

# Beren One Hand Volume 5: Frostfire

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Version 1.0

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## Year 461

The winter's wind scoured the white land as a howling wolf, driving fogs of bitter cold across a leaden sky. The man ran through the whipping rain, fought desperately, ran again; often hungry, always shivering. He found no refuge, nowhere to hide from the enemies who coursed him like a hare from one end of Dorthonion to the other. He who had been proud of his skills of subtlety and evasion had not realized until now how much he had relied upon a secure retreat: a place of peace where he could rest, warm up and eat. But the spell of Aeluin was broken. The Orcs came there freely now, and there was nowhere else to go.

He had not even the comfort of mourning for his dead companions; there had been no time for it. He was a hunted animal, his entire being taken up in keeping one step ahead of his pursuers.

Throughout that long, bleak winter he stretched his cunning to its furthest degree, used up every subterfuge and trick, merely in the struggle to stay alive. The forest swarmed with enemies. Mairon had sent three full legions to turn out the fugitive, to find and bring to him the single chance survivor of his deadly raid.

The land offered neither help nor mercy. The hills and woods he was wedded to, that he could not leave, had no ruth for him. They did not care if he lived or died. The pitiless gales roared over a harsh landscape wiped as clean of human life as a bone; what trees were not bare were as dark and bitter as his heart.

However, until the Last Year comes, winter must relent in time. There came a morning on which Beren, high in the pine that had afforded him a rough night's shelter, was awoken by a golden light filtering through the serried needles. All around him he could hear a sound he had not heard for weeks: the sound of running water. The thaw had come.

The wind abated, the sun shone, and all the land echoed with the sound of waters large and small. Colour and life crept back into the world.

With the coming of spring, Mairon withdrew his soldiers, having better uses for them. A single rebel was not worth his attention. The task was completed, the battles in this sector were over. A lone fugitive could do no harm. In time, as the conquered land was brought more closely under control, the man would run out of luck, and be swept up.

The turn of the season brought new life surging everywhere. Birds were busy, the meadows were scattered with gay flowers, the woods were bordered with blossom. Green sprang into the trees; the woods became clothed again. Sunlight flashed on calm blue waters.

Only Beren's heart remained cold. He felt out of time; he felt that he did not belong. Restless, he wandered secretly through wood and glen, feeding and sleeping when the body demanded. His thoughts dwelled only on the people he had known. In his mind he saw again their faces, heard their voices; but they were gone, lost. Only he remained, lonely and bereft. The warmth and the sprouting life were not for him.

The end of another long spring day found Beren high on a green hill, near the centre of his lonely domain. Fingers of cool air rustled the leaves as the warm glow of sunset faded slowly towards evening blue. Bats began to flit through the branches. The air was full of fresh new smells, but the fugitive heeded them not. He huddled like a beast into a nest of leaves, his long hair matted and full of dirt.

The man's eyelids drooped; he slept. Twice in the night he started awake, listening, sniffing, peering suspiciously through the trees, the corners of his eyes showing fearful and pale.

It was a night full of stars. He could see them glimmering through the gaps in the leaves. The glittering points seemed infinitely remote; they meant nothing to him.

He slept soundly after that, only whimpering once or twice, in the grip of some dream of blood and terror.

Deep in the night, as the nervous creature slept, twitching, a silent figure appeared at the base of the slope. It

began to climb the hill. No sound betrayed its approach; only its shadow grew steadily larger beneath the stars. Nearer the dark figure came, and nearer still, until it reached the tiny dell in which the last, shabby soldier of the armies of Bëor lay huddled in helpless slumber.

The figure stood over the sleeping man and considered him for some time. It bent then, and with noiseless fingers opened a bag it had carried. The shadowy hand reached in and pulled from the bag a bulky object which murmured as it emerged, a faint and musical note.

Beren's dream slowly changed, lightened. The black monsters faded, altered, were gone; he was alone in the peaceful night. No, not alone – his companions slept there, all around him, huddled around the friendly flicker of the fire. The mountains had been cruel, but what they had left behind them on the further side was far crueller. Now surely here in this new land they would find the light they had searched for, half-blindly in the beginning, but ever more surely as they fought themselves slowly more free of the dark miasma of fear.

Their trek had begun in simple defiance, in disgusted revolt. They turned their faces from the sickness, simply walked away from it. It had been an act of despair rather than hope, for the dark had remained in their hearts; heavy, immovable. Nobody began with any hope, none at all – they had none of them believed they would ever find their way out of the maze. Horror sat heavy on their hearts, and their fellowship was no comfort to them. But gradually, as each hard step followed the one before, the ways and scenes of darkness were left behind. None had believed that it would be so, could be so; but gradually it became so. The darkness retreated behind them. The band of seekers had entered new lands; these were not the same as the hated scenes of their degradation. These were new, and fairer.

In their hearts too they fought with the dark. Others of their folk they met by the way, on the same journey, with the same aim. The hearts of the People were lifted by the encounters with new companions, new strength. A faint hope was born, like the silent, stubborn seed that sends forth a tiny shoot under the weight of black frost.

Now at last the Folk he had trekked with so long and so far had at last passed all the trials of the mountains. Somewhere ahead of them in this wide green land they could sense light and harmony; on this velvet night they could almost touch it. Indeed, it was as if the trees and the very air were singing to them, sending warmth coursing through their withered veins. Their ears became as if filled with a music which lifted them high above the fear and the pain, that washed their hearts clean at last. The joy of it pierced them to the marrow; its power was like the sun rising straight in their eyes. The great song was one time sad and deep, then wide and exhilarating. Words entered now softly in. A fair voice was singing of a One beyond the world, but to be glimpsed maybe in corners and sunbeams, if only one lifted the gaze and strived. The pure joy of the song wrung the listeners' hearts, and they wept as they slept.

Beren started up, throwing off the cords of slumber. His face was wet with tears, his heart rent with the pains of renewed hope – desperately sweet, yet at the same time as cruel as an eagles' claws. His awareness caught a last note, fading, and the fleeing beauty smote him like a blow.

Sitting over him he perceived a figure clothed in ghostly white, crowned with stars, holding a great lyre. Starlight glistened on every fibre of the being's hair, touched the contours of his noble brow, gleamed off deep eyes.

“Play on, I beg you,” whispered Beren. “I care not if you be a dream; only play.”

The figure in white lifted the lyre again. His fingers stroked the strings, and he sang softly. Beren closed his eyes, overcome by the beauty of the voice, and by other emotions he could not name. Cradled in the stream of the music, carried into the sunlight of lost days, he felt again his mother's warm body behind him on the horse and smelled her scent. He saw his young father laughing. Then Gorlim standing proudly with Eilinel in the brilliant white of her dress, the bride yet more radiant than the cloth. A glimpse of Nose he had, and of Willow, and last of all he saw the companions fighting for their lives: brave men who loved one another, fighting on even when there was no hope left; falling one by one under the savage whirlwind of steel.

The playing stopped, but Beren's sobs went on. He raised his tear-drowned eyes. "I was not there," he cried. "I should have died with them. But I was too late. Too late! Tell me now what I shall do! Death will not take me, but there is no life left for me."

"Speak of it," said Finrod. "Your heart is full, and you have had no ear to tell it to. Tell me now."

So Beren, haltingly at first, but with increasing fluency as the memories gripped him, told Finrod all that had happened in Dorthonion since the night of fire. He told of the victories, of hope raised, of the stubborn struggle of brave men and women; then of hope dashed by Darkness on the field of Ladros. Of the catapult raids he spoke, and of the valour and sacrifice of the forest people. He lived again the last fight at the inn, with his father plucking the sobbing innkeeper from the burning building. Over the agony at Sightfoot he wept anew. Of the furious weeks of love and healing with Carver he told. He spoke on through the hours of night, telling of the companions, of their closeness, of the raids, and the narrow escapes. Gorlim suffered his pains again; furtive visits to the cottage; the apparition at the lake; the run, the death. Too late.

As he told on and on, he cried until he had no tears left. At the end of all, the dawning sun wheeled in his eyes as he fell senseless to the earth.

A damp cloth on his face woke him. Beren opened his eyes and focussed on the face above him, the deep eyes, the golden hair lit by the early sun. The air around them was fresh and warm, and birdsong gladdened the high spaces.

"There is a stream at the foot of this hill," Finrod said to him quietly. "Go and wash, and drink of the water."

Beren clambered down the slope to the stream, to the water gurgling over rocks. He made his way down the winding course a little way until he found a pool below a waterfall. There he took off his filthy kilt and stood for a long time under the head-battering stream of water. He spent some while trying to get the knots out of his hair, but gave up on that after a time and washed his faded kilt instead. He cupped his hands and took draughts of the living water. Eventually, clean and refreshed, he climbed back up the hill.

Finrod had made a small fire and was brewing something. The fingers of flame cracked and licked, playing like a living thing around the conical bark cup. Smoke tickled the nostrils.

Beren leaned forward for a sight and scent of the brew. "That smells a little like gorscht," he said.

"There are herbs in it, yes," said the Elf.

"Do you mean to dose me? What is in it?"

Finrod only smiled in answer. When the liquid was steaming, he poured a little into a smaller beaker which he handed to Beren. "Drink!" he said.

The subtle liquid, although not strong in taste, seemed to burn its way into Beren's centre and then out into the furthest extremity of every limb. He felt not just warmed, but cleansed; as though all black thoughts and despair were washed away. The sorrows were still there, but he no longer felt mastered by them. He suddenly became aware of the sweetness of the colours around him: the young green in the trees, the purity of the sky, the colours flashing in a tardy drop of dew. He savoured the fragrance of the air, the scent of new life, of spring.

"Sleep now," the Elf said to him. Beren was about to reply that he had never felt less like sleeping in his life; but suddenly he was not sure. He remembered then lying down on fresh ferns, but after that slumber took him in its arms like a mother.

Firelight flickering on the trees woke him, and a delicious smell of cooking. He turned over and saw that Finrod was tending another brew, his intent face bent over the fire.

Beren sat up, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes and trying to work out what was in the stew from the odours it gave off. Rabbit, to be sure; he also thought he recognized some herbs; but the dish had a power and aroma he had never quite encountered before.

“My, that smells good,” he said, pleasant anticipation in his voice.

Finrod smiled at him. “I can see that matters go better with you,” he said.

Beren sat down across the fire from him. “Well, a little,” he said soberly. “My heart is still heavy within me, and I have no more hope than before. But at least now I feel more able to bear my sorrows.”

“One cannot live without hope,” said the Elf.

“But I see none,” replied Beren. “Not through the whole length and breadth of this forsaken forest, that once I called home. Dorthonion has turned from me; she comforts me not. Indeed though, I wonder how I ever expected anything else. Stone and wood are not friends to beings of flesh and blood.

“Sometimes I feel like cursing this country. I have wondered if there is any luck here, for anyone. If there ever has been luck. Perhaps it is no good place for anybody. Perhaps none of us should ever have come here.”

“Why,” said Finrod lightly, “have you never been happy here?”

“Well, yes, of course,” the man replied, taken a little off balance. He thought for a moment. “Just not lately.”

The Elf-king left the stew and sat back. The warm rays from the fire played over his face and glowed redly off his tunic. Hairs on his head glistened like threads of fire in the light.

“Grief, joy, they are like the many-coloured leaves that fall in autumn,” he said. “Neither lasts for long.”

“Not for you, perhaps,” said Beren.

Finrod made no reply to this, but sat looking at the mortal man, his expression impossible to read. The firelight gleamed faintly off his eyes in dancing golden stars.

He stirred himself after a moment. “Come,” he said, “this food is ready. Let us eat before further talk.” He took up two bark bowls and poured some of the flavoursome brew into each.

Beren ate his portion slowly, savouring the tastes which blended and played together like a song of many voices. The warmth of it spread slowly through every limb. He sighed when it was gone, and put the bowl down.

Finrod had finished before him and lay now reclined on bracken at the edge of the circle of light. Looking at his former liege, Beren remembered something. He fumbled at the small pouch he wore on a thong around his neck, and brought out the ring.

“The Enemy robbed my father of this, after he was dead,” the man said. “But I recovered it.” He held it out to Finrod. “Take back your own, Lord.”

Finrod took the ring, which gleamed cold in his hand. He did not put it on.

“This, as you know,” he said, regarding the small silver circle, “is the ring of my House. My grandsire made it for my father, and my father gave it to me. I in my turn gave it to your father. It is the gift of my House to yours. I say ‘is’. The gift, being given, may not be ungiven. Therefore: take back your own, Lord.” He smiled as he said this and held the ring out to Beren.

Beren looked at the shining thing held in front of his eyes: the gleaming snakes, the burning gold of the

crown of flowers, the hot green of the jewels. He kept his hands in his lap.

“I am no lord,” he replied in a low voice. “Such is not for me.”

“Take it!” said Finrod with sudden fierceness, brandishing the ring. “Do you think lordship is some garland for the random fortune of birth? A guerdon only to the rich? A high honour to which the humble should not lift their eyes? Do you think it solely a matter for those with fine clothes and gilded towers? No! Lordship is a burden, something thrust upon one. Deeds make a lord. They made your father one, and they make you. Take it!”

With hesitation, Beren accepted back the ring. “You may say what you like, my lord,” he said, “but I hold it an unequalled honour all the same. As for lordship, I do not presume to gainsay you, but I would merely remark that I had thought it customary for lords to have followers. But as you see, I make here a nation of one. To name me lord of it is the same as to name me its basest knave. That target is all clout and no field – one hits it wherever one aims.”

“Followers you may never have, it is true,” said the Elf-king, “but I do not think it is in you to follow ever again. Peers you may find, but not betters. Not any more.”

“I won’t find either in the Pine Mountain,” said Beren, shaking his head. “Unless I rank myself with the deer and rabbits.”

“Then come to Nargothrond!” said Finrod. “It would please me immensely to have you at my side. And there you would find no followers perhaps, but companions certainly. It is not good for a man to be always alone. Come to us, Beren.”

Beren turned his eyes away, a troubled look on his face. Instead of answering directly he said, “Did you know a woman named Silmenen, of Aegnor’s company?”

“Yes,” replied Finrod, and sadness ran in his voice like the dark current beneath a mirrored pool. “I knew her.”

Beren sighed. “She was one who could see far. She told me once that my road would be a long one, but lonely and hard. Lately I have wondered if I have not yet seen more than its beginning.”

The other said nothing.

“My lord,” continued Beren, “once again I am in your debt. Your offer to me is like... well, it is like a shining beacon on a hill. I would come, with all my heart. But I cannot leave this place, to which I am chained. Even more so, now that the bones of my dead lie here. I must stay, and I will stay, to deal to the foe what flea-bites I can.”

“I feared that would be your answer,” said the Elf, “but I wanted you at least to hear the offer.” He examined the face of his companion. “Very well. Now, you carry the ring of my House. But the ring was meant as a token: a token of my vow, to aid your father, and all his line, in whatever need. I did not speak that promise lightly. Therefore I ask, is there some other way I can aid you? Do you have a sword?”

“I do,” replied Beren. He turned and dug into the pile of drying bracken where he had slept and pulled from it his father’s sword, still in its battered sheath. He handed this to Finrod, who drew the blade and held it glittering in the firelight.

“Why, I know this blade!” said the Elf. “I gave this myself to Boron, who was the grandson of Balan, he who became the first Bëor. It is of Noldorin make; a fine edge.”

“Father called it Dagmor,” said Beren.

“Yes,” replied Finrod, “that is its name. ‘Battle-the-Dark’, it might be rendered.”

“In truth, though,” went on Beren, “I find more use for bow and dart. I carry the sword more in memory of Father. But it is something to have one all the same.”

“Indeed,” said Finrod. “It needs a new sheath, but that is nothing. What of other equipage? Is there aught else I can send you?”

“Arrows,” replied Beren. “Or at least the heads. Shafts I can make, if not well.”

“Essay it not,” said the other. “We can easily supply your needs of both. Indeed, touching the metal-work, I know one who would do it very gladly. One who knows you and honours you.”

Beren was mystified. “I cannot think who you mean,” he said. “I know no Elvish smiths – only Maegam, and he perished in the Flame.”

Finrod laughed as if with delight at a jest, his fire-gilded locks tossing. “Did I say he was an Elf?” he replied.

A picture formed slowly in Beren’s mind. “No,” he said, “you cannot mean – it cannot be Telchar.”

“It is!” exclaimed the other merrily. “He came to us last year.”

“Telchar is in Nargothrond?” asked Beren. “But why? He is... it does not seem...”

“Gebshâr died,” Finrod said simply.

Beren sat up in surprise. “King Gebshâr, dead?” he exclaimed. “But he was not old. How...?”

“Telchar tells us that the king was found with his mouth and nose filled with gold dust,” said Finrod drily. “Filled. Your guess is as good as mine as to how it got there.”

Beren was silent while the uncomfortable possibilities played before his mind. One name loomed large. “Then is Yg now king in Nogrod?” he asked.

“He is,” said Finrod.

A whole panoply of memories of the time long past filled Beren’s thoughts; of the grinding, endless days of his lonely pupilship.

A point occurred to him that he decided to mention, since circumstances had so presently arranged themselves to suggest it. “I used to wonder, my lord,” he said diffidently, “in those days, when I was a child with the Dwarves, whether it was quite fair of the Eldar to seek advantage of Gebshâr’s sickness and desire, and consequently of the duty his subjects owed to him, by doling out to them their treasure-finding lamp-light in such calculating and miserly amounts. It does not seem consonant with the nobility of the Eldar as I have known them.”

“You might well think not,” replied Finrod, “but I would reply that like deserves like. You will know for yourself, having spent those years with them, that Dwarvish hearts are hard. They will not give; only trade. And they seek ever to screw out the meanest bargain the trade will bear. They therefore should not complain if they receive from us in the same coin.”

Beren, remembering the generosity of his forge-companions, did not quite see the matter in the same light, but he chose not to pursue the point further. Instead he said, “Touching Telchar, I can well understand that discretion might urge him to remove himself out of Yg’s grasp as soon as that Prince came to the throne. Indeed, he once told me as much himself. But I wonder that he did not go to Belegost, which is the city of his birth, and so much closer. Surely not even Yg could touch him there?”

“Indeed, the Queen returned thither,” said Finrod. “I think you know her? But Telchar follows another star. But enough of that, I will speak no further of another’s affairs. Telchar the Dwarf will make your arrow-

heads with a good will, that is all you need to know. So, we have you equipped; but as you say, you want for followers. Can I send you some? A hundred Elvish archers could do much to aid you.”

Beren thought about this for a long time. He knew straight off what his answer was going to be; he just needed some time to work out why. “I think – not,” he said in the end. “Once more I am sensible of your magnanimity, my lord, and I wish I had some fitting way to show my gratitude. If it would truly make a difference, be sure I would accept. But what I pursue here is no military campaign. I am a fugitive, not a soldier. I cannot hope to make any weighty stroke of war, only to cling to my country as long as I can. There are better uses for your hundred archers – indeed, I admit it, a better use for me would be at your side, defending your great Halls in the South, as you have offered. But I do not follow ‘best’: my business here is a purely personal one. No, I believe I must remain here alone to the end: a one-man defiance, both lord and knave in one.”

Finrod leaned forward. “My friend,” he said, “you have said that you feel no hope, see no future; that you cling on here in grim stubbornness, simply because you must. I cannot view you so. Silmenen saw glory for you; and glory there will be.”

“Not here,” replied the man bleakly.

“Yes,” insisted Finrod, “here.”

Beren shook his head. “Silmenen said not so.”

“She was a great seer among us,” said the Elf, “but others too can see, if not so far. Shall I tell you what I have seen for you? Such deeds I have seen, like blazing stars in the sky! This Mairon who now rules this land in Morgoth’s stead: you will wreak havoc with his every plan. No place of his will remain closed to you. You will reach his throat, his very throat; you will force him to his last throw. None will match you, none will catch you. Alone you may be, but vagabond never. Say rather, a solitary king in the North.”

Beren met this with a sceptical look. “No place closed?” he said. “Forgive me, my lord, but those sound like rash words. Indeed, just the sort of throw-away glamour that Bregolas would have despised – while trading largely in it himself.”

“I mean exactly what I say!” Finrod insisted.

“You speak as if I could even raid Mairon in his captured tower.”

“You can,” replied Finrod. “Only you can. No-one else. And I think that you will.”

“Oh, come! There are hundreds of Orcs in that tower!” protested Beren. “Hundreds! And worse things!”

“Nevertheless.”

“You’ve *seen* this?”

Finrod shook his head. “Not as a picture before the eyes. It is more like – a clear memory of the future.”

Neither spoke then for some little time. The man was trying to assimilate these strange words; the Elf was busy with his own thoughts.

“I envy you this foresight,” remarked Beren at last. “I can see further than many into the now; but from the future I receive at best only cloudy hints.”

“You envy it?” said Finrod. “You should not. Such knowledge burns. What happiness or other advantage did Silmenen derive from her sight? A wise woman among us has declared that the only purpose to foresight is to demonstrate the perfect uselessness of knowing answers to the wrong questions.”



“I cannot believe that,” said Beren.

“You wish to see your future, laid out in front of you like a map?” said Finrod. “You think you would find that helpful? Knowing one’s fate does not allow one to avoid it, I can tell you that.”

The remark made Beren curious. “Do you, then, know your own fate?” he asked.

“The when and the how of my death,” replied Finrod, “no. But I know in whose cause I will die. More than that I will not say.”

Beren tried to see the other’s face, but it was shadowed at the edge of the waning pool of light.

Finrod leaned forward and cast his bark bowl onto the coals of the fire. The flames caught it, and in the increase of light his face could clearly be seen, and the sadness in his eyes. “That is enough talk for one night,” he said.

“Where will you sleep?” asked Beren. “You will be cold. You have no fur.”

The other smiled at him. “I do not often need to sleep,” he replied. “I shall walk under the stars. I shall remember the times that were, and dream of the times that are to come. That will be all the rest I need this night.”

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Beren dreamed strange, disturbed dreams in which he shrank from glittering eyes in a black horror, and in which he leaped from a high place. Birdsong woke him in the early morning. Everything was soaked with dew.

He found Finrod on the peak of the hill, gazing into the West. After greeting the Elf, Beren said, “What is your intention, Lord? Will you stay here a while?”

“I cannot,” said Finrod. “I have cares in the South to take up. But I will walk in your woods this one day. Will you come?”

“Of course,” smiled Beren.

Beren followed his former liege-lord through the trees. The Elf set a good pace, but he trod lightly and was hardly to be heard in his going. Beren had never seen an Elf move through woods before, and there was something about it which caught his attention. It was a long time before he could put his finger on it, but in the end it came to him: Finrod moved effortlessly, like a fish through water. He moved as if he belonged here.

They wandered through the fresh woods that morning, relishing the new life which spring brought forth. High in the pine-clad southern hills they found a forest pool, hidden and shadowed in a fold in the ground. Laughing, the two shed their gear and dived in. The water surface was covered with pine-pollen which coated the skin when one emerged.

Later, after they had scraped off the bulk of the clinging pollen and were using the sun to dry themselves, Beren asked more about Telchar. “I find it rather wonderful that the old Dwarf should seek refuge among your people rather than his own. It raises all sorts of questions in my mind. Will you not tell me more?”

Finrod grinned at him. “No,” he said, “for the story is not mine to tell. Perhaps you will learn more in time; then again, perhaps you will not.”

Beren felt a little nettled. “Always these hints and riddles,” he grumbled. “Why can’t Elves ever speak plainly?”

The sun-haired Elf laughed. "My thoughts are my own," he said, "to reveal or not as I please. You do not tell me all of your mind, and rightly so."

Beren thought then to bring up a subject which had been on his mind. "Since you will not tell me any stories of others," he said, "perhaps you will not grudge me a word or two about one which concerns me more nearly? I have wondered: we had no tidings of our folk who fled, none at all, in all these long years. Do you happen to know any news of them?"

"Nothing of my own direct knowledge," replied his companion, "but I had heard that some had settled in Brethil, others had made the longer journey to Dor-lómin. Some, too, fight beside Maedhros in the East. Further than that I do not know."

"Did you chance to hear anything of my mother?" added Beren. He felt a little apprehensive about the answer.

But Finrod shook his head, sympathy on his face. "Nothing," he said. "I am sorry."

Beren sighed. "My father believed her dead," he said, "and in truth, nothing else seems likely. But I would like to know for sure."

Later they hunted and killed a small deer. Butchering the carcass and arranging the strips of meat to smoke took the remainder of the day.

"I hate to kill the beasts," said Beren as they lay around the evening's fire, having scrubbed the blood and dirt off their bodies in the stream below Beren's camp. "But I have to eat, and a man cannot run and hide on roots and herbs alone."

"It does not look to me as if you eat often," observed his companion, eyeing Beren's hollow flanks.

"Can you wonder at it?" replied the man. "Those filth of Orcs were coursing me all through the snow-time, like hounds after a hare. I had a hard enough time keeping my skin whole. They have left me alone these several weeks now, Powers be most heartily thanked, but even so I do not think I would have dared build such a fire on my own."

"It is safe to do so," said Finrod. "There is presently no Orc or spy within miles of here."

"I know that," said Beren, "but the habit of fear is hard to break."

They feasted on roast deer and on starchy roots which they baked in the embers. At the end of it, after wiping the grease from his mouth with a swab of grass, Finrod asked if Beren would tell him more of how he had recovered the Ring.

Beren looked glumly at the fire. Loth was he to think of that time. He sighed, however, and said, "They must have cut it from Father after he lay dead. They cut off his whole hand, you know. After I... after I had seen to the fallen, I followed the Orcs. It was a hard run but an easy trail. Thanks to the Powers, they travelled easy and slow. I caught up with them by night as they camped by the Rock Water – Rivil, I mean. Their captain held up the hand in boast. He said he would keep the ring for himself. I crept close until I could spring out and take it from him. By what luck I do not know, all the arrows missed my body. I came away. That is all."

"Did they not hunt you afterwards?" asked Finrod.

"It is not difficult to elude those scum when there is no snow to make tracks," replied Beren.

"How many were there?"

Beren shrugged. "Some hundreds – I don't know. I didn't stop to count them."

“And the captain?” asked Finrod.

Beren replied by drawing his finger across his throat.

The Elf-king laughed. “Some hundreds. And yet you still tell me you are no match for a few Orcs in a tower?”

“You mean your Minas Tirith? It’s a *fortress*,” protested the man. “How would I even get in?”

“Alas, no longer mine,” the other said. “But that is neither here nor there. I know you will find a way.” The confidence in his voice was plain to hear.

Beren was silent for a time. He was curious in spite of his disbelief. “I can’t believe you have me even thinking about this,” he said. “All right then. Tell me something of how it is laid out. Unless you think the plan will now be altered?”

“Mairon, curse him,” said the Elf, “found a way to undermine the guard-words that knitted the stones together; thus was the fortress lost. Yet I doubt he has changed much in the pattern of the place. Why should he?”

“So what can you tell me?”

“The first thing I must tell you is that you will not enter through the front gate.”

“All right,” said Beren. “What of the other gates?”

“There are no other gates,” replied the Elf.

Beren snorted. “Riddles again,” he said.

Finrod shrugged. “You will find their answer quicker than I.” He sat up and began sweeping a patch of earth free of leaf litter. “Come,” he said, “I will make some drawings; so goes it quicker than words, and sits better in the memory. Will you make a light for us?”

Beren was confused. “I? Light? How?” he asked.

Finrod sat back on his haunches and laughed merrily. “Why, with your ring!” he replied. “Did you think it a mere gaud? Pshaw – it was made by high Noldor in the Land of the Ever-living, under the eye of Aulë the Maker himself. It is much more than it seems, and has many powers. Bid it make light for us.”

Beren pulled the ring out of his pouch and looked wonderingly at it, before turning his puzzled gaze back to his companion. “What do I do?” he said.

“Oh, by the eight winds of Middle-earth,” exclaimed Finrod. “Command it! No, here, give it to me.” Beren handed him the ring. The Elf held the band of metal high and spoke directly to it. “*Arcorma, mánalyanen, á silë!*”<sup>1</sup> he said in a voice which rang with sudden power. Instantly a cone of white light blazed down from the ring. Beren had to hold his hand in front of his face against the glare. “Hold it while I draw,” commanded Finrod. He took a twig and drew several sketches under the actinic light, explaining as he went. Beren had to work hard to suppress his wonder at the ring and to concentrate on the drawings. There was no heat, but the light was so bright he could see the bones in his hand as shadows against the red glow that suffused his flesh. After some questions and explanations, Finrod sat back. “That is all that it will profit you to know,” he said. “Enough light now.”

“Er...” said Beren.

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1 Quenya: noble ring, of your courtesy, let light be!

“Tsk,” said Finrod, “did you learn nothing of the old language from your aunt?”

The young man racked his brains. “*Hauta?*<sup>2</sup>” he ventured, with no result. The ring blazed on.

Finrod sighed, took the glaring centre of light in his own hand again and addressed it. “*Á havē!*<sup>3</sup>” he commanded, and the unearthly light cut off. “*Hantan, a corma*<sup>4</sup>,” he concluded, and gave the ring back to the half-blinded Beren. “It is well that the Enemy is far from here,” he remarked. “We have just proclaimed ‘here is one of the Noldor’ for all who have eyes to see.”

Beren looked wonderingly at the ring as it lay in his palm, quiescent now in the firelight. But drowsiness was creeping into the edges of his mind again. The evening had grown late; the fire had sunk to a living heart of red coals.

He yawned. “I will sleep now,” he said.

“And in the morning I must return,” said Finrod.

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It rained in the morning, but neither paid the weather much attention. Elves live in the world; made dwellings are for them something of an afterthought, arranged more for defence and for the pleasure of their beauty than as mere shelter against the caprices of wind and water. As for Beren, he had long been used to view things in similar vein. When the rain stopped, Finrod laughed for sheer joy of it, squeezing the water from his train of golden hair. Beren did likewise with his own thick mane, with less success.

“I must hack me some of this hair off,” he remarked.

“I must away,” Finrod said. “I will send you the war-gear as I promised.”

“I thank you for it,” said Beren, “although I am tired of killing. I kill and kill and kill, and what for? It cannot bring my father back, nor my friends who are gone.”

Finrod shrugged. “Vermin must be killed to cleanse the house,” he said. “It is an ugly task, but inescapable.”

“I wonder,” said Beren. “Can anything good be founded in a lake of the blood of thinking beings? No matter how vile they are. Is there no hope that they could become better?”

The Elf-lord looked at him curiously. “Andreth told me I did not understand the human heart so well as I believed,” he said. “I think she was right.”

“Andreth is gone with the others,” said Beren, “else I would ask her why I must be condemned to this life of bloodshed. I can see no good reason. It is in my mind to stop, and to do something else.”

Finrod leaned over and touched him lightly on the knee. “Beren,” he said, “I must say once again, you do not recognize your place on the wider stage. You see only yourself, and a landscape empty of friends and full of enemies. You see no hope of winning back to the fine, easy days of your childhood. In that I must agree: you cannot win this war. Dorthonion is lost.”

Beren said nothing; only stared at him glumly.

“I offered you a place in the South,” continued Finrod, “because of the duty I felt I owe to you. I felt it was fair to give you the choice. When you refused, my heart grieved for you as a man, as my friend; but it leapt in my chest for the world’s sake.”

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2 Quenya: ceasing?

3 Quenya: let it cease!

4 Quenya: I thank you, O ring.

“The world? What do you mean?”

“It is of no importance in itself whether a few Orcs live or die. You are right in that. But consider all those living below, in the Southlands.” Finrod’s free arm swept through an arc in that direction. “Your value, your supreme value, lies in what you mean for these others. Through this dreadful war, thousands of men and women, yes and Elves too, who had no other wish but to live their lives in peace, to sing and to love, to weave and to sow, have suffered their dreams to be smashed, their lives blighted, their hopes slaughtered. The descent into full and grievous domination by the Enemy has seemed to them only a matter of time. The chains are not yet about their necks, but the rattle of them has been loud in their ears. But now what do they hear? A tale is noised through the camps and halls; a story of a band of Men, a handful, who defy the Beast, again and again and again. You have been alone here, you Companions, but we have heard of you – the rumour of your deeds has run like fire among us. Can you imagine what that has meant for us? How heads have lifted, colour come back to cheeks, and light sprung again into eyes? How with new heart we have sought counsel with one another and begun to plan how we might fight back? If you have not had this thought, Beren of the North, then you do not know your own worth!

“Now the Companions are fallen, having held for longer than any of us had believed possible. Fallen, all but one. Beren remains. Who is he, what does he signify? Is he, as he seems to think of himself, some lost waif, wandering in grief, killing a few here and there without aim or purpose? No! He is the first soldier of the vanguard of the Peoples of the Light. He holds the standard high yet; and while he holds it, so are we all better strengthened to face the Enemy eye to eye, and more firmly girded for the coming fight.”

It was some moments before Beren could think what to say. “I... did not know that any had heard of us, down there,” he said with hesitation. “We had thought ourselves forsaken, unknown. Is it really true? That our names and deeds have been on men’s tongues?”

“It is,” said Finrod.

Beren thought some more. “Your words are very fair, Lord,” he said at last slowly. “These are new thoughts to me. I must think more on them.”

“Do so,” replied Finrod.

But when the Elf-king was at last ready to take his leave, Beren burst out suddenly, “Lord, why did you come only now? A year earlier might have saved much!”

“I have many cares,” answered Finrod gently but firmly. “I have come as I could. And I am not of your opinion: I do not think I could have saved anything. I could not have cured your friend the smith, nor diverted him from his courses.” He laid a hand on Beren’s shoulder. “My friend, we are all helpless straws borne down on the torrent of fate. Even I. In time you will see that.”

Beren looked down at his feet. “Your pardon, Lord,” he said in a low voice. “I seem ungrateful. I am not: you came to me in a dark hour, and you have soothed my pain to a level I can bear. I am thankful for that, and for your words of challenge and comfort; and for arrows, if you can send me any. But what I am most in need of is direction.”

“Nay,” replied the Elf, shaking his head. “There at least I may know you better than you know yourself. You will find your path again, do not fear. Your immediate needs are more practical: you want shelter and companions.” He smiled suddenly, the sunlight glinting from his eyes and lighting his white teeth. “But these too you shall find. The one may lie beneath your feet, and the other in some place scarcely more likely. Farewell now! We will see each other again; but not here in the North, I think.”

Before Finrod left, he did something strange – he walked around Beren, looking him over intently.

“What are you doing?” asked the puzzled man.

“Time reveals all,” answered Finrod cryptically. He turned then and sped off with light foot down the slope. Soon the white flash of his tunic was lost between the trees.

Beren watched his friend’s going in the loneliness of his heart. But once the last sight had vanished, he glanced at the ground, puzzled. Shelter beneath his feet? Just what had that meant?

\* \* \* \* \*

Through those shining months of spring, as the sun rose high, the man wandered over the face of his land. It would be wrong to call him aimless; it was simply the way of the Druug to move with the flow of things. Equally, although thoughts and scenes passed in unending train through his mind, he was far from indifferent to the world around him. Indeed, the forest was now so much part of him as to feel almost like an extension to his body. The land breathed under the sun, and he breathed with it.

He came back time and again to the place where he had camped with Finrod. He had thought much on the Elf-lord’s parting words, and it came to him that Finrod must have meant a cave. This he could easily believe, because there were caves in the ground here, so much was obvious from the way in which some brooks high on the rock disappeared into the ground; whereas the broad stream which led north from the foot of the hill had its beginning in a roiling pool at the base of a precipice. However, search as he might, he found no way in; until one day the way in, as it were, found him. That finding was almost the death of him.

It happened when he was high on the hill, nosing through some of the broken gullies which furrowed its upper flanks. The passages were not easy, being overgrown, stony and awkward, and often infested with brambles. Beren was sure-footed; he had well learned the art of perceiving what support his questing foot would find. All at once, though, as he stepped on a place on the earth, he suddenly had the alarming feeling that it was no longer firm.

Before he could pull back or do anything to prevent it, the ground vanished from beneath his feet.

His bow was slung about his body, but it caught sideways in some growth, and his clutching hands also arrested his fall. He had a moment in which to stare unbelievably at the daylight gully into which his head and shoulders still protruded before the heather and grasses which were all that held him tore out of the soft earth and let him plummet into the blackness below.

The stomach-clutching, helpless horror of the drop; the rapidly shrinking patch of light above him. Then he struck.

He was not killed, as he expected, only stunned. He found himself in darkness under chill water. Lungs bursting, not knowing which way was up, the man struck out in blind despair. He found the water surface, let out his breath in a whoop, just before the stream slammed him against a rock. He sank again, half stunned.

After a timeless period of struggle and terror Beren found himself clinging to a slippery rock in complete darkness, the unseen torrent loud around him. He was shivering violently from reaction as much as from the chill of the water, but the cold was creeping into his bones all the same and making him weak.

Get out of the water, he said to himself – worry about the rest later.

He could not make any headway clambering onto the rock to which he held. After several gasping attempts he told himself sternly to desist. There was no other option but to deliver himself up again to the torrent, whose terrifying strength was manifest through its roaring. He made himself let go.

After what must have been only moments – although he struck his head in the passage, so was not certain of the elapsed time – Beren found himself with footing underneath, shelving to dry rock under his questing hand. The bruised and sodden man dragged himself out of the water like a wounded crab.

Here it was almost – but not quite – entirely dark. There was not such an amount of light as to allow him to

see, but there was some, although from what source he could not at first make out.

At least his eyes still worked. There was a wound on his head where he had struck it, but since his face was as soaking wet as the rest of him, he could not tell how badly he was bleeding. He felt bruised all over – he knew he had passed over at least one waterfall in the last passage – but there seemed to be no broken bones.

His bow was gone.

For a long time Beren lay there, shivering violently with cold and wondering what to do next. There did not seem to be much he *could* do. Suddenly unbidden to his mind came a vision of Finrod's strong face in the firelight, speaking words of command. The ring! Did he still have it?

Powers be thanked, his pouch still hung around his neck. He fumbled with numb and shaking fingers at the tie and brought forth the ring. The faint light, which his dark-adjusting eyes now perceived was coming from beneath the water, just touched the silver circle.

Beren held the ring high above his head. What were the words?

"*Á silë!*" he commanded.

And lo! The great light held within the ring blazed out as before. It was as if he held a captive star. So great was the contrast with the former dark that it was some time before he could bear the light, but must needs stare only at the red glow which passed through his tight-closed eyelids.

When at last he was able to open his eyes a little, he found himself in the middle of a wide open space. It was a cavern which extended into the shadows on both sides and into dimly-seen domes overhead. Veils of pink and pale stone hung in swooping arches and clustered ropes from the high ceiling. Thousands of crystal facets, embedded in the smooth shapes, flashed at him from every side. When he moved the ring, some of the brilliant mirrors faded, while others, hitherto unseen, woke to life.

He was crouching on a broad platform, polished by water. The stream which had carried him there tumbled into the cavern through a low arch and spread into a wide pool which surrounded the platform on two sides. The surface of the pool was disturbed by knots and knuckles of turning water, but he could find no obvious outlet.

Sticks and other rubbish swept down by the stream had piled up at one end of the open area. He found his battered bow wedged in the mass. He freed it and placed it to one side.

Beren knew he should explore the passages, but bruised, cold and weary as he was, he had little appetite for wandering lost through the hill. Light he had, but he had no way to map his passage.

His speculative eye fell on the mass of driftwood. He had flint and steel in his pouch, but perhaps there was a quicker way to fire. What was the Quenya for it? Ah yes.

He gathered a handful of vegetable junk and thrust the blazing white point which was the ring into its centre, throwing giant bars of shadow across the cave walls. Holding the ring in just two fingers for caution, he addressed it again: "*Á narë!*"

Instantly the white light was replaced by a tongue of red fire which sputtered out along the axis of the ring into the fuel. In seconds, flames were leaping high. In something of a panic, Beren tried to remember the word for stop. "*Á havë, á havë!*" he cried. The fire and light from the ring faded, but the wood was well alight, cracking and smoking.

Beren looked at the ring. It felt foolish to thank an inanimate object, but on the other hand it couldn't hurt, so he said to it "*Hantan, a coram... a corma,*" in polite tones, then stowed it back in his pouch.

After the excitement of calling on the ring's power it was a relief to sit by such a familiar thing as a fire, even

in such an unfamiliar setting. He curved himself around the blaze and began luxuriously to warm up. He had been worried that the smoke might build up and smother him, but he found that there was a constant, imperceptible draft in the cave which drew the smoke away into a high corner of the cavern from whence it disappeared. Indeed it was rather more convenient than a fire on the outside, since the slight waft of air never varied in strength or direction.

Beren gathered enough half-rotted material to shield him from the cold stone, threw himself down onto it, and slept.

When he woke, little remained of the fire but a few embers winking dimly red under the ashes. He lay on his back and stared into the blackness above while he considered what he should do. He had light at his command; and perhaps with the aid of charcoal he could mark his passage and so avoid running in circles until he died. He needed to find a way out, and there seemed no alternative but to explore for it. There might be drops and climbs, or narrow places; almost certainly would be. He should be all right though, so long as he went with caution, kept his head.

All the while he was thinking these things, in the back of his mind was the memory of the faint light he had perceived – ‘seen’ was too strong a word for it – after his arrival in the cave. Did that not indicate an outflow? Why risk danger and confusion in the unexplored bowels of the hill when he had an exit at hand? Besides, he doubted there was a dry exit from that cave system large enough to pass a man; he had not found one outside, despite days of searching for exactly that.

His Druug-trained senses told him that it was not yet dawn in the external world, so he sat himself down to wait.

Some hours later he woke with a start; he had drifted into a doze. It was high day outside. A little vexed with himself for oversleeping, the man peered into the darkness. Was that something...? He felt his way to the edge of the water, then cautiously into it, until his feeling hands came to the edge of the shelf he crouched upon. Indeed he could *see* the edge, a faint outline of rugged black. The light, what there was of it, appeared to be seeping into the cave from beneath the shelf of rock.

Beren considered. He could leave bow and valuables here while he took an exploratory swim. But how if he could not get back? After a moment of quandary he laughed, felt for his bow in the dark, then slipped into the chilly water.

It turned out not to be difficult. He had to swim fairly deep at first, but once he had done so he found the way was clear. The passage was broad, and not too long, and he was carried by the current of the water. The greenish light grew as he kicked along, and at last it opened wide above him. He swam up and broke the surface, gasping but triumphant. He found himself, as he had half expected, in the pool he knew at the foot of the cliff.

After a few days, as soon as he had recovered, he came again to the pool and sat beside it, thinking. In the end, with great reluctance, he discarded the cave as a shelter, because he could not imagine how he could emerge wet in the freezing depths of winter without having immediately to build a fire to ward off frostbite. It was simply not practical. He sighed, and commenced looking for a better cave; but he never found one.

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Finrod had said that Beren would find companions. But who, and where? The land was empty of men, of that he was certain. There were the animals of course, and it had to be admitted that he enjoyed a certain real companionship with the eagles. His relations with Fairfeather, Bronzemail, Farsight and the rest had, however, never reached the depth of the former friendship with Thunderbolt; likewise he had not the same bond with R’raag as with her grandfather. Apart from these, the only denizens of the land he could bring to mind (apart from the Enemy) were the Ents. Perhaps Finrod had meant them? Of the Ents, he was sure he could rule out the women. Although many were no doubt well-intentioned, the few who were deadly made them impossible, taken as a group. But even with the male Ents he was unsure where he stood. He suspected



that many, if not most of them, viewed Men in a light hardly to be distinguished from that in which they viewed the Orcs themselves. Indeed, from the point of view of a tree, there would seem little difference between dying to make someone's farm and dying through another's simple urge to destruction.

The only Ent with whom Beren had been close was Rattlecone; and where Rattlecone was concerned, he had a bad conscience. It seemed to him that all he had ever done was to make one demand after another of Rattlecone. The Ent had always given in, but it had usually been against his better judgement; and more often than not, events had proven Rattlecone right.

In all the long years of the rebellion Beren had avoided Rattlecone. Neither had he encountered him by chance, although he had seen several others of the Ents in his peregrinations across the land. He had not wanted to meet Rattlecone until he could do *him* a favour for once; and the likelihood of such circumstance ever arising seemed small.

In the midst of his thinking about it, his mind swung suddenly like a weathercock. He would seek out his friend, and thank him at least, and apologize for his long absence. However, Beren was determined on one thing: that no power in Middle-earth would make him ask any more favours of the Ent.

He set out therefore one fine summer day for the upper valley of the Whitewater, where Rattlecone of old had made his principal home. But he was not to reach the Ent that day. In the meadows beside the Whitewater he crossed the track of some Orcs.

He leaned over and inspected the traces, then followed them for a little way. He did not have to deduce the direction of travel; he just read it straight off the prints. That there were two of the creatures was equally obvious, as was the fact that the smaller was weighted down by some load. But there was something more, some hint... Beren went carefully along the trail, scanning every inch of ground down to the bank of the river, looking carefully at the foliage along the way; and all the time, the certainty grew on him.

The load was a living captive.

The conclusion was puzzling all the same, because the supposed captive couldn't be anything very large. Was it, after all, just an animal? Perhaps, although he could not make himself believe it. Why would they keep such alive? But if not an animal, what else could it be?

He could answer this question himself if he caught up with the Orcs. They were not long hence, maybe an hour. Heading north. The man set out after them in his silent lope, a sharp eye kept on the traces.

Orcs were easy to track. He caught up with them over the ridge, in a shallow valley leading north. He knew the place; a little further down, in the winter of the Sudden Flame, Barahir's exhausted army had huddled in a snowy thicket, wet and frozen to the marrow after crossing the same stream he followed now.

The Orcs were not moving with much caution and it was easy to slip ahead and find a place to waylay them. Two quick arrows disposed of the monsters, and as they fell, a sudden memory came to Beren of the time years ago when Nose had rescued him. He had been the captive then.

He had not so far been able to get a good look at the Orcs' prisoner, but now, as Beren slipped silently through the last bushes, he saw that it appeared to be a small child or baby, bound in cords.

A child? How in the world did a *child* come to be here? He knelt beside it, and as the dazed infant turned frightened eyes to him, he saw that it was a girl. Very young by the size, no more than three or four, but something about that guess didn't quite fit – he was not sure what. She had a mass of curly dark hair, tangled now and full of burrs. Beren first cut away the filthy rag which had been bound over the child's mouth. The face was dirty and scratched, but what Beren principally noted was that it was covered or rather clouded with a fine, short down. When he went to release her feet, he found that these were covered in a mat of fur-like hair.

The little maid, once her legs were free, attempted to stand up, but she fell down again straight away. The bonds on her legs had been pulled cruelly tight. Her eyes, wide with fear, had been fixed on Beren the whole time. She shrank away from him now, hitching herself backward through the leaves.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said to her gently. “I won’t hurt you.”

The little girl showed no sign of understanding, just tried to hitch herself further away.

No sense in asking her a lot of questions, he thought. Best to carry her back to where the Orcs caught her; then I’ll likely know more. If she’ll let me carry her.

“What’s your name?” he said to her. No reaction. He touched himself on the chest and said, “Beren.” The child at least stopped her hitching movements at this. “Beren,” he said again. He pointed then to her. “And what’s your name?” he said, keeping his voice as soft as he could.

She opened her own mouth and whispered, “Etty.”

“Etty? That’s your name? Etty?”

The child nodded shyly.

“Well Etty,” he went on, “you’re a long way from home, your legs don’t feel too good I imagine, what say I give you a carry back? On my shoulders maybe?” There was no sign of comprehension on her features, so he went to her, still crouching. He made a gesture of carrying, but when he reached out, she shrank away from his hands. He said again, “I won’t hurt you,” and something in his eyes and tone must have reassured her, because she stopped shrinking then and allowed herself to be picked up. He held her easily at his side and she put a soft arm around his neck.

The sensation sent a curious pang through him. He could not remember the last time he had held a child. It touched him somewhere deep.

“Shall we go, Etty?” he said to her. The dark eyes in the downy face inches from his own turned to him and examined him seriously. “Go?” he said again, with walking finger movements, and this time she nodded. He set off up the gentle slope he had crept down a short time before. Some instinct kept him talking, of anything and everything, the day, the trees; just a soothing stream of words. He shifted her to the other side after a while. Etty said nothing, only looked around with wide eyes at the world, which appeared very different when seen from the height of her protector.

It had been clear to Beren almost from the start that she did not understand his speech, no matter whether he spoke in Grey-elven or in Mannish. She was clearly no Elf, nor Druug either; but then what was she? And what was a child so young doing in the wilds of Dorthonion?

The burden was growing heavy, even for his strength. “What say we switch now?” he said to her. “Shoulders?” He lifted her up and over behind his head. Her legs found their way on either side of his neck all right, as if she had been used to being carried so by somebody else. Her hands went over his eyes at first but after he gently moved them away, she remembered, and left his vision free.

He put his hands on her tiny feet, strange under their fur. The soles were tough as bull-hide: clearly these were feet which had never known shoes. “Toes not cold?” he said to her from turned head. “Toes?” He twiddled them gently and she giggled and pulled them away. “Come on Etty,” he said, “Let’s be doing.” He set off again then and found it easier. They were in fact not far from the river. He crossed the meadow with her and set her down on a warm boulder beside the rushing stream. She looked at the water with what he thought was a longing expression but seemed too tired and stiff to do anything about it. He cupped his hands and brought them up to her full of water. She steadied his large hands with her tiny ones and drank. As the small fingers clutched trustingly at his, again Beren was smitten by a sudden stab of unfamiliar feeling.

He had some dried meat in his bag, and a little starch-cake made from the roots of rushes, pounded and baked. He brought these out and offered them to her. She accepted a reed-cake shyly, murmured some thanks to him, then bit into it with relish. When she had finished it and had refused more, he asked with gestures and words if she was ready to go on. She held up her arms to him and he lifted her again into place on his shoulders. He clambered over the rocks of the stream-bed with some care and soon was on the other bank and close to the place where he had picked up the trail. From there he had to pay more attention to the ground. While his eyes were busy, he sought still to distract Etty, and now he thought to try songs. He dredged a tune or two from deep in his memory, cheerful rhymes of the sort which children of every race delight in. At first Etty tried to follow along, but the strange words defeated her and soon she was patting him on the side of his head to make him stop and listen to her own song. As the childish voice piped out, the first words she had said clearly to him, clouds of meaning began slowly to form in his mind in the way he was familiar with from long before with the Druug. He tried to pick up her tune and her words too, singing along, and the two voices, the high childish one and the resonant man's, graced the sunny woods. Beren was enjoying himself; he had not sung for a long while.

Suddenly it came to him where they were; and with that realization, he had the answer to the riddle. They were not far from that high place where he had once come across Rattlecone's Little People. He had not seen anybody on that occasion, only felt their flung stones, but he knew it now beyond doubt: this was a child of the Little People he was carrying.

Not far short of the cliff they came to a clearing. A small woven-grass basket lay there with herbs and roots scattered from it, and the tracks here made a knot that spoke of struggle. When Etty saw the basket she cried from remembered fear and clung to his head with both arms. Beren pulled her gently loose and brought her around to his chest where he could more easily sooth her. The sobbing child clung with both arms around his neck, her head warm against his. "It's all right," he said to her, "it's all right. You're safe now." He rocked her to and fro while he examined the traces. He thought she had entered from that side, there; but he would have to put her down and take a careful look. When the sobs had subsided a little he gently prised her arms loose and set her down. She watched him for a moment as he scanned the ground around the clearing and looked over the surrounding growth. She crawled over then and began tidying the roots back into the basket.

As soon as he felt confident that he could follow her trail he came back to pick her up. "Take you home now Etty, shall we?"

Etty wasn't going to have this, however: shook her head vigorously and said words to him which he thought were thanks and refusal. She tried to stand up, but she fell over again straight away.

He squatted down to her. "You'll have to let me help you, Etty," he said gently. "Come on, old girl. Be sensible now, you're in no state to climb that cliff on your own." She was crying again now and still speaking in impassioned tones. 'Secret' came into his understanding, and 'stranger', and 'not'.

"I understand," he said gently, "but there is nothing else to do. I can't leave you here." He picked her up again despite her protestations, grabbed the basket in his other hand, and set off carefully to follow back on the way she had wandered in the early morning of this day. The mood for songs was not right any more, so he rattled the basket of roots, some of which he recognized. "What's this for, Etty? Somebody sick?"

'Grandpa,' he distinctly understood, and 'legs'. He tried to repeat the words back to her. "'Grandpa, legs'? No good?"

The dark eyes regarded him gravely and she nodded. "(Something something) legs hurt," she said.

Powers, she was growing heavy. The faint marks of her feet – so very much lighter than those of the goblins! – led through several dells back to the foot of the cliff. Here and there he could see where she had plucked plants or dug for roots. The trail straightened at the cliff and began to be difficult to trace on the rocky ground. Beren, left arm aching under the weight of the child, had to stop several times and scan sharp-eyed for disturbed rock grains, tiny scuffs. Suddenly he lost the trail altogether, and at the same time the child in his clasp became tense.

“It’s here, isn’t it?” he said to her. “I’m sorry to open your secrets, Etty, but I need to get you home, and that’s all there is about it.”

He looked around carefully. There: just a tiny fleck of rock with that greasy gleam which betrays passage. There, another. The traces led into a crack where a sheet of rock was coming away from the wall. When Beren looked around the edge he found the narrowest of clefts. The pebbly path led steeply up it for a few yards, sideways on to the rock face. Beren could not see how it could lead much further in that direction, but then he had not been able to see the start of it either before he entered it. There was another thing he noticed: the winding way had undoubtedly seen the traffic of many small feet.

Carrying the little girl close against his chest, he squeezed into the cleft and slowly trod the path higher and higher. Each time he expected it to peter out, some twist or fold would reveal a further extension.

It was a steep climb and he began to sweat. The afternoon sun came into his eyes as he worked his way around the curve of the cliff.

Beren stopped, hearing noises from above. People were coming. He hesitated, unsure what to do, warding the sun from his eyes with his free hand as he tried to peer towards the upper portion of the track.

The oncoming party spotted him before he saw them. A sudden uproar of shouting erupted. He saw the oncomers then, right in the eye of the sun; realized too that the sun was glinting off edged weapons. At the same instant Etty shouted something, wriggled out of his grasp and tried to limp her way up the track.

A small figure hurried down out of the glowing nimbus, scooped up the little girl and then backed slowly away, glaring at Beren and waving a spear in his face. For the first time Beren was able to get a good look at one of the Little People.

This was obviously the girl’s father – he had the same look of hair and eye. The person stood barely three feet high, but appeared tough and well-knit. His head was crowned with a mop of the same chestnut curls as covered his feet, although he had no beard; which Beren found afterwards was general among the men of this people, although not universal. The man’s broad, suspicious face was only lightly furred in the same manner as his daughter’s. Beren noted abstractly how the sunlight gilded this facial down while devoting most of his attention to the spear point, made of finely-chipped flint and undoubtedly razor sharp, which was directed unwaveringly at his heart.

All this time the small man had been shouting non-stop in fierce tones at Beren. His daughter, clasped in his free arm, was beating him on the side of his head all the while and shouting with equal vehemence into his ear. After a moment, he stopped his noise and began to listen to what she was telling him. Beren picked up the sense of it: she was telling her father how the Giant – that was him – had rescued her, saved her life, given her food and drink, and carried her all the way home. At the end of the tale she wriggled loose again. Standing painfully on her bruised legs, she grabbed her father’s horny hand and pulled him determinedly towards Beren. The little man’s face was a study in mixed emotions – relief, chagrin, apprehension, shame, unquenched suspicion. He stepped with reluctance nearer, and as the spear point raised to point to the sky rather than his breast, Beren sank to his knees and extended his own hand. The hairy-footed creature edged closer, the whites of his eyes showing, until Etty could reach and grasp Beren’s hand as well. She brought the two very different-sized males together. They shook hands, and her father mumbled something which Beren knew to be thanks.

Etty was not finished yet. “Beren?” she asked him. Beren nodded and echoed his name back to her. Etty patted her father and said, “Bhalacho,” plus the word which clearly meant ‘father’.

Beren tried it out. “Balaco?” The father grunted non-committally, but Etty corrected him: “Bhalacho.”

The others in the party had by this time edged closer. There were five of them, goggled-eyed, armed with spears or bows which were not quite pointed either at him or away. They were all of similar colouring, but varied a little in age, size and physique.

Beren had left the basket of roots at the entry of the cleft. He said then the word for the roots he had learned from Etty and added those for 'grandpa', 'legs' and 'ill' for good measure. The last two matching pretty well with Etty's condition, he repeated them, pointing this time to Etty. After some discussion, Bhalacho and four of the rest of the party accompanied Beren back down the cleft while the fifth, a younger-looking chap, carried Etty higher. Her clear voice rang out for some moments after the separation, evidently giving her harassed-looking father further instructions about Beren.

After they had retrieved the basket, the Little People stood awkwardly. An older-looking one nudged Bhalacho and muttered something to him. With the air of a man about to do something he had never in his wildest dreams imagined doing, Bhalacho cleared his throat and addressed Beren in gruff tones. Beren listened carefully, then realized the gist: it was about hospitality. He was being invited to the top of the cliff. He nodded emphatically, and bowed deeply, an action which surprised the Little Folk and caused some nervous titters. With many a doubtful backward glance, they led him up the winding path.

On top of the cliff he found the same landscape he remembered: a wooded land falling towards a shallow valley. This time, however, there was a reception committee. There must have been thirty or forty of the Little People waiting there, of both sexes and all ages, and more were still streaming out of the trees. Instead of the former silence, the air this time was thick with exclamations, remarks, confirmations, scoldings, and disputations. The People were of all shapes and sizes, but all of them had their goggling eyes fixed on Beren, and all of them had their mouths hanging wide open, in the short intervals of time that is in which they were not using them for talking. Many of the small folk were holding spears; others carried stones, a sight which made Beren wince from painful memory.

There was a great deal of noise and confusion, but nothing seemed to advance any further until everyone's attention switched to a party making its slow way towards them through the trees. This turned out to be a chair carried on poles by four red-faced and puffing persons. They set the chair down in the cleared area, not too close to Beren, and he was able to get a good look at its occupant as she clambered with the help of somebody's arm to stand on her own feet. Another of the porters fetched her stick of thorn-wood. With the arrival of this person, undoubtedly someone of importance, the clamour of talk among the Folk sank to whispers.

Beren saw it was a fat little woman of great age, bent over almost double. Her hands on the thorn-wood cane were knotted with lumps of rheumatism. The tiny old woman craned up, squinting toward Beren, then motioned him over with an impatient beck. He went to her and knelt at her side, finally choosing to sit, because even kneeling he was taller than she was.

The two different creatures looked one another over. The woman, peering at him through the fog of her old eyes, made out a great shield of a face under a river of hair. Darker, the hair was, than most of the People bore, but touched with fiery lights where the sun caught it. It was a well-shaped face, once you got over the size of it. She looked from his lips, which were firm, to his great eye, which was clear and bold. A youngish man. She had never seen eyes like that before: they were a deep blue like the vault of summer heaven. She could not decide if they were kind or fierce. Perhaps both, according to need. She made a tiny grunt, satisfied with what she saw.

Beren in his turn took in a small, round face laden with years, fissured and folded like the bark of a venerable tree, under a crop of pure white hair. The deep-set eyes, straddling a hooked nose, had once been brown, but were faded at the rims almost to grey with age. Her features were those of one accustomed to authority, and on her deeply furrowed brow sat the wisdom of many summers. He was reminded of Willow – only Willow had been lean; whereas this matriarch was well covered.

"So!" she barked at him suddenly. "You are the giant who rescued our Etty. You don't seem 'specially fearsome to me." She considered him a while, making soft 'umph' noises in her throat. "Do you understand my words, hey?" Beren held up thumb and forefinger with a small gap between them. The matriarch nodded. "Better than nothing, I suppose. Will you come to my house and drink tea with me? Tea?" She made appropriate gestures, but Beren had understood, and nodded. He bowed to her from his awkward seated position. By the warm winds! she thought, what a lump he was. She gestured to her porters. "Well come on

then, help me in, let's go." They edged in past the giant, but he forestalled them, offering the old lady his own hand. She flashed the great creature a look of surprise and gratitude and with only the barest hesitation rested her knotted paw on his broad hand. With the aid of that support, she sat herself painfully into the padded chair with an audible "Oof!" Beren stood up and stepped back to allow the porters to take up their burden again. They hefted the fat old matriarch and led the way down a faint trail leading toward the bottom of the valley.

They arrived at the broad grassy area he remembered from last time. Again, the difference was that whereas last time it had been empty, this time it buzzed with activity. The visit of a giant to the town of the Little People was clearly something not far off the event of the century! All the inhabitants not absolutely bed-bound and at death's door seemed to have assembled to goggle at the lumbering monster and to engage in ceaseless discussion of the phenomenon with their neighbours.

To the accompaniment of a flood of excited talk, punctuated by irritated orders from the old lady, a steaming pot of aromatic-smelling tea was eventually produced, together with several plates of cakes, scones, bannocks and other delicacies of the baker's art. Where to seat Beren proved to be something of a problem, eventually solved by providing him with some boards to place between the grass and his bottom. He found these a little hard, but he tucked his kilt between his crossed legs and gave off as earnest a simulation of pleasure and comfort as he could.

His first thought had been to enquire of his erstwhile charge, so he turned to the matriarch and spoke the little girl's name in enquiring tones.

"Etty? Etty was put to bed," the old lady told him, but at that moment, as if prompted by the sound of her name, the familiar little head popped out of a hole. "Beren, Beren!" she called, waving. "Here I am!" A harassed-looking woman popped up in the hole beside her. Shooting a nervous glance at Beren, she scolded Etty and urged her with tongue and hands back into the burrow.

The old lady turned back to her guest. "Is that your name, then?" she said. "Beren?"

He nodded.

"Funny," she mused, "never thought of giants having names, somehow. Do you have families and everything too then, hey? Wives? Is there a Mrs Giant? A Mrs Beren? No, there ain't; I can see that a mile off. Others of you might have, though, there's no saying." Beren had been trying to follow this, with only partial success. The old woman patted him on his great shank of a brown arm. "Never mind, ducks. But I ain't showing me manners. I got your handle but you don't know mine. You can call me Granny White-top, or just Granny. Understand? Got it? Granny! Grandmother!"

"Gran, mudder," he repeated carefully.

