. The ground in front of their shortened diamond side was covered, just covered in groaning goblin corpses, with arrows rising up everywhere, thick as stalks of corn.

Some more of their own numbers had fallen, but thankfully, not many.

Beren stretched himself, feeling more weary than he could ever remember. His tongue was parched; he could not remember the last time he had drunk. He nudged the man next to him.

"If we can keep on our feet, and don't run out of arrows, we can see them off," he husked to him.

"Aye," replied the man darkly. "We will. But they got my brother. The bastards got my brother. See 'em off? Aye, that we will, or die trying."

They were pulling the wounded to the middle, inside the shrunken diamond. Beren went to see how his mother was faring. He found her sitting up but holding her head in her hands. He had just arrived at her side when Father joined them, throwing himself off his horse.

"Mel," Barahir said to his wife, crouching and grasping her by the shoulders, "are you all right?"

She tilted her hands away from her face and looked up into her husband's. "I think so," she muttered. "Just a bit shaken. I must have hit my head, I think. It aches some awful."

"We have to get them out of this," said Barahir. "Somehow. Form up, pull back. That's the main thing now."

Just look after yourself, Mel. You too, Son. I have to get this business organized.”

Retreat turned out to be easier than most of them had feared. The sun was fully out now and the Orcs had had enough of it. They had gathered into a mass and were swirling back north to keep under the shade of the retreating clouds, with the swarms of filthy birds hovering over their ranks.

Emeldir was still shaky, confused. “Did we win?” she asked Beren.

“We haven’t lost,” he reassured her.

In fact they had lost, which became apparent to all after they had had time to take in the field. Only the arrival of the sun had saved the defenders from complete annihilation.

Some of the defenders commenced the weary task of salvaging arrows, others made up rough stretchers to carry the wounded. A wagon stood not far off, but no horses to be seen anywhere, apart from Barahir’s; either they had run off, or been killed or captured. Barahir sent a young lass off on his horse to the wagon park to bring back as long a string of horses as she could manage. It would be weary work if they had to carry the stretchers two miles back by hand.

Other bodies of dazed troops were to be seen making their slow way across the fields in a westerly direction. Nobody thought of going to the town. It was obvious from the dense plume of smoke that it had been captured and was by now doubtless suffering the usual fate of captured towns.

The lithy maiden came back, leading a string of several mounts. Lagging a little way behind her they could see three more wagons coming up. After the wounded had been laid carefully in the carriages, the shrunken column of bone-weary farmers began the long trudge back to camp. Barahir rode beside them, counting them silently. Sweet sky above, sweet Kindler, it couldn’t be true. Barely six hundred? It couldn’t be true.

Trying to shake off the numb feeling, he rode up beside Gramlach. Apart from an impressive collection of minor wounds, the house-man appeared to have escaped without scathe.

“I’m going to see who else has survived,” Barahir said to him. “Over the Elfwell, and up to the town.”

“You be careful, Master,” replied Gram. “Keep your eyes peeled.”

Barahir rode out and passed close to each of the plodding bodies of weary soldiery, calling encouragement to them as he went. He spotted Gildor, felt a pang for the young man. As he approached the next unit, which was marching with crisp discipline in a neat oblong, a hand raised to him from its van. It was Belegund, his green cloak now filthy with blood and torn in several places. And glory be, beside him marched the tall figure of his brother. Baragund wore no helm, and a piece of bloody cloth was tied over his head. His right arm was in a sling, and he seemed dazed, but he bore no other obvious signs of injury.

“We need to form a perimeter,” shouted the Greencloak hoarsely to Barahir. “Those swine will be back as soon as the sun is down.”

“At the wagons, or in the wood’s edge if we can manage it,” replied Barahir. “I’m going on a piece. I want to see if there is anything left of the others.”

The Soldier roused himself. “Should attack,” he croaked, with hardly voice left to whisper with. “Mithbrûn. Use the sun.”

Barahir shook his head. “No use,” he said bleakly. “We can’t fight *him*.”

There was a mile to ride to the ford, and for the whole length of this journey, the left-hand field of Barahir’s

vision was taken up by a sight, the memory of which would bring him to sweating wakefulness on countless nights to come. Seven thousand men and women, dead or dying, lay on that ground. There were so many corpses tangled together that they did not look like people at all, but like a broad carpet of some peccant growth across the land: ruptured gourds, the vegetables of nightmare. Some of the things that had been people were strewn in pieces, in a stew of their own curdled and browning blood; others lay splayed, with crossed and cocked limbs, like discarded puppets. Some few who had a little blood left in their bodies were sitting, rocking to and fro, or stumbling witless among the crowded dead. Many, living and dead, had lost eyes or tongues to the infernal birds. Luckily the wind was from the South and carried the stench away from Barahir, otherwise he might have been overcome. As it was, enough drifted over to make the horse snuff with fear and disgust and to jerk nervously at the bridle.

Barahir found that his hands were shaking. He did not know how to stop them. What had happened this day? He had thought they were going to win. He really had thought so. Then all that... that bright and dawning hope, just snuffed out in a moment. There was no way back now to that peak of hope; there were not enough of them left. Five minutes, that was all it had taken to wipe the flower of Dorthonion from the map.

He rubbed the great ring with his other hand, and suddenly he was weeping. It was a relief to weep, because he was alone, he could weep here, with no-one to see but the dead. And the dead did not care; their empty eyes gazed at the sky, indifferent, not minding even the busy flies.

With an effort he mastered his sobs, because he was not a boy any more, but a grown man, whom people depended on; and there were still many things to do.

As he approached the ford, having wiped his face and compelled his face and hands by force of will to return to his service, he saw that another of these small but disciplined bodies of men was crossing the stream in his direction. This company proved to be at least nominally under the leadership of Dairuin, who was limping and covered with blood. How much of it was his own was hard to say. The moustaches were ragged now and his eyes were wild. A younger man was helping him to walk.

“They cut us to pieces,” he cried to Barahir as soon as the man approached. “A darkness took us, and the wolves came in it, and they cut us to pieces. Is it all a bad dream? We had them! We had them in our fist! And then we had them not. I do not understand. If this be real, then it is no war for men; we are lost in it. We are lost.”

“Come on, Sir,” said the young man, whom Barahir remembered having seen about the Hall. “Not far to go now.”

“We are reforming at the wagon park,” Barahir told them, his words echoing bitterly in his own head. ‘Reforming’, ye Powers. With these ragged refugees? “Help will come for the wounded. Have you any word of the town, and the armies defending it?”

The column of smoke from the town streamed out high to the North, and flames could now be seen at the base. The whole town looked to be burning, and no matter where he looked, Barahir could see nobody moving.

Dairuin made an effort to pull himself together. “None,” he said. “We have seen no survivors. We suppose there are none.”

There was a heavy silence, broken at last by Barahir. “Get yourselves to the rear,” he said. He eyed the burning town, the planes of his face seeming as if cut out of harsh iron.

The battered Guard-major turned to his young helper. “Come, Halthaldir,” he said dully. “I will ask you to lend me once more your shoulder. It seems we must drag on our way yet a little through this life of sorrow. We must wait to be slain in our turn; we may not leave by our choice. All the laws of Men speak against it.”

* * * * *

Despite the dreadful shocks they had endured that day, or perhaps the better not to dwell upon them, the people worked ceaselessly through the long afternoon. Barahir's first thought had been to muster and encourage those who remained fit to fight, but it quickly became apparent that the care and recovery of the wounded was a far greater task. There were plenty of wagons for this, but not enough horses and mules to draw them, and not anything like enough healers to handle the numbers. They all worked grimly on, however, all fit folk who could lend a hand, because everybody knew what would happen to any person left on the field after nightfall.

They could do nothing about the dead: there were simply too many. They outnumbered the living by ten to one.

People were wounded not only in body but also in mind. There were many who were dazed from the shock, unmanned, even tough men like Dairuin. A few had never returned out of the darkness; they had lost their way back. They sat where they were put, gazing slack-jawed into nothingness.

Beren found time to gather the eagles' reports, and what he heard from them filled him with helpless fury. It seemed that a great part of Taenthir's force had in fact escaped to the East, but at cost of leaving the town and bridge undefended. The diamond Barahir had sent to him had fought bravely but had been overwhelmed in the darkness.

When these tidings were brought to Barahir, his face darkened with anger, but he said nothing. What was there to say? But this perfidy was not forgotten. Even unto the high days of Númenor, the dark memory of Taenthir's faith-breach, that festering knot of rancour and shame, would resurface to plague the Men of the West.

Towards evening a few bloodied stragglers from Menelrond's defenders limped into the camp, bearing the sad news of the deaths of the man himself and of his eldest son.

Beren had taken himself off late in the afternoon to snatch a couple of hours sleep. He planned to be up the whole night, but he had not had a full night of sleep in over a week, and could not go on for ever so. Barahir missed him, and had short words for his son when he reappeared, just as the sun was going down.

"Where in the Pit have you been?" he said harshly. "You picked a fine time to go absent. We're in something of a crisis here, in case you hadn't noticed!"

"I needed to sleep for an hour or two," replied Beren, "because I..."

"Sleep!" shouted Barahir. "Sleep? How if I just took time off to sleep, eh? Or if we all did? Shall we all go off to sleep while the Orcs saunter along and slit all our throats? Sleep!"

"Father," said Beren calmly, "if you would let me finish. I'm going to be up all night, patrolling outside the fires. I can't do that unless I catch up a little sleep. I've hardly slept at all since the catapult raid, and that was several nights ago."

Barahir made a visible attempt to rein in his frayed temper.

"All right," he said. "But you could have let me know."

Beren thought it better not to mention that he had tried to do exactly that, but had found his father busy with a long list of other concerns; in the end, since time had been running on, he had just taken it upon himself to do that which he knew his father would approve anyway. He said nothing of this, but bowed his head. "I am sorry, Father," he said.

“All right,” said Barahir, already thinking of the next problem. “Go and coordinate with Gram. I made mother lie down.”

Gram was looking weary. His injuries had not received any attention, since the healers had so far had their hands full with more serious cases. He listened to Beren’s plans, nodding.

“You planning to creep around outside the laager? Well, I don’t doubt you can do it,” he said slowly. “Don’t know as I’d have said that of anybody else, though. You going to use that?” He pointed at the blowpipe Beren was carrying.

“Yes,” said Beren. “I’ve prepared a fresh batch of stuff for the tips, and I’ve plenty of darts.”

Gramlach was curious. “I’ve always wondered,” he said, “how d’you avoid jabbing yourself? I mean, all right, ’spose you can be lucky a hundred times, but that one time you slip up is all you need, surely? Then you’ve had it.”

“Well, you do have to watch what you’re doing,” admitted Beren, “but I’m not going to use the stuff that kills, not on a business like this. I do have some of that, but you’re right, it’s mostly too bloody dangerous to use in the field. These darts here won’t kill, they’ll just put them to sleep. Then I come up and stick ’em. You still don’t want to be knocked out in the middle of the field of course, but at least with these you’ve a chance of waking up again. I’ve stuff to reverse the working, too, in case of accidents. Though you’ve got to be quick with it.”

“Ah, I see,” said Gramlach. “Well, you don’t need me to tell you to be careful.”

“I’m always careful,” replied Beren. “Anyway, I hope I’ll be able to keep a few skirmishers off your necks.”

“Aye, well,” sighed Gramlach, “it’s anyone’s guess what those swine mean to do. Just between you and me, boy, if it is anything more than skirmishers then I don’t see how we’re going to cope. We’ve a camp crammed with wounded and we haven’t enough hale defenders for more than a thin line around them.”

Beren shrugged. He could think of nothing encouraging to say. “If it gets too hot I’ll come in,” he said. “Take it easy, Gram.”

Gram gnawed a knuckle. “I’m most worried about back home,” he said. “Told Cal I’d go back ’n help her, but with one thing and another I haven’t been able to get away.”

“One thing at a time,” said Beren. He went off then, since he had things to arrange. During his time with the Dwarves, years ago, he had learned many things. He had remembered a trick from those times that he thought would be of use now. He needed some special materials; eventually, after some difficulty, he secured them. Finally, after making some low-voiced arrangements with the camp-marshal, he trotted out with his weapons into the gathering gloom.

* * * * *

Again, a battle against Men had not gone as Mairon had designed. The Mobiles always seemed to do less than one expected, and the humans had once again done more. Who would have expected those horsemen to throw their lives away like that? What could they hope to gain from it? They were dead now! Indeed, their lives had been forfeit from the moment they had charged, and they must have known it. Where was their possible gain?

How difficult it was for order to anticipate chaos!

He had not planned to contribute more than direction to the battle, but in the end the situation had become so

dire that he had been forced to take a hand. Once again, he had spent precious, slow-gathered power. Oh, the pain of it! He felt reduced by the outlay, lessened; cold and empty.

The deficit would have to be made up as soon as possible. They had already taken captives, and after the sun had hidden himself, the Mobiles would search the field for more. He would have any prisoners taken to the Tower, where they would undergo his Procedure, and after that he would see how things stood. In the meantime the spare Mobiles could amuse themselves in the captured town, or elsewhere as they pleased.

* * * * *

Flatnose, however, was far from amused. “Fuck ’em,” he growled. “Fuck ’em all. And especially fuck that Bloodbelly for a shit-sucking sack of rats’ piss.” Bloodbelly, the commander of his cohort, had ordered him to take his troop to scout out the enemy camp rather than heading for the town like most of the other Lice.

“Won’t be much left in that town by now anyway, Boss,” put in Cutfinger, one of his squad leaders. “And at least we’re not out there in the field, stumbling over deaders like Fuckbottle and his boys. We might at least get some fun this way.”

“You shut your mouth,” said Flatnose, eyeing his inferior with hostility. This chirpy little scum was always flapping his jaw; too perky by half. Time for him to have an accident, maybe. Flatnose believed in frequent rotation of his squad leaders. Promote ’em, then mulch ’em before they got ideas. That was the way.

But fuck it, you couldn’t be lopping off every head that poked up. Lop too many, and there’d be questions, and then he might easily lose his own head, one way or another.

Anyway, in point of fact, the little toadsucker was right: they *did* have a reasonably cushy detail. They hadn’t to attack; just scout. Well, no problem there. They’d stay out in the dark, have a look around, maybe send in an arrow or two towards the fires, just for fun. Fires: they had to be fed. It was an old game, and a satisfying one. His mood began to brighten. So what if they missed out on the looting.

“All right!” he called. “Gather in here, you scum! Listen up!” When they had jostled in close, he continued. “We’re to head to the Softy camp. We’ll see how things stand with them first, and plan the night’s festivities from there. So you’re to keep it quiet, do you hear? First one that coughs gets a little bit of looking after direct from me.” Here he drew his knife and made a horizontal slash with it in the air at neck height. “Flatnose’s Guaranteed Cough-cure, never fails!” he crowed, to the laughter of his troop.

The creep inwards went off all right. Those Softies had quite a parcel of wagons in there, but they had no fires inside, just a few in a ring on the outskirts. That was wise of them because it made it difficult to see much of what was happening in the camp.

Flatnose considered the possibilities. There was a long night ahead of them. He would station some of the lads by each fire to pick off anybody who came with fuel. That would be amusing, and after the fires sank down a bit, they could maybe sneak in and get up to some more tricks.

The Rrrk rubbed his hands. This wasn’t going to be so bad after all! Silently he made signs to his companions – time to go back and deal out orders.

After they had crept half a mile or so back, he gathered them together behind a shed, where they had set their own small watch fire.

“All right,” he said. “All here?”

“Well, no,” said one of his squad leaders. “I’m short three.”

“I’m down one,” said another.

“Oh fuck ’em,” growled Flatnose. “They got lost somewhere. A bit of lash tomorrow will sort them out. Listen up!” He told them his plan. The listening Lice grinned and nodded; it was a game after their own hearts.

They went back and stationed themselves out in the dark beyond the fires. Some of these were beginning to burn low; it wouldn’t be long now. The Lice set themselves to wait.

Something happened then, something completely out of Flatnose’s reckoning. One the fires suddenly flared up blue! While the Lice were goggling, a man ran up from the dark behind, from the camp. He dumped on a load of wood on that fire, turned, and ran back. Not an arrow had been fired.

Flatnose cursed. What in the fires of Hell was going on? Why hadn’t his boys shot? He worked his way around to that side and crept in towards the fire, which was now crackling and blazing up brightly. Before he had reached the position he bumped heads with a frantic Cutfinger.

Cutfinger grabbed him. “They’re dead!” the Louse babbled into Flatnose’s ear. “Dead as bones!”

“What are you talking about?” hissed his leader.

“Something killed the shooters!”

Flatnose wanted to see for himself. He followed Cutfinger at a crawl back in towards the light to the shooting position, both peering mistrustfully around them in the dark. When they arrived at the shallow fox-hole, the forms of four Lice could just be made out. All four had neat stab wounds in the neck, but there were no signs of a struggle. How was that possible?

Flatnose shivered, recalling some of the stories he had heard about this country. The word was, the woods here weren’t canny. Well, they had stayed out of the woods, but things like this were still happening.

As he turned these uneasy thoughts over in his head, the exact same blue thing happened at another fire, across the circle. Curse it!

“Somebody must be out here!” he hissed to Cutfinger. “These fools didn’t stab themselves. You go that way, tell the lads from me to leave the fires and get looking. I’ll go around this way.”

There followed the most frustrating half-hour Flatnose could remember. They combed the whole area without turning up any trace of the marauder, but the count of dead Lice mounted steadily all the time. It was always the same story: no cries, no fight, just stumbling over another corpse and finding on it a single stab wound to the neck. Three Lice also shot other Lice in the confusion, mistaking them for the marauder in the darkness. In the end Flatnose had no alternative but to call them back to the shed.

“How many are we down?” he snarled. After a quick muster, the answer came back: sixteen. Soul-flayers and heart-rippers, that was a quarter of the troop! Fuck!

Flatnose chewed on a claw. “We need some sniffers,” he said. “Strangler, go and see if you can turn up any. Don’t go to the town, that’s too far. See if Fuckbottle can spare a few. Don’t come back with just one, mind; if he got mashed we’d be back where we started.”

After Strangler had loped off on his mission, the other Lice huddled close around their small fire, peering warily into the dark. They were shocked into howls of fear by arrows which came slicing in, making four successive *thunks* as they found marks.

“Get him!” screamed Flatnose, drawing his knife out and running in the direction from which the arrows had come. The whole troop of yelling Lice followed him out in a mob. They quartered the ground viciously, but found nobody. After a fruitless quarter of an hour Flatnose gathered them back in again. “Put that fire out!” He yelled. As soon as the welcome darkness had covered them, he gave orders for the Lice to hunker down and to wait in silence.

“Space it out,” he whispered. “Don’t huddle up together like you wanted to fuck each other. Space it out! Just near enough to see the other fellow.”

They waited as the hours went by, faces turned away from the eye-stabbing stars which wheeled slowly overhead. There were no further alarms.

The realization gradually grew in Flatnose that Strangler was not going to come back.

By the time the sky began to pale in the East, Flatnose had had enough. He gathered the remains of the troop together – at some point they had lost another five – and moved off to the East.

Two hundred paces out, they stumbled over some bodies, facing in. One was Strangler; the other three were of the short, spread-nosed Lice who were used as trackers.

Day Nine

The bruised and traumatized survivors of the massacre had passed a quieter night than any of them had dared hope for. Most people had been able to enjoy a certain amount of uninterrupted sleep, which had a wonderfully restorative effect. Their spirits being lifted, at least in some measure, the people faced the tasks in front of them this dawning with determination, even with traces of energy.

Barahir also was feeling better. He sought out Beren early in the day and apologized for his temper of the day before. Beren came immediately to his father and squeezed him in a strong embrace.

“It is a hard time for us all, Father,” he said.

“It is amazing how much better things look after a little sleep,” Barahir confessed to him. “Thank the Powers the enemy left us in peace.” A tendency to wryness in his son’s expression made the older man hesitate. “Did you... were things quiet out there for you?” he asked, with less certainty in his voice.

Beren grinned and shook his head.

Barahir was silent for a moment. “I have a feeling you are going to tell me that you kept the Orcs off our necks all night,” he said at last.

“Only if you ask me,” said Beren, still grinning.

“I well know your value,” said Barahir slowly, “but there are times when I forget. Forgive me again.”

“Pshaw,” Beren waved this away. “But I must sleep myself now, Father, if that accords with your will.”

“I would ask you first to join us in a brief council,” said Barahir. “We must decide what to do.”

All the leaders were present at the parley. Barahir first asked his son for the report of the birds.

“The main army of our foes has formed up again near the river, but they have gone to ground against the coming of the sun,” said Beren. “The, the Presence – you all know which I mean – has, my flying friends think, returned to the burg which had been Angrod’s in happier times. On the other side of the account, Newfort has fallen, with what loss of life we do not know, although the birds have seen some survivors

fleeing towards the high country to the South. The Orc legion which came via the west road had been much delayed by Hannas's force, and now also waits the day out, perhaps some ten miles short of the inn at the crossroads. Elements of Hannas's force remain in contact with it and continue to harass the enemy."

There was something not far from a suppressed cheer in the meeting. People sat up straighter at this news and a gleam came to their eyes.

They came then to discuss their possible courses. It became quickly apparent that their first care must be the many injured. Everybody wanted to fight on if they could, but it was not in them to leave uncared-for those rendered helpless by wounds.

"I think we must take them to Aeluin, to the Blue Lake," said Barahir. "They will be more protected there, so long as there is any protection at all in Dorthonion. With our wounded secreted in that hide, we whole ones will be free to take the battle back to the Orcs."

His plan being agreed by all parties, the task resolved into how to order the march so as to reach the lake in the quickest and safest manner. The problem was the wagons; the first obstacle was the river. After some discussion, they decided to retreat first to the inn, and take the Dwarf-road south from there. Matters were quickly set in order, and the cavalcade was under way within the hour.

They enjoyed a quiet day on the road west, with no alarms, and no mishaps worse than broken wheels. Beren slept as best he could in a jolting wagon filled with sacks of flour. The flour kept getting into his nose and making him sneeze. He woke when the shadows were growing long, and sat up to look around. The trees had closed around them but they were still some miles short of the inn. Ahead on the track, the sinking sun was shining almost directly into their eyes.

Beren, who was sensitive to such things, felt something suddenly amiss – some great stroke of sorrow. It was as if far off, a great soul had flared and died. The birds fell silent, as were the people in the column; even the leaves seemed to droop sadly.

The moment passed, the birds took up their song, the sun shone again. Beren shook himself free of the empty feeling, jumped out of the wagon and ran to the front of the column, where he found his father riding with his mother. Emeldir smiled welcome to him and, in answer to his query, told him she was feeling almost recovered.

"And you, Father," Beren said to Barahir, "have you slept?"

His father smiled. "I have," he said, "and for the same reason as you yesterday: I expect to be up most of the night. We will not find the crossroads held against us, if your eagle reports are sooth, but we cannot expect such peace to endure forever. The enemy is fleeter of foot than we. He can easily reach us from both directions tonight, and since he can, we must expect that he will. I think we must send the wagons south while we may, while everybody fit to hold bow or spear stays to hold the road."

There was a subject Beren wanted to raise, but he was not sure how. "It is difficult to judge numbers when the people are spread out so," he began in hesitant tones, "but I cannot escape the feeling that there are fewer of us now than when we began this retreat."

"Yes, there are fewer," replied Barahir shortly. "Many asked for leave to go back and defend their homes."

Beren was silent, taking this in. "But they cannot hold three legions of Orcs from their doors," he said at last. "Not one by one."

"It is hard to deny the call of the heart," replied Barahir. "Have I not felt it myself? And have you talked to Gramlach lately?"

The sun was down now and was spreading pink light across the evening sky. "Gram will stay to defend the inn," said Beren.

"Yes," said Barahir, "but not longer, I think."

* * * * *

The inn loomed dark under the stars. At first they thought it was empty; but Barahir found Zalta sitting with a candle in her office at the rear.

"Zalta, what are you doing?" he asked.

She raised her dark eyes to his. "Waiting," she said.

He realized that further questioning would be pointless. He knew how it stood with her, although he had ideas of his own concerning that. "Have you heard the news?" he said instead.

"I hear all the news," she replied, her tone as flat as her gaze.

"Well, we mean to defend the cross-roads this night," he said. "We have many wounded whom we will send south to the Lake. Can I ask you, do you still have stores of food? We have enough for now, but we have many mouths, and I do not think we will have enough for long. Every morsel we can eke out will help."

"Yes," she said dully, "of course. Take whatever you want."

"I have no silver on my person," Barahir said apologetically, "but I am sure we can find enough somewhere. Make up a tally of what we owe you and I will see that it gets paid."

She laughed shortly. "And what use would I have for silver? Nay, Master, we are beyond that. Just take what you need."

"I will send Emeldir to you," he said. "If you would show her where to find things..." He bowed his head to her and went back out.

The plan which had been formed between the leaders in the course of the march now swung smoothly into gear. Those of the company who were motile, but who were on account of their wounds unable to hold a weapon, had been detailed to marshal the wagons on the journey south. These now, taking up their charge, directed the long column into the south road with hardly a pause. The fully fit remainder were set to digging a ditch and breastwork about the crossroads. This work would have gone slowly had not a great many shovels and other implements been stored at the inn for distribution at need. Hundreds of willing hands now took these tools up; the earth-bank rose swiftly under the light of a ring of brands set high on poles.

Other workers were sent out a short distance from the line of the earthwork with different instructions.

Scouts had been dispatched to watch the west road, some also left behind to watch the eastward. The night was not far advanced when the western scouts cantered back in. "They come," their leader told Barahir breathlessly. "Their van will be here inside the hour."

The Orcs, when they arrived, showed that they had learned some caution when it came to operations in Dorthonion. They must have had their own scouts in advance, because they approached the bank warily. Having sighted this check, it appeared that they formed up a little out of bowshot from it while they considered what to do. The Orc troops had come carrying a few brands, but these they now cast down and extinguished. The defenders for their part had kept some light within their own circle, since Barahir and Baragund had settled that they must be able to see if any section of the ring was overcome; these torch

flames flickered now redly off their helms and the tops of their shields.

Barahir turned to his son, who stood beside him at the barrier with an arrow already fitted to his bow. The head of it was wrapped in cloth and a small brazier stood nearby.

“Do you still think you can do it?” asked Barahir.

“I think so,” said Beren. “I can make out the mark.” And indeed, if Barahir squinted, he too could just make out the pale patch in the darkness. This was a whitewashed board that they had carefully set up earlier.

“I’ll leave the timing for you to judge,” said Barahir.

There were a few minutes during which nothing happened; then suddenly they could see masses of silent goblins running at them out of the dark. Everything then happened very quickly. In a moment the enemy had reached the barrier. Yells broke out, steel flashed redly in the light, and the whole shield-wall on the west side was engaged in furious, clashing struggle with the enemy.

At the same instant, a fiery arrow arced through the sky. Nothing happened for a breath after it came to earth, but then in the place where it had landed, fire bloomed suddenly. The working party had earlier dug a narrow trench across the way in that place, had packed it with brush, then soaked the whole with oil. The kindled flames now ran greedily along this furrow and soon were leaping high across the full width of the western roadway. Some goblins were singed in the flames but the main effect of the curtain of flame was to illuminate the field.

Masses of the enemy were clearly revealed in the bloody light. The waiting archers now had targets, and once more in this summer of butchery the death-song of the bows echoed across the killing ground and laid the foe to waste. The Orcs, however, did not wait to be mown down, but gave up the assault and ran for their lives, the survivors leaping with howls across the flaming ditch and vanishing into the dark beyond.

“Well, it was a good trick,” Barahir said to his son. “It is just a shame that we cannot do it again.”

The brush in the ditch was burning low now. Soon the Orcs were able to run in and dump earth on it to hasten the extinction. Very soon darkness had returned to the field. There followed a long pause, for what reason none of them knew; perhaps the Orcs were searching for further unpleasant surprises before advancing again.

They came again, and although the fighting at the shields was fierce, the defenders stood firm. As soon as it became clear to the enemy commander that the defenders would not be cowed, the attack abated. He had not numbers now to force the issue by attrition.

In the welcome pause that followed, the injured were cared for and water and biscuits were passed among the troops. Their respite was not destined to be long, however, because a scout rode up suddenly from the East. Both she and her horse were bloodied and wounded.

“The army comes,” she gasped to Barahir. “They surprised us. Ask me not how I escaped, for I do not know.”

“How many?” asked Barahir.

“Who can judge that rightly at night?” answered the young woman. “But very many.”

Barahir sent her to have her wounds seen to, then sat close with his council: this being as usual his own nephews, plus Gramlach, his wife, and his son. “The wagons are well away,” he said to them, “but we dare not follow them yet. We must delay til nearer the dawn. I do not know if the two armies are in

communication; if not, we may be able to play Beren's trick also on this eastern force and win some respite. Otherwise I do not know what we can do except hold the line as long as we can."

"This is what we have trained for," said Gramlach. "We have numbers to man this perimeter. We will hold."

When the eastern force arrived it became evident that the armies indeed had ways to exchange information. This new force came silently, bearing no torches; the first the defenders knew of their presence was a flaring in the prepared ditch.

"They have fired it themselves," said Beren. "There goes that chance."

The Orcs attacked as soon as the ditch had burned down. Those from the West surged up again at the same time, so as to stretch the defenders as far as they could.

There followed a time which slid gradually into nightmare. It began to seem to the weary Bëorings that they had always stood there, under the livid flare of torches, standing on an earth mound while yelling devils chopped at their shields. The Orcs came, and came. Each one who came, fell; but more came, and always more. The defenders ducked, and stabbed, and shot, until their shoulders were burning and their arms felt as if they would drop from their sockets. One by one they too were picked off: victims of a cunning blow, a mistake, or simple bad fortune. At first they had stood three ranks deep, but after a time this was reduced to two. Then in places the second rank became thin, as men and women stepped forward in their turn to take the place of some groaning unfortunate, dragged to the rear. The carpet of dead and wounded in the centre of the ring grew ever denser, until the two haggard leeches who had remained with the defenders had, from shortage of space, to begin to lie the latter on the former.

Day Ten

The longed-for light began at last to creep into the eastern sky. With that, the fury of the attack began perceptibly to abate.

Soon it was possible to rest; the enemy had pulled back. People blinked and peered about them, uncertain what to do, now that there were no more targets for their spears.

"We've done it," said Barahir hoarsely to Gramlach. "With the mercy of the Powers, we've done it."

However, the attackers were not quite finished. The circle of defenders had enclosed the inn; this now became a target of their foe's spite. Flaming arrows curved through the air above them, one after another, to lodge in the thick thatch roof. There was nothing to be done, they had neither water nor manpower to fight it. In a short time, even as the first dim light from the dawning sky began to diffuse across the battlefield, the roof was well alight. The towering flames gleamed on the eyes and teeth of their enemies as they drew back from the perimeter.

The upper story had caught now and smoke was coiling out of the windows. The old timbers cracked and popped as they took the flame. The heat was fierce on their cheeks.

"Get the wounded into the wagons," ordered Barahir. Then, before anybody could say anything or stop him, he ran into the building. People looked aghast at each other, wondering what to do; but not a minute passed before Barahir appeared again, carrying Zalta over his shoulder. The weeping woman was hammering at his back with her fists.

* * * * *

Gramlach had been in a wagon, but he had somehow managed to get himself onto a horse and to ride up to where Barahir sat on his own plodding mount. The older man was struggling to keep his eyes open and had

twice almost slipped asleep from his seat, but the sight of his lieutenant drove all sleep from his mind. Gramlach had suffered two deep wounds in his thigh in this last fight, and his left arm was in a sling since an arrow had been cut out of that shoulder. The House-man looked pale, as if he had lost a lot of blood; which indeed was the case.

“What in the Pit do you think you are doing, sitting on a horse?” Barahir said to him. “With those wounds? Go and lie down immediately.”

“Master,” said Gramlach, “forgive me, but I cannot. Give me your leave to ride to the farm. I cannot rest until I know that Caladis has got away.”

Barahir chewed his lip. He felt the need himself, felt it as a stab in his heart; but just look at the man!

“You won’t get two miles in that condition,” he protested.

Beren, who was riding beside them, spoke up. “I’ll go,” he said quietly. “Stay, Gram, and rest.”

Gramlach’s face set into a determined look. “Nay, lad,” he said with a shake of the head, “tha’ll not do my work for me. I thank thee most heartily, and if tha wishes to come, then I thank thee even more; but I am going, and there’s an end on it.”

Barahir had no more strength in him to argue. And after all, what did it matter? “Go then,” he said in a flat voice, drained of all feeling. “Do as you think best.” But as his son passed him he roused himself, leaned over and grasped his wrist. “Do not throw your life away, Son,” he pleaded, “no matter what the cause. We need you.”

Beren squeezed his father’s hand and smiled reassurance, then urged his horse to follow Gramlach.

They first went some way back down the road towards the crossroads, but after a time, Beren bade his friend halt. He wanted to settle on the best route. “We dare not keep to the road west,” he said to him, “even in daylight. Leaving it will slow us down, but it cannot be helped. I believe we must skirt the hills to the South of the road, then come to Sightfoot from behind the hill it is named after. What do you say to that?”

“I would rather risk the road than come too late,” said Gramlach.

“Gram,” said Beren, “there will be Orcs everywhere along that road. They won’t venture into the woods, but they’ll have dug in beside the path. We could not possibly get through them. Better to take a little time and be safe than not to arrive at all.”

He eyed his friend covertly. What was to be done? He did not believe Gram would last the distance. The man had a will of iron, but there is only so much a man can do without enough blood in his body. Well, let us just see how far we get, he thought. Cross that bridge when we come to it.

They rode on throughout the day, threading their way through the woods below the line of granite massifs which lined the valley. Towards sundown they crossed the same stream where Beren and Chases Goats had picked up the trail of the first Orcs he would ever kill. So many years ago now.

The two had not climbed far up the further bank toward where Foen reared his bald head above the trees before Gram, who had in the last hour spent much of the time bowed right down over his horse’s neck, fainted dead away, sliding from his mount to the ground.

Beren jumped from his own mount and ran to his friend. Luckily Gram had fallen into a patch of bracken, and did not appear to have hurt himself. Shortly his eyes fluttered as he pulled himself back into the world of life.

“Gram,” Beren said to him, “let me go on alone.”

Gram cocked his head slightly to take in the fading light in the sky. “Dark soon,” he whispered. “Orcs’ll be abroad.”

Neither of them said anything more for a time. The light was fading fast now. “I’m going to look for some herbs,” said Beren. “I won’t be long.”

Nor was he. He knew the land well, and could almost go straight to the plants he sought. He came back with several bunches of leaves and roots and set about making a brew. Some stones from the stream made a handy fireplace, and he soon had a small blaze going and had a clay-smearied bark satchel of water hanging over it. Measured quantities of herbs were cast into the seething water; a pleasant, tart smell began to fill the little hollow.

After the brew had drawn sufficiently, Beren filled a leather bottle from Gram’s kit with it. As soon as it was cool enough, he held it to the sick man’s lips. “Drink this,” he ordered. “All of it.” When Gram had finished the brew, Beren rinsed his makeshift kettle and refilled it with fresh water. This time he shaved dried meat into the water, with other savoury herbs and roots, and thickened it with a bit of reed-flour. He quickly had a soup ready. Gramlach slurped this down with rather more enthusiasm than he had given to the tisane. After the last of the tasty liquid slid down his throat, he lay back exhausted, eyelids drooping again already.

“Sleep now,” Beren said to him, and Gramlach slept.

Beren himself had no sleep in him. He sat on, feeding the fire from time to time, listening to the night, and smelling the changing currents in the air. A part of his mind watched over this activity, and noted too that the weather was changing again, but for the most part he was brooding on the recent past. He saw again the arrow take Owl; he saw Nose’s death, and the blood pooling under Camlaf’s head. Hiril’s face floated before him, and he heard again his mother’s grief and despair. Aegnor, Angrod, Silmenen, all those bright spirits fallen into darkness. Darkness – indeed, it seemed to be spreading inside his own head. He felt as if he was sinking into deep water, heart-freezingly cold deep water, down toward a base of slime, where creatures of nightmare lived. He did not know what to do. It was as if somebody else was moving his arms and legs, speaking with his lips. He felt that he had no control over this somebody, and did not know but that the somebody might not suddenly forget how to do the movements. Fear coiled within him.

“No,” came Willow’s stern voice in his head, so clear that he started, and looked involuntarily around in the night for her.

Just that single word came as if voiced; but more came after, in the silence of his mind. You are yourself, came the thought. There is nobody else, no puppet master. Only you.

He wept a little after that, because he missed Willow with a sudden pang. Sleep took him then at last. He rested for an hour beside Gramlach, and he did not dream.

Day Eleven

The day dawned cloudy, as Beren had known it would. There was no use cursing the luck that had turned against them; there was nothing for it but to go on.

Gramlach awoke feeling greatly refreshed. His voice was stronger and his colour was much better, but he was weeks from being a well man, and both of them knew it.

The older man was very stiff in his legs. He had difficulty mounting his horse, particularly with his left arm out of action, but at last he was up and they could proceed. Thereafter they rode for some miles under the skirts of Foen until they neared the place where they would have to leave the forest.

Gramlach stopped his horse and sniffed the air.

“Aye, smoke,” agreed Beren. He had been smelling it this half hour and more.

“We must get on!” said Gramlach in alarm, and made to gee up his horse.

Beren rode in front of him. “Steady on, old friend,” he said. “You don’t want to ride into a spear-point. Let us go quietly down to the base of this slope; then I shall scout ahead, on foot.”

That is what he did. When at last he had crept to the edge of the trees, he could see Sightfoot Farm exactly where he had expected to see it. He knew every inch of this ground, every tree and hollow.

The farm appeared to be whole, and there was no smoke rising from its buildings, which was a relief; but it was also clear to him that there were Orcs in the area. He could not see any, but he had been feeling the ugly loom of their presence for some time.

He went back to Gram and made the situation clear to him. “There’s Orcs close by,” he said. “I haven’t spotted them, but I don’t have to. I know they’re there.”

Gramlach swore.

“Our best plan, I think,” continued Beren, “is simply to ride for the farm as quickly as we can. There is not enough cover to do a sneak. Not all the way, anyway.”

Gram struck the ground with his fist. “Pit take it, boy, if they spot us going in, as they likely will, how are we going to get anyone out?”

“I don’t know, Gram. I don’t know what else to do.”

Gram thought a while, then looked at Beren. “You could get in,” he said. “You have ways. I know you do.”

“Maybe I could at that,” said Beren, “but that only works for me. I couldn’t bring anybody out that way. As soon as we stepped back out of that gate they’d be onto us. No, sneak or flat out, it’s the same position once we’re in there. Only difference is, if we dash in, then there’s two of us. We don’t know if there’s anyone left in Sightfoot can hold a bow, or a spear; and I can’t keep Orcs out on my own.”

The older man struck the ground again savagely. “Should’ve let you go on ahead,” he said. “I’ve held you up.”

“Nobody can know what’s going to happen ahead of time,” said Beren. “These fellows must have arrived during the night in any case. I’d have run right into them.”

Gram said nothing for a moment. “Come on then,” he said heavily. “Let’s be doing.”

Beren led him carefully down the old stream gully that he knew so well. He had explained the predicament to the horses and made certain they understood the importance of silent going. They reached the empty pool of Hiril’s death without alarm and turned up the path. As the trees gave out at last, they peered with great caution out from the undergrowth, while the horses concentrated on breathing quietly.

Beren cursed under his breath. There, in plain sight, camped in the north field, a strong unit of goblin soldiery could be seen, fifty or sixty of them. There was no possibility of reaching the farm without being seen. But why had they not sacked it already? His eyes searched the area. Ah...

He leaned over slowly to whisper in Gramlach’s ear. “Crows. At the base of the fence. Somebody’s been shooting, I’d say.”

“How’re we going to get in?”

“Ride like the clappers. Just let me explain it to the horses.” After he had done this, he looked again at Gramlach. “Ready?” The other nodded, and they gave the knee to their horses, who bunched their haunches and sprang into a furious gallop down the path. Side by side they pounded past the field of surprised Orcs before any one of them could put arrow to bow. Beren spotted Hrotha’s amazed face peeping at them through a loophole in the parapet. “Open the gate!” he bawled up at the old man. They reached the gate and the horses pirouetted around, not sure now what they were called upon to do. The yelling Orcs had swarmed to the top of their field and were jumping the fence already into the path. Beren hammered with his knife hilt on the gate. “Open the gate!” he yelled again. “Open it!” At last he heard the bar being lifted up. The moment the gate moved back a little they were pushing hard on it. They jammed the horses though as quick as they could. Beren had a glimpse of Mari bowled over in the dust as he leaped from his horse and made haste to close and bar the gate again. Not a moment too soon: the gate thumped under his hands, and Orc voices were yelling just outside it. Random arrows flew over the wall.

Beren hadn’t stopped to listen. He jerked his sack of arrows out of the saddle bag, leaped over Mari, and ran to the corner where Hrotha was perched. He jumped up, and before the old man could do anything or even take a breath, Beren had leaned out and shot three Orcs. The rest of the creatures slunk back, snarling, out of range.

Beren glanced into the yard, saw Caladis too standing there white-faced, and cursed wordlessly. Why oh why were the women still here! They had been warned to get out days ago!

No use cursing. They would all just have to watch their chance.

From his position on the parapet he had a quick look around the neighbourhood, but could see no obvious sign of further Orcs. He could feel the presence of the creatures on every side, but there were no others that were very close.

He looked at the sky. The overcast was not particularly thick, the day was bright; the Orcs in the field had been sheltering from it under skins and shields. It was not impossible that it might clear, and in that event, they would be away.

He could see no horses in the enclosure to the South. Damn.

Gramlach had run to the north-west corner as soon as they got in the gate, and was perched up there now. What did he think he was going to do there? He couldn’t hold a bow with that arm. Beren could see another head up there with him, who was that?

After he had taken in all these things, he turned his attention to Hrotha and greeted him. Cal in the meantime had run over to Gramlach’s corner.

“I’m sorry Hrotha, we could not come sooner,” he said to the old man. “Can you give me an idea of what’s been happening?”

“Main glad to see you, Son, main glad,” said Hrotha. “Well now, one or two o’ these grumblers been lurking around since yesterday. Guess they could’ve come into the yard by dark, lessen we hadn’t set up a fackel¹³ or two. They wouldn’t have favoured that, mebbe. They had the horses away though, the scunners. Come point ’o that, I had half a mind to drive off these young maids into the woods today to take their chances, horses or no horses.” He pointed to the mass of Orcs huddling sullenly back in their field. “These other fellers came with the dawning though – Pit take the skank-eyed devils – what nat’rely shut the gate on *that* idea. Too many on ’em. We been just sweating it here since then, busting our poor heads on one notion or t’other,

13 A torch or brand.

without landing on anything sweet. And that's about the long and the short of it."

"But these dead ones here...?"

"Oh, they tried it on, the divils," said Hrotha with glee. "Didn't they just! But I got two on 'em, and Bremund one or two more, and so they up and slunk their ways back and hunkered down over there in the fallow. Been quiet the time since then, 'til you two came galloping along like mad fellers."

"Is that Bremund over there in the far corner?" asked Beren.

"Aye," quavered Hrotha sadly, "but he took arrow to breast. He's dead, lad. I left him propped up there, like. Didn't rightly know what else to do."

That was unwelcome news, and not just of itself. Two fit archers on opposite corners could defend the palisade against light attack, but one fit archer, plus one old, old man, and one arm-lame walking wounded, did not add up to much of a defence. He looked again at Hrotha, then down at the dead Orcs outside the fence. It was a wonder that the old man still had it in him. But why had the Orcs not pressed the attack? He could not understand it.

He was not to know that this troop had been cut to ribbons and reformed from survivors not once, but twice. They were rebellious and resentful to the point of mutiny. They had all had quite enough of being slaughtered at palisades, and their newly promoted officer had not the weight or presence to drive them to do more; at present he was mostly concerned with saving his neck from his own sullen and dangerous underlings, until the cool night allowed them to slink off and sniff out some easier undertaking.

"You've done amazingly well, Hrotha," Beren said. "Just keep an eye on things, will you? I want to talk with Gram."

"Two on 'em, I got, the divils," repeated the old man proudly. "Two!"

Beren found to his surprise that Gramlach had cast the sling from his arm and taken up Bremund's bow. "What are you doing?" Beren said to him. "You can't shoot with that arm."

"Can't I now?" replied Gramlach grimly. "Had one o' them beggars already. Nay lad, it do catch to be sure, but the arm holds the stave steady enough, and that's all as matters."

Beren looked with regret at Bremund's body, slumped in the side of the perch. "You know best... it will make a difference, I don't need to tell you. If we can hold these swine off til the sun comes out, we can get Cal and Mari to the woods. Orcs took all the horses, but we can double up on ours."

"What of the old ones?" said Gramlach.

"I doubt they'll want to come," said Beren slowly. "We can put it to them. Otherwise we'll have to think of something else."

"Nay," said Gramlach firmly, "I'll have none o' that, what you're hinting. They'll go over saddle, like Master did with that Zalta. I'll not leave them here."

"All right." Beren slipped down then and faced Cal. "Did you hear all that? Get ready to mount the instant we say. We'll head for the nearest woods, that tongue just to the South. We'll be safe under the trees." He hoped. "Can you sort out Mari? And look after the horses?"

His aunt nodded dumbly and hurried into the house.

Beren looked up at Gramlach. "Are you all right up there? I'll go and keep Hrotha company."

"Help me get this poor fellow down first," said Gramlach, so Beren took the cold, stiff weight on his shoulder of the brave man he had last seen sweating over a sheep, livid scars striping his bare back. Gently he lowered Bremund's remains to the ground.

"What was he doing at Sightfoot, do you know?" he asked Gram.

"Cal said he came to help," said Gram. "His own folk were well away, and since he weren't fit to go to the war, he came here. He were a bonny man. I can't think of the world without him, somehow."

Beren sighed. There was nothing to say. He left Gramlach then and went back to Hrotha.

The sun climbed through the sky over the next slow hours but always remained tantalisingly covered. The Orcs stayed sweating in their field. Cal and Mari came around twice with drink and food. Mari's face was tear-streaked and the plates rattled in her hands. Beren listened to Hrotha's wandering talk for a while, but it was obvious that the old man was tired; he sent him to lie down.

A little after midday Beren could make out places in the layer of cloud where a tinge of blue showed through far-off gaps. With time these places grew in size, and drifted gradually nearer. Come, come! he pleaded with them. All they needed was one good hole for ten minutes. Just ten minutes. They could drop the old ones in the wood and gallop back for the women.

He knew it in his heart well before he heard them. It was singing that he heard; a savage song from many brutish throats.

"Coming from the West!" shouted Gramlach to him from across the yard. "Mebbe three, four hundred!"

These Orcs had come over the pass from Rivil. They had been stewing idle in the Vale of Sirion for months and were half-mad from boredom and starvation. There was almost a whole cohort of them. They had cut a swathe through the soft farmer country, burning and raping in animal release, not caring that it came with the price of a few dead from arrows.

"Hold your fire!" Beren called to Gramlach. "Maybe they'll go on past!"

They did not. The new arrivals swarmed up to the stockade, merging with the band which had been hunkered in the field. The Orcs spotted Gramlach and began shooting at him. "Hi! Hi!" called Beren desperately, banging his bow-stave on the fence beside him, although he could not have said what good he hoped that would do; they could only last as long as their arrows. The Orcs didn't hear him, but they were pouring around the side now anyway, looking to claw their way up behind Gramlach's arc of fire. Beren began to pick them off, but there were swarms of them. Arrows began to rattle on the sides of his loophole. He had to pull back then because they had come around on his other side and were shooting also from there. Amid the yells and the noise he heard a faint cry from Gram.

With a last despairing glance at the stubborn sky, Beren jumped down from his perch and ran to the other corner. Gram was sagging, hit. No time for niceties; Beren simply grabbed him, pulled him to the dirt by main force and was dragging the man to the house before he had stopped bouncing. He reached the door just as the first arrows began to skitter about his feet.

Beren dragged Gramlach inside the door, slammed it. Caladis was standing there, white in the face. Somewhere in the house he could hear Mari screaming hysterically.

"Help me with this, Cal," Beren said, indicating the heavy war-shutter standing ready beside the door. This comprised alternating layers of oak sandwiched between gratings of iron straps. With his aunt to guide the

tongues he was able to heave the heavy shutter up by main force and slot it over the inside of the door. Panting from the effort of it, he dashed into the kitchen to check the similar shutter was already in place at the back. Assured of that, he came back, hoisted the groaning Gramlach under the arms and dragged him a few paces further away from the door, into the main room. He stood up then, hands and teeth clenched, eyes slitted, arms held rigid at his sides. It wasn't supposed to go this way!

"He's bleeding," said Cal in a tremulous voice.

"Do what you can for him," said Beren. He could hear shouts in the yard. The Orcs had got over the fence and had surely now opened the gate to let in more. The first blow fell on the door, making them both jump.

"Is there any way to escape?" asked Cal. Tears were leaking out of her eyes, but she dashed them away fiercely.

Beren listened to the noises outside and could find no word to say to her. Seeing the look on his face, she suppressed a sob; her head bowed, and more tears dripped.

"Look after Gram," Beren said to her. "I'll be back in a minute."

He knew they didn't have long. He doubled up the ladder and went at a trot through the gloom past the bend to the new wing, head bowed to avoid the beams. He was following Mari's cries. Axe-blows were sounding below on both doors now. Beren thought the Orcs would not get through the shutters, but there were well-tried methods of winking people out of an undefended house. It must only be a matter of moments before they fired the thatch.

Mari turned a wild, frightened face to him as he came in. She rushed to his arms. "Help me, oh help me!" she sobbed. "They're coming!"

He patted the weeping woman on the back with one hand, making soothing noises, while he searched in his pouch with the other. He had come prepared, but now that it came to the crunch, he found that internally he was not prepared at all. He had in fact not believed that the worst would ever come to pass. Perhaps no-one ever does; perhaps this dogged persistence of the last scrap of hope is all that keeps us alive. But now Beren was come at last to that awful crux to which we all of us hope never, ever to come: a forced choice between terrible alternatives.

He knew he could escape that house himself, using the skills he had learned. He also knew he could take no-one else with him. If he tried, they would all be caught; killed, if they were very lucky. This was a cast-iron certainty. But the other choice, the one he had prepared for but had never believed in, sat on his heart like a terrible stone. Like a terrible, terrible stone. Yet it was the only way.

He had in his hand now what he sought. He extended his arms and held Mari by the shoulders, looking into her frightened brown eyes. "Do not fear, Mari," he said to her firmly. "Help is on the way!" And as the expression in her eyes changed from one of pure terror to include a wild and dawning hope, he touched her neck with the needle that he held in his right hand.

With desolation in his heart, feeling like an utter, filthy murderer, a despicable betrayer of innocence, he stayed with the woman until she was still. He left the body slumped against the wall and went in search of Hrotha and Methemel.

He found the old couple huddled in a corner of their room, lit by a single candle. They were holding each other tightly. A wild hubbub was sounding from the yard below. Beren could smell smoke.

Methemel's face was buried in Hrotha's chest and she jerked at each booming blow of the axes. The old man looked up at Beren as he crouched before them. "Have you seen to our Mari?" he quavered. Beren nodded,

his throat too constricted for words. Hrotha nodded with him. "She were a good girl," he mumbled. "Always a hard worker." He tried to focus on Beren again. "Son, can you help us?"

Beren nodded through his pain and showed Hrotha the needle. "It's quick," he said thickly.

Hrotha indicated Methemel with a twitch of his head, stroking his wife's white hair the while. "There now, old girl," he crooned. "Not long now. Not long." Beren touched her withered neck with his needle. Hrotha held her through the ugly time, the body fighting the unwinnable fight, the death-gasp and the twitching muscles; until at last she was quiet.

Tears were streaming down the old man's face and his features worked. "Do hope there's good liquor in that new country," he croaked. "All right, Son, I'm ready." And very soon he joined his wife in her peace.

The thatch was burning now: Beren could hear the crackle. Layers of smoke were creeping through the upper air as he stumbled coughing back down the ladder. Back in the central room he found that Gramlach was conscious again. He was lying propped against a pillar with his arms around the weeping Caladis. Beren knelt by the pair.

Gramlach smiled weakly up at him. "Shame it had to end like this," he whispered.

"We took a few with us," said Beren, trying speak bravely, trying to ignore the horror in his heart.

The man other shrugged. He had not much breath to waste. "Time to go," he whispered. "Best if you could help us along, lad. Can you do it?" Caladis cried aloud at his words. She was shaking with a fear she could not master. Gram stroked her head with his free hand. "Don't be afeared, lass," he said gently, "don't you be afeared. I'll be with you, wherever we're going. It's not the end; it's a new beginning."

Beren showed him the needle, the same as he had done for Hrotha. "I have this," he said in a strained voice. "It's quick and painless."

"Let me do it then," said Gram. He turned back to his wife. "Thou must go before me, lass. Art thou ready?"

Cal tried to wipe her eyes free so she could look at Beren. Her face was puffy, despair in her eyes. She smiled tremulously at him through the tears. "Sorry I've been such a cow."

Beren's own lips twisted up, his eyes full of pain. "Nonsense, Cal," he said to her in a voice he did not himself recognize. "Farewell now, go with blessing. We'll see each other again."

She hid her face in Gramlach's chest, nodded, and squeezed her man's hand. Gram took the needle from Beren, gave his wife a last, weak hug, then sent her to rest.

He turned back to Beren, a look of utter weariness on his white face. There was a lot of blood pooling on the floor beneath him. "Get out of this, lad," he husked. "I know you can. Fight on for us." Beren nodded, and Gramlach raised his hand to his own neck. In a short time the man kneeling weeping at his side was the only living person in the burning house.

Day Thirteen

The chaos at Aeluin was indescribable. Wounded were lying everywhere, and they were everywhere dying, groaning, crying in their despair, because there were not enough healers. The few they had were working themselves ragged.

Emeldir had organized the refugees to tend to the hundreds of injured, but many had no experience with that kind of work, and some were unwilling; and in the end, there was not very much they could do. Still, the tall

woman with the greying plait strode everywhere, cajoling and marshalling everybody she could lay hands on to carry water and to wash rags and blankets. But the weather was hot, the flies came, and soon the stink of gangrene began to permeate the air of the settlement. The sweating washers and carriers cursed Emeldir; the red-eyed surgeons at their ceaseless cutting cursed everything and everyone; and the Orc-butchered wounded continued to die.

It was to this Hell-like scene that Beren returned. His way led him past a great stack of bodies, swollen and greenish, the black juices of their corruption oozing out of the sides. Men were toiling with spades in a field nearby which was already nearly filled with raw-earthed mounds, each as long as a man; but clearly the diggers were inadequate to cope with the influx.

Beren ripped his kilt off and held it to his face in a vain attempt to keep out the frightful stench of putrefaction. He dashed past the obscene pile at a flat run, his gorge surging in his throat and his eyes feeling as if they were about to start from their sockets. Was this what they had saved from the Orcs? A wild laugh bubbled up inside him somewhere, threatening to break loose. Surely it had hardly been worth the trouble: what worse could the Orcs have inflicted upon them than this horror, this atrocity? His wits were spinning.

After he had escaped the destruction of Sightfoot, he had been seized by a desperate desire to seek the peace of the woods, to live again the quiet life among those he thought of as his own people. Only duty had dragged him east again, to report the sad news to his parents, and to bear them living witness that their son had survived – at least so far. For shock and despair were again gnawing at Beren's breast and he was struggling to find cause to go on. Only the hope of the cool, quiet depths of the woods lying somewhere in his future drew him forward.

He found his father sitting in a booth over a table covered with stacks of paper. There were lines in the weathered face which had not been there before, and Beren saw that his father's hair was growing out thick with silver.

Barahir sat back. He read his son's news from a single glance at his face. "I'll send for Mother," he said quietly.

Emeldir came, and she too saw it in his eyes. She embraced her son, then sat down to hear his story. Not long into the account, her hands crept to her face, and at the last, tears were silently running down it.

When Beren reached the point at which he had dragged Gramlach into the house, he stopped, unable to go on.

Neither of his parents could think how to frame the question. He looked at them, staring at him, the pair of them: the dark eyes and the blue.

"I killed them," he burst out. "I killed them all. I killed them!"

His mother rose and came to him, her face working, but he dashed her hands away.

"No," he said thickly, "you don't understand. I have to go. I can't... I have to go!"

He stood up, and his father did too.

"Do what you must, Son," said Barahir sadly. "But come back to us when you can."

The strong young man who was their son shook his head, his mane of red-brown locks spreading wide. He looked wildly around, then fled, carrying nothing, and wearing nothing but a breech-clout.

* * * * *

Jarrol was good with cows, but he wasn't so handy with a spear and shield. He'd gone all the same, and done his bit, when the call went out. When the Lord called, you went. This Lord, anyhow.

So he'd marched, and he'd stood in ranks, and faced where they told him. A lot of horrible things had happened that he didn't understand, didn't want to think about; and when the dreadful day was over at last, in the night, he'd gone home under the shelter of the dark. He didn't care if he never saw another wolf in his life, or a cut-up dead person, nor one of them yelling goblin filth either.

Jarrol had been worried about his Ma. Since Dad died when the tree fell on him, there was only Jarrol to do the man's stuff, look out for Ma and that, and his younger brothers and sister. He hadn't wanted to go to the war; only the word that if he didn't go to it, then it would come to him, had sent him. That and the call of Barahir, the great Captain, him what they were all calling the true Lord these days. Jarrol would have gone anywhere for Barahir.

Now it was all fallen apart; all the light and glory, all the brave deeds gone for nothing. Jarrol didn't dwell on it, but he knew all the same. It was all done now, all finished, and all he had to do was go back and look after Ma. Go back, and wait.

The wait wasn't too long. They came, not too long after. The goblins. The enemies.

There was quite a few folk in the settlement, where Dad had his little place, and some of them fought. Fought and died, mostly. Jarrol had tried to fight, but he wasn't handy with his spear, not like some. The filth hadn't killed him then, they'd trapped him in a net. Now he was lying tied up and bundled with lots of others, thrown in a heap in a corner of the hall. The others were mostly crying and howling, but Jarrol lay silent. Howling wasn't going to help. Nothing was going to help. There was nothing to do. Nothing but wait. It would come to an end, if he waited. So he lay there, face to the wall, watching the flickering light of the flames, and trying not to listen to all the noises – the howls, and the other noises; as those devils came for the captives, one by one. Trying not to think about Ma, or Mulan, or Yallie, or poor little Beren, named after the Lord's wonderful son. No use thinking about it. No use doing anything. Sooner or later, it would come to an end. All he had to do, all he could do, was wait.

There weren't so many left when they finally came for Jarrol. He'd hoped to be one of the early ones, but he wasn't lucky. It had been a weary long time. Well, his turn had come at last. They grabbed him, two of them, grinning fangs beneath the savage glitter of eyes. They took him past the pile of things that had once been men and women; children too.

They hauled him up before a big fellow, lounging on a carved seat that had belonged to the Head of the Settlement. Old... now what had been his name? Jarrol couldn't remember. He was tired, more tired than anyone had any business being. His head was full of fog, he couldn't settle his mind on anything.

A stinging slap brought him back to the present – to the flickering light, to the stink of death. Death, and other things. Awful things.

Claws clutched his jaw and forced his head up, forced him to look at the big leader.

The goblin was regarding Jarrol critically. The monster had stony, glittering eyes set deep in a, well you couldn't call it a face, because there was nothing human about it. The cheeks below the hard eyes were carved in deep sardonic curves. The creature had red and black tattoos on the cheeks and around the eye sockets.

The monster leaned toward Jarrol. "I am Gorgol," it said to him in Man-speech. "That means 'butcher'. I want your people to know me. I send forth one from each hundred to carry my fame about the lands. Here, now, you are that one. Do you understand?"