She chuckled. "Close enough. Maybe you'll pick up the talk, maybe you won't. Do you like the tea? Tea good?" She pointed to the cup he was holding, dwarfed in his great plates of hands.

"Tea good," the giant replied. "Good good!"

"Very good," she corrected.

"Ver' good tea." He lifted a cake. "Ver' good! Mmmm." He rubbed his stomach and closed his eyes in pantomime enjoyment.

Granny White-top laughed delightedly. "Why, you have manners," she crowed. "Better'n mine, maybe. I suspicioned it before, when you went to help me into me chair. You *must* have had a mother, master Beren-giant, and a good one too." She was struck by the mind-boggling concept of a mother that size, but shoved the thought aside. "Mother?" she asked the great creature, touching his arm again. "You have a mother?"

The giant looked sad. “Modder – modther sick,” he said. “Ver’, ver’, ver’ sick. Not sick. Ver’ not good.” He shook his head.

“Your mother is ill? No. Is your mother dead?” said Granny gently. “Is that what you’re trying to say?”

“Mother dead,” he confirmed. “Fa-ther dead.”

“Oh dear,” said Granny. “I’m that sorry. Me own Ma and Pa been dead this long time o’ course, but I’m supposing you’re only a young fellow, and that’s worse.”

They talked on for another half an hour or so, by the end of which Beren had a very much better understanding of the language of the people, and the beginnings of the capability to speak it. He learned that their word for themselves was Zukukun, which meant Hairy-feet; that they had lived in this place for a time out of mind; that they farmed goats, grain and potatoes; that they indeed lived in burrows; that Etty’s misadventure was not the first time they had tangled with Orcs, who they named Harrek; but that such unpleasantnesses happened thankfully seldom.

Granny stopped suddenly in mid-flow, aware of the start of an uproar towards the far side of the clearing. She made out a familiar voice shouting, and sighed. Oh dear – *him*. He *would* have to come back now.

“Where is it?” the voice shouted. “Stand aside! Let me deal with this! Stand aside!”

The crowd fell back to the sides to reveal the approach of a curious figure: another Zukuk, rather a large, beefy one as they went, but still less than four feet tall. This personage lugged a heavy wooden shield in one hand and was waving some sort of blade in the other. He was clad in an assemblage of leather pieces which had been sewn together with thongs and which were covered everywhere with brass rings of varying sizes. The creature stamped right up to Beren and started waving the blade under his nose. Beren noted that the sword was a bronze sax<sup>5</sup>, and that the edge looked very sharp. Behind the blade were a pair of suspicious, muddy eyes bulging out of a red face, crossed by a broad bar of sandy-coloured and obviously well-tended moustache.

“All right,” shouted this martial figure self-importantly, “I’ve got it covered now, no need to alarm yourselves, just all get back now. Situation’s under control. If it makes one false move I’ll have its throat cut. Move back now!”

Granny, who had been listening to this with irritation, raised her stick at this point and whacked the man on the shin.

“Ow!” he said. “What d’yer think you’re doing, Aunty?”

“Trying to stop you from being an even bigger fool than what you are already,” she said. “Put your sword away before you cut your whiskers off! This here’s Beren, he’s very kindly gone and rescued our Etty from Harrek for us, and I was just having a nice cup of tea and a talk with him. As gentle-mannered a young giant, he is, as you could hope to meet.”

The armed figure goggled first at Granny, then back at Beren. “What, *him*?” he said. “Res-cued? Tea?”

Granny leaned over to Beren again. “This here’s Worrafoskin,” she said to him in confidential tones. “He’s what we call our War-ward. He’s by way of being my grand-nephew, but then again he’s my third distaff-cousin once removed, and some other connections too. He’s not a bad lad. Not over-bright, but most days he’s worth his food. Most days.” She sighed, turned back to her nephew and enunciated clearly: “Worrafoskin. Put! The blade! Away!”

With extreme reluctance, the War-ward removed his sword from under Beren’s nose and slid it slowly back into its sheath. He looked as though he were ready to pull it out again on an instant’s provocation. “You say

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5 A type of sword with only a single sharpened edge.

he *rescued* our Etty?” he repeated, as if unable to believe his ears.

“Yes!” said Gran. “Go and ask her! Melena’s tending her. Those devils cut her, they tied her up so tight. This here Beren run across them, killed the Harrek and carried Etty all the way back.”

The War-ward looked Beren up and down with incredulous eyes. “But, but, but,” he protested, “look at the *size* of him. *Rescued* her, I’d have said he’d have *et* her. He’d make a good two Harrek, the size he is. No, three. I never seen the like.”

“That ain’t true,” interjected a round-bellied, middle-aged Zukuk who exuded an air of prosperity and self-satisfaction. “You can’t lay your hand on your heart and say you never seen one, ’Foskin, ’cause you have, I know that for a fact. You know there were a mort o’ these big folk up down below til just a few year ago. Everywhere, they was. I seen ’em meself, and you seen ’em, and Bosko ’ere seen ’em, and – oi, Danusc! You seen ’em too, ain’t yer lad, and Oglo there seen ’em, and...”

“All right, all right,” broke in Granny White-top. “No need to make a meal of it, Hampus. There were lots of them big ’uns, like Beren here, and he ain’t no Harrek – only a right booby would suppose otherwise. We all know about the big ’uns. Here, Beren,” she said, “Where’d all your other folks go? Cause we ain’t sniffed too many lately, nor heard ’em neither.”

“All dead, gone,” replied Beren, and he told the sad story as best as he could manage it, in as even a voice as he could muster. The entire company had edged slowly closer over the course of the afternoon and now they listened in captivated and at times horrified silence to the tale. At the end of it Granny whacked Worrafoskin on the shin again with real fury.

“Ow!” he cried. “Leave off! What was that for, I didn’t do nowt!”

“You was going to *stick* him,” she growled. “You great sweaty lout. ‘Harrek’ – here’s his whole folk been killed and killed and killed away to *nothing* by Harrek, but that ain’t enough for you, no, you was going to *stick* him.”

“Well, I wasn’t to know, was I?” sulked the War-ward.

“Oh, get out of my sight, you, you... you moxicacious booby.”

The sun was getting low, and Beren was uncomfortable to be the centre of such acrimony. “I go now,” he said. “Late now, dark soon. Can say bye Etty?”

Eyes turned to Bhalacho, who had been on the rim of the crowd for the whole time. The small man flushed under the attention. “Aye,” he said gruffly, nodding. “That’s all right. Suspect missus would like a word, too.”

As Beren stood, the Hairfeet all shuffled hastily back away from him, gaping one and all up at his great height. Led by Bhalacho, he went over to the hole out of which Etty had popped before. The woman he had seen with her was still there; she had been peeping out from the shade of the hole all this time, listening to everything. The whites of her eyes showed as Beren approached, but she held her ground.

The small woman nodded nervously. “I’m Melena,” she quavered. “Etty’s mother.”

Beren squatted down. “Can say bye Etty?” he asked.

“She’s sleeping just now,” Melena said. She ran on in a sudden flood of words, “I... I don’t know how to thank you. My heart... my heart is full to bursting, and I don’t know how to say it to you. My daughter – she’s everything to me. Thank you, and bless you. Bless you.” She darted suddenly out of the hole, kissed him on the cheek, then disappeared again into the depths of the hole before he could think how to react.

Beren was left outside the hole with the uncomfortable-looking Bhalacho, both still in the centre of the ring



of avidly following Hairfeet.

“Look, mister,” the small man said gruffly to him. “I’m not a great one for words. Thanks is o’ course nowt but manners; you’ve had Lena’s, now you have mine. But that ain’t hardly nothing. Thanks don’t go near enough, no, not by a long stretch. Understand? There’s a sight more owing. A long sight more. You just keep that in your noggin. All right?”

Last of all Beren took his leave of the bent old woman. “Maybe come again?” he enquired of her. “Maybe should talk more. Bad things happening. Hairfoot maybe have good say, maybe Beren have good say.”

Granny White-top thought about it. The Hairfeet kept to themselves on purpose; they were wary of Men, and had always preferred to stay out of their way. But if the big folk were really all gone... that altered things maybe. As to the ‘bad things happening’, she had been having uneasy thoughts about that for some time. There were changes on the wind, and few perhaps for the better. Might indeed make sense to hear what ‘good’ the giant had to say.

She turned to the crowd of avidly listening Zukukun. “Shall we have him back? What do you say?”

Heads turned as people looked at one another and considered. The answer coalesced slowly into a growing murmur, accompanied by nods, tentative at first but waxing in vehemence. “Arr!” came at last in ragged chorus from many throats.

Granny looked back at Beren. “That’s settled, then,” she said to him. “We’ll see you again, hey? Learn you up some more in the talking. Not but what you’ve come on wonderful well. But you be off now, before it gets too dark to see your way.”

“Bye, Grandmother,” the great tower of sun-browned muscle rumbled to her, showing his great white teeth in a grin. The giant turned to go, but stopped and glanced back. “No stone next time?” he said.

Granny was nonplussed. “What?”

“Last time come,” said Beren, “no see Hairfoot. Many stone.” He made throwing gestures.

Granny goggled at him. “By the four warm winds!” she said. “Was that you?” Beren nodded, and the wrinkled old woman fell into a gale of laughter. “Oh my! Oh my!” she gasped as soon as she could draw breath. “Here was we thinking the end of the world had come. No my lamb, next time no stones, I promise.” She was still shaking her head and wheezing with chuckles long after the shaggy beast had disappeared between the trees, now slanted with long bars of golden light from the setting sun.

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Lúthien and Galadriel sat in a bower of green ferns, heads bowed, intent: the golden crown beside the midnight dark. Lúthien had a play in which she spun a thread of gossamer light, and Galadriel was trying to learn it.

“I like your new name,” Lúthien said to her friend. “I think it suits you.”

Galadriel only snorted.

“I admire your choice of partner as well,” the maid added, dimpling. “Supposing one had need of a man, one could not easily find a better.”

The bright-haired woman looked up, blushed a little. “Well, you were right about one thing,” she admitted. “He is fun.”

Lúthien smiled. “He says you tried to drown him, when you first met. Pushed him off a cliff.”

Galadriel laughed. "He is as impudent now as he was then! Drown him, nonsense. I jumped off with him."

Lúthien joined her in laughter. They subsided after a moment and bent their heads again over the threads.

The bright-haired woman had, however, been thinking over what Lúthien had said. Her mouth twitched, and a glint came into her eye.

"'Supposing one had need of a man.' Curious choice of words, is it not? You make a great show of your independence, Cousin. Such a very great show. What are we to make of that?"

"Nothing," laughed her companion. "It is no more than the transparent truth. I am entirely content in myself. I need nobody, and never shall." She laughed then in earnest, indicating her friend's work. "Oh, Galadriel, look! It has all gone awry! See what men do to you?" She leaned over to help with repair.

"But there are no men here with us," protested Galadriel. "Should we not rather blame teasing companions?"

The two sat on for a time in contentment, enriching the time with lively words and laughter.

A soft rain began far above. Drips found their slow way through the tiers of branches. In the quietness, Galadriel raised a hand and caught a drop of the pure water. She turned her hand, the sparkling globe dancing around its contours. She threw it away at last with a flick and a flash.

Everything was becoming moist in the gentle rain. "Come," said Lúthien. "This is no good for work. Let us put our things away and find a clear space in the wood, where we can enjoy the rain, and listen to the things growing."

Her companion smiled. "All right. Lead the way." So the golden woman followed the dark beauty along one of the many winding paths in that great, green, living wood.

Lúthien was carelessly clad in a rumpled shift of beech-bark grey which left her arms and legs free – pale and smooth; flexuous shapes to trouble the dreams of men. The maid sang softly as she skipped along, lifting her arms to greet the drops. It was a light, dancing song, a duet with the tiny runnel which tinkled and tickled beside the path, sometimes bending away, sometimes near at foot.

They came at last to a clearing. The two stood enjoying the clean, quiet rain as it fell on their skins. Lúthien raised her voice again in praise. The nature of the song changed after a time, becoming slow and lilting. Little finches came down and hopped from head to head, cheeping counterpoint. She laughed, holding out her hands for the cheery birds. The rain rustled softly on the dry leaves. Mist breathed through the forest.

"Will your brother come to see us soon again, Galadriel?" asked the younger woman, stroking a tiny, closed-eyed bird on its head with a gentle fingertip.

"More words in which deeper meaning may be read," said Galadriel, smiling broadly at her young companion. "Did I not see you making round eyes at him, last time he was here?"

"Hoho, cousin, you won't catch me that way," chortled Lúthien, "and neither will he. My heart has no chinks in its armour. But of course I was aflutter at your brother! What maid would not be, with him so beautiful, and so wise, and yet so merry! There will be hearts lost by the bucket-load over that one, sure. But not mine. Indeed, I find he is like all those high ones you brought with you out of the West, Galadriel. Their thought is ever on swords, and jewels, and wars; they are too stern for little me. I am a creature of light and air, like this little bird here. What should I do with a great, grim warrior?" She kissed the bird and gave it back to the air.

"Brought with me? You speak as if I carried men in my pocket," said Galadriel, laughing. "As for your other claim: most hearts have at least one chink."

"Ha ha, not mine," said Lúthien. "At least not for your high-natured Noldor. And as for the swains here, I know them too well. I see the fools, when I come before their eye: how they blanch and sweat. But not one

of them is worth a toss of my head; not one.”

“Not even Daeron? You are often in his company.”

“Oh, come now,” said Lúthien, making a rude noise with her mouth. “Cousin! Please! I cannot believe you are serious. Daeron and I are the best of friends; but more than that? He would be the first to give it the laugh. I honour him, I truly do; never was such music as his. But Cousin, have you not marked his heavy brow? Always serious. Gods no, he would be the death of me!” She laughed and sprang up, prancing around the clearing with her arms raised. “But I will have none of them. What do I need with love? I have the rain, and the sky, and little birds that sing to me.” She turned her face to the sky, relishing the gentle rain that dimpled her perfect nose.

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Some days after his encounter with the Little People, Beren was sitting with his back to the watch-stone that Carver had made. He came here as often as he dared, mindful always of the likely fate of any hunted creature, such as he was, who made the mistake of becoming too predictable in its movements. The high hill was always full of light; the clean winds blowing over it blew the mists from his mind and helped him to think. It was a place for contemplation.

He had thought often about the things Finrod had said to him in the spring. Vanguard of the Armies of Light? He had thought the phrase high-flown when he had heard it, had shrunk from it. Who was he, a simple farmer’s son, a wood-struck wanderer, to wear such a mantle? He felt the same way as he had about Boromir’s sword: that it was all wrong, that he was a hapless actor wandered into the wrong play; a plough-boy who had reached for his straw hat but who had picked up the hero’s helm by mistake.

Yet here he was, in the conquered land, refusing to leave it. The fact of his defiance could not be denied. Little by little, as he played the Elf-lord’s words again in his mind, and remembered the look in his eyes as he said them, Beren came to see that Finrod had meant no inordinate praise, had in fact meant no praise at all. Rather he had been talking about responsibility. The helm was there; and if the hero was wanting, then it was up to the plough-boy, maybe, to gulp down his doubts and just do the best he could.

The encounter with the Hairfeet had also steered his mind into new courses. They were so frightfully vulnerable. Their survival until now he could only put down to them being too small to make useful slaves and too inaccessible to provide a convenient source of food. He could not believe that the Orcs did not know of the settlement; they went everywhere in this country, now that the trees had returned to their former indifference.

Thinking of these things, he wondered what the present position was in respect of the enemy. He had taken no thought for the Orcs for some time. What were they up to? He laid his head back against the living stone, closed his eyes, and concentrated on his inner senses. Helped by the Watch-stone perhaps, the picture that he saw, which usually consisted only of vague loomings for all but things at closest hand, sprang for once into depth and sharpness.

He found the Forest there, in his mind, the great web of life, as he had known it from earliest childhood. A billion trees breathing; miles of roots quietly pulling up a mighty river of water. In between them drifted the sparks of the moving creatures, large and small, in their uncounted swarms.

Dark. Across the whole swathe of burned forest, he could feel it, pressing on his mind – the wrongness that battered on the northern face of Drûn. He must ask Rattlecone about that. Within that band of sickness were two deeper points of shadow, marking the overthrown towers of the Brothers, Angrod and Aegnor. The conquered forts rose stark against his mind like broken and blackened teeth. There were more towers now too on the eastern marches, beyond the mourning grounds across the river, that plain of ghosts where the strength and youth of Ladros had been brought to nothing in a terrible hour of blood.

Near at hand on the western side, the high places reached to the sky – lands of ice and silence, domain of the

mighty eagles. He reached further yet with his mind, beyond the mountains, into the deep of the gloomy valley, and there he could sense it: the heavy pulse of a Mind, a centre of power, seated brooding on the plundered Isle.

He sensed Orcs in many places. Some few wandered in the woods, but mostly their cruel minds seethed in the tower that had been Aegnor's, and on the Isle itself. They were busy, they were not sitting idle. More were marching down from the North, and the traffic on the old Dwarf-road beside the Whitewater was constant. Something appeared to be afoot, but what?

Rattlecone! He might know. Days ago Beren had set out to find him, but had been diverted. Now he would complete that errand.

He found the Ent after a few days of searching, some way down the Whitewater. It was dusk, and Beren could hear the deep voice of his friend long before he came in sight. Rattlecone appeared to be engaged in some slow chanting. The tones were musical, but low-pitched and resonant, buzzing most strangely in Beren's chest as he approached.

He found Rattlecone singing to some alders. The man sat down quietly and composed himself to wait. He knew Ents, and thus he knew the wait might be long. It was. Rattlecone sang on, his arms raised towards the group of trees, the slow words coming in an endless stream. The sun went behind the mountains and it grew dark. Beren had no fur with him, but the night was mild. The round moon peeped above the valley and slowly climbed higher in the sky. The man slept, and when he woke, the black shadows of the trees at the edge of the moonlit meadow had grown long. Rattlecone sang on, his form striped with alternate silver light and blackness.

The man woke with a start. The sun was well up. Birds were singing, but he heard no other sound. The song had ceased. He sat up, and there was Rattlecone, standing just where he had been, looking at Beren out of his deep eyes.

Beren stood, shook the sleep out of his head, came closer. "Have you finished your song?" he asked.

"It is never finished," said the Ent, "but there is no hurry. Silence also has value."

"It has been a long time since we spoke last," said Beren.

Rattlecone blinked up at the sun. "I have seen you betimes," he remarked, "here and there."

Beren looked at him soberly. "You know what happened to us? To my father and my companions?"

"I know," said Rattlecone, and there was sadness in his voice.

"You were right about my friend," said Beren, "but I do not regret asking you to help him."

Rattlecone made no reply to this.

Beren sat down on a rock with a sigh and began playing with a stem of grass. "I have missed your company," he said. "I wanted to see you, many times. But I have not sought you out, have rather shrank from it, and do you want to know why? Because ever since I first met you you have done things for me, given me many gifts; yet I have never given you anything. I am ashamed. I do not know that there is anything I could give you or do for you that you need. You are strong and wise, I am weak and foolish. But the fool does not enjoy being a fool, he does not relish that he always must be the receiver, the one who is helped. I wish there were something I could do for you."

Rattlecone considered for a long time. "We might do some things together," he said at last.

"Against the Enemy?" asked Beren.

Rattlecone appeared to hesitate. “Perhaps,” he said.

Beren, not quite understanding the undercurrents which the conversation seemed in its short time to have acquired, looked up at the Ent and said, “But we have already worked together – humans and trees I mean, although it was not so designed. In the Year of the Fire, we had great success at first, we human folk that is. But much of that was due to you people of the wood; for you would not allow the Orcs to enter. You killed them if they tried. I saw it myself, not far from here, when they came at us with torches. We wondered at it then, or at least my fellows did, since I already knew something of your loss and fury. But I have wondered more why you stopped killing these creatures, having once started.”

“It is not easy to rouse trees to action, let alone to kill,” said Rattlecone, and it seemed to Beren that he still chose his words with care. “It is different for you ones who move about; whether you like it or not, the continuation of your lives depends upon the cessation of the lives of others. You must kill to live, and perhaps therefore, killing comes easily to your hand. It is otherwise with tree-folk. So soon as the red rage had faded from their roots and leaves, so most of them grew tired of the ugliness of dealing death.”

The two were silent for a while, Beren digesting the other’s words. There was something which did not seem to fit, but he could not put his finger on it. “Rattlecone,” he said at last, changing to another subject he wanted to know about, “after the Fire, you mentioned something about Unlife. When I asked you what you meant, you would not tell me. Why not?”

“Out of caution, or prudence,” replied the Ent. “Some knowledge is not safe to speak of. The matter is a perilous one, and at the time I considered that the less you knew of it, the safer you would be.”

Beren turned that over in his mind. “Things have changed since then,” he said after a time. “I have changed. My world is larger. Do you still think it is safer for me to remain in ignorance?”

Rattlecone looked at him: a long, measuring glance. “No,” he admitted. “I have thought on this since that time. I was wrong in my estimation, although not wrong in my restraint, since caution in itself is very rarely wrong. Well then, the Unlife. What do you want to know?”

Beren threw his arms out. “Everything!” he said.

Humour glinted in the deep wells of the Ent’s eyes. “Everything?” he repeated. “I could indeed tell you much. But how many seasons have you to spend in listening, master Beren? When you say, ‘tell me everything’, you do not mean ‘everything’ as one Ent would say to another, that being a matter which would occupy many journeys of the sun through summer and winter, many flowerings of the may-blossom and falls of leaf; what you mean is, ‘please skim the barest top layer for me, no more than I can absorb in a handful of breaths.’ Is it not so?”

“You have wasted at least two breaths in telling me so,” observed Beren, but then he broke into laughter. “Come now, old friend, not all of us are gifted with life without measure. When one can expect a mere eighty or so sun-journeys if blessed, rather fewer if not, then matters take on a different light. If we mortals are to get anything done at all, then we must hasten about it.”

“That is true,” Rattlecone sighed. “It is a strange sort of existence, indeed. I should not like it myself, to be sure. Well then. The hasty version. You know, I suppose, that all living things have two parts: the body which we see, and the spirit which is unseen. The Eldar name them *hröa* and *fëa*. There were beings of the spirit kind before the world was made, and as with all things that are, they were made by the One; but the spirits of living beings were made with the world, even for the purpose of living within it. That is to say, *hröa* and *fëa* were made for one another, they are closely wedded. Now it can happen that the two are cloven asunder; the *fëa* can be driven off. If this occurs, a primeval spirit may enter and take over the *hröa*. These spirits are not meant for life, and their influence on it is altogether bad. Far, far better it is for the *hröa* to die and decay to dust than to become house for one of the Unlife.

“There now, that should not have exhausted your patience, while yet still telling you something of the

matter.”

“I see...” breathed Beren. “And is that what happened on the slopes of Drûn?”

“It is,” said Rattlecone. “The Darkness drove away all the life-spirits, leaving none to occupy the seedlings which sprouted after the fire. That could have only one end. Empty houses will be occupied by someone; and there is no shortage of eager tenants.”

“But what can be done?” asked Beren.

“Little,” said the Ent grimly. “It is beyond our powers to drive the Unlife back to the void from whence they came.”

But then he shook himself, rattling the garland of twigs around his head, and turned to squint at the sun. He looked back at Beren. “For one of your race, you have sat long without eating,” he said to him. “Should you not like to?”

“I am used to fasting,” said Beren. “Never mind me. What had you planned to do now?”

“I? Nothing,” replied Rattlecone. “Shall we talk some more? Or must you hurry away?”

Beren laughed. “I have no appointments,” he said, “and I have much I would like to talk with you about.”

“Then let us return to my house,” said Rattlecone. Beren agreeing, they went there straight away, the man riding on the wide shoulders of the Ent for the sake of speed. They spoke little on the way, Beren at least because he had much new information to think about.

“Do you wish me to fetch you a rabbit?” Rattlecone asked Beren as soon as he had deposited him on the sward.

“No,” replied Beren firmly, “leave the poor rabbits. I have a heel of reed-bread I can gnaw on. But Rattlecone, that puts me in mind of something else. I have met the Little People!” And he proceeded to tell the Ent of that adventure. “I suppose they must be the companions Finrod promised I should find,” he concluded. “I can think of no others he could have meant. But although I take pleasure in their society, to be sure, I find them more of an added worry than a balm to my thoughts.”

“Perhaps a concern for others was what you needed,” remarked Rattlecone.

Beren glanced up at him, surprised. “Well!” he said, “I don’t know. I will have to think about that. You are a bundle of new ideas today!”

The Ent made no comment, only eyed the man solemnly in the afternoon light. As Beren looked back at him, the puzzlement he had begun feeling earlier in the day, the subliminal impression of a loose end somewhere, rose suddenly to the surface of his mind like a trout rising to a fly. “Rattlecone,” he said in a changed tone of voice, “there is something you are not telling me.”

Since the tall creature gave neither word nor sign in response, Beren searched his mind for some handle on the question, some way into it he could follow. “I killed my first Orc when I was eight,” he said at last slowly. He was feeling his way. In the moment of saying the words he was not sure where they would lead him, yet he knew the next ones to be said. “That was with the Drúedain. I learned that they were assiduous hunters of the Orcs, so much so that my father’s people, the farming-folk, had not themselves been troubled by Orcs for some years; in fact since the Drúedain first came north.”

Rattlecone still gave no sign, just continued to regard Beren out of his deep eyes.

“But the Drúedain were here only in summer,” continued Beren slowly. “They left the land over winter. Which naturally led to the question, who kept the Orcs away in winter? I was given to understand that it was

you Onodrim. Is that true?"

At last the Ent stirred. "That is true," he rumbled.

Beren had at last arrived at the kernel of the question. "When we were talking earlier, when you were telling me about the Year of the Fire, I noticed, or rather I did not quite notice at the time, but I do so now, that you were rather careful to speak of what the trees did, how the trees felt." Rattlecone made no reply. "It is natural for me," went on Beren, "to lump all you tree-folk together. But this is false – too hasty of me, hah. It is not so, is it? Ents are not trees, as the shepherd is not the sheep."

"No," said Rattlecone, "they are not."

"Thus I come to the question," said Beren. "Leave aside now what the trees in their fury did in the Year of the Fire. That is understood. What of you Ents? Ents used to kill Orcs. Now, it seems to me, they no longer do so. Why not? And what *do* they do, what have they done, in their own time of fury?"

The Ent had not moved, but tension could be read in his stance. "You squeeze me for knowledge like a sponge," he said.

"I have had enough of secrets," said Beren. "Secrets are for enemies. Friends and allies confide."

Rattlecone began to pace around the enclosure in an agitated manner. "And what if one has more than one alliance," he said, and his voice had gained in volume. "And what if the alliances conflict?"

Beren considered that. "There comes a time when one must choose," he said.

The tall Ent glanced at him, and there was fire in his eyes, but he neither spoke nor paused in his pacing.

Beren eyed him narrowly. "Let me tell you a story," he said, "since you prefer to keep silent. You know that we farmer-folk fought the Orcs in the Fire-year, many times. My father was not lord of our people then; his brother was lord. But the brother had strange ideas. He thought one could win a war by bluster and show. My father was pulled in two directions. On the one hand, he knew well that wars are won by sound preparation, by planning, cunning, courage, endurance, plus a bit of luck. How bright one's armour and how loud one's boasts have nothing to do with it. On the other hand, he was a loyal follower of his lord. What to do? My father was greatly torn. Even on the last day of all he could not bring himself to rebel outright. Nevertheless he ignored Bregolas and his wild commands and fought the war the best way he knew how. I do not think there is anybody – anybody, Elf, Man or Ent – who could have fought it better. He was outmatched in the end; you know the rest. But the point of my story is this: he chose. A bird can fly only one course. Mighty Ent, wiser than I, hear the words of the weak and callow: the time will surely come when you too must choose. That time may come soon. It may even now be upon you. You Onodrim decline haste, you like to take your time. Well, you have had years in which to ponder all sides of the question. I believe the time is up. So choose! And may you choose as wisely as my father."

Rattlecone came to a halt and stood still in silence. Beren waited until the last light of day was just touching the hill high above them, then left his companion to go down to the stream and drink. The Ent was still standing motionless in the centre of the sward when he came back in the gloaming. Beren sought the chamber in the rock-wall where he had slept before, found the bed of ferns there as before and flung himself down. He was soon asleep.

Light and birdsong woke him in the morning. Stretching and yawning, he emerged from the cave to find Rattlecone gone. The man shrugged, fetched from his gear his light bow and some snares, then loped off into the woods.

The long day passed. It was a hot day, with promise of thunder tomorrow. Beren roasted his catch over a small fire some way down the valley from Rattlecone's home and filled his belly for the first time in some days. He curled up after that and had a nap. Waking in the long shadows towards sundown, he slipped down

to the chattering waters and washed in the icy fresh stream. It was getting dark when he eventually returned to the sward between the alders.

Rattlecone had returned. He was standing under the curtain of droplets under the cliff, but he came over as soon as he saw Beren. The two, man and Ent, came to a stop facing one another in the middle of the lawn.

“I have chosen,” said Rattlecone in his deep voice. “I choose you.”

“Then tell me why your people now leave the Orcs alone.”

“It is our chief,” said Rattlecone. “He hates everything that goes on wings or legs. He did not love your folk before, as none of us do, but the Fire marked him. He has never forgiven, never forgotten.”

“I do not understand,” said Beren. “Why should hatred make him stay his hand?”

“He thinks you Elves and Men are at fault for Drûn, for all the evil that we suffered,” replied the Ent in harsh tones. “He thinks the Orcs, if left unmolested, will first kill all you others, and thereafter leave the woods in peace.”

“Then he is a fool,” said Beren.

Rattlecone looked away down the hill. “Did your father name his brother a fool?” he asked the air.

Beren did not answer this. There was silence for some minutes.

“I mean to harry the Enemy in this land,” said Beren at last. “I have been hunted long enough; now I will be the hunter. Will you help me?”

“I will,” said the Ent.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beren visited the Hairfeet several times over the following weeks. Early on, he explored the surrounds. He knew the cliffs stretched without a break on both sides of the pointed plateau; he was mostly interested to find out if it was accessible from the high country in the rear.

He found no direct way in from the South or West, but the slope running off to the East, while rocky and steep, was not sheer. It was a way in; even if no very obvious or likely one.

The Hairfeet quickly got used to the great-bodied form of their visitor. Instead of stones, he was greeted now by a stream of shrieking children who swarmed around his legs, shouting all their news at him together and making it difficult to walk. As soon as he sat down at the settlement they would climb over him and search his belt and pouch for items of interest. The first time it happened, some little mite hauled forth the Ring, and the Hairfeet fell silent with awe as the great band of metal threw back the light into their faces. Beren gently took it back from the small hand that held it up, but then he had to explain all about it. The Little People were left half wondering, half suspicious; they did not like new things.

Much the same happened with his belt and knife. Beren hastily took the knife away from the Zukuk boy who was drawing it out, but Worrafoskin then asked to see it. The War-ward held the long blade a little distant from himself and inspected it with distrust and disdain written on his face.

“Hrmp,” he blew into his moustache, handing the knife back to Beren. “Grey-metal. Heard of it. Rusts something shocking. Honest bronze is good enough for me. Know where you are with it.” His listeners all nodded their heads sagely.

From the first renewed visit, Beren had badly wanted to have a serious talk with Granny White-top, but the Little Folk seemed to have no concept of a private conversation. He was forced in the end to be direct.



“Granny,” he began one day. “Here, stop that!” to a child who was determinedly trying to undo Telchar’s belt. “Granny, there are things I wanted to talk with you about, concerning the Harrek, but I don’t know that it is such a good idea for the children to hear. They might be afraid.”

Granny leaned back and looked at him in surprise, then glanced around at the children who were running, laughing, playing like children anywhere; many of them climbing all over Beren while they did it.

“Well, I don’t know,” she said. “We never worried before. They don’t pay no mind to serious things, times we’ve talked ’em over.”

“There’s serious and serious,” said Beren. “What happened to Etty, that’s what I call serious.”

Etty was there and perked up at hearing her name. “I’m all right now, Beren,” she piped. “My legs are healed up, good as new. Look!” She jumped off the seat, ran in a circle around the table, then did a handstand.

“Very good, Etty,” said Beren. “Granny, don’t you see?”

They were sitting at one of the tables, enjoying something of a spread of baked delights. It was before noon, but whether the meal counted as breakfast or lunch, or something in between, Beren wasn’t sure. The Little Folk loved such occasions and seized on any excuse for one. Beren was sitting on a padded sack laid directly on the ground, at the end of the table. He had no good place to put his knees but at least he was at a reasonable height with respect to the table itself and wasn’t towering over the heads of the others there. Granny sat on his right, Worrafoskin had taken the place on his left, and other self-appointed worthies of the community were seated further along the benches on both sides.

“Well, I don’t know,” Granny said again. “What do you have in mind, exactly?”

“Is there somewhere private we could talk?” asked Beren, moving a wriggling child’s leg out of his face so he could see.

“Aye,” said the rotund Hairfoot named Hampus. “Good idea. We don’t need all these folk. Shut the door on ’em.” The faces around the table all nodded and grunted agreement – all of them apparently assuming that they themselves were too important to exclude.

Granny rubbed her wrinkled face. “I don’t see it as a proposition,” she said. “It’s not our way, really. I mean, we could all creep in one of the burrows, but folk would want to know what was going on, like.” She thought for a bit more, then looked up brightly. “Suppose you start to tell us what’s on your mind, and if it gets too bad, why then, we can think again, eh?” The plump old woman sat back with a look of satisfaction on her face.

Beren looked around at the varied faces waiting for his response, and his heart sank even further. “Look,” he said, “the fact is, I’m worried about you. Your people are dreadfully exposed here. You have no defence. What are you going to do if the Harrek come?”

Everybody began to talk at once in reply. Several people assured him that the Harrek had never found them, never could. Worrafoskin was incensed. Red in the face, he declared that he himself was all the defence the Zukukun required; he had kept them safe in the past, and always would in the times to come.

Only Granny looked glum and held silence.

“Times have changed,” continued Beren. “Granny, you sense that, I know. Even if these others don’t. I can see it in your face.”

“Nonsense,” puffed the Hairfoot named Bosko. “Where’s your proof? Doom-mongering, that’s what I call it. You’d have us all running around waving swords like boobies, wasting our time, instead of sweating away at good honest labour.” He punctuated his remark by taking a large bite from his cream-laden scone.

“Proof?” said Beren quietly. “You want proof? I can show you proof. In the open valley, five days’ journey from here, that’s where my proof is. In the fields by the river there, you will find the bones of ten thousands of my own people mouldering under the sky. Ten thousands, can you imagine that number? They were giants, like me, and they had swords as long as my arm. Now they are all dead. At half that distance, the blackened timbers of my home still stand. Inside its fallen walls are other bones of my friends and kin, dead at the hands of the Harrek, or... or... just died, killed, to escape them. My grandfather’s burnt homestead lies nearer still. I can take you to it, any who desire to come. No? Well, if murdered bones are not to your taste, then come with me the other way: climb with me into the heights, just a little way to the West, there. From there we can look down on the Isle of the Sorcerer, where wolves howl, and the arts of Darkness are woven ever thicker, ever blacker. There you will find proof enough for the biggest fool alive. Hampus, Bosko? What say you?” The two named looked down, avoiding his eye. “You will not come? You are not eager? Oh, well, do not disturb yourselves. Sit here and wait long enough, and the proof will come to you. Only, by that time it will be too late.”

Silence had fallen over the whole clearing. The children had stopped playing; they were standing there, wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

“Well,” said Granny drily, “if you wanted to scare us, you’ve succeeded. Or was there something else you had in mind?”

“I don’t want to scare you,” replied Beren, “I want to keep you safe.”

“Safer than your own folk?” commented Granny shrewdly.

“Look,” puffed Bosko, “I’m sure we’re all mortal sorry for your own folk. Mortal sorry. And we don’t doubt your word about it, do we fellows?” The others shook their heads. “But see: that’s your folk, and that’s down there. We’re us, and we’re up here.”

“Ar!” said several voices. “That’s right. He’s talking sense.”

“Fact is,” went on the Hairfoot, “we ain’t got nothing them Harrek want, no, nor your chap on his island neither. And they don’t know where we are. We’re not easy to get to, as tha knows. Easily forgotten, we are.”

“Aye,” put in Hampus. “Out of sight, out of mind, see.” This seemed to be the general opinion.

Granny shut off the talk by rapping on the table with her stick.

“This all don’t matter,” she said testily. “Maybe it’s so, maybe not. What I want to know, master Beren, is just what you’ve got in mind. What do you think we should *do*? That’s the meat of it.”

“I think you should leave,” said Beren. “Get out while you can. Things are bad now; they’ll only get worse.”

Several voices were raised in protest at this, but Granny rapped again. “*Leave?*” she said when there was a bit more quiet. “We can’t *leave*. Where would we go?”

Beren sighed, remembering similar conversations with his own farming-folk from six years before. “South,” he said. “Over the mountains.”

The hubbub of incredulity and outrage started up again, but Granny peered at him and said, “You’re serious, ain’t yer?”

“I am.”

“Well then, young Beren, why don’t you take your own advice? What’s keeping *you* here?” She turned around, irritated. “Shut up, you lot! Shut up! A body can’t hear herself think.” When the chatter had subsided a little, she repeated her question.

"I'm staying to fight," said Beren.

Worrafoskin sat up. "Ah!" he said. "Now you're talking! I'll be in that! Two's better than one there, Master, and cos why? Cos the one can look after the back of the other, that's why. We'll draw blade together, eh lad! Could be I could show thee a trick or two!"

Beren smiled at him, trying hard to make it a smile of friendship and not amusement. "Perhaps you could, too, War-ward. But touching that, you cannot be the only one of your people who can bear arms. I know to my cost that a stone in the hand of a Hairfoot makes a good weapon, and some of you have spears; but have you any other arms, and practice in using them?"

"Just a minute," broke in Granny White-top. "Hold up with that. You still haven't really answered my question. *Why* are you going to fight?"

Beren thought about it. "Because somebody has to," he said at last.

They stayed there talking a while longer, and gradually a consensus emerged: the Hairfeet should be more vigilant, they should train up more of their young folk in shooting, and they should not allow their children into the valley to seek herbs without escort. It was not what Beren wanted, but he could not move them further at this time.

At the end of it, Beren stood up to go. Worrafoskin stood up with him. "What's next then, lad?" he asked, rubbing his hands together. "You've got me all fired up, you have. Shall we have a go at these vermin together?"

Beren struggled to find what to say. "Er," he said, "well. Do you not rather think you are needed, War-ward, to guard the folk up here?"

"No, no," said the Hairfoot. "Well, mostly no. I've two or three lads training up, as tha knows. They can fill in for a time, bridge the gaps, as a sort of makeshift. Temporary, like." He scratched his head, then brightened. "Anyroad, I can be back in a flash if I'm needed. No no, offence is the best form of defence as they say! You and I, that's the ticket, we'll take on these rogues together. We'll send 'em packing, won't we just!"

There was no putting him off. "All right," said Beren. "I'm due to collect some arrows tomorrow. If you like, you can... that is to say, I'd value it very much if you would come along and lend your strong arm and your, ah, keen eye to my protection."

"Tomorrow?" said the red-faced War-ward pompously, pursing his lips. "I think I can come. Yesss, I can spare you that time. Very well."

Before Beren left, Granny grasped his hand in both of hers and shook it repeatedly. "Thank you, my son," she said. "Thank you for your thought for us."

\* \* \* \* \*

After his meeting with Rattlecone, Beren also made efforts to refresh his connections among the birds. He made contact with the eagles, and even visited the hill of the ravens of Goracc's tribe, whom he had avoided since the death of the Companions. Gradually, by dint of much negotiation and persuasion, he managed to reconstitute something not far short of the trusted network which in the Year of the Flame had kept him so closely informed of events over the length and breadth of Dorthonion.

He had told Worrafoskin he expected arrows because a falcon had reported to him at sunrise that day that Elves were leading a train of pack-ponies into Anach from the South.

After leaving the Hairfeet that evening, Beren found a place to spend the night in the woods at the base of the

cliff. He was up on the plateau again early the following day.

Worrafoskin was not best pleased at being woken so early. He took a long time to get ready. He insisted on preparing and eating a full breakfast, and spent some time after it in sorting and packing a bag of dainties to take along the way. It was mid-morning before the impatient Beren was able to lead him down the cliff-path.

Their pace after that was much slower than the man would have preferred. They had, maybe, five and twenty miles to travel, most of it over fair ground. Beren did not expect the Elvish party to appear at the head of Anach before evening, but as the day wore on, and he had to wait more and more often for the puffing Worrafoskin to catch up, he began to doubt that they would be there on time.

“Listen, my friend,” he said, squatting beside the Hairfoot as the small figure sat panting and sweating on a fallen branch, “I think you must cache your bag, yes and your heavy war-gear too. I do not want to miss my tryst, and that I will do if we cannot pick up some speed.”

“But all the food is in the bag!” protested the War-ward.

“The Elves will feed you; and believe me, that will be a repast to remember. After that your pleasure in other foods will be so much the less.”

“But... but... that is not until this evening!” spluttered the Zukuk, his sandy moustaches quivering at the appalling prospect. “My stomach is already cleaving to my backbone. Indeed, I was about to suggest a halt. It is past time for the noon meal.”

“I shall not halt,” said Beren firmly, “and if you want to make cause with me, War-ward, you will postpone your meal. Nobody said war was easy.”

Although he grumbled frightfully at this, in the end Worrafoskin had no option but to do as Beren demanded if he wanted to avoid the fate of slinking back alone, in shame, to his folk. He crammed a few bites of pie into his mouth before wrapping his sack of provisions in his heavy brass-ringed jerkin, then shoved the lot into a badger’s hole, blocked with a stone. “How shall I ever find it again,” he moaned.

“I will find it,” said Beren, “Now come!”

So lightened of his burdens, the manling was able to make fair time. The oddly-matched pair splashed through the last brook by mid-afternoon and began the long, ten-mile climb to the mouth of the pass. Worrafoskin never ceased from moaning and grumbling under his breath, but he stumped along steadily enough. The stream of mumbled complaints was cut off as if with a knife, however, when Beren’s falcon friend flew down and perched on his arm. The handsome bird had news: the Elves were through the pass and were camping some way above.

“Thank you,” Beren said to it. “I wish you could talk to them; you could have told them we are not far off.”

“They are Fair Folk,” replied the falcon. “They know.” He spread his wings and flew off. Beren turned to Worrafoskin, but had to suppress a smile as he caught the Hairfoot staring at him and the now departing bird with mouth and eyes opened equally round.

They pushed on. As the sun began to play with the idea of sinking below the western mountains, the two mismatched figures were toiling up the curve of a great grassy alp, perched high above the dimming valley below. Tall walls of rock towered up some little way to the South; a path wound its way towards them down the slope from a notch in that stony barrier. High on the hill, the last golden light of day caught on a blue twist of smoke which trailed up into the sky before thinning away to nothing.

The two plodded up the slope, limbs feeling weighted. Three ponies came at last in sight, and three tall figures, brightly clothed. Two had hair of gleaming gold, but the third was dark. As the climbers narrowed the distance, Beren noted further that the dark-haired person was broad of shoulder. Further details came

clear. The Elf had a noble brow; and his hair was bound behind his head in a thick, clubbed plait.

Beren gave a sudden cry of joy and began to run. He met with the broadly smiling Elf, and the two embraced. Beren held the other then at arms' length.

"Celevir!" he cried.

"No other," smiled the Elf, whom Beren had last seen leading the Third Company of the garrison of Minas Tirith, at the time of the Battle of the Grassy Slope, in the bare beginnings of this dismal war, nearly seven years before.

"But what are you doing here?" said Beren. "I had not... I did not... oh well, that is all nonsense. I am glad to see you!"

"I petitioned my lord to let me come," said the Elf. "It was not easy. Loth was he that any captain of his should serve as donkey-herd! I had to threaten mutiny." He turned to the other two who had been observing this meeting of old comrades with obvious delight. "These rascals here are Aramil and Pergas." The two Elves grinned and bowed low. "Do not, by my rede, allow them near your wine; in other matters they are steady enough. But who is your own companion? We have watched you climb for some time, and we are greatly puzzled as to what his kind might be."

"This is my bold war-comrade, by name Worrafoskin," said Beren, keeping the straightest of faces. "His people call themselves Hairfeet, for reasons which will not escape you. He has chafed with inaction, and is eager for battle. I invited him along today, but it has proven a sore trial for him, for he is faint with hunger, and only my description of Elvish drink and meats has kept him on his feet this day."

"Is that how the matter stands!" exclaimed Pergas. "Friends, it were shame to countenance this sorry state of affairs an instant longer. We cannot allow a companion of the road to remain so in hunger – not least one so bold and warlike. Come ye! Aramil, look to the fire! Celevir, unlock the drink! For this one night we shall comport ourselves with honour, I swear it thee. To work, friends! The feast awaits our making!"

The three moved around briskly, laughing and singing as they worked, and without ever once getting in each other's way, or indeed giving any impression of haste. As if by magic, a feast came together under their hands in the bare field. As the light on the slope grew dim, the western peaks standing black and sere against the rose banner of the sunset sky, the fire blazed high. Coneys were roasting, and beherbéd trout; savoury jellies arrayed on reed platters, beside crisp rounds of pastry that melted in the mouth; succulent berries, and aromatic fruits. Into the wondering hands of man and halfling, jewelled glasses were pressed: slender shells of cunning glass that bent the cheerful light of the fire into a thousand glints. Into these a golden wine was poured. A toast was declared, and all drank.

Beren found his mouth filled, *filled* with the rich scents of summer. Into his mind came a clear vision of fields of vines under an azure sky, tended by a cheerful brown-skinned race, far in the warm South.

Worrafoskin behaved as though he were in a dream. He could not understand the speech of the Elves, nor they his, but somehow it did not matter. He laughed when the Elves laughed, and answered their gestured sallies as boldly as he could.

As soon as all had eaten their fill, Pergas fetched a long-necked stringed instrument from the dark outside the fire, and Aramil pulled pipes from his pocket. The two began to sing and play. They drew the War-ward in and soon had him singing along with enthusiasm. Joy and wonder remained written on his homely face.

Beren enjoyed the tastes and smiled at the merriment, but they were as nothing compared with the pleasure he took in Celevir's company. While the others laughed with the halfling, he and the dark-haired Elf spoke together earnestly. They had much news to exchange. The Elf-captain had of course heard most of what Finrod had learned on his visit, but Beren told him more, not only concerning the battles in the Fire-year and the long defiance of the Companions, but also of his present situation and plans. In return, he greatly desired

to know how it was that the Sorcerer Mairon had captured the Tower of the Guard, and how Celevir had escaped.

Sorrow flashed into Celevir's eyes when Beren mentioned this. "Ah!" he exclaimed. "Would that I could forget that day of grief!"

"I am sorry," said Beren. "Do not speak of it if it pains you. After all, it is not a matter that concerns me in the slightest."

"The pain is there whether I speak of it or not," replied Celevir. "And whether it concerns you is beyond my wits to reckon. Your shadow has grown longer since the days when you were only a farmer's boy with a mighty bow and a strong arm to bend it. So, I will tell you. To begin: you perhaps know that we built the Tower with more than stone and mortar. Into that fortress was woven the cunningest spell my master could devise. It locked stone to stone, and warded them from harm. Seven days that enchantment was in the singing. I witnessed it, and I marvelled, I who was born in the Land of the Undying; for never have I seen or heard a song of greater power, nor of beauty either. The song grew through the stones like a great tree, bearing innumerable blooms of a loveliness to wrench the heart. I have no words to tell you of the joy of that day."

"I remember the stones of it," said Beren in a low voice. "The very walls shimmered like... like the inside of the pearl-shells one finds in shallow streams."

Celevir smiled at him a little sadly. "Even so," he said. "Although those shimmering stones live now only in memory. They are gone from the hard world in which we are condemned to live. Worst perhaps is that we cannot understand how the magic failed. So perfect was the song, so strong the ward-words; so well knitted, that not even the wisest among us can comprehend how it was overthrown. Yet it was so.

"There came a day when word came to us of Orcs on the move. We feared little from that – those filth in uncounted thousands could pound our walls like waves without disturbing the least stone of them. The vermin came, and they camped, and indeed there were thousands. They gathered in silence, only their spear-heads glinting palely beneath the moon. They swarmed until both banks of the river were clothed in their living filth; but they did nothing, only gathered and waited, while we sat behind our walls, wondering what it portended.

"No-one knows when or where the rot began. Dark spots began to grow on the pearly walls. They stretched their stealthy arms like a cancer. They were green, and they stank. Our strongest mages set to work, but they could do nothing. My lord Orodreth himself could not halt the spread. Pearl was turning to corpse-colour wherever one looked. Our Tower was dying, and it called to us in its agony, but we could do nothing to hold it from death.

"Panic spread in the enclosure. It shames me to say it, but I ran with the rest. I could not think or see; there was a darkness in my mind, and voices of the dead crying. The gates must have been breached at that time because suddenly there were Orcs among us, cutting us down. Some of us found spirit to fight back. But the foe were too many, we could not stand. The murdered and decaying stones betrayed our feet; men slipped, as if on slime, and so were taken.

"We were forced back and back, with small thought for where our steps led us. I found myself at last with a handful remaining on the highest tower, on the southern end, where the Isle rises to a cliff above the torrent. The courts below were filled with a miasma of darkness. All was lost; we were outnumbered, and the enemy were pouring ever thicker up the stairs.

"Now it was known that, from the height of that parapet, if a man leaped hard enough, he would sail over the rocks below into deep water beyond their teeth. Four of us essayed the leap, three of us survived it. My two companions died afterwards in the waters from Orc-shot, but I did not, and how not I do not know, since the foul creatures lined the banks for a great way downstream. I think I breathed more water than air that day. Seven arrows I took, most in that place without glory on which we sit; but I survived, although to what end I

do not know. Yet my fate has brought me here today, and if I am too late to speak again with my comrade Barahir, then at least I have the joy of seeing again my other brother-in-arms, his brave son Beren.”

Beren had listened to the grim tale in silence. Even so recently as a year ago it might have brought him to tears; but no longer. He felt there were no tears left in him any more. “But...” he said at the end, “were you the only one to escape?”

“From the southern fastness, yes,” said Celevir. “But my lord Orodreth’s guard formed a phalanx around him and fought their way out of the gate. They came at last through much loss to the Delving<sup>6</sup>.”

Their talk turned to affairs in the South. Beren was pleased to hear from Celevir some news of Húrin, the first tidings he had had of his friend for many years. He laughed with pleasure when Celevir told him of the fight of the Haladin against the Orc-raid, and how even Huor had taken part, refusing to shelter behind his tender years.

“It is like them both,” said Beren. “How I long to meet with Húrin again! I think he is the best and bravest spirit I ever met. Tell me, is he still with the Haladin?”

“No,” replied Celevir, “he and his brother fight now again at their father’s side; but in between comes a strange tale. In the battle of the Ford, the brothers were lost in the mists – and I do not mean just for the day, I mean that they could not be found at all. Haldir spent days in the search, but even the Drúedain were baffled, since the tracks led to a certain place and then no further. There was weeping in North and South, and elsewhere too, for both brothers were most highly thought of, even as you said yourself. Nay! Do not blench, your friend lives yet, have I not said it? But to return to my tale. Hearts composed themselves at length, because life goes on. But, and here comes the strangest part, nigh on a year after they disappeared, the brothers appeared again. They walked into the hall of Galdor their father, in Dor-lómin, as cool as you like. They would not speak of their absence, neither to say where they had been, nor in whose company. But both were arrayed as young princes, yes and held themselves so too. So tongues have run on, but the mystery becomes no whit less murky.”<sup>7</sup>

They discussed that a little more, then Celevir went on to tell him of other doings, mostly of people Beren had barely heard of, in lands he had never seen. He suppressed a yawn. Worrafoskin had fallen asleep by the fire by this time and Aramil and Pergas were quietly packing things away. “It is time to sleep, for me at least,” said Beren after the Elf-captain had come to the end of his news. “I wanted to mention just one more matter: the Orcs are massing, both on the Isle and in the sad remains of Aegnor’s tower. I misdoubt they plan some further assault.”

“We had suspicions of something,” replied Celevir, “but I thank you for the firm report. Do you have numbers?”

“Nothing definite,” said Beren. “I have wondered for a long time what the Enemy’s next move would be. He seems to sit and do nothing.”

“He spent most of his Orcs in the Flame-year,” said the Elf, “else your sojourn here might have been less peaceful. Now he has had time to bring a new generation to full growth. He will strike with them somewhere.”

“But where?”

Celevir considered. “Do they mass also at Angrod’s tower, or at those further in the East?” he said.

“I think not,” said Beren.

“Then you have, maybe, answered your own question,” said the tall captain. “I should guess the Enemy

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6 Nargothrond.

7 For the explanation, see *The Silmarillion*.

means to strike against Hithlum. He cannot well move south while Fingon remains on his flank. We will warn them. I thank you once again.”

“This build-up of Orcs,” said Beren, “I mean to hinder it. Or rather: to deal it what pin-pricks I can, with the aid of the arrows which I hope you have brought me!”

“Arrows in plenty,” smiled the tall Elf. “But you should not underrate what you can do with them. It is not by numbers of dead that your works shall be valued; it is the diversion of attention, and also the insolence. Your father and his men have long been a thorn in Mairon’s side. Think how greatly it will irk him, he believing the gadfly caught and squashed, to find it stinging him yet!”

“So indeed I hope,” said Beren. “But now I bid thee good night.” He laid himself down on a pelt beside the snoring Hairfoot and was asleep within moments.

He was up again as the dawn light laid streaks across the blue bowl of the sky. The great grassy slope where they had camped lay yet in shadow, but the sky-rays converged to illuminate the peaks to the west, which looked as though they were warming themselves in the rising sun.

There was much to unpack: bundles of arrows, as well as darts of the sort once favoured by Urthel. Beren bade the Elves cache the arms in a small cave in the rock which lay not far off. He hoped that the goods would be safe there from the Orcs, hidden as they were at least from casual gaze.

“You have no lair?” said Celevir.

“None that I would trust,” said Beren. “Finrod said I would find one; and I did find one. But I cannot use it in winter, and at other seasons the need is not there.”

Celevir looked concerned. “But what will you do in winter?”

“Trust in my wits,” Beren grinned. “They have not failed me yet.”

The Elf-captain made no further comment, but after the last arrows had been stowed, he drew two bundles from the remaining bags and gear. One was long, the other compact. “These also you may find of use,” he said. He handed the long one to Beren.

Beren knew what it was from the feel under his hand. He unwrapped it. Yes, a long bow, beautifully made. Only... a slight cloud formed in his mind. It was so light and slender! He was stricken by the awkward feeling which follows a gift that is well meant, but not quite suitable.

“It is beautiful,” he said, infusing his voice with an enthusiasm he did not quite feel. “Shall I give it a try?”

Celevir was grinning. “By all means,” he said.

Beren went to string the bow and immediately realized that his estimation had been wrong – the stave was much stronger than it looked. He looked sideways at Celevir and the other Elves, whose grins were wider now. He laughed, because he was suddenly sure they had a fair idea of what he had been thinking.

He pulled with all his might down on the end of the bow, bunching his muscles. The loop of string slipped over the end; he carefully let up on the pull. As the loop settled in the notch and the string came abruptly under strain, the bow thrummed a single short, deep note.

“Very powerful,” he remarked.

“None of us could string it,” said Celevir. “I am glad to find that you can.”

Beren nocked an arrow and looked for a mark. Near the top of the grassy round of the alp, the stump of a dead pine stood up against the sky. It was a hundred paces distant, maybe more. “The pine,” he said, and



went to raise the bow.

“Where on the pine?” said Celevir. Beren lowered the bow, looked at him, then squinted again at the stump.

“That broken stub of branch, waist-high,” he said.

“Agreed: the centre of the stub,” qualified Celevir, grinning still.

Beren raised the bow, drew back the arrow against the bow’s power, and immediately felt how the bow fitted the strength and reach of his arm as though it had been made for him. He had suddenly a vivid mental picture of Finrod’s measuring gaze upon him, early in the year. That sly Elf! He had measured well. Beren felt not simply like a man drawing a bow; he and the bow felt as one.

All this took less than a second to flash through the man’s mind, before he put it away from him to concentrate on the shot. He steadied on the mark, automatically adjusting for wind, drew down a fraction more, until all felt right: the man, the bow, the mark, all meeting together as one.

He loosed. The arrow flew straight and true and hit the centre of the branch-stub with a solid ‘thunk’. The bow itself had made very little noise, just a sub-vocal grunt.

Beren looked at it in amazement. “This is a kingly gift!” he said. “I know I have Finrod to thank for it.”

“Yes,” replied the smiling Celevir. He reached the other package out to Beren. “This one is from Telchar.”

The second package was limp and heavy. Beren could guess at its contents almost as well as with the first. He was not surprised therefore when his questing hands folded back a corner of cloth to reveal a mail of linked steel rings, of a lightness and fineness which Beren had only before seen in Nogrod. As with his belt, the rings bore a hard coating of a subfusc brown. This was gear of war, not for display. Beren thought, with some regret for times lost, for past errors never amended, that his uncle would not have approved.

He shook out the whole thing and held it up. It was a war-shirt, long enough just to reach the upper thigh. He pulled the heavy, cold material over his head, slipped his arms into the holes. It was perhaps a little loose; but he had nothing else on his upper body at the moment, and mail should be worn over leather. Allowing for that, it seemed as perfect a fit to his physique as the bow.

The mail carried very light on his frame. He made no doubt at all that it was strong – this was Telchar’s work, of which he knew well the worth.

The man took off the mail, folded it, and stowed it into his satchel. He unstrung the bow and slipped it over his shoulder. He glanced toward the ashes of last night’s fire, where Worrafoskin still lay snoozing, then turned his face back to the Elves. “Pray pass to Finrod and Telchar the thanks of my heart,” he said. “But now – I fear the time of leave-taking is upon us. I wish it were not so. You have no idea how much it warms my heart to see you, Celevir, noble friend and stout comrade in arms. Some day I hope we shall have time to spend yarning over that stoup. Aramil and Pergas, I thank you for everything, and I am only sorry that my small companion took up all of your time, as this dark-haired warrior here took up mine. Perhaps someday we will have more converse together.”

The two fair-haired Elves echoed his wishes.

“The wish of my heart would have me stay for more talk,” said Celevir, “but there is no more time for it. The weather is uncertain, we must be going.” He grasped Beren by the shoulders. “Fare thee well, Elf-friend. You will not be far from our thoughts.”

They went back then and stirred up Worrafoskin. The Hairfoot was roused with some difficulty, but got up when he understood that their hosts were departing. He goggled round-eyed at the Elves, as though he had thought them a dream, but managed to stutter a farewell that Beren translated.

The Elves mounted their ponies, but just before they spurred away, Aramil leaned down and tossed a bulging satchel at their feet. "Against starvation on your journey back," he said to Beren with a twinkle in his eye. The three roused their mounts and rode up the hill, waving as they disappeared over the round of it.

Beren picked up the satchel and gave it to Worrafoskin. "Here, this is your department I think," he said. "I must fetch my arrow."

\* \* \* \* \*

The return journey was one to try Beren's patience. The War-ward was full of their recent encounter and could not stop talking about the Elves, and that in the most glowing terms. Beren had agreed to stop for breakfast as soon as they re-entered the forest, and when they did so, the small fighter spent a long time smacking his lips over the dainties which Aramil had given him. At last, with regret, still praising the 'Star-folk' in all of their faculties, he allowed himself to be stirred into movement by the impatient Beren. At the end of a weary trek, Beren left his companion at the foot of the Little People's cliff. Although cursing himself internally for a fool as he did so, Beren had promised the martial Hairfoot another foray soon, one with perhaps more action and less hunger in it.

The next time Beren visited the Little Folk, he found their heads full of Worrafoskin's tales of the bright-haired People of the Stars, with their eyes like the morning. He was often implored to arrange a visit. It will I hope reflect not too badly upon the character of the Hairfeet when I relate that a principal fixation in their minds was the wonderful, enchanted food and drink of the Star-folk.

Rattlecone responded to news of the encounter with a more practical suggestion: he offered to store the arms. "It would be a bold Orc who would rifle through my possessions," he said.

As soon as the bundles were fetched from the pass-mouth, Beren stocked his quiver with darts and arrows. When this was done, he turned to the Ent. "Now it begins," he said.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Orc-captain was worried. Even so short a time as a week ago he would not have been concerned, because this was captured territory, conquered years ago. The last rag-tag of rebels had been cleaned out last season; he had not put much credence in these tales of a last, lone outlaw, despite the claims of tracks found and followed throughout the winter. Most likely those tangle-feet of chasers had been fooled by a bear, he thought, or had followed their own tracks. After all, they had never caught anything; and there had been no trouble, no trouble at all.

Until last week! When a whole troop had gone missing. A whole troop! Their gear had been found by the group coming after, not ten minutes behind. There had been some sort of fight, that was clear enough; but there were no bodies, and no other clues.

Mutiny? Any Louse who spent much time with that word in his mouth came to bad luck, but everyone knew it happened all the same. Just every so often. Not too often, because it never came to any good, and why? Because where was a fellow going to run to, that was the question. They were stuck between the Star-eyes on the one hand and the Masters and Mind-eaters on the other, with nothing but these cursed stinking woods to hide in. But still, runaways did happen. But a whole troop at once? It was past believing. But then, what other explanation was there?

The captain was musing uneasily on these matters as his caravan approached the fork in the water that marked the start of the upper valley. It had been a trip full of nuisance: broken carts, forgotten stores. He would be glad to get into barracks, spend a few days casting knucklebones with the lads and enjoying a bit of drink. The captain grinned in anticipation – maybe Mongrel would have cooked up one of his foul brews.

His reverie was interrupted by a loud *thunk*. Something dropped? He looked blankly around, not immediately able to tell where the sound had come from. His eye was caught by a Louse slumping down on the last cart.

As the captain stared stupidly at this, another *thunk* sounded. Like arrows? But it *couldn't* be arrows. The trees had been cut back for a bow-shot along the whole road by now, and were kept cut. There was no cover to shoot from.

Another *thunk*, and another Louse toppled over. By the stinking – by the Pit! It *was* arrows! Voices were raised in yells now as the Lice looked wildly around. Fuck! Where *was* the scum? *Thunk* sounded right behind him. The captain swung around and saw an arrow sticking out of a Louse's head as the gurgling soldier slowly collapsed in a heap. From the left!

“On the left! On the left!” he yelled. “Get after him!” But *where*? He scanned the dark edge of the wood, could see nothing. Yelling Lice had leaped down and were pouring across the cleared area. *Thunk!* One down. *Thunk!* Another. The rest disappeared into the trees where he could hear them shouting and thrashing the undergrowth. Then with another *thunk!* the driver of the cart in front of him fell over and the horse began to buck. Oh shit oh shit. The captain dived down into his own cart, heaving the sacks of meal away so as to get some shelter from the wooden sides. His own dazed driver goggled down at him. “Whip it up!” the captain screamed to him. “Get us out of here!” The driver turned to obey just as an arrow struck him. The turning motion of his head took him out of the direct path of the shot: the pile struck him in the face, lodging somewhere in the sinuses of his upper jaw. His head, knocked almost sideways on his neck by the force of the blow, whipped elastically back, the feathered shaft swooping through the air like some nightmare semaphore.

The stricken driver drew in a full lungful of air for a scream while reaching to scabble at the shaft emerging from his cheek. But he never had a chance to give voice: a second arrow took him in the centre of his skull. He dropped off the cart like a stone.

The captain swung himself out of the cart and began despairingly to run. He put the carts between himself and his best guess as to where the unseen assassin was lurking. Jinking wildly, legs pounding, eyes wide and fixed on the dark line of the trees ahead. He'd never make it. His back cringed away from the bladed shaft which any second he expected to feel slamming into him, punching his life away. Any second...

He passed a trunk. Another. He dived for the ground and began worming up the hill. Had he made it? As he penetrated deeper into the shelter of the trees, he began to relax. He allowed himself a wary glance back: no-one. What had happened to his troop? But at least he seemed to be in the clear. He got up now and ran. It was dark under the trees, and quiet. He ran for a long time, until he had left the scene of the carnage far behind him.

Panting, he flung himself down at the base of a great tree. He was shaking still from reaction. Just what in the name of the Seven Hells had that been?

He began to relax, then to grin. What luck to escape, though! What a tale to tell the lads back at base! Some rebel with a strong arm, it must be; well, that was solvable. They'd get up a hunting party and flush the scum out.

How quiet it was here!

The captain had only a second to register that thought before the tree he was huddled against stepped on him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mairon was not angry. He never got angry. Anger was for the powerless, for those with no solutions. But every problem had a solution; one just had to find it.

He was pacing to and fro in his chamber, the highest one in the Tower. He had secluded himself there for three days. Things were happening in the external world, there were many matters which demanded his attention, but his servants shrank from disturbing him. A stinking pile of corrupt and disordered matter in the corridor outside his door was all that remained of the last one bold enough to try.

It was extraordinary. He had endured six years of irritation from that gang of bandits, these proxies of the Dream-witch<sup>8</sup>. Mairon had chosen to avoid them as best he could, since the problem was not severe enough to warrant spending the amount of power its direct solution demanded. He had been content to wait until time freed up mundane resources enough to deal with the renegades. In the end he had not needed to wait, he had solved that problem through his own cunning, as was proper. The rebels had been destroyed; the single man whose blind luck had enabled him to escape the net had come within a whisker of being caught during the winter and would surely not survive another. He was alone and unshielded, the Witch's connivance having been eliminated. So surely there had been nothing to fear from this one, fearful, hunted marauder?

But now here it was again, the same irritation, only now even worse than before. This one brigand seemed able to wreak more havoc on his own than his whole band had managed! What kind of man was he? Was he all that he seemed? Had he help? It was difficult to credit some of the reports of his own servants, but there was no doubting that they themselves believed what they were claiming.

No, Mairon was not angry. Fools got angry; anger clouded thought. But Mairon thought, and thought, and still could not find a solution. Mobiles had to be conserved for next year's operations. He had none to spare for sweeps through the forest. What about his darlings, his pets, his wonderful project? They were not yet full-grown – perhaps in a year or two he might risk the first brood, but not yet. Well then, should he perhaps contemplate spending some power? But to lavish hard-won might on this woodland tramp, this eater of furtive mushrooms, this scraper of moss, this slinking beggar – it was too absurd. Expend power, on that? After all, if worst came to worst, with mortals all one had to do was wait. A few short years and they were gasping their mayfly lives out on the death-couch, writhen and grey. No, he would not sink so low as to spend power on that, he would conserve his potency for a worthier object. As with all difficulties, there was a solution somewhere; all he had to do was think of it.

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Etty grabbed Beren's hand in both of hers the moment she reached him and commenced to pull with all her might. "Beren, Beren!" she shouted. "It's my birthday! Come and see my cake!"

"Your birthday, is it?" Beren replied. The Hairfoot children had surrounded him by now in their usual chattering throng. "How old will you be?"

"Eleven," replied Etty proudly. Beren was a little surprised at the answer. He had revised his original estimate of Etty's age to seven or eight once he saw how small the adults of the tribe were, but it seemed he had still fallen somewhat short of the mark.

Following in the direction of Etty's tugs he had arrived at the door of her burrow. Melena was there to greet him shyly. "Mama, mama!" cried Etty. "Can we bring the cake out now so Beren can see it, he can have some too of course, can we, can we?"

"In a minute, Daughter," said Melena. "I'm just finishing the decoration."

"I wish you could come in," said Etty wistfully, "and see it, and my things too. I've got some lovely things, dollies Papa made for me, and some I made myself, and bits of funny bark, and a chrysalis, and lots more."

Beren had never seen the inside of a Hairfoot hole. The holes provided shelter at night, and during the winter, and also served as stores for food, but he knew that the little people lived their lives mostly in the open air.

"I misdoubt I am too big," Beren replied now to Etty. "Your mama and papa would have to cut a door specially for me, and then what would I do once I got in?"

Etty giggled. "We could snuggle up to you like you was a big sheep," she said.

Beren thought about this and then came out with a perfect baaa, which made all the listening children laugh.

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8 Melian.

Melena had disappeared in the meantime but now she popped her head out of the hole again. “Come now, Etty, help me fetch it out so everyone can have a bit.”

The two of them emerged after a moment, greeted by general cheers, with a large confection balanced between them on a board. The cake was covered on the top with rich, fresh cream and was decorated with a pattern of strawberries, redder than blood. Mother and daughter set the board on one of the long trestles, presided over by Granny White-top and some others of the older folk. The children gathered around greedily. Shortly the noise level decreased noticeably as small mouths became occupied with cake.

“Beren!” called Etty, and her small arm rose out of the throng bearing a slice of cake on a woven reed platter. Beren took the platter before raising it to Etty and wishing her happiness on her Year-day.

He eyed the cake, feeling a little at a loss. When was the last time he had eaten something as frivolous as this? He couldn’t remember. He took a tentative bite of the succulent morsel and his expression brightened as his mouth became filled with wonderful flavours of berries, spices, and other things he could not put a name to.

“Mmm,” he said in real enjoyment, “that’s delicious, Melena. Did you make that on your own?”

“I helped!” shouted Etty indistinctly through a mouthful of her own.

“ ‘Help’ mostly meaning eating up all the currants,” said Melena through a smile. “Yes, master Beren. You know we bakes for lots of folks, my man and I. A cake’s just the same, only a bit fancier.”

Nearest at the table to where Beren was sitting on the ground was Etty’s grandfather, the one for whom she had been gathering herbs that first day of all. Beren had made his acquaintance on a previous visit. He turned to the old Hairfoot now and addressed him politely. “I hope I see you well, Sir?”

The old Zukuk peered at him from his depth of years. His eyes twinkled in a face that looked like beaten up leather. “Oh, aye, well enough,” he said. “Can’t complain. I’m a prisoner of me legs, o’ course. Always have been. Spiteful, they are. Now you wouldn’t think a man’s own legs would work against him, would you? But they do. Just plain contrary to reason, I call it. I mean, who’s going to feed them if I don’t, eh? Eh? Stands to reason.”

“It does indeed,” agreed Beren. “But I notice you aren’t feeding them now, Sir. No appetite for cake?”

“Oh, well, as to that,” said the ancient, “baking is my trade, you know. A bee don’t enjoy honey, do he now, it’s just work to him. Same for me and cake, see. I made enough on ’em in my time, oh yes. Taught my son all I know, and now he does it, and his missus there. No, let the young ’uns enjoy it. Tis pleasure enough for me just to watch ’em at it.”

Granny, sitting on his other side, was clearly not of the same view: she was wiping cream from around her mouth after managing a considerable slice. Beren turned to her now. “How do you find yourself, Granny?” he said.

She squinted her eyes at him. “Same as always,” she said. “I don’t get no younger. But that don’t matter. How’s the world down there? That’s the important talk. Still turning, is it? What you been up to with them Harrek? How’s things looking, and all?”

“Well,” he said, “not much has changed. I think – or my friends think – that the, well, the chief Harrek of all you might call him, in these parts anyway, is planning a war, a war in another country. He’s gathering a large force together, and soon I expect he will march them off. It’s nothing that should trouble us here, though, on the Pine Mountain. Not yet anyway.”

“This is black talk,” she said frowning, “and I do so hate to enter into it. Can’t wriggle out of it, though. Life’s not all cake.”

“No,” he agreed.

“And what have you been about, master giant,” she continued, “while this boss creature has been gathering his army?”

“Hindering it where I can,” said Beren. “But there’s only one of me.”

“Powerful big ’un though,” put in Ety’s grandfather, prodding Beren in the arm. “Make several on us, you would, should a felly cut you up.”

“I hope you aren’t planning on trying it, Sir,” said Beren. The old Hairfoot broke out laughing at that and was attacked by fits of wheezing mirth at intervals for some time thereafter.

“I wish you’d take ’Foskin with you,” said Granny, “on one of them forays of yourn. Always rabbiting on about fighting, he is, how he’s going to do this and that to the Harrek. Wears you down after a while.”

“What’s to stop him doing it, then?” said Beren. “Powers know there is no shortage of them.”

Granny rubbed her ear. “Well,” she said, “I don’t think he rightly knows where to start. You know, a lot of folk here don’t take much account o’ ’Foskin. Reckon he’s all beer and no bottle. Me, I don’t go along with that. There’s tough wood in there somewhere. Hidden under a sackful o’ talk, to be sure, but it’s there all the same. You might be surprised.” The old woman peered at him. “These ‘friends’ you spoke of,” she said. “Are they the same ones you took ’Foskin to meet? The Star people?” Beren nodded. “Made a big impression on him, they did,” she remarked. “A big impression. He can’t ever stop talking about that time. Their vittles not the least.”

“Ar!” said Ety’s grandfather. “He did claim as how their pasties were better nor anything *we* could knock up. Now that takes a deal o’ believing, right there. It’s my belief as how he hit his head and dreamed it all.”

Beren did not make any reply to this. His own feelings about the Elves were complicated and he did not feel like trying to shape them to fit the Hairfeet’s understanding of the world.

Granny was still eyeing him narrowly through the fog through which she had to view the world these days. “You don’t want to take him again, do you,” she said. “Foskin, I mean.”

Beren felt awkward and struggled to find a way to express his thoughts. “It’s not that I doubt his courage,” he said, “it’s just that I don’t think he has the least idea of what he would be getting into. And he wants to stop to eat all the time.”

The old people all laughed. “Aye, well,” said Granny, still chuckling, “we do like our vittles, we Hairfeet, there’s no use to deny it. All the same, was you to take ’Foskin with you on a foray or two, that might be the best way to learn him up, if you catch my meaning. I understand what you say about him being a bit innocent, like. Mebbe so are we all. But it seems to me, master Beren, from all your talk, your black talk, not meaning any aspersion on you, the fault being with the matter not the speaker as it were, but black it is all the same; it seems to me that the quicker some of us learn about these things, the better.”

Beren was silent for a moment. “It won’t help him if his learning comes via a Harrek arrow through the throat,” he said at last.

“Well, no,” admitted the portly old woman. “But need it come to that? Couldn’t you find him one small, weasely Harrek? One a bit sick, mebbe? Just for him to practise on? Because he do need the practice; just as we need him.”

The man sighed. “All right, Granny,” he said. “I’ll come up with something.”

At some point during the interchange, Ety’s father Bhalacho had appeared. The baker had greeted his father quietly and had sat next to him, listening to the talk in silence. Beren had seen little of him on any of his

visits. On the few occasions when the dark-haired baker had made part of the company, he had shown himself to be reserved, undemonstrative, a hard person to get to know.

Beren made his farewells to company at the table and took leave of the others with a raised hand. He left them and made his way through the trees to the top of the path. Before he could reach it, he heard his name called. It was Bhalacho, who was hurrying towards him, encumbered by a heavy package.

“Got something for you,” puffed the baker as he arrived at the side of the wondering Beren, who had squatted for easier converse. “Didn’t see no call for them others to chew all over it. Here,” and with that he held the package out to Beren.

The man took it and unwrapped some folds of leather. Inside he found a neat array of smaller packages wrapped in dried reeds. He teased a hole carefully in the wrapping and exposed what looked like a biscuit.

Bhalacho took the reed package from him, unwrapped it, and held out a biscuit. “Try one,” he suggested.

Beren inspected the biscuit, which appeared to contain some sort of vegetable matter in its mixture. He sniffed, then took a bite. It was dry of course, and consequently hard, but he found it tastier than he had expected. He looked up enquiringly at the baker, who was standing awkwardly on one leg then the other.

“Keep you on your feet, that will,” said the shy Hairfoot. “All sorts of good things in there. They’ll keep, those biscuits, so long as you keep them dry.”

“My thanks to you, Bhalacho, most sincerely,” said Beren. “But why?”

“Oh, well,” replied Bhalacho diffidently, “you know why, Master, I dare say, well enough. On account o’ Ety, o’ course. I said there was more owing. Don’t thank me; this is my thanks to you. But there’s more on it. We know you’re fighting for us. We small folk, there’s not much we can do to help, spite o’ what ’Foskin blatters about. But we can feed you; or leastways I can. It takes a lot of a man’s time to feed himself, I know that well enough. Well, that’s time you could spend on better things. And now you can.”

Beren was touched. “It is a help,” he said, “perhaps more even than you know.”

“That’s not all,” said Bhalacho, flushing now. “It’s not meant as a one-off. I’ll supply you, Master, so long as you’re fighting, like. Just tell me how long that there will last you. I ain’t so expert at judging the hunger of giants.”

Beren weighed the pack. “I can’t say for sure, but I’d guess there’s a month’s worth for me here, maybe more,” he said.

Bhalacho looked surprised. He looked at the pack, then back at Beren. “Are you sure?” he asked. “That might last *me* a month, on thin rations, but you...!”

Beren smiled. “I am used to hunger,” he said. “This is a great gift you have made me, Baker. But do not be so hasty to burden yourself with a promise having no certain end. This fight may last for many years. We might all grow old at it.”

The halfling shook his head. “Your pardon, Master, but I doubt so long as that,” he said. “Our days here are not so far from their end. I feel it in my water.”

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The Rrrk armoured the wagons now, because of that damned Bandit. Panels of stout wicker were fastened on sides and rear, and the drivers sat in booths built of several layers of the same, with only a narrow slot in front to see out of. Not even the Bandit should be able to shoot through that. Even the horses carried woven withy panels to protect heart and head. The thought of fire had occurred to someone, so each wagon carried several covered buckets to deal with that eventuality. The Lice also had new orders: ignore any attacks, just

stay in the wagons and push on.

The Louse leader was uneasy, despite that there had been no attack for three weeks. His superiors were loud in their praise of the new tactics: they'd given the Bandit a puzzler, they said. Let him try his tricks now! They'd brought the bastard up short; and once the snow came, they'd scrag him for good.

The leader wasn't so sure. He had seen a lot of service, and had seen a lot of boasting end in a twitching corpse. It was true that he couldn't think of a flaw in the present set-up, but that didn't mean that there wasn't one.

Thus, when the horse in front of him folded gently up and fell in a heap in the road, somewhere behind the leader's shock, fury and fear, a tiny, savage satisfaction reared its head. Those blowhard know-it-alls! Their chests would collapse, all right, their crests would well and truly fall, the bastards.

It was just a pity that it seemed likely to be at his own expense.

While these thoughts were flashing through his mind, the commander was crouched trying to see through the holes between the weave of the withies. Nothing. He sprang to the wicker wall on the other side of the wagon just as the horse in the wagon behind him collapsed. Peep through the holes. There! A running figure!

He turned to the yammering Lice beside him. "Shut your gobs and get an arrow on that fellow! Over that way!"

They paid him no mind. He cuffed the nearest bewildered and gaping Louse across his stupid face and tore the bow from his hands. Arrows – where the fuck were the arrows? There. He grabbed two and stood up, just in time to see the figure disappear into the bushes. Fuck. Too far. Cursing, the leader aimed for maximum range and lobbed the arrows anyway. Too short of course.

His ears caught a faint twang. Just in time, he ducked back behind the wicker. A great long arrow whipped through the space where his head had been a half-second before and thudded quivering in the opposite wicker. From over *there*? It wasn't possible! How did the man move so fast?

All three horses were lying on the road now. There were no obvious arrows in them; and they didn't even seem to be dead, he could see their sides heave. What had the bastard done to them? Forget it, the main point was, he and his Rrrk were all stuck there, in the open.

The others had quieted down now and were looking at him, waiting for orders. What could he tell them? What the fuck could they do? Anyone who so much as poked his head up was going to get it shot off.

"We'll wait the bastard out," he said to the sweating Lice. He could taste their fear in the air. Have to try to calm them down else they'd not be good for anything. "This is just a try-on," he continued. "Oi! You at the back there! Shut it! All of you just need to relax. All right, he's nobbled the nags somehow. Some wood-creeper trick, I've heard of such. But there's nothing else he can do to us. He can't touch us, see? He can't sneak up on us – we can see good enough through these-here holes. We'll just wait him out. So, odd numbers, fall out. Eat 'em if you've got 'em, have a nice little nap if you want. Even numbers, stay alert! We'll give the odd numbers an hour and then we'll switch. It'll be a bit dull, lads, but come nightfall and we'll be away. There's no poxy moon tonight and we'll be able to see the road out of here a sight better than he'll be able to see us. D'you all follow? Relax. No drama. It's just a delay."

The odd-numbered soldiers had barely started digging into their packs when all his calming talk was blown to the four winds by an arrow which arced in out of the heavens and stuck in the cart floor with a thump. The Lice all started yelling at once. More arrows fell: sudden screams showed that someone in the next cart had been hit. The yammering Lice began to run witlessly about in the bottom of the cart. You stupid little fuckers, fumed the leader to himself. Half-grown, half trained. Useless little cunts.

There followed something of a pause, before further arrows began to fall, coming in almost vertically now.



Hang on, thought the leader, that's not right. Not even the Bandit could shoot like that from the distance he was at. Damn, he's moved! And nobody spotted him! Just as he had this thought, a panicked Louse scrambled over the wall of the cart opposite to the side where the marauder had been at the start. Tried to run, but straight away an arrow flung him into a gurgling heap.

The Lice had all completely lost their heads again now and were scrambling up the side to get away. They were being picked off mercilessly as they clambered over the top. It took them a handful of deadly seconds, and a few more deaths, to realize what had been clear to the leader for some moments: the Bandit had crept around them and now was placed to their rear, and not far away either. From where the fucker was sat, he could either lob high or pick off anyone who poked his head up.

Damn these panicking little swine, thought the leader. If we worked together we could have him. Well: looks like, if I want to save my skin, I'll have to do it myself.

He cuffed aside the yelling Lice in his own wagon who had turned now and were trying to clamber out the front. Having cleared himself a little space, the leader put an arrow to the string and considered. Just about *there* the Bandit must be, he thought to himself, behind and a little to one side. The leader poked his head up, and there his foe was! Just about exactly where he had calculated. The tall soft-skin was standing there with his great bow, cool as you like, in easy shot. The leader only had time for the briefest impression before the other was onto him. The Louse loosed his hurried shot at the man, but he knew as soon as it flew that it was no good, because he'd had to duck like lightning to avoid the arrow which whipped an inch over his own head. Damn, but that big prick was good! He must have been watching special for any Louse not panicking. What I couldn't do with a squad like him, instead of these useless little shits!

Not many breaths had actually passed since the beginning of the bombardment. Lice were still scrambling forward and trying to get away from the deadly rain.

No good, can't nobble him. What to do? The leader hesitated, then pulled out his knife and started cutting furiously at the thongs which bound the sheet of wicker to the side of the cart. As soon as it was flapping nearly free, he swung back, and in a lightning-quick movement reached into the driver's wicker booth and jerked the Louse crouching in there bodily back down into the base of the cart. An arrow missed them both by a whisker.

The leader knew the driver, a wizened little fucker with an evil glare. Like the leader, the driver was old school. He wouldn't panic.

"Grab the panel," he hissed in the driver's face, "with me. Grab a corner. Hold it behind us. Then to the woods. Got it?" The other took it all in for a second, glanced at the wicker panel, nodded.

The last thongs cut, the pair of them grabbed the unwieldy panel and jumped down. They started running as soon as their feet hit the ground, holding behind them the sheltering panel which dragged and bumped in the dust. By the Pit, thought the leader as they strained their legs to run, is this actually going to work? It'd take the Bandit a second to realize. Sure, he could probably run faster than them, could come around them; but he was hopefully still occupied in killing the others. The Louse could tell that not all were stuck yet because there was still screaming and commotion going on behind him.

The panting pair were nearly at the edge of the woods now. No arrows had come their way. No sign of the Bandit. At the woods. Yes! They had done it!

"Drop it, and in," he hissed at his companion. They left the wicker panel and dived through the undergrowth into the cool dark of the woods. Everything was quiet. "Right," whispered the leader to his companion. "Further on, soft now, on through these trees. The road bends about here, see? We won't have to creep far through, then we're out again, and can leg it. Come on. He won't catch us, won't ever see us."

The two started off, running and jinking through the trees. The leader looked up at the big sticks distrustfully. He had heard stories about these damned woods. They weren't safe places. But just a tick, and they'd be out

of them and running free.

Before they could get all the way through, something totally unexpected happened. They ran into a clearing, and there, blocking the way out of it, was a small figure waving a sword. The leader thought it was a child at first before he clocked the moustaches. What in the world was this? A real little chap he was, smaller even than most Lice. Bronze sword. Bronze rings on leather. White in the face, sword waving, a bit uncertain.

All these impressions had raced through the leader's head in less than a second. The two Lice had skidded to a halt. They looked at one another, then drew their own swords. Without need for words they separated and began to walk around the little swordsman on opposite sides. This wouldn't take long; not long at all.

Something stung the leader on the neck. As soon as he swiped at the place and felt the dart, the hollow realization came to him, tinged with regret, that they were not, after all, going to make it back to camp.

Quickly he drew back his other arm with the sword. Could he at least throw his sword at the little fucker? But a wave of numbness was already sweeping over his limbs. The sword fell out of suddenly nerveless fingers and, as the leader's knees buckled, he toppled himself helplessly to the earth.

He was awake, just couldn't move. His eyes were open, but he was facing the wrong way and couldn't see what was happening. All he could hear was the noises. He heard the ring of blade on shield and a shuffling and gasping. Clash, gasp, clash, gasp. This went on for a little while. Then there came a sudden clatter, and a groan, followed by the thump of a falling body. The noises stopped, apart from hard breathing.

Another soft footfall intruded into the silence. A shadow entered the clearing. The leader felt a foot shove into his side, rolling him helplessly onto his back. And there he was: the Bandit. Big fucker. Dark hair. Eyes as blue as the staring sky.

The big man bent over and plucked the dart out of the Rrrk's nerveless neck. The little chap came over then too, little white-face bronze-blade. They stood staring down at him, the big and the little. The two exchanged some words, but the sounds meant nothing to the leader. All he could do was lie there, waiting, while his two enemies mumbled away. Staring up at the leaves which roofed the clearing. Leaves. Poxey things, leaves. Give him a cave any day. Well, this was it. He'd never enjoy a drink again, or a joke with the lads, or a spot of fun with a prisoner and a hot knife.

The big one drew his sword. This was it, oh fuck fuck. The blade swept down, and then everything became confused. The leader felt as if he taken a tumble, somersaulted. It stung at his neck, but his face was pressed into the ground and there was dirt in his nostrils. He tried automatically to snuff out the dirt, but it wouldn't work. No snuff. His whole body felt strange, pins and needles, but the worst of it was, warmth and life were running out of his head like drink from a spilled cup. Only a second had passed, but his head felt already cold and empty. His sight had gone dark, there was dirt shoved up his nose, and his snuff wouldn't snuff. The sense of baffled annoyance at this was the last thought he had.

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The celebrations of the Hairfeet were terrific. Ale flowed, a feast was prepared and eaten, songs were sung in uproarious chorus. When the sun went down, the people lit torches and the merriment continued. Worrafoskin's face was as red as a beetroot from excitement and drink. He had to tell the tale again and again of the fierce band of Harrek and how he and Beren, standing side by side, had vanquished them one by one. Beren's back was slapped countless times and mugs of beer were pressed on him, but he had the distinct impression that the Hairfeet seemed to view him as the junior partner in the venture. He did not mind that, and he enjoyed the celebrations, but a worm of doubt was wriggling somewhere in the back of his mind.

It was some time before he had opportunity to have a quiet word with Granny, who had been holding her usual court and leading half the songs; but when things began to quiet down a little after midnight, when the numbers of snoring Hairfeet scattered lying around in the grass began to outnumber the tenacious but increasingly bleary-eyed chorus of mug-bangers, he found a space at the side of the old lady.

"I am for sleep soon," he said to her. "I am not used to such carouses."

"Ah, well," admitted Granny, "I dare say I must soon do the same myself. I could dance the sun around her circle when I was a girl, yes and the moon too, but those days are long behind me." She glanced sidelong at Beren. "I ain't had the chance to talk with you since you got back. Seems it was quite an occasion, what you and 'Foskin got yourselves into."

He smiled and shrugged.

"I dare say he's embroidered it a bit," Granny added drily.

"A bit," said Beren.

She leaned closer to him. "Well, come on then," she said. "What really happened?"

Beren gave her a quick outline of the events as he had seen them. "Most of the time I tackle the Harrek with a bow," he concluded. "Stave-work, as an old friend of mine would have put it," he added, with a sudden poignant recollection of Hrotha. "But it needs a long draw to pick them off from cover. Worrafoskin isn't of a size or strength to manage that, so I had to think how to give him some excitement he could tackle with a sword. Not too much excitement. I did manage it fairly well in the end, but then so did he. He only took down one Harrek, quite a little one at that, and I had to help him out a bit too, although he doesn't know that. All the same, considering the odds, he did well. He stood his ground like a game one, and he came out standing in the end, which of course is the best way to come out of things. No, allow him his celebration, he's earned it."

"Hrrmph," said Granny, chewing on her gums. "So what's next then?"

"From my side, nothing," said Beren firmly. "The War-ward has had his taste of war, and that's enough for him in my opinion. Powers send he never has to taste any more of it, or any of you. Once he's cooled down and slept off the beer you may find he's not so keen for another encounter."

"Could be," grinned Granny. "And what about you?"

"Oh, I'll keep on stirring them up," said Beren. "I'll tell you one thing though. I'm not so sure I should be coming up here so much as I have been."

Granny digested this. "You afeared they'll follow you up?" she said after a moment.

Beren looked uneasy. "I don't know," he said. "I'm not so easy to follow as all that. But every time is a risk. The season's changing, too. Things will be harder in winter."

"Some of us was talking about having you with us over the snow time," she said. "Dig you a house, we would."

Beren looked at her, surprise showing on his torch-lit face. "That's – I don't know what to say," he said. "It is a generous offer. I don't know. I'll need to think about it, Granny."

"You do that," she said. "Where else you going to go?"

"Right this minute," replied Beren, "I'm going to go and sleep. See you in the morning."

"Who are you staying with then?" asked Granny White-top. "Didn't think as how you'd fit in any burrow of ours."

The man laughed. "No burrow," he said. "I curl up in the forest."

Granny's eyes opened wide in astonishment. "What, *really*?" she said. "Out in the cold air? Ugh!"

"I'm used to it," said Beren with a smile. He stood up. "Until next time then."

"Come to breakfast?" said the old woman. "Not too early, mind!"

"Not tomorrow, Granny," said the big man, "I have things to do." He saluted her, then slipped away into the shadows.

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When Beren arrived at Rattlecone's house, he found the Ent standing silently in his garth with two others of his race. These were Ents whom Beren thought he had seen about the land from time to time, but had never spoken to.

Rattlecone greeted him gravely, then indicated his companions. "These have cast their lot with us," he said. "You may call them Wiggleroot and Longlimb."

Beren looked over the newcomers, whose appearance, in what seemed to be the usual Entish way, somehow matched very aptly with their names. He greeted them each by name, bowing low, which caused the eyes of all three Ents to flicker with amusement.

He turned back to Rattlecone. "Do they speak any Kelvar<sup>9</sup> language?" he asked. "I think it is beyond me to learn Entish."

"They understand Elven tongues," replied Rattlecone in his slow way. "Indeed it was the People of the Stars who taught us to speak to begin with, back in the young days, the broad days, in the cool and dark before the coming of the Sun. But the speech of Elves has flowed and changed like the water of a stream which rushes down the mountain. It is difficult for us to keep up with its evolutions. It would be well if you spoke to my friends here clearly, and slowly, or as near to slowly as you can manage. It is not the knowing so much as your mad haste to which they must accustom themselves. To speak with you butterflies is for us as if to dance on hot coals. I have had practice at this; my friends here have not."

Beren contemplated the new Ents, who gazed upon him gravely in return. "You said they have taken our part," he said to Rattlecone. "Does this mean you are in worse trouble, Rattlecone, or less?"

The Ent laughed. "Oh, probably about the same," he said. "Although truth to say, there is no real trouble. We do not all agree, we Ents of the Pine Mountain, that you know. But among us the many are not ruled by few, or by one, in the way you two-legs like to bind yourselves. We have no duty to obey; my dissent is not betrayal."

"I am glad to know it," said Beren. "But I recall that you have spoken of a chief Ent. What is he then, if not your ruler?"

"Our eldest," replied Rattlecone. "He guides us – or he should. We owe him respect, and attention, but not obedience."

Beren thought about this. "What is he like?" he said. "I do not think I have met him."

"You may have seen him," replied Rattlecone. "You recall that business with the Dryness, the waking evil in the stones, in the South of this land? After you woodmen called the storm down and washed the sickness away, we Onodrim took as our part the re-wooding of the valley. Aye, and we were hasty about it too, for once; yes, hasty, even we. All were there, save only I, on account of my injuries. Our chief must have been at the van."

Beren thought back and remembered a baleful glance from a dark, rough figure. He described this Ent to his

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9 Quenya: 'beings that move from place to place'. Ents, although obviously they can do this, are nevertheless considered 'Olvar', that is, sessile.

friend, who nodded his stiff nod at the end of the account. “That is him,” he confirmed. “His ‘hasty’ name, the name the Fair Folk gave him, is Tabbieneedle. You would be wise to stay out of his path.”

There did not seem to be anything to say about that, so Beren turned the subject to his recent foray with Worrafoskin, which Rattlecone for once had taken no part in. He gave as light-hearted an account as the incident seemed to him to merit, but the Ent did not smile.

“My tale does not please you,” said Beren after he had finished.

“No,” replied Rattlecone. “You speak as if you find it amusing. I do not. Every time you stand against these vermin of Orcs, you set your life at hazard. Well, in strict truth so do I; but you are soft, whereas I am tough. Although we Onodrim can be killed, as we know now to our recent grief, it takes a deal of doing. Certainly it is beyond the power of these, these foul brood of Orcs, lest they came in their hundreds with fire. But you! One small slip of a sharp steel edge and your breathing days are done, my friend. If you treat it as a joke, the slip will come all the sooner.”

Beren was a little nettled. “Well,” he said, “I do not really treat things so lightly. It was just a way of speaking! For all love, may I not make the tale light, even though the deed be not?”

“It is not your manner of telling the tale that concerns me,” said Rattlecone. “It is the pains you took to blood this Hairfoot. You had to expose yourself to do it, to take risks which, on your own, you would not have taken. To me that sounds like folly.”

This did nothing to calm Beren’s temper. “The Little People have no defence,” he replied angrily. “The Orcs could wipe them out at any time. I sought only to remedy that.”

“It is true that they are dreadfully exposed,” said his friend. “I have often had the thought. But you could train fifty such guardians as you describe without making a dent in their peril. Their only wise course is to flee.”

The man stood silent for a while. “I know you are right,” he admitted at last. “I even said as much to them – indeed I urged that course upon them as strongly as I knew how. With but little effect. One or two of them understand the need, perhaps; but the mass of them cannot grasp it. I do not know what else to do.”

“Are they your responsibility?” asked the Ent gently.

“Am I yours?” returned Beren with a flash of returning fire. Speaking more slowly he said, “I am fond of them, Rattlecone. They have warmed the winter of my heart, touched its loneliness. They are a merry, innocent folk. It would grieve me to the marrow, were they to be caught up in this meat-mincer.”

Nobody said anything for some time. Beren, looking at the new Ents, wondered how much of the talk they had caught.

Rattlecone stirred himself at last, sighed. “We cannot solve the world’s problems,” he said. “Come. Tell me what you have in mind for the campaign, now that we have extra force.” He indicated his companions.

Beren’s mood turned to glee. He rubbed his hands. “Now we can really take them on,” he said.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Rrrk recruits were not happy. They had been hustled out of the squeaker pits, the only place they knew, just as soon as they reached size. They had been whipped into long files and made to march for an endless time through a tunnel, inadequately lit by the occasional stinking and guttering lamp. The air was bad in the tunnel. Sometimes it was so foul, it scraped their dry throats raw and left them gasping. Any Louse who fainted was trodden over by the files coming after; his carcass transformed rapidly into a knobbly mush stumbled over by the endless lines of cursing Lice, until finally all that remained of a former life was a

stinking patch of wetness that extended for yards along the lumpy path.

Emerging into the light again – and sometimes it was too much cursed glary light altogether – the sullen creatures were herded into a land of death and told to camp there. Death – there was no other word to describe it. It stank. The branched objects which had once covered the hills were dead, which would on its own have disturbed no-one they supposed, but the black, thorny stuff which had grown up to replace it was infinitely deader. It pressed upon the spirit. Some Lice disappeared. Others went crazy, stabbing and foaming until someone managed to cut them down. Acrid vapours drifting up from the burnt plain below caught at the throat. The place was haunted by hostile ghosts. Rrrk spoke of menacing whispers in the dark, mournful voices murmuring on the wind.

To cap it all, the black woods concealed an enemy, a live one. They couldn't track him, couldn't find him. He would sneak in, cut a few Lice down, then vanish again. Three legions were camped in those life-sucking woods, and a few Lice less should not have made much difference, but somehow it did. The cursed Bandit made special target of officers, and this hurt the organization. Distribution of rations suffered. Other units were left leaderless, and without anybody to order them they fell into a resentful idleness punctuated by snarling fights which there was nobody to break up. Others gathered in furtive groups and muttered. The M-word became not just whispered among them but spoken openly.

It would have been incorrect to describe Mairon as unhappy, because he did not permit himself the indulgence of time-wasting emotion. Some matters were not going as he wished; he had a problem to which he had not found the solution. Certain alternative actions became necessary; wasteful of resources, but unavoidable.

He decided he must visit the northern camp. The Bandit's sporadic attacks on the convoys had been little more than a nuisance, but his recent concentration on the northern arm of the forces being prepared for the New Year's assault threatened to become serious. Disorganization was growing; Mobiles were absenting themselves, the exercises were not being pursued. It could not be allowed to continue. He must go there in person and stiffen a few sinews.

\* \* \* \* \*

The whole island fortress viewed any absence by Mairon as something of a holiday. The work and the whips remained the same, but a Louse could stand up and breathe a bit, relieved of mental pressure. The guards on the bridge appreciated the relief as much as any, but guard-work as such remained as boring as ever – that didn't change, whether Master was home or not. However, they knew better than to allow their boredom to leach away at their watchfulness. Such things were tested now and then by superiors, and woe betide any Louse found playing knucklebones by the fire in the guardroom, or even just yawning and blinking sleepily at his post. So the guards paced their rounds and scanned the surrounding hills and approaches dutifully. Not that there was ever anything to see. This Bandit they talked about never ventured near, and strong patrols layered in the approach to the South kept off any more conventional forces from that direction.

It was the dark afternoon of an autumn day. Clouds were stacked many miles high over the valley, and what light could penetrate them emerged leaden and dull. A constant drizzle had accompanied the monotonous hours.

Half-shift change came. The new squads marched down from the gates, one toward each bank. Each end of the bridge had a guard post. The guards at both ends were paying no attention to the replacements coming up behind them but were scanning the approaches with a heightened, wary attention. Twice now that bastard Withertongue, the shift supervisor, had caught them just at that time, at the moment when their attention was distracted by the new arrivals. That shit-spawn had minced out of the bushes at the precise moment when nobody was looking out. Those who had been on shift on those occasions shivered to think of it; their skins still tingled from the memory of the whipping they had copped. Fucking Withertongue – bastard, fucker, sucker of Mairon's dick. Well, they wouldn't be caught that way again.

As the newcomers took their place at the gratings, their reliefs took themselves off with alacrity. The other

half-shift, two hours of duty left to go, eyed the rain and the gathering gloom with despondency. Two hours! What a bloody life.

A patrol departed, another returned. Each was occasion for a momentary crash of arms, harsh voices. Apart from that there was nothing to see, nothing to do but watch the grey landscape, blurred with rain that never stopped.

Some time ago a barrage had been built upstream of the island – a slanting row of stakes which extended from one bank to the other. Occasionally, things floated down the river and fetched up against this. Each had to be investigated. The guards didn't mind this, since it broke the monotony. Mostly it was just bodies, there was never much of interest. A Louse could hope, though. Who knows what might not turn up?

A shout came from the slit that faced upstream on the eastern end. Something coming down. Wary of Withertongue, the guard commander detailed two of his men to go see what it was. They were soon back. "You should take a look at this, Chief," said one.

The commander cursed. "Ain't you got tongues? Use 'em, unless you want to lose 'em. Just tell me, rot you!"

The two looked at one another. "Well," said the first who spoke, "it's bodies. But not like normal. There's four of 'em, like, tied together. Someone's done it a-purpose. There's some stakes sticking up, and a bit of bark on top, and wot looks like writing on the bark."

"Wot the fuck you talking about?" shouted the commander. "Stakes, bark?"

The guard shrugged. "That's wot it is," he said. "I said there was no use to tell yer."

"Shut up!" barked the commander. "Fucking useless little shits. Come here both and glue your eyes to this-hole."

He left the niche at the bridge-end and tramped through the rain down to the water's edge at the end of the barrage. There he found the crude raft, which was pretty much as his underling had described: four Louse corpses, bloating already, tied to a frame of stakes which rose out of the base to a blunt point. A sheet of birch-bark had been tied to the top of the frame, and on the bark was what looked like a word, written in a smear of what looked like ash mixed with fat. Some sort of beast-fat. In fact the whole frame was smeared with it. The deaders stunk something horrid, and the rancid fat was almost worse.

Most of the guards on that end of the bridge were taking furtive peeks at the scene. The breeze came from up-river and so carried the stink towards them.

"What's that all about, d'yer reckon?" one asked another in a low voice.

"Dunno," said his mate. "Tell you one thing, though, I'd say the Bandit's behind it for sure. The fucker. They been sayin' as how we'll skin his arse for him come snow-time; ho yes. But me, I ain't so sure. He's been running rings around the Master for years, why should he stop now?"

"You want to keep your voice down, saying things like that," the first Louse commented.

"I'm not the only one sayin' 'em," muttered the other. "Plenty sayin' 'em up North from what I heard. That's why Master's up there now. He had to go sort 'em out in person."

"He'll sort you out if you don't watch it," said the first. "Eh up! Boss is coming back. Eyes on your post."

The commander stomped back into the niche, water streaming off him. "Fucking weather," he swore.

"What do you make of it, Boss?" one of his crew ventured to ask.

“Shut up!” growled the commander. “No business o’ yours. You just keep your eyes on your slot. Where’s that little cunt Shit-worm?” Shit-worm, the runner, ducked across from the other side of the bridge. “Go take a message to HQ,” the commander ordered him. “Tell ’em all about it. Higher-ups need to see this.”

The weazened Louse nodded and set off up the bridge at a run. After the clap of his feet had faded, the day lapsed once more into boredom. However, the dull sameness lasted only a few minutes; the air was suddenly filled with the clangour of a bell. All the guards jumped as if shocked.

“That’s the Watchers, on the inner gate!” exclaimed the commander. “What the...? Blackrot, Sick, go and see what’s up! Drawn swords! The rest of you, watch them slots!” He swung his head from side to side, growling. “Something’s goin’ on – something’s not right. Fuck! Why’d it have to happen on *my* watch?” The bell stopped, but after some seconds the renewed silence was punctuated by the faintest of sounds. “Was that a splash?” asked the commander of nobody. None of the Lice replied. “Keep the post,” he growled to them, then loped out into the rain again.

The guard commander met Blackrot and Sick coming back just as he reached the high point in the bridge’s arch. “Report!” he barked at them.

“Nothing, Sir,” Blackrot said. “Couldn’t find nothing. The fellows inside said nothing had come through. False alarm, maybe.”

“False alarm my arse,” growled their sodden chief. “There’s something going on here. It’s all connected, or I’m an Star-eye.” He scrambled onto the firing step on the downstream side and looked over the breast-wall at the grey water flowing away beneath him. “Something tried the Watchers, couldn’t get in, and dived away. I’d bet my legs and eyes on it. But how did he get past us? That’s what I want to know.” He scanned the waters in the gathering gloom, but there was nothing to be seen.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beren told Rattlecone about it some days later. “Finrod talked about getting into the tower,” he said. “Back in the spring. I didn’t know what to think. On the one hand, it sounded like nonsense; on the other, when was the last time you’ve known an Elf to be wrong? And him one of the wisest of the Eldar. So I just wanted to have a look. I felt Mairon come north; so I went south.”

“Did you get in?” asked Rattlecone. His expression and tone made it plain that he took the most dubious view of the whole enterprise.

“For a while it all went as though greased,” Beren said. He smiled at the thought. “In fact I was pretty well greased up myself, come to that.

“You know I learned this trick of being hard to see from one of my old teachers of the People. You sort of think yourself out of their attention. It works with Dwarves and Men, it works with Orcs, although it doesn’t work with you, and I bet it wouldn’t with any of the Fair Folk either. Their eyes see further than the world of solid things.

“Trouble is, I can’t do anything about my scent. And some Orcs can smell well. So I arranged a bit of a distraction – something that smelled strong, that would mask my own odour.

“I got onto the bridge with no difficulty – slipped in through the postern gate after they opened it to go look at my distraction. I don’t think any of them had any hint that I was there. There was no traffic to worry about on the bridge, only a runner. He didn’t see me. I crept over the arch until I reached the island, where the main gate is. I wasn’t sure what I would find there. In Orodreth’s time there had been another guard post there, but that would be no guide to how Mairon had chosen to arrange things.

“In the event there were no Orcs at all guarding the inner gate. But under the arch-way there I found something strange: a guard indeed, and much stricter than any made of flesh and bone. There is a pair of



carven figures under the arch now which face each other across the way. These were bigger than a man, but they weren't man-shaped, the heads were different. Most like to cruel birds, they looked to me. Each figure had three heads: one facing forwards, one backwards, and one staring across the gap at its partner.

"These were of stone, but not just stone. My People, the Drúedain that is, have something similar. Watch-stones we call them. But I don't need to tell you that, I'm sure you will have seen many. Anyway our Watch-stones are friends and allies, but these bird-heads at the gate were malevolent. They were aware of me, and would not let me pass. I gathered my will, and perhaps I could have forced my way, but an alarm sounded. With that, it seemed to me time to be taking my legs with me. I sprang to the wall nearby and leaped into the stream. The water is foul under the island where Mairon pours his filth into it, but there was no further alarm, and after landing a mile or so down the valley, I made my way back over the hills. And so here I am."

"And glad I am to see you," said the Ent.

"I suppose you will take me to task again," said Beren, looking at the Ent with lowering brow, "for risking my neck with no reason."

"If you know that," replied the Ent drily, "what need to mention it? And if you thought nonsense of Finrod's suggestion, why did you nevertheless attempt it?"

Beren cast about for an answer. "He put it in such a way that I felt obliged to," he said at last. "At least now I can face him clear-eyed and tell him he was wrong."

"I would not so quickly dismiss his words. He would not have spoken them lightly."

"Finrod foretold a number of things in the spring," replied Beren. "He said that I should find shelter under the earth, and that I should find companions. But his shelter is unusable and the companions have brought me scant company, only extra worries. So I think I have some reason for doubting."

"I recall that he also said you would not get in through the gate," said Rattlecone. "In that at least he spoke sooth."

"But he knew of no other entrance," said Beren, "nor have I found any. Let me know when you have solved that riddle! In the mean time let us do the task before us: to hunt Orcs where we can."

"The year grows late," said Rattlecone. "The first snow is not far off. In that time, as you have judged it, the creatures of Mairon will turn and hunt you. Have you yet taken thought for this?"

"Matters are no different to last year," replied Beren in bleak tones. "There is no refuge. If they catch me, they catch me. I cannot hide, and I will not run."

"Take shelter with me," said Rattlecone.

Beren shook his head. "No," he said. "No more favours."

"But you must stay with me," the Ent insisted. "Else you will be caught, and all our struggles gone for naught."

The man put his head down, prepared to be stubborn. "No. And stop now with this, if you love me. My mind is made up, and there is no point in further debate."

Neither said anything for some time. They were under Rattlecone's cliff shelter, watching the rain.

"I tell you this," Beren remarked, "I am glad I managed to penetrate no further into the fortress. I found it just as Celevir described. I remember the tower as being full of light; but Mairon has made of it a place of slime and death. The very stones of it are corrupt. And there is worse yet: he keeps some foul coil within. Exactly what I do not know, for no clean bird can get near since the Fall, but other creatures have told me

they have heard howls coming from inside the walls, such as no beast they know could make. Wolves themselves have told me this, and shivered in the telling. I ask myself, what can it be that makes the howls, and I am not wanting to know the answer.”

“This has come also to our ears,” answered Rattlecone. “I will not speak my heart about this Maia, who is anything but admirable, for I cannot express the depth of my thought in this tongue, and to do so in my own would take more than a season, and yet do no good. But he will come to his deserts. It is our misfortune that this will not be soon.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Beren prepared himself a hide in the deep woods back of Foen – indeed it was the same shallow cave from which he had gone to his last meeting with Silmenen. The first snow-fall found him sitting moodily in the chilly hole. He had dried meat, and Bhalacho continued generous with his supplies, but the prospect of crouching in this dismal burrow during the long months of cold, hoping the Orcs and wolves would not sniff him out, never daring to light a fire, was not a cheerful one.

He had not expected the hunt to be up until the snow lay thoroughly on the ground, thus was unprepared for the incursion his urgent senses were suddenly telling him of. The man sat up, electrified. What was approaching? Hurriedly he strung his great bow, jumped out of the cave to stand behind a tree.

A twig cracked. A dark shape loomed... Rattlecone.

Beren lowered his bow. “Rattlecone!” he called. “What in Middle-earth are you doing here?”

“I am come to fetch you,” replied Rattlecone. “You *must* overwinter with me. Anything else is madness.”

“No,” said Beren. “I told you already. I am very well here.”

“You would not live,” said the Ent gravely. “You know that in your heart. Or you should. Already the hunters gather. They started as soon as the snow did. They will turn over every stone in this land to find you.”

“Rattlecone,” said Beren sternly, “I thank you again for your offer, but I have made my decision.”

The tall Ent said, “The hunters will be here within the hour. Can you not feel them? I outpaced them, but you will not. See reason. Come with me. Or must I drag you?”

The man stared up at his friend, furious at his obstruction. But behind his anger, a sense of gathering darkness was beginning to form in his mind. Even as he considered, it was gaining shape and strength. The awareness came to him that Rattlecone had spoken nothing less than the truth – the Enemy was coming, and in numbers never before seen in the woods. Curse it!

“Let me gather some things,” he said tightly.

As soon as he had crammed a small store of food and weapons into satchels, Rattlecone reached and lifted Beren and baggage together onto his shoulder. The Ent turned then and set off, heading west.

The forest was quiet, but a dark tide was running down the valleys and extending fingers in their direction. Soon it would reach them. A vision flashed through the man’s mind of a far greater tide, rising up to consume the whole world; and he shivered.

Rattlecone came to a halt. “They are close,” he said quietly, and Beren knew that he spoke truth. “You must help me here. Use your trick.”

“I cannot hide my scent,” murmured Beren.

“I can do something for that,” rumbled the Ent, “only hide yourself from sight. Quiet now! They come.”

Beren felt for the familiar feeling, turning himself away from attention in the inner world. Nothing to see, nobody here. Stand thin-side on to the world. As he settled into it, he heard the first rustling of leaves on the slope below. Movement. And there they came: wolf-riders, Orcs clinging to the backs of great shaggy beasts, red-eyed and eager. The marauders galloped past man and Ent, seeing there nothing more than a gnarled tree; then up the slope and out of sight. More goblins were massing in the valley below.

It took the two of them a long time to arrive back at Rattlecone's abode. All the time the snow had been falling thickly, and now it was beginning to settle. Rattlecone's head was crowned with heaps of sparkling frost. Although Beren too was garlanded with white, somehow he was not cold. Time and again they had to stand motionless while packs of Orcs passed beneath.

Twice or thrice Rattlecone reached out with tendrils that seemed to come from nowhere and silently yanked a tardy foe out of his purpose and his life. The Ent cast the bodies into the next stream.

Rattlecone set Beren down when they had at last arrived between the alders. The shouts of Orcs could be heard from the gully below.

Beren, shivering, shook the snow from his head and clothes. Now that he was out of the Ent's sustaining grip, he felt the cold. Fatigue also laid hold of his limbs.

"What holds the goblins from this place?" he murmured to his friend. "Do they not dare to come here?"

"It is not fear that keeps them off," replied Rattlecone. "The place swings their minds around. As each approaches, he becomes convinced that he has already been, and turns aside."

They both stood there in the falling snow, listening to the sounds. "I didn't expect the hunters so soon," Beren remarked after a time.

"Indeed," said Rattlecone drily. "But it does not do to underestimate this sorcerer. It is easy to understand that he has drenched himself in witchcraft sucked from pain and death; it is easy to observe that he dabbles in vile arts, and breeds monsters for his diversion; but do not forget that behind it all is also a cunning mind."

"You were right," said Beren eventually, although it cost him something to say it. "You usually are. I thank you for your care – and your wisdom."

Rattlecone smiled at the man, a spark of his regard showing in his eyes.

Beren wrapped his arms around himself for warmth. "I suppose there is no chance of one of your draughts?" he said.

Rattlecone shook his great head slowly. "I have thought of all that I might brew," he said, "but there is nothing which would not twist your body out of the way it is meant to follow. Already you have travelled further along that path than any before. My powers are not limitless – they are good for things that grow; for beings who run and eat I can do little. I cannot even brew you a warm drink such as your Drú mother could."

"I could brew the drink myself, had I only water and fire," said the shivering man.

"I think no fire for the time being," replied the Ent. The calls of the Orcs in the woods around them provided reason enough for his words.

"I must find some warmth somehow," said Beren.

"Sleep," advised Rattlecone. "You will not be cold within. Later things may be quieter."

\* \* \* \* \*

The army liaison had been conditioned not to feel fear in the Master's presence, but some nervousness was

leaking past the barrier all the same. He had heard stories.

“What news?” asked Mairon.

“The reports are not yet all in,” answered the liaison stolidly. “We found an empty hide. He’s been there, and not long since. But it’s cleaned out. No trace of where’s he’s got to, neither. The wolves couldn’t get a scent.”

“He is somewhere,” said Mairon darkly. “Keep them at it. Any other incident?”

“A few Mobiles lost,” said the officer. The whites of his eyes showed, and he swallowed visibly.

Mairon swung on him. “Lost! What do you mean, lost? Are they dead? Be precise!”

The officer gulped again. “Er, some bodies were found Sir. Some are just missing. No marks on the deaders. Seem to have been drowned. All found in streams, you see Sir.”

“None shot?”

“Nosir.”

“In water...” muttered Mairon to himself. “Have those scum of fish-men declared against me?” He turned back to the sweating liaison. “Where were the bodies found? Show me on the map!”

“Four places so far,” said the officer, and indicated them on the map with a finger that shook.

“They are well scattered,” Mairon mused. “I see no pattern... Listen, you. Give orders to concentrate on such places. Pack them with troops, set them in lines to step through the area pace by pace, side by side, and let a spear pass through every bush and into every hole. Kill everything you find; everything. It is too late for the places you showed me, but do it there anyway. And pass the word: when this happens again, and it will, pack as many Mobiles into the area as quickly as may be. Cut down stragglers to enliven the others. Do you understand?”

“On the alarm, everybody in reach to stream in, quick as can be; side by side comb the area, kill everything found,” repeated the liaison. “To be done with the present incidents and any new one. Sluggards to be chopped to hurry up the others. That all Sir?”

“Just keep them at it,” said Mairon tightly. “All ten legions. No fire, no rest, no food, until they find this criminal.”

The officer gulped again, saluted. “Yessir.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The snow-covered Northlands became a vast arena for a savage play. The Orcs in their thousands sought and threshed and found nothing to their consolation; but ever more of them found death. Most were found drowned or strangled, cast up from a brook like crumpled rags. There were some, too, who simply fell and gasped their lives out, blue in the face, while their companions looked on in bafflement and fear. To this inexplicable tally was added the straightforward but equally deadly toll wreaked by the Bandit with his bow. With each death, the summoned armies streamed in, but the howling mobs that formed and stamped the snow into a bloody slush had, every time, to subside again into sullen silence before trudging back with empty hands to their cold camps. Deer they found, and bear and wolves – or sometimes the bears and wolves found them. Trees they found of course in uncounted numbers; but never trace nor glimpse of their quarry. Last winter they had run the Bandit close, very close. They had seen tracks of the man, had found his camps still warm. But now he seemed to have acquired some magic power to pass unseen before their very noses. None of the searchers believed any longer that their foe was within their powers and ken – he had passed beyond, into regions they could not know or find. Their spirits being low, the cold and the constant hunger took their toll on the Lice as well, and murmurs of rebellion ran through the legions like the flicker of blue

flame that runs and vanishes again behind the log that smoulders hot upon the fire.

Beren kept up his trysts with Bhalacho, although both now had to be very careful. They usually met high in the southern hills, close by the line where wizened pines gave up the fight and gave way to bare rock, now heavily drifted with snow. Rattlecone had carried Beren direct to the first rendezvous, but the small Hairfoot had found the vast presence of the Ent so unsettling that they thought it better not to try his courage so again. Speaking also against this was the leaving of any traces of a meeting. Any such a pattern would lead to suspicions.

Eventually they settled on the following plan. Beren had Rattlecone or one of the other Ents carry him to a stream, from whence he waded along until the meeting place with Bhalacho. Their exchange concluded, the man would go back the way he came while Bhalacho would continue. In this way the tracks of Hairfoot and Ent did not meet, and those of the man never appeared at all. It was only hard on Beren's feet. He wore heavy buskins packed with grease, but the snow-fed water cut through regardless. It felt like knives in his flesh.

Beren's conscience pricked him in other ways. "Have your people enough to eat?" he asked Bhalacho. "It is hard for everyone in winter." He hefted the satchel of biscuit. "I will not have your children go hungry for the sake of these."

"Nay, no fear of that," said the Hairfoot. "We've plenty. Don't you worry yourself, master Beren, I can supply you all right."

"I won't deny that it is an enormous help," said Beren. "The deer and cattle trust me far more now, and I suppose it is because I don't smell of meat any more. They have aided me greatly in this war in the snows. No Harrek can follow tracks once a herd of deer have trampled over them, and now they occasionally even allow me to ride."

Bhalacho made no remark on that, the idea of riding on a deer or a bull being somewhat beyond him. He had other things on his mind. "That great Tree-fellow," he said hesitantly. "You're housing with him then I suppose?"

"They move me about between them," said Beren. "There's six of them in the company now, and we might get more. They carry me about, too." He did not mention the dissension among the Ents, nor the looming trouble about it that he had scented lately.

"You're well housed with them, are you?" the baker continued with some diffidence. "Comfortable? Can't imagine how a tree-man would live."

"Not nearly as comfortable as I should have been with the Zukukun," replied Beren loyally. "But well enough. I was all for staying out of everybody's way; but Rattlecone came and took me off. In the nick of time, too."

Bhalacho had other things on his mind. "Look you, Master Beren," he burst out, "how do you think this is going to go? Here you are, up to your neck in these Harrek. Is this the way it's going to be for you from now on?"

"I doubt it," said the man. "Nobody can say what the Enemy will decide to do, but between you and me, I doubt it very much. He has more important things for his armies to do. All I am is a nuisance to him, and a small one at that. He just hoped to catch me on the hop. Well, he hasn't done that, and he can't keep all these troops combing the woods for ever." He clapped his small comrade on the back. "It will let up. Right now, I think I'd better be getting back. I need to park my feet near a fire."

"You want to grow a bit o' fur on 'em," grinned the halfling. "Keeps the cold out a treat. But we can't all be lucky. Same hour of the moon next month, then?"

“All right, but not the same place,” said Beren. They discussed possibilities for a while with the aid of a map scratched in packed snow, eventually settling on a location. “Come to that, let’s change the time, too,” added Beren. “It doesn’t do to give them any kind of pattern to sniff out. Say, three days after the full?”

“Fine,” replied the small figure. “Mind how you go then.”

“You too. Say hello to everybody for me, and especially to Etty.” He scratched the map out and carefully swept the snow over it with a pine branch.

The halfling nodded his farewell, and the two set off in their different directions.

\* \* \* \* \*

Still the legions were driven, until numbers began to perish from pure exhaustion. Others lost hold of their wits and cut their fellows down in rows until they were brought down themselves to add their scarlet stains to the snow. Blizzards blew and the whips sang without cease.

The liaison dared make no protest. Anyway, why should he? If the Master wanted to spend his armies like water to chase some supernatural chimera, it was no business of his. He sweated all the same whenever he had to report the numbers. Far more Rrrk were dying or slaying one another than the Bandit ever took, until the toll reached frightful heights. In his innermost thoughts the liaison named the whole campaign nothing short of madness; but it didn’t affect him – unless he should be sent out to join them. Indeed this had become his greatest fear, eclipsing even his suppressed terror of his Master and the grisly revenants he commanded.

Today’s numbers were starker than ever. Mairon stared at the table on which lay the report. He did not gnash his teeth or give way to emotion. Such was not Mairon’s way. A cool head, that was the thing. There was all the time in the world. A solution would present itself; one always did. Emotion was without function, it just got in the way. Rage was for lesser beings, for ineffectual fools and rabbits. The cool heads who planned and arranged did not trouble themselves with rage.

He became painfully aware that his hands were clenched so tightly, the fingernails were cutting into his palm. Surprised, he forced them to relax.

There was only one thing to do. He spoke without looking to the liaison. “Call them off,” he said.

The liaison twitched. “Master?” he said uncertainly.

“The legions,” said Mairon harshly. “Call them off, fool. All of them. Back into camp. They are to resume their previous training regime.”

The officer bowed. “It shall be done instantly, Master.” He hesitated. “That is – all of them? No hunters to remain engaged? Are you sure?”

Mairon looked at him, then raised a single finger, at which the unfortunate Mobile fell shrieking and writhing to the floor. Mairon lowered his finger again after an agonisingly long moment. The stricken creature ceased its shrieks and lay panting, crimson in the face. It had soiled itself in its pain and terror, and now it groaned and bent over double, sideways on, and retched a runnel of sour liquid onto the marble floor.

Mairon, wrinkling his nose in disgust, bent over the shabby bundle and addressed it. “You have served me efficiently,” he said to it in clipped words, “and it is less trouble to keep you than to have to train a new liaison. But let this be the last time you question one of my commands.” He straightened up and called some of the servants in the passage to drag the moaning object away and to clean the floor.

## Year 462

The respite was very welcome to man and Ent. Still wary, they kept up their cautious regime. The snow continued to fall at times. Although Sunwending was past, the time of thaw was not yet. At least the snow lay

cleanly now. Fresh falls covered the bloody patches and coated the stiff bodies in white shrouds that flashed diamond in intervals of sun.

Beren kept up his own pressure on the enemy, nibbling at the marshalling formations where he could. In neither place was it easy. The legions near the Isle marched and wheeled in open ground in the valley mouth. The Ents would not venture out of the wood to help him, and the place was too near to Mairon's dark thought for safety. In the North, the armies practised in the dead woods of Drûn, which the goblins hated and feared, but which man and Ent found equally noxious. Beren and his comrades could knock down Orcs there but the place took its toll on their spirits.

Mairon had once more abandoned the road through the forest for his traffic with the eastern redoubts; the convoys again now took the longer path through the Gaspings Dust. The season's cover of snow masked the poisonous exudations, which made it easier on his couriers, but likewise permitted the thrice-cursed Bandit to launch occasional raids on this formerly safe route. The losses were minor in themselves, but the attacks never let up, and the net effect on morale was disastrous. The Orcs were completely convinced that in the person of the Bandit they had to deal with one of those interfering Powers from the West: one who had tired of lolling on that island of folly, maybe, and who now amused himself by plaguing poor soldiers.

Mairon was just as firmly of the opposite view that the Bandit was a mere mortal man, however much help he might enjoy from whatever Maiar or even Valar lurked behind the murk of their discretion. But the certainty mattered little, since he could neither catch the wretch nor find out anything about him.

In the intensity of his vexation he resorted at last to spending some of his miserly hoarded power. But still he could win no advance; the spirits he called up were singularly uncooperative.

Red birds he sent to gather tidings. They returned; he questioned them.

"Where is the renegade now?"

"In the Land of the Pines."

"Where in that land does he lay his head?"

"Among trees."

Spirit after spirit he summoned before him. The pain of the outlay was beyond belief, but still it availed him not. There was one who had aided him in the past, who appeared in the form of a sullen-featured youth.