Jarrol simply stared stupidly at the devil's twisted face.

They stuck a knife into his flesh, making him cry out.

"Say my name," said the big leader, the firelight flickering off his polished stones of eyes. He said it almost gently, but the clutching captors stuck Jarrol again. "Say my name. You are no use to me if you can't remember. Say my name. Say it!"

Further pain. Jarrol's mouth opened, and it felt like it had been centuries since he had spoken, and that everything was all rusted up. He forced his voice to come. "Gorgol," he croaked. "Gorgol the Butcher."

The ogre sat back, looking satisfied. "Very good," it said. "Don't forget it." It turned to the others. "Prepare him," it commanded. "And get it the right way up this time!"

A blur of oaths and blows later, Jarrol was held spread on his back on a bench – head held, legs pulled wide. A glow in front of his face made him open his muzzy eyes wide. It was a heated iron, a letter: an upright, and two bars slanting up to the left. A backward G.

It did Jarrol no good to struggle. He howled then, right enough. The pain of the burning on his forehead was worse than anything he had ever experienced; he almost didn't notice in comparison the sharp slice between his held legs, as they slit his sack and ripped it empty.

They cut off Jarrol's hands, and put out one eye; then they let him go.

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Choker's former legion, the 89th, had been more or less annihilated in the first debacle, when they'd marched up with torches and been cut down by the filthy Softy archers. Somehow, he had survived the ensuing debrief. He almost wished that he hadn't. The line to be interviewed by Him, by God, had been a shattering experience, from which he had not yet recovered. There had been only three ahead of him when the reprieve came. Now he couldn't sleep; couldn't seem to find himself. He felt as if bits of him were missing, or not set right; but he couldn't get out of his own skull to see properly.

They'd taken him out of the 89th after that and made him commander of the 2nd cohort of the 310th. He'd rather have been demoted right to the ranks, where he could curl around his hurt in private. Now he was exposed; he had to perform, had to do things, and do them right. He had a new lot of superiors, competitors and subordinates to get the measure of.

Oh, he was so weary of it! But the worst of all was to be stuck in this tower, that had been taken off the Star-eyes. It still stank of them, where it didn't stink of the Firelord who had eaten them up.

This Mairon, he'd been in charge all along of the southern campaign, so Choker had heard, but they had never seen him up till now. He hadn't showed his face. Now he was around all the time. He was one of the high, high ups; some said second only to God. And the punch he packed! Mind-eaters were piddling affairs in comparison. Choker's bruised brain flinched every time Mairon's mental presence brushed against it.

The operation had got under way soon enough. Choker was glad of the distraction. It was bitter fought, they had more losses than they bargained for. In fact there was a point at which Choker thought it was all going tits up. They'd got to the plain at last, away from the fucking trees, and to begin with it had looked not too bad. But then they'd lost the rest of the catapults, and after that the wolves. They cut up a lot of useless cattle on the left, were pushing in, but they found they'd only stuck their dicks in a bear-trap. The damned Fire-eye came out of the clouds at that point, nobody could think properly in the burning of it, nor see to fight; it was looking pretty tense.

Choker didn't like to think of what happened next – it too closely resembled some of his own most horrible experiences. But anyway, skate over it, the horrible interlude had secured the advantage for them, that was the important thing. They'd gone through those farmers pretty well after that, like bad meat through a squeaker.

Choker's legion, what was left of it, because the cursed farmers had cut it up pretty thoroughly before ever they'd even got down out of the hills, had been detailed to sack the town. Quite a cushy job. He'd heard that others got a bloody nose, chasing the remnants of the humans into the high country. Not his problem. His side had won, and Choker was alive. He'd heaved a sigh of relief. He'd thought perhaps he'd be able to rest a bit now.

No such luck, curse it. He'd hoped to get another legion elsewhere, but maybe the Bosses felt uneasy at reusing a cohort leader who had twice now lost almost his entire command, without having had the good manners to throw himself onto the same pyre. When he'd heard his new orders, he had groaned in spite of himself. Detailed to Mairon's personal guard!

The worst of it had been when the Mind-eaters had racked him. Security check, they had called it. Security! As if they didn't have every Louse helpless under their thumbs; as if they didn't know every last detail of their miserable lives and thoughts! This time he almost did die. When he opened his eyes again at the end, he had moaned to find himself still living, and still in this cursed Elf-tower. His whole soul felt as if it had been beaten with cudgels. He went dull-eyed and stumbling about his assigned duties, and only his size and a bit of luck kept him out of somebody's cook-pot.

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Beren found the Druug exactly where he had expected to: in the cool woods which sloped up to the high country in the South of the land. There had been no drum talk to follow, no calculation; he just ran straight to them.

The waters ran clean in that place, the wind was soft, and it carried nothing but the scent of tens of thousands of pines, quietly growing. Beren had no desire to fill his nose with anything else, ever again. Here there was peace; here one could forget about the troubles of the outer world.

They came all around him, his people, and they laid their warm hands on him, as if to be sure that it was really him.

Made Bean Soup took his hand and led him to the fire. "Come, my son, and sit," she said to him, pulling him gently down. Although it was she who still bore bandages on her head, whereas Beren bore no bodily wound, she behaved as though it were he who was ailing. She tucked a fur about his shoulders and fussed over him, warming up some stew. She set Story-Teller trotting about gathering herbs for a draught.

The others sat at his feet and gazed anxiously in his face. They all seemed to be recovering well from their wounds; only Talkative was lying down, weak from recent fever.

Carver sat a little behind the others. When he caught her eye she smiled at him shyly, her black eyes twinkling in their folds in the old way he knew.

After a time, the Druug took up again some low talk among themselves. Beren sat silent; he had no words in him. Sensing this, the others did not try to draw him in.

When night fell, they made a place for him to sleep. He had brought nothing, but everybody contributed something from their own skimpy possessions, silently and seemingly without plan, as was the way with the Druug. Touched by their wordless generosity, Beren curled up under the fur and tried to sleep.

Sleep would not come. For hours he tossed, listening to the wind through the branches; sometimes staring at the stars where they peeped through in night-blue patches between the dark outlines of the trees. The fire burned down, and at last he fell into a fitful doze. His breathing deepened, and he slept.

The dream came to him, and with it the terror, the despair, the inescapable disgrace, the black guilt. He saw again the needle in his hand, had to take in again like a blow the despair in Cal's eyes; smelled again the acrid stink of the flames, while Death hammered at the doors. The scene whirled and changed: he stood then again before the pile of bodies, saw their lurid colours, and smelled again the awful, faecal, sweetish stench of their corruption, such that he never thought he could be free of it again, that everything henceforth would have that smell: his food and drink, his loved ones, the woods, everywhere. But now he saw, horror of horrors, that the bodies were not still. They stirred, and their slack faces turned to him, and grinned to him terrible grins of slime and bone. And the faces were the faces of his parents, and of Hiril, and Cal and Gram, and all the ones he knew and had known. He screamed in the dream, and screamed, but suddenly there were arms around him. He opened his eyes, saw the red embers of the fire and the stars through the gaps. He saw that it was Carver who was holding him close in her arms. But these sensations were as yet thin and unpersuasive of reality; the corpse pile was yet stark behind his eyes, the death-stink heavy in his nostrils.

He closed his eyes and embraced the girl while she rocked him and crooned low noises in her throat. Gradually the warmth of her body seeped into his, and her fragrance stole into his nose, and the feel of her soft hair against his face grew in his awareness. Slowly these gifts drew him back to the world.

Carver lay down with him now and drew him close under the fur, her arms snug around him. His head was cradled on her warm shoulder, tucked under her chin. His free hand cupped her back and he felt with wonder the sublime softness of her skin under his hand; softer and silkier than anything he had ever imagined. He fell to stroking this wonderful skin, feeling the curves of her back, and he kissed her neck where it lay against his lips, warm and pleasant smelling. He felt her lips press to his forehead in return.

Neither was wearing anything under the fur. He became aware of her breasts pressing against him, and also of the scratch of hair against his lower belly. Shortly his body responded in a way that he had not often been troubled with. The stiffened organ was impossible to hide.

Carver moved under his hand. She raised herself a little, her breast sliding across him. He could feel her breath warm on his lips. Then her lips came slowly toward his. He felt her breath become hotter and narrower, until their lips touched.

The first contact was a shock. He delicately explored her lips with his own, and his enjoyment of their softness was intense. She was doing the same back to him – a slow, teasing play of silken petals.

Another slight movement, a hitch. Carver laid a heavy thigh on him, pulled him in. He was facing her now, her leg was around him. The head of his penis felt softness, and a warm wetness. The two bodies moved a little together, and suddenly his stiffness was entering her, just a little at first; spreading her like a tender flower, then sliding slowly, so slowly all the long way in; and the heat, the softness, the gliding warm depth of the girl were overpowering, rising to his head like a potent wine. She moaned slightly as he moved himself gently out again, caressing with his body along and around the full curve of her slippery-soft cleft.

The tide of the blood gathered in them. They were kissing deeply and intensely now, kisses at the same time of fiery urgency and of heavenly tenderness. Their bodies began to move together, dancing the slow dance of love which is as old as time itself. The girl was in passion, crying out, clutching him, and he found himself in the grip of a power like a mighty river; carried on this flood down the rapids of the instinct to rut, to possess, to make, thrusting into her, gasping to her cries, until the fire in his blood rose inexorably toward a blinding point of white-hot oblivion. He was clenching her to him, bucking with his back, carried on the tide of fire, possessed, incandescent... Then the release, oh the release, deep in this girl, this love, this dear companion of his mad desire.

Beren woke just before dawn snuggled into the delicious warmth, softness and fragrance of Carver's back. For some time he gave himself up to simple enjoyment of the sensations. He felt deliciously drowsy and relaxed, and for the first time in what felt like weeks his mind too was at ease; the scenes of recent butchery both dealt out and received were removed, distant.

However, new troubles were soon drifting in upon him like storm clouds to furrow his brow.

Something in his changed breathing or muscle tone must have penetrated to her, because her own breathing changed pace, she stirred, rolled around in his arms. In the first faint light now filtering down from the tree tops he could just make out the gleam of her eyes. She kissed him, and he kissed her back, but she sensed that he was not at ease and drew back slightly. He could see the dark shape of her head against the morning blueness. She leaned back down then and whispered in his ear. "What is it?"

He did not know what to say. "We shouldn't do this," he whispered back.

"But why not?" came the words breathed in his ear. While he struggled trying to formulate an answer she added, with the utter certainty of a Druug stating an evident fact, "You need it, and so do I."

"Carver," he whispered despairingly, for his desire was swelling and stiffening again, "I can't... this won't... there's no future in it. Not for either of us. Our roads can't run together for long."

"Do you think I don't know that?" she murmured, head next to his. "Nose was right: you have been too long away from us, all you can speak is foolishness. Stop speaking it now!"

She started kissing him again, quick light kisses on his mouth, sealing it every time he wanted to open it to protest. She moved to straddle him, heavy breasts brushing his chest. Before he knew it, the wonderful intimate embrace was happening again. Carver moved on him slowly, unhurriedly, looking into his eyes and bending gently to kiss him, to kiss his face, his cheeks, his brow; running her hands through his thick hair. He was stroking her, massaging her breasts, feeling the weight and the heavenly texture of them, feeling the stiff nipples slide firm under his hand. Her hair tickled his face. Her scent filled his nose and mind, and all he could think of was her, of how fine her skin was, of the beauty of her face, eyes half-closed now as she enjoyed him, in slow rhythm, teasing, pleasuring, loving.

Afterwards, after the time of passion, she lay heavy on him, the warm, dear, spent weight of her. His love; his girl. He held her tight. The pair of them were bathed in sweat, and were breathing like people who have run a mile. There seemed to be fluid and mess everywhere. Beren stroked Carver's head and kissed the sweat-damp hair. She found his other hand with hers and grasped it tight, holding onto the sweetness, the beauty.

They lay there a while recovering as the light grew. The other People were already stirring, stealing with Druug quiet around the clearing.

She let go his hand and rolled off him with a tiny grunt. "I need a wash," she said. "Coming?"

They went hand-in-hand down the slope to a tiny valley in which a freshet chattered down the rocks. A short way down the gully they found a knee-deep pool at the bottom of a sparkling waterfall. The water was shockingly cold. She laughed at his shivers, eyes sparkling, and splashed him. He grabbed her then and the pair of them collapsed into the pool, shouting with laughter. They were gasping in the water in a tangle of limbs, and he could feel the warmth of her body, hot in comparison to the water, and the silky smoothness of it under the water, flexuous as an otter. They fell to kissing tenderly; then before he could think or plan he was taking her again, sitting on a rock with her in his lap, her arms entwined around his neck. He felt drunk with kisses and love.

His thumbs smoothed over her broad cheeks, felt the shape of her bones and flesh, her black eyes gazing all the while her love into his.

After the urgent climax they sat on for a while in tight embrace as their breathing steadied and their tissues disgorged. Her eyes were closed as her head lay on his shoulder, her finger slowly tracing the shapes of his backbone.

She washed him then, exploring him, and gently encouraged him to do the same to her. The intricacies of her hidden parts were a wonder and a joy to him. How beautiful she was, how beautiful! They dried each other sensuously, and returned, hand in hand again, up the hill.

Beren would have happily continued like this all day, but his partner had other plans. After they had drunk some of the inevitable gorscht (Beren remembering, with a poignant stab of memory, Sunshine's famous brews), Carver sprang up.

"Can you help me?" she said. "The others are either wounded or old."

Wondering, he stood up. Bearskin and Story-Teller had appeared silently in the meantime and were standing waiting. Big Belly and Noisy joined them straight away. The two young men both limped still a little, but they looked cheerful. Beren saw that Stories had a long coil of vegetable fibre cord over his shoulder. Bean Soup evidently meant to stay behind to look after the invalid Talkative.

Carver set off through the woods at a brisk pace, always downhill, for perhaps half a mile. The others followed. They came to the bottom of the ravine and turned aside at the stream. This was no freshet, but a vigorous, battering flow of water which had carved a trough for itself in the native stone.

Carver danced along the rocky bank until she found what she sought. "This," she said. It was a block of the local stone, fine-grained brownish stuff. The block was as broad as Beren and not much less tall. He noticed that the top of it had been trimmed almost flat.

"What do you want us to do with it?" he asked her.

"Take it to the top of the hill," she replied.

Beren was taken aback. What! That great thing? "You're joking," he said.

"No," she said, and he saw that she meant it.

Well! Beren scratched his head. He wasn't quite sure what to say.

Stories touched his arm. "We have often done this, Speaks with Birds," he said. "It is not so difficult. We have cunning ways, and we are not in a hurry."

The three men went to cut some saplings with flint axes. They came back with a mess of various lengths. All five of them then went to work tying the pieces together on the ground next to the stone. Soon a sturdy sledge began to take shape. Carver and Bearskin in the meantime had gathered great armfuls of bracken and withy. These they placed on the finished sledge. Two Δ -shapes were tied together, quick hands whipping cord about the join. These were raised, one on each side of the stone; a stout pole laid across. A rope was passed in three turns around the pole and tied to the top of the block. All being now finished, the two younger men took position behind it with staves, ready to lever it over.

"Here, Speaks, take this," said Stories, placing the rope in his hand. Carver had made two others fast to the block, and these were now led out to the sides. Stories took one and Carver the other.

"Are we ready?" asked Stories.

"No!" said Beren. "Wait! What am I to do?"

“Take some of the weight as it falls,” explained Stories patiently. “We need to lay it on the sledge, but we don’t want to break the sledge, do you see?”

Beren saw. When Stories gave the word, he cautiously took strain on his rope while the young men levered the block up. It tilted, then he felt the inexorable weight begin to pull on his arms as it tipped. Bracing his feet and setting his brawny shoulders, and helped greatly by the braking effect of the turns of rope, Beren allowed the great block to lower onto the sledge in a very satisfactory controlled fall. The frame creaked, the bracken and withies crackled; then it was down, perfectly placed.

Beren let go the rope and checked to make sure his shoulders were still in their sockets, swinging his arms to limber them. There was some weight in that thing!

“That is good,” Stories said. “Now with patience, it will come. Speaks, if you could come to the front and pull when the boys work their staves. Once you get into the rhythm of it, it goes well.”

They were all day at the work, edging the great rock higher and higher up the hill. Bearskin and Carver spelled the wounded men at the levers, and Stories lent his pull beside Beren. Despite being probably three times stronger than the older man, Beren felt he was working more than three times harder for the same effect, such that although each of them contributed roughly equally, Beren became far more tired.

At the close of a long day they had climbed some half of the hill. They left the rock on the sledge, because the sun was setting, there was food to eat and draughts to drink, bruises to be massaged, and the incidents of the day to be revisited and in some cases laughed over.

Beren was drowsy and would have gone straight to sleep, but Carver had other ideas. “Pshaw,” she teased him, tickling his ear with her hair, “are you so easily conquered? By one little stone? Was it too hard for you?”

He rolled over and pinned her down, both laughing. “Hard?” he said. “You want hard? I’ll show you hard.”

She giggled; and shortly afterwards they had no need of further words.

The woman shook him mercilessly awake early the next morning. “Come on! Work’s not over yet!” Towards mid-afternoon they had finally dragged the sledge up to where Carver wanted it: on the edge of a clearing on the ridge line. The view here was to the South, where the dark forest slopes ran down from left to right, becoming dimmer and bluer with the increase of distance, until rising with dramatic suddenness into the realm of rock and ice, great walls and pinnacles of it, ending in a jagged crest: the high places where none but the great eagles dared to go.

Under Stories’ direction the crew set to work with axe and rope. After an hour or so they had made a curious arrangement of long spokes over the recumbent massif like one quarter of a wheel. These were kept apart by stout struts, and the whole was lashed together. The spokes ended in forks, in which a single thick cable was now laid. This ended in a knot from which four smaller ropes led. Again there were additional cords laid out on both sides for keeping the rock steady.

Beren realized it was all about raising the heavy stone to the vertical, but he couldn’t quite see how it was going to happen. It looked as though they were going to pull horizontally on the wheel-frame; but how would that help? Who was going to lift?

Soup came up after a time, and when all was ready, she took one of the side ropes, and Stories the other. The remaining four of them were to pull on the ropes attached to the knot. As the tension was taken up and the frame began to move and creak, Beren suddenly understood. Of course! The wheel would turn the horizontal pull into a vertical one, and because the rope was laid loose on the forks, the angle they had to pull at would never change.

There were stakes hammered into the ground for them to brace their feet against, and knots tied into the ropes for grip. Beren leaned back to test things. He could appreciate the power of the arrangement, how it would enable him to exert the full force of his body.

“Are we ready?” called Stories. Everybody nodded. “Then pull!” he said. “Nice and steady now!”

The four of them bent their backs and strained. Straight away they gained traction, the block left the sledge and slowly came higher. Beren hauled in, reached the next knot. Higher. The block was half way up now, and the pull was easing off. Higher, and easier still.

“Steady!” called Stories. He and Soup were braced on their own ropes. The block was nearly there. The two on the side stepped back, adding a little back-pull so the block would not go over the vertical.

The weight had fallen now to almost nothing. “Careful, careful!” cried Stories. He and Soup dug their heels in as the great rock hesitated. It came onto its flat base with a jerk and a crunch, teetering to and fro for a little before coming to rest. Almost before it had stopped swaying Carver had bent over, bringing her taut rope to the ground, where she bound it rapidly to a stake which Beren had not noticed. She took Noisy’s rope, taking it out nearly sideways on to the pillar, and tied that off as well; Belly’s followed quickly, and at last Beren’s. The two older people had already tied theirs off. At the end of all this the stone stood vertical, braced on all sides by guy ropes. Beren took in now that it was resting on the flattened part which had formerly been on the top, and the base it was standing on was also a broad, flat shelf of rock. He thought it would stand free all right without the ropes, but he guessed correctly that they were there as a precaution.

And that seemed to be the end of the exercise. As mystified now as he had been at the beginning, Beren accompanied the others down the hill a little way to the camp site.

The next day Carver was again up early. Beren found her on top of the hill. She was sitting, almost in a Druug trance, staring at the block of stone. He crept away and left her. She stayed there the whole day, not eating, just sitting.

The following day Carver set to work on the stone. She brought up a bag of big flints, chose one, and attacked the stone in seeming fury. By the end of the day she had chopped deep grooves in it.

This set the pattern for the following days. The two of them curled up together at night and resumed their passionate communion, but during the days they separated: Carver to continue her fierce assault on the stone block, Beren to busy himself about food collection and other tasks.

Beren had returned to the People at the end of a period, full of strain and death, that had tested him almost to his limit. He thought he had left these trials behind him, but he soon found it was not so easy to be cured of the after-effects as he had supposed. The first night with Carver had already helped to divert him substantially from the dark channel into which his thoughts had fallen, and for the two days after that he had been too physically occupied, too focussed on working with the others, to dwell on recent experiences; but since that time he had been obliged to fill his days by himself, and was usually alone. In such circumstances the black memories would seep back into his mind like the oozing juices of decay from the pile of corpses. He would shake his head and try to drive them out, but it was like trying to sweep back a flood with a broom. He tried working in the camp, where many of the party tended to stay during the day, but he found them a poor source of distraction. Those of the People who had lost dear ones in the raids had not, at present, much spirit for diverting conversation; and even in the best of times, chatter was not something the Druug much indulged in during daylight hours.

In desperation, Beren fell to running. He would run for the whole day, all through the southern forests, where the Enemy had not yet set foot. He explored the hidden valleys in the high country to the West, then travelled right across the breadth of Dorthonion to nose through the wild, rugged land along the eastern fence; but always on fleet foot. What he ran from, he could not have said, for he carried all his griefs with him, inside

his own head. But the running and the seeing, the quiet trees and lonely valleys, occupied his mind and tired his body. It was what he needed.

In Carver's arms he had room only in his mind for the warmth and sweetness of her embrace. At the end of each day, provided he had not ventured too far away, he would return to camp, scratched and weary. He and Carver would bathe together, eat from something the older ones had prepared, then fall side by side into bed. Both of them were pushing themselves hard during the days, hard enough that they were losing weight. Around the camp fire with the others, their heads would nod and their eyelids droop as they scooped stew into their mouths with the clumsiness of exhaustion. When they lay down afterwards, by rights they should both have been asleep before their heads hit the ground; but somehow the physical nearness of the other would always, somehow, magically, wake fire and passion from the cold embers left by the day's efforts. Half-asleep as they were in their coupling, their whispered words of love, the heart-piercing sweetness of this, the closest, tenderest embrace, drifted even into their dreams. In these dreams of joy, the lovers seemed to step hand in hand into the sunlight of a cleaner world.

Slowly Beren began to find that the strong bonds woven by this love were pushing out the dark thoughts. His mind was healing.

The camp lay not far from the hill of the ravens, one time led by Goracc. The birds had been absent on his first arrival, but a few days after that the tribe began to return in fours and sixes, flying in heavily from the North and East. The birds' movements were torpid, somehow satisfied; their feathers were glossy and they appeared well-fed, indeed almost obese.

Beren knew what that signified, but in an odd way this too helped him to overcome the affliction of spirit under which he was struggling. A dead body was, after all, simply that: substance returning to the earth from which it had come.

He ran still in the days, but he did it now for joy of living. And on top of the hill by the camp, the stone block slowly began to take shape.

* * * * *

No time of horror lasts forever, and at Aeluin, a day came eventually when most of those who were going to die of their wounds had done so. The healers could one by one collapse into a sleep which lasted in most cases for days, broken only by short intervals to eat and bathe. The toiling grave-diggers caught up with their work, and the place where the corpse-stack had stood was slowly cleansed by rain. The once-soiled grass began to grow fresh and high.

Among the refugees who had fled direct from Newfort on the day of the battle was a group of youngish men who all appeared to be sorely wounded. That is to say, they bore broad swathes of bandages, stained in extravagant blooms of darkened blood. These men had arrived before the masses of slashed and chopped-up fighters who had come later via the inn, thus at a time when the healers could respond quickly to any need, but the first of these who went to examine the wounds was curtly turned away. "We have our own healers," he was informed by the young man who appeared to be the leader of this group. Some there remembered him as having served the lord Bregolas.

The healer looked sceptically over the group. None of these young toughs had the appearance of a leech to him, but if a patient refused help, in the end there was nothing one could do.

In the very first days at the Lake, those still able to walk and fight were quick to organize patrols. Barahir feared above anything that the Enemy would quickly discover their hiding place and move to renew the attack. Aeluin was well hidden, but it had never been intended to serve as a refuge for such numbers. But the dreaded attack did not happen. Scouts had seen Orcs in the hills, but none came into this valley. No-one could say why, or how long this seeming cover would hold.

One day after the first frantic phase was over, Baragund came to see Barahir. The Soldier had quickly got over his shock from the day of the battle, but the experience had cut deep lines in his face and silvered his hair. He was not yet even forty.

Baragund's message was short. "The people want a meeting," he said.

Barahir glanced in question to Emeldir, but she seemed as surprised as he. "What about?" he said.

Baragund only shrugged. "Quickest way to find out is to come," he replied. "Directly after the noon meal."

The meeting was held partly in, and partly next to, the large tent which housed most of those still confined to bed. It was a warm day, and the hale people could sit on the grass among the buttercups. A great crowd of them were gathered there. Children shouted and ran about on the verges.

Barahir stood in the opening of the great tent, its walls thrown wide so that all could see him within and without. "What is it you wish to say to me, good people?" he asked the generality.

To his surprise, his stubborn old neighbour Karrack stood up to speak. "Master," said Karrack, "our former lord being now dead, it falls to us to choose a new one."

Barahir could instantly detect the direction this talk was likely to take, and he didn't like it at all. "Is that necessary?" he said. "It seems to me we are managing perfectly well as we are."

The people stirred uneasily at this. Karrack's face took on the dogged look that Barahir knew so well. "With respect, Master," the man said, "we've always had a Bëor, and we mean to keep on having one. It don't do any good to go back on tradition. It's not lucky, for one thing."

A chorus of nods and half-voiced grunts showed that he spoke the mood of the whole meeting.

"But there is no Bëor more," protested Barahir. "Our liege lord Finrod has released us from our vassalage. My ring here is token of it." And he raised the ring, which flashed silver and green in the sunlight.

"That's as may be," said Karrack. "That's as may be. But what the lord Finrod says, and what we think and say among ourselves, are two different things. All respect to him, mind. But this is *our* tradition, *our* choice, and always has been. He can say as he likes, take it as he likes, that's up to him. But we will still choose among ourselves what seems right to us. I'll say it again: we want a Bëor, and we mean to have one."

"Aye, that's right," came the chorus from the listening crowd.

"Well," said Barahir firmly, "if that is your will, then if you will allow me to say, I am sure that Baragund here will be your clear choice. The office has passed among us from father to son from time out of mind; if it is tradition you want, there it is right in front of you."

Baragund now stood up. "I refuse the office," he said, shaking his head. "I can lead a company, but not a people."

"It was you who led during the battle," said Barahir. "Yours would have been the victory, had victory been allowed to us."

"That's a considerable exaggeration," replied Baragund, "but even were it true, life is not all battles. I know my own nature, and among the things I know are the many things I can *not* do. I cannot lead the Folk, and it would be pointless for me to try. You can."

Barahir's glance sought out the Greencloak.

“Nay, Uncle, look not to me,” laughed the younger man from where he lounged upon the sward. “I, become Lord? I pray thee, be serious!”

The Soldier fixed his uncle with a stern eye. “Barahir, you must be Bëor,” he said. “You cannot escape this.” A clamour of agreement from the listeners followed his words.

Barahir raised his hands helplessly and let them drop again. “Is this all your wish?” he asked the crowd.

“Aye!” they cried with one loud voice.

“And is there nobody else you would propose?”

Silence, with some shaking heads.

“Then you leave me no choice but to accept,” he said.

The whole meeting began to cheer. “Barahir! Barahir!” they shouted. Some of them ran forward and lifted the mortified man onto their shoulders. He had just time to glimpse the twinkle in Emeldir’s laughing eyes before they started carrying him around among the cheering people. Everybody he passed patted him on the leg or tried to touch his ring. Seeing the upturned faces of his people, both the rough and the fine, faces well-known or not at all, but with gladness on every visage as they welcomed him as their titular leader, he who for so long had been their leader in the heart, Barahir’s vision blurred and a lump came into his throat.

But where had he led them, and whither could he lead them now? That was the thing.

Provisions were short, but they managed a feast that evening all the same. It turned into a full-throated, unfettered celebration of survival; of coming through a time of terror and death to find, quite unexpectedly, that one could still draw in the sweet breath of life, and feel the sun on one’s back and the blood surge through one’s veins. The open ground beside the quiet lake grew rowdy with boisterous singing as the light of many torches touched with their warm light the alders that grew there. Couples formed and sneaked off into the darkness to celebrate returning life in their own way. It was a glad time, a bright spark in the memory for some there in future years, when their land was lost beyond recall and those with whom they had feasted, sung and loved were either dead or scattered to the four corners of Beleriand.

Barahir was sitting at the high table which had been erected on a daïs of turves. Emeldir sat at his right hand and Baragund at his left; all of his household who were dear to him were there. Only Beren was missing.

The new Bëor, having drunk too much ale, was reflecting woozily that he would be feeling it in the morning, when a hand fell on his shoulder. He turned and found that it was Erlian.

“Is aught afoot?” Barahir asked the Northerner.

“Nay,” smiled the fair-haired man. “Indeed I beg thy pardon, Master. The time could perhaps have been chosen better. But I must away: it came to me suddenly. I have not thought on my duty to my King or my parents for too long.”

Barahir stood up and led the tall man a little away from the table to where they could better talk. “I understand,” he said now to Erlian. “I had already wondered that you stayed among us so long. My friend, we owe you a debt that we cannot repay. Your strong arm has fought with us and kept us; you have risked your life for us, although you had no call to do so. I am forced by circumstance to stand now graceless before you, for had I the means, I would give you thanks in the measure of your own gift, after the manner of the lord they make me out to be; but I have nothing of worth to give you.”