"Who is hiding him? How is he living?"

"Trees shelter him, coney-men feed him, earth and water will hide him."

"That is no answer. Be specific!"

"It is all the answer *you* will get," sneered the Boy.

Mairon glowered at him. "Tell me at least this: is he one or many? This killer of my servants?"

"He is one – and many."

"Answer my questions!"

"Be careful how you speak to me," warned the Boy. "*You* do not compel me. I am to answer questions, but the manner of my answering is mine to choose."

"Compel? I will show you compulsion, if you vex me further," replied Mairon through gritted teeth.

"Answer me this! Will I ever hold him captive?"

“You will,” replied the Boy.

“I will? When?” pressed Mairon.

“I have answered enough on this matter,” said the Boy sullenly. “I will not be so handled. Release me!”

“Answer me!”

“I shall not.”

Mairon raised his hand and the air became tense with menace. The guards outside the room felt their skins prickle. Not for the first time, they fervently wished themselves elsewhere. Inside the chamber, Mairon spoke some harsh words, then made a slow twisting motion with his hands. The Boy screamed like a wounded gull as his whole body twisted, following the movement. Around and around his upper torso turned until his middle part appeared like a rope wound from many strands.

“Answer me!” repeated Mairon when he had finished twisting.

“I shall not!” shrieked the Boy. “You do not compel me!”

Mairon lowered his voice. “I will release you,” he said in reasonable tones, “if you answer me just one more question, and answer it fairly.”

“Of fairness I must be the judge,” moaned the Boy. “What is the question?”

“This renegade,” said Mairon. “He will come under my power, you said. Tell me only how that will be accomplished, and you are free.”

“You will untwist me?” said the Boy.

“Of course,” replied Mairon. “Will you answer the question? How is his capture to be effected?”

“Love will bring him to you,” whimpered the Boy. “Now let me loose! You have had your quota. Not one answer more shall you have from me.”

Mairon stared blankly before him. ‘Love’? What did that mean? The noise the Boy was making distracted his thoughts; he half-turned and waved him impatiently away.

The Boy clung stubbornly to presence however and cried to him, “Hey! Unwrap me, as you promised.”

“Get thee gone,” said Mairon to him with a brow like thunder, and cast him firmly out of the plane.

“Perjurer!” shrieked the Boy as he faded into shreds of mist despite his furious efforts to remain. “You will fail! You will capture this mortal, yes, but you will neither...”<sup>10</sup> his voice faded away into nothing, but Mairon had ceased paying him heed, his mind busy with the conundrum. ‘Love’? He had heard of the word, it was one of the nonsense syllables prisoners often mouthed among themselves. He had not thought they meant anything by it.

For days after that he paced in his chambers. ‘Love’? Couriers and reports he received with half-absent mind. He went over all the occasions on which he had heard the word, and quizzed the gaolers and torturers as well. He had some prisoners up and put to the rack, while he asked them what they knew of love; but their answers made no sense. He reviewed everything he had ever learned of Men, both in the early days in the East, and in these later times, right up until the present day. Days passed, and nights, and still he paced and thought, no nearer a clue. And then one night the entire answer came to him, all at once, like a great blaze of fire.

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10 “...know it when you do, nor keep him!”



Mairon laughed loud and long in the sudden lightness of his heart. He smote his hands together. “Oh, fool!” he crowed. “Fool! There was the answer in front of you all the time.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Beren, in his forays, had occasionally captured an Orc to question for news. He did not often get much of it, for he would not stoop to torture, and Orcs were not easily cowed by threats alone. On the other hand, they felt no loyalty to their chief, thus saw no reason not to talk, outside of natural enmity. Sometimes he struck one who waxed even garrulous, perhaps out of a kind of camaraderie with the Bandit whom they had hunted, and who had hunted them, for so long now in these tree-infested lands.

One such told him many dull and ugly details of the life of a small soldier in Mairon’s wars. Beren was listening with only half his attention, when a name mentioned made him jerk to alertness.

“Say that name again,” he commanded the goblin.

“Gorgol,” repeated the Orc in slight surprise. “I was saying as how he’s posted here again. A fine mess he made last time – nary a prisoner took. Master weren’t happy. Prisoners is necessary – ’s how we find things out. Like me with you, eh?” He eyed Beren hopefully. “You will let me go though, eh? At the end?”

“You know I can’t,” said Beren. “Sorry.”

The Orc took it well. He found little enough in life to value. “Oh well,” he said with indifference. “Worth the asking I s’pose. Was you interested in Gorgol?” The longer the talk went, the longer he would go on breathing. Not that it mattered so much, either way.

After Beren learned as much as the goblin could tell him, he killed it as mercifully as he could manage. He was thoughtful for some time after that. He had not forgotten Gorgol.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Butcher was bored with his posting. Back years ago he’d had a lot of fun in this country, fun enough to be worth the stripes it had cost him, but it was all empty now. Just this one bugbear of the Master, this Bandit. But if no-one else had caught the scum, Gorgol’s lads weren’t likely to do it either.

On the other hand, the invasion the big-wigs had planned sounded promising. The country to the North-west: brimming over with softy scum that place was, so they said. The Butcher had licked his lips when he first heard the news. More fun in the offing! Wo-ho! He’d risk the stripes – although maybe it wouldn’t hurt either to hold back a bit more and send HQ a prisoner or two. Just to keep the turd-eaters happy.

In the meantime, waiting was dull. Nothing to do, no fun to be had. The lads were quarrelling, but he couldn’t be bothered with ’em. Now and again he picked one, stretched him out, they had a bit of fun with him, but it was no substitute, really.

He was lying blinking one morning on waking, thinking of these things, when he heard a hullabaloo. Tsk, the lads fighting again... but no; probably not this time. It sounded different.

Feet ran to his tent, a scared Louse face poked in. “Chief!” it shouted. “Come quick! All the guards is dead!”

Cursing, Gorgol leaped to his feet. He followed the soldier. Others were running, some yammering at him, but he ignored them.

He looked down at the body of the first guard they came to, considering. The attacker – the Bandit, he supposed – had drawn something on the Louse’s tunic in blood, and stuck the hapless guard’s sword into his chest, right in the middle.

What was the drawing? “Pull that out,” Gorgol ordered the runner. The sword came out, and then he saw.

It was a G-rune<sup>11</sup>.

He turned and shouted whiplash orders. “Why haven’t you replaced the guards? Get some replacements! Double! And send out a patrol, look for tracks. Do we have any wolves? All right, whatever. Send off a despatch, HQ gotta hear about this.”

Later, towards evening, the Butcher issued further orders. The guards were to be extra strong, and as watchful and attentive as threats of dire punishment could make them. He would tour them himself.

In the morning after a night without much sleep for anyone, Gorgol felt he could allow himself some satisfaction. There had been no further attack; no guard had died.

“We’ll keep it this way, though,” he told an underling. “We’ve been too slack altogether. The Bandit won’t catch us again.” Another subordinate had been trying to get his attention, and he turned to this other now in some irritation. “What? What?”

“Dead Rrrk, Sir,” stammered the soldier, white-faced. “In a tent. A bit inside the camp, like.”

They found more, in other tents – ten in total. The new deaders were the same as before – G written in blood, sword stabbed through the middle.

Fury and terror warred in Gorgol’s mind. How had this even been possible? How had the scum got through? He himself had patrolled the lines most of the night!

The victims had been found distributed in a rough circle, centred on Gorgol’s own tent. He knew well enough what that portended, and snarled at the thought out of reflex.

Nobody slept the next night. They stayed awake, with fires lit all over, staring around into the dark with wide eyes. When the light came, they looked with trepidation for more victims; found none.

The following night was the same, and the next day also the cohort found itself unscathed. But they couldn’t keep this up. Nobody had had any sleep for three days now – some for longer than that. They were also getting low on firewood.

Gorgol organized a sleep rota system for the next night, nodded off himself for bits of it, before jerking awake again in fright. He, who had never known fear before, was tasting it now. It was outrageous! He was Gorgol the Butcher! Terror of him had stalked the land. But this Bandit, this spectre of the night, this secret slitter of throats – how did he manage it? So quiet, and so secret? Now he was after Gorgol’s throat. The Bandit’s knife would find him, his life would run helpless out, and that would be the end of all the fun. No more ecstasy from the screams and blood of others.

Gorgol nodded off, jerked awake, listened, shivered.

In the morning came the news he had feared. Another ring of dead, closer now than ever. The butcher moaned. His troops stared at him, re-eyed and thoughtful. They had sniffed well enough which way the wind was setting.

Only by means of torturing several waverers to death did the Butcher succeed in recruiting Rrrk to guard around him that night. He stationed several in a tight ring just outside the tent, with three inside, jammed around his sleeping place. They sat there the whole night in misery. No deaths in the morning.

The next night the same, but half-way through, a shout went up. The red-eyed Rrrk rushed up, torches were gathered. A body; same G, same stab. Right outside the tent.

Another was standing there, gabbling. “I just nodded for half a minute! Half a minute, no more, I swear it!”

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11 ¶

Gorgol struck the gabbler down with a sweeping cut to his neck. He turned a haggard, blood-speckled face to the others. "No-one sleeps," he ordered hoarsely. "Anyone who sleeps, dies. And that'll go on until you've caught this wight."

The following night Gorgol was killed by his own guards. They bound him first, then they killed him. They took their time with it, though. It was worth the lack of sleep to see the bastard writhe and buck.

\* \* \* \* \*

The thaw arrived with its usual abruptness. The sound of running water was to be heard everywhere; patches of earth appeared; and in a short space of time the snow had retreated to stubborn patches in the hollows of shaded ground.

Beren seized the opportunity and wrought a night of terror and slaughter on the complacent western army – running through them, and killing as he ran. The confusion he left behind him was immense. Orc shot Orc in the uproar, but they couldn't hit the marauder. Nor could they hold to his track on the newly sodden and streaming ground. The Isle-bred wolves they set to the task were found, one by one, with long arrows through their breasts.

Then the killings ceased. The Orcs wondered at it, but not too much, because their hearts were too full of relief. Nobody expected the surcease would go on for long; it was altogether too much to be hoped for that the Bandit had met with some accident.

The truth was that the coming of spring had seduced Beren from his duty. Sick of bloodshed, he wandered the vales, so full of sunshine and many-coloured flowers. Everywhere life was reawakening, surging upward from the earth. The land was so beautiful!

Memory drew him to Aeluin, lonely and forsaken among the hills. The lake was beautiful still, if sanctuary no more. He visited the graves of his father and the other Companions, and wandered through the heather, hearing no sound but the wind and the far-off cries of birds. The surface of the lake remained a puzzle-picture of unmelted floes, and snow lay yet in broad patches on the hills around, but the air was full of scent and life. Beren sat betimes, and thought, and breathed the air, and did not know if he was sad or happy.

The weather changed, the clouds gathered. Unwilling to leave the place just yet, he hunkered in the ruins of a booth, down on the flat. The roiling airs darkened slowly to storm. Lightning played along the hills, and dark curtains of sleet swept down the valley. Beren's heart was heavy in him, for what reason he knew not. Unbeknown to him, far to the West, Eithel Sirion lay under assault. The Orc armies which had trained under the forest this half-year past, and yet more which streamed from Angband, struck their captain's long-planned blow. The battle waxed furious, and as the day closed to dusk, Galdor the Tall, son of the Goldenhead, lay in the dust of his glory. His fierce-eyed son stood over his body, even as he had done over Beren all those years ago. Beren felt the anonymous weight of sorrow as he lay shelterless under the soaking rains, staring into the gathering dark.

During the night, the rain stopped. The man slept at last. When he woke, the clouds were dispersing. The weight was off his heart, the birds sang again. In the field of the North, the tattered remnants of the Orcs were slinking away. The assault had failed.

Graves were scattered about Aeluin. On a sudden thought, he went to seek one out, one of the many. He found it at last, although it was half-hidden by heather: Andreth's resting place.

He sat himself on the stone and looked out upon the lake and the hills. What had this place meant to Andreth? She had been here as a girl. He found it hard to think of his aged aunt as a girl, but she had won the heart of a prince of the Eldar, and that must count for something.

Of course then the sword came to his mind. What a sorry tale of folly that had been! Well, Andreth had disposed of it at last where it belonged. He hoped she had found peace.

There was flowing water at every hand in the valley, clean burns rejoicing now that they were released from the ice. The man threw off his clout and washed in one, relishing the chill water. Its coldness scoured his hide, but refreshed his spirit. The water seemed to speak to him in words he could not quite hear.

He remained all that day near Andreth's grave, watching the slow caress of cloud-shadows on the hills, and the cats'-paws of wind upon the serenity of the water. He had but few thoughts in his head, and those were dreamy ones. Vague memories of times and people gone by came to him, but he spent no thought on the future. It would be as it would be.

In the gloaming, he lay his head under the heather and went peacefully to sleep. Many had died at Aeluin, but there was no disquiet there any more. All had been washed away; all were at peace.

He dreamed. He dreamed of a handsome girl with hair the colour of honey. She sat on the grass in the sunlight, her legs curled under inside a spread of skirt. The girl smiled teasingly up at him out of her dark eyes, head a-tilt. Her teeth were even and very white in her sun-browned face, and there was a fetching spray of freckles across her nose.

The maid in his dream sprang up and walked away from him, but she glanced smiling back and beckoned him on. Her form was as pleasing as her features, and her hips swayed as she walked.

He followed the comely girl as she danced down the hill. It was high summer in his dream; Aeluin flashed kingfisher blue under the sun. The heather was in bloom everywhere, deeper purple as well as pale, with a scent that was rich as well as sweet. The air was loud with the humming of many bees.

Following her, they reached the strand. The maid came to a halt. She turned her head to face him; raised a silky-contoured arm, and pointed.

At what? He looked in that direction, and saw one of the granite islands in the lake. He looked back at the girl, at her smile. At her dark eyes. At the meaning in them.

"Andreth!" he cried with all his breath, and the cry jerked him out of the dream like a bucket of water in the face.

Beren sat up, and came to himself. It was night. Stars glimmered above, and played in a faint sheen of light on the lake.

There was no more sleep in him. He could not leave this alone. Taking up his weapons, he made his way down through the heather as best he could in the darkness.

As he neared the flat, the winter-bare alders on the shore loomed black, and the broken walls of the booths. The night was warm and still. Beren advanced to the water's edge, where the maid in his dream had stood. There was not a breath of wind; stars glimmered deep in the waters of the lake as well as overhead. And before him, as in the dream, rose the dark shape of the rock – it hardly merited the name of island. He had seen it often before; it was one of several such at that end of the lake. Indeed, he had fished beside it with his father, how many summers ago? Was it really only two?

Then he stood as one transfixed; for the sweet sound of night birds came faintly to him across the water.

The Orcs had smashed most of the boats. He thought he had seen one or two which could be made usable, but they were sunk beneath the water, invisible in the dark. He would not wait for light of day to seek them out. He left his clothes with his gear on the bank and stepped into the water. The cold of it pushed breath from his lungs in a gasp and burned like fire against his skin. In a rueful flash he remembered the rafts of ice he had noted only yesterday on the deeper waters further up the lake. The line of burning water came over his chest as he waded deeper. He felt the shock fully as he dived in. Setting his will to ignore the freezing pain, he made his way with firm strokes toward the rock.

Having arrived at it, he did not know what to do. The rough face was sheer, he could gain no purchase on it. The water was too deep to stand, as he knew. What was he meant to do? If he splashed around too long in such temperatures, it would not go well with him.

Only the sweet music of the birds drew him on, kept him to the attempt.

Slowly he swam around the curve of the rock, trying to ignore the claws of deadly cold creeping ever deeper into his body. It was madness to swim in such conditions. But only a little way further on he came to a low crevice. There was bare room to insert his head above the lapping surface. Had Andreth come this way? An aged lady? It was impossible. But all the time the birds called to him. They were somewhere inside the hollow place, only a little way within; and from the crack there wafted a fragrant air.

He edged his way into the darkness inside the rock. By now all of his body below the neck was numb – he could feel nothing at all, not even the cold, except for a burning band of it where the surface lapped his neck. He was shivering in great shudders that knocked his head against the rock. But suddenly he found footing beneath him; and only a little way further in, the rock opened out.

He clambered out of the channel onto a dry shelf, shaking from cold like a man in deepest fever. He could not see, could hardly breathe. He had to lie, panting, to recover. Beren thought the pain as the blood began to venture back into his extremities was the worst he had ever felt.

After a few moments the pain subsided, his vision cleared, he caught up with his breath. He could look around to see what sort of a place this was.

He found himself in a tiny chapel-like hollow inside the rock, open at the top. A spring tinkled out of the rock into a pool. A tree grew there, of modest growth, of some sort he did not know. The perfume from its pale flowers filled the hollow like wine. The black shapes of small birds sat in the branches, gazing down at him, and the gentle welcome of their song was all about him, in harmony with the delicate scent. Starlight gleamed on the eyes of the little birds in faint points of light and sparked in tiny, liquid embers from the happy trickle of the spring.

Although Beren could see no-one, he knew he was not alone. There was a Presence in this place. This Being was not strange to him, but the fact of recognition was strange in itself, for he had no waking memory of encountering her before.

Beren knelt on the rock and humbly bowed his head. Here was power: the voice of the wind, the waking heart, the smile of mother to child.

The Presence spoke no word, but he knew clearly what she desired him to do. Dreamlike, almost unwilling, he advanced to the spring. He knelt and put his hand in the pool. There. His hand closed, in the clear water. Colder than ice, he felt again the grip he had last known as a child. Slowly he drew the sword from the water, the long blade gleaming cold under the faint light. He held it high in his hand: Nixenárë, Frostfire, the sword of his ancestor.

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Beren felt heather prickling his cheek. The early sunlight warmed his leg and glowed red against his closed eyes. Goodness, he thought, what a place this is for dreams! I cannot even blame rich food, since I have not had any of *that* since... well, a long time.

He became aware that his hand was holding something. Something wrapped in coarse cloth. Something long. He opened his eyes. Under his hand was a long bundle. He peeled back a corner, and the faceted ice of Nixenárë threw blazing light back into his eyes.

It came back to him now: the cold swim back in the dark, cumbered with the naked blade which he dared not bring anywhere near his body. The stumbling climb back through the heather. The old woollen cloth, which

he had found in a bothy two days before.

He stood now and took the sword properly into his hand for the first time since he had grown to his full height and size. That which he had found heavy and awkward as a child now sat light in his hand. The balance of the blade was superb. He cut with it back and forth, and the sword left a glowing trail behind it in graceful swoops and curves. A sharp taint to the air came to Beren's nostrils, and he laughed. This blade was pure sharpness, sharpness given body; sharper than any object merely made to be sharp. Great Powers, it seemed that it was sharp enough to wound the very air itself!

The sword blazed like a glory in the sunlight. Rainbow light coruscated off the ice-jewels of the hilt. When he tilted it, oily highlights glided along the edges of the clear blade. Beren laughed again, a laugh made up partly of delight, partly of a sense of his own absurdity. Indeed the whole matter was ridiculous. What should he do with such a gaud? Was this any suitable weapon for a furtive outlaw such as he, a creeper through shadowed woods, a moonlight assassin?

He tucked the sword away and returned to the shore, where he spent most of the morning bailing out and repairing, as best he could, one of the sunken coracles. When this was reasonably watertight he fetched the sword again, found some oars, and sculled out onto the quiet lake. The calm had held, the water was still. The sun stood near noon in a sky feathered with mares' tails.

As near to the centre of the lake as he could reckon it, he stopped.

"Lady," he spoke quietly, "you have had your way at last. You have pressed this thing into my hand. Yes, you have had your way with this gift; but you do not own my will. You cannot force me to use this thing. You are a lady of high reverence, I know that well; but I will not dance to *anyone's* tune.

"Now, I could drop this sword over the side; but I suppose you know that I will not. Nor will I shrink to use it if need arises – I hope there is nobody who could call *me* pig-headed. But, with all respect, there are one or two things I would humbly draw to your attention.

"A person may be of high and puissant order, deserving all reverence, as I know you are, yet have little experience of arms and how to use them. You have wrought here a wonderful sword, there is no slightest doubt about that; but in battles of the sort I fight it is unfitting. It is far too showy, for one thing. It may have suited Boromir well, I imagine, serving not only as a sword but also as a sort of banner, shining there in the sun, high at the head of his men. But I: I have no men. Such a blazing object as this is no weapon for a lone woodland brigand such as I must be. And even were there no difficulty of that sort, were this sword made from some substance with less show to it and more discretion, like to the dull-surfaced belt and mail that Telchar the Dwarf fashioned for me, in all honest fact I must tell you that I have more use for bow than sword in encounters of the sort I engage in.

"One last objection: the blade suits my hand wonderfully well, as, for all I know, you have designed it to. But aside from some frantic slashing in skirmishes as necessity has demanded, I have held no blade in my hand for nigh on thirteen years, at which time I was half my present size. That is no way to make a swordsman. At one time I was, perhaps, the best wielder of small-sword in all of Middle-earth. I make no boast, but it may be so. But whether or not, that time is gone. Nowadays I could claim some standing as an archer, but in swordplay the merest tyro could pierce my guard, and my side. The fault is no doubt mine, for not keeping up with the art; but whoever is to blame, it does not alter the fact.

"Well, that is all my say, and I hope you will forgive my rough candour, which I have learned in camp and field, in place of the courtesy a more gentle education may be supposed to instil. But truth is truth, no matter how coarsely it comes packaged, and I am sure you would prefer it to a gilded lie. I thank you for your interest in me, and I hope too that this long drama is now at an end. And would you grant my poor aunt peace, if it lie within your power."

Beren sat for a while, watching the diminishing ripples creep ever further from the coracle. No answer came; but he had expected none. He sighed at last and turned for the shore.

Despite his gruff words, Beren slipped quickly into what could only be called an infatuation with the sword. At first he meant to stow it with Rattlecone, among his other possessions, but a spirit of mischief awoke in him. They gave it to me, he thought; it is mine. I can wear it if I damn well want to.

He made a crude sheath for it out of leather, fearing all the while that no work he could contrive could keep that amazing edge from slicing what it was not meant to, but he quickly found that the sword was not passive; it would not cut blindly. Most importantly, it would not cut *him*. It also appeared to acquiesce to the leather.

The sheath hid the blade, but the hilt was exposed, and every passing sunbeam made it glitter and flash. With every new day, Beren winced at this and told himself that it would not do. But the lands were empty of foes, so every day he buckled it on again and admired the rainbow coruscations. Furtively he would draw the sword now and then, simply to see the play of light down the long crystal blade and to enjoy the feel of it in his hand.

Rattlecone disapproved. "Why do you wear it?" he asked. "You have no use for it. A pretty fool you would look if a patrol of Orcs were to spot you."

Beren laughed. "You surprise me, Rattlecone," he said. "I had this of the Lady. I thought you were all for her."

"I'm sure she did not mean it for a swagger-gaud," the Ent grumbled. "She has some purpose in mind for you, of that I am sure. But I doubt it is to go prancing about the woods like a fool."

"You may say what you like," said Beren, "but this sword came to me by a hard road, and now that I have it, I mean to enjoy it for a while. Anyway, all the gathered legions of enemy have marched off to the assault on Hithlum. There are no Orcs in the woods just now."

The Ent just shook his head.

"Come, my friend, you take life too seriously," teased Beren. "A little enjoyment is also necessary. Some diversion from cares, when occasions allow it, so that one may take them up again afterwards with a cheerful heart. I recommend it to you."

"I enjoy life," protested the Ent.

"Do you? I do not, mostly," said Beren. "Do not begrudge me then this short, harmless moment of idle folly."

He could not resist wearing it to his next meeting with Bhalacho. The small baker's eyes almost started from his head at the sight of the glittering blade.

"Do not touch it," Beren warned as the halfling extended a tentative hand. "Only I can touch it. It burns anybody else." He had to explain then a little of where the sword came from.

Bhalacho also shook his head over the matter, albeit for different reasons than Rattlecone. "Take my advice," he said to Beren, "and never show this to Worrakoskin. You would not need to burn him; oh, no. You would find out if a Hairfoot could die through sheer envy."

"Do you think so?" said Beren. "He seemed quite content with his blade of bronze; even poured scorn on my steel knife."

"That does not mean he does not greatly desire one for himself," replied Bhalacho shrewdly.

Beren's light-hearted mood was somewhat dampened by Farsight's news of the battle in the North. Fingon

and the men of Hador had won, certainly, but Beren grieved at the news of Galdor's death. He had warm memories of the genial, blond giant from years before. As for his merry wife, what could she be suffering now?

And Húrin. Leader of his people! How times had moved on.

Beren laughed at a sudden thought. He could match Húrin in this contest. For could not Beren, too, claim to be leader of his own folk in the North? Had not Finrod said it? King of a nation of one. He stopped laughing then, because there was in fact little but pain in the notion.

A few Orcs came back to the forest in furtive patrols, but Beren avoided them, and wore the sword still. He made the excuse to himself that he was low on arrows, which indeed he was. As the spring gathered force, and the ice in the high places melted, he began to look forward to a further supply train from Finrod. Added to the reassuring thought of new supplies was the hope of seeing Celevir and his companions again.

Farsight brought him word at last that the long-expected cavalcade had been seen approaching the pass. Silently blessing once again the generosity of his former liege-lord, he asked the eagle how many Elves were in the party.

"No Elves," replied Farsight. "They are six Dwarves."

Beren sat back in surprise. "Dwarves?"

But Farsight could tell him little more. He said he had no skill in describing the particularities of land-crawlers.

Dwarves? It must be some of Telchar's following – they were the only ones with Finrod, so far as Beren knew. But perhaps he erred, and the party came not from Finrod?

"Were there pack-ponies, like last year? Laden, and how many?"

"Yes," replied Farsight. "Seven ponies, well laden. So far as the train is concerned, it is similar to last year."

Well, thought Beren, this is a piece of news. It seems I am not to see Celevir this time; but any of Telchar's folk that I once knew would be almost as welcome.

Then he wondered: but why would Dwarves come at all? It was a riddle. Well, the quickest way to solve it was to go and see.

He had been wandering far to the East when Farsight found him. Beren travelled west all that day, seeing no Orcs, and crossing a day-old trail of them only once. Evening found him under Goracc's hill. He first greeted the ravens, then laid his head to earth in a nook.

Farsight woke him as the sun was peeping over the hills.

"Make haste!" the eagle said. "An orkish patrol is in the pass. They will encounter the Dwarves within the hour."

Beren grabbed his weapons and set off at a run, wasting no breath on curses. An hour! He could not reach them in an hour. His brows lowered then, and he pumped his legs faster. 'Not'? He would just see about that.

As the man settled into his speedy pace, the country flowed past him. Hills he knew, small valleys, even individual trees were known to him. His feet flashed in rhythm, each quick step a small work of discernment. No thorn stayed him, no hole or rock delayed him; his passage was more like to a dance than the flat-out run it would seem like to any watcher. No other man could have kept such a speed in such country.

The wind of his passage cooled his brow, the life surged through his limbs, and he ran faster still.



The eagle was keeping pace, flying from tree to tree. Beren spared breath to shout to him, “How many Orcs?”

“Fifteen,” came back Farsight’s reply.

Beren was climbing the approach to Anach now. His legs laid the long slope behind him and the breath pounded hard in his chest. Farsight flew ahead to see how matters stood above, but was soon back. “It is a close race!” he cried.

The man’s chest was on fire, but he drove his legs like two engines of iron that would pound and pound until the sun went down on the Day of Wrath. Up and up he went, stretching for height. He had long left the trees behind and was leaping up the stony path. The lands around had opened up and lay spread wide beneath his pounding feet.

Farsight thumped to land in front of him, forcing the man to check. “Stay!” croaked the eagle in his own speech. “Twenty paces more and you are in sight of them. You can hear them, already engaged.” And now that Beren had halted, he could indeed hear shouts and the clash of arms. “Take a moment to catch your breath,” the eagle advised him quietly, “or you will not be fit to fight.”

Nodding to his winged comrade, Beren went forward still, but now with caution. He tried to keep his bellows breaths as silent as possible, but even just the pounding of his heart sounded impossibly loud in his ears.

He took in the shape of the ground, considered. No, not here. Ten paces to the side, that would put rock behind him instead of sky. He ducked and scuttled silently across, trying to master pounding breath and heart. His cursed legs were trembling – stop it, legs! Just stop it.

There. Now. Inch slowly forward and up.

His battle-trained glance took in the scene. The Dwarvish party had backed into a nook in the wall of tumbled rock that rose at the other side of the notch. He could not see them, only orkish backs, but the glimpses of axe and blade rising over the attackers’ heads showed that the defence still held. But Beren’s spirits sank, because the angle was dead foul for shooting. Any arrow he sent into that mass risked piercing a friend.

He noticed then that four Orcs were making their way up the rocks to the side. A glance upward showed their purpose: to get above the defenders and rain boulders upon their heads. *These* he could do something about. He strung his great bow and nocked an arrow. He shot the lowermost Orc. The victim fell with no cry, making only a clatter as he fell back down the slope. The next went the same way. The fall of the third was seen, and a shout went up. Beren disposed of the fourth, but those on the ground were aware of him now.

This was absurd. One half-naked man against eleven Orcs? He was going to die here. Was this what you came to me for, Sword? I don’t have my mail, I don’t even have a shield.

Even while thinking this, he had shucked out of his belt and kilt. He quickly wound the cloth about his left arm, latched the metal belt tight around the outside. He drew Frostfire from its sheath and ran, quite naked now, against the attackers.

Four of the Orcs had turned from the Dwarves at Beren’s approach. These were now spreading themselves, angling crabwise. Old lessons had been ground into Beren about this. Never let that happen! Take them as soon as you can, don’t allow them to surround you, ever.

Choosing the strongest and the boldest-looking Orc, the naked man directed his run straight at him. The Orc was in the middle of a disbelieving grin, but Beren was upon him before he could properly take in the situation. The goblin raised his shield, his forming quip turned to a shout; but he was already falling over, had fallen, what in the Pit just happened? The Orc found himself lying on the ground staring stupidly at blood squirting from the clean-cut stump of his leg.

Beren had danced on the rebound, fended a blow from the next foe off his belt-clad arm, the orkish blade scraping on metal; stuck his sword in the creature's belly. A glance at those still engaging the Dwarves: some were falling, one turned to run, a jab from Frostfire took him in the ear. Jerk it out, no resistance hardly. Slash down and across, hard as he could, and a third Orc's shield was in two halves, two clean halves, his hand and his blade falling in a tangle of severed and disbelieving limbs.

The man stepped back. The fourth Orc had taken good guard and had stepped back as well, uncertain. The goblin was looking with wide eyes around at the groaning figures sitting and lying on the ground.

Beren became aware of the roaring and a clashing from the Dwarvish line, just in the side of his field of view. He risked a direct glance in that direction and saw that the Dwarves had all but beaten their foes. Bodies strewed the ground; two survivors were backing away.

Before he could strike at their backs, the Orcs decided they had had enough. Joining with Beren's remaining opponent, they all backed rapidly away, then dropped their shields and ran. But Beren ran also, not after the Orcs, but angling across to where he had dropped his bow. Three quick shots with it, and the pass-mouth was quiet.

It was a curious tableau. The Dwarves stepped slowly out from their notch. The seated and lying Orcs goggled in silence as their blood pulsed out in splats and made slow crimson streams down the rocks. They made no resistance as the axes, one by one, made grisly ends to their lives.

Only when the seven defenders, and the eagle perched nearby, remained the only living things in that space between the rocks, did they all look at each other and take stock.

From the ranks of the Dwarves one came slowly out. He took off a great helm of jointed and polished steel, and there was the high domed head Beren knew, with the mass of white hair and beard springing out. Telchar.

Beren went to meet his former friend and mentor. The familiar light eyes were fixed on Nixenárë, an unbelieving expression on the old smith's face. Telchar tore his eyes away from the bright blade after a moment to glance, stunned, into Beren's, while his mouth opened once or twice, without any words coming out.

"You asked me once if I had a sword," said Beren smiling. "Here is your answer. But, old friend, have you no words of greeting for me?"

"Master Beren, I most humbly beg your pardon," said Telchar hoarsely. "Such carelessness shames my ancestors. And indeed it does my old eyes good to see my well-beloved apprentice once more. Pray give me your hand." Upon which the aged Dwarf seized both of Beren's hands in his own huge, work-knotted ones and shook them with fervour. His fascinated gaze was drawn then back to the bright blade. "But this!" He found a rock and sat on it with a helpless air.

The other Dwarves had doffed their helmets by this time and came now forward, shouting greetings at him and banging him as high on the back as they could reach. He knew them all. Old Khabbock was there, thumping him like one possessed; here was Breshke laughing merrily; and three who had been fellow apprentices in his time, all grinning and taking turns to pump his hand.

As soon as he could, he pulled free of their embraces. "Your pardon, friends," he laughed, "but I am hardly in any sort of state to greet you. Allow me first to clothe myself, I beg you!"

"By all means," the old smith said to him, fixing him with his steel-coloured eyes. "But as soon as you are clothed, I would fain take a closer look at your wondrous blade."

While Beren restored his kilt to his waist, he asked Farsight to scan the surrounding area for enemy. In the meantime the apprentices were running after the ponies, which had panicked and scampered back up the

notch.

Farsight and the recovered train returned together. Since the eagle reported seeing no more Orcs within a circle of three or four leagues around, they felt able to light a fire, rest themselves, and exchange stories.

The first thing Telchar did when he had opportunity was grasp Beren's arm again. "My lad," he said earnestly. "Please. Would you permit it?"

Beren looked around at the others, who also showed a lively interest. Well, no point in trying to hide anything now! Hesitating still, he said, "I will show you most willingly, honoured Forge Master. I would just request of you all... the secret of this thing is not really mine to reveal. It was an accident of circumstance that showed it to you today. I would beg you to allow word of it to go no further."

"Of course!" replied Khabbock. "We do not gossip; we are Dwarves!"

Beren took the rough leather sheath from his bundle and drew the sword. The icy blade sparkled in the forenoon sun, throwing rays over the faces of the awe-filled watchers, making them blink.

"Might I touch it?" asked Telchar, with trembling voice.

"Alas!" said Beren. "I would not advise it. She is a fickle lady, and will suffer no other hand but mine."

"I think she may suffer mine," was all the smith replied. He extended his hand, and to Beren's surprise, the sword permitted the touch.

"But how...?" Beren was completely taken aback. Surely, Andreth had said...

Telchar smiled briefly at Beren. "We makers have a certain dispensation," he said. He turned then his wondering gaze back to the sword. He laid it onto his lap and caressed with his great hands its every curve and surface. The smith's eyes were half-closed. "Oh," he murmured, "here is a work. Here is the path. All my dreams made real." The old Dwarf opened his eyes and sighed. He felt the flex of the blade, and took a careful shaving of skin from his thumb. "It is sharpness made flesh," he marvelled. "With this you may pierce the very heart of evil. It is what I have dreamed of, all these long years."

The others had gathered close, but no other of them dared touch the crystal blade.

At last Telchar, with reluctance, extended the sword hilt back to Beren. "I have no words to thank you," he said. "You have shown me my way forward."

Beren slid the sword carefully back in its leather house and covered the glittering hilt with a cloth. There followed something of a pause. Beren did not know what to say next; the Dwarves, as was their wont, seemed quite content to say nothing.

Telchar appeared still deeply affected. The old Dwarf stood up suddenly. "I have much to think on," he mumbled. "I will walk a little in the free air." He walked out of the nook and around the corner of the rock like one in a daze.

"Can someone tell me what this is all about?" Beren asked the company.

Khabbock looked faintly surprised. "I thought you understood," he grunted.

"I don't understand what you all are doing here," retorted Beren.

Breshke shrugged. "The Forge Master wished to see whether the mail he made for you was a passable fit," he said.

In his agitation, Beren stood up and walked around. "Forgive me," he said, "but I think that is about the

maddest thing I have ever heard. This history becomes more absurd by the minute.”

Khabbock, brows lowering, opened his mouth to speak, but Beren came in before he could.

“No,” he said, “let me finish. Let me review. In your city, long ago, the Forge Master honoured me many times with conversation. I accept that he developed, perhaps, a fondness for me. Out of his great good heart he saved me much anguish at my leave-taking, and gifted me with this belt that you see around my waist. So far, maybe, so understandable. But lately he has gone further. I have had boons from him which I have not earned. He has made me arrows; he has made me the mail – which I happen not to have with me, but which I can assure him is a perfect fit. So far as any mail can be said to fit, anyway. But what is it all for? And now we come to the height of all. That an aged Dwarf, near the end of his days, should climb a hazardous pass into a land swarming with enemies, and for why? To measure the slack in his unearned gift to a stranger of another race, whom as a boy he knew slightly. And you tell me I should understand?”

Khabbock turned to Breshke. “You can say it better than I,” he said.

Breshke leaned forward and fixed Beren with his dark eyes. “I told you the answer to the riddle years ago,” he said. “Don’t you remember? Telchar is a tool forged by the gods. And you are another. *That* proves it, if nothing else.” He pointed to the sword leaning in its wrappings against a rock. “What he receives from you is inspiration. You promise to be the key to his lock. He recognized this in you, the very first time he met you, even as the boy you were then. I told you all this! That is why he has made for you, from time to time, such goods as you mention – which he thinks of as poor recompense for the renewed hope you have given to him, the fire you have lit in his breast.

“Beren, what you have shown us today is that you have grown fully into your earlier promise. Now, at last, maybe, the Forge Master can do the same. I hope and believe you have released the power which lies within him, at last, at long last. The hope of this blazes in my eyes like a new-risen sun.”

“Aye,” grunted Khabbock, looking with approval at Breshke. “Brother-son, I could not hammer at so many words in a month; but you speak my own heart.”

They heard a crunch of pebbles, looked up. It was Telchar.

The smith was blithe, smiling. “I beg your pardon once more. I am calmer now. But come, enough of these deep matters. The humble body has also its needs. The sun is high, let us sup together. And while we do, you can tell us all that has passed with you since the day you left us, at the gates of Tumunzahar.”

“That would take more than a meal time,” said Beren, returning the smile, “but I will do my best.”

That is what they did. The younger Dwarves bustled around and soon had drink and meats of various sorts arrayed among the stones of their shelter. The eagle accepted some scraps with austere approval; the rest of them fell to. After hearing something of the Dwarves’ lives and projects in the great delving and city of Nûlukh-khizdîn<sup>12</sup>, of which they also had many wondrous things to relate, it came Beren’s turn to mention something of the long fight of the companions led by his father, and of his present lonely situation. They had finished eating by that time. His company sat around him, hearing his story with respect and wonder written on their faces.

“We had heard something of your resistance,” grunted Telchar after Beren wound to a close, “but I see that what scraps of rumour have come over the mountains are but a pale shadow of the awesome reality. Why, one might say you hold back the armies of Morgoth with a single hand!”

Beren smiled, shook his head. “All I do is shoot the odd Orc,” he said.

“You have arrows,” said the smith thoughtfully, “you have mail. Is there aught else we can do to aid you in your fight?”

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12 The Dwarvish name for Finrod’s underground city and fortress, Nargothrond.

“Forge Master...” began Beren, reluctant to open the wearisome theme again.

Telchar held up his hand. “No! I will have none of your cavilling,” he said. “I cannot fight myself. What then should I do? It is my calling to make armour and blades, to be used by fighting men. *You* are the only one now fighting in the North. So I should make gear of war for you. I do not understand why you find the matter so difficult.” He looked Beren over, glanced at the fabric-wrapped sword. “Your sword needs a scabbard,” he said. “Would you permit me to make you one?”

Beren thought of the misshapen leather sheath he had contrived himself and found the suggestion attractive. “That... would be agreeable,” he admitted. “I would value such a thing, truly. I cannot think of anything else I need; but in that matter you have hit me in the clout.”

“Then we have a bargain,” said the smith, leaning forward to shake Beren’s hand. “There remains only the practical difficulty of getting it to you! This is a fine country you have here in the North, but you must confess, it is not easy to reach.”

Beren thought, then laughed. He felt a sudden giddy rush. “Send it by eagle!” he chortled.

Farsight, on being consulted about this, allowed that such things were possible, but hinted politely that he would expect a pretty solid recompense in the article of rabbits.

They turned finally to the ostensible business of the caravan: the bundles of arrows and other stores. The Dwarves asked him what he wanted done with them. Beren requested them simply to offload the bundles then and there; he had friends who would fetch them.

“Friends? What friends?” Telchar said, surprised. “I thought you were alone.”

“They are Onodrim,” replied Beren. “Shepherds of the trees.”

The Dwarves looked blankly at one another. The man spoke of beings they knew nothing of, save the name, and of matters they had nothing to do with. Trees for them were things to burn, or to make mine props out of.

“Can you trust them?” rumbled Khabbock, dark brows contracted.

“I think so,” said Beren.

The Dwarves still looked doubtful, but since they had no better plan, and wanted to be about their own affairs, in the end they followed Beren’s bidding and stowed all the unloaded goods in a nook, out of plain sight.

“I cannot thank you enough for all that you do for me, Forge Master,” said Beren to Telchar when all was done. “Without these arrows I should be but a toothless serpent under Mairon’s crushing foot.”

“Nay, it is no cost to us,” said Telchar, smiling in his great silver beard. “The *Mahalbuhû*<sup>13</sup> give us the metal, and our hands must be occupied with something, otherwise we would not be content.”

The lightened ponies were roped again into order, and the cooking utensils were stowed away. When all was ready, Telchar clasped Beren’s hand and shook it, as if he would never let go. He spoke no further word, but his eyes were full of emotions he could not convey. Releasing Beren at last, the aged Forge Master with his band departed in the waning day.

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Farsight took to the air when Beren set off for home. For a long time there was no opportunity for the pair to talk. The man soon turned from his path of approach in the morning and went walking down the steep slope

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13 ‘Friends of Aulë’, i.e. Noldorin Elves.

which led to the river. He soon reached the treeline and plunged beneath the dark pines. The eagle sailed in the airs above, its keen vision allowing it to keep sight of the man without much difficulty. The man halted finally in a clearing at the base of the slope, not far from the water. He sat on a log. The great bronzy bird wheeled down and came to land on a nearby branch, making it sway.

“That was a day to remember!” Beren remarked to the bird.

“The battle ended well,” the eagle replied. “Did you conclude satisfactory business with the Dwarves?”

“No,” Beren replied. “I am not satisfied. I am not satisfied with anything, myself least of all. As you know, Farsight, I have been forced to take this sword at last, and I confess it has all gone somewhat to my head these last weeks; I have been prancing about the woods with it like a fool. Well, today it nearly got me killed. I have learned my lesson at last. I shall stow it with Rattlecone and never wear the thing again.”

“I know little of the mannish art of war,” said Farsight, “but it seems to me that, on the contrary, had you not had a blade about you today, some of your friends might now be lying dead, and perhaps yourself as well.”

Beren glanced at his bow, which he had leaned against the log. “It is true that I dared not shoot at first for fear of hitting my friends,” he said. “I was forced to use what I had. But that is no sensible way to fight: unprepared, and with neither mail nor shield. Naked, for all love. It is pure luck I am not lying there now in my blood. Better not to have the temptation.”

“I cannot gainsay you,” said Farsight. “If you do not know your own business in this matter, how should I know better? The facts, though, are clear to any eye: four armoured Orcs cut down, and you without a scratch upon your naked hide. Does that not say something to you?”

“I must think about that,” Beren admitted. “There is something about the business which I do not understand.”

“There are a great many things in the world which I do not understand,” replied the eagle, “but I do not trouble myself on that account. I know where my duty lies, and that is enough.”

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The peaceful time continued. The eagles told Beren that what remained of the armies defeated at Eithel Sirion had largely slunk back to Angband. Few Orcs ventured inside the bounds of Dorthonion, although the towers on the borders remained well garrisoned. Those patrols which still came into the land from time to time tended, in their nervousness, to keep away from the deep woods; they preferred open ground, keeping where possible to one of the made paths. The Orcs sweated inside heavy armour and were thus difficult to bring down.

Some weeks later, Farsight brought the promised sheath, labouring with it over the pass. After thanking the weary bird profusely, and coming to an arrangement with him over his pay, Beren turned with interest to examine the artefact. Telchar had formed it from some light, tough metal. As with all the fighting gear he made, it was designed for use, not display; the metal was thus dull and matt. A closer examination revealed, however, that the sheath was covered in an intricate pattern, in slight relief, subtly shaded. It managed to be beautiful without sacrificing discretion. When the bright length of Nixenárë was slid therein, and the crystal guard covered by a leather flap, Beren could begin to wear the sword on his operations without worrying about detection.

That time of year was now come which some consider the best time of all. The first flush of spring was past, and now it was the time of warmth; the time of sleepy, insect-laden noons; the time of fresh young leaves, of that pure, deep green of new vegetable life. Life waxed everywhere in a great surge, and only the Orcs were unhappy.

Beren was as blithe in spirit as any other creature of the woods. Farsight’s words about duty had troubled

him, but he found it hard to stick to what he felt to be his own. He was bored with sneaking, bored with the endless killing. No matter how many Orcs he picked off, there were always more. It was hard to think of grim matters of war at this time of year. Thus he spent much time wandering the woods, singing in the lightness of his heart, feasting his eyes on the new greens now flourishing on every side and savouring deep breaths of the fresh young air. Water too was his delight, whether ducking his head under the pounding cold of a man-high waterfall in some forest brook, or simply sitting beside a stream in the warm blue of evening, relishing the ever-changing chuckle and sparkle of the living water; watching as mayflies danced in the cool, and trout rose in the calmer pools.

One fine morning he was making his way beside one such stream. He had garlanded his head with a chain of flowers and was hopping from rock to rock, feeling the splashes of water on his bare legs. Birds were busy all around; the woods were filled with song. Beren trilled along with them, trying to match their mastery. The birds sang with him, when they were not teasing him about his atrocious accent.

A goldfinch suddenly flew low and landed on his shoulder. "One waits by the water," the pretty bird reported.

Beren became instantly alert. He sought inside himself for messages, but there was no feeling of wrongness or oppression. "Of what kind?" he asked the bird.

"Unbird," replied the goldfinch.

"Two legs, or four?" asked the man, since that was about the only further level of discrimination he could expect.

"No legs," replied the creature. "Water thing." Having told the great animal all it knew, it flew away.

Beren mulled over what he had learned from the goldfinch, which was little enough. But there was no point in taking chances. He shucked his bow loose and strung it quietly before continuing on his path, but now with a great deal more caution.

He rounded a bend, peering carefully around a clump of hazel bushes which obscured the view. He knew the stream, knew there was some flat rocks just ahead, the start of an interesting area with small falls and deep pools.

He edged further. Further still. The rocks came slowly into view through the dappled edge of leaves. And there, on the shelf of rock, he saw the last thing in the world that he expected to see: a girl.

A naked girl.

Closer inspection suggested however that she was no ordinary girl. Her colouring was slightly strange for a start. The man noted that she sat with only the upper part of her body out of the water; the lower part was hidden, but silvery gleams beneath the water hinted at something covering her legs.

Beren advanced cautiously around the bushes. The eyes of the maid – if that is what she was – were already on him. She gave no indication of being surprised at his appearance.

He stopped when he was a few paces away. The two of them inspected each other. Beren saw an ivory-skinned girl, of slender curves. Breasts, though, ample and well-shaped; those pleasant confections known as female nipples having on her the same dark red colour as the inside of fishes' gills. The girl's pose, which had just a suggestion of the wanton about it, thrust these breasts forward slightly.

Beren's eyes travelled higher. He took in a longish, flexible neck; a narrow head; a tumble of wet hair, appearing rather like purple seaweed; and lips of the same deep, hot colour as her nipples. His gaze reached her eyes, and there he had a shock, for these were opalescent, almost fluorescent in their intensity. They reflected tints from blue through green to yellow as she moved her head.

She in her turn saw a man whose proportions and movements were balanced and pleasing to the eye. He was above medium height, broad-shouldered, wearing nothing but a brief kilt of battered leather, only a few shades darker than his weather-bronzed skin. His long muscles bunched and moved smoothly under his skin as he approached. The wild sweep of the man's hair was hacked to shoulder-length, and his noble brow was crowned with daisies. His hair was dark – but no. Under shadow, yes; but sunlight woke glints of copper in its depths. The man's face was long, the planes strong, the expression open. His eyes: his eyes were the deep, true blue of the summer heavens. They seemed light in his sun-browned face.

Beren squatted down on the stream-bank, the strung bow held upright at his side; still marvelling.

"I bid you good day, O Maiden," he said in pleasant tones.

She said nothing, only gazed at him. Her strange eyes were slanted, her expression impossible to read. She made the slightest adjustment of her position, but the movement was picked up and amplified by her full breasts. The shape and the mobile swaying motion reached into Beren's blood and charged it in a way he had not felt for some time. He began to be conscious of the pulse at his throat.

"I suppose it would be too much to expect that you spoke any tongue known to land creatures," he said.

She continued to gaze at him, still taking him in. The slightest of blushes seemed to bloom faintly in her cheeks; and suddenly she had moved off the rock with a smooth, fluid motion. She was neck-deep in the water now, easily maintaining her position against the slight current. He could see clearly now that her hind parts, waving to and fro under the water, were silvery, and resembled those of a great fish.

The creature had not taken her eyes off him the whole time. She opened her mouth now, revealing sharp, pearly teeth. "Swim with me," she said. Her voice was low and full.

"Ah!" he said. "Then you know the Elvish speech! How does that come about?"

"Those creatures you name Elves would teach all life to speak," she said. "Swim with me."

He turned the idea over. "Why?"

"Because it is pleasant," she replied. She broke off to dive backwards beneath the water. He had a brief glimpse again of her breasts and the curve of her belly, then the fish-tail slid past his eyes. The shape of her lithe body curved under, came back up, til her head again broke the surface. It was all done in a second or two; inexpressibly graceful, done with hardly a splash. "Two together is even more pleasant," she added.

"I cannot breathe under water," he said with regret. The thought of tumbling about with this lissom fish-maid had a powerful appeal.

She considered this. "That does not matter," she said.

"Well," he replied, scratching his head, "I'm afraid it does matter quite a lot, to me."

She grinned at him. Her teeth were sharper, more pointed than human teeth. "I will support you. With my arms about you, you will not hunger for air. And two together is warmth against the cold of the deeps."

His mouth was dry. He was unable to keep the images from coming into his head, the anticipation of her smooth skin against his. However, the Blackthorn Queen had done her work well; he felt the heat in his blood, but it had no power to master him. He had always meant to refuse the offer from the start, and now he did so explicitly. "No," he said, shaking his head, and the fish-woman heard the decision in his voice. "But will you not stay and tell me who you are, and of what folk? I did not know there were people living in the streams."

She did not reply. Her smile disappeared and her face became solemn, almost sad. She looked deeply into his eyes a moment longer, then ducked beneath the water. A flick of silver, and she was gone.



Rattlecone was very thoughtful when Beren told him of the encounter. "I have heard of these people," he said, "aye, and glimpsed them too at times. I know little about them, and we hold no traffic with them. They do not fit within the Eldar's scheme of things; but then, not everything does."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Beren.

"The Eldar have much lore," said the Ent, "which they learned at the feet of the Powers, during their long sojourn in the West. Few of them stop to consider that the tale may be incomplete; that the Valar in their wisdom may have told the Elvish folk only so much as they thought it good for them to know, or as much as the Elves could understand. For you are to consider that not even Manwë the High One himself can conceive of Arda entire, and lesser beings have proportionally lesser reach. Only the One knows all the secrets and inner workings of the world He made.

"So. What the Eldar learned is that Elves and Men are the Children of the One. The Dwarves are of separate make, but their beginnings are also known and accounted for in that lore. Spirits there are too from outside the World which have stolen bodies – we have spoken of this loathsome matter before. But whence came the Orcs? Who is he whom we name the Eldest? Where do we Ents come into the picture, or the birds and beasts? The great eagles? The mighty living islands which cruise the deep? Other Powers in other lands, far to the South and East? These sea-people are but one of many who have no place in that story."

"Are they then of the sea?" asked Beren. "If so, what is one of them doing here?"

"I could make some guesses," replied Rattlecone, "but for certain knowledge you had better ask them, should you meet any again. But have a care! I know no evil of this folk, but no good either. They have their own purposes, which no doubt seem good to them, but all that you can know at the beginning is that those purposes are not your own."

"I should know better than to expect a clear answer from you by now," said Beren. "I suppose you will tell me nothing of who this Eldest is, either."

"Should you chance to meet him, then you will already know more than I," replied Rattlecone. "I make no apology for spending my words with care. Each one has power; they are not to be cast to the four winds, as is your own careless preference."

Beren sighed. "We are of such different kinds, Rattlecone, that I sometimes wonder what it is about you that so draws me to you."

"Hah!" replied Rattlecone. "You are not the only one whose mind is plagued with such puzzles."

They passed then to talking about the latest news and of plans for the continuing campaign, such as it was in that quiet summer.

Nothing of note happened for some weeks. The occasional Orc patrols continued, as did Beren's harassment of them. Once or twice the Enemy set wolves on his trail, and now the wolves were grown large and cunning. There was something not canny about them. But a wolf, cunning or not, is still just a wolf; Beren could feel their wrongness before they came near, and none had any answer to an arrow.

Beren had wondered about the wolves. Since the earliest times of his youth he had met forest wolves now and then in the forest, and had not found anything particularly amiss with them. As with any eater of flesh, they would not hold back from eating his if they could manage to get it; but there was no evil in them. They had even been helpful to him from time to time. But he knew that the Enemy, or at least Mairon, could cozen wolves to his cause, because of the many who had wrought so fearfully at the time of the Great Battle, in the plain there by Newfort, where Beren had never ventured again to this day. But these new, large, cunning wolves seemed to mark a new phase. Was Mairon breeding them? He thought of the howls which people

reported now from the Isle there on Sirion, and shuddered.

He continued to meet Bhalacho, and once he even dared to visit the Hairfeet on their hill, whose children shouted with delight and clambered all over him while he talked with the older people.

“Take your people south,” he pleaded with Granny White-top. “I am sure this is just the calm before the storm.”

“I’ve been a-trying to persuade them,” she sighed, “but we’re a stubborn lot. I’m getting older, too. I don’t have the vim for it any more.”

He had left them with nothing resolved.

It was high summer before he met the sea-maid again. There was no warning this time; she simply poked her head above the water one day as he walked beside a stream.

“Oh, hello!” he said. “I thought you had given up on me.” He saw that she was this time fully clad to the neck in what looked like fishes’ mail. “Will you stay to talk this time?”

“Perhaps,” she said, not looking at him directly.

He sat on the grass by the bank. “Will you tell me your name?” he asked.

She made no direct reply to this, only bent back and shook her long hair under the water. Upright again, she glanced at him slyly. “I already know how you call yourself,” she said. “You are called Beren.”

“How do you know that?” he asked, surprised.

“All here have heard the noble name of Beren, son of Barahir,” she answered, bobbing up and down. “He who fights the Orcs.”

“Hmm,” said Beren. “In that case you have the advantage of me. You know my name, but I don’t know yours. That is hardly fair, is it?”

“‘Fair’?” she repeated with faint disdain. “I do not know ‘fair’.”

He sat down on the bank, willing to dally. “It surely would not hurt you to tell me your name.”

“It would be useless,” she said, squinting at him slyly. She never stayed quite motionless in the water. “You could not pronounce it.”

“Come now,” he said. “Stop playing games. Tell me!”

She smiled at him in a toothy, sideways way. “Call me Glithiringirililopsch,” she said. Then she had to repeat it for him, before he made a trial himself. The maid laughed delightedly at that. “That was far from bad!” she said. “I did not think you fungus-folk could speak so well.”

“‘Fungus-folk’?” he repeated, with raised eyebrows.

She looked a little confused. “Ay, well,” she said. “Because you are so dry and soft.” Her expression hardened to defiance. “I wonder that you do not own to the name yourselves.”

He smiled. “We have enough hard names for each other, without needing more. But come, be kind to me. I do not think I can manage Glithi... Glithiring... – wait, I have it – Glithiringirililopsch, every time we meet. Can I not call you Glith?”

“Ugh,” she replied. She dived to make one of her underwater manoeuvres. When she had surfaced again,

droplets streaming down her face, she went on, "Anyway, who says that we will meet again?"

"Why should we not?" he said.

She looked at him sideways out of her slanted eyes. "You might find that once was enough."

"It is already now twice," he said. "This time is different, though. We have spoken at least two dozen words, but you have not yet asked me to swim with you."

She laughed. "Perhaps you have missed your chance," she said. "Perhaps I will not ask again."

"That was my thought," he said. "But a chance for what? It would undoubtedly have been most charming to drown in your arms, but drowning it would have been all the same."

Now her smile was gone. "You do not trust me," she said. There were spots of red on her cheekbones.

"I do not know you," he said carefully.

She stared at him a moment longer, then ducked beneath the foam and disappeared. Beren sighed, shook his head, and walked on. He had not gone a half-mile before the maid surfaced in front of him in a spout of spray. She landed seated on the bank with a thump, not three paces in front of him. The iridescent fish-skin covered her without seam to the neck, but did little to hide her curvaceous figure, or the bounce of her breasts as she landed.

She held a package out to him. "Here," she said. "Take it!"

"What is it?" he asked.

"That you will see," she said. "It will let you swim as I. Take it, and try it, in some secluded pool where Glithiringirililopsch cannot come and drag you to your death."

He took the package hesitantly and turned it over. It too seemed to be comprised of fish-hide: close-set scales flashed in the sun. "Thank you," he said. "But Glith...!"

"Keep it moist," she said, and dived into the stream and away.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was indeed a suit of fish-mail. He took it to Rattlecone, who handled it with interest and with cautious care. The Ent closed his eyes then and stood for some minutes in silence. The tendrils of his hands that were wrapped around the skin seemed to move. At the end of this searching procedure, he handed the skin back to Beren.

"Well?" said the man. "Is it safe?"

"Properly I should reply 'no'," said the Ent, "but I suppose by that you mean, does it contain treachery? To which the answer, so far as I can tell, is also 'no'."

"In that case," said Beren, "I am minded to try it." The Ent made no reply. "I wonder," went on Beren after waiting in vain for an answer, "that you do not counsel me against such a course, as being a foolish and rash diversion, likely to carry risk to my life, while in no whit advancing the war against Morgoth."

"You only needed to say 'rash diversion'," said Rattlecone. "The rest is contained in that. But I did not say that it was one."

"Well," said Beren, "here are two wonders in one sentence: an Ent taxes me for using too many words, and neglects to counsel me against having fun."

Rattlecone laughed his full, deep-chested laugh. “Ah, mortal. Go and take thy bath, I pray thee. To the relief of us both.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Beren had looked forward to this diversion, but he saw no need to take unnecessary chances. He chose thus a tiny tarn high in the hills, whose outlet was a trickle which he was sure that no sea-person could climb. In this supposition, as we shall see, he was wrong; but more of that anon.

Unfolded, the suit of scales showed flexible and light. There were not separate legs to it, only a single conical fish’s tail into which Beren hoped his legs would fit. After some experimentation he determined that a sliding pressure would close the suit tightly along its ventral seam. The trick of opening it again took him longer, but he managed to work it out at last: there was a single spot at the throat which, when cunningly twisted between his fingertips, would unlock the seam again.

Climbing into the clammy suit took some time, but once he had at last smoothed all the wrinkles out, it felt supremely comfortable, as if melded to his own skin. At that point he perceived that his legs were encased in separate tubes of skin. When had that occurred? And how? Shaking his head, he concluded that he must simply have been mistaken about the shape of the suit.

He stepped gingerly into the mirror of the water and found that it did not feel cold, contrary to the earlier report of his unprotected fingers. He had chosen a shingly, shelving area where he stood in no danger of getting beyond his depth. He waded in, feeling the pebbles under his feet, until the gently lapping water reached above his waist. He knelt then to submerge himself, and as he did so, he felt the entire world change around him.

When Caladis had lived with them, years ago, she had owned a roundel of clear glass through which she used to peer at books and other things held in the hand. Beren had tried it one day and found that, with the glass held to his eye, the whole world seemed different: distant things became vague and obscure while objects a hand’s-breadth away grew giant-sized. And everything he could see, great or small, was ringed by a rainbow halo.

The present sensation was similar, except that now all the senses were involved. Everything was different; everything. The forest and the world he was used to faded to something vague and half-perceived, but the new world of living water extended from him in a web which stretched in all directions to immense distances.

He felt an irresistible urge to swim. As he lifted his feet from the pebbly ground, his body took over. Without the slightest thought or effort, he found he was swimming like a fish. Before he had any time to be concerned about it, he was already in deeper water.

It was a marvellous feeling. The whole volume of the lake was his to explore. He discovered the joy which birds also know, of having an extra dimension to move through. He felt surrounded on all sides by a vast, clear, luminous space; although in fact the distance he could see through the peat-stained water was not great. He could hear clearly the trickles of water entering and leaving the tarn; the click and buzz of fishes conversing; the ‘glopsch!’ of a trout sucking a fly from the mirror-like surface above; and the stealthy clack of pebbles in the cold, gloomy depths, where armoured and prickly monsters felt about for muck to eat.

While gliding through the water and enjoying all of these things, he received two more of the shocks this day had prepared for him. He realized firstly that he felt no particular need to breathe, and secondly that his legs seemed to have fused together. In a slight panic, thrashing with his hind part, he sped to the shore. He broke the shimmering mirror at the lakeside, and once again found himself in the old familiar world of sun and air. His trembling fingers fumbled at the catch at his throat until he succeeded in popping the seam. He stripped the suit from him as quickly as he could; then stood there naked in the chill shallows, running his hands down his legs and sucking in lungfuls of the mountain air. He had feared to find some change, but all seemed to be as it was before.

\* \* \* \* \*

There followed one of the most pleasant times Beren could remember, as he explored the waterways of Dorthonion with Glith. A whole new world opened out for him to discover, and she was a willing and constant guide. He spent every day with her. His friends saw him not, and the Orcs patrolled unmolested. Mairon's wolves snuffed out places where he had slept, but from these the trail led nowhere: always shortly to a stream, where the scent disappeared.

In the fluid underwater world, many things he had held for fixed seemed now to be mutable. His form and even size were one. He had already found that he could fuse his legs to a driving fish-tail at will; now Glith showed him how to take the transformation further. He rejoiced to thresh and batter his way up the smallest freshet, like the salmon which came no more to the river. With a slant-eyed smile at him from Glith, they even visited the tarn he had first swum in.