Erlian smiled again. “Nay, Master, there need be no such talk of gifts or debts between brothers. But I cannot

stay longer, for there are other calls which I must heed. I depart at daybreak.”

“So soon?” said Barahir.

“The summer grows late,” said Erlan, “and since I must perforce go back the same way I came, over the high pass of Anach, I dare not leave it too late in the season. But Master, that brings me to speak to you of another matter. What purpose you to do with all your wounded, weak and aged? The Orcs have not yet come to this place; but they will. And you cannot grow food enough in these high moors to feed so many.”

“I perceive the direction of your thought,” said Barahir, “and indeed we have already decided on the course you suggest with such courteous discretion. Indeed, they must depart to the South. We wait only some few weeks more for some of the worst cases to heal.”

Erlan received this information in silence.

“Of course you must choose what you judge is the best course,” he said slowly at last, “but I would urge you not to delay too long. Anach is cruel; even in the height of the season, there are some who have come to grief in it. It is a fell place, unfriendly to men, scattered as it is with the bones of the incautious or unlucky dead. Had you proposed to set out immediately, I would have waited for you, and gone in your company; but you speak in terms of weeks, and I cannot wait so long.”

It was now Barahir’s turn to ponder the other’s words, so troubling as they were. “I thank you once again, noble Erlan,” he said. “I will think on what you have said. But simply expressed, I cannot send them now. There are many whose hold on life is as yet weak. They would not survive a milder journey, let alone through the mountains. There is no road for wagons over the pass, so all who go must at least be able to sit astride a horse. We must wait, and gamble a little on the weather. But I will send them off four weeks from now at the latest, even if it means that some must certainly die on the way.”

“You say ‘send’,” said the Northerner. “Will you not go with them?”

“No,” said Barahir, with firmness returning to his voice. “I will not give up my land so easily. Those who cannot fight we will send to safety, and those who have no stomach more to do so may freely go with them. But I will stay; and I hope there may be some who will stay on with me.”

Erlan bowed low before him. “Then I must bid thee good night and farewell, Master, and wish thee good fortune, with the hope to see thee again in happier times.”

* * * * *

Emeldir and Barahir had been concerned about supplies from the very beginning. Clearly, something would have to be done, but what? Once the infirm had crossed the mountains, their hunger would become somebody else’s concern, but it soon became clear to Emeldir that their company would be in want well before that time.

“Perhaps there remain some barns which the Orcs have not torched,” suggested Barahir.

Emeldir looked sceptical. “Do you think that likely?”

“Perhaps not,” said her husband, “but we should at least look. In any case, it is time we gained some idea of how matters stand in the valley. I will send out scouts.”

After several days the scouts began to trickle back to the camp. After all their tales had been heard, it appeared that the Orcs, although present still in considerable numbers, were nowhere organized or concentrated. Regarding food, most of the wary spies had only dismal reports of burned steadings and

plundered barns. However, a single farm was discovered which the Orcs appeared to have overlooked. The scout who discovered it had not liked to linger, but he said there was certainly some grain in the store and many bags of meal in the barn. There was even a smoke-house, with hams. The farm lay not far from the edge of the moor, behind where Menelrond had lived.

The Soldier heard the news with none of the pleasure Barahir had expected. "That sounds like a trap to me," he said.

"I don't see why," replied Barahir with a tinge of irritation. "Do you think the Orcs are perfect? Could it not be that they have simply overlooked something? The scout said there were few signs of them in the neighbourhood, at all. The farm lies on a back alley, far from centres of importance. It is in fact just what we were looking for, just what I had hoped to find. And think you: if we do not find some grain soon, we will have to cut rations, and they are not above subsistence as it is."

"Take a small force then, at least to begin with, and let them bring back as much as they can manage," suggested Baragund.

"No," said Barahir. "I will take everybody who will go. We must gamble on it. This is a time for boldness, for nothing else will save us."

They called one of the whole-camp meetings which had become habitual with them to tell people about the raid. Barahir wanted also to take the opportunity to present to them the plan of flight. He and Emeldir had discussed this much together, but until now he had not proposed it to the people.

The assembled Bëorings listened carefully to his explanation of the situation of the rations. When he called for volunteers for the raid, nearly all the fighting-fit people stood up and commenced shouting. A few of them found swords or spears and waved them in the air. There must have been two or three hundred of them. Barahir was cheered beyond measure by their enthusiasm. Why! he thought, with such spirit, perhaps we can win some of our land back from the Orcs in time; and if we could attract new blood from the South, we could build our numbers again...

His dreams were interrupted by Emeldir. "You had better get them to sit down again," she said, "or somebody will be cut."

He saw that she was right. After fruitlessly waving his hands for some moments and trying to shout above the tumult, he took a horn from his waist and blew it. This brought the sword-wavers to relative silence. "Thank you!" he called to them. "But sit down now please, for we are not setting out just this moment; and there are more things we need to talk about."

As soon as a degree of decorum had once more descended, he raised the subject that had been on his mind. "As you all realize," he began, "we are in a difficult position. We have suffered several reverses, thus we have retreated here to recover and to gather our strength. Few of us, I believe, are of a mood other than to continue the fight. But we stand in a corner here, far from home and comfort. There is not much food, but there are many mouths, and the greater part of the mouths here now belong to people who are injured, or whose worth in other areas of life is no doubt great, but who cannot fight. Therefore we suggest to you non-fighters that it might be better for you to retreat further, over the mountains. There in the Southlands you will be free from attack from the forces which beset us here, and you will find yourselves again in rich lands where there is food for you to earn. What say ye?"

A confusion of voices followed this speech. Many had objections. Some asked why they could not stay; others asked whether they should not better cross Sirion to seek refuge with their friends and kin in Hithlum.

"If you stay here, we will all starve together," said Barahir firmly. "And Sirion is held by our enemies. The direct road north to Hithlum is shut. Only by passing Anach can you hope at length to arrive in those lands.

But your first need is to escape; and Anach is the only route to safety which remains open to you.”

There followed a great deal of discussion, some of it heated. Eventually, however, the majority of those affected came to see that Barahir’s suggestion was in fact the only feasible course open to them. The small rump who remained stubborn were shouted down in the end.

A sturdy but now one-legged farmer formerly from the warm slopes north of Newfort had gradually emerged as one of the wounded people’s chief representatives. “Your words make sense to us, Master,” this man said at last. “Keep it quiet, you at the back there, can’t you? You’re out-voted. Master, when do you think we should leave?”

“Soon,” said Barahir. “There are many things to be discussed, but the first thing we should do is choose who will lead you. What is your name? Can you accept this burden yourself?”

“My name is Dunaic, Master,” replied the farmer, “and begging your pardon, but I do not see how a man with one leg can lead anything. Standing here in council is all very well; here I need move nothing but my jaw. But such a retreat as you advise is an active enterprise and requires a fit body.”

“Well, choose someone fit from your numbers whom you trust,” said Barahir.

“We trust in the House of Barahir,” replied Dunaic.

“But I am not going!” said Barahir.

“Master,” replied Dunaic slowly, “I said your house. I know you are staying to fight, as I would too if only I could. I have in mind another, one to whom I owe my life; aye, and many more here must admit the same. Tireless she has been in our care. I propose the Lady Emeldir for our leader.” His words were no sooner heard than they were drowned in a roar of acclamation. It seemed to be a popular suggestion.

Emeldir had jumped up straight away from where she sat at her husband’s side. She shouted now in his ear to make her voice heard over the din of people shouting her name. “Did you put them up to this?”

He shouted back to her, “No!”

“Well I am not doing it. ‘Not’, do you hear? I am staying!”

“Mel,” he said into her outraged ear, “just listen to them.” And indeed the whole Folk had joined in now and were beginning to call her name out in unison. “Em-el-dir! Em-el-dir!” The successive waves of sound surged over them.

She looked him despairingly. “Do not do this to me, husband, I beg thee. I had no thought but to fight on at thy side; nay, nor wish either.”

Barahir grasped his tall wife by the arm and bent to her ear. “Just lead them over the pass, that’s all. Then come back! Do you think I would accept being parted from you forever?”

Her head bowed while she thought about it. Then she raised it and looked him in the eye again. “You put it so that I cannot refuse. All right then, I accept. But I am afraid! Ask me not of what, for I do not know.”

* * * * *

Like many of the older people, Andreth had suffered from the relocation. The changes which had come upon her were not only confusing and upsetting, they were in all respects changes for the worse. The booth where she was housed was cold, damp and uncomfortable; the coal fire smoked and gave out only a grudging heat.

Everybody seemed to be too busy to spend any time with her, and she could not readily lay hands on any of her things.

The red-haired girl had sat with her a day or two ago. That was nice of her. Andreth knew there had been a big battle, and that it had not gone well. That was why everybody was here. The redhead: she remembered everything about the girl, could recall diamond-sharp in her mind how she had consoled the maid, years ago, when her son the Boy had wanted to go and live in the woods; but the woman's name was lost to Andreth, as with all the other names.

What had been her particular news? Oh yes, that was it, they were all to go on a great journey, to the South, over the mountains this time. Andreth was to go with them. Well, it was impossible. Andreth knew flat that she could not do it. No good to tell that to the pretty redhead though, so Andreth had nodded and smiled to her, and thanked her for coming to tell her.

Now she sat staring ahead of her as to a blank wall, chewing her gums. Indeed she was facing a wall, and its name was Death. She had come to it at last. There were no more escapes, no more distractions. Truth to tell, Andreth didn't much mind, not at this end of things. Living in so aged a carcase was so inconvenient, so uncomfortable; and there was nothing to look forward to any more, no expectation that things would ever become any better. She was old, and blind, and getting stupid. It would never get any better.

The only thing that troubled her was the matter which had so often troubled her: what to do with the sword. The Boy was off somewhere in the forests, his mother had not seen him for some time. She could not fool herself any more: for whatever reason, he did not want the sword, would never come to take it from her hand. Nobody wanted it, nobody remembered it, not even the gods themselves it seemed. Never had Andreth had smell or sign of any dream or other guide to what she should do; not even here, at the Blue Lake of the Lady herself, where Father had been given the thing to begin with.

Well, if there was no rede to be had, no message from the gods, she would just have to stop dithering and do something without it.

Listening to make sure that nobody else was in the dark hole they had stuck her in, Andreth reached under her lumpy bunk to where she had stowed the blade, wrapped in a cloth as always. It was damp there, but she supposed that a sword made of ice could take small harm from that. Her hands felt the wrappings; fumbled inside, found the rough hilt and caressed it. That was real, that at least remained to her. One thing she was certain of: she was not going to let anybody else meddle with the blade. She would find her way to the water's edge in the dark of night – light or dark made no difference to her now! – and cast the thing in. Yes, that was it. That was the thing to do. Make an end of it, before she found her own end. And that would not be long; she sensed Death, waiting for her, only a little way on the path ahead.

She must have dozed off – as she often did – because when she opened her eyes again, it was night. Andreth's eyes registered nothing but featureless light these days, but she knew well enough when the day began or ended. And was there a dim yellow bloom of candle light at the corners of her vision? Yes, she could make out the flicker.

She had missed the evening meal seemingly, but she was not hungry. She ate little these days, only some soup at daybreak, and a little broken bread at noon. She was tired, though, despite having dozed, so she lay there without trying to get up, watching the flickering fog of golden light.

Her eyes drooped closed again and she drifted off into the light sleep of the aged, in which waking thoughts blend with memories and it becomes difficult to tell whether one is awake or asleep, in reverie or in dream. In her mind now were scenes from long ago. She harked back to a time when her hair had been the colour of honey, when she could dance still, and climb a tree. She had been ill one night though, a light fever. The weather had been hot, not a breath of wind in that night, she had gone to the window and heard the music of night-birds in the tree by her window. So clear was this memory that Andreth could hear them now. The

Presence she had felt then had guided her feet and hands, had led her to take up her father's sword and so to begin this long journey which seemed to have no end.

The window: she had stood at the window, but where was the cursed thing? Her searching hands could not feel it; instead they felt the rough sides of a bunk.

Of course! She was not in her old room in the Hall, but in this miserable turf booth beside the lake.

As she lay there, coming to herself again, she realized with a dawning shock that the gentle music of the birds that she had heard in her dream was still sounding in her ears; faintly, but most definitely there.

Somebody must have doused the candles, for she had woken to darkness. From the feel of the air she knew it was deep in the night. As the old woman lay on her back, trying to shake the last strands of the dream from her waking mind, a new feeling stole over her: a certainty, and with the certainty, a surge of joyful release, like a warm wind at dawn. At last it had come, the sign she had waited for, and for so long! So long that she had given up on it at the last. But now here it was; she knew, at last, at long last, what she must do. The night-birds were telling her.

She raised herself off the bunk with difficulty and fumbled about the room until she had found her thick gown. With this wrapped around her, she fetched the long blade from under her bunk. Andreth stood with it a while, listening. There was no sound but the birds. With silent footfall, she went to the low door and stepped out into the night.

Andreth had lived here when she was a young maid – no, more: she had fallen in love here. She knew every inch of the place, every part of it held some memory for her. She did not need eyes for it, she could see everything in her head. She knew she stood presently among trees, and there through the scattered trunks lay the sheet of starlit water, stretching away into the dark hills beyond. She could see it clearly in her mind. Carefully she made her way down the sward towards the bank, through the sleeping camp. It was from the direction of the lake that the sound of birds was coming.

There must be boats here somewhere, but she had to feel for them, because they were not in the vision of her memory. Ah – a small punt by the feel of it. Just the thing. Was it tied? No. An oar? She fumbled in the bottom of the light shell of wood. Her fingers closed on poles, ran up the length of them and felt the paddles. Capital!

Now she just had to get it into the water. Put the sword in first, go to the upper edge of the little boat, push. Push. The boat grated on sand and began to move. Push!

It was the lightest of punts, the distance was no more than a few yards, but it was as much as Andreth could do to get the thing in the water. What a nuisance it was to be old! When the boat finally bobbed free, she tumbled wet-foot into it and lay in the bilges, bruised and gasping for air. Keep this up, maid, and you'll pass on even before you get there. Take it steady. Take it steady.

Drat, now she was wet. Well, there was nothing for it but to press on. But what foolery, at my age!

As soon as she had recovered her breath somewhat, or at least brought the panting under some control, she sat up and began to push the boat out from the shore with an oar at the stern. She had known how to scull once, but she had lost the skill somewhere in the long tally of years, and now the best she could do was to push weakly with the oar opposite the direction she wanted to go.

Her old heart began to stumble again in her chest from the strain of the exercise, but she was making progress. The birds were nearer now. She knew now where they were. She was going to meet them; and she knew in her heart that the Lady, too, would be waiting. And beyond that, the Doorway.

She had been afraid of it all her life; had scorned most of those who professed hope, had named them fools and cowards in her heart for averting their timid faces from the withering truth. Although Adanel, she knew, had lived in that hope, and Finrod had spoken for it, she had never been able to believe in it herself. But it came to her now, sitting here wet through in a punt in the middle of the starlit lake, that she had lived her entire life with courage. With the force of sudden revelation she realized that it did not matter what one believed or did not believe about the unknowable; the only thing that mattered was to meet it with your chin held high.

Well, as she had lived, so would she die. What happened after that would look after itself.

She pushed with the oar, and pushed, nudging the boat ever further out over the dark waters.

* * * * *

Another old woman was inconsolable. "I meant to help," she sobbed, tears trickling down her face. "Not to be somebody else's burden."

"Don't take on so, Mother," said Emeldir, trying to put out of her mind the hundred and one urgent things she had to do. "You looked after me when I was young; now it's your turn. That's how it goes for all of us."

"It seemed so clear when we were planning it out," Surith said, hiding her damp face in her hands. "So *right*. Father did what he had to do; and I had my own part ahead of me. And after all, it wouldn't be so very long before I joined him. But now Caladis is gone; my bright, clever girl. Oh, oh. Blown out of life, as if she had never been. I never truly understood how you felt, Mel, losing Hiril, until now. My dear, you'll know. It's knocked away the best part of me. Simply knocked it into nothing."

Emeldir swallowed, nodded out of her own pain.

"And now I'm laid up here," wept the frail old lady. "Useless. Useless. I should have stayed with my man. We could have held each other as we went together, and neither of us would have to bear this awful blow, this loss. But he never knew; he's gone ahead, and left me half alive, grieving and alone."

* * * * *

This year the salmon failed to arrive.

Beren had gone to the valley with Big Belly and Story-Teller. They had been watchful during the last part of the journey, because although no Orc had yet been seen in the high forests in the South of the land, the same could not be said of the valley of the Whitewater. Orcs had been here recently and were not far away now. The party had met no Orcs, but their wariness paid off all the same, since it meant that they found the bears just a short while before the bears found them. The party was thus not wholly unprepared for the attack. All three of them ran in different directions; it took them most of the morning to work their ways back around the angry animals and to find each other again.

"That has never happened before," remarked Stories. When the three of them finally managed to make their way down to a quiet stretch of the river, the reason for the bears' annoyance became apparent: the frothing waters were empty of fish.

They sat down again and tried to make sense of this as the light left the valley depths and the long rays of evening touched the hill tops with gold.

"It must have been the Enemy's fire-wave last winter," said Beren at last.

Story-Teller looked at him, then shook his head doubtfully. "But he cannot destroy a whole river," he said.

“Can he?”

None of them could think of anything more to say. Whatever the explanation, the absence of salmon remained an undeniable fact. In the end they could do nothing but retreat back to the hills.

When the party returned to camp, they found that Talkative was up, but that was the only thing they could be pleased about. Somehow the time seemed increasingly out of joint. They all felt it; the Druug always felt everything together. They were restless and discontented. There was a growing sense among them that they were out of their path, and needed soon to return to it; like a hunter who has turned aside to admire a beautiful flower, but who now again, with rumbling belly, seeks urgently the trail.

Carver and Beren both still filled their days with labour, but they too shared the sense of a time soon to come to an end; indeed more acutely even than the others. Neither of them was getting enough sleep. Carver spent all day at her work, and Beren at his, and in the nights their coupling took on an urgent, fierce quality. Carver's cheek bones were showing and she had dark shadows under her eyes. Beren for his part had shed all excess fat. His skin slid over corded muscles; a line of ribs showed starkly, like a fish's gills, in the hollows at the side of his chest.

He no longer ran all day, but spent most of his time now finding and preparing food: digging for roots, gathering the starchy bases of rushes. Other times he spent back at camp pounding, scraping, seeping and roasting the fruits of his harvest; all the myriad activities needed to extract nourishment from what nature provided. He refused only to hunt, having had more than his fill of blood for that year. The others contributed their shares, and through their joint efforts the stacks of winter food mounted ever higher.

Somewhere in the past month, Beren's nightmares had ceased; nor was his waking mind any more subject to intrusions by images of death. The memories were still there, but now they were under his control.

There came at last the day he knew so well, the day he had known would come this year, as it had come in all previous years; but a day he had dreaded. He woke to find that the wind had changed; the air carried new messages. From the tired rustle of leaves in the tree-tops to the plangent cries of the restless birds, all voices in the forest were carrying the same message: summer was over.

Carver came down to the camp to fetch the others. The People followed her up the hill. Among them Story-Teller and Made Bean Soup, both looking old and shrunken, both still feeling the death of their son Matted Hair. Bearskin holding hands with Talkative; the man still pale and weak, with little talk left in him. Big Belly and Noisy, not limping any more, but sad and silent. Last of all came Beren.

On the windy hill sat now a Druug, but a Druug of stone. From his squat folded legs to his rounded belly, up the whole body to the head with its great beak of a nose, Beren knew him. Big Nose. His other father.

The eight of them there, all that remained of the sojourners in the North of the People, gathered around the stone and laid their hands on it. They stood there in silent communion as the sun swung around the sky and the hours fled by. Each was recalling Nose: words the old Druug had said, smiles, a look on his face. Beren saw again in his memory the first time he had set eyes on his foster-father, when Nose had stepped out of the bushes after killing the goblins. Days and nights passed through his head, and in each of them Nose was there, shaping the small figures he made in his leisure, or patiently waiting for game to come down a trail, or laughing his pure, joyful laugh.

One by one those gathered around the stone shook themselves free of the vision, sighed, and took their hands away. The sun had long set by that time and a waning moon was filling the clearing with a soft light. The far-away mountains were crested with a gossamer glimmer; and the stone the people encircled was no longer only stone.

Next day came the time of parting. Beren went to his people one by one and embraced each for a long time.

Last of all he came to Carver. He looked into her brimming eyes, the dark eyes he knew so well, knowing that he would never see her again. Yet he was bound to her, could never forget her, and would never forget her, not even after the stream of life had buried this past under many layers of new experience, new love.

They put their arms around each other, she barely coming up to his shoulder, and he bent his head and smelled for a last time the familiar and beloved scent of her hair, of her body that was dear to him. He felt the spirit that was in her, the true Carver, who would remain the same girl he had loved, even when the body was fallen and withered. She hugged him back with a desperate strength, as if trying to squeeze the life from his body.

She pushed him away at last and stood free, staring at him from her black eyes full of tears. She raised an impatient hand and wiped them away.

“Go now,” she said to him. “No farmers’ words. Just go.”

* * * * *

When Beren arrived back at Aeluin, he found that the whole place seemed to share his flat mood. He could see little activity; the few people visible were just sitting around, listless.

He flinched from the place where the pile of corpses had been, but there was nothing to see there now except long green grass.

The hospital tent was the only place that seemed to host any activity. Here there was even bustle; it also seemed to be surprisingly full. Sounds were coming from it which he shied away from.

In his father’s tent he found, instead of Barahir, the Greencloak dutifully addressing the dull work behind the rough table.

Belegund, glancing up at the sun-browned young man, sat back in surprise.

“By the Kindler!” he exclaimed. “You are the last person I expected to see today!”

“Greetings, cousin,” said Beren. “But where is Father? And what has been happening? Why is the hospital so busy?”

A sombre look came to Belegund’s face. “Your father is injured,” he said. “Not too badly. Not like some of the poor wights... There was a battle. We raided a farm just to the North, where there seemed to be some grain, meal. It went badly for us. The enemy knew we were coming, that seems now certain. We lost many. And since we did not succeed in bringing back any of the provender, all are now on short rations.”

Beren sat on a box just inside the door, his face pale. *More* death? Would it never end? “And Mother?” he asked.

“Some grazes, nothing worse,” replied the Greencloak. “But she is very tired. She has hardly rested since we returned.”

“Who else have we lost?” asked Beren.

“None from the family, or from your House-men,” said Belegund. “Brother is also wounded, but with the blessing he too will recover. There was one other loss though... not in the battle. I am sorry to tell you that Andreth is dead.”

Beren looked down, then up again. “Well, she lived to a good old age,” he said heavily.

“She did,” said Belegund, “but there are strange circumstances. They found her in a boat in the middle of the lake.”

In a *boat*? Beren couldn’t take it in. And what of the other item that suddenly rose in his thoughts? “I had best talk to Father,” he said. “Would I be able to see him?”

“Ask that at the tent of the healers,” replied his cousin. “But Beren, before you go – what of yourself? Your father said that you... we were concerned that...” He could not quite find the words to express himself.

“I was sick at heart,” replied Beren, “but I believe that now I am healed.”

“I give you joy of it,” said his cousin sombrely. “Alas, we have many similar who are not.”

* * * * *

Beren entered the tent with trepidation. Almost the first person he saw was his mother, who indeed was looking worn.

As Emeldir caught sight of him, her face lit up like a sunrise. She ran straight to Beren between the bunks, cannoning into him and forcing him back a pace or two.

She let go her fierce grip and looked into his face, her blue eyes brimming with tears. “Is it really you?” she said, holding his cheek with her hand. “I’ve been so worried...” She stepped back and looked him over at arms’ length. “Oh, Beren, you’re so – well, thin is not the right word. But that doesn’t matter – how are you? Are you...?”

“Yes, Mother,” he said, smiling down at her in his affection, his teeth showing very white in the brown of his face. “I am well. I am better.”

Her expression was relieved, but after a moment a new impression seemed to steal over her. She raised her nose, as if scenting something. “There is something different about you,” she said, and as he watched her, he saw the realization come into her eyes.

Mothers, he thought, how do they do it? It has been three days since I left Carver, and I have washed in between. “You may possibly have guessed near a certain mark,” he confessed, “but I would ask you to save your questions for now. Things are a little raw still.”

Her eyes were full of those questions, but she bent her head forward in compliance. “Very well, my son. I shall not ask.”

“Tell me rather how it goes with you,” he said.

Her smile faded now and she looked troubled. “Father is here, sick,” she said. “Things have not gone well for us.”

“Belegund already told me something of it,” he said. “Can I see Father? Where are his injuries? Is he fit enough to see me?”

“Where?” she echoed. “Most places possible! Nothing is missing, but he lost a lot of blood. I ought to ask the chief Healer, but I will take it upon myself for this time. If your father is awake he will want to see you, that I know.”

Barahir, what Beren could see of him past bandages, was looking shrunken and white. The one eye left uncovered was closed. “His face was much slashed,” whispered Emeldir, “but through good fortune they

missed the eye itself.”

Barahir’s visible eye opened at the sound of her voice. As he took in Beren’s presence in the shadowy tent, his face also came alight. His impulse to grin ended in a wince, but he extracted a hand from his blanket and extended it to his son, who grasped it fervently.

Beren sank to his knees beside the bed, still holding the hand.

“What is this, Papa?” he said. “Malingering?”

Barahir snorted. “Not quite,” he husked. His eye looked over his son. “You’re looking well, Son. You look a sight better than I feel.”

“You seem to have done a proper job on yourself,” said Beren. “Any more cuts and there would be more Barahir left on the field than lying in this bed now.”

His father did not smile at this. “All too true for some,” he sighed. “Have you seen Belegund?”

“I have,” said Beren. “He said you had bad luck.”

“Then he was being kind,” replied Barahir in his weak voice. “I was a fool. Baragund warned me not to go, but I wouldn’t listen.”

Emeldir leaned down. “Hush now with that kind of talk,” she said sternly. “It does no good.”

Barahir moved his head impatiently from side to side, but he did not pursue the theme. “He told you about Andreth?”

“Yes,” said Beren. “I don’t understand that.”

“Nobody does,” said Barahir. “There’s one detail he doesn’t know about, though. None of them do. It wasn’t in the boat; nor was it with her things, where she kept it before. There was only the cloth she wrapped it in, lying beside her in the boat. I recognized that.”

Beren well knew what ‘it’ was. He sat back, eyes wide. “You think it went into the lake?” he asked.

“I fear so,” replied his father shortly.

The young man hadn’t expected that, although as he immediately thought to himself, perhaps he should have. Mixed with his shock was a sense of loss, but straight away he was angry with himself for it. You could have had it any time these last ten years simply by asking, his mind scolded him, and now you want to tell me that you grieve for its loss?

“It seems a shame it ended this way,” he said slowly. “Doesn’t seem right somehow.”

“That’s how life is sometimes,” said Barahir. He was clearly tiring. With perfect timing, Frola, the head healer, bustled up at that moment and requested them with steely politeness to go away and leave the patient in peace.

* * * * *

Beren was called to council the next day with his cousins and his mother. Chiefly they wanted to tell him some more of how things went with them – the wounded, the shortages, the planned evacuation over the pass.

“You had better go soon,” said Beren, alarmed at the news. “Indeed, just as soon as you can. The season is late as it is.”

“We are preparing as fast as we can,” his mother said. He marked again the deep lines in her face, the tired skin, the shadows under her eyes. “It is not easy. We would value any help you can give.”

“Anything,” he said. He looked down. “I am... I am sorry I left you all to do it alone.”

His cousin Baragund the Soldier laid his unbandaged hand on Beren’s arm in a rare show of affection. “We understand, lad,” the hard-faced man said gruffly. “Not all wounds are to the body. Do not chafe yourself. We are only glad to see that you are healed.”

“I wonder that there are not more so afflicted,” returned the younger man. “There surely must be many with more excuse than me.”

Emeldir’s face turned grim. “When you come to look more thoroughly among the sick,” she said, “you will find plenty. Never think you are the only one.”

They told him then of Gorgol, whose horribly maimed victims were still at that time limping occasionally into camp. Beren closed his eyes and laid a hand to his forehead. Was there no end to the horrors of this summer?

“I cannot think why they have not found us,” he said. “I cannot think what keeps them off.”

The Greencloak shrugged. “Some speak of the Lady,” he said. “That she shields us. I cannot say; I am not wise in such matters. Faelind thinks it is the case, and I have learned to trust her in such things.”

His brother the Soldier grunted. “I know even less,” he said. “But I do know that we should not trust to protections which we cannot see or judge. Nor do we; we make what patrols our numbers allow. There, too, you could greatly aid us, Kinsman.”

They spoke some while longer over various dry matters to do with the daily running of a vast camp. Finally, Emeldir said, “I think that is all for now. Indeed, I cannot speak longer. I can hardly keep my eyes open. Shall we adjourn?”

The Brothers concurred. All stood.

Emeldir swayed on her feet as she rose. Beren clasped her around the waist, looked down at her, smiling.

“Now it is my turn to carry you to your rest,” he said. He suited actions to words by bending and sweeping her up into his arms. “Shall I sing to you, Mother, as you used to do to me? Nay, perhaps not. I have not your sweetness of voice.”

She gazed at him from her worn face, tears forming in her eyes. She had no words; simply clasped her hands together behind his strong neck.

Beren carried his mother to her tent, laid her on her bunk before the eyes of a startled Parth. “See that she gets some rest, Parth, would you?” he said, and left them to it.

* * * * *

The fugitives had set up a smithy in a corner of the encampment, and Beren was not too surprised to find Gorlim within it. He had seen little of the smith since the terrible start to the year, and he was shocked now to see how much older Gorlim was looking than his thirty-odd years: there were deep lines in his face, and his

hair was turning grey.

Beren advanced a few steps closer to the fire, where Gorlim was working the bellows. "Hello, Gorlim," he said.

The smith glanced up at him, nodded shortly, then returned to his labour. Soon the piece on the coals was glowing white; he moved around, took it up swiftly and commenced to hammer it skilfully into a curved shape.

Beren looked around. "Nobody to help?" he said.