Glith counselled him to beware of flesh-eaters in the waters, and to make sure always to be the largest beast in the waterway. His first glimpse of a huge pike, larger than a human thigh, as it dozed in a sunny pool, underlined the importance of this lesson.

All these revelations which to Beren were deeply cloaked in mystery, Glith took as routine. She became impatient under his questioning. "How should I know why?" she would exclaim. "It just is!" She preferred telling him stories of the sea: of its vastness; of its pure deep blue found only in the depths, whence all the other colours fled away; and of its many and strange denizens. She told him of chains of jellies; of great, many-suckered squids; of strange, gape-eyed fishes in the black cold of the deepest ocean, who carried their own lamps with them; and of huge beasts, which were not fishes at all, but rather things like cows which had returned to the sea. "For all creatures have their origins in the sea," she said, "even you fungus-men. I have heard different tales, but they are not true."

In their explorations they never went far beyond the mouth of the valley of Ladros. The reason was clear, even to Beren, for the water began to taste bad if they ventured too far into the blasted plain. The realization came to Beren that Glithirigirilopsch was trapped in Dorthonion. The same vast blight of Morgoth which kept the salmon from returning also blocked her access to the oceans she clearly longed for. Since he could think of nothing he could do to help her escape, out of delicacy he kept silence on the topic.

Although he found her a lively companion, and was only too aware of the strong reactions of his body to her fluid curves, he maintained towards her a friendly neutrality, and was never tempted to take up what she had seemed, at their first meeting, to be offering. She was not like Carver. Glith was a thousand times more beautiful than the Druug girl, but Beren had shared not just love with Carver but also fear, weariness, struggle, joy and grief; their souls touched at many points. Glith, despite her charms, remained a stranger to him; unknown, and perhaps unknowable.

Glith on her side studied him often when he was not aware. She grew familiar with every plane of his strong face, and with the bold, eager look in his eyes with which he greeted each new challenge. She grew to know the gentleness in his hands when anything was hurt.

From the first day, the pair of them had been accompanied by a glitter of small beings who could shape themselves as dancing fish if they pleased, or as tiny silver sexless children, full of chatter; or as anything in between. Glith called them the Minnow-fairies, but had no explanation for their being. "They are in all the streams," she said. "There is no harm in them. Although they steal eggs sometimes."

At some point it occurred to Beren to ask, "Are you alone, Glith? Are there others of your folk here?"

She gave him the sidelong glance he had come to recognize. "My parents are here with me," she said.

"I wonder that I have never seen them," said Beren.

Glith held silence over that for a moment. "They do not venture out much," she said at last. There seemed to

be a note of hesitation in her voice.

“I would like to meet them,” said Beren.

The Sea-maid did not immediately reply, and he wondered if he had made some blunder in manners. But then she said, “Why not? I will ask them what their wish is.”

Some days later she greeted his sunrise immersion with an outstretched hand. “Come,” she said to him, “I will lead you to my parents.” Accompanied by the ever-present Minnow-fairies, she led him in a way he did not understand. The path they followed lay along no stream a clumping air-breather could plumb with a stick.

A time passed which he could not measure, but it was not long. Shortly they found themselves outside a great curved mass which appeared in the gloomy light most like a shell. Glith smiled at him and led him through a gap which seemed to serve as a doorway. Once inside, Beren found his guess confirmed: those pearly curves and hollows could only be those of a shell. But was it a great shell, or were they become tiny creepers inside a normal one? He could not tell.

Ever-moving sunlight streamed down from above in slanted rays, dancing in slow dapples on the sandy floor underfoot. It dazzled him when he tried to look up.

“Where are we?” he whispered in awe to his companion.

“Inside the wave,” she said. “Come, my elders await.” She led him into a further room. The light here was different, more green in hue.

He had not time for speculation about it, because two people were seated by the far wall. He saw that they were a tall man and a good-looking woman, both with the same ivory skin and purple hair as Glith. Their eyes too were the same flashing opals. These new people were not clad in fish-mail but in diaphanous curving sheets of stuff. Each single layer of it was translucent, but the entirety provided complete modesty. The man bore a finely-figured pearly crown upon his head, and the woman had a proportionally more delicate one nestling among the floating strands of her hair.

Beren made a knee before the couple and bowed his head. “I greet you, O King, O Queen,” he said, because it seemed clear to him this must be their rank. Curse that Glith! Why had she not *said*? “I am Beren, a visitor from the lands above the wave.”

“You are welcome to us, Man of the lands above,” said the king slowly. “Pray be seated.” Beren looked and found a great round shell like a whelk beside him, so he sat on that. He glanced at Glith and saw, to his surprise, that she now too was clothed in the same stuff as her parents, somewhat differently shaded. She looked very lovely. She smiled at him, showing her sharp teeth.

Beren felt ill at ease, although he did not know why. Perhaps because he was the only one still clad in gleaming mail from neck to toe? He did not know how to transform to more gentle dress; Glith had not thought to show him.

The Minnow-children had swarmed into the chamber and stood now gathered in a shimmering, simpering crowd on either side of the thrones. They whispered to themselves and poked their tongues out at Beren.

The eyes of the crownéd couple flicked uneasily. It came to him, he knew not how, that they were nervous.

Beren cleared his throat. “May I not know your names, noble sir, noble lady?” he said to the two of them. They looked at one another as if puzzled, then at Glith. She in her turn smiled at Beren.

“We do not use names,” she said to him. “We know who each of us is without them.”

“But –” he was confused. “But then – what of yours?”

Glith laughed in helpless delight. “Oh!” she said. “I am sorry. I must beg your pardon. I made that up. But you may continue to call me by it if you wish. I have come to enjoy hearing it from your lips. Is that not strange?”

Beren felt warmth rising into his cheeks. He felt he had been made a fool of twice within the space of a minute, and enjoyed it no more than anyone else would. He made an effort to suppress the resentment, and sat on calmly, feeling no requirement to say anything further. The next move was surely up to them.

The woman, Glith’s mother, made a nervous movement with her hands. “Would it – would he like to eat?” she asked Glith.

“I’m sure he would,” said Glith, with her sly glance on Beren.

“Can he... er, is there...”

Glith laughed. “Be at ease, Mother, he can eat anything we do.”

Whispered instructions from the queen to the Minnow-people followed, upon which crowds of them dashed away. Shortly a train of them pranced back, bearing dishes. The chain of bearers wound its way to Beren and the leader offered up to him her platter, the feral eyes in her small face gazing at him the while in apparent scorn.

He took the plate from her, or from it, with a thank-you that the creature ignored. The next dumped her plate on his knee, and the next; he was soon balancing several plates awkwardly on his lap. A goblet of some drink followed, and now he had only one hand free. His astonished mind protested briefly – drink? But we’re underwater, how can there be drink? – but he pushed this away into the growing store of questions to which he suspected he would never find answers.

Nobody else ate. Fighting down renewed annoyance, Beren did his best to savour the dainties he had spread on his lap. Why should he care if they wanted to make a show of him? Let them enjoy the spectacle!

While he ate, he thought over his experiences so far with Glith and her people. The more he turned them over in his mind, the more certain he became that there was something wrong in the whole picture. He just could not put his finger on what.

The food, albeit unusual to his taste, was actually not bad, and the liquor warmed his bones. It had a strange tang to it. This was in fact the taste of seaweed, from which the drink was brewed; but he had never seen that plant, so he did not know.

None of the sea-people said a word while he was engaged; they just sat there soberly and watched him eat. As soon as he was finished, however, Glith leaned towards him and smiled.

“Would you like to see the treasury?” she asked.

“Certainly,” replied Beren politely. She stood and guided him towards another doorway. Placing the stack of plates on the ground, and with a bow of his head to the strange couple, he followed her out.

The sea-maid led the way down a winding passage, then opened a scaly door which resembled a large oyster shell. Inside the door he found a round, hollow room. It was well lit, but the water here had a stuffy taste. The walls on all sides were hung with things that glittered in the light, which he could not at first make out. Suddenly it all came into focus. He saw that the walls were chiefly hung with mail and shining swords, both sheathed and unsheathed. These were none of the fish-scale ware he had come to associate with the sea people, but rather iron and bronze of the sort he knew. He turned with a questioning look to Glith.

“These are not our work,” she said. “They are trove from the world above. We keep our own arms elsewhere. This stuff is no use, it is only pretty. We cannot stay here long, the water will not sustain us. We must keep it

dull lest the stuff decay. A horrid sight that is too, like a diseased body; red of blood and green of pus.”

He realized after a moment that she must be speaking of iron- and bronze-rust.

There were other gauds there too – gold and silver, chains and brooches. Jewels flashed their colours at him from all sides.

He was surprised at how much treasure there was, and said so.

“Why,” she replied, “most things come to the water at last. The arms do not usually last well, it is true. These here we had some years ago, after the winter of the Great Poisoning. There was a great battle in the fungus-world. Many who were struck down found their way direct to us.”

When the full realization came to Beren of what this meant, the gorge rose chokingly into his throat. The clutch of horror was such that he feared briefly that he might lose his meal. What kin and comrades of his had once worn this gear? Which cold carcasses of men and women he had once known had been stripped to decorate this room?

He turned to Glith. “I think I have seen enough,” he said unsteadily. “Let us go. Indeed, I think I have seen enough of everything for one day.”

She looked him curiously. “Do you not wish to see more of the house?”

“No,” he replied. “I do not feel well.”

“So?” she said with eyebrows raised. “Perhaps I was wrong about the food. The Minnow-folk shall guide you back.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Beren lay down to rest in his fern-bed, still feeling upset; and behind that, still vaguely wondering where the worm in the apple lay with Glith. However, the matter that was soon to rise up in his mind would sweep all thought of this out of his head.

The mind works even while we sleep. Beren had seen something in the treasure chamber which he had not recognized at the time; but in the middle of the night it came to him unbidden, and the picture jerked him awake in his bed of ferns. He rose staring into the dark, seeing the thing clearly before his inner vision.

He badly wanted to rush straight back to the shell-house, but he was not sure of the way. Certainly he would not be able to find it without light. Unable to sleep, he paced back and forward in the dark, impatient for the dawn.

It seemed a night as long as years. As soon as the East began to pale, he fetched his salmon-skin from the tiny pool in which he stowed it. After struggling into it, he sat with his feet in the water, waiting for Glith, or whatever she wanted to be called – grinding his teeth the while at the memory of how he had been made game of – to appear.

The sea-girl’s head broke the water while the air was still full of birdsong. “They sound sweet, do they not?” she said. “These small beasts which swim in the air. Are they as pretty close up?”

“Let us speak of that another time,” he said shortly. “I beg you now to convey me to your parents’ house as quickly as you can.”

“Why, what swims here?” she retorted. “Just yesterday you could not wait to get away from it.”

“The less talk and the more haste, the happier I shall be,” he replied sternly.



She opened her mouth to make a remark, then looked into his face and thought better of it. “As you wish,” she shrugged. She turned, dived under, and showed him the way inside the wave. Beren paid more attention than he had previously; he did not want to remain dependent on others for guidance to the place.

Outside the house, she paused. “I must alert my parents,” she said. “They –”

He interrupted her. “My errand is not to them,” he said, with no friendliness at all showing in his face. “I just want to see your treasure-room again. If that can be achieved without disturbing your parents, then let us do so.”

She looked at him uncertainly. This was a side of him she had not seen before. “Come, then,” she said.

She led him around the curve to another door. Once inside, they passed through a chamber filled with stacks of what seemed to Beren like large-sized bones and scales from fish. Most of the nacreous scales were the size of dinner plates, but two or three were as large as shields. They looked like arms of some sort, but he was in no present mind to pay attention to the puzzle. Shortly the pair found themselves in the same winding corridor, before the same oyster-door as yesterday. Glith opened it for him. He stepped inside. His eyes went straight to the place; and there indeed it was. He went to it and unhooked the small thing from the wall.

It was the shell necklace Hiril used to wear.

Unable to keep a tremor out of his voice – whether from grief or fury he knew not which – he turned to the apprehensive sea-maid. “Where did you get this?” he said.

She shrank from the look in his eyes. “Ah, that was long ago. A small... small creature I think, one of your folk. I was only a child myself.”

“Where is she?” asked Beren, and his voice rang harsh.

Minnow fairies had been gathering behind Glith in the doorway, and they were joined now by the figure of the King. He did not look pleased. “What swims here?” he said coldly in the Elven tongue. He spoke to his daughter, but kept his eyes on Beren. “Why was I not told of this intrusion?”

Glith turned to her father and spoke to him in their own language, a passage of slippery sounds like a stream of fish emptied from a net.

Holding high the shining necklace, Beren took a step forward and spoke, interrupting the silvery flow. “This belonged to my sister,” he said, the steel plain to hear in his voice. “I *will* know where her remains are. I will not be turned from this.”

The Sea-king opened his mouth to object, but Beren’s determination beat upon his brow like the noonday sun, so that the man choked on his words, abashed in spite of himself. He shrugged, turned to his daughter. Low, liquid syllables poured out of his mouth.

“He has told me,” she said in subdued tones to Beren at the end of this. “I will take you.”

The two of them left the shell-house and found their path back to the world. Beren had turned on the way and snarled at the Minnow-fairies, who fell over themselves in backing away. None came with them.

The stream widened as they finned down with the current. Now they were under Foen, where the farm had been. They passed the plank bridge, now fallen. Following the windings of the broadening river. Finally Glith halted at a place where a long-dead tree, clean and white as a raven-picked bone, stretched branches like a many-fingered, skeletal hand beneath the water. Down, she dived; down to the base of this, down. And there, in the deepest, murkiest point, something gleamed pale.

The bones were smaller than Beren had expected. They were caught beneath the tree, half-buried in mud. Working with care, he freed them, one after another, and laid them on the bank. There were many bones. The

gathering took him some time, but at the end of it, all that remained of his sister lay piled on the grassy bank.

He heaved himself out of the water and sat down beside them. Shortly Glith joined him on the other side. Her eyes searched his face, but she held her tongue.

Beren touched the round vault of the skull. In his mind he could see chestnut hair, laughing eyes. All gone. But he knew the skull, knew the bones of her.

“She would swim up there,” he said quietly. “I warned her many times. It was an old dam. One day the earth shook, and the wall broke. We never found her. My mother and father went to their deaths not knowing. How can I tell them now?”

Glith found no words to say. They sat on there, listening to the birds sing of other joys, other cares.

\* \* \* \* \*

Midsummer’s day found Beren high over Aeluin, at the grave of his father and the Companions. The stones he had laid over their place of rest lay still undisturbed. The man had found a rusting spade at the settlement below, and with this now he dug a small grave next to the large one. As soon as this was deep enough, he took up the parcel he had brought with him, the wrapped bundle of Hiril’s bones, and laid it down in the good-smelling earth. He clambered out and stood by the side a moment, taking his last look at his sister. He filled the hole in then and laid stones he had fetched along the top.

When all was done, he stood there a while, watching the peaceful shapes of cloud-shadows gliding imperceptibly over the blue waters of the lake below.

“Father,” he said in a low voice, “I do not know if you can hear me where you are now. If you can, then I would tell you that I have found Hiril, and I have laid her remains next to yours. May you both find peace. I have kept her necklace; if ever I find where Mother lies, I will leave it with her, as a token – or a guide-sign maybe, that perhaps you all may find one another somehow, and wait for me together. Farewell to you now; and farewell too, my sister. I am sorry it has taken me so long to come to you.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The Lord of Middle-earth, Melkor, He who Arises in Might, brooded in his hall. He had many reasons for discontent. The assault, so many long years in the planning, had failed – there was no longer any point in denying it. True, he had made some gains, he had broken the cursed Leaguer, had killed a handful of his chief foes; but despite expending almost the entirety of his lesser forces, he had failed to sweep the Noldor into the sea, as had been his intention and his hope. Although many of the Fëanorians had run, this Maedhros still held out, despite everything Melkor had thrown at him; and Fingon on his right flank lurked almost untouched behind his mountain walls. As for Finrod and Turgon, where were they? What were they planning? They were mighty princes, as the Elves counted these things. It was not safe that they worked deeds unknown in the hidden background.

Men had dealt him some unpleasant surprises. Like his chief lieutenant, Melkor had believed that he knew Men through and through. In earlier times he had played with these Aftercomers awhile in the East, blunting and muddying what meagre qualities he had discovered in them, but he had never found much in them to cause him concern. He had certainly never expected them to fight so doughtily at the side of his enemies. On the other hand, the ones who showed mettle were few; the bulk remained as he knew them – weak, foolish, easily cozened. Melkor could see ways to set them one against another. Such faint-spirited folk were always exposed to betrayal. He had great hopes of that. For what is worse than a shield that one knows to be weak? Answer: a shield which is in fact weak, but which you think to be strong.

Other difficulties remained. This creature Huan for example. Melkor knew his story; indeed he had heard the judgement as it was made<sup>14</sup>, for no gates in the mind, no discipline could shut out the voice of Mandos. But

14 See the prologue to volume 4.

why was the hound here at all? It seemed the merest accident. This wayward elemental had bound himself to some Elf princeling or other who had promptly run truant across the Sea. He could not believe this was a design of those pouting peers of his, nor would he expect such in any case, since these purblind fools had long since turned their coward backs on the field. None of them had the spine any longer to meddle in his affairs, not openly at any rate. He had bloodied their noses for them, and they had not had the spirit to reply.

Melkor smiled at the memory, and for a brief moment forgot the burning weight on his head and the smart of his newer wounds. What a pleasure that had been to him, to rob them of their treasured Trees and Light! He, only he now possessed some of that light, while his coevals must huddle whimpering in the dark. Those white-livered fools – he had stolen their jewels, ha ha! He savoured still the pain he had spread among them. True, he had not been able to unlock the stones, and the sullen things burned him with their fire; but they were his, his forever; he would never give them up. Certainly his prating, soft-bellied brothers would never have them again. *That* he knew.

No, those fools on their Island had not sent the dog Huan; yet he was here nonetheless, and must be dealt with, and that as soon as might be, for the sore fact was that he was too sharp a foe for any here who fought for Melkor's vision, Melkor's triumph. These allies and tools of his sulked now deep within the Fortress and refused to go forth until the Hound had been, by whatever means, cast into the Dark.

Even the Brotherhood of the Flame<sup>15</sup> had been obstinate. "We made cause with you to cleanse the earth with fire and fear of these crawling scum who infest it," their chief had protested. "Not to wrestle with recalcitrants from our own order." Melkor had left them, disgusted that creatures of such power should be so faint-hearted. For had not even this Fingolfin, even one of the scum, to use their own term, managed to send a Flame-lord away with its tail between its legs?

Well, he knew the Brothers. Perhaps one should expect no more from them. The blow that really stung was the refusal of his pretty, his favourite, his pet, the object of so much of his nurture and teaching, to go again to the wars. Glaurung, his golden one, eldest, chief and dam of all his fabled dragon-brood, had refused his command. These beasts were terrors that walked the earth. Melkor knew that, in time to come, he would breed them stronger still; but Glaurung was their banner, their spear-point, the burning flame that heralded all the fearful might to come. There was no creature native to Middle-earth who could best her, either in plain battle or in cunning; even thus had he bred her. But now came this Dog from outside to shatter his plans into splinters. The Dog had met his pretty on the field in the East, and the Dog-thing had made nothing of Glaurung's flames, had scorned the malice of her glance which turned all other hearts to whey; had savaged her face and paws, until she had turned tail and run.

Melkor tried gentle reason with his favourite. He always believed in being reasonable with defaulters.

"I made you," he bellowed to the great beast, "and I could cast you into nothingness with a wave of my hand. Explain to me then, dastard, why you refuse my commands, and shirk your duty!"

"O my master and my father," replied the dragon silkily, "these are words of hurt. Dastard? Shirker? How canst thou accuse me so? I stand ever ready to face thy foes – at thy side, as is proper." She eyed him slyly. "As the father leads – either forward, or perchance, in withdrawal – there must the child follow. Dost thou name thyself craven? Surely not!"

The Lord of All ground his teeth. "Do not presume to sharpen your wits on *me*, worm. It were no sound strategy, but purest folly, for any general to throw himself into the fray. As you well know. For while wide numbers of rankers may be killed without great hurt to a cause, there is only one who holds all the strings. That chief must hold himself back, in coldest policy, no matter how hot burns his heart. But indeed, have I not lately given way to my springing battle-rage, setting policy to one side, and fought into dust the chiefest of our foes on this shore<sup>16</sup>? At great risk to our venture, I may add; but such was the urgent call of my blood.

15 Valaraukar.

16 Melkor is referring to his duel, late in the Flame Year of 455, with the Elvish High King Fingolfin. Despairing of the course of the war after that disastrous defeat suffered by the Elves, the High King had challenged his enemy directly. Melkor won the fight, as the wildly unequal nature of the contest would have led any to expect, but

All this while *you hid*, quaking in your armoured hide. So do not seek to root your craven actions in me!”

“Ah yes, your duel!” drawled the great dragon. “All of Underworld rings with huzzahs for your victory. Who could fail to admire the valiant manner in which thou didst from thy redoubt emerge, in a fashion which some may name timely – surely some! – to battle a lowly Elf. The tale of the clash resounds in all mouths; every missed stroke of thy hammer and every cut of his sword has been cause for catch of breath and wondered sigh. All feel the pains of the wounds thou hadst at the hand of this renegade. (Of the claws of, ahem, birds, perhaps we shall not speak.) This foe with whom thou hast struggled so stoutly was, nonetheless, as must even you admit, far beneath thy order. *I* however am chided because I shrink from one above my own. I must humbly beg to petition that the comparison is very unfair.”

“You thankless battener upon my cost,” sneered the Great One. “If your claws were as sharp as your tongue, the whole world might not stand against you. The war is out there, and needs to be fought. But will you? No! Your idle pleasure is to lurk behind strong walls that others have built; and to gibe me – me, to whom you owe everything!”

“Master,” replied the dragon more sharply, “I am overmatched. I will not march blindly out to be bested again. It is not wise policy. It was not for that that thou hast made me.”

“The cursed dog is long since hence,” growled Melkor. “There is no longer cause to fear him.”

The dragon bared its great row of teeth in the sketch of a smile. “Alas! My father, it pains me once again to amend thy wisdom. As the Hound was quickly gone, so can he as quickly return. Now, I am many things; but I am, alas, not quick.

“They say a wolf shall slay him; well then, a wolf should slay him. Until he is removed for good, it were plainest folly for me to venture forth.”

There had been no more to be said; the more so since Glaurung was right. In fact Melkor had long thought on this matter of the prophecy. This Huan was fated to die at the hands of the mightiest wolf in the history of the world – so much seemed certain, if the words of his coevals could be trusted. But from whose hand should such a wolf spring, if not from Melkor’s own? He had set about the undertaking secretly: had taken tribes of the creatures, had bred them and warped them, feeding their growth with all the brews of savage strength he could pour down their throats. In time, over the cycling generations, he had brought this line to a fearful height of might and malice. Into the last and greatest of these wolf-bodies he had bound the fierce spirit he had tortured to madness, the same one whose meddling had ruptured the earth prematurely<sup>17</sup>, some time before the designed time for the Fire-flood. The two bound together made more than a haunted beast, more than a monster; they made a red-mouthed terror of whom even he, Melkor, was secretly afraid.

Late in the project he had become aware that Mairon was also, by chance as it seemed, dabbling in the warping of wolves, as well as other creatures. Melkor had smiled, savouring this as a piquant jest. Let the sorcerer dabble! Mairon, at least, would not be the one to compass Huan’s death.

Mairon: there was another problem. Melkor was perfectly aware of all the schemes the fool thought to hide from his sight. The time would soon come to bring him to a clearer and humbler understanding of his place on the greater stage. Melkor had long mooted a project of correction, but there had seemed no particularly urgency about it. However, things were changed. His lieutenant had taken the fortalice on the Isle well enough, it was true, but this sorry tale of the pine-clad highlands was nothing short of a disgrace. Even allowing for obstruction from the Witch, that chronic meddler in things beyond her ken, the cleaning of a few rustics from those woods should have presented no difficulties. How shameful it was then to witness one of Mairon’s order brought to a stand by thirteen mortal men. And now by one only! It was beyond painful. The rebels who lurked deeper in the South, beyond the piny barrier, had been growing bolder on the rumours of this defiance. And now even his own servants were muttering. Well, it had gone on long enough. He must

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nonetheless suffered wounds not only at the hands of his opponent but also from beak and talons of the eagle-lord Thorondor, who had flown at the last to recover the body of the dead King.

17 The earthquake, ten years before the great outbreak, that had caused Hiril’s death.

summon Mairon and make the matter plain to him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beren went back to the water after a while, although a lot of the fun seemed to be gone from it somehow. He was also guiltily aware that he was neglecting his duties. But somehow he could not set the new, free world aside again quite yet; and Glith remained as charming as ever.

Her manner was different with him now, softer. She apologized for the trick she played about the name. "I have a name now," she said to him. "Glith. You gave it to me."

He half-smiled. "Not Glithiringirililopsch?" he said. "I've a mind always to use that from now on."

He was sitting on the bank, she in the water. She struck him lightly on the knee. "Do not tease me," she said. "I've said I was sorry, and I am."

A thought had been nudging Beren for some time; a sort of loose end, a subsurface question, which now came to the front of his mind for the first time. He had no foreknowledge that, in voicing the question, he was pulling the small rock from the slope that sets an avalanche in motion.

He was looking at Glith, trying to remember whether she and her parents had had legs, that day in the shell palace. He couldn't recall. But he knew the Minnow-children had; he could still picture them prancing over the sand with all the dishes of food.

"Glith," he said, "when we first met, you said that the Minnow-babies sometimes stole eggs."

"Yes," she said, curious to know what was in his mind.

"Eggs from birds? On the land?"

"Yes," she said.

"Well, how do they get them? Can they walk on the land?"

"If they choose, yes," she confirmed, puzzled at the direction he was going in.

"Well," he said, "when I am in this suit, I find I can switch between legs and tail fairly freely myself; and I'm almost sure you had legs in your parents' house, and they too. Can you? Change your tail into legs, I mean?"

"Yes, of course," she said, still puzzled.

"Well, why don't you?"

She was nonplussed. "What, here?" she said. "Now?"

"Yes," he said. "We could walk in the woods for a change."

She bobbed there in the pool, looking at him with surprise. It was not a thought that had ever occurred to her before. "Walk, in the dry?" she said, sounding scandalized and repelled at the same time. "Ugh."

The man lay on the rock to place his head nearer hers. "Oh come on," he wheedled. "It's beautiful in the woods. I could call a bird down," he added cunningly. "You could see one close up. You could see many. Even talk to one."

She swam a while, turning the thought over in her mind. She looked at him. "You are not to laugh at me," she said.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he assured her.

She hesitated, then sprang out of the water as she had that first day, so that she was sitting on the rock, with her tail trailing in the stream. “Turn your back,” she commanded Beren.

“What?” he said.

“Turn your back! Otherwise I’m not doing it!”

Suppressing a grin, he turned around as she required. He heard a wet rustling sound, then her voice came again: “Come and help me up on these things.” He swung around, and saw indeed that, in place of the tail which had been there a moment before, Glith now had silver-clad legs folded under her. He went and took her hand, and with an effort she managed to clamber to her feet. The feet were bare of scales but were webbed still. She let go his hand, struggled for balance.

“I prefer my tail,” she said uncertainly. She looked down at herself. “These things are very ugly.”

Her legs were long and well-formed. The Sea-maid looked heart-breakingly beautiful as she stood there, the whole slender length of her, all the curves of her body gleaming in the sun.

“They are not ugly,” he said, smiling gently and shaking his head.

She raised her chin. “So!” she said. “It is done. Now call your birds.”

He shook his head again. “Walk first,” he said.

She frowned at him in exasperation, then looked down at her legs. She moved one forward in a jerky motion, waving her arms wildly to keep her balance; then the other. Beren stayed close at her side, but she would not let him help her. “No, let me be! I can do it!” She made it to the end of the rock shelf, turned a luminous glance of triumph on him, then tried to turn to go back. This was her undoing. One webbed foot caught on the other, and all of a sudden she was tipping over backwards.

Beren was ready. In one quick lunge he had caught her, and for a moment she was in his arms, helpless, her face inches from his own. He had never been so close to her before, and for an instant he was overwhelmed by the feel and warmth of her body. But then he read what the unguarded moment revealed in her face: fear, and despair, and a look of hopeless love.

He put her down and backed away, startled.

They sat on the bank, not knowing quite where to go from that. Glith slid back in the water after a moment, laughed a little in a forced way, then splashed him with water. “Come on. The birds can wait for another day. Let’s explore in the mountain streams.”

“No, wait a minute. No, stop that for a minute. I want to talk. I’m just wondering. Glith, we’ve never talked about it, but you and your elders are trapped here, aren’t you? You want to get back to the sea, but you can’t.”

She moved back a little in the water, away from him, and her face became strange, guarded. “That is so,” she said carefully, allowing no shade of feeling into her voice.

He looked at her. “Here, come and sit again, I can’t talk to you properly when you’re bobbing about like that.” She shrugged slightly and sprang out again in a flurry of wet curves. As soon as she was settled, he continued. “I don’t know why it never occurred to me before. Perhaps because, when I’m swimming with you, I think as you do. The water is everything then; the upper world dim, close to forgotten.” Glith was listening attentively, but her eyes were turned away, her face still closed. “You can swim into the high headwaters of the Whitewater; I should know, we’ve done it together. Not two hundred paces over the ridge from the highest spring you would find trickles that flow the other way, into Sirion. From there you could

reach the sea, even though you would have to pass the filthy Isle of the Sorcerer. Two hundred paces? You could walk that far, if the need were great enough. I know you could. Then why don't you?"

Stark shock grew on Glith's face, but it went on past shock into a look of such horror as Beren hoped never to have to see again. Her face turned white; no, it was not white, it was the bloodless pallor otherwise seen only in corpses. Her lips turned the colour of putty and the pupils in her staring eyes grew wide and black.

Her eyes half closed then and she swayed, bowed slowly over sideways until propped from the rock by a thrown-out elbow. The stricken maid retched then convulsively; sourness gushed from her mouth to the stone.

Beren was amazed and appalled by the strength of the Sea-maid's reaction, which he had not in the least expected, and could not at all understand. But as he hesitated, not knowing what to do, he remembered the hopeless despair, mixed with equally hopeless love, that he had glimpsed in her only a few moments before. And out of nowhere a horrid suspicion appeared in his heart.

In all this turmoil, some small, dispassionate part of his mind was noting the jarring contrast between the finely-cut shape of Glith's nose and the inelegant fluids that were dripping out of it.

He reached out a hand to her, but she raised her own to fend him off and shook her head. Before he could think what to do or say, she had turned, slipped into the water and fled.

The suspicion lay on his heart like a stone. All those wrong notes, all the looks. The nervousness of the parents.

He dived in himself and swam after her with powerful strokes. Although she had been born to this life, his greater strength made him the faster swimmer. Her thrashing tail came at length in sight. With a surge of power born of angry suspicion, he caught up with her and laid hold of her tail. As she thrashed against his grasping arms and fought him with desperate slaps, the suspicion hardened to a hot core of certainty, and with that certainty came fury. How had he not seen it? From the very first day he should have seen it.

He wrestled her roughly out of the water, slamming her shoulders against a rock with force enough to make her gasp. She would not look at him. She put her hands over her lower face and shrank from him, eyes tight closed.

Beren fought to keep down the tide of rage which threatened to overwhelm him.

"You sold me, didn't you," he hissed into her averted face. He shook her shoulders, hard. "*Didn't you!*"

She gasped again, sobbed once, and nodded.

He let her go then, and sat back in the foamy pool. The maid's shoulders were heaving, her hands still at her face, her head turned aside. His anger to her had all run away somewhere, but in its place was a sullen glow of outrage – not directed at her, but at the evil which had sought to use her.

Beren waited until the last of the sobs had faded away, leaving the Mermaid sitting there passive, listless, with downcast eyes. "Tell me about it," he said to her in gentle tones.

She made no reaction.

"Glith," he said, and at the name her eyes rose to his, shaded by the angle of light to the blue of a butterfly's wing. "Tell me," he said again.

"He promised us freedom," she whispered. "Walk? We never thought... how should we think of that? Oh, how the blindness of it burns... I was to bring you to them, to where they could catch you. In the open lands, not in the dark places under the trees. Thus should we buy our freedom. I was to put love on you." A sadness came into her face, and she looked down. When she spoke again, unmeasured sadness coloured her voice.

“But you do not love me,” she said.

He felt her pain as his own, but there was nothing he could do for her. “He would not have kept his promise,” he said to her, and the deep-rooted anger rose in him again, anger at the cruel and the faithless of the world, chief of all Him. “When was this to happen, this capture?”

“A week from today,” she said. “I have put him off thrice. He threatened to make all our waters a desolation if I did not comply. But oh, Beren, how could I do it... were it not for my poor parents, I would not...”

“Hush now,” he stopped her with a raised hand. He was thinking hard. “Can you show me the place?”

She took him down the river, a long journey, to where the plains opened out, among the ruined farms, the desolation that had once been the rich and thriving land of Ladros, home of his vanished people. There were canals here, as he knew, which led water away to gardens to the South: fruit trees and melons which needed moisture during the burning height of summer. Glith led him down one of these waterways, then further down as it branched into narrowness, until she stopped at a channel, a mere ditch between neglected and abandoned fields, now rank with grass. Wooden shutters, now rotting, closed off the ends. The listless water stank and it was thick with scum.

“In there?” he said. “You think I would have followed you in there?”

“For love, yes,” she said simply, and he knew that it was true.

He clambered out and looked cautiously around. Other ditches were visible, lying parallel, not far away. One could crawl some way perhaps with cover from the grass, but the land was so flat that a standing man would be seen for a hundreds of yards.

He returned to Glith. “I would dearly like to serve out to these folk a taste of their own treachery,” he said. “But I do not think I can do much on my own. Not here.” He looked at her pensively. Even if she and her people would be willing, they were only three; and he was sure that the women at least had no skill in warfare. But wait... that room with the scales. He turned to Glith. “What were all the weapons for?” he said. “The other weapons, you know. The bones, and the fish scales.”

She looked faintly surprised. “The Minnows use those,” she said.

“Can they fight?” he asked.

“Oh yes. That is what they are for. Among other things.”

“On land?” He remembered what she had said about the eggs.

“Oh yes, anywhere.”

“Well,” he said, observing her closely, “I suppose then the only question is, would they?”

She raised her chin to him and looked directly into his eyes. Her own flashed topaz.

“Yes,” she said, “they would. They exist only to express our will.”

He thought it over. “I cannot take my bow through the water,” he mused. “It is a pity.”

“We can equip you,” she said. “I will bring you things. I must urgently speak with my parents in any case. What shall I bring, shield, spear, sword?”

“A shield, of your courtesy,” he answered, and a feeling of grim humour took him. “I have a sword. One most suitable.”



Mairon was pleased. Yes, he believed he could allow himself that. For what rightly constituted creature would not be pleased at the promised return of order and efficiency?

He presently had some Men in the tower. Bands of them had lately crossed into Beleriand from the East, and the news was that many more were on their way. These later-comers were much harder headed than the airy-visioned fools who had arrived first, who had proven to be such an unexpected impediment to the smooth conduct of the campaign. Overtures had been made to the recent arrivals, with some success.

A delegation had been brought to Mairon to be worked on, since he had skill in these things – subtlety, and a cunning touch, whereas Melkor knew only how to browbeat. The chief of the band was a stocky brown man with furtive black eyes and a shock of coarse hair. Mairon understood his nature thoroughly, and soon had him well in hand. If only all Men were so amenable!

When their parley was concluded, and the rough man was about to leave, Mairon had the idle notion to mention his personal bugbear to the fellow, just to hear what he would say.

“I wonder,” he said to him, “have you heard of this quaint fellow, this outlaw that we have here?”

The man shook his head warily.

“No? Not surprising, I suppose,” said Mairon, “since you are but lately come into this land. Well, it is no great matter. The servants here can tell you more of him, should you be curious. He has been something of a gadfly – kept the armies on the hop. Probably rather good for them, if truth be known. It has amused me to try various gambits on him from time to time. So far he has done amazingly well; but I rather suspect I have his measure this time.”

“That so?” replied the swarthy man cautiously, not sure where this was leading.

“Yes,” said the Sorcerer. “You will appreciate this, as a human male. We know how you fellows lust after a pretty female – indeed, have we not bought your aid with the promise of the virgins of Hithlum?”

“Ar,” said the man, his thought dwelling on this inviting prospect. “Yes. Yer did say. Yer did say as how we might have ’em. Golden-heads, did yer say? Good-looking sorts, would they be?”

Mairon could feel the rising lust beginning to throb in what passed for the man’s mind.

“That’s right,” he said, watching the man closely. “Tall, proud and blonde. Busty, silky-bottomed beauties. And all to be yours to subdue at your pleasure. And your men’s too, of course.”

“Would there be many?” asked the man furtively. “Mean ter say, sharing’s no lark. Not as much fun, having to share.” His black eyes would not look at Mairon straight.

“Thousands of the fillies,” Mairon assured him. “You could outrage two a day for a year and not make a dent in their numbers.”

“Ar!” said the man again, brightening visibly.

The Admirable One smiled to himself and spoke on. “But to return to our renegade. He has eluded us so far, but now I think we have him. The sex lure! I am vexed with myself for not attempting it sooner. But now we have him hooked on a pretty bait. Three days hence and he will run his love-crossed head into the noose. I have sent a cohort, three hundred armed Mobiles. He cannot escape. Our woods will be quieter afterwards, our affairs more ordered. But do you know, in a way it seems rather a pity; we have got used to him so. I shall miss the fellow, there’s no use denying it.”

The sullen Easterner, his animal mind now cooled again, made no comment.

“What do you think of our plan?” Mairon asked him sharply.

The stone-like eyes flicked from side to side, not meeting his. “Sounds well enough, so long as you catch un,” grunted the man reluctantly. “Never does to be too sure. Might ask what else yer doing, as backup, like.”

“ ‘Else’? Why, what would you suggest?”

“Hunt un,” said the man. “Dogs.”

“We have hunted him with wolves and with armies,” said Mairon. As he spoke, he allowed a touch, just a touch of ice to show in his voice; enough that the rough fellow shrank back, fear rising in his eyes.

Mairon masked the ice again. “Nothing works,” he continued in neutral tones. “The gangrel is wood-wise beyond compare.”

“Trap un, then,” said the man sullenly.

Mairon was intrigued by this idea for a brief moment, then put it aside. He was bored with the conversation.

“Well, this is but idle talk,” he said. “We have the brigand well enmeshed.” He stood up and clapped his hands for retainers. “Come, let us see to your return. And keep thinking of those blonde females! Alas, I fear you have some little work to do before you can come at them.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Consulting with Glith, Beren had hammered out a plan. It was not one he felt at ease with. “Are you sure?” he had asked her. “It sounds like a recipe for confusion to me – a good way to get myself shot.”

“No,” she had said. “You should trust the Minnows. They know how to do it.”

“I’ve been in a fight or two,” he objected, nettled. “I know what I’m talking about! With the best will in the world, arrows go astray.”

“So have the Minnows,” she replied. “In any case, you have your new swim-skin. Don’t worry!”

The new skin had silvery plates of bony armour at back and breast, with a similarly protected mask and hood. Like the other he had worn, it shimmered most wonderfully in the sun. Glith had told him the scales would turn all but the most determined thrust. All the same, on the day of the attack, he wore Telchar’s mail underneath. Glith had shaken her head over this, but it made Beren feel better.

The hood fitted snugly, and the impossibility of this vexed him. “Where does my hair go when I put this on?” he had asked, but Glith had just smiled and shrugged.

The shield she had brought for him was just as he had glimpsed in the chamber: a great, silvery-pearly fish scale. It carried light, was tough but flexible. It had been years since Beren had fought with such a targe, but after he had drawn his sword and made a practice pass or two, moving sword and shield in concert in the way he had been taught, he had to admit that it felt good, felt right.

Could he use this gear? Beren did not know what to think. A deep-set doubt remained in him – he could not so easily accept that skills learned half a lifetime ago could still be of any use; but the memory of the fight in the pass argued otherwise. In his memory of what he had done that day, he could find no fault; every move had been perfect. It was as if his old lessons had sprung from the past and come to life, as fresh as if he had learned them yesterday. It didn’t seem canny.

Well, whether yea or nay, he was stuck with it now. He would just have to do the best he could.

They had discussed what Glith and her folk should do afterwards. “You must not delay,” he had told her.

“Leave straight after, in the same hour. Mairon’s teeth will be seeking your throats.”

Glith looked scared. She had gulped, nodded. “We know.”

“I wish you did not have to pass his stronghold,” Beren had fretted, “even hidden in the water. Will you not consider again the longer route over the pass?”<sup>18</sup>

“It is no use,” she had said. “Two hundred paces through dryness, that we can manage, although with pain; some miles over ice and rock, we most certainly cannot. We should perish before the first mile.” She had dismissed on the same grounds any suggestion of an eastern route.

That had been yesterday. Now they were in the canals in the plain, swimming quietly onward. Silvery Minnow-children played around them in the water. Beren found it hard to credit that these tumbling, feckless beings could be of any use. Once again, doubts seized him. What am I *doing* here? he asked himself. Is this it? Is this to be my death-day?

There was nothing to do but swim on and meet it.

The waterways narrowed, the waters became ever more green and soupy. Now they were close. Before much longer they reached the point beyond which they had agreed that Glith should not come. The Sea-maid anchored herself silently under a clump of reeds. She clasped his hand tight for a moment; then he left her and went on. Ghosting on now. The Minnows all around him in ordered array, no longer playing. Beren scanned the silvery circle above him as he swam with slow, stealthy movements. Close now. Still nothing to see above but grass, reeds. Had something gone wrong? Had they missed the day, the place?

Ahah. Warped shadows on the rim of the shivering mirror. The enemy was waiting.

There was no need to confer; everything was arranged. The hosts of the Minnows swam one way while Beren eased his way stealthily down a mud-choked channel, hardly larger than a ditch. He took great care so as not to make any ripple in the surface. There was much overhanging growth, but the crouching figures of Orcs were here too. Further still, and still he counted more enemy above. So many! He had not expected so many. Not for the first time on this venture, he cursed silently to himself. Surely this could not go right.

Here. This would do. Perhaps even too far, but there was no room to turn and go back.

Now he had but to wait. It seemed like years. His heart was thumping in his chest, the weed-green water was rank in his mouth. He slowly drew his sword, readied his shield. The first moment would be the worst, he would be at his most vulnerable, as he was clambering awkwardly from the water. With luck, in that instant the attention of the enemy would be elsewhere. He eyed the shapes at the rim of the glimmering circle above, waiting. Waiting. This was always the worst time, the time which gnawed at one’s soul.

Put the worries away! Concentrate. Patience.

The moment exploded into sudden action. The black figures began to run about, and Beren could hear faint shouts, much muffled by the water. Now!

He rose high from the channel, streaming with water, and scrambled his short way up the bank. His shining figure escaped instant notice, because the enemy had other concerns. Their ordered ranks had been shattered into a panic whose cause Beren could not yet see. As the numbing water ran from his ears, these were assaulted by a great tumult of cries which was filling the shaking air. There were hundreds of Orcs in that place, hundreds. A part of Beren’s mind had a brief moment in which to be appalled; but he had gained the land and now there was no time for anything but fight.

The Minnow-fairies were visible to him now, he could see their silvery forms flashing and weaving between the Orcs. It looked like a dance of small children, but it was a deadly dance. Fish-bone arrows filled the air,

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18 Anach.

bodies were falling, blood was on the grass. The Minnows danced and stung; stabbed and sprang away. Frail blades jabbed up under war-shirts, into knees. Slight arrows were standing out of Orc eyes, more and more of them, waving about before the body fell. The cursing goblins swung at the creatures, but they were never there when the iron landed. More Orcs were falling now, and those who fell did not get up again. Silver-laughing, deadly fish-children were everywhere.

Now Beren was also among the enemy, laying about him with a white-hot fury; the silvery children laughing and dancing around him on all sides. He ran through the first row of Orcs with almost insolent ease, Nixenárë slashing her bright arcs through the tortured air. It was the old dance, the dance he had learned, of bash, cut, fend, sway, chop. A light was on Beren now, blazing off scales and sword, and the joy of battle had risen in his heart like a springing fire. He charged the next masses of the foe, the great sword flashing in the light, a shout of challenge on his lips. His onslaught to them was like a thunderbolt, like the levin-flash that blinds and burns. Crying, falling, the goblin soldiers tried to run, and died but the sooner. The devil-children were everywhere around their knees, stabbing with their bitter needles. The shrieking goblins were tripping on bodies and blood, stumbling, dying. Another victim fell before Beren, and another and another, in a monstrous tempo of slaughter; the ice-blade sweeping through their shuddering flesh, the man springing to confront the next, leaving life to gush out behind him onto the cold ground.

A lull came. Beren turned, crouched, guarding with sword and shield. He straightened slowly, the blade relaxing to his side. He could see no enemies standing.

The ground was carpeted thickly with bodies, and with parts of bodies. The grass over the whole area was trampled into a mess of blood. Orcs were groaning and cursing still, but the Minnows were among them everywhere, and where a cry came or a body twitched, there came the slender blade – precisely, almost kindly; and the sound and movement ceased.

Beren's silver salmon-skin was streaming with blood, but none of it seemed to be his, although his whole body ached from the fray. He saw that the shining surface was besmirched here and there also with gobbets of curdled blood. His gorge rose, and he looked away, turning his eyes again to con the field of victory. He saw no silver on the ground among the slaughtered forms; none at all, although he spent some minutes in careful looking. The more he took in the field of strewn and slaughtered Orcs, the more amazed he became. Why – there must be close to three hundred here.

Three hundred? For no loss? It wasn't possible.

He wanted now nothing more but to come away, to clean himself, and to think. The Minnows could and would look after themselves. Wordlessly, he turned and left them at their grisly work. Even the warm, scummy water of the canal was an improvement, but all the same, he made his way towards the freshness of the river as quickly as he could.

Glith joined him where he had left her. Her eyes sparkled in the moving lights under the water. "I saw," she breathed. "That was – magnificent!"

"Don't let's talk about it," he said shortly. "I would fain have clean water to wash this filth from me."

They swam in silence until they reached the wide channel of the Whitewater, flowing serenely here in the plain. There they paused. Both felt suddenly awkward.

"You do not need my help – so you said?" asked Beren.

The Sea-maid undulated, keeping her place in the stream, her wine-dark hair flowing out behind her. The ever-moving net of light played along the curves and contours of her silvery body. Not for the first time, Beren thought her the most beautiful creature he had ever seen.

Glith's eyes were sad. "My father is sorry," she said softly. "Sorry for everything. But to meet you now would only shame him the more."

“Then we say goodbye here,” said the man.

Her lip trembled. “Shall I ever see you again?”

He shrugged slightly. “Who can tell? The future is unknown to me.”

She came then and took his hands in hers. She was very close to him now, he could read the pain in her eyes. He felt her anguish as if it were his own; but there was nothing he could give her.

“Will you not kiss me in parting?” Her voice trembled. And part of him wanted to very much; her lips were just there, their beautiful shape inviting him. Her hands were warm in his: a promise of other warmth. But no, it would not do.

“Better not to, Sea-woman,” he said gently. “We are in deep enough as it is.” But he for his part felt nothing, save that he grieved on her behalf.

“Then say my name. Say the name you gave to me,” she said, and the despair of parting was thick in her voice.

He squeezed her hands. “Farewell, Glith,” he said, then let her go. He took in the sight of her one last time: the white face among the floating veil of purple hair; the slim fish-tailed body in the dappled light. He turned then and swam powerfully away.

The light went out of Glith’s face as soon as the man had left. She stayed there motionless for a long moment, slowly waving her tail to breast the current. No trace of the pain she felt within showed on her calm face. She could not weep, for what use would tears be to a water-dweller?

The Minnows crept cautiously out of the shadows and glided curling about her limbs.

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He followed them, a day later, over the watershed. The tracks led over the shallow ridge and down a little way into a slight hollow. Here he could both hear and smell water – just the merest trickle coming from a rock; but enough. He stood a moment, looking around and sniffing the air. The ground sloped down north and west from here. The Rock Well, what the Elves called Rivil, lay only a few miles beyond.

He stepped into the rivulet, wearing his skin, and thought himself small. He had never swum here before, and the moment he entered the water, entered the other world, he was aware of something new: far away at the end of the bright net of waters, right on the edge of perception, it was as if a giant lay stretched across the whole world. He knew it was the Sea.

As the man-fish flashed down the widening brook, the Sea lay ever there before him: unmoving, infinitely distant, but calling to him with many voices. The temptation to swim and swim until he found this salt immensity was strong. He could smell the salt tang, hear the cries of the gulls. And beyond the sea was – what? Everything. Light, mystery, life.

Much nearer though, and looming higher with each stroke of his fins, another presence reared blackly in his mind: the Sorcerer. Beren came past the fens, past the place where Finrod had fought his desperate defence, until the broadening river turned south. The threat now towered right before him, like the mighty black tooth of some world-serpent, grown old and wicked on the tide of the centuries. The closer Beren swam, the harder he found it to push on, although the current pulled him there unwilling. The power of Mairon beat upon his forehead like the noonday sun, and the voices of the Sea grew faint behind it.

At last the man stopped, clasping tight to a sunken tree-branch on the river bed. He feared to go further. He held to the branch for some moments, breasting the muscular current, while he tried to think what to do. But awareness of the Sorcerer filled everything and was everywhere. It scattered his thoughts, left him confused.

This was no good. He left the branch, rose to the surface, and put his head with caution out of the rushing water. He found himself already deep within the narrow valley, with Fear looming ahead; but the scent of the trees encouraged him. That was the world he knew.

Enemies were not far distant, but he could see nobody on the road, so he slipped out of the water and ran quickly across it into the thickets on the west-facing slope. He felt horribly exposed in the silvery suit, and wriggled out of it as soon as he could. Once free of it, he immediately felt better. He climbed then a little higher, away from the immediate vicinity of the road, and found a place of cover where he could rest and think.

He feared now for Glith and her family. The danger of the passage was much worse than he had supposed. What had his foolish suggestion led them into?

But was it after all so foolish? What else had there been for them? To stay would have meant certain death – this way at least they had a chance; it made no real difference that the risk was greater than he had weighed it.

A memory of Silmenen flashed through his mind, and he shivered. Had he met now another maid marked for death? He had kissed the Elf on her way; he was more than ever now glad that he had not kissed Glith.

Was the Sea-woman in that tower? He had to know. But he had no way to know. He could not evade Mairon.

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The summons came like a bolt of lightning – it seared Mairon to the bone. Cursing, he left the victim. His guard was summoned; the party mounted. The Maia rode north at their head like a storm of wind.

\* \* \* \* \*

The head Extractor was harassed. “Look,” he said to Choker, “you’re on your own today. But there’s not much to do. You know the mess we’re in, a whole cohort slaughtered – not but what some of them upstairs,” here he jerked a scornful thumb toward the ceiling, “still claim it is all the work of a single Softy. Do me a favour, what kind of fools do they take us for? One Softy, to clean up a whole cohort?? All I can say is, if that’s soft, well I hope I never see hard.

“That’s none of our business. But what with the losses, and now Master being called to Central, well, we’re short-handed. Most of the crew’ve been called away to stand guard. Now look, we just got the one still living. The other two talked their heads off, they’re caulked already, but this one won’t open her mouth. Usual story, they get crazy and then you can’t do nothin’ with ’em.” He led Choker into one of the chambers in which a slender figure lay bound to a working-table. The leg-shackles hung unused at the sides; instead the tail of the creature had been bound to the bench with makeshift cords.

The subject wasn’t crying out any more, just whimpering like an over-tired child.

The Extractor stood on the other side of the bench and looked down on his client with a clinical expression.

“I don’t reckon we’ll crack this one,” he remarked to Choker. “I seen ’em go like this before. She won’t take much more, neither. Just about had ’er lot, I’d say. But whatever the price, it’s all on hold. You don’t got to do nothin’ to her. She’s just gotta be kept alive til Master gets back, that’s all our orders.” He went on to instruct Choker in the details. “Think you can manage all that?”

“Yeah,” said Choker. “No problem.”

“Good lad,” said the Extractor. “It’s just for a few hours. I got to get me head down, haven’t had a wink for two days. Well, I’ll leave you to it. You know where I sleep. Come holler if there’s anything. Though it better be important, mind.”

Choker sat on a bench. He felt for the hollowness within him as a man probes a hollow tooth with his tongue. The emptiness had been growing of late. Some days he felt like he was some sort of puppet: the legs moved, the mouth talked, but there was no pith within, no life, and who then jerked the strings? He did not know.

He watched the thing that had been a woman as it cried and flinched, and he thought of other women at other times, men and children too. He saw again in his mind their pain and their defiance; saw their life. He envied them, he envied even this fish-girl here, gasping out her time, because they had lived, they had had something. He was not sure what it was they had had, but he knew it was there, it was real; it was something he didn't have, and as he went on and on, while the legs moved and the mouth talked, down the long months and the years, the hole where this something should be gaped wider in him; gaped like the cavity in a dead Louse's stomach, after all the guts had rotted away and run stinking into the sand. Choker went on living, because there was nothing else to do. It was easier to go on than to stop; but there was no sense in it. No sense.

He changed the dressings on the bloodied creature when it was time to do so, and fed a measure of water into its stomach through the tube. She cried anew at the touch, although he had tried to not be rough; he didn't know why he bothered, because what difference should it make to him? It was not him on the slab. Even if it had been, harsh, soft, what difference would it make? The hollowness would stay the same.

There was a knot in his stomach, as if he had eaten bad food. He sat there in his dullness, tired beyond belief. The absence of the Master was like a pressing weight removed. He could think a little now, feel feebly. When the tyrant was here, all others marched to his drum, all were as if clenched to iron frames, blazing with the heat of another's fire. Now the fire was away, the frame lay open, and Choker-with-shit, the Louse of God, felt tired and old.

He watched the fish-girl, and listened to her, and did the appointed things at the appointed times, to hold her spirit in the tortured body just a little longer; and as he sat and moved and did these things, the knot in his stomach grew and grew. A picture came into his head of the bald, toothless brood-girl, in her despair, years ago. He remembered what she had pleaded with him for. He had wiped her face, he did not know why, as he did not know why he tried to be careful when he touched this one here today. The waste-land of his life was growing within him, and he most passionately wished it were not so, but he did not know what else there was. There was something, though, somewhere, he knew that for certain; but he did not know what it was. Desolation was all that he knew.

But the girl, and her plea.

Without really knowing why, he was standing now beside the ravaged body of the fish creature. Keep her alive, they'd said. But she won't talk nohow, they'd said. Master had been furious with her.

The creature whimpered in her distress, and he winced as he listened. The desert lay parched in his heart, and the passionate wish for something other than desert.

Only half-aware of what he did, in the trance of his awful emptiness, the whips of despair lashing his mind, the knot in his stomach a burning curdle, Choker slowly reached out his hand.

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The water below the island stank. It stank of death, it stank of filth, it stank of ordure; it stank of who knew what unhealthy meddlings with living flesh. The choking stench made it hard to breathe – or whatever it was Beren was doing when he was under water.

A single large pipe gathered and released to the stream much of the filth and waste of the fortress, but that was not what he sought. There were many smaller drains, some of which had no issue, others which stank most evilly of shit; but at last he found what he sought – a gushing culvert in which the choking, dominant stink of waste was overlain by a trace of blood. Not Orc blood.

Struggling to keep down his gorge, Beren wriggled his way into the dark pipe, suiting his size to it in the way he had learned. The sword followed, but how? Best not to dwell on it, best not to question. It all might be possible only because it did not know it was impossible.

A grating above, caked with filth. No light, no sound. He swam further; found another, and another. Hah! This one was different: he heard movement above. Moaning, muttering.

No light though, and the grating was too small. This must be a row of cells.

He swam on through an endless, nightmare time. The pipe wound its way deeper and deeper under the citadel. Gratings in the roof were frequent, but they all seemed to lead into lightless cells. Beren could hear snores from some, shouts from others. Piss dripped, or the nameless fluids of corruption.

Somewhere far above, muffled by stone, a deep-voiced horn blared. Beren halted, frozen, not knowing what this portended. Could they be aware of his furtive intrusion into the fortress sewers?

But no – it seemed to signal a change of watch. Dark shadows moved across his mind, followed shortly after by the sounds of boots and harsh laughter. The man inched on his way.

Light at last, the harsh voices of Orcs: a guardroom. No chance there, they would have him before he could struggle free. Onward, past more dark openings in the pipe ceiling.

He found at last what he was hoping for: a grating hole wide enough to admit his passage, through which no sound came, no smell of prisoner, and only a faint light. He braced his legs against the bottom of the culvert, pressed his shoulders against the hanging filth that besmirched the grating, and heaved. The iron came loose without too much difficulty, and to his relief, without much sound. The man grabbed it to prevent it clanging and lowered it gently to the dirty floor.

Head out, look around. Seemed to be a store room of some sort. Silently he clambered out, manoeuvred his sheathed blade out of the square hole. While he fastened it silently to his belt he listened, both with ears and mind.

The whole fortress lay piled above him, and it was full of Orcs – and not just Orcs. There were things here much worse than Orcs. Evil upon evil, stacked in layers, all pressing down most terribly upon his spirit.

Mairon held this whole valley in his grip and eye; there was no evading him. Beren realized that now. He was here at this moment, had come on this cursed fool's errand, only because the Master of the Tower was presently away. Beren had felt him go, and had seized his chance. But even in the absence of its dread ruler, to venture into this centre, into this terrible heart of his stronghold was to place oneself between the very jaws of Death. It took all of Beren's strength of will to keep himself to the course he had entered upon.

He had come a long way up the drain, past many cells. Much of this lowest layer seemed given up to dungeons. Finrod's half-remembered description could not help him here, because Elves had no need of such aberrations, and had built none. These were solely of Mairon's delving.

Trying as best he could to ignore the multitude of threats he could sense, those black minds higher in the tower, Beren focussed his attention nearer at hand. His head scanned slowly around as he mentally told off the nearby clots of darkness. There. There. There.

He found three major groups of wrongness on this level. There appeared to be six Orcs in the closest of these.

He had Nixenárë; he had his salmon-armour; he had his knife. He had a small blow-pipe thrust in his belt. In a waterlogged leather satchel he had brought some darts for the pipe, as well as a few throw-darts of the sort Urthel had taught him to use. He had not brought his shield – doubted he could have manoeuvred it into the narrow pipe, and had not wanted it anyway. Indeed he would not have brought even the sword if he could



have found some safe place to leave it, from the place where he had started on this mad venture, lurking in the Vale.

Only a few days before he had taken part in a battle in which three hundred enemy were killed, to no loss on his own side. However, he had had the Minnows with him then. Without the Minnows, the battle would have had a very different outcome; of that, he was quite certain. But the Minnows were not with him now. He did not know where they had gone – had seen none since saying goodbye to Glith.

He could not take on this fortress. He could do nothing for the prisoners he had heard groaning. He would be lucky enough to escape with his own life. He was not on a mission to kill; indeed he would prefer not to have to wet blade or dart at all. Mostly what he wanted was to find some things out.

He no longer had any real hope that Glith had escaped the Sorcerer's nets, but he had to know. He had to be certain. And if she was held captive, he had resolved to free the maid, or die trying. It was the least that he owed her.

How to deal with these six guards? If he lured one away, questioned it and killed it, it would not be long before the others became aware. He might have to kill them all, despite his intentions. Because then perhaps, if he was lucky, their absence would not be noticed before the next change of shift.

Cautiously Beren opened the door of the room he was in. He could sense that four of the guards were in the room down the passage to his left. Two others had apparently gone to the cells. Well, that made things easier.

If he focussed hard, he could sense where the guards were in the room. Three were sitting, and one standing, pouring some drink. As he stepped through the door, as their ugly figures entered his field of sight, Beren's hand was already moving. The furthest Orc looked up, just as a dart appeared in the middle of his forehead. A second dart went into the neck of the left-hand guard. The third guard was turning his head, mouth opened to shout, but he paused to fumble curiously at the metal spike suddenly growing out of his earhole. His hand fell then nerveless away, he slumped to one side, slipping at last to the floor with a sodden thump.

All this had occurred in less than two seconds. The noise of the falling body alerted the standing Orc, who was in the middle of relating some barrack-yarn to the others. Before he could realize that his audience were all dead, a fourth dart had brought him crashing to the ground. The flagon he had been holding smashed on the floor.

A rough voice came from the further passage. "I hope none o' you's spilled the drink," it said. The goblin emerged from the corridor before he had finished speaking. He had just time to open his eyes wide at the sight of the silver-clad figure in front of him before Frostfire clove him almost in two, the blade cutting through his body as easily as a new-whetted axe in kindling. Beren had no time to marvel at this, because the sixth Orc was in the doorway. This one let out a yell, but then Beren was on him, bearing him to the floor, a hand over the creature's bristly mouth, a long knife in front of its goggling eyes.

"You'd better hope nobody heard that shout," whispered the man, "because you'll be the first to die if they did."

He listened tensely, but slowly relaxed as he heard no alarm. He supposed, after all, that yells from the cells were no uncommon thing.

Beren turned his attention back to the Orc, who was lying in the warm blood running out of the halves of his comrade. The Orc was stretching his eye-sockets trying to look sideways at the body.

"Pay attention," said Beren to him quietly. "I am looking for three prisoners. You have many prisoners here, I suppose, but these I seek were of unusual kind. They were fish-people, clad as I am, except with no legs maybe, just fish-tails. Fish-people. Do you have that clear in your mind? Does it open the doors of memory? I am sure you will have talked among yourselves about such unusual prey. Do not think to feign ignorance. Tell me where I can find them, and I will let you live.

"I am going to take my hand away from your muzzle now, and I do not need to tell you that one squawk from you and this knife at your neck will be lodged as deep in your brain as I can shove it. Do you understand? Nod for yes."

The Orc nodded its head, difficult as that was with the knife at its throat.

Beren took his other hand from its mouth. "Now, have you seen these three I mention?"

The Orc swallowed convulsively. "Did hear of 'em, yes," it croaked. "Three, yes. But they ain't here. Didn't see 'em at all. Did hear they was down the row, second section, when they was brought in. Honest, mister. We're fourth section here. We, I, I had nuffin to do wiv it."