"No," said Gorlim without looking at him or pausing in his hammer-strokes. "They never stay."

"Shall I help then? Work the bellows like I used to?"

The smith stopped at that, stood straight and stared at Beren for a full moment. Then he returned to his work. "Aye, if you like," he replied with indifference.

Beren moved to take hold of the heavy bellows and laboured at them in the old familiar way whenever the piece grew too cool to work.

"I haven't talked to you since you... since the start of the year," he said after a few cycles. "I came because I wanted to see how you were."

"Me? Well enough," replied the smith without raising his eyes from his work.

"I meant to ask you... what happened to your parents? Did they come here?"

"Ma died," replied Gorlim shortly. "Pa, I dunno. Ain't seen him in a while."

"Grol," said Beren with rising desperation, "talk to me. Tell me how it is with you." He did not know how to go on.

The smith glanced up at him blankly. "Talk? What for?" he said.

"I feel as though you hate me," said Beren. "I tried to help you... maybe I wasn't very wise with some of it. Maybe you're right to hate me. I just want to know."

Once again the smith stopped his work and stood straight. His brow furrowed. "Hate?" he said. "No, I don't hate no-one." He thought about it some more. "Lessen you could call what I feel about them stinking filth of Orcs, hate. Which I don't meself. No, hate don't fit that. What it is, see, is I am their Death. I chop 'em whenever I can, and I'll go on a-chopping of 'em until they chop me. Death; that's it. First for them, then for me. That's all there is, now." He bent once again to hammer, found the piece had gone cold and placed it again on the coals. "Pump that up now."

Beren's heart was as if frozen. He could think of nothing at all to say. He stayed at the bellows in silence until Gorlim was finished with that piece and had dunked it into the water-bucket with a hiss and a puff of vapour. Beren let go the handles then and edged away. "I have to go now," he said thickly. Gorlim just half-glanced at him and grunted.

As Beren blundered out of the doorway, blinded by tears, he almost ran into a man. "Sorry," he mumbled, and tried to go past, but the man reached out and grasped his arm.

"Beren?" said the man.

Beren took a good look at the other, then it was his turn to be surprised. “Why,” he said, “you are Hathaldir!”

“I am,” Hathaldir smiled at him. He had grown into a sturdy young man of middle height, with a friendly, open face, still a little soft around the edges.

“But I have not seen you since...” Beren thought back to the time, “well, since that awful business of the Blackshirts.” He looked at his old friend. “I have an apology to make to you, Hath, about that time.”

His friend waved that away. “Oh, nonsense,” he said. “It’s all forgotten. Anyhow, we should not be digging up old miseries when we have grief enough in the present.”

“I cannot dispute that,” said Beren. “But Hath! Put aside whatever you were doing and come and take a cup with me. Ale is not to be had, I know, but I can brew you some Druug gorscht.”

“Will I survive the experience?” laughed Hath. “Aye, with a good will.”

When the two were seated beside the small fire on which the drink brewed, they each sat back and looked the other over. The friendship and welcome on Hathaldir’s face were unmistakable. “You may not have seen me,” he said to Beren, “but I have seen you between times, and heard about you too! You are famous, did you not know?”

“Do not speak of such things, if you love me,” replied Beren ruefully. “I do not care at all to be on everybody’s tongue; indeed I have exerted myself to avoid it.” He was still taking in his friend’s familiar features, now written on a man’s face and body. Suddenly he broke into a delighted laughter. “Oh Hath, you have no idea how it cheers me up to see you here, and in one piece too!”

“I am glad you feel so,” said Hathaldir, “the more so because it seemed to me that you were not happy just before we met today.”

The smile faded from Beren’s face. “No,” he said sombrely, “I wasn’t. The smith is another old friend of mine, but the year has not left him unscathed. He lost his wife right at the start, and he has never got over it. It is as if a great chunk of him has simply been carved away.”

Now it was Hathaldir’s turn to look sad. “There are few now who are truly without scathe from these dreadful times,” he said. “A man may smile, but the wounds lie open underneath, and who knows if they will ever truly heal?”

“You speak as one with his own losses in mind, I make no doubt,” said Beren in a hesitant voice.

Hath nodded. “My father and brother were taken during the Darkness,” he said in a strained voice, “or so I suppose, for I did not see them fall, and there has been scarce chance since to seek their remains. When we shook ourselves back to light, the Wolves were right in there among us, ripping out throats right and left. We had to strain nerve and sinew to the utmost simply to rescue our own lives – some of our lives, at least. My kin I never saw again. They were there; then came the Dark, and they were not there.

“Some that you may remember are also lost. Indeed, few of our childhood companions are still alive. Marcil was killed outright, and Ollandar died some time later of his wounds. To him at least I could bid farewell; but on the other side of that balance, his death was neither merciful nor quick.”

Beren thought of the corpse-pile and shivered. “I hesitate to ask,” he said, “but you have so far said nothing of your sister and mother?”

Hathaldir smiled again. “In their case, no news is good news,” he said. “They are both here. You must come shortly and greet them. They mean to depart soon to the South in your mother’s caravan.”

Beren poured the gorscht at that point, and Hath, laughing again, was forced to admit that the brew had something to it. The two of them stayed on for a further hour or so, recalling with laughter old times and old friends. Passers-by smiled to hear their animated exchange.

When they got up, Hath took Beren to see his family. His mother, a sad-eyed matron who matched but poorly with the black-haired, cheerful woman of Beren's memory, bade him quietly welcome, but she had not much further speech in her, and during his visit she mostly just sat staring at the fire.

Hath's sister Britha seemed at first totally changed, being now a grown woman full of curves; but once Beren looked past these marks of femininity he found her essentially unaltered: the same mischievous grey eyes, the same dark unruly hair.

Britha had opened her eyes wide as this strong young man ducked his head to enter the tent. It must be said that Beren had no idea of his own appearance, of the picture he made now in others' eyes. To Britha he appeared like some woodland god. With wonder in her eyes, appreciation too, she took in with woman's discretion the whole of his tall, sun-browned form; admiring the slide of his muscles under the skin as much as the humour and kindness in his brilliant blue eyes. Beren was wearing his usual almost nonexistent Druug attire, so there was very little of him that could not be directly admired; and what could not, could easily be guessed at. The young woman's heart almost skipped a beat as their visitor turned away at some instigation, and her eyes glanced down. Oh my.

She had fallen instantly into a purring, half-lidded, curvaceous mode, but she very soon saw that this would not do. Beren's smiles to her had the warmth of old companionship, but nothing more. Some instinct whispered to Britha that this gorgeous man was not for her: that whatever tender thoughts he might allow himself were fixed in another direction. She sighed a little to herself, but it went easier between them after that.

Beren lay down to sleep that evening feeling happier than he had in a long time. He was absurdly pleased to have encountered Hath again; the laughing young man was like an stout line leading back to a bright, sunny time in his life, before he became burdened with the duties of maturity.

* * * * *

At this time there were still people trickling into the camp in ones and twos. Some of them were crofters from the moors; others had tilled the earth in some remote corner of the land or other, overlooked by the Orcs until lately. These ones usually had some tale of woe to relate, but such things were so usual now that few listened with more than polite and cursory interest.

One old couple arrived one day carrying a strange cargo. Their ox-cart appeared on the rough track which led over the moors from the North-east, which was the route the earlier refugees from Newfort had arrived by. The patrol by the road glanced at them only so long as to be sure they were not Orcs, then turned their eyes back to their duty.

The cart was a primitive affair, piled high with furniture and other items. After the old couple had found a place to park it and had turned the ox loose on a hobble to graze, the man made enquiry of people standing nearby, who directed him to the hospital tent. Beren, who had been helping inside, came out of the tent with a basin of dirty water just as the old man approached.

"Here, young 'un," said the man to him. "Be there healing folk inside yon tent? Felly back there tole me to enquire here."

Beren threw the water into the ditch nearby, then straightened up and took the man in with a swift glance. He beheld a bent old farmer, whose faded blue eyes squinted over a bushy grey thicket of beard. The man's hands were a wonder: great knobbly, horny things, coarsened by a lifetime of hard labour. His shapeless hat

might once have been green.

“Yes, there are healers,” Beren answered. “Are you hurt?”

“Not me,” said the old farmer. “Felly we picked up by the way. Trapper felly, camps back around our way betimes. Stuck full of arrows like a hedge-pig. Cor, we had a job to get him into the cart! You wait til you sees him, you won’t believe as hooman beans come that big.”

“Show me!” Beren said to him. The old man led him back to the cart, where his apple-cheeked wife was waiting. And there, nestled in straw at the bottom of the pile of possessions, which was somehow braced so as not to press its weight on him, Beren saw a man as large as any he had seen anywhere. The insensible face was pale and drawn, but Beren had little difficulty in recognizing the features of the trapper Radhruin, whom he had known since childhood. The big man still turned up in the Sightfoot district now and then; or rather he had done, before the war. On those occasions, he still carried all before him in the wrestling ring, despite his increasing years.

“We’d better get these things off him,” Beren said to the farmer. He called over a couple of people he knew, and with their help the trapper was soon exposed. There were several arrows still stuck in Radhruin’s frame, broken off short; Beren supposed, those ones that could not easily be removed. A lot of blood had soaked into both the man’s clothes and the straw he had been lying on.

A stretcher was fetched and the man was carried with much effort into the tent where the staggering bearers succeeded at last in levering his bulk onto a vacant bunk. Radhruin groaned as they did so and his eyes fluttered.

Frola, who had been directing the operation, turned to Beren. “All right, thank you all for your help,” she said. “You can leave him to me now.”

“I wanted to ask him what happened,” said Beren.

“Later,” she said sternly, and he found himself gently but firmly urged out of the chamber.

It was over a week before anyone was allowed to speak to Radhruin, since some of his wounds had been serious. The leeches now believed he would pull through, although for a while it had been touch and go.

Emeldir came with Beren to the bed. They found Radhruin looking white-faced and shrunken. The familiar green eyes turned to them as they came to the bed side, but all the ferality had gone out of them. In its place was only pain.

“I know ee,” the man rumbled as soon as he set eyes on them. “’Tis Missus o’ Sightfoot Farm, and the Forest Boy. I know ee.”

“That’s right,” said Emeldir gently. “What happened, Radhruin? Did you run into some Orcs?”

The man grunted as if the question hurt him. “Aye, well, more they ran into us. Still dunno really how it happened. We was biding quiet in our little place up under the eastern fence. Weren’t fixing to stir about none for a piece, an’ didn’t see any sense in mixing in with the horrid doings down on plain. I was keeping sharp lookout, but didn’t see no sign o’ nuthin. Dunno how it happened, they came at night. First I knew, they was a-howling about and breaking down door. Jumped up and fetched me axe, but they was too many. Dunamany I laid out but they was always more.” Here he paused and swallowed. “My, my, my Marag and my girlie Trixie, they stood up like good ’uns, but, but, but we ain’t none on us made o’ bricks, and by wood and water, tweren’t long before them brutes had ’em down. Had ’em down. My Marag and my Trixie.” His lip trembled. “They stood up like good ’uns, but they went down in the end. I seen ’em go, seen it were end o’ the road for ’em. So I picked ’em both up with one arm and with axe in ’tother I ran. Lord, how I ran! Got

clear o' them rats after a while, an' I kept going, and kept going, dunno where I was going, just away. Passed out after a time and next I knew ol' Jem was there, him an' his missus. Used to see 'em now and again, they had a little place up against the downs, a sight too near them Tree-witches for my liking; but that don't matter now. Jem buried my missus and my girl proper, an'... an' I don't know more than that. I suppose he give me a lift up here. Wanted to thank him, but I ain't seen him since." The big man suddenly covered his face with his hands. "They took my Marag and my Trixie. There was too many, too many. I couldn't save 'em." He turned his head away to hide the silent tears which trickled over his shaggy face.

* * * * *

The time of parting was now upon the people. Every horse or mule which could be laid hands on was gathered, tethered and tallied; some of the bolder spirits even raided the lowlands for what beasts the Orcs had left behind. Still there were not enough mounts for all, and worrying numbers would have to ride double.

Beren ventured into the plain himself and, with the help of his horse, gathered many animals which had been living wild since the battle. They were afraid of the Orcs, so it was not difficult to persuade them to take part in the flight to warmer, safer lands in the South.

Packing was an immense business. A great deal of the load of organizing this fell naturally onto Emeldir's shoulders. There would have been enough to do in balancing necessity with capacity, but she was also constantly plagued by people wishing to take along a varied and voluminous list of personal belongings. Barahir would have willingly shielded her from some of these fools but he was still confined to his bed.

In the middle of these preparations the people received news which, although it concerned them not directly, smote hard upon the spirits of many.

Beren still received reports from his eagle friends about the movements of Orcs in the land, and any other matters of common interest. Bronze-mail came to him thus one fresh morning when the fading leaves shone pale under the sun and the air carried a hint of autumn cool. Beren had seen the great bird approach and ran out of the camp to meet him.

Bronze-mail came straight to the point, as was his way. "I bear heavy tidings," he said. "The Elf-lord Fingolfin, High King of the Noldor, is dead." He proceeded then to tell Beren that tale which the Elves preserve with a grief which time has done little to soothe: how Fingolfin, in a transport of despair, rode to Angband itself and challenged the Enemy to come out and fight.

Beren was weeping sightless into his hands before the eagle came to the bitter end. All his life he had heard stories of Fingolfin, of his high honour and his glory; of all the High Elves of the West, the brightest and most valiant. His name had been a blazon of hope for all the beleaguered peoples in the West; but now he had fallen. How were they to go on hoping now?

The news was old. According to Bronze-mail, the stroke had fallen in the height of summer. Some days later, after he was calmer, Beren reckoned it back. It must have happened during the retreat to the inn.

After he had collected himself, it fell to Beren to pass the dismal news to his elders. He called them in to his father's bedside: Emeldir, Baragund and Belegund. It struck at his heart to see the changes in their faces as they heard his words. They were of a people who lived close to the earth, who had to work hard to keep life in their bodies. They had not much leisure to lift their thoughts out of the things of dirt and sweat with which they must grapple on a daily basis, but the Elves meant something to even the humblest farmer in Dorthonion: a dream of brightness beyond any that which they knew, woven of moonlight and gossamer; a glimpse of a vision unattainable for such as they, but which nevertheless existed somewhere, around some secret, shimmering corner in the dulling world of field and cot. Of such promise were the Fair Folk to them; but now their best and fairest had been trodden into the mud.

Nobody had anything to say when Beren had finished. There was nothing to say; nothing to be done.

* * * * *

The year had one more grief to fling at Emeldir. She came in to Barahir's tent one morning, some short time after they had begun the labours of the day. She was holding a scrap of paper, and there were tears in her eyes.

"Mother has gone, off into the woods," she said, lip trembling. "She left this."

He took the note, read it. Shortly pain crossed his own features as he took in the contents. He let the paper fall at the end and rubbed his face with hands already weary, although the crisp autumn day was still early. "I am sorry," he said.

"Beren will find her," she said. "I will ask him."

It was hard for him to speak against her. "Mel," he said gently, "think about it. She's right. She hasn't been the same since Cal died. It's clear to any eye that she does not have long to live, even in the best of circumstances. It is all too likely that she wouldn't survive the flight."

"You don't know that," she said in defiance, wiping her eye, "and neither does she."

"It's the right thing to do," he said more firmly. "It's what *you* would do. She's old and ailing. It's right, what she says, that she would drain your energy on the trek. She knows as well as you that you will need all the energy you have."

Emeldir put both hands over her face. She was weeping openly now. "She said goodbye to me yesterday," she choked. "She said she was so proud of me. But I did not know then what she meant to do."

He stood, and came to her. He had no more words; just held her.

In fact the sick old lady had not gone far. They found her body the next day.

* * * * *

Human beings know of no way to part that does not harrow the soul. Husband parting from wife, mother from son, the fit farewelling the sick; tears flowed, eyes brimmed with grief and loss.

Morwen had not been easily persuaded to go with the fugitives. "Yes, I am young," she said to her father, "but what do years matter? I can ride and I can fight; if not so well as some, then certainly better than others; what more is there?"

She stood before him in the weather-stained hunting attire that she favoured above all other forms of dress. She was growing tall, and the drab hose and doublet could not disguise that her body was blooming into a woman's comely curves. The same was true of her face: the boyish crop which crowned it only served to frame an unearthly beauty that could no longer be denied.

"Years bring more than mere physical prowess," replied her father. "Wisdom, for example. I do not doubt your courage, Morwen, nor your prowess, otherwise I should not have allowed you to take the part you already have. But not this time."

The fair maid's eyes had flashed at his words regarding wisdom, and she drew herself up now stiffly.

"Of your courtesy, Father," she said, "tell me then what this wonderful wisdom of your hoary age has revealed to you. Why may I not stay, and fight by your side as I have done til now? What has changed? A

battle is a battle, surely. The enemy attacks, one defends. Even such a one of little wisdom as I can understand that.”

“I mean no insult, Daughter,” said Baragund. “Wisdom is the child of experience; and that is something which no person of tender years can possess, no matter how fine their other qualities.” He looked at her speculatively, as of one coming to some decision. “You ask how the battles to come will differ from those we have already seen. I would not want this widely known, but I will trust you to keep your mouth closed. The difference is that we can no longer hope to win.”

“Is that all?” she retorted. “Did you think that was not already clear to me? Do you think me such a fool? I could reply that it makes no difference. I might also ask what good your vaunted wisdom is if it reveals to you the doorway to death, but you will pass through it nonetheless.”

“We all must pass through that doorway,” he replied. “Only the manner of our going is our own to choose. Mine is the only path of honour.”

“But this is the same choice you deny to me!”

“When you are grown you may choose,” said Baragund. “Until that time you are in my charge; and I must think first of your safety.”

“Safety? Pah,” she said. “Why have you no thought for *my* honour? It will be shame for me to be cast among these witless geese, this prattling throng, these weak fools who can bleat until the skies fall but are good for nothing with any pith to it. I shall be as a hawk among doves. What should I do among them? I can see neither honour, nor sense, nor anything for me in that path. Your thought is only for yourself. You will throw your own life away on a word, but I may not do the same. When you do it, it is called honour, but in my case it must be youthful folly. Well, you may compel me to your will, Father, but I will never name it justice.”

Her words stung, but he was obdurate. “My life is my own to spend as I will,” he said evenly, “but until you are of age you may not say the same. I am sorry, Morwen. I cannot permit you to do this.”

She knelt suddenly before him and clasped his knees. All the pride was gone from her face now and her clear grey eyes pleaded with his. “Father,” she said, “I beg you. This is my last chance. It is different for you: you are a man, you are free. It is no great labour for you to keep strength in your arm and many miles in your legs. But I, I am trapped in this softening body. Soon I may be fit only for kitchen and bed; a rounded accessory, a brood-cow, whose greatest hope is that she may have sons who are sung of, but who is excluded herself from any chance of fame by the iron fate which rules her sex – choiceless, cornered, condemned to die nameless and forgotten. Who now sings of Boromir’s mother? Do you even know her name? Do not chain me to this fate, Father, I beg you again. Let me at least make a song, be it only a short one. The world has enough sons.”

Baragund hesitated, and the genesis of a whole saga of glory and tragedy trembled on the cusp; but he shook his head and said “No,” and with that single word the seed of bitter future fruit was sown.¹⁴

When all was prepared, he came to the tall horse on which his daughter sat.

“It is goodbye then, Father,” said Morwen coldly.

His smile was strained. He hated to part from her like this. “Never say goodbye,” he said. “No-one knows all the turns of fate, and help may come unlooked for.”

“Nay,” she replied, “I do not think so. There is no help. Even I have wisdom enough to see that.” And with that she turned away.

¹⁴ See the saga of Túrin Turambar in *The Silmarillion*.

hand. She had in the end to be torn from it, and from his heart.

Last of all came the parting of Emeldir from her husband. They had held one another through the night and had then scant need of words. As she stood fully girded in front of the opening of the tent, ready to set her features into the firm mask of leadership, she hesitated, and looked again to her man. The blue eyes brimming suddenly, she came with rapid steps back to his arms. "If only I could have found her," she muttered brokenly into his ear. "It's hard to leave her behind, cold and alone. So hard."

He could only hold her tight and stroke her hair.

She released him at last, because she was a woman of high courage who did not flinch from her duty. She wiped her eyes, blew her nose, and hardened her features. "I will be back in the spring," she said to him, smiled a final quick smile, then left the tent.

* * * * *

At last the unwieldy caravan got under way. There were old people and children; there were wounded fighters, and soft townsfolk who had never held a bow or blade in their lives. Most of the refugees were, by reason of age or weakness, unfit to help; and few of those who were fit knew how to pitch a tent or care for a horse. There seemed always to be too many things to do, and not enough capable people to do them. There was no road where they were going, thus no wagons could be taken. Those who would go must perforce either walk or ride. There were endless complaints, endless calls for delay on this ground or that: illness, bad stomach, anxiety. Babies were born, some of the aged died, and one or two children were lost in the woods.

Emeldir was as tough as iron with them, and many who felt the edge of her tongue came to hate her with a passion. Ever mindful of the lateness of the season, and of the perilous nature of the mountain crossing that lay before them, she would brook no delay. The dead must be left, if they could not be interred in the space of the nightly halt; those who would seek children must stay back alone. The column could wait for nobody.

She was kept busy all the time. There were a thousand things to organize every day, and a thousand mishaps were constantly occurring. Emeldir seemed to live on the back of one horse or another – Storm sadly no longer among their number, he having died on the plain on that day of grief – and was constantly riding up and down the length of the column. Her voice became hoarse from shouting orders.

Early on, the Bëor's lady had gathered to herself as many people as she could find who were capable of helping. There were not many. Among them she counted her relations by marriage, Rhasûl and Faelind; the old crofter-wife Lainwen; Heledir, the maimed captain of archers; Menelrond's beautiful daughter Gilraen; and Zalta the former innkeeper. Tasks were divided, and responsibility for the column also; they each had a list of families. And still they were too few for the mountain of work.

Beren guided the great caravan on its long journey. It was thirty leagues from Aeluin to Anach, none of which could be passed on a made road. Without his unequalled knowledge of the moors and woods which covered the wild southern half of Dorthonion, few of the riders would have arrived even at the entrance to the pass.

Because of his scouting duties he had been allocated no section of the column as his special care, but he rode at times along its length, helping where he could, trying to cheer and speed with an encouraging word where not. He saw many faces that he knew; most were welcome, others less so.

He received something of a shock on the first day. He had ridden to the rear of the caravan on an errand and was hastening on his way back to the van when he recognized a face. He turned to look directly at the rider in question and immediately recognized several more among his companions. Among them was Girazôn.

Beren checked his mount and turned it toward the column. As soon as he did so, several of the men of that

party placed their hands on their sword-pommels. They kept riding at the same pace but bunched now together a little nervously.

Beren inspected Girazôn from out of spear's-reach. "Well well," he said to his former lieutenant. "Fancy seeing you here."

Girazôn said nothing in reply, only nodded shortly.

Beren looked over the others in the party. "Not wearing black today then, fellows?"

"You keep bringing that up," said Girazôn. "But times have changed. It's a shame your ideas haven't."

"One thing hasn't changed," replied Beren. "None of you possess an ounce more stomach than you used to. Change my ideas? I might have done, if any of you had stayed to fight, instead of running off with the dodderers. Ah, but no, there I exceed myself – you were all horribly wounded, were you not? How fortunate that your wounds have now healed up so completely."

Girazôn flushed. "You seem to be here with us and the dodderers," he said with a glitter in his eye. "Should you not also apply your contempt to yourself?"

"I shall go back to Father just as soon as I have seen this convoy to the mouth of the pass," said Beren.

The other seemed taken aback. Clearly this was not an answer he had expected. He changed tack. "The fight here in the North is lost," he said. "Any but a fool can see that. And pray do not weary my ears with talk of honour. Your honour, all your fine talk of stomach will be no use to you when you are gasping your life out with a goblin sword in your chest, or withering in the Enemy's dungeons. That is not courage, that is folly."

Beren grinned at him. "I would have you off that horse, churl, for a spoonful of mouldy flour," he said pleasantly.

The others reined their horses to a halt at this and bunched closer together. Swords now were drawn openly. The chain of riders coming behind were impeded by the group and had to pull up in their turn. Voices began to be raised in protest.

"Do you think you can prevail against all of us?" said Girazôn tensely.

"Why not?" replied Beren. "I used to. And you were all bigger than me at that time, too." Seeing that the disturbance of the halt was propagating back down the column, and having neither interest in mixing himself any further in Girazôn's affairs, nor any need to prove anything to anybody, he left the matter then, simply ordering them to get their horses moving. The former Blackshirts jeered at his retreating back, but all he was thinking was: just as well they are leaving, really, we don't need those scum hanging around.

A little further along he spotted Pipsie, farmer Merezum's daughter, sitting behind her mother on a horse. The farmer himself plus the two younger daughters were jammed onto a dispirited-looking nag plodding with its head down behind them. The gnarled old farmer gave Beren a nod as he cantered by, and Pipsie smiled shyly. So that was all right. It cheered him up; until he remembered that there had also once been a lumpen brother...

Elsewhere in the column still he found Parth, Lorinis and Adril riding together. Adril, who must have been about fifteen at this time, had been very vocal in his resentment at having to leave with the old and weak, and he implored Beren again at this time to be allowed to stay. "I can fight!" he protested.

Beren shrugged. "It's not for me to say yea or nay," he said. "But have a bit of patience, Comrade. This war will last for quite a while. Wait a year or two, practice your war-craft down there in the South, then come

back to us! You'll be welcome, and needed." He turned then to Lorinis, smiled at her. "Everything all right?"

She smiled back at him a little sadly. "We can keep pace well enough," she replied, "but I too wish I could stay behind."

He had no ready reply to this. She knew the state of things as well as he. "Well, look after yourself," was all that he could think to say.

"You too," she said. "And look after your father, your companions, and... and greet Arthad from me."

He nodded. He slowed his mount then to let Parth catch up. She had been riding, disconsolate, a little behind the others. Her youngster Wamlo goggled at Beren from his position in front of his mother. "Hello Parth, how are things?"

"Try 'scared, lonely, bored'?" she replied. "Or all three at once. Can't you come and talk to me sometimes, Ber?"

He looked into the friendly, bony face he had known since childhood; observed the way her body swayed and flexed with the easy gait of the horse; saw the plea in her eyes. He hesitated, then smiled and shook his head. "Bit tricky just at the moment, sorry," he said. "So much to do." He kneed his own horse again to a trot and rode on ahead.

Elsewhere in the column he found Morwen, riding glumly beside another horse on which her brothers Baranor and Barachast were perched. Faelind's Borgil and Rían on a third horse completed the small convoy.

The maid's eyes lit up as she caught sight of him. "Cousin!" she cried. "You come in a good hour. I am about to go out of my mind with boredom. Take me with you! How much liever would I go hunting in the woods with you than plodding along with these milksops!"

Beren looked at the children. "And what about your charges?" he said.

"Oh, they can look after themselves," she said. "You'll be all right, won't you Nor?"

"Well, yes, I suppose," the boy replied. He looked uncertain. "But Chast might cry for Father again."

Borgil spoke up. Although only eight years old, he was already showing marked signs of the strong character he would later become. He would be one of the last to fall at Húrin's side at the time of the great defeat.¹⁵

"Mother said that you were to be in charge," he said to Morwen. "We were to hearken to you, and we have done that, as best we could. But it would not be fair if you went and left us. You should do your part too."

The girl was impatient. "Oh, tush," she said, waving this away with her hand. "Can I come with you, Beren?"

He tried to side-step the issue. "I'm not hunting today," he said. "I have too many things to do along the column."

"That doesn't matter," she said. "Let me come! Anything would be better than baby-sitting."

"Morwen," he said, shaking his head, "young Borgil has the right of it. We each of us have our duties. I am not free to leave mine, and neither are you. Perhaps there will come a time for hunting. But not today." He rode on then, although she shouted first protests after him, then curses.

15 The Battle of Unnumbered Tears; see *The Silmarillion*.

* * * * *

After a few days of travel, Emeldir called a council. As soon as her assistants had gathered, she came straight to the point. "We go too slow," she husked. "The season is late. If we are caught by weather in the mountains, we will all die. We must find ways to speed them up."

Rhasûl frowned. "Easily said," she scoffed. "But just how are we to do that, unless we call up some stone-giants to drag them? I have a hundred families, and half of them are always stopping for some cause or other; and when they start again, it is time for the other half to stop. If I shout at them, they only shout back. Plus I have my own children to look after. It's impossible to manage so many." She subsided, looking sullen.

Nobody said anything straight away, but Heledir stared down angrily at her missing fingers.

Lainwen fixed the Northwoman with a sceptical blue eye. "Others of us manage without as much trouble," she observed. "Your sister-in-law, for one." She glanced at Faelind, who flushed. "An' she has 'most as many childer as you, and younger too."

Rhasûl flared immediately at this. "Don't you try to make trouble between me and my sister!" she said. She was fond of Faelind, although the two women were poles apart in their natures in every article but courage. "I have a lot of old people in my lot. They won't listen to me!"

Emeldir started husking, "Nobody's trying to..." but young Faelind had also started speaking in her mild voice. Flushing with nervousness, stammering a little, she said, "I, I think Rhasûl is right. She does seem to have a lot of awkward types. Mine are not so bad. I, I, well I'd be happy to take on a few more. We made the numbers even, I know, but nobody can make the assortment of people even. Isn't that what we're here to talk about now? Adjust the loads to meet our experiences?"

Emeldir looked doubtful. "We all have heavy loads," she said in her hoarse voice. "But if you're really willing to take a few more... very well. Agree among yourselves perhaps, and exchange the names."

Gilraen spoke up. She was knitting, and did not look up. "I could take a few more," she said.

Emeldir looked at the fair-faced woman in concern. "But you have so many children in your care," she said. "Your own three, isn't it? And poor Arasenaur's pair."

"Alagos looks after them well," Gilraen said. "He is healing, slowly." Alagos, her husband, had lost an eye and a foot in the battles. A warm look of pride spread over Gilraen's face. "He is good with the children; always patient, although I know he is sometimes in pain."