Beren was about to ask for directions, but a thought brought him up short. "They *were* down the row? Meaning, no longer? Where are they now?"

Another hard swallow, the creature's grimy throat moving against the knife point. "Well, they was taken straight away for Extraction. Diff'rent department. Nuffin to do wiv me, mister."

"Extraction? What does that mean?"

"Er," the creature mithered, "well it means, information like. You know, where they get 'em to cough up what they knows."

"Tell me more," said the man softly, pressing the point in harder. "Tell me everything you know."

The Orc was sweating, craning his eyes down, trying to see the knife. "I dint do nuffing," it whimpered. "Honest, mister! The older two's dead, I do know that. Seen 'em meself in the wolf feed, time I went acrost. Dunno about the young 'n. She wouldn't gab, way I heard it. But I dunno anything more. I dunno what happened to her, honest! Let me go, mister, eh?"

Black fear gripped Beren's heart. Seeing the fell look in the man's eyes, the goblin quailed.

"'Across'?" whispered the man. "'Wolf feed'? Across where? Where did you see them? Explain!"

"Courtyard, mister," gasped the Orc in a low-voiced, panicked gabble. "Acrost the courtyard, 's what I meant. That's where Extraction is, base of the tower, acrost there. Wolf feed's where they put the bodies, like, when they're done wiv 'em. 'S where I saw the older ones, couple days since. There's a big carrel there, in the courtyard, where they put the carcasses. They go to feed the wolves. Not but what there's never enough. The others would be et already, I reckon, dint see 'em no more yesterd'y. Ain't bin there since. Dunno wiv the young 'un, I haven't heard. But if they've finished wiv her, 's where they'll put the bits, like."

Beren put more questions to the creature, trying to make out from its semi-coherent babblings just where in the tower the Extractors pursued their filthy business. But all the time, the black foreboding lay on his heart.

After he had found out everything the whimpering Orc could usefully tell him, he stared down at its terrified face. The desire rose in Beren to cut this miserable creature up, to make it suffer as Glith had suffered. Glith the beautiful, the lithe. Glith, who had loved him. Brought to this.

He wanted to slaughter the filth so badly he could taste it. But if he did, what difference would there be between the two of them?

Holding his knife still to the goblin's throat, he leaned carefully back until he could grasp his sword from where he had laid it on the ground below the creature's feet. He stood up, and allowed the Orc to stand up, keeping the point of his sword at its chest. The Orc goggled at the gleaming icy blade.

"Find some cords, you," Beren snarled to the creature. "And be quick about it."

He bound and gagged the Orc, pulling the bonds spitefully tight, then laid the trussed-up figure in a vacant cell. He stuffed the bodies down the drain, rinsing the blood down it afterwards with another jug of the sour-smelling beer. It might puzzle the pursuit for a time. He left the place then without even glancing at the prisoners. He could do nothing for them, and time was passing. The sight of him would only prompt questions and raise false hopes.

Beren managed to make his way to the great court without too much difficulty. He had been concerned about the visibility of the skin, but he found that so long as he kept to the shadows, its reflectivity rather helped than hindered; Willow's trick of presence-annulling, allied with the usual woodcraft, did the rest. Orcs passed him, some talking, others being driven with snarls and blows; but nobody noticed him.

He paused in a doorway and coned over the court. It was a mess, and it stank. Arms and all kinds of equipment were stacked here and there on the greasy stones. Towards what had been the stables, the ground was scuffed and stained dark with what looked like old blood. Various scraps and bones lay scattered about; with something of a shock he recognized a human femur.

And there it was – the carrel the Orc had mentioned. One glance was all that he needed to conclude his foray: for poking out beyond the ends of the wooden sides was a ragged fish's tail, of human size.

Beren could not help himself – he had to be sure. Pressing down his field of presence as hard as he could, he crept on noiseless feet to the wooden carrel. Reached the side. Looked in.

One glance was enough. He turned away and bent double, trying desperately in the fog of his grief and horror to control the reflex that seized his stomach. Trying to keep silent.

He managed to keep his mouth closed on the sour fluid that filled it. After the convulsions in his middle had died down, he swallowed what he could, spat a little quietly onto the cobbles, wiped his mouth.

Time to go. As Beren looked across the courtyard, seeking a grating by which he could return into the drainage system, he heard a noise from the stables close at hand. It sounded like the snuffing of some large creature, at the base of the heavy door. Several snuffs, then a scrabbling sound, followed by a thump that jarred the door.

The hair rose on Beren's neck. The snuffing turned into a horrid growling, with more scrabbles. He could see the door moving against its stout bar. Now the creature in the neighbouring pen joined in the disturbance.

To the grating! But even as he took the first step, an alarm began to clang, echoing through the courtyard. At its prompting, a frightful cacophony of howls broke out from the unseen creatures behind the doors. Beren had heard wolves before, but here was something to freeze the blood.

Shouts, footfalls. This was no good, out in the open – the Orcs would be upon him before he could lever up the grate.

Nearest at hand loomed the great green-black, dirty Tower. Instant decision: run for the dark archway at its base.

A lobby. Glancing search; no gratings. To his left, a stair led upwards to the higher levels of the tower. No good, he needed down. Facing him across the lobby was a door.

Beren could hear shouts now and running feet in the courtyard behind.

In that moment, before he could guard himself, turn his presence away, two Orcs burst out of the door facing him. They saw him immediately and yelled fit to split the air. More came jostling through the doorway behind them, and the running feet and shouts from outside were now converging toward the tower.

Quick as he could, the man sprang left and leapt up the steps.

As he ran, a corner of his mind was thinking coolly: well, friend, your game is probably up. There is no way back down from this tower. Glith is dead; it was all for nothing. All you can do now is sell your own life as dearly as you can.

Floor followed floor as he dashed up, the yelling mob of Orcs not far behind. Goblins in ones and twos tried to intercept him, but he cut them down with hardly a break in his stride.

He was near the top; he could see daylight above. How had he made it so far, past so many malignant presences? He could feel them pressing on his mind. They were aware of him now; some were feeling for a handle on his mind.

There would be guards on the roof. He had hardly time to think of this before he burst out of the trap into the light; and there were two guards, upon him. A blank moment, then somehow they were both sagging in a mess of blood to the stones at his feet.

Quick look around. A wide space. Parapet, good. Jump from that, a better end than being caught.

More roof-guards were running towards him with blades drawn, shielding their eyes from the brightness of the sky. The battle-joy came upon Beren then. At least he would take a few of these swine with him before he went. He moved in the old dance, now renewed in his bones and sinews, and no matter how the Orcs cursed and slashed at him, he was never there; but Frostfire struck down foe after foe.

The roof-guards were all down now, but fresh goblins were bustling in a yammering swarm out of the hatch. Beren ran for the parapet, sprang onto the step. From there he could see the gleaming river far below, bordered by black and hungry rock. Deep breath; fleeting regret at the haste.

But as he looked his last on the woods and waters, preparing to jump, the voice of Celevir sounded in his head, as clear as though his friend were standing next to him. "From the southern end of the tower," his friend had said, "if a man leaps hard enough from the parapet, he will sail over the rocks into deep water."

A fierce hope sprang in Beren's breast, and he laughed as he cut down the snarling faces jostling to come at him. He would cheat these devils yet!

A further quick leap brought him to the very top of the parapet. Without breaking step he ran through a scatter of hasty arrows along the narrow, gap-toothed ridge of stone, seeking the point nearest the water. He could see it ahead of him, where the wall made a corner. Goblin hands reached for him, but he kept just ahead of their clutching claws. An arrow passed close by his head; another glanced off his shoulder. Beren ran now as he had never run before, leaping madly over two loopholes at a time. The black minds below were groping for his. Yelling Orcs were at his heels; arrows were thick in the air about him. One lodged in his thigh with a sickening thud, then another, rocking his balance; but he paid them no heed. Three more paces. One. At the point. Now leap! Leap!

The air rushed about his ears, the tower swung high through the corner of his vision. Then with shock enough to stun him, the water slammed into his body.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rattlecone was enjoying the last warm sunshine of the day when he heard a splash from the ravine below him. A few moments later a silver-clad figure came in sight, limping up the steep slope. The creature passed through the alder gate onto the quiet lawn inside. It cast aside a parcel of sodden gear, ripped off its fish-mask. It was Beren.

The Ent made him no greeting, only gazed at him.

"Don't you want to know where I have been?" Beren said to the Ent. His tone was harsh.

“Tell me, then,” said his friend.

“I have been in the Tower,” the man said. “Mairon’s tower. The Sorcerer’s tower. Was it not foresaid that I would? I did not believe it. Yet I have been in, and done battle, and am come out again. What do you say to that?”

“I would say, it is a deed of renown,” the tall Ent replied.

“A deed of renown. A hero’s deed, eh? Would you say a hero?” Beren drew his sword and held it high, the slender blade flashing in the light. “This is a hero’s sword. The hero wears a magic suit of lights – a fish-skin, no less; salmon armour. Here I stand, a hero. I am what you wished to make me. You may claim success at last. But should you like to know the price?”

“All prices are high in these grievous times,” said the Ent sadly. “Welcome, Beren. It is some time since I have seen you.”

“Such platitudes do not satisfy,” said Beren, and his voice trembled with grief and fury. “Only exactness counts. So let me be exact. Beauty has paid the price; tortured, ruined, and slaughtered beauty. And I have paid the price, too, and how is that, you ask? Seeing as I stand here before you, clad and armed in fable? Should I not rather be glad of the gift of so much glamour? Well, I am not. You know it was the last thing I wished for. Yet now I am become that which I have fought against becoming. My old life is dead; I can never get it back. Never again can I be just Beren, the farmer’s son, or Speaks with Birds of the Drúedain, the simple man of the woods. No, I must be Beren the Hero. Fate has plucked me up and carried me away, as if in the beak of an eagle.”

“It seems to me,” said Rattlecone dryly, “that the greater part of your sorrow is reserved for yourself. Yet it is not you who were captured and misused unto death.”

Beren advanced some steps, still holding the sword high. The brilliant point of Nixenárë, although not directed straight at his friend’s broad chest, hovered no great distance away from it.

“Be not clever with me, Ent,” he ground out through clenched teeth.

“I invite you only to examine your own heart,” said Rattlecone quietly.

“I have to live with the knowledge that she died because of me!” flared Beren. “And I have to live with the memory of her poor dead body.” He lowered the blade a little. “But I will not be diverted. My life belongs to me, to direct as I will; or it should. But now I have been robbed of this choice.”

“You are wrong,” said Rattlecone. He could not properly shake his head, his neck being too thick to allow it, but he was twisting the whole of his upper body from side to side. “You do not own your life. We none of us do. As for the rest: farmer’s son, is it? Farmer! Your father was Barahir, seventh Bëor, the heir of Boromir; lord of an entire doughty people. Yes, he tilled land to feed himself and his kin, but what matters that? By his deeds alone he earned a place at the table of any King in Middle-earth. Let us not forget your mother: Emeldir, Man-hearted, granddaughter of Adanel the Wise. Emeldir, who roused her people to fight against evil; and who led them at last, at cost of her own life, to safe refuge.

“‘Speaks with Birds’, aye, that was your name, which you were given not for any mark of skin, or joke, or woody deed, as with others of your tribe, but because of the power that was granted you to do what no other can do; a power that was breathed into you as a babe. No, lad, you were never simple. This life you mourn never existed. It is a day-dream. It is time you grew up and accepted who you are.”

“Am I to have no say in how I live my own life?” cried Beren.

“Of course,” replied the Ent. “Always. But if you do not choose the high path that Fate has laid before you, you must sink into meanness; a life of shame and regret irremediable. There is no other choice.”

Beren raised the sword again, bright and terrible as the morning. His eyes over it were deadly. "You seek to best me with words," he said, grinding his teeth in his fury. "You are very clever. But you forget one thing: blade beats tree. Did it not run so? Do you remember the game? I could cut you in half, Ent, with this hero's blade. What do you think of that?"

"If that is what you mean to do," replied Rattlecone, "then you will do it. Thus will your choice be made."

"Do not goad me with your talk of choices! As if I ever had one!"

The Ent leaned forward, and now his own eyes were hard. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself," he said. "If you are going to cut me down, then do it. Only let us end this farce."

Beren looked at him, then down at the sword held in his hand. He lowered it, suddenly shame-faced. All the fury seemed to run out of him into nothing.

"Cut you?" the man repeated, sounding shocked. "What are you thinking? Rattlecone, I would never strike you. Even when you vex me half to death. I only said 'could'."

He looked again at the sword in his hand, then cast it from him onto the grass in a sudden rush of abhorrence. He sat down heavily then himself. The skin he wore was stained and scratched, and Rattlecone noticed that there was fresh blood on his leg.

"I feel as though I am being torn in two," the man said, gazing at his hands in misery.

Rattlecone sighed. "It is hard, I know," he said. "All who remain true to themselves know this pain."

Beren sat on for some moments, brooding darkly, plucking grass stems. He looked up. "So tell me, master Ent, since the wisdom of the ages flows like honey from thy mouth. Bitter honey. What am I to do next? Since it seems I have no option but to bow to my fate. What hero's deed stands next on my calendar?"

"The first thing you should do is take that suit off and let me see to your wounds," said the practical Ent.

Sighing, Beren began at once to follow this sensible suggestion. "Don't evade the question," he said, peeling the suit down over his chest. "What next? All right. If I must play the hero, then so be it. I cannot fend off your arguments. But I am tired of chopping Orcs; more tired than you can imagine. The Enemy breeds them like fleas, there is no end to them, and it does not help. I just go on and on and on. They tell me it puts heart into the people down South. Well, let them bring their hearts with them and do some chopping of their own! Why must it always be me? I am sick of it; and Glith is dead. I do not know what to do with this water-mail, which in any case I have sadly rent in my fool quest in the Tower. I do not know what to do with this absurd sword that fate has insisted on thrusting into my hands. I do not have the experience of centuries like you; all I know is how to fight, and I do not want to fight. I do not enjoy it."

Rattlecone eyed him. "Here are several points," he said. "Nay, do not purse your lips! You asked for wisdom, and that you shall have, so far as it lies in my measure to speak it.

"First, this skin. It is a living thing. Store it a while in sweet water and see what happens. Second, the Seamaid. Her death is very grievous, but you did not cause it, and you are to cease to belabour yourself as if you had. Simply put, she was caught in a trap from which there was no escape. I am only thankful that you were not caught up with her. Third point: the sword. You ask what you are to do with it; better were to ask what it has planned for you. But that will be revealed in time.

"Now to the main question. I know well that you are a reluctant killer of the marauders of the enemy, no matter how evil their condition and how much they may seem to have earned their deaths. I should fear you if you were otherwise. Nevertheless, I counsel you to continue, despite your aversion. Why do I make you this rede, loathsome as it must be to any man of clean blood? Because great things may arise out of the orkish blood you so unwillingly continue to shed. I say 'may', because nothing is sure.

“Consider this one who calls himself Mairon. ‘Admirable’ – hah. He far better deserves the Grey-elves’ name for him of Gorthaur, the despicable horror, the Cruel One. But whatever we call him, he was set by his Master to conquer this land of yours. That he has most signally failed to do. Not only has he failed, but he, and by implication his Master, have been made to look foolish in their failure. And by whom? By *you*, simple Beren the farmer’s son.

“What will come of this? I do not know. But something will crack, and it may be soon. Your latest outrage with the fish-children must have brought matters close to the brink, otherwise Gorthaur would not have been so summarily summoned. You want my advice? Work some more outrages. Push on that weakness. There is more at stake here than the lives of a few miserable Orcs.”

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The Tower on the Isle swarmed like a wasps’ nest that had been kicked. Imagine though if the wasps were possessed, not by anger, but by a deadly apprehension, and you will have some idea of the turmoil among the garrison in the wake of Beren’s raid. The shadow of their returning master lay across the minds of the Orcs in a choking cloud of dread. They ran hither and thither, tripping over one another and screaming. Frantic officers laid about them with whips, orders were shouted and countermanded; all to no effect. The Lice were fighting one another in the extremity of their terror at the coming retribution of their master. Some of them ran out of the tower and did not return. As the day wore on, and as the full despairing horror of their situation sank into their minds, that which never before had been known began to occur: goblins began to kill themselves. Some leaped from the tower, others fell on their blades. They preferred to escape to wherever the dead go than to suffer the capture and rape of their spirits at the hands of their dread Master.

The servants of higher order stirred uneasily. Most of them had come of their own desire into Arda, drawn by the light and the life, where they had clad and disported themselves after their amusement; but they had one by one been drawn inexorably into the circles of Melkor and his mighty lieutenant, until their wills had become subject to those of their rulers. Stronger than the puny goblin-spirits, they could not be destroyed or dispossessed at whim; but there were still many ways in which Mairon could express to them his displeasure. His likely extreme displeasure.

Only the wolf-creatures felt no dismay, since this was not a possible mode of their natures. Their outlet was rather a blind, animal, red-blazing fury: they raged in their enclosures, tearing at the locks with white and foaming fangs, and throwing themselves at the heavy wooden doors until the bars bowed and the timbers creaked.

Mairon’s return was like a black storm sweeping down out of the North. The Orcs howled, the Soul-riever quivered; but in place of the fury they apprehended, nothing. No punishments occurred, no decimations. Witness after witness was called, quaking, before Mairon, but the interrogation in each case was cold and dispassioned. The Master’s present desire seemed only to be to arrive at the facts. The fear did not disperse however, but lay over the island like a cloud, pressing down unbearably on every heart. Locked again to the Sorcerer’s will, the Orcs might no longer run mad or take their own lives, but Mairon could not prevent them from simply dying in the oppression of their dread; and this they continued, in their ones and twos, to do.

Choker survived. The Extractor had been furious at finding the fish-girl dead, but the aftermath of the Bandit’s raid had swept him out of life along with its other random victims. Exactly how his chief died, Choker never learned. The Louse simply failed to appear again at the close of that dreadful day.

They’d tortured Choker a bit – of course they had – but there was no impulse behind it, no Question. The Extractors had been bored, yawning. Defaulters had to be punished; that was all there was to it. And the punishment should fit the crime. It was routine, no more. After a few half-hearted rounds they had thrown him out. It wasn’t too bad with him afterwards; everything still worked.

\* \* \* \* \*

There came now the time which Beren in after days thought of as the Autumn of the Traps. These began now

to appear everywhere – pits and falls, nooses and gins. None of them gave him a moment's worry. He could sense the distortion in stream or wood caused by even the most cunningly concealed trap, and the countless small birds of the forest would also warn him. Beren took grim amusement in harassing the parties of goblins as they laboured at their unrewarded task, and on one or two occasions he was able to lure some of his foes into their own deadfalls.

All this was only a surface preoccupation. Far more present and threatening was the terrible pressure of the fury of the Enchanter on his Isle. The constant oppression of a powerful and remorseless mind seeking his own, seeking to grasp and grapple with him, wore Beren down. It disturbed his sleep, brought him fighting in a sweat out of dark dreams of capture and degradation.

The hapless goblin agents of the Sorcerer had no more success in pinning him down than before, but Beren was no longer sure that all of his movements were secret; the cloak began to feel ragged around the edges. Spies were about. The eagles still ruled the skies in the days, but the nights were less sure. He began to hear reports of furtive things which crept on or under the ground. The Ents reported that they, too, were being watched. More than ever now, Beren was careful to keep his exchanges with Bhalacho secret. He met with the Hairfoot seldom, and then only for a quick whispered exchange, in a place cleansed of spies beforehand through means of tooth and claw.

The number of Ents of Beren's party – more accurately, Rattlecone's – had grown to ten, the last two recruits being people of the pine; the same folk, the Bëoring understood, as that of the Chief Ent, this Tabbieneedle. The mayhem they were able to deal out to Mairon's forces increased in like measure.

On a black night of storms, in Rattlecone's cliffside chambers, Beren awoke with a start, aware that something was wrong. Pausing only to feel out what it was, he clambered out of the warm ferns and felt his way outside.

"Rattlecone!" he hissed into the wind. "Are you there?"

A tall shadow stirred. "You felt it too?" came the deep voice of the Ent.

"They are coming here," said Beren uneasily, shivering. "Directly here."

"Yes," said Rattlecone. "Gorthaur has pierced my veil at last. You had best go from here."

"But what about you?"

"I will keep them off as I can," said Rattlecone, "but it is not for my person that I fear, but for all your stores."

"I stay," said Beren. "We will keep them off together."

"No," said Rattlecone. "There are too many. Can you not sense it? I doubt they can do me much scathe, but you must go. I beg you, just for once, not to argue!"

Many things he could say rose into Beren's mind, but he knew that the Ent's suggestion was the only one which made sense, so he returned to his sleep-chamber without further words and quickly clad and armed himself. He went then to the stores and picked up as many bundles of arrows and darts as he could carry. Laden with all this, he came out again into the rain whipping through the darkness. "I will come back when it is safe," he said to the Ent. "Take care, my friend. I know you are strong, but do not be foolish in your strength."

"Have no fear of that," replied Rattlecone.

Beren set off through the blustrous night, hampered by his load, but sure-footed even in the dark. He knew this land through and through; in this quarter of it, almost every stone and branch. He sniffed the wind and



worked his way up-slope. In a quarter of an hour he was over the ridge-line and well on his way; thus he saw nothing of the attack.

As Rattlecone afterwards told the tale, hundreds of Orcs converged on his alder refuge with axes and fire. Goaded to a frenzy by the fierce will of their master, the snarling goblins hurled themselves on the Ent. They made no headway on his person. He set to coolly, and each punch of his mighty arms sent shattered bodies flying. They could not touch him with their axes, and their torches took no hold on his body. His camp, alas, did not fare so well. Rattlecone could only be in one place at a time, and where he was not, there the enemy freely wrought destruction. They set fire in the hollows and chambers under the cliff, and the light of it turned the whole garth red and glittered off Rattlecone's eyes. When Orcs in their foaming madness began to hew at the surrounding trees, the Ent roared in fury. He strode to and fro smashing waves of the foe into bloody mush with great sweeps of his arms. He ran finally with thumping steps to the rocks where he commenced tearing loose great stones which he cast in a deadly rain on the scrambling Orcs. At last, when a bare quarter of their numbers remained, the enemy turned tail and ran.

Beren returned in the grey midst of the following day. The wind had dropped, but a dismal rain was falling straight down out of the leaden sky. The cliff and the adjoining garth were stained with great swathes of black and brown, and the air all about was thick with the bitter smell of cinders.

He found Rattlecone trying with little success to pull arrows out of his own back. Dozens of broken shafts lay cast upon the grass.

"You are hurt!" cried the man.

"Not to any grave degree," replied Rattlecone. "But just help me get these ones out behind, will you?"

Beren levered out arrows while the Ent told him of the fight. "I am sorry," Rattlecone said to him at the end. "It is as I had feared: the stores are destroyed."

"It is an inconvenience, no more," said Beren.

Rattlecone looked at him. "Somewhat graver than that perhaps," he said slowly. "This means I am no refuge for you any more."

"I had thought of that," said the man. "I also wondered about the other Ents of our following, and have asked my friends to find out how they fare. Farsight and Bronze-mail will report before the light fails."

"It will be the same with all," said Rattlecone. "In which case, what you are to do this coming winter I do not know."

Beren shrugged. "What was your phrase? 'Rede will come'." He looked over the entirety of the Ent's back, but could see no more darts. "I think I have them all. Is there some salve you wish me to baste you with?"

"The rain will wash the wounds clean," said Rattlecone. "But what will you do? You would prefer to be dry, I know, and warm; but I cannot now offer you that."

Beren laughed. "I cannot remember when last I minded the rain," he said. "Come, I will help you clean up. That will keep me warm."

Later in the day the eagles confirmed that all of their Ent-comrades had fared in similar wise. None were hurt, but clearly the Sorcerer had now seen into their affairs.

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Beren still spent much time in the water, finding it a masterly way of eluding the noses and eyes of his enemies. The salmon-skin had healed itself as Rattlecone had surmised and now bore no trace of the arrow-rents and other damage it had suffered during the raid. As he swam through the streams and springs,

reminders of Glith came often to Beren, and these of course he found painful; but despite these twinges of emptiness and loss, the aquatic world retained many charms for him. All the same, it was not the world he was familiar with, and he had to be wary in it, in particular because when he was in the water, he could not properly sense the forest. He also had no allies in the waters, the intelligence of fish being no more than rudimentary. He caught the flash of Minnow-children from time to time, but they took no heed of him and would not answer or even take notice if he addressed them.

He found himself one day in the stream which came from the cave pool, and the moment this thought formed in his mind, a second followed it like a blaze of lightning, bringing him up with a jerk. Why should he not now winter in the cave? The salmon-skin would protect him from the chill of ice-fringed waters!

Vexed with himself that he had not realized this sooner, he swam upstream with powerful strokes. In a few minutes he was at the familiar pool, which was coated in the present season with slow gyres of red and amber leaves. He kicked under and found all as he remembered, except that swimming the route into the cavern was as easy as last time it had been strenuous. He surfaced in the dark, smelled again the cool air of the cave. He found his way by touch to the shelf, lifted himself onto it. He split the seam of the skin suit then and sought the great ring from the pouch which never left his breast. The remembered command woke the device to lambent life, and where had been dark was now a light of such power as to almost blind him. It was minutes before he could stand the brightness enough to open fully his eyes; then he could again wonder at the creamy veils of stone, the flashing crystals, and the dark spaces overhead.

Beren explored the cave more thoroughly this time, but he found that it wound back into the hillside further than he saw need to go. Close to the outflow there were chambers enough, some of them dry and out of the current of air which flowed over the water. All in all, it seemed to him to have the makings of a comfortable refuge. The mounds of drifted vegetation provided a useful source of fuel, and additional supplies could clearly be brought in, at least those kinds which could survive a temporary immersion or be readily protected against it.

He had an uneasy recollection of that other cave far to the South and East, where he had once found the dead Dwarf-maid, and the fabulous necklace of gold and glowing jewels; but that was far away. Here the earth and rock smelled clean.

One question remained: could he risk a fire here? With the aid of the ring, he set one going, then tried to see where the smoke went; but it disappeared out of knowledge into the winding hollows in the roof. He swam back outside and sat long on the bank, trying to see smoke, but he could see none. Finally he climbed the hill behind and sought with eyes and nose for the least trace of smoke; again he found nothing.

Capital! The problem of winter refuge seemed to be solved.

Over the next few days he adapted the cavern for his greater comfort, finding places to stow his weapons and supplies. For Frostfire he found a cunning niche: at the edge of the rock platform where he had made fire, just under the water surface, was cut a long, hollowed-out shelf. He could reach easily into it if he lay on the edge by the water, but the hollow could not be seen from above. In any case, Frostfire vanished from sight when immersed in water. The place might have been made for her.

At last all was prepared. He sat by a flickering fire in the silence of the cave, drinking from the savoury soup he had prepared. Somewhere his enemy sought for him still, but he felt protected here; he could almost relax. This is a good business, he thought. Let them try to find me here!

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Beren was carrying stores towards the cave one day when his forest-senses began to tingle. After little way further, he became certain: something was following him.

There was no feeling of wrongness, as there was when the enemy was on his trail. His mouth twitched. Forest hunters, hunting *me*? Let us see what luck they have.

Quickly he shinned up a tree with his bow and took a position where he could cover a wide wedge of the downwind directions, at the same time sniffing to catch any hint from upwind. The wolves surprised him all the same. One materialized near the base of the tree, then suddenly there were many. They were all staring at him in the tree with cold intelligence.

“Put aside your stick, man,” the leader said to him, “and come down. We do not seek your blood.”

Some people think wolves are like dogs; but that is because they have never seen a real one.

Beren grinned. “That’s as may be,” he said. “Seven wolves, eight? I think I’ll stay here, thanks all the same. I can hear you perfectly well.”

“As you wish,” said the wolf with indifference. The pack stayed looking at him, some of them raising their noses to sniff the air.

“What do you want?” said the man. “I am sure you do not simply happen to find yourselves in my road.”

The leader looked uncomfortable, which was a new thing for Beren. He had not known that a wolf could look uncomfortable. “We want talk,” it said.

“You want to talk to me? What about?”

“Wolves,” said the leader. “Except they are not wolves.”

Beren thought about this. “Do you mean the ones on the Island?” he said. “In the valley, over the hills toward sun-setting?”

“That is a place of no good hunting, ever, for anybody,” replied the leader elliptically. “We do not go there any more.”

“Well, that sounds wise,” said Beren.

“Yes,” said the great grey animal. “We do not go. But now they come.”

“The Isle-wolves? We’ve had them before, surely?”

“Yes,” agreed the leader. “Great wolves, very fast and strong. We kept out of their way. But these that now come are different. They do not smell right. We cannot keep out of their way. When they wish, they can pass unsmelled, unseen. They hunt us, more and more. But those hunted are not eaten; they are taken.” There he stopped.

Beren waited for more words, but none were forthcoming. “Do you tell me this to warn me, or are you asking for help?”

“Not help,” the leader said quickly and with just a hint of disdain. “Wolves have legs, and there are other forests. Some among us think it is time to leave this one. Maybe time for wolves, certainly past time for all lesser beasts. If you are wise, you will go.”

Beren thought uneasily of similar warnings he had received lately had from other animals. There was something of a drift of creatures just then beginning, leaving Dorthonion for the South. “If nobody stays to fight these wrong-wolves,” he said carefully, “then what is to stop them entering all the forests?”

The leader was silent for a long time. “We cannot fight them all,” he said at last. “You neither. Maybe you can survive, for now. But there are many, many wrong things on that Isle. The wind tells us this. The time will come soon when they are too strong for you too.”

## Year 463

It was a long, tedious winter of inaction. Beren spent much of the time in his cave, sheltered equally from hunters and weather. He welcomed the thaw when it came, although it brought the usual mess and noise. The clean, thick blanket of snow gave way to mud, and the quiet of the frosty air was replaced by the rushings and gurglings of water freed from its icy chains.

At this time Beren put aside his fish-mail and gave himself once more to the woods. His joy at the returning life to be sensed and seen at every hand was intense; almost as if it were the first time. And of course, that is what the spring is: it is that first time, the time of youth, innocence, and freshness, magically renewed every year.

It would also be his last spring in Dorthonion, although he was not to know that.

He gathered again the webs of his Eagle comrades, and now also he found that his authority with all the other birds and beasts carried more weight than ever before. There was a deepening, a maturity; a sense almost of pulling together. Although there were still few Orcs to be seen about, he bethought him of the wolves – the ones who did not smell right. They shrank from hunting him, it seemed; well then, he would hunt them.

At night these fell creatures owned the forest. During the dark hours, Beren sheltered in his cave, or dozed high in a tree. With the coming of dawn though, the net of watchers spread itself anew. Nothing under sunlight could escape the eyes of the eagles.

Twice the birds found the prey during the sunlit hours, but the days were not yet long, and both times the great grey beast disappeared in the night, and was not picked up again the following day.

Beren knew some of the ordinary sort of wolves remained in the forest. He found again the pack whose leader had given him the warning the previous autumn, and summoned them to gather to him under the full moon. So great was his authority now on this brink of destiny, that the wolves came to his howl. They gathered to him in the silvery moonlight. Twelve wolves, thirteen, fourteen; and still they came. The females came, and the young. It was the full pack. They ringed him around in the glade where he sat on a rock, their eyes flashing green.

“What moves?” snapped the leader. He was angry. He had obeyed the call; but he was angry with himself that he had obeyed.

“I move,” replied Beren in their tongue. “I hunt wolves who are no wolves.”

The wolf grinned at him savagely, baring long teeth that gleamed pale in the moonlight. “Those?” it said. “You and I have gnawed this bone before. *You* will not find them. If *we* cannot best them, how will you? They were bred in darkness, and in darkness is their wrongness grounded. The cool dark should be our friend; but these creatures are strong in the dark, strong. They turn dark into an enemy.” Its voice became tinged with scorn. “But you, a creature of day? Hunt? You will stumble blindly through the bushes until the teeth meet in your neck.”

“That is why I do not hunt them in the dark,” said Beren.

The wolves were silent. This was not a thought that had occurred to them.

“I need your help,” said Beren. “I cannot hunt these evil wolves alone. I need a pack.”

“We are not friends to any two-legs,” sniffed the leader. “You are not of our pack. Why should we risk our lives on this trail?”

“Are you friends to yourselves?” Beren replied. “You told me how these things prey upon you!”

“I also spoke of leaving,” said the wolf. “This is now decided. Came you a moon later, you would have

found us gone. We wait only on the season of good hunting.”

“That is postponing the problem, not solving it,” said Beren forcefully. “Hunt with me! Make me one of your pack! Together, if we choose our time wisely, we can kill. Then there will be no need to run.”

The wolves crouched in silence, their coats silvered by the moon. After some moments, the big leader stirred. “We must think on this,” he said. He got up, and all the wolves did the same. They trotted off into the bushes, some giving him a final glance as they did so. In a few seconds Beren was alone again in the silvered glade.

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It was a week before he heard any more. He was running through the flower-sown glades one rainy morning, following a report of a party of Orcs, when he pulled up suddenly. Not far ahead, a blackbird was raising a racket: something was in the thicket.

He felt no wrongness, but he unslung and strung his bow all the same. With an arrow loosely on the string, well concealed among the tree-trunks and bushes in the Druug way, and suppressing his presence using Willow’s art, he waited on events. His eyes searched the gaps in the winter-bare growth, his nose quested the slight breeze. Everything was damp, which didn’t help.

He was not too surprised when a grinning wolf’s face appeared out of some growth. He recognized the big grey leader and lowered the bow.

“You have some good tricks,” said the wolf. “I knew you were there, but I could not see you. Your stick that bites is also a sharp tooth – when you happen to be holding it. If only you could scent and see, you might make quite a respectable wolf. But we will put up with what we have.”

“Is that your answer?” said Beren, his heart leaping with a fierce hope.

“We are still leaving the forest,” said the wolf. “There is more danger here than monsters in wolf skin. I have told you this. But for half a moon, we will stay, and make one pack with thee.”

“Half a moon!” said Beren. “That is not long!”

“That is what we give,” said the leader. “Be thankful that we give any. Many argued against this. But enough talk. Meet us tonight. We must know thee.”

“But where shall we meet?” said Beren.

The wolf had turned and was going. It swung its head back briefly and said, without breaking stride, “Thou wilt find us, else beest no wolf.” A final toothy grin and it was gone.

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Beren found the pack without too much difficulty. They were, after all, a part of the forest; and it was his forest. He found them in the dark before moonrise. Approaching the lair, he took extra pains to be as silent as possible. The wolves would know he was coming, try as he might, but ‘stumbling through the bushes’ still rankled.

All at once he was among them; he could smell them. Straining his eyes to the utmost, he could just about make out their shapes in the starlight.

The leader greeted him. “Welcome, man who would be a wolf. Now we will learn thee.” One by one the wolves, young and old, came to him and snuffed him deeply and thoroughly. One or two of the very young ones licked his jaw. Beren smelled them in return. Close to them like this, he could easily tell one from another. He knew something of wolves, though, and of how they lived, so he was prepared for something more. He thought they might wish, not only to know him, but also to test him. Thus when a big male wolf

went slyly to nip his hindquarters on leaving, Beren's fist lashed out. The wolf dived away like lightning, but the fist just connected on its head all the same, jolting its jaw with a deep 'tock'.

The wolves laughed, in the way that dogs and wolves can laugh: tongues out over teeth that glimmered pale in the star-shine.

"Thou art slower than we are, and thou dost not see, smell or move so well," said the leader to him. "But it must be said, not by much. And to offset that, those things which thou carriest have longer teeth than ours, and more bitter. Thou canst hold thy own among us. Be welcome." The other wolves all growled the same: "Welcome, welcome among us."

"Shall we plan the hunt?" was Beren's reply.

They listened while he laid out his suggestion. Objections were made and answered; by moonrise they had hammered out a plan.

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Some days after that the eagles came to him in the fresh of the morning with news that the game was afoot: one of the wolf-monsters had been sighted some way further up the valley.

Sunrise that morning had found Beren and the wolves on the southern-facing slopes some way to the East of the ruined farm of Beren's grandfather of the same name. The climate was kinder here, and the forest a little softer; not so dominated by dark and bitter pines.

Beren turned to the leader. "Is all clear to thee? Go thou and hinder this quarry. Stop it from fleeing. I will come as fast as I can."

"'Quarry', is it?" grinned the wolf. "That terrible thing? At least thou lackest not for confidence. We go. Until the further meeting." He gathered the long, grey shapes of the hunters to him and they loped off between the trees.

After arranging necessary matters with Farsight, Beren set off after the wolves. He did not hurry unduly, since he had far to go, and therefore preferred to conserve his strength. The birds flew back and forth without pause, supplying him with constant updates of the changing position. Thus he learned that the pack came up with their chase not far short of midday, and commenced with it a deadly game of cat-and-mouse. The case indeed seemed to be as Beren had hoped: under the sun, the monster was not nearly so formidable as at night. Working together, the wolf-pack was able to evade its snarling jaws, could harry it and hinder it. As the man ran on, he heard from his messengers how the pack had denied the fanged horror the passage of the river; of how it had turned at last and fled to the South, with the wide-ranging wolves in hard pursuit. The chase led up the hill. At the ridge, wolves coming from the further valley turned the chase to the West, following a difficult line sideways along the slopes of the high hills.

Beren was jinking down the last steep slope which led to the Whitewater, the sun's glare slowly sinking to his right, when Fairfeather told him this. He stopped and questioned the eagle more closely. "But that way leads to the Hairfeet, and thence only to cliffs,"<sup>19</sup> he muttered, after he had heard what the bird had to tell him. "What evil chance turned its feet in that direction?" He told the bird of his concerns.

Fairfeather polished her beak on her side. "Do you mean those small two-legs who remind one of rabbits?" she said with a touch of disdain.

"Yes. Can you fly to warn them?"

"But I do not speak their language," said Fairfeather, "nor they mine. How should I warn them?"

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19 See [http://www.beren-one-hand.com/images/map\\_hairfeet.png](http://www.beren-one-hand.com/images/map_hairfeet.png)

Beren raised his hands despairingly, let them drop again. "There is not time to argue. Use your brains! Chase them into their burrows! No, wait." He tugged around the pack strapped tight to his back and delved into it, bringing up one of Bhalacho's wrapped biscuits. "Take this to them! Bhalacho at least will understand it is from me. Please, Fairfeather. They must not be caught above ground.

"They will shoot at me," grumbled the bird, "but I suppose I must suffer that chance. Well, I shall do my best. If I do not come again, it is because I am lying dead on the hill, pierced by rabbit-arrows." She gripped the biscuit and flew off.

Beren ran then, as hard as he could. He stumbled and slid through the bramble thickets on the last steep slopes down to the river. The water stung in his scratches as he splashed through it, up to his waist in the strong currents that poured between boulders. He was through then and pounding up the slope on the far side. The pack had run the beast of Mairon up the rocky slopes to the East, but Beren was heading directly for the cliff, and the path he knew.

Fairfeather found him again as he reached the base of the cliff. "It was not easy, the task that you laid on me," the bird reported. "Those rabbit-folk are quick shots and slow thinkers. But it is done; they are underground. Not too soon, either – the beast has doubled back from the heights, and is close upon them."

Beren spared no more words before ducking behind the familiar rock to set foot on the steep and winding path up the cliff.

By the time he stood, panting, on the top, the evil power of the approaching monster was pressing on his heart. He unslung his bow and brought it silently to readiness. The potency beating on his forehead told him exactly where the thing was: in a thicket, on his left, a bare hundred paces distant. Indeed he could hear the crashing of it. The wolf-pack would be driving it close behind. Time to tell them he was here.

Beren gave a single, ringing bark in the wolf-tongue before dashing off to the right. He knew the creature would try to break back.

Now he heard a confused noise in the bushes to the East: growls, a scuffling, followed by a yelp. When he felt he had gone far enough, Beren halted and raised his bow, watching the undergrowth warily and trying to piece together what was happening from the sounds he could hear.

With brutal suddenness, the bushes thrashed aside. Running full at him from the gap was a creature such as he had never before seen, and scarcely imagined. In wolf-shape it was, but twice as large as any wolf. Terror ran at its side. A dark power gleamed from the eyes that were fixed on his, coming nearer with every bound. The creature's sides were slashed, but there was foam and blood also on its muzzle.

All this he took in during the instant of drawing the bow back. The heavy arrow took the monster full on the chest, but it did not check. There was just time to whip another arrow on, draw, loose, and then the thing was upon him. Beren threw himself to one side and heard the fangs snap closed an inch from his face. At the same instant, the foul reek of the thing smote his nose and lungs.

Even as he was leaping, his hand had sought another arrow, and somehow he managed to keep hold of this, and the bow, through his tumble. He sprang up and sent this bolt too into the great beast, which was scrabbling in a cloud of dust and spume, attempting to turn and come at him again. Grey shapes leaped past him suddenly: the pack. They ringed the monster, working it in snarls, leaping back to avoid its bloody, white-fanged lunges. Beren slammed another arrow into the prey, and another; and now the beast stumbled. Its black blood was pouring onto the grass. A wolf slashed it, and away; then another. Beren aimed with care and sent a bolt thudding into its eye. The great beast toppled then and fell, and as soon as it hit the ground the wolf-pack closed on it. It became hidden from view beneath a tumble of snarling, worrying wolves. The pile of wolves heaved once, then continued undisturbed at their savage work.

After what seemed a long time, but was doubtless no more than a minute, the clustered wolves one by one ceased to tug and champ on the prey and fell slowly back. Some were limping. In their centre lay a great dark

mound of ragged and bloody fur, with six of Beren's arrows sticking out of it.

Beren went up to the animal he thought of as Second Wolf. "Where is Leader?" he asked.

"Dead, yonder," said the wolf with a flick of its muzzle in the direction. "I am leader now."

"Under challenge," snapped another well-grown wolf nearby. Second Wolf grinned at the objector, showing two rows of white teeth; jagged, but fitting neatly together.

"I am sorry he is dead," said Beren.

"Why?" said Second Wolf. "He was old. I would have killed him soon anyway."

There was not very much Beren could say to that. "We had good hunting, at least," he said.

"No," said Second Wolf. "Better if we had left already. This was a foe beyond our powers, even under the sun-glare. Many are wounded, and the wounds smell bad. The taste of Death is in our mouths. Fewer will live to go south."

"I am sorry," said Beren again.

"Sorrow will not feed cubs," said Second Wolf. "The hunt is now over, as is any nonsense about two-legs pretending to be wolves. Your pack and mine are no longer one." He turned and trotted off, the pack following. Beren did not see them again.

Feeling weary and aching as he always did after a battle, he sought the Hairfeet. They were cowering in their burrows and it was some time before he could induce any of them to emerge.

Worrafoskin was an early exception. He bristled and fumed and drew his sword and wanted to inspect the corpse immediately. Beren would not let him until he had spoken with Granny. The fat old lady emerged at last, gasping and wheezing.

"Oh my," she moaned. "Oh my! To think of such things, in my day! Oh, we felt the evil in our hearts. I think I feel it yet."

"The monster is dead, Granny," said Beren. "All is well."

Worrafoskin twisted his moustaches. "We must make sure," he said importantly. "No more delay now! Show me!"

Accompanied by all who dared, Beren led Worrafoskin to the scene of battle. The Hairfeet recoiled in shock and horror from the body of the wolf-thing, which was higher than they were tall. Worrafoskin, swallowing and sweating, inched nearer with sword outstretched, meaning to give the body a poke. Beren stopped him.

"Do not touch it," he said. "It is evil even in death. It is too late today to deal with it; tomorrow we must contrive to drag it into a pit." He took them then into the bushes and found where Leader lay in a pool of his own congealing blood, his throat half ripped away. "This one we shall bury with honour," he told the goggling Hairfeet. "That is not custom among wolves, but he was my comrade, and it is *my* custom." He got them to help him drag some briars over the corpse to keep off the birds and foxes.

As the sun lowered, more of the Little People came forth, and as the cloud left their hearts, so their mood lightened. Soon laughter was to be heard again, food and drink was gathered to the tables, and the children came forth and climbed all over Beren, asking him where he had been all these months.

Resigned now to spending an evening openly among the Hairfeet, despite his fear of drawing attention to them, Beren set himself once more to the task of trying to persuade the small folk to leave. "You see what we are coming to," he said. "This monster is just the start. There will be more, and worse. We were all lucky



today. I had the help of powerful comrades; and you were lucky that I was near, and was able to warn you.”

“But this is our home,” several of the Hairfeet said to him. “Where else could we go?”

“Anywhere!” he said. “The world is wide; and much of it is kinder than these cold northern woods. Indeed, I do not understand what you are doing here at all.” He changed tack then a little, and instead of trying to cow them with horrors, he described the warm southern lands, the rich lands, where life was easy and food and drink were plentiful. From the gleam in their eyes he could see that this indeed had some effect. Their questions also gradually changed character. Instead of asking rhetorically what they would do if they had to leave their home, they started asking real questions concerning possibilities for the journey.

“The way out of this land lies over the mountains,” Beren told them. “But not here; a day’s journey further down the valley, once you come to the end of the icy peaks. There you can find a way over. That will be the worst hazard of your journey. Attempt the pass only in fine weather, and take food and water for two or three days. Once you are over the mountains, why then, you will be safe!” Later though, when the party was in full swing, speaking privately to Granny White-top, he went further than this: “Don’t stay there, Granny, once you get over. Make them keep on. Go far to the South and East. Otherwise, sooner or later, this war will sweep you up.”

Granny sighed. “If only I were younger. ’Tis a hard trial for an old woman. Can you not come with us, and help us along?”

“I can help you as far as the pass,” Beren said. “But I cannot leave this land yet; my business here is not finished.”

“Well, it is barely spring,” said Granny. “Plenty of time. And there’s a mort of things to prepare.” Beren was not happy with this conclusion, but decided not to push harder just at present. He had at least got them to accept – more or less – the idea of going, in the abstract; he could work on the practicalities later.

He bedded down under the trees, comfortable in skins the Hairfeet had lent him. In the morning, they went to bury the wolves. They dealt with Pack Leader, but when they gathered their courage and went again to the place where the monster had been slain, they found the body was no longer there. Only the six arrows were lying on the grass.

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The Orcs were coming again in numbers into the forest. They came in heavy armour, in wary groups, not all together. For a long time Beren and Rattlecone could not work out what they were doing. There were some who travelled the length of the old Dwarf-road, but most of them spent their time in the valley between Sightfoot and Anach. Parties of them would visit the pass itself. At length word came to Beren that larger forces were gathering again in the dark woods of Drûn.

“What are they doing there?” Beren asked his friend. “No creature of this world can abide there long. It is the place of waking nightmare, as you and I well know!”

“Perhaps they see it as the choice that is least bad,” rumbled the tall Ent. “They have fortified their camp there. We cannot pick at them as we did before.”

“Well, perhaps so,” admitted the man. “Though I wager the Orcs themselves did not do that choosing. But that does not explain what these others are up to.”

“Nothing good,” said Rattlecone. “They observe, and they sketch, and they measure. They have some work in plan, so much is obvious.”

Before this matter could become any clearer, Bronze-mail brought word to Beren that the spring supply party had been seen entering the pass. The company comprised ten Elves; there were no Dwarves this time.

“Ten!” mused Beren. “I wonder what that means.”

“That the lands are becoming more perilous,” suggested the Ent.

Guided by the eagle, Beren met the Elvish party in much the same place as two years before. There to his joy he found Celevir, and Aramil and Pergas too. They had three more Noldor in their party, as well as Elves of a sort which Beren had not seen since his youth: silver-haired, slight, clad in forest greens. These were Sindar, Grey-elves.

“I am glad to see you!” Beren said to them.

“Hah!” exclaimed Aramil. “He says he is glad! Did I not tell you his wolf’s nose would smell out the wine?”

“I do not think wolves care much for wine,” said Beren, smiling. “But why, did you bring some?”

“We did,” replied the golden-haired Elf. “You are not the only one who can perform a hero’s doughty deeds – listen, we forbore to drink it! What do you say to that?”

“A monster of temptation, wrestled into the dust,” replied Beren. “We must toast your prowess without delay!”

The Elves laughed.

“You are bested there,” Celevir remarked to Aramil. “He has the joke on you.” He turned smiling to Beren. “The sight of you is welcome as ever, noble Bëoring. I will not hide that we have feared for your life; the game grows hotter in these northern lands. But let us sit – and drink some wine, too, since you press us so! – and exchange news.”

“First tell me how you avoided the Orc-folk,” said Beren. “I know there is a party high in the pass.”

“They hid themselves among the rocks,” the dark-haired Elf told him. “They were more than us, and heavily armoured, so we were rather glad of their faint hearts than otherwise. I know not how it will go on our return.”

“I am glad you did not tangle with them,” said Beren. They sat then and made a fire. The Sindar, who were armed with bows, proposed to station themselves as scouts, but Beren assured them that Bronze-mail would give warning of any approach.

Beren valued Celevir more than he would easily have been able to describe. In fact all of the Noldor in the party were of like nature – straight as ash saplings, clear as spring water. A light was in their eyes, a truth. With the Sindar it was different. It was not that he could feel any wrongness in their hearts – not at all. But they were wild creatures. They reminded him of the wolves. There was no evil in them, but perhaps little of kindness or mercy either. For this reason, or for some other reason obscure even to himself, he was reluctant to describe his doings in much detail to the whole party. He did not tell them of the water-folk, nor did he tell them of the raid on the Tower. He was ashamed of his dealings with Glith, even though he had committed no dishonour, and could not think how else he could have acted toward her. It was simply shame to him that a maid had offered him a love that he could not return, and still greater shame that she should have met her death, in such a wise, and that he had not been able to prevent it. No, he did not wish to rehearse that episode to anyone. It would not help Finrod to know it, so he kept quiet.

He had not worn Frostfire to the meeting, and chose not to speak of that either.

The Elves for their part reported many movements in the lands, mostly to their disquiet. Men were coming again over the eastern mountains, of a type not seen before: shorter, darker-skinned, uncomely to Elvish eyes. Nearer at hand, fell creatures prowled the woods. Nobody was in any doubt as to whence they came: the captured Tower on Sirion, now become a place of filth and death.

Another of the party spoke on this: a bright-eyed, firm-faced Noldo named Edrahil, whom Beren had liked from the moment he saw him. “They are calling that place now Tol-in-Gaurhoth<sup>20</sup>,” Edrahil said, “but these are far beyond ordinary wolves. Gorthaur has meddled with them. He has warped their bodies into a nightmare growth, infused them with his power, and supplanted their rightful souls with who knows what filth from beyond the borders of the world. We from Nargothrond can neither trap them nor catch them. Were it not for Huan, these creatures of the night would run free through all the Southlands.”

“I have met one of these demon-wolves,” said Beren, feeling a little elated that he had succeeded in killing one where the Eldar had failed. “But who is Huan?”

The Elves looked at him with surprise. “Is it possible that you do not know?” said Celevir. “All the North has heard of Huan.”

Beren’s elation faded. “All except me,” he said, feeling slightly aggrieved. “I fight alone here, I have nobody to tell me the news.”

The Noldo reached forward and touched him gently on the arm. “I beg your pardon,” he said. “My surprise was discourteous. Well, shortly spoken, Huan is a dog – but such a dog as you will never see again. He is the Hound of the Valar. He has been in the world since its beginning, and has hunted the creatures of Morgoth all the days of his life. He came over the sea with us, but we do not know for certain why. There are... strange rumours concerning him, of which I do not care to speak, because they touch on us Noldor, and on the path we tread in this world, and on the cause of our choosing it. Because you are my fast comrade, I will hint to you this much of the matter: that was no good cause, and it is no good path.”

The other Elves stirred at these words, looking troubled, but nobody said anything. Celevir glanced at the others, then continued. “More than that I will not say; and perhaps that was already too much. But back to Huan. It is said that no foe can harm him, save the mightiest wolf the world will ever see; and in that fight he will meet his death.”

“And where is that wolf?” asked Beren.

“The greatest we know are these new ones of Gorthaur,” replied Celevir, “but so far Huan has bested them all.”

“I could use his aid here,” said Beren. “We too are plagued with these monsters. Could he be persuaded to come north for a season, do you think?”

“Huan is not free,” replied Celevir. “He hunts at the will of Celegorm, of whom you may have heard, and has done so since before we Noldor crossed the sea. Celegorm makes his home with us for this time, in Nargothrond.”

This time the Noldor did not stir, but looking from face to face, Beren gained the impression that this last fact was for them a source of some obscure unease.

Celevir changed the subject then, and spoke of other movements and peoples. Maedhros<sup>21</sup> held fast to Himring, he said, and lately even Aglon had been recaptured from the enemy. In the West, the league of Fingon and Húrin fenced Hithlum in a ring of swords, with doughty arms behind them. “Nobody can say what the Enemy’s next move will be,” he concluded, “but many now are saying that we should move ourselves, and not wait on his initiative. But there are many opinions, and no single voice is listened to by all, not even my lord’s.”

When little more remained to say, when they were already at work unloading the gear, Beren asked Celevir about Telchar.

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20 Sindarin: ‘Island of Wolves’.

21 Celegorm and Maedhros were among the seven sons of Fëanor.

“Hah!” said Celevir. “Yes, Telchar. He had it fixed in his mind last year that he must see you, and he had the ear of the King. There was some debate about that escapade! But a Dwarf is immovable once he sets his mind on something, and that goes doubly for Telchar. Well, they came safe back, and that is what counts I suppose. But the Smith grows old. I do not think he will venture forth on any such madcap errand again.”

“Is he well?” asked Beren.

“Yes,” said the Noldo, “and more than well: for he is filled with fire since he came back from that journey. He has been ceaseless at some mighty work. Something happened to him in that time, some vision he received; so much seems clear.” He looked with speculation at Beren, but since nothing was forthcoming from that quarter, the Elf shrugged slightly and went on. “Nevertheless, I would guess he is not far from his end.”

When all was finished and the Elves had prepared to go, Celevir took Beren aside. The Noldo looked troubled. “Elf-friend,” he said. “I bid thee beware. I do not know how it is, but I see a greater cloud of danger around your head than I have ever known. Have a care for those were-wolves! We have not yet seen the worst of what Tol-in-Gaurhoth has to fling at us.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Celevir’s words came true sooner than Beren could have imagined. It began a week later with a warning from a sparrow-hawk. The bird landed on Beren’s shoulder one morning. “Hunters,” it told him. “Up the valley. A short flight. They come this way.”

“How many?” asked Beren.

“A clutch,” replied the hawk. That meant two or three. Beren thanked the bird and began to move cautiously up the valley, senses aquiver.

He picked them up before long: two spots of wrongness. They felt to him like more of Mairon’s wolves. If that was the case, he had small chance of coming up with them. All the same, he reached a hand behind and counted his arrows, checked his bow. No sense in being caught unprepared. Well then, he thought, let us see how good these creatures are.

He worked his way silently downwind. As soon as he had reached the position he wanted, he chose a place in good cover, pushed his concealment to full strength, and waited, arrow on the string.

While he waited, he thought of the first time he had lain in ambush of the Enemy – the first time of all. That was those Orcs near the farm. He had been with Chases Goats. Good old Goats. What was he doing now, Beren wondered?

Well, it was much the same now, really, as it was then. He knew himself to be a far more potent hunter than he was in that far-off time; but weighing against that, this prey was clearly far swifter, stronger, wiler than any Orc. It was a good match.

The spots of darkness in his mind had halted. They were not far off, but he could see nothing. Beren cursed. How had they discovered him, how?

Perhaps by the same senses you use, his mind told him.

He left his hide and moved closer, step by careful step. But what was this? Beren stopped, questing with his inner sense. One of the beasts had drifted nearer too, closing the distance from the other side. The second was not much further away. Beren froze, but the other’s slow approach continued. He looked around, chose a tree, climbed it silently. Two fathoms high, he found a branch to wedge his legs, and waited with the bow held high. The deathly presence was not far off. Not far. Not far. His quivering alertness marked also that the second was moving a little around to the side.

He never knew what warned him. A sudden sense of wrongness gripped his stomach, strong enough to shake his hand on the bow. He felt a quiver somewhere in the web of things... a sudden movement. Brute instinct ducked his head, so that the arrow passed only through his hair before slamming with a deafening blow into the solid wood.

Before he had time to think what to do, Beren's body had taken over. He had leaped in the same instant and was falling freely. While he was still in the air, a second arrow whizzed through the space he had just vacated. Both creatures had shot, at almost the same instant.

The man was running almost before he hit the ground, but the two beasts were running close behind. His mind caught up at some point with his terrified instincts. He was appalled, *appalled*. These were *not* wolves.

Twice more arrows came, and had he not been employing all the cunning of a lifetime, they would have found a mark in his flesh; as it was they merely added to the day's frightful tally of the closest of close misses.

After a heart-pounding time he found, to his inexpressible relief, that he had the legs of these creatures, whatever they were; he was slowly drawing ahead.

That condition changed with horrible suddenness. One of the centres of darkness had halted, fading to the rear, while the other came on. Now the one that had tarried reappeared, but running at twice its former pace. Almost faster than it takes to tell, the evil presence ran ahead of Beren, off to the side. The shock of this new turn of events rolled through him. What *were* these creatures?

He twisted desperately to the other side, but that lost him ground. The second hunter, the slower of the two, cut the corner and was close on his heels again.

This horrid game of cat and mouse went on for about five minutes. Thrice arrows came close to ending Beren's life. Only once had he loosed himself, although at no clear mark; but he could not stand to shoot, he had to run and run.

By some instinct he had turned uphill. The ground became rippled and fissured with many little gullies. He knew every one; and by this knowledge, and his cunning, he was able, most of the time, to keep solid earth between himself and the slower pursuer, the one with the bow. A tiny part of his mind wondered at that. There seemed now to be only one archer; but the first arrows had come from two different directions, he was sure of it.

The cliff loomed greyly through the trees. The instant it came in sight, Beren knew what he meant to do. He ran the final few paces up the slope, then sprang at the rock face and scrambled up as quickly as he could.

The rock face had great fissures where thousand-ton sheets of it were in the slow process of peeling away. One of these afforded the man a rapid ascent under cover. He emerged from the top of the fissure, tree-high on the cliff. Beren peered out, but jerked back just as an arrow clattered on the rock in front of his face. Cowering behind his shelter, he could hear the shaft rattling down as it fell.

From where he hid, he could see but little of the ground below. His enemy must be near, at the base of the cliff. Beren ducked his head out for a lightning-fast reconnaissance, then quickly back, before he could be shot at.

He digested what he had seen. A Bowman, man-high. No Orc. He thought there had been something wrong about the head. The momentary glimpse had not been sufficient to reveal clearly how it was clothed.

In the narrow patch of ground in his field of view he saw movement. The second hunter emerged: a large wolf. Beren cursed – he had dropped his bow at the base, the better to climb. Too far for a dart, and he had in any case no room to throw in this crack. Stalemate.

As he watched the baleful creature and wondered what to do, a thing happened which would, in years to come, take its place among the row of horrors fit to wake him from sleep in staring fright. Before his eyes, the wolf changed. It changed horribly, wrongly. It stood on its hind legs, and these twisted, and its arms changed and grew. Before Beren could think or react, what stood there below was no wolf more, but the semblance of a man. A man in a wolf's hide, with a wolf's teeth. What Beren had passed over at first glance as branches caught by the wolf in its passing through the thickets revealed themselves to be a knife and a long bow. In the brief time Beren had used up in taking all this in, the man-wolf had strung its bow and stretched it back. Aimed at him. Shocked to his core, Beren squeezed back just in time to avoid another arrow.

Now he was so jammed in he could hardly move. Luckily he had chosen his hide well: there was no piece of ground below from which he was irrevocably exposed. The second wolf-archer moved from one side to the other at the base of the cliff, trying to get a shot, but there was no place from which Beren could not find shelter behind rock.

But where was the first? It must surely be climbing. An increase in the feeling of dread, and a rattle of stone not far below, both confirmed that guess. Beren freed a dart from his pouch. He knew just where the thing must be. With a heave, he pushed his upper body out of the crevice, threw his dart as well as his cramped body could, and as soon as it left his hand he was pulling himself desperately back. He just managed to beat the pursuing arrow, felt the rock-splinters it flung from the cliff.

Beren, crouched again behind his shield, knew he had not hit the mark; but perhaps it would give the climbing creature some pause.

There followed again a delay, and then he knew suddenly that the other creature, the wolf-changeling, was also climbing. He doubted it could shoot while on the rock, but if he could throw darts, so could they. Two against one: they could hold him and work him, until he made his inevitable mistake. The only advantage he had was that he knew the country.

He looked up and over as much of the cliff face as he could see. There were places of cover he could use. Beren also knew that the top of the cliff here was in fact a sharp ridge, with another steep face falling away behind it. If he could reach the top, he would be in a better position.

He prepared himself, then stood up for another quick throw. He saw the first werewolf clear, but it was itself in the act of throwing. Both threw, both ducked, both missed, but Beren thought he had slightly the better of the encounter. While he was thinking this, he had already leaped the other way out of his hide. A quick scuttle, gaining a few yards, then he was scrambling around a rock corner into shelter, just beating the vicious dart that stung his leg with stone-chips.

In this wise he slowly worked his way up the cliff. Just before he reached the crest, he ran out of darts. He thought that at least one of his enemies had as well.

Beren was now crouching behind a pillar of rock. This place was not three leaps from the jagged rocks of the crest, but they had him pinned. The enemy who still had darts was below and to one side. He knew where it was, although he could not look. He had to keep the stone between them.

From where he crouched, he could see back to the chimney he had just come from. The other monster was now climbing it; Beren could see it clearly.

The thing was coming nearer. It looked up, saw him. The man stared back at it in fascinated horror. It was not a wolf's face that he saw, but it could not be described as human either. The eyes which were fixed on his were yellow and terrible. Beren drew his knife and brandished it at the thing. It grinned at him in return, showing jagged white wolf's fangs, with a wolf's red tongue lolling. The great grey creature was barely four fathoms below him now, inching its way up the beetling rock.

Curses, this was no good – to sit here petrified until he disappeared down its maw. But what to do? He

looked the climbing monster over, taking in the beast-strong sinews and the cruel claws on its grasping hands. He could not hope to win a wrestling game with *that*; certainly not with the other waiting to pierce him at its leisure.

His hands found a stone, as big as his fist. But as he raised his hand to throw, the near creature ducked, quick as a snake, back behind the lip of rock. He saw that he could never hit it; the great rock shield sheltered the monster, even as it had sheltered Beren.

He stood up straight then, in his despair, and threw his stone long and hard – not at the nearer wolf, but right to where he knew the other skulked. The path of the stone was not quite perfect, but it shattered on the rock by the werewolf's head, peppering it with fragments both heavy and sharp. The creature was caught in the middle of its own throw and was knocked out of its aim. Its dart went wide.

Beren leaped up and ran up a slanting ledge, inches wide. In a flash he was up and over the ridge. A sheer drop fell into nothing just below his feet, but he gave it no heed as he scampered back sideways. Loose stones and rubbish slid from beneath his feet, fell off and down with silent fall, followed by a distant clatter as they struck the base below; but he had already reached the place where he needed to go. Seconds only had passed since he began his motion. He knew the nearer werewolf must still be climbing, directly below where he was now crouched.

There, on the cap of the ridge, Beren had earlier spotted a large rock that seemed loose. He was behind it now. As he heard the distant scrape of claws on the far side of the ridge, he wedged his toes in a crack, set his shoulder to the rock and heaved. With the full power of his strong body, the rock grated, shifted.

Not enough. Once again! Muscles bunched. His vision turned pink, his pulse thundered in his head. Beren reached inside himself, called on everything, found a strength he did not know he had. The heavy block crunched slowly to a pivot, teetered, went over.

Its crashing descent was appallingly loud, shaking the cliff-top where Beren lay gasping. Flocks of birds flew shrieking from the trees, but cutting through all the sounds was a scream of grief and rage from far below. One of the blots of darkness he felt in his mind was falling, falling, falling into nothing.

Gone. Only one remained.

That one was bent on revenge. He could feel it, hear it scrambling up. There were no more rocks. Time to be away.

The ridge was steeper on this side, over the vertical in places. The rock offered little in the way of cover, no cracks or broken places. However, only a little way along, tall pines grew right beside the cliff. He eyed these as he worked his way quickly along the top. There were one or two he thought perhaps he could jump to.

The remaining werewolf came now into sight, near the end of the ridge. It had blood on its face from Beren's earlier missile. The creature followed him along the top of the cliff, and whether it was a better climber or used less caution on the scanty toe- and finger holds which were all that kept them both from plummeting into the yawning gulf below, it steadily gained on the man. But one great stroke of luck was with Beren, one great and blessed stroke of luck: this foe too seemed now to be out of ammunition.

Beren was higher than he wanted to be and was trying to work his way lower. It was difficult to find a way, and he was ever conscious of the vengeful werewolf, no longer far behind. The slaving creature was scrambling over the sheer rock like a thing possessed. Beren could not match its speed.

There were no cracks here, and finger- and toe-holds were mere edges in the sheer rock, less than finger-width. In desperation he leaped across a great, bare culvert in the rock, over the yawning gap below, to land with foot-wrenching agony upon a knob of rock projecting from the face. Fighting for balance, he leaped for the next support. Again the horrid beat, with nothingness swooping below him, until his feet met the hold with a shock of impact. This was a fathom's leap down, and the landing horribly jarred his already bruised

foot. He heard the scramble of the monster close behind, but he dared spend no time to look. The first pine was close; he was nearly level with its spindly top.

The sounds paused now behind. The werewolf was at the first jump; he heard it land. The second would immediately follow; then it would be on him. Beren turned gasping toward the feathery top of the pine, swaying gently in the free air across the space before him, and leaped.

The resinous branches thrashed his face as the rough trunk thumped into his hands. Then he was dropping, almost at falling speed down through the mess of branches beside the slender stem. The impact of his weight swung the spindly tree far, far out, but Beren was cascading down through the whipping branches; he was halfway down already. The tree oscillated drunkenly back toward the cliff, paused, then away again.

He felt the shock as the monster hit the tree. Under the renewed impetus, the pine swung much further than before. The tree hesitated, continued tipping. It was picking up speed. Roots were tearing.

Covered in resin and scratches, Beren was on the ground and running. The tree behind him was toppling, cracking. He heard a howl, and a long tearing noise, ending in a thrashing thump. He gave no thought to any of that, because he was running faster than he had ever run in his life. He felt the dark still in his mind. The fall had not killed the creature; and now it was wolf again.

The gasping man pounded the earth with his feet, giant strides flying down the slope. The wolf behind him was clear of the ruined pine now, running close on his trail, and for every step the man ran, it leapt two. Beren thrashed uncaring through brambles, thickets. He stretched every sinew, and where he found the speed he never knew; but still the wolf came on. With every bound it surged nearer. He could hear it now.

The slope ran out, they were on the flat, trees whipped past, the crashing leaps behind him coming closer. He knew the teeth were gaping, the white teeth, preparing to close on his neck.

The clearing he knew came in a blur. With one mighty leap he was across it, but the wolf on his heels galloped, gathered, reached...! And was jerked back and up, caught in the sprung noose.

It was a trap the Orcs had set for him.

Beren lay half conscious on the ground, chest heaving, heart thumping madly almost in his throat. Shaking with terror as well as the extreme exertion, he listened stupidly to the thrashing sounds of the strangling wolf jerking about in the noose. He felt almost as if he might die himself, so direly had he called upon his body. But oh gods, was it really over? Was he alive?

He heard suddenly some difference in the sounds; glanced blearily up. What he saw there cleared his head in a flash and made him forget all his distress.

The plunging and struggling wolf was changing before his eyes. The hind legs were lengthening, the fore paws growing into hands. Half-formed hands, which began to fumble lower, even as they gathered shape. Fumbling for the knife at its warping waist.

Beren leaped. He seized the feet. As his weight came down on them, the neck bones broke. The creature jerked in a single great spasm; the twisted, fumbling arms slumped loose. The whole hairy body relaxed, hung slack and dead. The darkness of its mental presence faded to nothing.

The man, overcome, fell to the earth beneath the dangling corpse. He lay there fainting, half senseless, while piss and shit from the foul thing dripped onto his body.

But he was alive, and his foes were dead.

Beren came slowly to his senses. The sun shone on the peaceful day; the birds twittered their idle pleasure in the warm. The misshapen corpse swung above him a little in the movement of air.



The stench of its ordure clung to his skin. Suddenly he scrambled back from the body in disgust, disturbing the flies which had gathered in a sullenly buzzing swarm. Dizziness took the man again and he had to sit with his head in his hands, trying to shake himself free of the cloud of horror that seemed to cling to him. The terror of the hunt was with him still, and a fog was in his mind, an oppression; the sense that somewhere a malevolent mind was seeking him, feeling for his heart, creeping ever nearer.

He needed to wash, and he badly needed to retreat somewhere safe where he could rest and recover. He attempted to stagger up on weak and shaky legs, knees that did not want to support him. A bruised ankle flared with sudden pain. He managed it at last, hauling himself up by saplings. He needed something to lean on. Bow, where was the bow? Other side of the ridge, too far, fetch it later. By dint of much painful effort he managed to break off a hazel shoot, thumb-wide, and with the help of this wavering support he was able to move away from the clearing, leaving behind the dead thing attended by the avidly feeding flies.

He had a mile to travel to the cave pool. It took him all afternoon, but he forced himself on, through the pain and the memory of fear. The sun was low by the time he reached the pool, the golden rays slanting through the treetops higher on the hill. Down here in the hollow the shadows of evening were beginning to gather. A shadow lay too on his heart, one he could not shake free of.

He took to the water, and it was chill on his many wounds. Down, he swam, down into the dark. Under the siphon.

As he reached the deepest point of the short traverse, a hideous certainty fell upon him. It seized him out of nowhere, with no pause to consider, no darkening suspicion. One instant the thought was not in his head; the next moment, he *knew*.

He heard again in his mind the exchange with the hawk. "How many?" he had asked it. "A clutch," was the reply. That meant two or three.

Two or three.

An icy calm seized Beren as he floated there in the dark water. He could not sense his enemy, although he knew it must be there. All sense of the upper world was quenched under water. But might he therefore hope that the werewolf could not sense him?

The seconds until he would have to breathe were ticking away, but he reviewed the options. To go back was merely to postpone, and where then could he seek refuge? He could never be sure again, whenever he went to the cave; fear would gnaw at him, and one time the wolf would be there, and that would be the end of him. No, he would never have more advantage than he had now.

But how to use it? He pictured the man-wolf. It would be on the shelf, waiting with a bow. Where would he stand, in its place? He knew where, he knew exactly where the monster would place its feet so as to have the whole faintly lit spread of the pool in view.

Nixenárë? No, it must be the knife. There would be no time. He could count on a bare second of time, and in that second he must strike.

His lungs were heaving now, outraged at the lack of breath, but he gave them no attention. He drew the knife, Gorlim's knife, made for him so many years ago; the only link he still kept with his boyhood. Stealthily he reached out his other arm and stroked his silent way against the stream, rising up, into the cave. He found the underside of the shelf by touch and finned slowly down it, towards the end where the stream tumbled into the chamber.

Here. He grasped the rock to steady himself, braced his feet on the bottom. A fierce concentration burned in his mind, rehearsing exactly what his body must do, how he must move. If he failed, it meant death.

Now.

The man surged out of the water. The knife was in the air, the man fell back. *Splash* of the water, *thung* of a bowstring, flick of the arrow over his head; then he was under again. There had been no time to suck in a breath, and now his lungs were on fire.

Had he succeeded? Beren had a moment of mental agony, but there was no escape: he had to rise again, not knowing if he would meet a second arrow or not. It was either that or drown. He stood slowly, streaming water, lungs whooping in air; but no arrow came.

As the man collapsed on the shelf in the utter blackness, he knew that he had taken his enemy's life, because the oppression was lifting; the dark mist in his head was clearing away. Beren's throat was raw with the violence of his gasping, and he thought almost that his heart might give out. He could not stand, his legs would not support him. So he lay there, slumped against the rock, gasping and gasping, in the cold and dark, wondering whether sheer exhaustion might not after all do the work the wolves could not.

He bethought him of the ring at last, Finrod's mighty ring, and fumbled it forth. The light he called forth showed him what he had known was there, but had until now not seen: the body of the third werewolf. Gorlim's knife stood straight out from its forehead.

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Victories are always glorious in song, and this alone is a lie, because what victors most strongly feel is not glory, but rather a kind of profound and exhausted relief; and the defeated of course have no more voice at all. But what the songs principally ignore is the aftermath. Cleaning up after a victory is a business which may be nauseating or disgusting, but is always wearisome beyond belief. Even the luckiest are likely to have wounds that ache, and all that anyone wants to do is sleep. But there is no rest yet, for there are things that must be done: the stricken must be cared for, refuge must be sought, and sometimes also the next battle must already be planned, for war is a thing that waits on no man's pleasure.

Beren spent a time he could not measure alternately in fainting then waking again to the horror lying near him in the blackness of the cave. Eventually he roused himself to do those things he must do to save both his body and his reason. He shrank from contact with the corpse, but his shaking hands managed after an agonizing time to secure one foot of it with a noose. Calling up strength from he knew not where, he dragged the thing into the water and out under the syphon, leaving rope and all to float in the pool outside. Returning to the cave, by the blessed light of the ring he was able to scabble punk and sticks together to pile over the dark stains on the rock. This he lit, then curled up shivering in his robe beside the roaring warmth of the fire. He passed out again then. He woke when little remained of the fire but coals, drank a little water, then slept again.

It was days before he was able to venture out. He stayed in the water-world, since he was not yet able to put weight on his foot. He was able to catch a fish, which he roasted in a sunny glade over a small fire that snapped and cracked, the flames almost invisible in the daylight. The smell of the roasting fish was a delight so keen as to leave him breathless. He devoured the sweet white flesh, then curled up to sleep in the drowsy sun among the bees. Enemies were far away.

As soon as he could, he sought out Rattlecone. Most of the journey could be accomplished via the waterways; only the last hundred paces uphill presented a problem, but these he managed with the help of a stick to support him. He found Rattlecone not at home, so he curled up warily to wait. The garth was no longer a safe place. Although, when he came to think of it, he could think of no place any more that was truly safe, for he could not now even trust the cave any more.

The uneasy world turned around him as he waited. Orcs were gathering; something was afoot in the land. His peaceful meal in the sunlit glade, only a few days earlier, seemed long ago now, in some other time, cut off in the irrecoverable past. He wondered now that he could have felt such peace. The sun shone hotly, but there was no more peace in it. The air smelled of war.

Rattlecone loomed out of the mists of the morning of the second day. He acknowledged Beren's greeting in

silence with only a flick of his eyes. There seemed to be a tension about him. He listened in silence to Beren's account of the fight with the werewolves, before examining the ankle.

"You must bind it," he rumbled. "Don't you know that?"

He fetched some swathes of fibrous material from some store or other and bound the ankle carefully. When he had finished, Beren felt the benefit of it – the foot felt better, more comfortable.

"Rest it, and keep it cool," continued Rattlecone. "Swimming in moderation will not harm it, I think, but you must not walk on it for a week." He stood away from the man then, looking out over the small valley, where the rising sun was just gilding the opposite slope. Beren could feel his tension. It came to him then that the Ent was angry.

Hitching himself painfully upright with the aid of his stick, he hobbled one-footed to the Ent and laid a hand on his side.

"What is it, old friend?" he asked. "Something has happened. I can sense it in you."

Rattlecone turned and looked down at him. "The Orcs are cutting trees," he said shortly. "Many trees. They make paths."

"Paths? What kind of paths? Where?"

"They are on the old Dwarf road east-west," replied Rattlecone. "They widen the verges, I suppose for fear of bowshot. But from Rivil direct to the Monster Isle they carve a new road, just as wide. Most grievous of all though is another, at cross to the old road, from Aegnor's fortress of old. They aim for the pass."

Beren digested this in silence. The news explained many things he had puzzled over.

"I wonder what they mean to do at Anach," he said slowly. "The Enemy already has a road to the South, along Sirion. I saw some of these parties with their sketchers and measurers in the pass itself, where there are no trees. I wonder if they mean to fortify it? That would put an end to my supplies from Nargothrond." He looked up at his friend. "What are the Ents doing about this?"

"We talk," said Rattlecone. There was bitterness in his voice.

"Can you lift me to your table?" said Beren. "Then I can sit, and take the weight off this ankle." Once the Ent had done this for him, the man said, "That is better. So, the meat of the question is, have more of your people come over to our cause?"

"They have not," said Rattlecone grimly. "They hold to Tabbieneedle."

"Must the Orcs, then, cut down all the woods before your chief decides they must be stopped?"

His friend began to walk to and fro in his agitation. "Your kind and mine are not the same," he said. "You know this. We have spoken of it often. For you Kelvar, you animals, the choice is fight or flight. But we Ents are Olvar, of vegetable nature. Our genius is to endure. We know that the river of time will wear away most problems at last, as even the strongest stone will yield to running water.

"For this reason it is hard for us to take positive action against any evil. Our instinct is always to retreat into our strength and leave it to time. Only great fury rouses us to strike, as happened after the Burning, when the rage of the Onodrim roused the whole forest to a vengeful waking, when for a time no Orc was safe under the woods. But we are not easily roused, we Tree-folk. We do not like to feel the fire of anger in our hearts; it reminds us too closely of fire in the real world, which we dread. The woods went back to sleep after that time, and in sleep they remain, although that sleep grows uneasy.

"You suppose perhaps that we Ents contend among ourselves, that we argue. Perhaps, knowing something of

me, you suppose that I am of the faction which pushes for action. It is more complicated than that. I too am Onod. Thus I contend within myself, as do we all. Yes, we could perhaps prevent these Orcs from further damage, hold back the storm for a time. But the storm would come again, and next time stronger. Will we or will we not, action or no action, we will have no option at last but to endure it, come what will.

"I fear in my heart-wood, I do, that the storm is not far off which will finish this northern forest. This Mountain of Pine, this home of peace, place of vast spaces of air over dark forest, fenced by the blue silence of the mountains, where one may walk for days in the quiet, scenting nothing but the resin perfume of the pines; all will go. The storm has been long in the gathering; it is nearly upon us. My heart forebodes that we will not see another spring in these woods. What, then, does it matter if a few more Orc-necks are wrung?"

"Your advice to me was not so," said Beren. "You urged me to wring as many Orc-necks as I could. You said that much hung on it; that I should push the Sorcerer to his last throw."

Rattlecone turned, came and rested his hands on the high stone table.

"I did say that," he said. "But it is exactly that 'last throw' that I fear. What is good for Middle-earth may prove the death of Dorthonion. Do you understand now our agony of decision?"

"My people also died," said Beren quietly. "But had they known their fate beforehand, I do not think that many would have held back. I, too, have given up much, as you know."

"I know that," said his friend. "I think we too will screw ourselves to this choice, and that soon. But it is hard to make."

Beren thought about this, then laughed. "I know what you lack," he said. "Some wise teacher to spur you on with sticks and thorny words."

Rattlecone's lips twitched. "Come now," he said mildly. "You go too far. I never hit you with a stick."

"All but," said Beren, but then his smile faded. "But I am not of much mind to jest. How can a whole forest die? What is it that you fear? Can the Orcs really cut down so many trees? And why should they?"

"I do not know," replied Rattlecone. "My fear hovers over me like a dark cloud, yet I do not know what it is that I fear, save that it will mean the end of this place."

"If the worst of your fears should come true," said Beren soberly, "then I do not know what shall be left for me to do, except also die."

"Nay, there speaks youth," said the Ent. "You say that because the Forest is all that you know. What, then, shall I say, I who have a far stronger bond to this land and all that grows on it? No. If this forest should die, I shall not die with it, like a wasting lover; I shall depart. Consider: I have seen many forests, and known many griefs. Of all the trees I knew and loved in my youth, not a single one remains; they are all gone to dust long ago. Yet I live on, and my joy in the new saplings is undiminished. There are always new joys, fresh ones, of sun and season. No, why should I pine away? Do you not so either. You have much life in front of you, and will have still, when Orod-na-Thôn<sup>22</sup> is just a memory."

Beren sighed. "Well, I don't know," he said. "I am not in any case much inclined to such speculations. I must live in the present, and the present has recently given me a shock; indeed it has nearly killed me. I still need some time to recover. My refuge is safe no more, and truth to say, all places in the wood seem now exposed to Gorthaur's eyes. I have no hunger to kill, but I remember your previous wise words, and kill I shall. I cannot promise an Orc for each felled tree, but I will do my best."

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22 The Mountain of Pines – i.e., Dorthonion.

It was some weeks before Beren was fit again for the hunt, and by that time the summer was well advanced, as was the felling work of the Orcs on the two roads. He found the groups of labouring goblins difficult to attack. There were many work-groups stationed in a chain along the route, but each group was ringed a good bowshot into the woods by a watchful circle of hundreds of heavily armoured goblins. When the sun was out, or in the blackest of black nights, these parties took shelter in stone forts which had been hastily run up at places separated by a day's march. Work to strengthen and extend these forts was also constant. There were thousands of Orcs involved in the whole project. Perhaps only a tenth of these at any time were actively working on the roads, but they made steady progress all the same and were difficult to hinder.

The finished roadway ran through a strip of land from which all growth had been cleared over a width which left the central way out of reach even for Beren's bow. The Orcs sprayed the ground with some noxious oil which killed the grass, until all that was left was a poison-stained wilderness of dead growth and stumps. Later, even the stumps were burned away, leaving the roads running through strips of ruined and barren earth whose stink caught at the throat. In the cleared sections, a further work was soon under way: streams which crossed the road were funnelled into pipes and paved over. It became clear that there would be no more water-borne ambushes.

The summer advanced. The sun passed its height, but the heat of the weather only increased. The Orcs laboured day and night, heads down in their sweaty misery. A hot wind set in from the South. The once-fresh leaves of spring hung faded and limp, and the grasses shrivelled and died to a harsh, silvered growth. The east-west way was cleared now, and as the north-south way neared completion, an army began to mass under the nightmare shade of Drûn.

Even Beren was suffering from the weather. He could not remember such heat. Despite its tan, his weather-bronzed skin blistered and peeled under the sun's remorseless fire. Nor was there any comfort in water: those streams which were not dried up or stinking with seeping poison became little more than chains of tepid pools, full of scum. Fish died and turned bloating bellies to the sun. Only in the highest, snow-fed brooks was something of the old cold magic still to be felt.

He made few kills in his war. The road-workers were not to be felled without risk and luck, and no creatures of the Enemy at all ventured into the remaining woods. Only in Drûn were they to be found; so the dogged man pushed again and again into that evil land, daring the black and tearing thorns and the emptiness of the Unlife that dragged at the heart. He was ever testing the enemy's defences, killing an Orc here and a wolf there; but he could not grapple with them in easy masses as he had before. The Orcs had learned. Their gathering ranks sheltered now behind a palisade, and came not out save under armoured and wary guard.

The idea came to Beren one breathless evening on which even the sky of dusk radiated such heat as to dry the eyes and crack the lips. He was high in the hills in the South, but even at this height the air sat heavy and lifeless. The heat-embittered pines smelled sourly of dust. He was weary and sticky after a long day's fruitless hunt down the south road, and sought a spring now to ease his thirst. Four of those he knew he found dry; only the fifth gave forth a grudging trickle. He drank for some minutes, but still he felt unwell. The water did not seem to have refreshed him; his skin was hot and dry.

Where to camp for the night? A brief image of fire crossed his mind; only out of habit or association, because fire was the last thing one wanted in such heat. However, the thought made him stop what he was doing and sit up. He thought about the long slopes of the forest of Drûn, still thickly covered with all its former trees, now withered and dead. He thought about the Orc-legion behind its palisade. He had guessed what the soldiers were for. They were waiting only for the completion of the road south, and then they would decamp to the pass, where they would likely build a stronghold. That would cut his only link to the South.

The hot southerly had abated for the evening, but every day for two whole weeks now it had blown anew with the coming of day. It would surely blow again tomorrow. The whole of Dorthonion was like tinder; to strike fire anywhere in it seemed like madness. But with the wind set as it was? How much risk would there be?

Dare he mention the idea to Rattlecone? What if the Ent forbade him to take the risk?

He knew in his heart that he must do it. This was the great stroke he had been looking for. He must tell the Ents, and hope that they would not stand in his way, but would help him keep the fire from spreading into the living forest to the South.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rattlecone's eyes opened wide with horror as he heard the proposal. Beren, possessed by a fear of the chance slipping away, had run without pause, arriving in the dead middle of the night. It had been no pleasure for him to run though the gasping air, hot as a bath, and he had needed to drink from the meagre stream in the ravine before he could muster voice enough to speak.

"Fire!" said the Ent. "In such a season as this! Are you mad?"

"Think, Rattlecone," husked Beren. "Think of the direction of the wind. Think of the result. The destruction of Drûn, and the Orcs within. So much is near certain. Is that madness? Don't think about anything else for the moment: just answer that one question."

Rattlecone was silent for a space, a mere looming shape in the darkness. "Clearly, you would kill many Orcs," he said, the words coming out as if against his inclination. "The loss of Drûn..." He sighed. "But no, it is senseless to think of what once was. No, there I give you the right. It would not be an unfitting end, so. But, you know, you cannot destroy Unlife that way. They will come back, stronger than before."

"Well then," said Beren, "I boil that down to a 'no'. *Not* madness. So the only remaining question is, what is the risk to the rest of the forest?"

"Unconscionable!" said Rattlecone. "You must not attempt this thing."

"On the contrary: I must," replied Beren firmly. "And you and your race must prevent the fire spreading south. That is the reason I have told you, Rattlecone, instead of running hot-foot with a brand already burning. I could have done that, mind, and started this thing with the dawn; but I came to you, to tell you, and so have I lost a day. I cannot come to Drûn now until another night has passed, and who knows if the wind will stay in the South?"

"It will stay," replied the Ent slowly. "But there are other considerations than weather. My chief, Tabbieneedle, was ready to make cause with you. At last, after endless efforts at persuasion, he is ready. What you propose would throw that chance away."

"You Ents have been talking of this for years," said Beren, and his eyes were hard. "Nothing has ever come of it. Events will not wait upon the ruminations of the Onodrim. If you will not act, then I must."

Rattlecone gave him a dark look out of his deep eyes. "We Onodrim are a pot which is bubbling to boil. This fire of yours may push us to that edge. I do not know what we might not do if the pot bubbles over. You had best be elsewhere on that day."

"I thought we had this settled." Beren's voice was bitter. "I thought you had chosen. You told me once that hard choices must not be shirked. So, now, if you fail me, if you Onodrim do nothing but endlessly talk, then I must carry on by myself. You can do as you please."

"And how would it be, master Beren, if it pleased me to hold you strait captive until the weather has broken? Where then is your 'must'?"

"That is up to you," said Beren stiffly.

Rattlecone was silent for several breaths. "Go," he said at last, almost roughly. "Go, before I think better of it. I will gather my people."

\* \* \* \* \*

The guards on the palisade smelled the first smoke soon after daybreak. Glad at first for some distraction from the awful hollowness of this dreadful land, this hell of their forced habitation, they muttered bootless remarks about smoke to their sense-dulled fellows; but the smell rapidly grew stronger, and shortly a big officer pushed his way to the parapet. "Have you seen anything?" he growled at the listless guards.

"Nothing," they replied.

The officer snarled at them, went back down. Almost before he was gone, smoke became visible on the southern horizon. From that moment it seemed to become thicker and blacker almost with each passing heartbeat. The thought of fire came to the guards and they began to feel alarmed. Shouts were now sounding down in the compound, and before long the clumsy gates groaned open on their hinges and a wolf-mounted patrol in heavy armour galloped out and off up the slope to the South. Not five minutes later they appeared again, running faster than ever. By this time the thick black smoke occupied most of the southern horizon. Clouds of it were drifting right at them, making the Lice cough and choke. The filthy sun-thing had already been stabbing rays through the dead trees lining the crest, but its fiery orb was quenched now to a sullen red coin that flared and faded in the rising coils of black.

Consternation became general. Lice ran to and fro in the compound, but officers plied their whips, and gradually order returned. The legion began to form into ranks, facing the north gate. In a short time, the gate was opened, and they were marching through – marching at double time.

"Hey! What about us?" shouted the guards on the parapet, but no-one listened. Smoke was everywhere now, making the eyes water and catching in the throat. Cursing, glancing wide-eyed up the slope to the South, from where the crackle of hungry flames could now clearly be heard, the guards one after another left their posts and scrambled down and after the retreating legion.

Embers were falling now. The Lice in the columns began to panic; the order of the columns was loosening. Those at the rear were running, pushing hard. Shortly the ranks of the legion had dissolved. The Lice were all shoving now, in a single heaving mass. The crowd was thick, the way blocked by others. Swords were drawn as terrified Lice tried to hack their way clear of the throng. The flames roared in their rear, the red glow of the burning fort blazing high through the thick air behind them.

The open country to the North lay not far, but was it too far? The fastest runners were to the fore now, and they threw their shields and swords away, put their heads down and pumped their arms. But the fire was faster. One by one the goblins swooned, tottered, and fell, wheezing their lungs out on choking smoke, roasting in the heat. The flames roared through the forest, swifter than the flight of eagles. Even the forerunners now were falling, skins blistering, lungs heaving in nothing but fire. The last of the Orcs lay now convulsing feebly on the red-hot earth.

Soon what had been a legion of the Soldiers of Morgoth was nothing but a spread-out tongue of high-fat fuel on which the flames roared high amid serried towers of fire, each marking the corpse of a long-dead tree.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beren had run a long way down the ridge line, setting fire as he ran. He had not wanted to risk the Orcs escaping to East or West. He came back then and joined the grim Ents as they stamped out tongues of fire creeping back into the woods to the South. All day he laboured, and at the coming of night he collapsed into scorched exhaustion. The Ents, however, worked on through the night. The next day found most of them far to the East, since the flames had spread in that direction within the dry tinder of Drûn.

By the close of that day the wind had abated, but if anything, the heat had increased. Towers of white and purple cloud were building. The break came the day after. The masses of cloud opened, drenching the grateful forest, and laying the embers in Drûn to hissing and bitter ashes.

Beren dodged across the widened road in the rain, swam the river, and took refuge at last in his cave. He seldom slept there now, although he still kept the sword in its hide there, but he did not want to face

Rattlecone again until things had had some time to settle.

\* \* \* \* \*

Little moved across the land in the days after the fire. There was a sadness to be felt in the air. Trees everywhere were losing their leaves already, leaves that had been overstressed in the time of heat; falling now, withered and failing. This year there was none of the slow mellowing to amber and wine, none of the bitter-sweet, long reverie of autumn; the leaves just died and fell. Time was out of joint.

Beren wandered from one end of Dorthonion to the other, feeling lost. There seemed little left for him here but memories. One after the other, as he passed through the lands, he remembered, and the memories were brighter than the dull present. From Drûn he went, and where now was a haunted and terrible desert stinking of ashes and death, in his mind he saw again the cool ranks of pines, felt the clean scent in his nostrils, the wind in his face. His memory brought him again Nose's keen eyes, gazing out over the sweet grasslands to the North.

Dead, all dead. The dead thronged his mind. Past the unkempt fields of Ladros he wandered, past the blackened stumps of former houses and barns; looted, burnt, wrecked. All empty, the people gone, dead or scattered. To Aeluin he climbed, and the curlews cried to him in the loneliness of the heather, where the lake was no longer blue, and weeds grew over the graves of those he had known and loved. The valley where the People had drummed, had called down the lightning on rebellious and unquiet spirits; now overgrown and rank. The Dead were here too, those who had given their lives for life. But what life now remained? There was no good in this place.

Along the windy southern heights he walked, where his folk had passed on their flight, years before. He seemed again to hear the cries of the sick and the old, pressed to an endeavour beyond their powers. So many unmarked graves, hidden and forgotten in folds of the dark-pined slopes. He came to Goracc's hill, but the wise old bird was long turned to dust, and the ravens of his kin were gone. He saw Owl's face again, and that of Chases Goats; but Owl lay dead in the North, while Goats was wandering who knew where, far away.

He slept under the Watch-stone in Nose's image, and it comforted him. Something of his woodland father still remained in the stone, some whisper of forgotten times – a hint, a scent. Carver was near to him there, and she came to him in his dreams, and smiled at him with her eyes that he knew so well. He felt her comforting arms around him, smelled again the familiar and beloved smell of her hair, and he cried out in his sleep in anguish and memory, and knew it not.

Across the harsh roads of the enemy, across the sad river his wandering path took him. He found the farm of his grandparents only after much searching, for the lands had changed. The fields he had known were now thickly grown with tangled thorns, the walls hidden and broken. Little remained of the buildings but stumps, fast decaying. The picture in his mind of the tall, silver-haired old man and his smiling wife had no meaning in the present. There was no connection. Here was no farm any more, only wilderness. No people were here. No people were anywhere.

He came at last to his own former home, that which had been Sightfoot Farm. Foen behind was unchanged, but the farm was dug into a muddy mess. An Orc-hold was growing in the middle, an ugly compound ringed with dirty stone, with a brutal tower building in one corner. Beren could not approach, goblins were swarming everywhere.

The lonely wanderer climbed at last high on Foen, seeking for clearer air, clearer thoughts. He came ever higher, and with each pace of height gained, the air grew cooler, the view wider; but a haze hid the horizon, and to his nose came ever the taint of loss and death.

Beren sat long on the stony height where Nose had brought him as a boy. Birds were flying south, fleeing the land. He sat on as the sun sank into layers of thick and sullen air, watching the slow progress of the flocks as they rowed their way through the air below.



The sun sank into a vast pyre, stretching across the horizon. It seemed as though the whole West was passing, burning to ashes. The fire faded to sullen blood, then that faded in its turn, leaving only ashes and bones.

The watching man sat on. Night settled on the hill at last, but the air brought him no messages.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beren had missed two rendezvous with Bhalacho, the first because he was recovering after the battle with the Werewolves, the second because he had been busy with the business of the fire. He wondered if in the meantime the Little People had left and escaped over the pass, as he understood that they had agreed to do, and which they supposedly had under preparation. Shortly before the next assignation therefore he asked Bronze-mail to see if the People were still in their old haunts. The eagle's news that the Hairfeet were about their normal pursuits caused Beren first incredulity, then exasperation. The season was fast flying, and if the People did not hurry about it, they would be blocked in the pass by Orcs, if not by weather.

Bhalacho did not turn up to the next rendezvous. This also Beren had half-expected, since the baker might reasonably assume that Beren was dead or captured after two failed meetings. With some hesitation he decided to risk the surveillance which was becoming ever more intrusive in the forest and seek out the Hairfeet in their home.

He was greeted on the plateau first by surprise, then jubilation. The halflings crowded around him, all talking at once, saying they had thought he was dead, and what was he doing here, and how glad they were to see him. He came to their central glade, and cakes were fetched, and ale. And there were the old folks: Etty's grandfather goggling, Hampus telling all and sundry that he had never believed it, Granny White-top clapping her hands with joy. The children swarmed all over him and demanded to know what he had been doing, and what did he mean by it, giving them such a scare!

Etty was at his side, tugging at him. "You missed my birthday!" she cried.

"I am sorry, Etty, I have had other things to do," he said. He turned then to Granny. "What are you all doing here still?" he demanded. "Was all that talk in the spring for nothing?"

Granny made placating motions with her stumpy hands. "Now, now, don't fret," she said, "we're going at it as fast as we can. There's a deal of preparations to take in hand. If you don't know that, well, you should."

He shook his head. "It is not for me to order you to and fro. I would just beg you, Granny, and all of you, Hampus, Oglo, Perina, Bosko, to think of your young people. The longer you stay here, the bigger risk you run. There is a shadow over this land. Do you not feel it in your hearts? Do you not see how the animals are leaving, and the birds? I implore you, from the bottom of my heart, to flee while you still can. Do not stop to pack. Just go. Go tomorrow. You could go now, this minute! Throw all this food into bags, round up the children, and go. If you delay, I tell you, the day will come when the Enemy will come here with fire and sword. Then it will be too late. You will hear your children screaming as the Harrek put them on spits, like pheasants at the roast; and you will wish you had left when you could. But it will be too late. Too late."

All the talk had stopped. The Hairfeet ringed him round, white-faced.

Only Worrafoskin seemed unfazed. "Hah!" he huffed in his moustaches. "Them Harrek will have to get through me first. When I..."

Granny cut him off. "Foskin!" she said sharply. "Shut your mouth." The red-faced War-ward subsided in fuming chagrin. Granny turned to Beren, and her face was long. "Your words hurt me like knives, youngster," she said, "but there is truth in them, bitter though it is. We have delayed. You'm in the right of it. My old heart has been telling me of it this long time. The air tastes different, water's not the same. Us old uns know." Grandpa across the table nodded wisely, and several of the grey-heads grunted. "But look," the round old woman went on, "what you say about going now, this instant: it's just not on. Nor tomorrow, no, nor the day after neither. Now don't start in, Beren, you don't know what's what. You're on your own, its easy for

you. You've never been a father with young uns to manage for, not nor you've never been old and frail. Ten days; that's what we need, and that's what we'll take. Ten days. Is you all agreed?" Here she swept the table with a fierce glance. None dared object. "Ten days, and not a minute more. We'll set out over the way you told us, youngster. Whether you come with us or not, we'll go. But we would take it very kindly if you would show us the way."

"Of course I will," Beren said. He took her hand. "Thank you, Granny. I would never have been able to sleep nights, if your people had stayed and been caught. I rue even the ten days; but if that is your best offer, then I must accept it. Until that day, then!" He stood up and went to leave, but Bhalacho intercepted him and handed him the usual bulging satchel.

Beren bowed low to the halfling. "Your spirit is truly noble, honoured Baker," he said, "and your generosity is a jewel of wonder. No thanks would be sufficient for all that you have done for me." He left them then and returned to the wide lands below.

\* \* \* \* \*

But Mairon came in the way of Granny's plans. By thinning out the work crews on the road, aided by drafts on the garrisons under his command, he assembled an army to replace the one lost in Drûn. Soon after Beren's visit with the Zukukun, these troops moved up in a body and camped in the pass, which they rapidly set about fortifying. Under their hands a wall began to take shape, and the foundations of a strong tower. Beren harassed them as he could, but the ones and twos he shot down were only a pinprick, and the work proceeded regardless.

By the time the ten days came around, the plan he had struck with the Hairfeet was clearly impossible. The path swarmed with Orcs; there was no way around them in the narrow defile.

Beren found the Hairfeet in uproar. Bags, possessions, even furniture, lay stacked everywhere. Laden and half-laden goats added to the cacophony with their bah-ing. Some had got loose and were trying to nibble their way into the sacks of provisions. Flustered Little People chased them off, but they only pranced off a little way before circling back. Adults were shouting, children were crying.

He located Granny. "We'll have to think what to do," he shouted in her ear. "This is impossible. Unload everything and settle people down. I'll come back in a week, and I'll try to have some better advice for you." There was nothing she could do but nod assent. Tears of frustration and distress were rolling down the old woman's apple cheeks.

\* \* \* \* \*

Choker woke to greyness. He didn't know what had happened. He had bunked down normally, listening wearily to the monotonous complaints of his barrack mates. Now this.

A voice came into his head. He was sure it didn't come through his ears. It was a calm voice; a thoughtful voice.

"771-098-161-42," it said to him. That was his number, branded on his bum. "You're quite old. You've had some experiences; I've looked all through them. Interesting experiences. I've woken your self now, because I want to know, not just what you have done, but why you have done it. You will tell me this."

Choker knew, indeed, that he would. He was helpless; lay open to the Voice, like a Louse on his back, arms and legs spread and tied, open to the chop.

The Voice continued. "I have studied our foes over long years. There are many things they do which appear to make no sense. Superficially, these are the actions of madness. Yet patterns emerge, if one spends long enough in their study. Time and again I have observed of these confused and benighted rebels that they will damage their own interests to further those of another. If the other is their spawn, or even their mate, and

provided we are speaking of short-lived mortals, then such actions may be understood; they merely protect their futurity. But often the other is neither spawn nor mate. We observe also such behaviour among the Elves, who, since they do not die, have small need to burden themselves with offspring. These behaviours are aberrations, which may only be understood as a pathological misdirection of the urge to mate. But aberrations are hard to predict and channel.

“Rebels have have a word for one of these peccant behaviours: they call it ‘friend’. Let me show you ‘friend’.”

As the Voice spoke the words, the fog cleared in Choker’s head, condensed into trees, sky, birdsong. He beheld a tall Soft-skin sitting on a rock beside a stream. He could not see the man’s face. In fact the whole picture was blurred and shaky, and the angle was strange, as if seen from near the ground.

“That is our Bandit, our biting flea,” commented the Voice. “More of him anon.”

A second small figure came now into view: Lice-sized, but this was no Louse. The small creature handed a bag to the Bandit.

“He gives him food,” said the Voice. “Food that he could have eaten himself, or fed to his spawn or mate. He damages his own interests, to further those of a stranger. This is typical ‘friend’. But now watch this!”

The picture was whisked away and replaced by another: the blurry-faced Bandit again, sitting on some grass. Other figures now streamed into the picture. They were small figures, smaller than Lice. They streamed all over the man, clambering over him, tugging him, shouting in his ear.

“Why does he permit this?” said the Voice. “These are young of another race. They are not his young. What can he gain by it? Are they ‘friend’ to him?”

Choker stayed mute. He had no answer.

“I could show you other examples,” said the Voice without passion. “We have questioned many prisoners about this, we know ‘friend’ well. We have even turned this illness to our advantage on occasion. But you have seen enough now to know of what I speak. I turn to you. You are a Mobile, our own creation; a small perfection. We have designed your natures to be efficient, and to be clean of such waste, of such aberrations as ‘friend’. Yet in your own memories, we found many strange things. Many strange things. We found things that look like ‘friend’. But this should not be; you Mobiles should be clean of ‘friend’. Nor should any other hold you in ‘friend’, least of all a rebel, for what would be the gain for them in that?”

“Look at this, and explain to me what you think is happening.”

As the Voice spoke the words, the scene changed in Choker’s head, and he saw into his own memories. He was back years ago in the cage, the cage those Softies had jammed him into, after the raid that went wrong. The fierce sun was burning into his back where he lay hunched in his bonds. The Softies swarmed around, yelling, their eyes stabbing at him, stones and filth bouncing off his hide. Then they had all run off. They had left only a boy, a boy with strange eyes. The boy had let him go; had undone the cage, and let him go.

“Why did he do that?” demanded the Voice, but Choker could not answer. “Ah, well, I perceive that this is as mysterious to you as it is to me,” said the Voice. “And perhaps I should not wonder that you have no reasons for the unreason of others. But now we come to your own actions. These you must surely understand.

“You are Mobile Unit 771 and so forth. An experienced soldier. A survivor; cunning, bold, almost wise. The Mobile who began his rise by drowning a nest-mate in his own faeces. I note the cunning plot against your superior; too bad that you were not as cunning as your even higher superiors. Then your career as a scout, which you survived, where hundreds of your peers did not.

“I need not go on. In this there is nothing unusual, nothing more than a successful Mobile. But staring out of

this picture like a loose tooth we have this!”

Choker saw now the scene he had been dreading. The captive woman, years ago. The breeder; bald, toothless, fine skin and eyes under the dirt. “You could wipe the sweat out of my face,” she had lisped to him, scornfully, and he had done it.

“771,” came the voice, “why?”

Choker could not answer, but it was different now, because he knew there was an answer. He did not know what the answer looked like, did not know where it was, but he knew it was there somewhere. He knew too that all this turmoil could be read by the Voice, by his master.

“Finally we come to this,” continued the Voice, and again Choker knew what was coming. His guess was right, because coalescing in his inner eye now was the ruined body of the fish-girl. He could hear again her gasping breaths.

“I knew you had killed her,” said the Voice, and it was as firm and level as steel. “The act itself was nothing. But you worked against my order. You, a Mobile of my design, lifted your hand against *my* will, against *me*, your Creator and Master. This has never happened before, and it should not have been possible. Ah, I read in your mind surprise: you wonder that I did not revenge myself against you. But why should I do that? Where was the gain? Revenge is not functional. There was further use in you. The act was also a thing of great interest. We have examined your memories of it, many times, and tried to understand. Now I bring you to this scene awake, and I ask you directly: why?”

The answer, the answer he sought was like a tumour within Choker. He tried to speak, but no words came out.

“I see,” said the Voice carefully, although Choker did not know what it could see, since nothing was clear to him. Nothing. He gasped like a frog in a dried-up pond, pressed down beneath the whole weight of the world.

“Attend now,” said the Voice. “I return to the Bandit. He, and the forces behind him, have been too potent a foe for you Mobiles by far. I thought that my pretties might overmatch him; alas, it seems not. We cannot yet deploy those who would drink his soul, batten upon his living flesh. So what to do? I thought to use sex to trap him. That did not work, although I do not understand why not. But finally we come to ‘friend’. He is ‘friend’ with Elves, he is ‘friend’ with the Tree-wights. We can touch neither. But these rabbit-men. These small spawn who clamber over him. He does things for them. They do things for him. It has been suggested to me that we capture the rabbits, use them as a lure, bait for a trap. I cannot believe that could work. Surely not even the maddest of these rebels would run his head into such a flagrant noose. What do *you* think?” The last question jabbed into Choker’s mind like a dagger. He gasped, and the answer was there, without him needing to voice it.

“So!” hissed the Voice. “You too think he would take the bait! So strange is this world we live in! I, however; I do not agree. I am convinced that it will not work. If he were that big a fool, he would have betrayed himself years ago, or fallen for the fish-slut. No.” There was a long moment of silence. “But...” continued the Voice, and it was full of thought. “On the other hand... it will not hurt us to try.”

\* \* \* \* \*

It was the start of the horrible time.

It was Fairfeather who brought Beren the news. He found Beren on a grey, wet midday, near where the old Crossroads inn had stood. No graceful circle of descent to a feather-folding landing; the great tawny bird hurtled out of the thick air, landing so hard she nearly tumbled over.

“Fairfeather!” hissed Beren. “Be careful! There are goblins nearby. What is it?”

“The small folk are taken,” gasped the eagle. “The hairy-footed.”

Beren stared at the bird, white faced. “They have been attacked?” he said.

“No,” said the eagle, still short of breath. “Taken. During the night. I saw them with the dawn, marching in chains, far up the valley.”

The picture which formed in Beren’s mind – the whips, the terror – was almost more than he could bear. He knew all too well what would be happening.

He tried to think. “I cannot come there before tomorrow,” he muttered. But Longlimb – he lived not far away. If he was at home... He looked up. “Fairfeather,” he said with shaking voice, “Do you know Longlimb, the Ent? Can you fly to his house, see if he is there, or nearby? Or any other Ent of our following. Come back and tell me where I might find them. One of the Walkers is my only hope of speed.” Even while he spoke the words, he knew that even Ent-speed would not be fast enough; the captives must be in the Vale by now. But he must do even that little that he could do.

Fairfeather spread her wings. “I go!” she said, and took to the air with hard beats. Soon she had vanished into the rainy air. Beren was already hot-foot on the same path.

With Fairfeather’s guidance, Beren found Longlimb not far above his home. The man tried to curb his impatience in telling the tale. Some of it he had to repeat. The tall Ent stood there motionless for a long moment, several breaths of time. Beren, in despair, wondered how long he would need to turn the matter over in his mind. He knew that Ents were not used to doing anything on scales shorter than weeks. But Longlimb had become somewhat used to the quicksilver world of the Kelvar and had, over the course of the year, been trying hard to accommodate himself to the rapid tempo of their actions. He therefore did not waste too much time in hesitation before scooping Beren up, wordless, and setting off through the forest at a mile-eating, striding pace. He set off straight through the uplands south of the old crossroads, threading his way between – and in some cases directly over – the bulging granite domes of the range of hills.

Beren bade the Ent pass by his cave. Quickly in the dusk he fetched Frostfire and his fish-scale shield, returning wetter than before to perch again high on the shoulder of the Ent.

All through the night the Ent strode on, through the empty pine woods, dripping with gentle rain that fell as tears, endless through the night. Past the abandoned colony of ravens they went, Goracc’s hill of old, and still the rain fell. Across the Orc-cut way, Longlimb wincing at the touch of poison under his feet. Over the wild ravines cutting down from the mountains, one after another, where only the lurching of the Tree-man who bore him told Beren in the blackness of the rainy night of precipices descended, cliff-faces climbed. He clung on with all his might and wished with his heart for dawn.

The dawn, when it came, almost made him regret his wish, so sorrowful were the sights it revealed.

Longlimb scaled the last stony face in the hard, returning greyness of merciless day. At the top, they found the Hairfeet’s domain strewn with smashed and ravaged goods. Goats lay slaughtered in their congealing blood, which the rain had leached in red streaks down into the brook. But there was more: bodies. Hairfeet. Two, three he counted, with knives in their hands, or in one case clutching only a wooden spade. Beren went from one to the other, wordless.

On the far side, the side from which the attack had come, he found Worrafoskin. The War-ward lay still and cold in the mess of blackening blood which had gushed from his many wounds. He was hacked in the neck, on the face; his blade was broken in two. Jumbled around him in the careless attitudes of death lay three dead Orcs.

Beren sank to his knees in the grey silence. As he sat there, numbly taking in such banal details as the disarray of the foolish great moustaches, Fairfeather landed with a thump beside him.

"I fear the prisoners will be in the Tower by now," she said. "The Orcs will not have stopped for night. But I will look to see. What will you do?"

"I will also look," said Beren grimly. "That is all I can do." He turned to Longlimb. "I pray thee, friend, to take me a little further: to the entrance to Rattlecone's valley. I will not turn aside to Rattlecone, but I will part from thee there, and go on myself into the Vale. These are my friends, therefore mine must be the danger." He sighed then and stood up. "I will just carry these bodies into a burrow, so that the birds cannot make them ugly." He did this. Worrafoskin was the last. Beren laid the mangled Hairfoot beside his clansmen, his broken sword on his breast, with the blades of his vanquished under his feet. He could not stand upright in the chamber, but he paused, crouching awkwardly under the roof, and saluted the Hairfeet. "Fare ye well, comrades," he said softly, then turned and closed the door on them. There was no time to do more.

Fairfeather had flown off on her errand. Longlimb stood there in sombre silence. "Is there more?" said Beren. "I cannot think of anything. Come, then, let us be away." The Ent picked Beren up and the two of them took their further road. Soon the clearing was empty, except for the carrion birds gathering for what pickings remained.

Longlimb made short work of the distance to Rattlecone's valley. Not far from its entrance, Fairfeather joined them again. The great eagle had a tattered look, and when Beren looked closer, he saw that there was blood on her feathers.

"I saw no living thing," the eagle gasped as soon as she had gathered herself, "but I could not get close to the Tower. That valley has become very evil."

"You say 'living'," said Beren, "but what of the dead?"

"Aye," said the bird, "I saw three small bodies this side of the ridge, and I think there were more beyond, from the way the birds were flocking." He paused, seeing well the effect his news had on Beren.

Beren thought a moment in silence, then looked up. "Thank you, Fairfeather," he said. "You have done all that you can. Rest now. Stay with Rattlecone if you will, until I come again. Tell him what has passed. I will come to him as soon as I have seen what there is to see in the Vale."

"Master Beren," said the eagle with emphasis, "if you set foot in that valley, I doubt you will return. Very many spies and foes are abroad on wing and foot. I came hardly away, and no-one could call me slow, nor weak either. I counsel you to leave this now. The Hairfeet are lost. Do not throw your life away on a vain cause."

"I will return," said Beren grimly. "Have no fear of that." He left the eagle with the tall, silent Ent and ran swiftly up the path.

Rattlecone lived on the high headwaters of the Whitewater, where it wound its snow-fed way from the depths of the unpassable mountains. The trampled path of the Orcs which Longlimb had been following left the valley near this place and climbed into the hills which barred the way to the Vale of Sirion. It was possible to get to the Vale this way, Beren knew, but it was no easy route.

His words to Fairfeather and Longlimb had been bold, but he felt far less certain in his own breast. The sense of evil and oppression grew on him with every step he took. His back itched between the shoulder blades as though there were furtive eyes on him, spying his movements. The growing conviction of wrongness made him wary as only a Druug could be; he slipped noiselessly between the shadows, every sense alert.

He came soon to the first body. It was Etty's grandfather. There were whip-marks on the old Hairfoot's withered legs, and on his face too. Beren stood by the pitiful body a minute, his face terrible. There was not a thing in the world he could do, so he turned and ghosted on his way.

He passed the next two dead with hardly a look. He knew them of course; he knew them all. Foolish Hairfeet with their love of food, and song, and the good things of life. Simple folk, untouched by the harshness of the world. He had tried to keep them from this; tried, and failed.

He was at the ridge, and there he stopped, because the malevolent will radiating from the Isle of Werewolves beat on his forehead like the heat of a devouring fire. Every sense screamed caution at him. He could see no living thing, no sign of the spies Fairfeather had mentioned, but his instincts had seized his limbs to a halt. This whole valley was one giant trap, and he knew beyond shadow of doubt that if he continued on the trail he would run right into its teeth.

After standing still and silent for a long moment of indecision, he slipped off the trail into the tall woods to the South.

Matters off the trail were scarcely better. The nearer he crept down and across the slope toward the Tower, the heavier the weight of fear became. The vigilance of unknown foes passed him close like blindly reaching claws which he had to exert all of his art to elude. Lower he crept, and lower still, until the rushing sound of the river brought its own terror with it, for it masked sound. Enemies were all around him, trying to find him. With the hair raised on his neck, he crept on. He came to the edge of the trees at last, and there it was: the great pile of slimed stones. The former Tower of the Guard, now captured and perverted, like the carrion shadow of some creature once fair and noble.

The thought of the gentle small people he had known brought within this obscenity roused Beren to a helpless rage. Forgetful of all prudence, he set an arrow to his great bow and drew it back until the bronze head touched the bow-stave. He filled his lungs then, and with all the strength of his full-flowered manhood he bellowed out the name of his foe: "Mairon!" As his shout echoed off the rocks, he loosed the arrow. The shaft rose up, up, until it clattered on the stones at the crest of the tower rampart, high above.

In that instant he knew that he was found, seen, and that the hunt was up. Springing off the rock he had shot from, he bounded into the bushes behind. He heard crashing sounds close on both sides, and from the tower behind came unearthly screeches.

Beren laughed madly as he ran. Let them seek him! In nine years of this chase he had defeated every hunter. A jink behind a tree, a quick arrow, and the first wolf was down. He ducked, weaved, was never there when his enemies expected it. He shot them down, and they shot themselves in the heat of their zeal, tangled by the wily prey. Steadily he made distance up the hill and away.

The air shook to the beat of great wings. The running man glanced behind him and saw creatures no nightmare could ferment into being. Great dirty wings they had, tipped with cruel claws; and they had no faces, just tangled, lumpy flesh out of which many black eyes glittered. The things spied him at the same time, and now they dived on him, shrieking fit to cut stone. He could avoid these winged hunters under the trees, but this hampered his movements. The rending cries went through his head and made it hard to think.

He had accounted for the first wolves, and was a few seconds ahead of the streaming masses of Orcs. The winged monsters were jinking around the trees, trying to get to him. He had too few arrows to waste on them. Running still, with the awful screeches of the winged horrors echoing across the slopes, he spied a clearing. He drew Frostfire and bent his steps in that direction.

Like all actions, it was quick once begun. He stood in the clear; the first black thing dived on him, filthy pinions spread to block the sky. Beren swung Frostfire in a blazing arc, stepped aside as the thing burst into two halves which crashed wetly into the ground before tumbling over into a leathery mess. But he was already dealing with the next to come; and the next. In the wing-beat or two all this had taken, the other monsters commenced rowing hard backwards. They sheared off now, although Beren's reaching stroke snipped a chunk off the end of a wing.

But now the foot chasers had caught up. More wolves: arrows for them, one-two. Just time to throw the bow aside and take up Frostfire again, and the shield. With fierce joy, Beren met the crashing attack of the Orcs.

They could not lay blade on him, and they could not shut out his. It was almost too easy. The hard lessons of Yg in his sinews, the balance and calmness learned from the Druug, the glamour of the blade of Valinor: they blended to make him a matchless opponent.

Leaving the piled corpses, grabbing the bow from the ground, he ran on. The horrors above were shrieking and wheeling, keeping just out of range.

Forces were massing. There were too many. If once they came up with him, he was done. He ran on and on, up the steep slope, steel legs pumping. The mighty will behind him was stretching its hand out to catch him and crush him, but Beren laughed, the mad fire of battle filling his heart. He stretched out his legs and ran the harder.

He was high in the hills by sunset, but the chase was close. He had not come far, not as he would count a journey, but he had been running for his very life for some hours. He knew that he could not keep up this pace forever; the dark, too, would tell against him. He was used to the dark, but he was at base a creature of the sun; whereas in the dark hours, his foes became strong. He was also running short of arrows.

With something of a shock he recognized where he was. Not far ahead lay the barren tarn where the ghost of Gorlim had come to him. The horror of that memory seized him, but he could not turn aside, for the foe ran him close on both sides as well as behind. So far ahead were they on his flanks that they threatened to close the way ahead.

The ridge with its writhen pines rose ahead of him. The haunted valley lay beyond. Fear was in him now, such a fear as he had not felt all this day until now; fear of what he would find in the place of fell memory. But to turn around or aside would be to run onto the teeth that were reaching for his blood.

Over the ridge, and there it was in the dull light: the tarn of his waking nightmare. The whole combe was wreathed with mists. Beren ran in gathering despair, the blood pounding in his head, the day darkening in pace with his spirit. The unquiet dead were here, the dead he had once known. He could hear their voices again, somewhere behind his ears, whispering in the shadows.

He ran on, feet thumping on the stones. The pack was close behind him, they had seen him on the barren slope. Other hunters were pouring in from the sides. Egged on by the screaming black forms beating above, the massed Orcs and wolves bayed for blood and swept ever closer behind the lone figure, now running for its life along the shore.

On the lake, strange-shaped twists of mist had risen and gathered with the dusk, but the hunters were too intent to notice. The thickening tendrils of fog were drifting to the shore, but the Orc-carrying wolves were close behind the man now. Hunger for the prey's blood fired their running, their slavering leaps. The sound of his pounding feet ahead, splashing through shallows, could clearly be heard. Each bound brought them closer

A wisp of fog momentarily cut off sight of the prey. They swept through, it was past, revealing him closer than ever. But now there was more fog. Where had that come from?

The fog closed in. The wolf-steeds wanted to follow the scent, which was hot and clear in their noses, but the Orc-riders reined them in, snarling. "Pull up there!" Other riders came up full tilt from behind, cannoned into the halted ones. Confusion, swearing. Similar noises came through the fog from the side, and splashes showed where some had ridden into the lake.

The riders gathered, conferred. "You lot stay with me, we'll keep on the trail. The rest of you, spread out, so he can't double back." "Where's them harpies got to?" "Fuck 'em – never mind them – you just keep to your job."

The captain took three of his riders with him and set his wolf to the scent. The fog was thick now, and the last of the light was fading to a charcoal dimness. Nothing could be seen or heard on the lake which lapped at



their side.

Suddenly all the wolves stopped rigid. The hairs of their thick pelts stood slowly out, making them look unnaturally swollen.

The hair of the captain's wolf felt like stiff wires under his hand. "Get on, you!" He dug his heels into the beast, but it bucked under him, snarling. Cursing it, the captain reached for his goad. The wolf was backing up now. He applied the goad, but the only result was to provoke the beast into wild bucking.

Before he knew it, the captain had been thrown off. He landed in chill water. The wolf ran off; the sound of its paws skittering in the water faded gradually away.

Silence. Just the mist drifting past, and now not even enough light left to see his feet. But the water wasn't deep. Where was the shore? It could not be more than a step away. And where were the others?

"Hoy!" he shouted. "Where are you!"

No reply.

Cursing now more than ever, the captain took a pace. No good: that was deeper. He stepped backward, then froze in horror, because *that way was deeper too*.

That couldn't *be*. He must have made a mistake. Think now. He drew his sword and shoved it into the mud. It stood upright, the hilt just protruding above the water. If he peered, he could just see it. So. One step that way. No, no good. Straight back.

The water was up to his waist, and he could not find the sword. Curse it, it was only a step away! Sweep with the hands, below the water. No good. No sword. Panic took him then, and he waded through the water, shouting wildly. No matter which way he went, it got deeper. The captain could not swim. Soon he was pawing for the bottom with his feet, straining to keep mouth above water. One last terrified yell for the others. From the lake there came no answer; only silence.

The mud was soft, his feet were sinking deeper. The captain tried jumping to get his mouth above water for a breath, but his feet only dug in the harder when he came down, so that he stuck and could not jump properly. Panic. Choking. At the last, a slow and terrified descent into oblivion.

After a long time, the fog drifted from the lake. It faded slowly into wisps and disappeared. Nothing moved more in the silence. The stars looked down, indifferent, on the floating bodies of Orc and wolf; and the man was long gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

The quarter-master came to the castle-major to complain. He found him sitting at a table with Mairon's legate, surrounded by papers.

"Look, what am I supposed to do with these rat-folk?" he said. "There's hundreds of 'em! Where'm I supposed to stow 'em all?"

"What's that to me?" said the castle-major. "Find somewhere! It's your job, not mine."

"Well then, I'll turf one of your cohorts out of its barracks."

"Don't you touch those fucking soldiers, you fat maggot," growled the major, looking the quarter-master up and down. "Not if you value your fucking life. Fucking civilian."

"Do this, don't do that," shouted the quarter-master. "Those rats are dying in their own shit. I'll take it to Master, that's what I'll do. You'll be whistling out of a few new holes then, I'll wager, you useless puff-gut!"

The legate stepped in before they could come to blows. “Where do you have them now?” he said smoothly.

“In the third armoury,” replied the quarter-master sullenly.

The major jumped up. “You what?” he spluttered. “You put enemies in an armoury? Are you out of your fucking mind?”

“Do me a favour,” sneered the quarter-master. “Them? Enemies? Have you seen ’em? They’re like little rabbits. Shriek if you look at ’em. There’s no fight in ’em. No, mate, you can rest easy on that score. Ha ha ha!”

“I think that’s all right,” said the legate. “I agree with you, I don’t think they’ll get up to much. But anyway, if they’re there, why can’t you leave them there? Where’s the problem?”

“There’s nowhere for them to doss down,” said the quarter-master, “nor nowhere to dung, neither. I told you, they’re lying in their own shit. Won’t eat their grub, and won’t drink neither, hardly. We got more deaders all the time. Fine by me, they’re a sight less trouble dead, but I thought you wanted ’em kept alive. If you do, well, you’d better give me proper quarters for ’em, that’s all I’m saying.”

The legate thought it over. He knew Mairon’s wishes on the matter, and something of his intentions.

“You must keep them alive, or as many of them as possible,” he said. “You’ll answer to Master if you don’t. Hmm... isn’t there some of that Elvish muck left somewhere? Provisions, I mean. There was barrels of it when we came in here, biscuit and I don’t know what. They’ll eat that, I’ll be bound. I’ll get some of the body-hackers to see to any who need doctoring. As for quarters...” He turned to the castle-major. “Turn one of your cohorts into the courtyard. A bit of rain and fresh air won’t hurt them for a few days.”

The major’s eyes widened and his face reddened. “What?” he shouted. “I’ll be fucked if I’ll turn out fighting Rrrk just to house a lot of snivelling rats!”

“Why don’t you take it up with Master?” said the legate, grinning unpleasantly. “Tell him what you think of his orders. But before you go, just tell us who the next castle-major is to be, will you? We wouldn’t want to waste any time easing in your successor.”

The castle-major subsided, fury wrestling with apprehension in his features.

“Look,” continued the legate in more soothing tones, “It’s only for a few days. Master’s got plans for these little scum.”

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The children were whimpering now rather than crying. The adult Hairfeet, huddled against the dirty walls, were mostly silent. Even the injured and ill were lying quiet. Terror and shock had stunned them all voiceless. The vicious and deformed faces of their captors, their curses and jeers, their cruel clawed hands, the roughness, the stink, and most of all the stabbing malice of their eyes, had been almost too much for the People to bear. These were things out of darkest nightmare, now emerged into the light of day and made horribly and inexorably true.