"All right," rasped Emeldir. "If you think you can manage, I make no objection. Can I leave it to you to sort out between yourselves?" The three women nodded. "Good. Thank you. But this does not touch the greater matter, that none of us are going fast enough. I want to know what's holding us up."

Heledir looked up, still frowning. "This is a death march," she said grimly. "There's no sense disguising it. Another of mine died yesterday. She was a ninety year old woman, for Powers' sake! She'd been confined to bed already in her home before she was chased out of it, forced to live then for weeks in a damp tent. And we demanded she sit on a horse. Through this rough country, in the open. The wonder is that she lasted as long as she did."

Emeldir couldn't avoid thinking of her own mother, who had side-stepped exactly this fate in the only way open to her.

"Nobody's trying to disguise anything," she replied sharply, her voice hoarse and scratchy. "I know it is a desperate affair. I know! But you know what drives us, what the stakes are, as well as I do. The stark fact is

that if they don't die here, they'll die in the mountains. There's no way to save all of them. No way!"

Lainwen leaned forwards. "It's main tough for all concerned," she said to Heledir. "But we have to drive 'em, if we're to save 'em."

"I know that!" flared the tall young woman. "I know the facts of it! But you asked why they're slow: that's why. I made that family leave their granny's body in the end, leave it in the open for the wolves. I drove 'em away, weeping – as I was meself. But they still wasted time. They're only human. We want them all to ride on, ride on; and if someone drops, leave 'em. But it's more than flesh and blood will stand."

"It's the same with sick children," said Faelind softly. "People want to stop and make a fire. It's hard to keep the young ones warm enough on horseback."

Zalta had held her tongue so far, but now she spoke up. "They should tie the dead ones onto the horse," she said firmly. "They can bury them at the night stops. For the children, how if we carried a couple of big pots of soup? Sick kids get a dollop. That'll warm them better than any fire."

The others brightened perceptibly at her words. "That sounds like sense," said Lainwen.

"It does," croaked Emeldir. "And indeed, Zalta, your party is the briskest of all. Do you have any other suggestions?"

Zalta scowled, blew the hair off her forehead. "Been dealing with people for years," she said. "I suppose that helps. Now look. Organize! Each of you, pick the best of your lot to help you! You can't do it all your own! Your parties want food, they want warmth, the sick ones want care. With a bit of ingenuity, we can provide all that on horseback. I know it's tough, but they know it too, else they'd none on 'em ever have come. They know they got to keep going, but surprises pull them up, make them stop. Prepare for the surprises. Some of the old and sick are going to die. Expect it, and get your people to expect it. Children are going to fret – expect it, prepare for it. Round up your young, unmarried women and detail each to a family with a feverish child. Hot food on the trot, like I said. A body can face anything with a dollop of something warm in their stomach. Don't stint the liquor, either. I know we carry a few barrels on the pack horses. Spend it! And spend yourselves. This is no holiday. I might not make it through the pass; but by the gods of ale, I'll die happy if even half my party do." Zalta looked around at all the women, who were listening intently. She nodded then to Emeldir. "Mistress, you'll get us through if anybody can. We can't want for a better leader. We all just need to follow your example. Less shouting, maybe, and more leadership. That's all I've got to say."

Rhasûl flushed angrily at the mention of shouting. "I am Rhasûl," she snapped, "and I cannot be somebody else. People have different experience, different skills. I am used to hunting parties, where all contribute equally. I have not your practice in bossing crowds of beery fools."

Emeldir stiffened, held up a hand. "That will do, the both of you," she said firmly. "We will get nowhere by sniping at each other. Zalta, your suggestions are very sound, and I think we should adopt many; but please keep a better guard on your tongue."

Zalta looked stubborn for a moment, then dropped her gaze. "Sorry, mistress," she muttered. She turned to Rhasûl. "Apologies, my lady."

The big blond woman nodded stiffly. "Accepted. Forgotten," she said. But the glitter remained in her eye.

Faelind spoke up in the pause that followed. "But Sister is right, I think," she said in her diffident way. "Few of us have much experience to bring to this necessity, or perhaps talent for it either. I... I know I am too soft with my group. A harder person would get them moving quicker. But what I wanted to say was this: people can learn, and adapt. I *will* become harder, firmer, with my group; I *will*. Indeed I *must*. Because if I do not, people will die. In this grim pass we find ourselves in, we *must* adapt, even when it goes clean against

inclination. Our people are depending on us to do so; we hold their lives in our hands. We must not fail them.” She flushed, looked down.

Heledir sighed. “Lady Faelind,” she said, “you speak well, and truly. We each of us need to search our hearts, find ways to do this better. I know that I have been too impatient, have expected too much. I pledge also to adapt.”

Lainwen nodded approvingly to Faelind. “Aye,” she said. “Well spoken, child.”

None of them said anything for a moment. A faint touch of colour had risen in Rhasûl’s cheeks, and when she opened her mouth at last, her voice was milder; almost hesitant. “Sister,” she said to Faelind, “I must keep you always close by me, because you school me as no other can; yet in such a kind way that none could take offence. I, I, I must own that I have... I have not done well. I have been impatient. I... I have shouted, where shouting achieves nothing.” She took a breath. “I must change. I *will* change.” The colour in her face grew deeper. The blonde woman turned her eyes then to Zalta, although it cost her an effort. “Mistress Zalta,” she said, “it is I who should apologize to you.”

Zalta returned the look with surprise showing in her eyes, then a dawning respect. “Let’s not speak more on it,” she said. “I spoke too loose, whatever the case. And this is not to the point. We need to sort things out, then go about our tasks. Sleep may be too much to hope for.”

“Well then,” husked Emeldir, “what other problems are there?”

They spoke for a while about various issues that had arisen. Often Zalta had some useful suggestion; the others listened to her with a respect that only grew with time. Some of them had not hitherto held the little innkeeper of much account.

They came to the matter of horse-shoes. With so many animals in the caravan, the numbers of cast shoes was not small. They discussed arrangements for marshalling the horses of each band, and also for inspecting the animals each day; but the true bottleneck was the smith-craft itself.

“We can run the forge all night,” said Emeldir wearily, “but the smith must sleep some time. We should have thought of this before.”

“Have we only the one smith?” asked Lainwen.

“I think Beren could shoe a horse,” replied their leader, “but I hesitate to load another task on his shoulders. He hardly sleeps as it is.”

Gilraen spoke up. “I have a man in my group who was a smith,” she said. “He was badly wounded, but maybe he can do a little work, with the need so urgent as it is.”

“There must be more,” said the white-haired Lainwen. “We should each enquire. If they can sit on a horse, they can sit by a forge. One eye, one arm, and strength to swing a hammer is all they need. And we can recruit boys to hold the horses, and fetch and carry. We have plenty of youngsters too young to fight, but full of vim and trouble. We need to find ways to put those boys to work, to keep them out of mischief.”

“And girls,” added Rhasûl drily. “Such would suit my Morwen better than child-minding, I am sure of that at least.”

With everything settled for the time, they broke up shortly after and went about putting their plans into action. Over the subsequent days, the improvement became plain: the journey became no easier, the conditions no less cruel, but the pace picked up markedly.

* * * * *

The weather had been fine, but as the long caravan climbed steadily towards the high country, conditions began to turn less certain. The sun shone weakly on them still, but the high peaks ahead of them were hidden behind a roil of dense grey clouds which grew thicker and blacker with each passing day.

Beren and his mother stood at last in the mouth of the pass. A cold wind blew from it into their faces.

“I don’t like the look of that,” said Beren, pointing to the ominous leaden masses curdled around the peaks on either hand.

“That is a pointless thing to say,” his mother croaked at him. She had very little voice left. “You know we have no option but to go on, even were it raining boulders. There’s nothing left to eat.”

“I wish you had started earlier in the season,” he said.

“Also pointless.”

Beren sighed. “I should stay with you a while longer.”

Emeldir shook her head. “No. We discussed this already. You have never been over the pass; you are no guide there, and in fact we need no guide, the road being plain. You have done your part. Turn back now and help Father.”

Now that he was come to the point, he felt a powerful reluctance to leave her. He told her so. Emeldir put her arms around him. “My dear son,” she husked, “your reluctance is matched by mine. But it must be so. I wish we had had time to talk; I have seen that your heart is sore within you, I can guess maybe at the cause, and it might even be that a mother could say something to help. But there is no time for that now. Be off with you now, look after yourself, look after Father, keep him safe for me. I will see these sheep to Dor-lómin and over-winter there. Look for me in the spring!”

He stood there holding his horse as she mounted her own, the grey plait swinging, her once-lithe figure now a little stiff in its movements. She blew on a horn, and the long column began the slow climb into the heights. At a bend in the path Emeldir turned once more to wave at her son; then she disappeared around it, and all that was left to him was emptiness, and the chill wind blowing.

* * * * *

Beren returned to find silence in the once-bustling encampment beside Aeluin. Nobody was about; only the smoke from a few scattered booths revealed the presence of the ones who remained. Piles of abandoned goods lay everywhere, and fabric flapped in the mournful wind. The weather had changed: a cold wind from the West sent clouds scudding low across the valley, their shadows blotting the ruffled waters of the loch. The grey skies occasionally cast a few dispirited granules of sleet at his back. He was cold; for once even he was cold. He looked forward to the fire.

The remainers numbered some three hundred. They were overwhelmingly men. The five women among them all housed together. As the autumn wore on the women had increasingly to fend off romantic sallies, until Barahir gathered the men together and ordered them sharply to stop.

It was a dismal time, and as the weather darkened towards winter, so sank their spirits even further. Beren’s birds reported that there were not many Orcs in the land. The knowledge that they were not being actively hunted should have been cause for satisfaction for the people at Aeluin; but in the short, dim days when all there was to eat was stale biscuit, and not much of that, when the wind threw sleet down one’s collar if one ventured outside, and whistled chilly under the door and blew smoke back down the chimney if one did not,

it was hard to find satisfaction in anything.

There was little to eat, and nothing fresh, since the bulk of what stores of food they had possessed had been given to the departers. At about the time of the first snowfall, some of the men began to complain of strange symptoms: pains in the legs, bleeding gums. Some of their wounds which had been healing well began to fester again.

Barahir had been improving, but now he took to his bed again. Beren became concerned, and now rarely left his father's side. He racked his brains, trying to recall anything the Druug might have mentioned about such a disease, but he could come up with nothing. He was as mystified as anyone. More and more people were falling under the deadly spell every day.

It was one of the women who found the answer. This was a middle-aged woman named Naraness, a weathered-looking crofter with iron-grey hair pulled tightly back behind her head. She came to Beren where he sat with the Greencloak beside his father's bed. "I was thinking," she said to them. "My granny told me of something like this, of the year when the People had come from the South. The food was bad, she said. It made the people's gums bleed, just like this."

"What was the cure?" Beren of course wanted to know.

"Fresh food," said Naraness. "That's what Granny said, anyhow."

Beren thought about it. "Meat or plant?" he asked.

"I don't know," replied Naraness. "If we had both, though, I suppose we couldn't go wrong."

"That's all very well," put in the Greencloak, "but none of us newcomers has been hunting here, because we don't know how. We're used to forests. There are plenty of deer on the moors, we've all seen them. But how to get near enough to shoot? There's no cover at all."

"My man used to do it all the time," said Naraness. "Creep through the heather, he would. There's cover aplenty, just none you can stand up behind."

"I can find plants to eat in the lowlands," said Beren slowly. "More than here. If I fetch some of those, Kinsman, can you organize some hunting parties?"

His cousin sighed. "What success we will have in this new business of creeping along the ground I cannot say. But I will see what can be done." The Greencloak sounded worn and old. Little of his former debonair self was to be seen these days; his hair was uncut and his clothing untidy. Beren knew that his cousin had been missing his family exceedingly.

"I will hunt," said Naraness. "I have not much practice at it, but I know the country."

Beren had thought that his father was sleeping, but Barahir moved an arm now to grasp his son's wrist. "Be careful in your foray, Beren," he said in a voice not much stronger than a whisper. "Do not take undue risks."

The journey to the lower ground nearer the river was without event and quickly accomplished on skis. Once there, Beren could detect few signs of the enemy. He had no intention of venturing near buildings and farms, where traps might be laid; what he sought was to be found in the deep woods, where the Orcs of late had not set foot.

It turned out to be no easy task. He knew the plants he needed, and knew where they grew, but everything above ground was dead and cold, and buried now under feet of snow to boot. Streams where he might have found edible roots were locked under a thick, ringing layer of blue ice. He managed in the end to fill his sack

full of roots and bulbs of various sorts, but digging them out one by one was very arduous.

He returned to find that the hunting parties had met with success. They had two reindeer carcasses, also a red deer, and Naraness had contributed a dozen or so ptarmigan. Everybody enjoyed the subsequent feast, which had an immediate lifting effect on their spirits. Beren made strong broths, fortified with starch from his roots, and made his father drink them. Anxiously he watched for any improvement. Within a few days he was rewarded: the bleeding stopped, the inflammation of the wounds diminished, and his father clearly had more energy. Sufferers all through the camp reported similar improvements.

The winter wore on. Hunting brought in a steady supply of meat, and Beren returned twice more for roots; the disease did not recur. All that was left was to endure the discomfort and to find what ways they could to pass the short days and the long evenings.

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Mairon never doubted that he would come in time to rule the world; but such was the satisfaction he derived from progress toward that end that he wondered sometimes, a little uneasily, if he would enjoy the goal once he had attained it. In the meantime, however, he could savour the completion of steps in the long climb to that eminence, as well as the contemplation of others shortly to be taken. Thus on the one hand he could celebrate the hard-won eradication of the Men from the pine lands; while on the other, he could take equal satisfaction from the plan he had devised for the imminent assault on the island fortress.

The Maia frowned. The one blot on this cheering picture was the power he had been required to spend. Little enough on defeating the men, perhaps; but the means he had devised to assault the Elves' island tower had made much more painful demands on his stores. Power could be made up, in time, it was true – most efficiently from the despatch of tortured souls; but with the cessation of the recent battles, even this piecemeal and meagre source had largely dried up. More would become available in time, but the necessity for endless patience was wearying.

He knew of a way, in theory, of vastly multiplying the potency of the will. He found the idea fascinating, but at the same time terrifying. The weaving of such a mighty charm would wring him dry of power, almost to the last drop; it was from this necessity that he shrank in horror. Such a dreadful emptying was necessary if he wanted to receive the same back many-fold. The prospect was dizzying – why, he would stand astride the world like a colossus. Even Melkor would squirm beneath his mighty foot!

Mairon played with the idea, hungry for its promise, but fearing to take any steps towards it. So long as he only played with the notion, so could he persuade himself that he was engaged in nothing more than an amusing mental exercise, with none of the pain and peril that yawned behind the reality. So he pondered, and ruminated, and toyed with this approach and that.

The principal problem was to construct a fitting repository for the charm. As with all spells made to endure, it must be locked into matter. This was merely a problem of craft – but such a problem! No ordinary talisman would do. So great a spell would require a house of superlative strength.

Mairon thought, not for the first time, on the Silmarils. The entire weight of Arda kept the seal on those stones; not even Melkor had power enough to unlock them. Mairon would need something similar to hold his charm. If only he knew how the jewels had been made! How had that gangrel Elf¹⁶ managed to harness the might of worlds? By rights the attempt should have blown the maker to bits, which would have been a fitting reward for his hubris. It vexed Mairon to admit it, but he had no faith in his own ability to follow that path with safety.

So high he dared not aim. But talismans need not be as strong as worlds. That accepted, safer ways existed to

16 Fëanor, who made the Silmarils.

forge them. He would need, probably, to bring a great Power of the Earth to harness; but such could be found and tamed.

What to make? A jewel? Perhaps. Other possibilities existed, with differing advantages. Other shapes of house. Lately his musing thought had turned to... rings.

Year 456

At last the year turned. Eventually the air at Aeluin grew kinder, the snow began to melt. The lake unfroze and lay once more mild and blue beneath the rain-washed sky. The sward around the camp became strewn with many-coloured flowers; the alders were festooned with green catkins, and on the ends of their branch-fingers the buds were swelling.

Barahir was up and about now, bustling about the camp with almost his old degree of energy. The birds came again to Beren with the easing of the weather and now he bade them particularly to watch the pass. But the days lengthened, the sun rose higher, and still no report came. The pass remained empty.

Midsummer's day came, the lake flashing blue, the larks singing high overhead. Everywhere was flushed with life; but Barahir sat silent in his booth.

"Father, she may be just delayed," said Beren to him. "There could be any number of reasons."

Barahir raised his head slowly. "Yes," he said. "I've no doubt you're right." But he remained in his booth.

The people were itching to undertake something. They were tired of the camp. Many began to wonder aloud what they were doing there. Delegations came to Baragund to complain, since Barahir would see nobody but his immediate family.

"Venture something yourselves, then," the Soldier answered them sharply. "You don't need our permission!" But the men looked sideways at one another and retreated muttering. Their trust in the luck and leadership of Barahir was immense; none of them felt like venturing into the plain without him.

Hay-time passed, then harvest-time. The heather grew red upon the hills. There came a day when Bronze-mail came with news, but it was not the news for which they had hoped.

"The Tower of Guard¹⁷ is taken," the eagle said, after he had landed on a boulder next to Beren and had finished folding his wings.

"What?" said Beren, shocked to his core.

"The Enemy's lieutenant has taken it," repeated Bronze-mail. "He who led the assault against this land last year. He has driven the Book-lord¹⁸ out with witchcraft and foul phantoms. The Fair Folk fly south, what remains of them. Many fell at the gate."

"Oh, that is... oh, I do not know what to say. It will not make much difference to us perhaps, but to the lands to the South... it must be the very knell of Death to them."

"Aye," agreed the eagle dourly, "it is grim tidings for everybody. We are all together in this war, bird and beast alike. Suffers one now, suffer all later."

The news of this dreadful blow only increased the sense of frustration in the camp. It all came to a head with the first storm of autumn. An argument over a dice game erupted into a furious brawl that pulled in more and

17 Finrod's tower on Tol Sirion.

18 Orodreth.

more combatants until most of the men in the camp had been drawn in to it. Knots of shouting and struggling men were scattered thickly over the grass, and more were running in from all sides. The *melée* came to an end only when the heavens opened and poured cold water on their heads. Sullen and bruised men ran for their shelters where they hunched dripping, waiting for the cloudburst to go by. When the rain finally ceased, their mood was still truculent, but turned rather against their leadership than each other.

A group of them came to Barahir's booth and demanded to see him.

"What are we doing here?" they said to him when he came out. "We want to fight the enemy; why don't you lead us against them? That is why we stayed! But we sit here and do nothing, and now another winter is close upon us. We would rather depart for the South where we can live normal lives again."

Barahir sat listening to their complaints until they had run down a little. Beren, standing with his cousins to one side, thought his father looked old and shrunken. The great scar across his cheek stood out livid against his pale face.

As soon as the clamour had subsided a little, the Bëor looked up. "I am sorry," he said tiredly. "Go if you feel that you should. No man could hold that against you. You have stayed by me, and it is no fault of yours if I have been unable to hold by you in the way that I should. Go with my blessing." He stood then and went back through the canvas opening of his booth. The crowd of discontented men stood silent for a moment before condensing into clusters that drifted slowly away, the men talking among themselves in low voices.

Those who had resolved to depart assembled their column on a day when the weather had turned warm and fine – perhaps the last such spell that year. They had no horses, and the route led through some thickly forested country, but some among them knew the way well enough. They calculated that a week of steady tramping should bring them to the pass.

Nearly everybody seemed to be of a mind to go; only a small group clustered by Barahir as he came out to bid the column farewell. He saw that all the women had formed up at the end of the column.

"You too?" he said to Naraness.

"I am sorry, my lord," said the rugged-faced woman apologetically. "Loth am I to leave your service, but we are wasting life and strength here. I go to fight on somewhere else, while I still have fight left in my body. My companions here are of the same mind."

Barahir bent his head to her but did not reply further. When all was ready, the leader gave a hail and the column set off. They climbed steadily up the slope of the moors, becoming smaller and smaller, until they vanished among the heather.

The Lord of Dorthonion turned then and counted his remaining followers. His son of course, and his nephews. Dagnir and Ragnor. Arthad, looking battered but resolute. Menelrond's son Gildor, with little of softness left in his features since his light went out last year. The grim, soul-smitten blacksmith Gorlim. Dairuin the former Guard-major, his black moustaches now overgrown and bedraggled. The brown-skinned Southerner Urthel, Baragund's former lieutenant. The hulking trapper Radhruin, scarce yet healed of his many wounds. Lastly, young Hathaldir, his son's friend, and the son of the Hall-major of old. Twelve.

Barahir smiled on them, then broke into sudden glad laughter. "By the Kindler," he said, "there are not many of you left; but such hearts I see before me! I have sat idle; I have wronged you all. But that is all changed now. We will deal the Foe some shrewd blows together, you and I, before we are done; that I promise you."

So began the last chapter of the war in the North, and a stranger one perhaps has never been written. With just twelve followers, Barahir took on the World Enemy and eluded his increasingly furious ripostes for four more years. The damage their attacks inflicted was small, but their significance was great. Word of the

defiance of these men of the North spread over the whole of Beleriand; many were the Men and Elves who lifted head and heart at the news.

Mairon had built a road across the hills which joined with the old Dwarves' way at Rivil and followed it then all through the old lands of Ladros to the eastern mouth and beyond. Traffic on this road was already frequent by the time of the first winter after his conquest of the Tower. The first inkling either Mairon or his Master had that not all the Northmen had been killed or driven over the pass, as they had believed, was an attack by a ski-born party on one of his convoys. The baggage train was destroyed, its workers as well as the few guards all killed; the goods were pillaged and the remainder burnt. From that time the guards on the caravans were trebled, but six weeks later the same happened again, on a sunny day when all the Mobiles, armed or not, were cowering under cover. Mairon despatched patrols with trackers, but they lost the trail of the departing raiders and could not find it again. In the meantime a further caravan was burned; and so it went on. Only by despatching a full cohort of guards, distributed on all sides of the wagons, could Mairon insure a caravan against attack, and at that there was often sniping, with a steady loss of Mobiles.

Matters did not improve in the spring. Mairon diverted more and more Mobiles to scouring the forest lands. They could pass under the trees now again without scathe, but it availed them little. Search as they might, they could not find the marauders. Trackers would set out hot on the trail, only to run into confusion. Parties scoured the woods and fields from top to bottom, searched every cave and hut, but still the attacks continued.

In the end Mairon had no recourse but to send his traffic the long way around, past the blackened northern border of Dorthonion. They made a way through the poisoned dust, too far from living lands for the attackers to reach; but beasts fell sick from the bitter vapours, and Mobiles too.

The patrols of wary soldiers in the land itself he maintained. Now and then he would lose a handful, enough to show that the rebels were still active; but find them he could not. He sat in his tower and brooded over what that might portend.

The twelve companions were as different in their natures as in their reasons for bidding with their chief. There was some friction at the beginning, as is to be expected among such differing men confined so closely together, away from all comforts of home and family; but by the end of the first year each had saved the lives of at least one other, and they were beginning to knit together. In the end they became not just a team, an assorted group held together by a common aim, but a band of true brothers, the bonds born of necessity having turned gradually to love. By the end of the second year, each would have given his life to save the others; to abandon the other Companions became unthinkable. Memories of their old lives became dim, thoughts of what families some of them still had over the mountains faded into unimportance. The future they did not think much on. All they had was the now, and each other. The Company had become not just the most important thing in their lives, but the only thing.

With the passage of time and with much practice, they all became as cunning in the woods as they were strong with a bow, although none of them passed Beren in the mastery of either. Time and again his quick wits and his sense for danger saved them all. Some of them came to the group with no very high opinion of this beardless Wood-wose, with his scanty dress and his uncanny ability to disappear from sight whenever and wherever he chose; but gradually they too came to value at his true worth the strong young man with his laughing blue eyes. In the end, if together they would have followed the father into Hell, each would have braved it on his own to rescue the son.

Ever the fiercest in attack and the most deadly in battle was the lined-faced blacksmith, Gorlim. In time the group worked its magic also on him: as he softened and talked with them, so even his withered heart began to absorb a tinge of the love, the bond the rest of them shared. They knew him, they knew he was a crippled soul, and none of them expected or demanded from him more than he could provide. They were gentle with him in camp and guarded his back in battle.

None of the companions had ever expected to last anything like so long as four years. If pressed on what they *had* expected, most perhaps would have answered that the Orcs were bound to find them before long. If they were lucky, they would retreat then over the mountains; if not, well, they would leave their bones here. None of them had stayed behind with any thought of it lasting for long, one way or another. But as time passed and Dorthonion elsewhere swarmed with Orcs, without ever a one appearing at Aeluin, even the least reflective among them began to realize that some special factor must be at work. "The Lady is with us," Barahir told them, and so it appeared to be.

All the same, they took pains not to advertise their presence. The rotting goods left behind were gathered into a heap and shoved into a bog; the excess booths were dismantled. They took care with their tracks and their fires. They had not the numbers to post a guard, but they made frequent, wary patrols around the surrounding hills.

The places of the Dead in the plain they avoided. None of them cared to set foot in the ruins of Newfort, where a few furtive dogs nosed still through the piles of half-burned rubbish. The sight alone of the bone-field on the north bank of the Whitewater was enough to raise the hairs on their necks.

The corner at Aeluin where the decaying bodies had been piled was, to begin with, not a place any of them cared to visit at night, but with the passage of the months, the peace of Aeluin worked on this place too. Perhaps the Lady was able to draw the troubled spirits from their fixation and to soothe them one by one into forgetfulness. Whatever the explanation, the uneasy atmosphere of the place leached gradually away with the months and years until it became just another corner of the field. No unquiet spirits walked then in that whole valley. The wind blew cleanly behind the curlew's lonely cry; the shadows of clouds crept slowly over the empty, heather-covered hills, and the lake waters reflected only the peaceful sky. Here the heart could be at rest.

Years 457-459

The years passed. Beren could not say that he was content; none of them could. Their daily life was hard, and much of it was lived under fear; only at the Lake could they relax and feel safe. Yet it could not have been said either, of any of the Companions, that they were discontented. Their life was simply the way it was, and they accepted it as such. Even in time of peace, they had none of them been people much given to reflection.

Beren was the strongest, swiftest and hardiest of them all, and the most silent and cunning in the woods. He was often absent from the camp on wide patrols which took him from one end of the land to the other, spying on all the ways and movements of the enemy. On the raids which the Companions still attempted from time to time he was the most responsible for guiding the group on the paths of safety and for extricating them from the clutches of danger. For him, these years spent with the Companions offered much the same bargain as a marriage: there was responsibility, but also the consolation of comradeship; extra work, but additional hands and shoulders to tackle it.

At the same time, although he was with the Company, it could not be said that he was truly of it. He had spent too much of his life either alone or in very different circumstances ever to feel entirely at home with the others. He dressed differently to them and he thought differently. Strange to say, he found the constraints most irksome at those times when he was most free. Incidents would gnaw at him while he lurked in spy-sight of the fallen Tower in the West, or was climbing through the goat-haunted vales of the Fence to the East. Once back at the Lake, all that would fall away again as his heart greeted with a rush of gladness the renewed sight of the familiar faces.

In the fifth year of the defiance he returned to the camp through the fog of a frosty day after one of his wide circuits about the land. He found the others clustered in their usual hut. The warmth of the coal fire was welcome to him, but there was something else in the air, some tension. His father took him aside before long and opened the issue with him straight away. "Gorlim has been absent," he said to his son in a low voice.

“He was away for several days.”

Beren considered. “Is that so bad?” he said after a moment. “He is surely free to come and go, as are we all.”

“That he is,” replied Barahir. “It is not so much the fact of it, as that he denies having been away.”

Beren sat back in surprise. “But...,” he began, “how... well, are you sure that he was?”

A trace of irritation passed over Barahir’s scarred face. “Of course we are sure. We missed him the first day, and searched everywhere. He cannot possibly deny it; but he does. And yet he speaks without guile. He believes himself that he was not away, that is clear to see.”

Beren was silent for some time. He did not like the sound of this. “Let me see what I can find of his tracks,” he said at last.

He was away two nights. On his return he went straight to his father. “The trail led to his old cottage,” he told him. “There were no other marks; he met no-one.”

Barahir breathed out. “That is some relief anyway,” he said, “although it does not explain his self-deception.” He looked at his son. “You were closest to him. Is there not something you could do?”

Sadness came to Beren’s face. “That was long ago. He would not hear me now. But if he goes again, I will follow him; then we shall see perhaps.

Things were quiet after that for some weeks. The first snows came, and the men settled into the winter phase of their existence, familiar to them now. Close to Sunwending, though, they woke one morning to find that Gorlim was absent from his sleeping place. Outside the hut, the tracks of skis could be plainly seen in the snow.

Radhruin, looking at the trail, scratched his beard. “Never heard a thing,” he commented. “Wouldn’t have thought he had it in him to be so quiet!”

Beren was already strapping on his own skis.

“What will you do when you catch him?” asked his father.

“I don’t know,” replied Beren. He stood up, stamped in the skis.

“You’re not taking any food?”

His son just smiled at him in answer, then dug in his sticks and swooped away.

From the look of the markings, Beren knew – although he could not have explained how – that the tracks were less than three hours old. He could easily haul in Gorlim if he wanted to – but was that what he wanted? He wasn’t sure. Before committing himself to any action he wanted to follow the man, see how he went, and where. He wanted to feel out the situation some more; to understand a little better, if he could, just what was going on in the mind of his friend. For this reason he paid careful attention to his pace: slowing down a little if he felt he was gaining on the man, speeding up if he thought he was falling behind.

More snow was coming soon, that was the problem.

The flakes were already beginning to fall thickly when he descended from the moorlands into the woods. He sped off at a slant into the woods then, leaving the track behind him, and skiing now as quickly as the terrain allowed. It was time to find his friend. An hour of this blind chase brought him through the falling snow to a place where a gully running down from the hills to the South opened out to afford a wide view of the strip of

land this side of the Whitewater. Something – instinct, or experience, or both – told him that he had got ahead of Gorlim now and that the smith would cross this place. The view was hemmed in by the pointillist curtain of descending snow, but it would suffice.

And there was the man. Seen now by eye, the furtive smith proved as wary and hesitant as his pursuer had expected. The smith skied easily, but kept a sharp eye looking constantly around him. He was a very different man from the bumbling villager of ten years before. As the skier passed not twenty paces from where Beren had made himself invisible in some thorn-bushes, there was no noise at all apart from the slight hiss of the skis. Beren saw that Gorlim carried his axe across his back as well as the ubiquitous bow. The former was his favourite weapon: a long-hafted war-axe that the smith kept razor sharp.

Once he had his man, Oromë himself could not have shaken Beren off. He ghosted now some hundred or so paces to one side of Gorlim. He rarely had him in sight, but he knew where he was. The smith in his turn showed unaccountably acute senses of his own. He was uneasy; kept stopping and listening. Once he doubled back and waited silently beside his own tracks, bow strung and ready.

Gorlim crossed the river at the old log bridge just short of Foen. Beren had crossed some minutes before, having quickly doffed his skis, wading the icy waters a bend further down. This was no light matter, because a man who became wet in such weather could easily freeze to death; but Beren gambled, being sure in his mind where Gorlim was headed, and knowing he had not far to go.

And then there it was before him: the cottage. The Orcs had broken the windows again in the assaults of four years ago, but the thatch still remained.

The tracks led to the door, and there were Gorlim's skis beside it. Of the smith himself there was no sign. The shabby building stood silent, cold, and untended. The front window with its rim of glass shards gaped like a snaggle-toothed mouth.

Beren stood there, shivering, not sure what to do next. Surely the smith was aware he had arrived. He noted that neither axe nor bow stood with the skis next to the door.

"Gorlim?" he called. "It's me, Beren."

A figure slowly took shape as it came towards the window. Beren was reminded of the similar occasion years ago, and shivered anew. Gorlim was carrying his bow, and it was strung, but it hung at his side, and there was no arrow in his other hand. He stared out at Beren.

"I knowed there were somebody behind me," he said.

"We needed to find out what you were doing," said Beren. "Gorlim, I'd like to build a fire before we talk further. I'm half frozen, I need to thaw. I'll make one out here."

"Nay," replied the other. "Come in out o' snow. It wants a fire in here, any road."

Before long they had a cheerful blaze going in the kitchen and Beren had stripped off his buskins and leggings and spread them to dry. The two childhood friends looked one another over.

"Last time we were here you pulled a knife on me," said Beren. "Are you likely to do it again?"

The other shook his head. "I weren't right in t'head," he said. A faint look of embarrassment spread over his face. "S'pose I ought to beg yer pardon fer that."

Beren shrugged it away. "It's a long time ago," he said. "Look, Grol. We need to know what's in your mind now. That's why I'm here. We're probably all of us on borrowed time, all of the Company; but we none of us

want to go before we have to, if you know what I mean. Do you understand? There we are, all working nicely together, and suddenly one of us ups and does something unaccountable. Goes off, then denies it afterwards. It makes us nervous. So the question in my mind, in all our minds, is not whether you were right in the head five years ago, but if you are so now.”

Gorlim sighed. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“I want you to tell me what you are thinking and feeling,” said Beren. “I want you to tell me why you have set off in the middle of winter, on your own, to come here, without telling anybody you were going.”

Gorlim was silent for a long time. “I cannot mind them olden days,” he began at last. “Not clear, like. Tis all lost. What we did as young fellows together, you and I, it’s like it were somebody else, all happened to somebody else, and I just got to hear about it, like. I don’t know how I got from there to here. And Neli: I knowed I loved her, I knowed we was together, but I can’t *feel* it. Leastways I couldn’t, for long and long. There was none o’ that left, ’twere like a spring what has dried up to dust. The pain were gone, but the love were gone too. Nothing left o’ all that but dust, and in its place iron to hammer, and Orc-necks to hew. I didn’t care about that one way or t’other, it were all one to me. But lately, and I cannot say how it is, but those old feelings, what I thought was dried and blown away to dust, they do be creeping back upon me seemingly. I have un-forgotten, or at least in a small way of it.” He glanced up at Beren. “Am I making sense?”

“Yes,” replied his friend quietly. “I understand you.”

Gorlim turned his lined face away again and stared at the fire. The silver hairs in his beard threw back the ruddy light. “I do not want to be this way,” he said. “It were better before, when nothing hurt. I don’t want the hurt. I don’t want the memories. What good are they? They won’t bring her back. I’ve looked for Death, but Death don’t want me seemingly. Well, t’were easy enough when I didn’t care, because it would solve itself given enough time. You’d just go on, like, until you stopped. But now I don’t know what to do. So I come here, hoping maybe I would find some answers. Some voice from meself in the past, if you like. I know that sounds daft.”

Beren shook his head. “No,” he said.

Gorlim tapped himself on the side of the head. “Something’s broke, in here,” he said. “Safest thing you could do would be to run me through. I won’t stop you.”

“You know I can’t do that,” said Beren. The pair of them sat wordless for a while. Beside the fire, Beren’s leggings steamed.

“I have to get me some glass and fix that front window,” said Gorlim at last. “I can’t stand to see it like that. Ranulf the Glass will have some, down in t’village.”

“Ranulf’s long gone, Gorlim,” said Beren carefully. “There’s nobody left in the village now.”

“I know that,” said Gorlim. “His shop still be there, though. I looked last time.”

The following day the two of them ventured warily down to the village. There they found much destruction, but some at least of the glass-maker’s stock had survived the casual vandalism of the invaders. Gorlim selected as much as they could carry on their small sled of the broad, clear glass that had been Ranulf’s pride and joy. The two of them pulled the sled back to the cottage and stacked the panes in an inner room. Beren insisted then on their returning to the camp at Aeluin. It made no sense, he said, to begin an extensive program of repairs in the middle of winter. Gorlim had now that which he had sought; let him put off further work til the season released its icy grip on the land. Beren promised to help him if he would do that, and with that he won the smith’s reluctant agreement.

“You know the Orcs are still around,” Beren said cautiously to his friend as they strapped on their skis preparatory to leaving. He was still mindful of the last occasion he had confronted Gorlim at the cottage and was unsure how far he could now challenge his friend’s thinking without risking some similar catastrophe.

“I know,” replied Gorlim shortly. “I know what you want to say. I know they could come tomorrow and burn it all down. I know.”

They skied back through the fresh snow, seeing no new tracks apart from those of animals. As they came over the last rise, bringing the calm waters of the lake into sight, Beren stopped and turned to his companion. “This is all out in the open now,” he said. “Better if we keep it that way. Eh?”

Gorlim looked sheepish. “Aye,” he said, “happen you’re right.”

* * * * *

Choker had been pulled along when the party moved to the other fort, the newly captured one, down there on the island. He didn’t much care – one dragging torment was the same as another. The new tower stank, but at least it hadn’t been soaked in the deadening horror, the dark stigmata of a Firelord.

There wasn’t any fighting at first, which Choker didn’t mind at all. But there were cursed rebels still in the hills; not many, maybe, but as time went on they began to make trouble. It seems a Louse couldn’t get any peace. They’d cut a road through to the East, and there was a lot of traffic on it. Choker went guard on a few of these, and it felt good to get away from the tower, to escape the relentless mental pressure of its high lord and his Mind-eater cronies. The rebels plagued them more and more though, and in the end the traffic was sent around the long way to the North. That wasn’t so good. They were out of reach of the rebels, but there was still poison in the dust there. It was terrible harsh on your lungs and throat. Lice got sick from it, and some died. Choker just put his head down and plugged away grimly. He’d seen worse.

In the end he wangled himself a place on the Extractor team. These were the Lice tasked with extracting information from prisoners and convicts. The head Extractor took him aside on his first day, gave him a bit of a pep talk. A medium-sized Rrrk with a deeply scarred face, he was. He looked over Choker shrewdly.

“Listen, my lad,” the chief had said, “I know well enough how you got yourself a place here. And I know why. Now, there’s not normally a lot to do; it’s a right cushy number. But let me tell you this: I’m wise to you. *I* run the show here, *I* choose who I’ll accept or not. As it happens, I think you’ll do all right. You’re not one who gets his jollies from giving people pain, and that’s just exactly what we want. Our job is to get information, and the quicker and more efficient we do that, the better I like it, and the better Master likes it.” All the tower Lice called Mairon that. “You’re not young,” the Extractor went on, “but that’s good too. Young means eager. Too eager. We’re none of us young here, but we’re all of us professionals. Do your job carefully and thoroughly, when you’re put to it, and we’ll get on.”

Choker didn’t much like the work, when there was work to do, but he found that the chief was right. Enjoying things would have got in the way. None of the Extractors much liked what they did, but they did what they had to do with grim-faced efficiency, and they knew how to get results. And when Choker got right down to it and asked himself what he would rather be doing, if not this, there was no answer. He was just left staring at the big blank patch in his soul.

Year 460

The moons came and went, the year turned, and at last the thaw came. Dark patches appeared on the snowy hills round about, and grew apace. Waters roared in the many burns. Spring tinged the newly dark moors with the sober purple of blooming heather, garlanded here and there with sprays of gorse-blossom. Their tarnished gold always made Beren think of a robber’s waistcoat; he couldn’t think why. Having never met a robber, he had no idea even whether they wore waistcoats or not.

The birds brought the usual news of the enemy: scattered patrols across the land, renewed traffic on the wide route through the Dust. The Companions stretched their sinews after the winter lay-up with two quick raids, killing a few goblins with no hurt to themselves. Gorlim and Beren crept across the river and replaced the glass in the cottage in three days of furtive labour. The sun rose higher and warmer with each day. Many-coloured flowers sprang up and made gay the sward of grass between the alders.

Barahir came to his son one warm morning. Most of the men were playing a game they had devised long ago which involved kicking about a rag-stuffed leather sac, to the accompaniment of a great deal of shouting and the occasional brawl.

“Fancy some fishing?” he said to Beren, who was sprawling lazily in the sun, watching the shouting players.

“They won’t be biting in this weather,” his son replied.

Barahir shrugged. “I don’t care,” he said. “It just feels like a nice day to be out.”

“All right,” agreed Beren. The two of them shoved one of the coracles into the water and climbed into it. Barahir took the oars.

The day was still and the disturbance of their passage spread out in huge calm Vs across the lake. Beren watched idly as the reflected forms of the dun-coloured hills wavered and danced in the ripples. He was enjoying the warmth and the sensation of having, for once, nothing pressing to do.

“It’s not a bad life sometimes,” he remarked.

“Ah,” his father said. “That is in fact rather what I wanted to talk to you about.”

Beren glanced at him through half-closed eyes. “I thought you wanted to fish?” he teased.

Barahir did not rise to that bait. Indeed he said nothing for some time. They were approaching one of the granite islands which reared out of this end of the lake, the continuation of a chain of similar crags which were scattered over the neighbouring shore. There was no use in these islands in themselves, since there was no easy way to land on them, the rock being almost sheer where it met the water; but the waters around them were known to be good grounds to fish in.

Beren’s thoughts turned to his aunt and to the strange fate which had made her the keeper of her father’s legendary sword; the same fate which had seemed to point its finger at the younger Beren. He had refused the nomination, since he knew he was not Boromir, nor were the present times anything like the ones faced by that hero of fireside stories. A worm of doubt remained nonetheless. Why her, why him? What was it all about? If it came to that, who was he to gainsay the dictates of fate? But it was all one now, anyway. The sword lay at the bottom of the lake; the child was grown, the chance gone.

His father spoke then, bringing him back to the present with a jerk. “This is our sixth year here,” he remarked.

Beren waited, but the older man said nothing more. “Yes,” Beren said, to encourage him.

Barahir sighed. “It’s no good,” he said. “I have sought for some easy way to say this, but there is none. Don’t answer for a moment, please, let me say my say. The truth is, Son, I’m thinking of giving it away. Of leaving this, of going over the pass to the South.” He looked in that direction, towards the faint grey line of ragged peaks which marked the border of the land on that side. “Mainly I am thinking of the men,” he continued. “They miss the company of women, even those not married; and I know we all hunger for the sight and sound of children. As for them as individuals, well, I know it goes sore with Baragund and Belegund for one. They have stayed with me because they are great hearts who know where their duty lies; but I know well

where they long to be. It is not fair to keep them from their families for so long. One could say the same of some of the others. They all have the right to some sort of life, and the younger they are, the heavier that weighs.” He looked at his own son, but did not yet say what lay in his mind in that direction.

“As for myself, well...” Barahir hesitated, then went on. “Oh, I know she is dead, I knew that already, that first summer. But I should like to find out how – and find her remains, if I could.” He swallowed. “The way things are, I feel I never had the chance to say good-bye.”

After a blinking moment, he pulled himself visibly together and continued briskly. “So. We began here wishing to deal some blows to the Enemy. Well, we have done that. We have defied him for five long years, and he the most powerful being in all Middle-earth; I imagine he will have found that a very hard bone to swallow. But I have been asking myself where we go from here. The sad truth is, we do not much further good here, the few Orc lives we can take being nothing in the scheme of things. We will never get our land back. Is it not perhaps time to accept reality, to accept that we have dealt our blow, that now it is time to seek for other fields to fight on, with perhaps more comforts? There is no virtue in hardihood for its own sake alone.

“I come at last to you, my dear son, my joy and my support. As I do so, I have to face the realization that I do not truly know you, perhaps never have. I do not know what it is that you desire, what you intend to do with your life. Shall you be closed out too for all time from home and children? Surely not!

“Before she left, your mother told me some things... she thought you may have encountered love and heartache. I do not know; you have never spoken of it, and even Mother was only guessing. Of course this is your own affair... but I have wondered much, lately, whether it would not be a kindness to release you from my service, my dear son, should you desire it, in order to... well, I thought perhaps, if there was someone... anyway, here it is, I put it to you. I am finished talking; now it is your turn.”

Beren smiled in fondness and pressed his father’s hand where it lay on the warm side of the boat. He looked then into the far reaches of the lake, gathering his thoughts.

“I am sorry to be such a mystery to you, Father,” he began. “I do not set out to be one; but I am not so constantly reflecting on my own condition either.” He paused, seeking for words. “After the battle,” he went on slowly, “many of us were sick in the spirit who yet carried no visible wound. This you surely know. You know too that I was one of them. I fled to the remnants of my woodland people; there I loved a girl, and she loved me. We healed each other. But Father, I knew as well as she that the joy we shared was not meant to continue. I cannot go back to that now. If I sought her out today, I know what I would find: I would find her a wife and mother, and a happy one too. The past is past, there is no way back to it, no matter how much we may long to go. This is the bitter truth which overset Gorlim and which has lately returned to trouble him anew.

“Let me not speak of that further. Suffice it to say, that is not my road, although I thank you most sincerely for your consideration. But what *is* my road? That I cannot tell you, because I do not know.” He looked now keenly at his father. “I can tell you this, however: if you call me with you to the South, I may come for a while for duty’s sake, but not forever. I cannot. It is different for me than for you all. You have stayed here, and fought, because it is your land the foe has seized, and if you cannot prize it back from him, your desire is at least to make him pay. But for me – I do not know how rightly to say this – it is not I that own the land, so much as that the land that owns me. Its rock is part of my bones, its living waters course through my blood. Spoken like this, it sounds mere nonsense. I blush to hear myself. But the fact remains, Father, that will I or nill I, I cannot leave the Pine Mountain until she leaves me.”

Barahir had listened in silence. When Beren was at last finished, he leaned forward and returned the grasp on his son’s hand. “I thank you for your candour,” he said soberly. “At least now I have some better idea what to do. So: I will stay here another year and see what further uproar I can commit in the Enemy’s formations.

Then, I think, it will be time to go.”

“Then there is no more to say,” returned Beren. “What partings there must be will take care of themselves.”

* * * * *

The two Lice watched the man go into the house. “Interesting,” said one. “An interesting thing. He must be the one we smelled.”

“If we creep a bit nearer,” said the other, “we can drop him when he comes out again.”

“Don’t be even more of a fool than you look,” said the first. “Knocking one over won’t help us to the rest. Why’s he on his own? There’s more to this than meets the eye.”

“Blah, blah,” sneered the other. “All this bollocks you talk. What’s it matter? The only good Softy’s a dead ’un. If you’re scared, I’ll go on my own.”

“You do, and I’ll shoot you myself,” snarled the first Louse. “Master’s got to hear of this, and he’s going to.”

The second Louse said nothing while he thought it over. “All right,” he said at last. The two crept back then until they were well out of sight and hearing of the cottage. Before the first Louse could stand up, however, the second one had leaped on him. He held him pinned, drawn knife to his throat.

“What the fuck are you doing?” spluttered First.

“Going to tell it all to Master, are you?” crooned Second. “You fucking little sneak. What if I stick you, eh? You and your fucking airs, they get right up my nose.” He laughed softly and moved the knife so the point was lodged deep in First Louse’s nostril. “And there’s a coincidence! Because guess where my knife’s going, any second now.”

“You stick mbe, and Mbaster will get to gnaw anyway,” said First nasally. “You gnaw he always does.”

Second Louse’s expression turned despondent. “Fuck!” he said. “You know what? You’re right.” He looked down at his victim. “But in that case, it don’t make any difference what I do, does it? So *this* is for satisfaction.” He pressed the knife slowly home, relishing the thrashing and squealing of his victim, until the convulsions subsided to the last tremors of a dying nervous system. Second pulled the blade out at last and wiped off the smear of blood and brains on First Louse’s jerkin. “I’ve been busting to do that for weeks.” He spat viciously on the cold rictus face lying beneath him. “Smarmy little fuck.”

* * * * *

Mairon examined Second Louse’s memories with interest. He turned to the servants. “Fetch me the Mobile we kept on ice after that last raid,” he ordered. The body in question was speedily fetched. Mairon rummaged through its mind for a while, but he became impatient with this.

“Make it talk,” he told his assistant. “Otherwise we must spend all day combing through this muddle.”

The attendant Soul-riever bowed and obediently snapped the Mobile back to life. The revived Rrrk looked wildly around the chamber, but then flexed and screamed as the Riever gave it a tickle in a tender part of its inner workings.

“Pay attention,” Mairon ordered the victim. “Look at this memory, and tell me if you recognize the human that you see.” He played the memory again to the terrified Mobile. When it was done, the degraded object looked in his direction and nodded.

“Tell me what you know of him,” continued Mairon. He turned to one of the Soul-riever. “Block its volition, would you? All this fear just gets in the way.”

The now wooden-faced Mobile began in a flat voice to recite. “I have seen this soft-skin. He is one of the rebels, the ones we cannot find. He is one of the most fierce of their fighters. He fights with bow and axe, and is skilled in both. That is all that I know.”

Mairon waved the brute back into extinction, then considered what he had learned. “If we capture this rebel, we can make him tell us where the others are,” he mused. “Some sort of trap perhaps? Although in point of fact we don’t even know if this human will come this way again.” He had them play the first Mobile’s memory one more time. “Have some soldiers keep watch – careful ones,” he said. “In the meantime we must find out the significance of this structure to the man. We will start by questioning all of the captives – both living and dead.”

* * * * *

In that high summer, as Beren ran lightly through the woods, he ran full into a wall of fear. The sheer shock of it tumbled him flat onto the ground; his hair was standing on end from the flood of sourceless terror even before he had finished sliding.

He sat up and looked around wildly, but there was nothing to see. There was no sign of anything amiss: the insects continued their lazy midday noises, the birds dozed in the heat; all undisturbed. In Beren’s mind, however, the miasma of fear lay so thickly that he could taste the sourness on his tongue.

“Who is there?” he shouted. His heart was thumping, his knees were weak. There was a Presence here, he was sure of it. In this quiet glade, miles from anywhere, Something had sought him out.

The sudden realization came to him that the fear was not his own. He stood up. “What is it?” he said softly to the air. “Tell me!”

After he spoke so, if anything the pressure increased; but mixed now with the fear he could sense a terrible urgency.

“I don’t know what you want,” Beren said quietly. “Help me understand. Send me a picture. Anything.”

As the minutes passed, the pressure slowly faded. Eventually it was gone, leaving nothing behind but an echo of frustration. But as even this thinned away into nothingness, a vision of Gorlim’s cottage came unaccountably to his mind.

“That damned cottage,” Beren muttered to himself. “That’s got to be what this is about.”

Gorlim had been at the camp when he left it. Beren did not think the smith would go off with his friend absent, but who could be sure with Gorlim?

What to do? Should he have a look at the cottage, or stay away?

Look. It was always better to know. He started running in the new direction. By the time the sun was low, he was not far from his goal; but since it was better to have a sniff around with assurance of sunlight, he turned aside and found a place to sleep. His sleep was uneasy; twice he woke, sweating, with the memory of the recent terror strong in him.

Day dawned fine and cloudless. Using his powers of silence and discretion to the utmost, his inner senses tuned twanging-taut, he crept closer.

Wait now – was that something? Moving with no more sound than a down-feather, he drifted around the area until he had made quite sure. Hah! There were three Orcs watching the cottage, well hidden from the midday sun.

Beren's dart-pipe came silently out, and shortly there were two Orcs, then one, then none. He paused then and felt for more. Strain as he might, he could sense no more Orcs. Traps? The enemy had tried in the past to set some, but Beren was able to feel them out too. Here there was nothing – at least, almost nothing. He could not put his finger on it; but something still wasn't quite right.

He had found out enough. The Enemy had discovered Gorlim's visits; there could be no other reason why the cottage was now watched. He regretted now killing the guards, although he had needed to do so to make sure of the rest of the area.

One thing however was plain: Gorlim must never come here again.

* * * * *

The men were all tired. The summer now past, the sixth after their old lives came to an end in that winter night of flame, had been the boldest and most successful of all. They had struck at the enemy again and again, and never where expected: they had ventured past the eastern wall, they had dared the Dust, they had even – a slap in the face to disturb even Mairon's icy composure – raided in sight of the Isle itself. Each time, after each strike, they had vanished into the landscape in a manner unaccountable. No trap could catch them, no amount of soldiers could flush them out; wolves on their scent were led in circles.

Without ever being talked about, the feeling of Barahir had become general among the Companions. They felt they had done enough. Soon it would be time to turn a new page of life. Come spring, and they would be away. Six years was long enough to spend in this lonely life. Come spring, and it was the south road for them. They would seek first the welcome of their own people, and only then would they ask Fortune what she held next in store. It was time to search out old faces, and to find new verses in life; the song here was almost at an end.

By unspoken common consent, they took the first storm of autumn as marking the end of serious operations. It was agreed: now they would relax. They would spend the winter quietly, then creep away in the new year as soon as the sun had melted the snows in the high passes.

Only after they let the tension loose did they truly realize how tired they were. They were weary to the bone. Six years of fear had worn them down; six years of exertion and of narrow escapes. They were all glad it was nearly at an end.

One dark afternoon in the tag-end of the year, a gale was roaring down the glen and tugging at the corners of the bothy. The men inside paid small heed however, since the big room was snug enough. The turf walls were thick, and they had long since tracked down and plugged all the chinks. It was not a day on which it was pleasant to be out of doors, but Gildor, whose turn it was to keep the coal box stocked, took a moment all the same to admire the dim grandeur of the view. The chill wind roared, driving a roof of grey clouds scudding low through the valley. But it was freezing out here, so after a short glance, he turned his collar against the sleet and hurried back towards the warmth.

Gildor manoeuvred the heavy bag through the low doorway. He slammed the door closed on its leather seals as quickly as he could, shutting out the weather's temper.

The nearest fire was that which warmed the wide brick bench that occupied half the room, upon which comfort several of the men were presently lounging. Barahir and Baragund were sitting at the far end of the bricks, sorting through a pile of war-gear. The grey-bearded Ragnor, still nursing wounds from the last raid, was curled up asleep under a blanket where the brick platform met the wall. Belegund, Dairuin, Urthel and

Hathaldir had placed stools and table right on top of the bricks and were busy playing an impassioned board game.

Gildor placed some lumps on the blaze and nudged the draught more closed. A little wind was getting in under the floor and the coal was burning faster than it needed to.

Baragund held up a leather jerkin before his uncle. "Look at this," he said, poking a hand through a widely gaping seam as he did so.

"That's the trouble," said Barahir. "It's all falling to bits."

"Aye, well," sighed the Soldier, "there's only so much a handful of fellows on their own can do. We've been living on borrowed time that way all along."

The open fire was the next to be stoked. Gorlim and Beren moved aside to allow Gildor room to reach it. Beren nodded thanks to Gildor as the older man put some lumps on and received a smile in reply. Gildor then passed through the leather curtain into the wash-room. It was difficult to move in here due to the lines of damp clothes strung across it. Dagnir was hanging the last items while Arthad, making the most of the warm wash-water, was squatting in the cramped tin bath. The Southerner was scrubbing himself cheerfully while singing a song in his own language.

Gildor fed the fire, which was heating another great pan of water. "Are you going to hang that one up too afterwards?" he joked to Dagnir, indicating Arthad.

Dag laughed his deep bear's laugh. "Aye," he said, "happen I will. 'Twould improve his song, mebbe, to be sung downside up."

"You just jealous," retorted Arthad. "*You* start sing, make dogs howl and cats run away."

Gildor grinned at them as he hauled the coal-carrier back out the door. The kitchen was his final destination, and the location of the coal store. Radhruin had long since gravitated to the job of cook among them, not only because the trapper understood better than any of them how a beast was put together, but also, and more importantly, because he could conjure a tasty meal out of the most scanty and unpromising ingredients. He also happened to be the best healer among the Company.

"Fire's all right," the big man grunted to Gildor. "Just tip it in the store. Can you help me here?"

"Just a moment, I'll wash up," answered Gildor. He grabbed a threadbare cloth and ducked back in the washroom. Arthad was out now, towelling himself next to the fire, while Dagnir was pulling off his own jerkin. Gildor rinsed the coal black off his hands in the bath water, which, it must be said, was already pretty murky. "Sorry," he said to Dagnir, but the other just shrugged.

Back in the kitchen, Rad pointed to a basin of roots. "Here," he said, "just cut them up, would you? Slice 'em fine, they're a bit woodier than's favourable. Need to stew 'em quite a while."

Gildor busied himself at the task. "Ragnor doesn't look much improved," he remarked after a while.

Radhruin glanced up at him and sighed. "He's getting old," he said. "That's about the size of it. And the feller is only held together with scars as it is."

"I feel that way myself sometimes," said Gildor soberly. "But where's the time gone? I found grey hairs in my beard last week; yet it seems no time at all since I was a lad. And things seemed so different then."

"How so?" rumbled the trapper. He was browning strips of venison over the fire in a big pan. The fat hissed,

and the smell was wonderful.

“Well,” said Gildor, “I don’t rightly know how to describe it. Brighter, somehow. More hopeful. As if life had some point, or meaning. But somehow I’ve ended up here; and if you ask me what I am doing here, and how I came to be here, I wouldn’t in the least be able to tell you.”

“You’re slicing them worzels, that’s what you’re doing,” grunted the other.

“You know what I mean,” replied Gildor.

“That’ll do, anyway,” said Radhruin. “That’s fine enough. Fetch me a dozen tatties now, will you? Peel ’em and chunk ’em, same as always.” He busied himself with the meat for a time before speaking further. “Not sure as I feel quite that way meself,” he said at last. “It do seem like all the same story to me. Sometimes one thing happens, sometimes another. This has just been more o’ the same, like.” He thought some more, then sighed again. “Time for a change, though. We all feel it.”

By the fire in the main room, Beren had been cutting fletchings for arrows on a board on his lap, but he was having difficulty in keeping his mind on the task. He had often been troubled by the recollection of the strange warning he had received in the summer, and it was preying on his mind now again. He had returned from the cottage in that time and told his father everything: what he had felt and found. The Company had discussed it among themselves, then they had sat Gorlim down between them and had impressed upon him the necessity of staying away from the place. It was beyond unfortunate, they told him, and they felt for him extremely; but it was simply too dangerous, not just for him, but for the group as a whole. Their safety depended on the Enemy not knowing where they hid; and that depended in turn on none of them being taken. Gorlim, despite being privately convinced that, were he to be caught, he might die fighting, but could never be captured alive, allowed himself to be persuaded.

The smith was doing nothing now, just staring grim-faced into the fire. Beren glanced up at him from time to time from his own work. Outside, the day was darkening to a close. The wind howled.

“Better to be in than out on a night like this,” remarked Beren at random, then immediately felt slightly foolish. Farmer-talk, Nose would call that.

Gorlim looked up absently. “Eh?” he said.

“The weather,” repeated Beren. “Not nice to be out in.”

He heard the Greencloak on the brick daïs behind them, laughing delightedly. “Thank you lads!” the man crowed. “That makes six.”

Dairuin sat back on his own stool and slapped his box of pieces on the table in frustration. He glared across the table at his partner Hathaldir. “*How* long have you been playing this game?” he demanded.

“Well, not that long in truth,” protested the youngster. “You were all keen on Staircase last year.”

“Surely everyone knows you don’t advance a cat when there are four nubbins showing,” said Dairuin. “Four nubbins!”

Gorlim had gone back to staring at the fire. Beren leaned over and touched his shoulder. “I know what you are thinking,” he said quietly. The smith started back, looked up at Beren, surprise and a touch of fear in his eyes.

“Well, what was I supposed to do?” said Hath in the background. “Urthel brought *his* cat up, what was I supposed to do?”

Dairuin rolled his eyes to the ceiling and raised his hands. "Tell him, Thel," he said.

The brown man looked sympathetic. "Four nubbins means we can cross you, lad. Way I see it, your proper move in that pass would be to cross yourself. That way you're shielded, d'you see, and you're set up to bring out either your Talkers, there, or to set a trap."

Beren kept his voice low, just loud enough so Gorlim could hear him over the players. "You're thinking about Eilinel, out in the weather," he said to his companion. "Aren't you?"

Gorlim's expression changed to one full of pain. He looked away from Beren, back at the fire. "Aye," he admitted finally.

Beren forced himself to be brutally frank. "She's dead, Grol. Dead. This many a year. You must know that."

The smith's lined face didn't change for a long moment, then slowly he shook his head. "I d'know you are right," he said. "I d'know it well. But I can't make meself swallow it, somehow. More and more, them thoughts keep coming back to me."

On the daïs, Belegund clapped Hathaldir on the shoulder. "Come!" he said. "Play the next round with me, youngster. Let's see if we can't trim these fellows' beards for them."

Gorlim looked up at Beren, and the pain was back in his eyes. "And what if it ain't true?" he said. "Nobody never found her bones. Just suppose she *had* run off? Was afeared, mebbe, and couldn't get her mind clear, couldn't find her way back? Then suppose she *was* back, and... and... and me not there, just she alone in the cold empty house, not knowing what to do, where to turn? I can't get it out of me head. And it's not for want o' trying, neither."

Barahir and Baragund had in the meantime sorted their items into two piles. "Is there any long piece of leather spare?" asked Barahir. "My scabbard's split. I'll need to make up some sort of sheath."

"Shame," remarked Baragund. "That was a fine piece of work."

Beren looked at his friend sadly. "Why don't we go and make a bit," he said. "Take your mind off it."

"Make what?" said the smith dully.

"There's always something needs making," said Beren. "What about some ring-mail? We're always short of it. And you make wonderful fine mail; it's much better than that heavy stuff we had from Newfort."

"Won't never be as good as them Dwarves, nor Elves neither come to that," said Gorlim despondently. "So what's the point?"

Beren stood up. "Come on, old fellow," he said. "The point is, we haven't any Dwarves or Elves here, and even if we had, I'd still prefer your work, because it is your work, and like no other. Come on, you know you have to. You'll feel better if you're doing something."

Gorlim looked up at him; then his face broke into a smile of extraordinary sweetness. "There's no-one like you either, Ber," he said. "You've been a solid friend to me, all through; times when I haven't been for you. All right then. You will have your way, and I won't say as it isn't a bad way either. Just let me do the hammering, eh? I may not be up to Dwarf-work, but I'm a sight better than anything you could bodge up." He stood up.

Beren laughed. "It's a bargain," he said. "You hammer, I blow. It's always worked best that way."

* * * * *

The storm had blown the last of the leaves from the alders, and the space around the camp stretched wide and bare in the diamond light of the calm day that followed. Everything stood out clearly: the dun hills curving around the horizon were sharp-edged, as if cut with a knife. Only the lake waters remained troubled and grey.

Beren had proposed to make a last sweep of the land before the snow came, which time could not now be far off. Already the surrounding heights were dusted with white. He did this every year: took a last look to east, north and west, spying on all the ways and motions of the Enemy. But somehow this year, he was not easy in his mind.

He stood outside the bothy with his father. "I'll probably be a week at it," he said to him. "Same as always."

"No hurry," replied Barahir. "Don't let familiarity make you careless."

Beren turned to go, but checked himself. "I could say the same to you," he said.

Barahir shrugged. "They haven't found us yet," he said. "It's no doing of ours. All we can do is trust that it will continue."

Beren could not think how to express his unease, since he did not himself properly understand its source. "Just... be careful," he said. "Keep your eyes open."

His father smiled. "We will. Walk safe now, Son. Until I see you again." Beren clasped his hand, then set off up the valley at his wolf-trot. He was soon at the crest; he turned back there and waved at the distant figure of his father, standing still beside the bothy. Barahir waved back until his son was gone, then went back inside the building.

Baragund woke the older man at daybreak the next day. "Gorlim's gone," was all that he said.

* * * * *

Gorlim ran through the darkness. In his cunning he avoided the valley, which was the route they might most expect him to take; instead he took the north-east track. He ran over the great swell of the moor, pausing to gasp for breath at the top. Then he ran on, down the long hill. He ran until the first grey light began to seep into the sky, and as soon as he could see his way, he left the road and cut through the pathless country. This had been grazing land, but there were no kine left; the grass had grown tall, and saplings were sprouting up too.

The sun was already high when he waded the shrunken river. All through the long day he ran a while, and walked a while, until the fall of night found him in the heights of Drûn above his own valley, not ten miles from his house. He knew better than to approach in the dark, however. Also, there was a pressure in his head; like a fever coming on, mebbe. So he scabbled himself a deep bed in the cold needles which blanketed the floor of that sad forest, and shivered and dozed his way through the night.

In the morning, he was initially almost too stiff to move, and the pressure was worse. Groaning, he sat up, holding his head in his hands. His stomach felt as if it was slapping on his backbone, his legs felt weak and shaky, and he was shivering from cold. It was a long time before he could bring his limbs under discipline enough to move quietly.

If only the thickness in his head would let up. He could feel the pulse pound in his skull.

He drank from a tiny rivulet made bitter by pine-needles. With the resin tang still tart in his mouth, he crept warily down the slope, all senses alert. All the warnings of his friends had gone home with him, he knew all

about the likelihood of a trap. He spent the whole of that day moving silently around the whole locality. Now and then he spotted the roof of his cottage through a gap in the trees, but he dared not approach closer until he had thoroughly scouted the area. In the last few years Ber had taught him a bit about tracking – and Orcs weren't hard to track, nohow: great clumping things as they were. But nowhere could he see any sign. There were tracks of deer, fox, wolf all along the valley, but no sign of Orcs or men at all.

The sun was low in the West before he dared creep up the path. The pain in his head was making it difficult to see. There was a buzzing in his ears, and a sound in his head like voices. But there were no voices; all was quiet.

All this side of the valley was in deep shadow; only on the far side, where he had come from, were the trees still lit by the lowering sun.

The front window was still whole, as he had left it last. Gorlim crept nearer, up the path. He passed the ruined byre; now he was at the gate. There he stopped as if rooted.

He could see faint candlelight flickering in the darkening window.

Unable to believe his eyes, the trembling man cautiously set one foot after another along the path. More of the room came into view. Then the candle itself. And there at last, sitting at the table, oh lord – her now greying head sunk despairingly in her arms, there was the sight he had longed for in a thousand sleepless nights, the sight he had told himself he would never, ever see again; the sight of the being most dear to him, more dear than life itself: his wife.

Eyes wide and staring, locked to the familiar figure slumped over the table, Gorlim advanced to the door with hesitant, jerky steps, like a badly-made puppet. The weight of the entire world seemed to be pressing on his poor head. Somebody, somewhere was desperately shouting his name. He pushed the door back slowly, silently, watching with fascination how the candlelight flickered on his raised hand. As he moved into the room, as the edge of the door moved slowly back across his field of vision, he readied himself to see her in the flesh whom he had dreamed of all these years. He couldn't breathe for it, could hardly walk.

But the moment before the flower opened, the instant before Gorlim's sun appeared from behind the cloud, all was cruelly snatched away. The table, the candle and Eilinel disappeared into a whirl of darkness. Rough hands were laid on the hapless man, and he just had time to shout her name before he fell into oblivion.

* * * * *

“This is interesting,” remarked Mairon to his chief Soul-riever. “Oh, this is very interesting! See, it is the sex-bond, as we had guessed. Its rupture has almost torn him in two. But see here, something has tied the hurt part off. That was a bold remedy. He has been enabled to function, at cost of losing connection to half his soul or more. Who could have done that, I wonder? I doubt any of these rabble of Elves could see or reach so far. Perhaps that one styling himself Spirit of Fire¹⁹ could have done it, did he not now sit chastened under Mandos.” He examined further. “The ligature is leaking. That is our good fortune, but also a block to us. Without this seepage, he would not have been drawn to our trap; but it also enlivens a perverted bond to his companions. That is a strong bond. I doubt we can work directly against that – these creatures cleave to their follies with a certain primal force. However, I make no doubt he will soon reveal all that we desire; there are several effective gambits.” He considered for a moment. “I think I will remove the ligature straight away. He will survive it. That will strengthen all these adverse currents many-fold, but it gives us a leverage we otherwise would not enjoy; and oh! what a pretty quantity of power this tangle will afford us at the close.”

The Soul-riever was silent – it would not be *he* who enjoyed the draught of power.

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“So,” continued Mairon. “Bid the Extractors adopt the direct approach for now. When the subject begins to tire, we shall engage him in a little talk.”

Some hours later, the attendant leaned over his victim. He examined the sweat-drenched features with concern.

“You should scream,” he said to the human. “Why don’t you scream? It’ll help you, really. It worries us when they don’t scream.”

“I’ll see you in Hell,” gasped the man. “You’ll be the one screaming then. There will be a reckoning.” He grimaced as the attendant turned a wheel on his side of the table another notch.

“You know,” said the attendant ruminatively, “you could be right. It’s a funny world, this one we’re in. Could well be that one day *I’ll* end up on the table and you’ll be in my place. Could very well be. But, you see, that will be then; here is now. One thing at a time, that’s my motto.

“Now listen a bit. We’ve given you quite a go of it today, but believe me, we’re nowhere near finished with what we can do to you. Oh, we’ve snipped a couple of bits off you here and there but basically it’s all still there, all repairable. More or less. Not too pretty maybe, but functional. You could tell us what we want to know now and be up in five minutes. Bit of a drink inside you, bit of food, and half an hour later you’d be walking out of here. Why not? Master don’t hold grudges; he’s famous for it.

“But, and here’s where you need to pay attention, soon we’ll be on the slippery slope. You know what I mean. We’ll be doing things to you what can’t be undone. All that’s any good of you, we’ll take that all away, bit by agonizing bit. Only a little way down that road, and it’ll be too late – you could tell us everything then, but you wouldn’t do yourself any good by it, ’cause you wouldn’t *be* no good no more. You follow? We’d just kill you then, at the end of it. Kind of a mercy, really.” Absent-mindedly the Orc turned the wheel another notch, an action the victim matched with a hiss and a rictus grin.

“Now in all this,” went on the attendant, “you’ll be thinking of yourself. Well, it’s only natural. But just try to put out of your mind the gear we’ve got here, the hot irons, the rats, the nerve worms, all the things we can do to mangle you up. I know it’s hard, but just try. I’d like you to think of how it seems from my point of view. Do you think I enjoy this? Do you? Well, I don’t. Oh, there’s plenty on our side what do, I’ll grant you, but not among my crew here. We’re professionals. You can’t lust after blood and be any good at this job, ’s a fact. And I’ll tell you another thing: that’s all it is to me, a bloody job. A boring job. Always the same. Usually they talk in the end, well all right sometimes they don’t talk; I’ll give you that; but often they talk. But you know what? You know what really pulls my tosser? Them what talk never does it in time. It gets me down. So just for once, just once, I just asks, can’t one of you be sensible? Do us all a favour.”

The victim spat out something which was mostly obscenities.

An exasperated look spread over the attendant’s face. “I could resent that,” he said, “but to be honest, I’d probably say the same in your place.”

Then the Orc did something curious: he looked furtively around the room. After assuring himself that the other Extractors were occupied down at the far end of it, he leaned right over and put his mouth next to the victim’s ear – what remained of it.

“Listen,” he hissed, “why don’t you get smart? Your life’s to be gained or lost, you know that right enough; but what you don’t know is, there’s more to play for. Much more. I can’t speak free – they’d have my guts if I told you outright, but think! Think! What’s the one thing you want above all else? What drew you here in the first place? Eh? Eh?” The torturer glanced up furtively, checking that the others were still distracted. Reassured, he whispered again in the victim’s ear. “I’m not supposed to let on to you; but I’ve just about had it for one day, I want to knock off. Me bloody feet are giving me gyp like you wouldn’t believe. So use your

fucking brains, squire, eh? Eh? Think!” He stood up then quickly and continued in his normal voice. “Won’t tell us, eh? Time for a bit of hot iron then perhaps.”

“Wait, wait!” gasped the victim. “Let me think a minute.”

The attendant laughed heartily. “You can think all you want while we’re burning your feet black, squire. No time off for cogitation here.” He stared down flintily at the prisoner, giving no sign of their private exchange of some seconds previous. “Well, what’s it going to be? I haven’t got all day.”

The victim’s face wrenched in terrible indecision. His teeth clenched together and he arched up against his bonds. For a moment he looked to be in far direr pain than any he had suffered so far at the hands of his torturers. The attendant watched this behaviour with interest.

“Maybe...” muttered the stricken man at last, “maybe we could... we could make some sort of exchange.”

“What exchange?” said the attendant with heavily emphasized patience.

The bloodied victim eyed him for a moment through eyes narrowed to slits. “Fetch your big man,” he said at last. “If I’m going to damn myself, it won’t be to the likes o’ scum-lickings like you.”

“Big man?” The attendant shook his head slowly. “You want to talk to Master? Friend, I predict you are going to be sorry. But, if that’s your only offer...?”

“It is,” grated Gorlim.

They left him alone then for a long, lightless hour in which he had nothing to do but stare upwards into the blackness. There was a darkness also in his soul; he felt himself sinking into it, felt it lapping higher and higher, like a suffocating lake of thick, black, rancid oil. But if only what the monster had hinted at were true... and after all, he had *seen* her. He would give anything for that; even his soul, if it came to that. He must find out, he must. But he must be clever.

Gorlim had barely time to notice the growth of light on the rough walls of the chamber before the people came in. He had a quick impression of a shining white robe and a noble face, but then he looked into the dark eyes; immediately he was held fast, his soul gripped as if in mighty claws; he could see nothing else. He gasped and nearly gave in, saving himself just in time.

Mairon smiled, released his mental clutch. “My servants tell me that you would bargain with me,” he said. His voice was low and resonant, with tones that seemed to linger in the ears.

Gorlim tore his gaze away from the pull of the eyes, looked to the side. “You must know I won’t tell you nothing without you give me something in return,” he panted.

Mairon shrugged slightly. “We offer you surcease from pain,” he replied. “Is that not enough?”

“No!” said Gorlim. “I want – something else. Something dear to me.” When Mairon made no reply, the bloodied man burst out, “Don’t deny that you have Eilinel – you have my wife!”

“I deny nothing,” said Mairon. “Is that your price? To rejoin your wife? Good. Shall we –”

“Wait!” said Gorlim. “I don’t trust you, Mister, no, not so far as I could spit in your eye. It’s no bargain yet! Like as not you’d chain us side by side, or something, and claim we was together.” He laughed then, allowing his eyes to slide back just so far as to see the paleness of the robe in the corner of his vision. “You’re not so smart, Mister,” he said. “You as good as told me that you have her. Well, Mister, this is my bargain: I want my wife, Eilinel, and then you are to set us both free. Free to go where we please. No tricks,

no five minutes later to go a-grabbing of us again. Free forever! Without that, we're not even passing the time o' day together, you and I."

Mairon started pacing slowly back and forth. "It is cunning you are, Man," he said at last, as if with reluctance. "You bargain hard. Very well. I agree. Be it stated: you shall join your wife, by name Eilinel, and you shall both be set free of my service forever, be released out of my power. In exchange, you will reveal to me this: the number of your companions, and where I may find them. You will show me where on a map. If they have more than one hide, you will show me all. None of your tricks now! I must be enabled to find them and capture them. All of them. Less than that, and you shall not have your price."

Gorlim groaned at the thought of betrayal, and writhed in his bonds. "No," he moaned. "Oh Powers. All of them... and Ber too. No, I can't..."

"Gorlim!" Mairon's voice rang out. Against his will, Gorlim's eyes were dragged slowly back until they met Mairon's. The sorcerer's eyes were deep and dark. "Is this your way, to strike a bargain, then gainsay it?" Mairon asked him softly. "Do you trifle with me? Or is it your beloved with whom you wish to trifle? You must choose. You cannot save both your companions and your wife. Which is it to be?"

"All right," said Gorlim faintly, locked to that gaze. "I'll do it. Fetch your damned map."

When all was finished, the blood-smeared smith lay back exhausted on the table while Mairon stared at the drawing.

"The Dream-witch," the Sorcerer muttered. "Well, we knew she was working against us. This just confirms it."

"Are you satisfied, Warlock?" called Gorlim without opening his eyes.

Mairon turned to him slowly. "Yes," he said, "I believe I am."

"Then what of my price?"

Mairon smiled down at him. "What curious beings you mortals are," he remarked. "Such a meagre price you ask for so great a betrayal. Why, the world simply swarms with human women, most of them boasting far greater wit and charm than your erstwhile mate; but no, it is this single one out of all the teeming thousands to whom you cling, with such force that you would throw everything and everyone else into the Pit for her. I wonder at it."

"Do not put your filthy mouth on my wife," snarled Gorlim. "Pay that which you promised. Or will you damn yourself as forsworn?"

"I did promise," said Mairon slowly, "but I must tell you, your bargain was based on a false assumption. I did not claim that your mate still lived; and in fact she does not. That which you saw in your hut was merely a conjuring, a small work of illusion. This will not hinder me from keeping my word, for you too shall die. You shall join her in death, and in death shall ye both be free to go wherever ye list. Eventually. Thus is the bargain fulfilled."

Gorlim ground his teeth together when he heard these words. The expression on his face caused even the attendants to back away a step. The man's muscles bunched as he strained against his chains, the blood running down from where they cut into his wrists. His voice, when it emerged, carried the echo of the grave.

"You Demon," he grated, his face in rictus and his bloodshot eyes almost starting out of his head. "You foul spawn of Night. You think you have won. You have not won. Your reckoning will come. Oh, yes. You send me now to my death, but I see already through that doorway, and what I see is the world made new; undying

glory. But for you: no glory for you. You will lose everything that you have; everything. It shall be shorn from you, and that shearing will come soon in the life of this world. You will gnaw then, you misbegot, in the dreadful pit of your loss, at many wishes, at many fervent, painful wishes; you will wish them with all the puny force that remains to you. And one of those wishes will be that you had been kind, just once in your long life. Because the Power who rules all, and before whom even you must stand at last, has no place in his designs for those with no heart. No place! You will drag your weary days as a worm until the Judgement at the end of time, and then you shall be cast into the nothing that awaits you!”

The man turned his eyes away then, and not one more word or sign could they get out of him.

Mairon had listened to the tirade with only mild interest. Prisoners often said such things, although they were rarely this inventive.

He turned to the attendant Extractors. “You fellows may do your pleasure with this,” he said to them. “Use him for practice, or whatever you please. Just do not be too long about his death. We await the harvest.” He turned to the Soul-riever and the others he had brought with him. “Come,” he said to them, rubbing his hands, “in the meantime we have a raid to organize.”

Some hours later, after the troops had been dispatched, Mairon started in surprise. “What?” he exclaimed. “He has escaped me! He slipped the net. How did he do that?”

The Soul-riever was nonplussed as well. “Lord, I do not know,” he said. “It should not have been possible.”

“Oh, that is a loss,” said his master. “Such self-contempt, such fury! Did you not taste it? It would have been the best harvest for some time.”

Something else was now engaging the Soul-riever. “My Lord,” he said with hesitation, “I see further bad tidings: the other has slipped away with him.”

Mairon sat back, astonished. “That mortal has outwitted us,” he said. “Yet you saw what a dull fellow he was. How did he do it?” He pondered on the case a while longer; then suddenly he laughed. “But after all,” he said, “he did but take me at my word. He and his mate are free indeed. Thus am I saved from forswearing. Oh, what a benison! Is that not a merry jest? I almost forgive him the stolen harvest.”

* * * * *

The lands were empty. North, South, East or West: nowhere could Beren find any recent trace of the enemy. He ran, and he ran, through the air which was cold and clear; beneath the retreating sun, which still gave forth a faint warmth. The birds and beasts were everywhere at peace, but he could find no peace himself. His heart lay heavy in him, and he could not say why; he ran and ran, but could never leave the heaviness behind him.

Time and again he thought he heard voices, mournful voices in the air or the waters; but whenever he stopped to listen, there was nothing there.

He ran along the back of the moors, behind the Ent-wives’ country, and down the eastern fence to the valley mouth. He ran through the dead forest of Drûn, past sight of the lost towers, now sprouting new and ugly growths, like the carbuncles on a sotten tyrant’s nose. He ran past Rivil and into the hills above the old Tower of the Guard, on the isle which the Sorcerer had taken for his own. The airs there seemed full of unrest, and everywhere the voices were whispering, just beyond hearing.

After peering uneasily at the darkened tower whose shape he had known so well, he retreated to a valley high in the stony hills above the Whitewater root. He knew of a tarn there, a lonely place, ringed by aged pines writhen small and twisted by the mountain gales. He wanted the loneliness; he wished to shake free of the

whispering multitudes who seemed to dog his steps.

But the ghosts were there too. Three times he lay down to sleep on the lake shore, and thrice he started awake with a cry, staring into the gloom, straining his ears to catch the whispers. A weak moon silvered the waters, but there was nothing to see. As the long night wore on, a coldness wound its way about his heart.

The moon was lowering, the light was dull. Beren he could not tell if he was awake or asleep. The dark trees all around him rustled as if in a breeze, but there was no breeze. He looked up, and saw that the wind-stripped branches were full of the black shapes of birds.

The birds were silent, moving only a little among themselves; and from their cruel beaks dripped blood.

The horned moon, turned a sickly yellow by the thick air between, squatted now barely above the hills. It grudged but little light upon the waters before him. Far off on this sullen shimmer, a shadow now appeared.

The dark blot drifted towards him across the wide expanse. Beren watched it in terror, unable to move or speak. As the thing drew nearer he perceived that it had vaguely the shape of a man. The phantasm came on. Now it was at the shore, black against the tarnished light, black as the silent birds in the trees. And from everywhere, from the air, the whispers; while the blood dripped and dripped. Still the shadow grew, and still, until Beren thought his heart would stop from the iron claws of the fear that gripped it. The shadow grew until its encroaching edges had extinguished the last dull edges of the landscape. In the blackness that had now displaced the living universe, a terrible visage appeared: a face once, warped through unimaginable brutality into a travesty of humanity. And the voices! The voices now on every side, they were whispering still; with the difference that the terrified and paralysed mortal at the centre of this nightmare could understand them now, could receive with revulsion and horror their faltering words, as they laid before him a grisly tale of torture and betrayal. As the disgusting revelation wound to its close, Beren realized to whom the face belonged.

It was Gorlim.

The sweat-drenched man started awake with a shout, looking around him wildly. But there was nothing to see on the waters, nothing in the branches. No birds; no blood. The voices in the air were silent.

Beren started up then, and ran. He ran as he had never run before. The mountain glens flew beneath his feet; shortly he was splashing in the Whitewater. Daybreak found him under Anach. Tireless still he ran, all through the dark southern forests, running crossways over the innumerable pine-clad ridges which sloped down from the South. By nightfall he was close upon the moors, but still he ran. The first light was creeping into the sky when he breasted the final ridge before Aeluin.

He knew even before he saw the circling birds. He knew from the scents in the air, from the appearance of the waters.

Ignoring his bloodied feet, he coursed down the last track as quickly as he could. Turning the last corner, he surprised the carrion fowl at their grisly work. The birds flapped heavily up in a feathered, blue-black mass and sat silent in gorged rows among the bare alder branches, their beaks dripping blood, just as in the dream.

The men lay all together, in among a great pile of goblin bodies. They had their shields with them, and had clearly not been taken by surprise, but had been defeated by numbers.

Beren ran to the nearest tree in which the blood-smeared crows clustered.

“Why have you shamed my dead?” he cried to the birds in their own language.

“They were not *our* dead,” replied one of the crows. “And why should we hold back from yours? We must

live; and food is food. You should have come sooner, if you wished to keep them from us.”

“You came too late,” croaked another, and several of them took this up in a harsh chorus: “Too late! Too late!”

Beren turned from the birds in grief and fury. He clambered over the rubbery wall of dead vermin and stepped into the narrow space to squat among the twisted bodies of his fellows. He was sobbing openly now, the tears flowing down in streams as he stroked the ravaged faces of one after another of his companions, each dearer than life itself. The merciless light grew steadily brighter; soon the first rays of the new day’s sun slanted over the hill, bringing a false flush of life to the dead cheeks.

He wiped his eyes at last and gathered his father’s remains into his arms. As he did so, he cried aloud from shock and grief, because only then did he see that the attackers had cut off his father’s hand.

Beren carried the body high over the hill to a point which looked down on the calm lake below, so quiet and blue. He remembered the day with his father on the boat, and the tightness came again to his throat; but he thrust that away now. There were things to do.

All that day he toiled, and at the end of the day he had laid all the eleven companions together in a row in a great hole cut in the turf. He placed his father in the middle, with the bodies of his cousins to either side, and the others out from that. All lay beside their own weapons, he knowing well which belonged to which. He kept for himself only the sword of his father. When all was done, he stood by the grave, looking his last on the forms of his friends.

“I bid you all farewell,” he said in a low voice. He spoke to each of them by name, giving his blessing and saying what kindly words he could think of. He paused then a while with the heart aching within him. “I do not know what I can do here on my own,” he said finally, “but I will at least seek vengeance for your lives. This I swear, on this your sword, my Father.” He swallowed. “I beg your leave to borrow it for a time. I will return it as I can when all is done.” He could think of nothing more to say. “Go ye now in peace.” He left off then and began the hard task of shovelling dirt upon the sightless, eyeless faces of his friends and kin. At the close of all he piled boulders over the place to prevent the beasts from delving into it. He threw himself down in the heather then and slept as one dead.

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The Lice took it easy on the road back, sheltering from the sun during the day and carousing into the dark hours. They felt a great weight lifted from them; each had cursed the outlaws who brought risk and fear to every journey. But now the rebels were dead, dead! They would have peace in these woods at last.

They reached the waters some called Rivil on the third night, but it was close to dawn by that time, so they stayed there that day, snoozing under cover while the Fire-eye seared from the merciless skies. When evening came, they felt no hurry to move off. Fires were lit and songs were sung.

The cohort captain’s fireside was as merry as any. His staff were singing songs of all the deeds they had done, although in fact most of them had hung back as well as they had been able to manage it, allowing the lesser ranks to bear the brunt of the rebels’ blades. It had been a bit fierce for a while and they were all glad it was over.

The captain, a big Louse who went by the name of Arse-cutter, rested on his pack, listening to their boasts with a curled lip. *He* had waded in and finished the head man; had stuck him from behind. To listen to these fools, you’d think they each won it by themselves, single-handed.

“Why don’t you lot shut up about all the things you *say* you done, wot in fact you ain’t,” he sneered.

Two cohorts had been sent on the raid. The leader of the other, a big, ugly, squint-eyed brute called (for reasons known only to himself) Sick Chop, always seemed to be hanging about Arse-cutter's neck. Cutter found him one too many altogether. He had kept an eye out for an opportunity to send a quiet arrow Chop's way during the *melée*, but no chance had presented itself. Cutter had kept his own weather eye open; he was under no illusions that Chop hung around him because he liked him.

The fucking maggot-buggerer was lounging there now, in easy earshot, just at the next fire over. Sick Chop leaned over now and grinned all over his slimy face.

"Why don't you tell 'em about the things *you* did, Captain," he said with mock humility. "I'm sure you could learn 'em a thing or two."

Arse-cutter scowled at him. "*I* was in there," he said. "Wot you on about?"

Chop raised his hands in mock surrender. "Don't jump salty, Comrade," he said. "I'm sure you was. We all saw you in the thick of it, didn't we lads? Leastways I didn't, but some of my lads must have seen you. How 'bout you, Threshits?"

Threshits knew what was good for him. He shook his head. "Uh-uh," he said. "Never saw him." He grinned at Cutter, baring long fangs. "Wiv all respec' to yerself, Cap'n."

"Oh," said Chop. "He didn't see you. Deary me. Stinking? Sniffer? Anyone? Someone must have seen 'im in action!" Head-shakes all round. Chop turned grinning back to Cutter. "Too bad son, no medals if nobody sees you."

"Listen, you greasy prick," retorted Arse-cutter, "it don't matter how much you joke. Have your laugh, go on. Cos it's me who'll be laughing last. And cos why? Cos it was me – not you, Sick Chop, but *me* – who stuck the head man. What's more, I got proof. I was ordered to get something off of him, which I did. So you can stick your smirking face up your arse."

"Oh yeah," scoffed Chop, "likely story. What was it that you got, eh, a bit of last year's arse-wipe?" His subordinates all laughed.

"Something valuable," said Cutter. "A trophy. A ring, they said, on the rebel leader's hand. And here it is!" He reached into a pouch at his side and pulled Barahir's severed hand out of it. Finrod's great ring caught the light and sent beams blazing all around the clearing. The Lice who were gathered about the fire cried out and raised their paws in front of their eyes.

"What the hell is that thing?" shouted Chop, shielding his own eyes.

"Pretty piece, ain't it?" said Cutter, gleeful at the effect he was having. "Elvish. I been thinking to keep it myself. Partial to a bit of elvish glitter, I am. My boys'll bear me out that the hand were bare. Nobody's going to listen to your boys, and cos why? Cos nobody cares what cowards say, that's why."

"You stupid fuck," snarled Chop. "Put that away, before it draws in something it shouldn't!"

"Not scared, are you Chop?" crowed Cutter. He had to squint under the savage glare of the ring, but it was worth it to see Chop squirm. Oh, wasn't it just. "We killed all the rebels. There's nobody left to draw in. Just what're you scared of? Eh?"

"The Black Master curse you through the Seven Fires, Arse-cunt," hissed Chop. "I never met any Louse so stupid in my life. Can't you count? There was one we didn't get!"

Arse-cutter laughed in his chest and held the hand even higher. Cries of protest were rising now on every

side.

“Oh!” he said. “A rebel left over. Oh dear. Just the one, was it? And where is he now then, d’you suppose, this fierce rebel? Ha ha ha!”

A shadow leaped into the circle of firelight. Before anybody could do anything or react in any way, it had grabbed the hand out of Arse-cutter’s grasp at the same time as swiping his head off with a sword. The intruder ran out of the light again just as the head hit the ground with a soggy thump. The Lice were still shouting their alarm and scrabbling for weapons.

Sick Chop was the first to get organized. He soon had the Lice combing the bushes, had sniffers too searching out the scent-trail. After the last dispirited Louse had returned, late in the night, reporting no trace of the intruder, Chop walked over to the headless body of his rival. He contemplated the corpse for a while, then gave it a savage kick.

“You stupid, stupid fuck,” he said. “What have you gone and done?”

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