Of the capture itself they shrank from thinking. During the awful march through the mountains, they could only numbly endure. Their minds could not really grasp the magnitude of the pile of rancid stone, towering impossibly up into the dull sky, into which they had been dragged. They had been bundled and shoved, crying, into these gloomy and shabby rooms, filled with gear that smelled rankly of oiled steel, and left. Later, sneering Harrek had opened the stout wooden door and thrown in some mouldy loaves and a few leathern bottles full of stale water. The Hairfeet had drunk a little of the water but nobody yet had stomach for the loaves. Time had passed. They were not lying in their dung as the quartermaster had claimed, but there was nowhere proper to do the necessary. By unspoken consent the People had chosen a corner of the

space for such functions. They averted their eyes from those who crept quietly to visit it, and tried to ignore the smells.

Bhalacho was sat holding tight to his wife and child. None of them had anything to say. Tears had left tracks down Etty's dirty face, but she was quiet now.

Grim thoughts paraded themselves through Bhalacho's head. Although they had avoided words in Etty's hearing, he knew from the look in his wife's eyes that she had been thinking much the same. What was to come of them? What was it all about? They had not been killed; only those few who had fought. But why had they not? What purpose had the enemy in keeping them alive?

Bhalacho had not fought at the time of capture, but he could imagine no good outcome from where they were now, and during the hours and days of their horrible trek he had many times cursed his passivity. To die fighting these swine seemed to him now by far the cleanest and best way he could dispose of his own life. If only it weren't for Etty and Melena... but then again, at the last, they could each hold a blade as well. If they only had any to hold.

His eyes roved over the things with which the dim room was filled. It seemed to be some sort of armoury. Here there were racks full of iron-gleaming weapons; over there he could see stacks of great helms. Further over there were rows of black-faced shields leaning against one wall. Bhalacho contemplated these objects for a long time as his mind turned over the dark prospects which lay before them. As he sat there, brooding on the hurts which had been dealt to those dear to him, the numbness and the fear in his breast grew no less, but a slow fire began to burn within like a smouldering coal. At the last, he clenched his fist. He had stood by and let that all happen, like some kind of great booby. Well, there would be no more of that. He did not know what he was going to do, nor quite what he was going to do it with; but somebody was going to get hurt, and this time it wouldn't just be him.

He stirred himself, waking bruises into painful life. "I'm going to see how it is with Granny," he whispered to Melena, and saw her nod in reply. He clambered stiffly to his feet and crept to where the old woman lay, surrounded by her immediate family. The Harrek had had to carry her for most of the way. They had not had enough stretchers for all the old and infirm; those unfortunates left over had had to walk as best they might, with whips to hurry them on. Some, like Grandpa, had simply collapsed and died. Bhalacho's heart grew hot within him as the dreadful picture came once again to his mind.

There was nothing to be done with Granny. She lay in a fugue, eyes half-closed. Her breathing was laboured, but she clung to life somehow. Bhalacho nodded to the silent carers, stood up again, and moved on. He had other people in his mind: men of his own generation, men like himself, men he knew well.

Here was Mungo. The Hairfoot was bare-chested, having taken his tunic off to tear into bandages. His half-grown son had struggled against the Harrek, receiving a deep sword-cut on his upper arm for his trouble. The lad had fainted betimes on the way here from loss of blood, and at last Mungo had had to carry him over his shoulder. Both were striped on the legs from the brutal whips.

Bhalacho crouched by his ragged friend and received a flash from his eyes and a grunt of acknowledgement. The baker wasted no time in rehearsing complaints about their predicament, he murmured only, "I was thinking to have a chin-wag with a few lads. Canst tha come?"

"What's to do?" grunted Mungo.

"Dunno," replied Bhalacho. "Something, though. I'm fair sick of this show, I'll tell thee that for free."

"All right," said his friend. "Soon's I've finished here."

Bhalacho left him and peered through the gloom for other faces he had in his mind. One by one he found them: younger men, some with families, all of them fit enough. Most of them agreed to come and talk. When they were all gathered, Bhalacho looked at their faces, trying to gauge the mood. He thought they were

mostly the same as he: the terror was there, but there was a spark behind their eyes that might be fanned into something.

“Look, lads,” he began, keeping his voice down, “I don’t need to tell you aught about the fix we’re in, how it looks and all. What I want to know is what we mean to do about it. Now I dunno about you lads, but I’ve had about enough of being cast about like a bag of leavings.”

“They cut my boy,” growled Mungo. “I dunno why I sat there and did naught. I dunno. I ain’t going to sit there no more, though. They’ll come for us. But they’ll feel my fist when they do, that they will.”

“Wish there was more we could do,” said another, a stout young Hairfoot by the name of Gopold.

“Look around you, son,” said Bhalacho.

“Oh aye,” said Gopold, “I’ve had the same thought. I’m sure a lot of us have. There’s a power of swords and I don’t know what in here. Can’t say I fancy these here pieces much, though. They’s all too big and heavy, for one; there’s no luck in ’em, for another.”

Several of the gathered Hairfeet grunted agreement. “Harrek blades is only good for Harrek,” nodded Danusc, a middle-aged goat-herd who had a plump wife and five children. The feet of his wife and the elder children were a mess of blood, and his wife had been whipped several times. There was a wild look now in Danusc’s eyes. “I’d trust my fist before I’d trust one o’ they.”

“Well we got to do something,” said Bhalacho fiercely. “And whatever we do, if we all do it together, we can hit the harder, if you take my meaning.”

“I’m thinking a lot of the folk would step up,” said Gopold, “if only they had a bit of a sniff of something to do, some way they could fight. We was taken by surprise first off. You didn’t ought to say those hard words to yourself, Mungo. We was all taken by surprise, like. ’Twill be different next time. Leastways it would be, if only a chap had something to hold in his hand. Something honest, not this Harrek filth.” The Hairfeet had all been stripped of whatever knives they had been carrying at the time of their capture.

“We ain’t seen properly what’s in here,” said Bhalacho. “Let’s see what’s what, first of all. Aye, that’s the thing to do. Have a scramble around, eh? Then back here in a kettle-boil or so?”

The rest agreeing, they split up and explored the chambers. In a short time they gathered again, bringing one or two more recruits in addition.

Mungo was excited. “I found a door,” he said. “I think there’s other gear inside. Couldn’t rightly see.” He led them to the far end of the armoury, where they indeed saw a stout oaken door similar to the one that shut them in. There was a barred opening in it. By hitching themselves up by the bars, they could peer in. The light was bad, but what there was gleamed off blades which seemed of other make than the ugly weapons of the Harrek.

They could do nothing with the stout lock, and the gap between the bars was too small for any of them to pass.

Bhalacho eyed the spacing of the bars with speculation. “My Etty could fit through that,” he said. “I’m sure of it.”

The others looked doubtful. “ ’Tis a big thing to ask of the maid,” said one.

“Is it?” said the grim-faced baker. “Let’s ask her and see.” He crept back to where his wife and child huddled. He found Etty asleep. He muttered his idea to his wife, and with her nodded agreement, he shook his daughter awake. Etty woke, stared with wild eyes around at the scene. When the realisation came to her that it was no night-terror, but the iron reality of despair, she buried her face in her father’s chest, her hands

clutching at his tunic.

Bhalacho stirred her gently. “Etty, love,” he said, “we need your help. We need you to be brave, child. So that we all can be brave too.”

Etty lifted her tear-stained face to his. “What help?” she whispered. Bhalacho told her of the door, and of the narrow window, and what might be found within. As he spoke, he saw the light of courage grow in his daughter’s eyes. When he had finished, she nodded tremulously. They all three stood up, and Bhalacho led them to the inner door, where the others still waited. Gopold, being the tallest and strongest of them, sat Etty upon his shoulders. She peered in through the opening.

“I think I can get through,” she said.

“Is there a way to get back, though?” asked Melena anxiously.

Etty put her head through the bars and looked around the inner room, as far as she could see it in the dim light. “There’s some chests and things,” she said. “If I could put one on another, I believe I could clamber up.”

“Well, what’s in there?” said Mungo. “Is there aught to make it worth it?”

“Oh, there’s wonderful things in there,” said Etty in awed tones. “Jewels and things. On the swords, they are. Like green and blue fire.”

“Nay, jewels is no good to us, lass,” said Bhalacho gently. “How big are the swords, then? Could we use ’em?”

“I don’t think so, Daddy,” replied the maid. “They’re for big folk. They’re as big as I am, almost. Oh! No, I can see some smaller ones too. It’s a mess in there, everything just thrown all over.”

“If tha canst see some honest blades which we could use,” said her father, “then I think we must ask thee to risk it.”

“All right, Daddy.” She leaned down and gave him and her mother a quick kiss and embrace, then addressed herself to the opening. She was able eventually with some difficulty to pull herself through by holding to the bars on the other side. Once clear, she dropped down. The tense Hairfeet waited outside for what seemed an age. They heard dragging sounds, and some thumps and bangs. Then Etty’s triumphant face appeared at the bars from the other side. “Here!” she said, and pushed something through the gap. Bhalacho reached up and took it from her. It was a long knife in a simple but beautiful sheath, of forest-green background, on which had been wound vines of gleaming silver wire. Small silver birds disported among the vine leaves. The wondering baker drew the blade from the sheath with a liquid rasping sound and held it high. The Hairfeet all fell back a pace, staring at the gleaming blade, which flickered as if blue flames were trapped within the metal.

“These must be Elvish things,” said Bhalacho in awed tones. “Powers only know what they are doing here, among all this filth.” He looked at his companions, his chin tilted up. “What do you say now, lads?” and found his answer in the light gleaming in their eyes. He bade Etty then find as many of such knives as she could. By digging through the disorder as well as she was able, the girl eventually found about twenty-five knives which were of a handy size to use. She found mail as well, some of it wonderfully fine; but there was nothing which would fit any of the Hairfeet.

By this time most of the able-bodied folk had gathered by the door and were passing the blades from one to the other, marvelling at the beauty of their make and at the fine, brave way they sat in the hand. At last Etty could find nothing more. They pulled her back through the bars and set her down. Her mother hugged her tightly, as if she would never let her go again, and the people vied to praise her and pat her on the back.

“Now,” said Bhalacho to his people, “we have summat in our fists, better than ever I had hoped for. But what are we going to do with ’em? Eh? We need a plan.”

Many voices began speaking at once, but Danusc thumped on the door with the blade he held, until they were quiet. The fierce look had not left his eyes. “We hide ’em,” he said. “That’s what we do. We hide ’em away, and wait. We’ll know what to do when the time comes.”

“That’s sense,” said Bhalacho. “We should wait til we see what’s what. Wait our chance, like.”

After some discussion, that’s what they decided on. The long knives were bound to legs and down backs. By the time the tramping of feet and the flicker of torchlight signalled the return of their captors, everything was safely hidden away.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beren reached Rattlecone’s garth well after midnight. After the briefest of greetings to the Ent, he collapsed on his bed of ferns and sank immediately into sleep. When he awoke the next day he found only Rattlecone present. The Ent told him that Longlimb had gone to take the news around, and that Fairfeather was on watch. Beren gave him then a brief account of the previous day’s occurrences. When he came to the part where he crossed the combe, he had to confess bewilderment.

“They drove me so close,” he said, “that I could not steer my way, else I would never have come near that haunted place. And haunted indeed it remains, else my heart lied to me. Well, I reached the lake shore, and the hunt was close behind me, and gaining. Wolf-riders were in the van. And then I do not know what happened. There was fog forming on the lake with the close of day, and an arm of it came across behind me. The hunters rode into it, but none rode out. You may believe me when I tell you I had no inclination to tarry in that place! I came away as fast as my legs would carry me. But what happened to the Orcs and the wolves I cannot say.”

“Perhaps it is best not to enquire,” said Rattlecone.

“Well, however it is, I am here, despite Fairfeather’s worst fears, and the foreboding too of my own heart, if truth be known. And now I do not know what I can do. It tears me to pieces thinking of those harmless folk under Gorthaur’s hand, but I cannot think of a thing I can do about it. Unless you have ideas? Otherwise I must just harden my heart and go on, as best I can.”

“I think you are right,” said the Ent slowly. “I do not think you can enter the Tower and live. You got in before, but the Sorcerer will not be caught the same way twice. But there is something about this business I do not understand. What does he want with the Little People? I cannot see any gain for him, any advantage. Save one.”

Beren looked up. “What is that?”

“I think all of this is pointed at you,” replied the Ent. “Indeed, the longer I consider it, the more certain I become. Gorthaur has hunted you, but you have eluded the hunters. He has tried to trap you, but you have evaded every trap. He put the poor fish-maid in your way, but you slipped off that hook as well. I wonder now if he has not at last found a hook which you cannot escape.”

“You may be right,” said Beren slowly. “The trap yawned wide for me over yonder, that I do know. But I escaped it, although I cannot say how. So what comes now?”

“I do not know,” said Rattlecone. “But I am thinking we have not seen the end of this business. I am thinking we may hear soon from Gorthaur.”

The day wore on with a sense of gathering tension. Fairfeather returned and reported little movement either by land or in the ways of the sky. Others of the eagles came, and then Ents began also to drift in: Longlimb,

Wriggleroot, Ivyhair, Nutfinger. None of them was sure why they had come; it just seemed the thing to do.

The westering sun disappeared behind thickening clouds. As the day waned towards evening, as darkness gathered in the grooves and hollows of the land, so the waiting creatures felt a weight of darkness growing in their hearts. The Ents stood silent; the eagles huddled dispiritedly in their roosts. Beren sat with bowed head. The last light faded, and evil was abroad in the hills.

In the utter darkness at the midpoint of that heavy night, man, Ents and eagles jerked alert, for a ghastly cry had rent the air. Again the shriek came, and again. Beren's knees shook, and he knew not how it went with the others. But he gathered his courage and shouted into the night.

“Who comes there, sneaking like a thief through the dark! Show yourself, if you have the mettle!”

The night was black, such that the line of the trees could hardly be seen, but into that empty field there appeared now a patch of shadow darker than any night. It grew, and as it came, it expanded and contracted, with a beat of sound, like a flapping of great wings; but never a bird flew in that manner. Like a shadow of despair, the thing approached. The dreadful cry rang out again, freezing all hearts; the great shadow dipped and landed with a crash on one of the alders. The weight of it bowed the tree over and showered the ground with broken twig and branch.

The watchers shrank back in fear and dismay. The dark wings stretched wide and beat corruption into their faces. They could see nothing in the blackness, and their hearts quailed in their breasts.

Beren stepped forward and held up the ring of Finrod. “*Á tulë, airë nárë, tultanyel i sina foá saura ustalye et lómello. Tula!*”<sup>23</sup> he cried, and a blinding red tongue of flame jetted high from his hand. The light of it illuminated the whole garth and gleamed off the eyes of the Ents. And there, weighing down the tree, they beheld the shape of the Darkness. Most like unto a bat it was, of the blood-gorging kind. Vast leathery wings spread blackly to each side; eyes glittered with malice in the twisted nightmare face; curved needle fangs they saw, and cruel iron claws.

“What are you, and what do you want?” cried Beren. “Speak swiftly! Or I will turn the fire on you, and more besides.”

The thing hissed at him, and such malice was in the sound as to freeze the blood.

“Thus bleats the lamb before the slaughter,” came its croaking voice, and it was a voice as cold as Death, laying its fingers around their hearts. “Thus squeaks the rabbit within the noose. Who am I, you ask? *I* am Thuringwethil, and I do my masters' bidding, and that of no other. I do not heed the pot-valiant threats of ragged outlaws, be they bedecked with trinkets beyond their worth and ken or no. My words to such dross as you are speedily said. Simply this: if you want this tribe of rat-folk you consort with to survive, you will give yourself up at the Tower. You have three days.” The creature bared its fangs at him then and stretched its vast wings wide, ready to depart.

“Wait!” cried Beren. “I cannot answer so quickly. You must give me time to consider.”

“There is no answer to await, nothing to consider,” hissed the monster. “Either you come, or they die.”

“I will come, to save their lives,” said the man. “But I must have surety of their release!”

“We give none!” shrieked Thuringwethil, and stretched her wings again.

“Your master will not thank you if he does not get me,” shouted Beren, feeling a desperation he dared not show. “When a little more care might have secured the prize. Come parley again tomorrow, or he will get nothing!”

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23 Come, holy fire, I summon you to burn this foul breath from the night. Come!

The monstrous bat-thing hesitated. "Tomorrow, then, if you will have it so," it spat, then leaped up. The tree whipped back with a crash; the beat of the giant wings blinded and choked them with the stink of death. The shadow left them, the breeze blew, the brook sounded. The night was clean again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beren and the Ents were all too shaken to take up the matter that night; indeed, they found it difficult even to sleep. When at last the clear light of day relieved them from dread of nightly phantoms, they sat and debated what best to do. Beren had no plan in mind when he sued for more time; but now they all cudgelled their minds to come up with one.

Around midday Rattlecone attempted to distil the arguments into clarity. "The central fact is that you have something Gorthaur wants," he said. "Namely yourself. That gives you a hold on him. There are certain things you can induce him to do. All we need to do is settle what *we* want, and steer things in that direction."

"I want the Hairfeet released," said Beren. "You know that. But another of your central facts is that Gorthaur will not honour any promise. Nor is our power over him more than marginal. I think we cannot compel him to release the Little Folk, no matter what we do. I tell you frankly, I am in despair."

"Why would he not?" put in Bronze-mail from the branch on which he sat. "Suppose he had assurance of gaining you in exchange. Why would he not release the small two-legs?"

"No, I cannot see it," said Beren. "It would be a loss of face. In any case, there is no such assurance. He will certainly not release them without gaining me in return, and I will not surrender myself unless I in turn have assurance that my friends are freed."

"I do not think Gorthaur thinks along such lines," said Rattlecone. "I agree with Bronze-mail. If he knew he would obtain you by that, and only by that, he would pay that price. It is the assurance which is the difficulty."

There was a deal more argument, but as the afternoon drew on, Beren decided he had heard enough. "Look you!" he said. "There is no solution, else we had found it by now. I will tell the bat-thing that the prisoners must be brought into the forest. Not in the Vale either, but in the Forest proper. There at least we are on our own ground, not his." He turned to Rattlecone. "If he agrees to that, can I count on you and your comrades here to help me keep this sorcerer to his promise?"

"We will do all that we can," said Rattlecone quietly. "But will you truly give up your life for these small folk?"

"Turn it around," said Beren. "Ask rather, am I willing to let them die, yet do nothing to prevent it? I am not."

After that, there seemed little more to be said.

When Thuringwethil came again, Beren made his demand. The great bat sat silent a time after hearing it, her stony eyes surveying him impassively. Suddenly she laughed, a high cackling screech.

"Treachery!" she shrieked. "I smell treachery. You would assail my lord from shelter of the trees." The creature cackled again. "But even knowing this, we will come. Mairon does not fear your puny plots. My lord is an eternal Power whose mind shaped the world in the Void before time. He Was, when your very substance was not conceived, and he will still Be long after it is frittered into nothingness. What need he fear a pulpy mortal man and some wandering bundles of bark and twig? We will come! And see that you, too, come. We had intended before simply to butcher these gobbets and feed them to our toilers, had we not lured you in exchange. There would have been no added weight of misery for them. But you were not content with that; no. You wish to dictate terms to Lord Mairon the Admirable? You, even you, a miserable hunk of ephemeral slime? If you will reach at such astounding insolence, then you must pay. Either you, or your pets;



but someone will pay.”

“Get you gone,” said Beren through gritted teeth. “Your embassy is over, and I do not desire to hear your threats. Just tell me when the exchange is to take place.”

“When my lord Mairon is ready,” hissed the monster. It took wing then into the air and flapped away, taking its foulness with it.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the following days they kept watch on all the movements of the enemy, wondering when the call would come. There was no call, but soon the eagles detected that great numbers of Orcs were on the march. They came from the East, and they came from the sacked Elvish towers to the North, beyond the charred ruin which had been aforesaid the cool forest of Drûn. These armies kept strictly to the roads newly carved through the forest. They gathered at the holds which had been built on the ruins of the old Sightfoot farm, then set out once again toward the West. As soon as they started, a new army was reported emerging from the Tower on the Isle. Mairon had drained the garrisons. But for what purpose?

The masses of armoured Orcs met at a bend in the young Sirion, twenty-five miles below Rivil’s Well; and there they set about a fearful work. Trees were felled over a hill within a curve of the stream, in a space a mile long and broad. As the sound of a thousand axes echoed through the dale, the watching Ents groaned in fury. There were many alders there by the waterside, and Rattlecone trembled with each new death.

As soon as the hill was cleared, some of the Orcs began constructing a tall paling made from the widest tree-stems, bound and pegged close together. Others dug a ditch outside the line where it left off following the stream, and more still ventured out and widened the clear-felled belt for a distance of two bow-shots. Smoke began to rise from many piles made of branches and leaf-trash. High on the rounded crest of the hill, another smaller, inner pen began to take shape.

“He does not mean to lose,” remarked Beren to Rattlecone, as they watched from the safety of a nearby height.

Ents do not have teeth as we know them, but Rattlecone ground his woody jaws together. He said nothing. There had been few words in him since the start of the slaughter, but there was a red light now at the back of his eyes which had never been there before.

Beren eyed his friend with concern. There was nothing he could say which would make anything better. “Does this change things?” he asked carefully.

“We shall see,” said Rattlecone thickly. He said nothing more for a time, while the two of them watched the pillars of smoke and listened to the distant sound of axes. The Ent turned then to Beren. “I will be back,” he said. “Can you wait here for me?”

Beren looked up at him, wondering what was afoot. “Of course,” he said.

“Then I must leave now,” said his friend. “I have far to go.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Beren never knew what woke him in the moonlight; some rustle of sound, or the mere presence of so many beings?

A night and a day had passed since Rattlecone had left him. The man had spent the time wandering around the rocky clearing below the peak, consumed by fears for his small companions.

Now in the night, he shook off his fur and leaped up. Below him, indistinct beneath the silvery light, he saw the forms of many, many Ents.

The eyes of the Ents glowed with more than reflected light; and he saw that they were all fixed on him.

A shadowed figure stepped out at the head of the glade. Beren saw that it was Rattlecone. The Ent began to speak to the others, standing silent below. His voice began in the dreamy, endless cadence of the Ents; but after a time that seemed long to the man, but must have been short for Onodrim, the voice began to change; it became deeper, gathered emphasis. It slowly gathered power until at last its tones began to shake the stomach like the tolling of great, slow bells.

Beren noticed something which made his hair stand on end: his friend was glowing. Rattlecone was outlined in a reddish light that gathered strength under the moon even as the man watched. And still the words flowed out of the Ent, in ever-mounting force. Each one sounded like a blowing of great horns or pipes, echoing off the sides of the glade.

The listeners were grunting now, as though in pain, with each ringing phrase.

Rattlecone's fury mounted higher, and now others were joining in the chant. Other glows rose up. Their voices rose with his, and before long the Ents were trumpeting with one voice and stamping their rootlike feet on the rock. The sound grew deafening.

Beren retreated up the rock, covering his ears. The fire and thunder of the Ents' rage reached to heaven, and the very rock trembled underfoot.

Just when the man was beginning to think he could not stand much more of this, a mighty voice rose up suddenly above the din, bellowing a long cadence. The whole assembly fell then into a silence so complete that Beren could hear the echoes of that call returning from the rocky crests around them.

Tabbieneedle, leader of the Dorthonion Ents, stepped forth. It was he who had brought the Ents to silence. Limned also with red, he stood before them all, beside Rattlecone. He commenced to speak in tones which began low, but which also rose, and rose, and rose, until he was bellowing with such a voice that Beren had once more to cover his ears.

A last blast from the leader, and all the Ents, every one, gave reply in a single, ringing word.

Silence fell. The glows faded. In the dark under the stars, the black figure of Tabbieneedle came slowly up the slope towards Beren. The great rough Ent stopped in front of the man. Beren could see the gleam of moonlight on his eyes.

Tabbieneedle spoke to him then in the Elven tongue. His voice was deep and harsh.

"We Olvar can never be friends with such as you," he said. "I do not comprehend those who say otherwise. I would liefer be friends with the blight that yellows the leaves. I hate you, and I hate all of your kind: all you race of despoilers who multiply and swarm across the earth. I have seen the future. I know what you will do. Your breed, what destruction will they not wreak? What peace will they not disturb with their brayings, what purity will they not sully? They will cut down the old, great trees until hardly a one is left; hardly a one. Where once was the living green of the growing wood, they will make into a desert, crammed with hard, dead things of squareness. The quiet air, the sweet air, will be gone; in its place only dust, and stink, and filth.

"Your friend I can never be. You need not indulge in such fancy. Alliance, however, is a cold matter of policy. The prudent make allies where they find them. You and we have a common enemy at this time who would consume us both unless we fight. I offer you therefore my alliance."

Beren eyed the dark Ent without favour.

"I am Beren," he said, in hard tones. "You speak to me in my person, not to my people. I am not accountable for my fathers; nor for others of my race; still less for any who may in time to come spring from our seed.

Only for my own actions may you hold me to account; and I have harmed no tree.”

The red glow blazed up again behind Tabbieneedle’s dark eyes. “Hear ye!” he said bitterly to his companions. “There is consolation for those who wander grieving through a desert of stumps. There is balm for the heart. We are to divide and parcel our heartbreak, because some few of the race of Man have not yet laid hand to the axe. So should the mother of a butchered child speak mildly to those Orcs who were not by. There is a justice fit to staunch her tears, indeed!”

“You Onodrim use over-many words for my preference,” returned Beren coldly. “Have we an alliance or not?”

“For the time being,” ground out Tabbieneedle through his teeth.

“Then let us cease this plabber and make our plans,” said Beren.

\* \* \* \* \*

Daybreak several days later found Beren and Rattlecone again in a position to spy cautiously on Mairon’s grotesque encampment. The structure of wooden walls was complete. No Orcs or other enemies could now be detected outside the pale. The eagles had brought word two days ago that the Hairfeet had been transported from the Isle; the small folk were now shut in the inner structure on top of the hill.

It was a grey day, with coils of vapour churning uneasily not far overhead. As the light grew, the two peering out from between the trees could make out the vast palisade made of logs a yard thick and several fathoms long. Armoured heads could be glimpsed along the parapet, and many black and red tents were strewn over the hill behind. Of the Hairfeet there was no sign; the walls of their enclosure were too high for them to be seen, even from this height.

“The Sorcerer is there,” Beren said grimly to his friend. “I can feel it.”

“Aye,” said Rattlecone, “but that is no less than we expected. He will want to observe the working out of his plan. So what do we do now?” They had expected another visit from Mairon’s messenger, but Thuringwethil had not returned.

“Let us wait a bit,” said Beren. “I want to hear what the eagles have to report.”

They had not long to wait. It was Bronze-mail who found them.

“We could not get near,” he said as soon as he had landed and settled his feathers. “But enough can be seen for all that. The Enemy rests in his camp. The small folk are shut within the smaller fence.”

“Alive?” said Beren.

“Aye, mostly,” replied Bronze-mail, “but I do not think it goes well with the old among them.”

Beren suppressed his feelings. It would not help to give vent to his sense of helpless fury. “Well, he said grimly, “it would seem that the next move is up to us.”

But the eagle had not finished. “Something more,” he said. “The Lords of the Air are abroad. My mighty cousins. We have felt them.”

Beren lifted his head, surprised. “The great eagles of the mountains?” he said.

“Yes,” said Bronze-mail.

“But what do... why should they interest themselves in this, in this petty affair of ours?”

"I do not know," replied the eagle. "I am not in their councils. We do not consort with them. We stand to them in somewhat the same relation as your Hairfeet yonder to the princes of the Vanyar over the Sea. Related, certainly; but far apart in station."

Beren thought about it. "Well," he said, "if they intend to declare their purpose to us, they will do so in what time seems good to them, I suppose. Otherwise I cannot see that it changes anything. I—" What else he was going to say was interrupted by a braying of great horns from the fort in the valley. The harsh sound echoed from the hills all around before fading slowly to nothing. But there was now movement below, where before there had been stillness. The great gate in the fence was swinging wide.

"I go to see what is afoot!" cried the great bird, before springing into the air. He soared up and out; but he was not long airborne before he turned back and spiralled down to the same perch he had left from. "A wolf has come out," he panted. "Such a wolf as I have never seen. It bears a white branch in its mouth."

"A sign of parley," said Rattlecone.

"So?" said Beren. "But I will not walk into a trap. Can you fly again, Bronze-mail, and tell me what it does now? Does it come on? Are there others with it?" The eagle made no reply but sprang again into the air. This time he went further and stayed longer. On his return, he said that the creature had come to a halt at the edge of the cleared strip. No others had come with it, and he could detect none in ambush.

"Nevertheless," said Beren, "I shall not go down. It would be too easy for them to rush out and snap me up. My friend, I am sorry, we send you up and down like a doll on a string. Can you make one more effort? Can you fly down and guide that creature to us?"

"With a good will," replied the eagle. "At least I can try. Whether it comes or not is not within my power to decide." He flew off again, and the man and Ent watched him as he made his way down the hill. They talked a little then and made what preparations seemed wise to them. Rattlecone had beside him a great pile of large stones, which Beren knew he could throw with deadly effect. Beren himself had his bow, and many arrows. Frostfire he laid also close to hand. He strung the great bow of Finrod, that seemed always to thrum its deep-voiced joy at the coming of battle, and waited.

It was not too long before Bronze-mail appeared again. He was short of breath. "The wolf comes," was all that he said before coming to land on a branch nearby.

Beren shivered. He had been aware of the approach of the creature of evil, as a moving point of distortion on the mirror of the world. He set an arrow on the string; Rattlecone also prepared himself with some rocks.

Movement down the slope. The bushes at the far end of the clearing parted, and there came the monster. In the form of a wolf it was indeed; but a wolf that stood as high as a man, and weighed many times heavier.

Beren called out to it in the wolf-tongue. "Stop right where you are!" he said. "We can hear each other from there."

The creature halted, and grinned at him up the slope. It had left its branch behind.

"Speak your embassy," Beren called to it.

To his surprise, the giant wolf answered him in Grey-elven.

"So abrupt," the creature said, and its voice was deep and silky. "Surely it is customary to bring more courtesy to a parley. Will you not at least tell me your name?" This was one of the things its master had ordered it to find out.

Beren eyed the creature. It was a magnificent specimen, broad across the chest. The coat was thick, and of a marbled grey-blue colour. The wolf's tongue was very red, and its teeth were long and white.

The man could feel the malice of its will beating on his mind, but the only outward sign of this was the eyes. They were deadly eyes, with irises of blue fire. Every time he looked into them he was seized by a terrible impulse to drop his weapons and fall in a quaking heap, waiting like a rabbit to be killed.

“Courtesy between foes is pointless,” he replied. “Nor do you need to know my name.”

“It is not by choice on our side that we are foes,” said the giant wolf, “and good manners are a treasure no man is too poor to buy. Moreover, they are everywhere held to be a mark of quality.” The malignant eyes had in the meantime taken in Beren’s every feature, and now they rested on the sword-hilt. “But perhaps it is too much to expect gentle manners from a ruffian,” it went on insolently, “be he a scion of Boromir or no. Of the third generation would it be, or the fourth?” The wolf grinned toothily at Beren, then without waiting for an answer it bent his deadly gaze on Rattlecone, whom Beren felt stir beside him in unease. “How with you, Master of Trees, can you display a better nurture than your associate?”

Rattlecone stirred again. “I have nothing to say to you,” he rumbled. “I am here only to protect my friend.”

The wolf grinned at them both. “No names, and no courtesy!” it said. “Well, I cannot amend failures in others. But you will not force me to play the churl in my turn. I shall tell you my name; or at least, one of my names. Draugluin I am called, that means Blue-wolf in this tongue that all our captives now speak. They are wont to call me other things when I eat them, but that name will serve.” It ran its long red tongue out and laughed at them.

“This wastes time,” snapped Beren. “Speak your embassy!”

The monstrous wolf shrugged. “The matter has been presented already,” it said. “We have captives who are, as we suppose, dear to you. You at least have not given us to understand otherwise. At great cost of effort, we have brought them here to you at your express demand. The bargain, as we understand it, is simply this: we shall release them without further harm, provided you deliver yourself to us, and suffer our justice for your years of depredation on our lawful occupations in this land. So that our party need not tarry in these woods, which although of great natural beauty to be sure, are not productive of anything of use, we require that you do so before the sun has made one more circle of its course. If you do not come, I do not need to tell you what will happen to your little friends.” The tongue came out again, really an astonishing red; and the wolf-thing licked its lips.

“You must release the small people before I put myself in your hands,” said Beren.

“Alas,” said the wolf mildly, “you have it backwards. First you come, then they go.”

“I do not trust your master,” said Beren.

“I would expect you to say that,” replied Draugluin, “for where manners are lacking, shall honour be found? Surely not. And those without their own honour are blind to it elsewhere. But we are used to treating such matters differently.”

“Is that why you do not trust me to come in my turn?” shot back Beren.

“You force me to point out that *you* are the brigand here,” said the wolf-thing with mock courtesy.

“This bantering is pointless,” said Beren. “Get you gone. I will consider what I will do.”

“Very well.” Draugluin ran his tongue out and again laughed silently at Beren. “I must counsel you against any attempt at treachery. We know your tree-friends are gathered in the woods about. Do not attempt an assault! You will not succeed.” It sat back on its haunches, looking from one to the other with evil mirth in its eyes. “I am bidden to give you one final message: to speed this regrettable business to its inevitable conclusion, we will encourage your thought by putting two of our hostages to death every hour. Indeed, I believe the time of the first sacrifice is nigh. Ah yes! There sound the horns!” As it spoke, they heard the

harsh braying again.

Beren raised his bow and kept his eyes on the giant wolf. “Bronze-mail!” he shouted to the side. “Of your courtesy, gain you some height and see if this is true!” He heard the eagle take to the air, then turned his attention back to the monster. “You, wolf! I care not what you are called. If you have nothing more that is pertinent to say, then go! Go before I set an arrow in your black heart!”

The wolf, still sitting, yawned at him. The sight of the deep-ribbed, gaping, fang-lined maw was shocking. After a long and insolent stretch, the jaws came together again with a loud clop.

“Your puny threats do not disturb me,” Draugluin sneered at him with a toothy grimace. “Do I really need to tell you what will happen to your friends if I do not return? I had thought that was obvious.” The next instant it had to pull a paw back violently to avoid it being skewered by Beren’s arrow, which buried itself in the ground instead.

“Then I will sting your hide, and chance the risk,” said Beren, who already had another arrow on the string. “Get you gone, if you value it!” He had the bleak satisfaction of seeing a flicker of uncertainty pass over the wolf’s demeanour.

The creature clambered to its feet and snarled at him. This was a daunting sight – some of the ragged line of white fangs were as long as Beren’s hand. Draugluin spoke again, and now all pretence of courtesy was cast aside.

“I go – because I choose to go. Know this, miserable prey: I could have torn the living heart from your quivering body at any time during our parley. Draugluin does not hold back for fear of sticks – nor stones either.” Here it shot a baleful glance at Rattlecone before again addressing Beren. “Our time will come, however. Our time will come. You and I will tangle again, Bëoring: I have seen this. And Death will attend that meeting.” It turned then and loped down towards the trees.

“You do not say whose death!” Beren called after it in bravado. The wolf turned its head to sneer again before it disappeared into the undergrowth. They felt its miasma recede down the hill.

Beren turned then to the eagle, who had just returned. He saw what he had dreaded in its demeanour.

“It is true,” the great bird said to him slowly, “and I never beheld a sadder sight. They held two above the rampart, and they cut their throats.”

Beren, stricken, bowed his head. But he could not allow himself to give in to shame and despair – that would help nobody. He looked up again, looked at Rattlecone. “Then let us do what we must,” he said thickly. “Let us do as we have planned.”

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Mairon had no fear of death as mortal beings know it, or even as it affects the Elves. His spirit was not subject to any constraint within Arda. His mortal substance was hard to kill, but even if the worst occurred, he could build himself another body. This was, however, not trivial to do, and would exact a monstrous cost on his carefully hoarded power. Also, according to the rules that governed these matters, he would not be able to achieve quite the same body again: like many creations of Power, each form could be essayed only once in the life of the world. For this reason, he was more careful of his carcass than many a mortal man. He had adventured it once or twice in these wars, and he did so now again; but he always fenced it about with many precautions.

On the present occasion he felt quite at ease. His servants had built a stout fort, and he had fully three legions of fighting Mobiles in here with him to guard him. Also, he never ventured into the world without a strong bodyguard of Mobiles of large size and proven toughness. Even if they should fail, he had his armour, the product of months of work with forge and spell; subtle plate which no mere arrow could pierce. He carried a

blade, a similar work of lengthy and cunning craft, charged with spells of woe and death. Finally, to wield the sword, he had the Swordsman.

Mairon was proud of the Swordsman. He considered his summoning to be his finest work. It had taken a great deal of Power, but mere brute Power alone would have achieved nothing; it had needed to be exquisitely shaped and directed Power. He had sent a tendril of seeking through all of space and time with but one finely-honed purpose: simply to find the greatest swordsman who would ever live, in all the worlds. This one had been found, had been torn from his place, whirled back through the firmaments, back to the here and now, to land at Mairon's feet. The man had stood nerveless before him, strangely clothed, a half-eaten joint from some broken-off meal hanging still from one hand. From there it was no great work to secure him in Mairon's service.

The preparation of his protection from that starting point had been a slow process, akin to carving a bow from a rude stick of wood. Everything of the captive, every last quirk and memory, had been gradually trimmed away until only a single essence remained: his ability with a blade. This last Mairon had absorbed and had stored in array with all his other powers. Any insurgent who somehow overcame the soldiers and the armour would thus have to face the deadliest blade in all Middle-earth in the hands, in effect, of the greatest master of sword who had ever lived.

Mairon stood now on the hilltop that his busy legions had cleared, sniffing the morning air and considering the possible dangers. Lowest of these he ranked the Bandit. Draugluin's report had been interesting; especially concerning this crystal sword, of which reports had emerged some years before. The man named Boromir had used it to cut his way through a few stray Mobiles, gaining some little space, some corner of these uplands on which to erect his hovels. It was a substantial weapon as such things went, and its re-emergence explained the wounds which had lately been found on some of the Bandit's victims. The provenance of the sword was not known; Mairon assumed it was Noldorin. It would be like their conceit to make a sword of crystal. He would examine it with interest when it came into his hand, but he did not greatly fear it in the hand of the Bandit. One man and one sword could, after all, in the nature of things, only inflict a limited amount of damage.

Of the creatures known as Onodrim he was a little more wary. He knew that they were strong, and he envied that strength. He had no servants of that rank himself; he had designs to rectify that, but these plans were not yet come to fruition. These droll creatures were, however, made only of vegetable matter. They were not in principle difficult to destroy, and he had means in place to accomplish that, should the ones who lurked in the woods to the North and West be so foolish as to attempt an assault.

The source of most of his unease was the great birds he had detected in the airs above, these servants of Manwë. For long now Mairon had luxuriated in the belief that the sometime lord of the Valar had turned his back on this arena of Middle-earth. The recent intervention of the eagles in the duel between the Mighty One and that presumptuous Elf-princeling<sup>24</sup> had come as a profound shock to the Maia, since it had shaken that assumption. Mairon was well aware that he could not stand alone against the might of Manwë, should it be turned upon him, and for this reason he watched the movements of the birds with suspicion.

He turned his mind then back to the question, fascinating to him, of the degree to which the fate of one creature could affect the behaviour of another. It was undeniable that his possession of this band of rabbit-men had some influence on the Bandit. The man had not simply ignored their capture, as Mairon would have done in his place – ignored it routinely, without a second thought. What a strange madness this 'friend' business was!

Only the question of degree remained. Would the man actually deliver his life up in exchange – or at least, in the hope of exchange – for the lives of others? Mairon did not believe it for a moment. No creature so constituted could live. What he thought most likely to happen was that the Bandit would make some attack, some attempt to free his friends from bondage. When he did, he would be caught like a fly between Mairon's finger and thumb. And then at last this awkward business would be over, and he, The Admirable

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24 The High King Fingolfin.

One, would be free to pursue his further designs in perfect serenity of mind.

He expected the man to try soon. Three pairs of his protégés had fallen under the knife so far. If that had no effect on the Bandit, then this whole business was in vain.

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Beren was at that moment waiting a mile upstream in the young Sirion. He was clad in his salmon armour, with Telchar's tough mail beneath. He lurked with just his head above water in the shelter of some rocks, waiting for the agreed signal. He knew the tally of the hours that had passed, and what terror and grief each had brought to the Hairfeet, but he would not let himself think about it.

What he could not shake from his stomach was the pressure of the years. He felt he was come to a final climax. The broad, free years of boyhood in forest and farm had led to the great battle for Ladros, after which the channel of life had shrunk to the rebellion from Aeluin. The pace of life had become hotter, the current ever faster. Those six years of struggle had narrowed down to betrayal and death, and then to his three years of precarious and lonely resistance, rushing as if between narrow banks. Now, finally, the channel had shrunk to nothing. Here he was; facing the point. The point of his death. In this last, desperate endeavour, his only hope was that he might somehow save his friends. Other than that, he desired only to come as close to his enemy as he could. When he was cut down at last, as surely he must be, his eyes would at least be resting upon the figure of his mighty foe.

The signal came at last. Like a clear horn-call, the mighty voice of Tabbieneedle sounded across the vale, returning after a second or two in multiple echoes from the surrounding hills.

Beren took hold of his arms and ducked into the cool world of water, leaving the forest behind. Far away and dimly he seemed to hear the shouts of the Orcs, the grumbling of great stones under the earth, and immensely high and far off, the cries of great birds.

He swam down the swift current, swam as an otter, as a flashing salmon. He knew where to go; it had all been planned, the places conned by Bronze-mail and his fellows. Down he sped, faster and faster.

He had not much time. Would he be in time? Would he?

He was there. The man-fish raised his shining-armoured head with caution under the bank, in the strip of shadow where the grasses hung over. The place was right – a short way below, the great palisade began, the stout corpses of murdered trees reaching high into the air.

The skies were grey and thick with vapour still, but what light there was gleamed off moving steel on the parapet above. Beren could see what looked like barrels, hung at intervals over the edge of the tall fence. He did not know what they were for. Torches burned too, wan and smoky in the dull light.

Rattlecone had told him what the Ents meant to do. He had not disbelieved his friend, he knew he told truth, but his mind could not accept what it heard. He had believed, but he had not believed. In similar way, he believed they had a chance, but at the same time he had never believed it.

Waiting there, he thought back to the day, lifetimes ago it seemed, when the Ent had commanded the trees to clear space for Gorlim. Gorlim. The smith had been happy then, a whole man still. Had there truly been such a time? It seemed one with the feeling of the day: Beren could remember it, but he somehow could not believe it. All those occasions seemed to have happened to another man.

As Beren skulked there beneath the bank, the faint sounds of birds, the chuckle of the waters, the shouts of orders from within the mighty fence, became overlaid by another sound, a sound that waxed with the passage of seconds. A single note it was, an even song of power, but made by no single throat: it was the joined diapason of many Entish voices. The blare of sound climbed into power, louder and louder still, until it covered all other noises. Beren could no longer hear the stream. Soldiers were running about on the parapet,



but their shouts could not be heard. And still the sound rose, and still, until it seemed to shake the earth. The waters shivered with it. Beren was covering his ears with his hands, but the sound resonated inside his skull. The endless trumpet blast rose, and rose, and now the command came into it; and at that moment every beam and trunk of wood in Mairon's fortress, in obedience, shivered, slumped, and collapsed into an incoherent heap of sticky fibres.

The sound ended, echoes trailing; and nothing remained of the mighty palisade but a confused mess.

No battle ever goes to plan. Beren was about to dive to swim the last yards when his motion was arrested by the sight of flames leaping up among the ruined fence. This occurred not in one place, but several. After a moment of stupor, he grasped the reason: the barrels! They must have been filled with oil! Smashed in the fall, the torches had set the oil aflame.

The whole frontage of the fort was covered now by spreading pools of flame. The fires were red and hot. Black smoke rose from them in thick streamers.

Beren cursed. This must have been meant for the Ents! With luck, none would have now been caught, as had no doubt been the enemy's intent; but so long as the flames burned, they could not mount any assault.

What should he do? He trod water for a moment, irresolute; but then he noticed that the flames on this side, spread by the gushing oil over the surface of the stream, were being swept away by the current. Shortly the water itself would become clear; and he could see along the far bank unfired patches of the sticky punk which only a few breaths ago had been the stems of tall trees. Without any more ado he set his sights on one of these gaps in the wall of flame, sank below the surface, and arrowed towards the place.

He clambered ashore up the steep bank, drew his sword, and looked cautiously around. Luckily he had been sheltered by clouds of choking smoke. Nobody had marked his appearance, and he had a few seconds in which to assess the situation.

What he saw was utter chaos. Orcs were still pulling themselves out of the heaps of shattered wood-fibre, others were running around shouting. But there, high on the hill, behind seething armies of Orcs, stood a tall black figure. Beren set his shield, but before he could start his desperate run, a roaring sound came from the far end of the cleared ground, a mile away to the left. The Ents were attacking!

The flocks of scurrying and yammering Orcs shivered then in unison as their minds felt the order. Even Beren felt it, and wanted to turn with the others. Down and meet the threat! That was the iron command. Like a field of wheat under a gale, the Orcs bent to that direction and began streaming down to Beren's left across the hill.

But now what was happening? The slowly churning clouds were separating. With every second, the light was growing brighter. The clouds parted; he could see blue. A ray of weak sunlight made its way through, to shine off Beren's gleaming silver armour. If ever a man wanted a sign, this was it! Frostfire in his hand blazed with sudden flame under the sun. Holding his sword high, Beren began his run.

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Thorondor, King of the Eagles, had seen all that had passed, despite the covering clouds. He had eyes which could look into the heart of the sun; a few wisps of earthly vapour were nothing to him. His gaze now was fixed on the man, who was charging the ranks of his enemies like a thunderbolt.

His guard flew in close formation. "Shall we intercede, Lord?" one of them called across the airs.

"No," replied Thorondor. "Let the prince win his spurs."

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Mairon could not understand what had happened. How could these walking bits of wood *do* that? Where did they get their power? He was disconcerted to the last degree. At the very moment of coming under attack, he had found his first defence whisked away.

Think! Think! What to do?

More oil. He had stores of it. Be calm. The palisade was never meant to keep out the walking trees, these Onodrim. That had been the reason for the fire. Keep calm! The fires burnt still; send some servants to fetch more oil, keep the fires fed. This was a surprise, but no setback. Bring them to order.

Just as Mairon was about to give his commands, he heard the roar begin. Cursing, he saw that the Tree-things were casting earth and rock on the fires to the West. The blazing swathes were quenched in patches already, patches that broadened as he watched. The vigour of these creatures! It was beyond belief. Earth and stones poured into the flames in broad streams, and one by one the fires dampened and disappeared.

Now the Onodrim were advancing. They were over the ditch already. Clutched with fear, Mairon sent his order with hammer-blow force to all his servants. Those nearest him groaned and clutched their heads, but all turned and began to run to the West; even his bodyguard. Not you, fools! he lashed their minds. One or two of them fell over under the awful impact of the order and began to jerk and foam at the mouth; the others staggered as best they could back to their places.

Watching in agony while the Onodrim batted away swarms of maddened Mobiles as they trod in their steady advance, Mairon failed to notice a danger much nearer at hand. The moments slipped by.

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The word ‘desperation’ does not adequately describe the situation of the Hairfeet. Many of them had died, and not just those cruelly slaughtered before the horrified eyes of all. The spurts of red blood from the dying victims – friends, parents, lovers – had shocked others into catalepsy and collapse. Also, the People had not been given water since they arrived in this place. Several of the old had died on the way here, and others were dying now. Some who were neither old nor sick died from no obvious cause; sheer terror had burned up their lives.

Those who had knives had kept them, as yet undiscovered, but the spirit to use them that they had mustered in the armoury had gradually leached away. Most of them now were in a state in which they would gladly have thrown any weapon away for a drink of something wet.

The great sky-shivering note of command and the collapse of the fence had not taken them by surprise, because they had no expectations to be confounded. It was simply another strangeness among a whole series of strangenesses, possessing only the distinction of being less horrible than most.

Many of their guards had been thrown down in the fall; the remainder had now run off. There were sounds of uproar coming from somewhere down the curve of the hill. The people blinked in the suddenly widened view and tried to grasp what was happening.

It was Mungo who first came to his senses. He left his family and stood up. Bhalacho was just over there, and a little way further he could see Danusc.

“Hoy! Lads!” Mungo called. “Bhal! Dan!” The two addressed looked up. “No fence, no guards! Eh up, lads! We said we would wait our chance; will we get a better one? Eh?”

The two looked at each other. “By the winds, he’s right,” said Danusc.

Bhalacho shook off his torpor, stood up. Danusc was already up and was going around, rousing others with fierce whispered words. People were beginning to stir. Clothes were rummaged for the hidden blades, and one by one they appeared.

Bhalacho was looking out over the piles of mush, trying to work out what was happening. A roaring sounded from down on the right, and a battle seemed to be under way down there. His eyes would not understand what they were seeing in that direction; but it was clearly something to avoid. Up slope, to the left... no, he shrunk from that. That hill there was where all the harm was coming from. But ahead... through the rushing crowds of Harrek... at the bottom of the hill was a stream... then a clearing... and then the forest, and the hills behind. It was no forest he had ever seen before, but it was the best place they could head for.

He turned back to the others. "Lads!" he cried. "Lasses! It's our chance! Forward's our best way! Come now, blade-bearers in front, eh, and some on the sides; you others, anybody as has legs under them and a hand free, grab one of them as ha'nt, and sling 'em over your shoulder! Come on now, let's be out o' this!" As he turned back to the front, his eye was caught by a point of light off to the left. The Hairfoot saw a lone figure, shining like the sun, the sword in its hand weaving a net of glory as it cut its way through dark ranks of foes. The figure was running up the hill on that side, carving a path as it came. And wonder of wonders, faint to his ears over the roar of the battles came the undeniable evidence: the bright figure was singing as it ran.

The mass of Hairfeet moved slowly forward, down the hill. Harrek surged around them, but the creatures were obviously terrified, out of their minds. Most of them swerved aside at the sight of the brilliant blades. One blundered in; it knocked down some Hairfeet, began swinging its fists to knock down more, desperate to find a way through.

Danusc was there. He hesitated; then struck. He pulled the blade out again, leaving the monster thrashing its life out in blood and mess. The other Hairfeet helped up those who had been knocked down, then they all moved steadily on.

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Face after orkish face turned to Beren in hatred and terror. He came at them from their sides; their wills were not turned to him. Few and feeble were the strokes that came at him. He was running now, the bright sun was raising a nimbus about him, and nothing could stop him. All that he had been and known coursed through his limbs like fire, and more than that: dim presences there were behind him – a power of life threading through the waters; the beating heart of the forest; the heart-fire of the forge; and the Lady of the lake, her raiment dark as the bloom on a new plum. The sound of night-birds was in his ears, and he smelled the perfume of night-flowers, although it was broad day. His heart sang within him, because he knew he was not alone. And so he ran with joy, like the crest of a gathering wave, and he sang as he ran, and none of his foes could stay him. He ran, bounding up the hill, Nixenárë carving his path in a net of light. He was closing the distance to the tall figure on the summit.

Mairon became suddenly aware of this new attacker, and reeled back in shock. Who was this figure of light, this god running in glory? Was Tulkas here? Had the Powers awoken?

Even while he shook himself, trying to understand, while his servants ran witless over the field, thrown aside in windrows by the advancing and furious Ents; in those short moments, the figure had cut its lightning path across all the hillside, and was steps away from the last hillock. Mere steps.

No! This could be no god. Mairon's command lashed the creatures of his will. Attack!

Screaming in madness, the Orcs who could do so turned and ran towards the sunlit avenger, claws reaching for its face. The flood of raving Mobiles slowed the fiery being, but none could lay blade or claw on him. His sword cut a flashing path step by step up the narrow way.

Close the bright figure was now. Mairon could see the gleam of its eyes. Bodies rattled off its shield, piled up at its legs, but it stepped over them and came on. No dart could pierce it, no blade could touch it. The sword wove light, the foaming attackers fell in pieces and heaps. A mist of blood rose about the place.

Now the shining figure was at the bodyguard. The giant Mobiles threw themselves at it. This was true battle at last; they brought it to a halt. But none of them could lay blade on the deathly, shining attacker: it wove

and blocked and dodged, was never there when the blade hissed past, the spear jabbed; and ever the sword swept its light of death through another body, and another, and another.

The guards were all fallen, some gasping out their lives, others motionless, or cut in two. Light gleamed still off the terrible figure, and now none of the cowering Mobiles further down the hill dared approach. Mairon lashed them in his fury, and they fell groaning, clutching their heads; but none would come.

The silvered knight was only yards away. He came on step by step. Mairon stared at him and the sharp blade he carried as if stupefied. The attacker's mind was as armoured as his body: Mairon could find no way in, no chink. Gathering as much power as he could muster on the instant, he threw it with a scream of rage at the knight, but the sword came up in a flash, and the ball of hate glanced off the bright blade and flew away buzzing like an evil hornet. And then it was too late for more; the knight was upon him.

Mairon dragged his own sword rasping from its sheath and gave over charge to his enslaved guardian, the hapless swordsman he had hauled from between the worlds and stripped – pithed like a melon of everything but its skill to fight.

The Maia's baleful blade swung and met the other with a flash and a sound like thunder. Again and again the two blades swooped and rang. Mairon's swordsman-slave was meeting every thrust, keeping the knight out, and as the battle on the hill top went on, gradually the balance began to change. Now more and more it was Mairon who made the strokes and the knight who parried. The enslaved swordmaster was feeling out his opponent, and although that opponent was superb, he was *not* the best swordsman who would ever live. He had his habits and his flaws, and the slave was working on them; feeling, probing, pushing.

The rush of power had carried Beren up the hill in glory and through the great goblins of the guard. He had run full at the tall figure in shimmering armour, to the centre of darkness, the cold will. The bolt of power had shaken him, and he felt how Frostfire had taken hurt from it. With this first scathe to his weapon, the river of glory began to falter. Distantly he became aware of the tiredness in his legs, the ache in his shoulders. The gladness was gone now, he had to set his will to the task; but this he did, with the fierceness of vengeance guiding the skill of his arms.

But in this Sorcerer he had met an opponent of a quality beyond any he could imagine. He himself had bettered Yg, and Yg was the best there was; but his rival here was perfect. Beren could feel no flaw in his actions; none at all. Ever more, as he swung and parried and ducked and countered, he marked how the other was feeling him out. The dark and shimmering knight was finding flaws in Beren's skill which he had not known he had, because no opponent had ever been good enough to test them.

For a while the swoop and ring of blades, the clash of shield on shield, yielded neither any advantage. An onlooker would have said the two were equal; but Beren knew, and Mairon knew, that it was not so. They both knew the moment would come, the opening. As the fight extended though, while most of Beren's brain was engaged in the increasingly desperate struggle to stay alive, somewhere there was a part which continued with the utmost coolness to assess his opponent. The longer he did so, the more a certain feeling began to steal over him. This opponent was *too* perfect. It was a cold perfection. There was no zest to him, no fire. He began to think of his opponent, the presence, mind, whatever it was that drove the arm, that guided the blade that sought ever nearer for his blood, as a thing, an other, a faculty. He was suddenly sure that it was not Mairon he was fighting, but something or someone else. Something that fought with surpassing skill, but with no joy, no zeal; just simply because it had to. His opponent was a machine, just like the mirror knight, all those years ago in Nogrod. Only more even than that: it was a reluctant machine, a perfunctory machine.

Mairon had taken everything from the man he had trapped, leaving only the skill he wanted. But it is difficult to separate the parts of a man cleanly from one another. Somewhere in the magnificent, machinelike skill of sword-art, a tiny part remained that knew what had been done to it. It could not rebel; such power was not in it. But it knew.

This period of Beren's thought was enough for several attempts on his life. Mairon – or rather, the thing that

fought for him – was pressing Beren ever closer. The man had been forced back a step, and now another. He was no longer sure what lay behind him and there was no chance at all to look. His legs were a-tremble with fatigue and his fish-shield was rent in three places. Frostfire had held up so far under the deadly blows of the other's blade, but Beren knew that she would not do so forever; the wound from the spell was eating steadily deeper. This contest could not last much longer.

The mind does not direct in fencing, it is the body which moves and reacts. Mairon made a step forward, and it was immediately apparent to Beren that it was him stepping, not the expert slaved to his will. There was an instant of discordancy. In that moment, Beren's body moved of its own accord. He leaped in, not back. It was a move of despairing bravado; a foolish move, a human move. Frostfire spiralled about Mairon's fending arm, the bitter point seeking the Warlock's head. The other's arm made the technically correct counter – polished and dutiful, but ever so slightly flat for the passion of the case. Beren took the Sorcerer's blade to the side of his head, but the blow was fractionally mistimed, and failed to penetrate his armour. Frostfire just missed her own target, but the sharp tooth of her guard pierced the other's hand, even as Beren reeled aside under the blow he had received.

The man sank to his knees, giddy and sick, all defences open. But Mairon was staring in shock at the blood streaming from his stabbed hand. A horrible pain was burning up his arm. The Sorcerer howled like the wind that scours the mountain's teeth. He dropped his sword and shield with a clatter and clasped his hurt hand with the other. The pain was appalling. He had never suffered hurt before; had never felt pain.

Through the red mist of his shock and agony, Mairon saw the figure in front of him stagger again to its feet, gather itself. The gleaming enemy raised its sword high in the air. As the Master of Wolves stared up at the poised blade, he screamed again; a scream of terror.

But an instant before the blade fell, something strange happened. The outline of the Sorcerer became fuzzy, the scream burred away into a strange roaring sound, and as Frostfire descended in a swoop of light, the blow cut through, not a body – but what?

Mairon had turned himself into a mass of blue-shimmered corpse-flies, that lost form, writhed, and filled the air with their buzzing fury. The flies were everywhere. Beren could not breathe for the foul insects, could hardly see. But they dispersed with the moments, flew to the four winds. Gone.

Beren found himself alone on the hill – alive, against every expectation; but the light was gone in, the glory had faded, and he did not know how he still stood for weariness and pain.

The masterless remains of the Orc armies were fleeing hither and thither, weapons thrown down, escaping the field as best they could. And there, only a little way away, coming across the slope towards him, he saw the sombre figure of Rattlecone. The host of other Ents stood behind and beside him, and at their feet was a crowd of little figures.

Beren limped straight to Granny's side where she lay on a heap of dirty skins. The wrinkled old woman was breathing still, but only just. The breaths were uneven and shallow. Beren grasped her small hand in his own, but there was no response.

Bhalacho and the others stood silently by, but nobody had any energy for jubilation. There was only weariness written on their faces.

Beren looked up to Rattlecone. "These people need to be brought into shelter," he said. "Can you help?"

The Ent looked around. There were still live Orcs visible on the hillside, but such as could be seen were fleeing as best they could. The will that drove them had vanished; none of them had any appetite for battle. "Best if we take them to their homes," he said. "At least for the present. We will make something to carry them in." He turned to his fellows, and the Ents spoke among themselves for a few minutes. Most of them set off then in an easterly direction, but Rattlecone and those dozen or so of his faction descended to the nearest edge of the forest, to the North. They busied themselves there for half an hour or so.

Beren spent the time retrieving the poor bodies of the Hairfoot victims from where the collapsing palings had thrown them. He did not ask any of the survivors to help him. He had known each of the tangled dead, and his face was grim as he doggedly freed the corpses from the sticky mess of wood-fibre, but his heart was screwed up as tight as a knot of wood within him. He had no more tears for anything in this world.

Rattlecone and his friends returned, carrying great curved objects between them. These turned out to be giant panniers, woven by some Entish art from living wood, and padded with mosses and ferns. Each was several yards across and something more than that long. The hundreds of Hairfeet were divided among the panniers and were soon packed snugly within them, the wounded and sick laid on the laps of others. There was just room for everybody. When all was ready, the Ents divided themselves into pairs. Rattlecone and Wiggleroot stood at each end of the pannier nearest to Beren. The Ents squatted as low as they could, grasped the carrying poles in their long arms, then lifted the entire load. The wood creaked, the Hairfeet grasped the sides and each other nervously, but they were up and steady. The other Ents had done likewise. With careful steps, the whole unlikely cavalcade made its way down the barren hillside.

They stopped at the stream so that the people might relieve their thirst. It was there that Granny White-top breathed her last. Beren stood numbly beside the still form, and other deaths he had known rose into his mind. They all seemed to die in the end and leave him alone. With some it was the natural result of years, and no-one should complain of that; but he missed them all the same. Goracc, Willow, Andreth. Others had simply been taken, such as Nose and Sunshine, Lion Scar and Owl; and his mother and father. There was not even always sense to it. Why should Hiril have died?

They had all gone and left him in this weary life; gone, one by one, taking all joy with them, and leaving only the harsh bonds of duty. Was this all there was to be for him? Not for the first time, Beren felt himself as someone being frog-marched down the road of existence toward a destination unknown. He did not wish to be free of life, for life was all he had; but he most passionately desired to be free of the iron constraints which condemned him to labour unceasingly in these battered northern lands, that once had meant home to him, but had come to signify only loneliness and loss.

He looked up to meet the eyes of Rattlecone, deep as a forest pool. "And when will *you* leave me?" he asked the tall Ent, knowing already the answer. The wind told it to him, also the withered leaves falling from the trees.

Rattlecone did not give voice to the answer they both knew. "We must get on," was all that he said. With a heavy heart, Beren helped the silent Hairfeet to arrange Granny's body between them. The Ents bent and lifted; the caravan continued. Through the grey day they marched, and into the night. The trees of the forest made a wide path for their passage.

\* \* \* \* \*

Three days later, Beren and Rattlecone met with those of the Hairfeet who, from greater strength of mind and body, had taken the leadership in the dark times their folk had hardly emerged from. Bhalacho was there, and Melena, with Mungo, Gopold and Danusc; there were also some other youngish men and women whom Beren knew less well. Absent were any of the rounded, comfortable burghers who had previously had first word in the People's affairs; none of them had come through the abduction sound in spirit or body.

A month ago the Hairfeet would have shrunk from Rattlecone in superstitious awe, but since they had in the meantime seen so much to amaze and horrify, a walking tree now excited neither reaction nor comment. Indeed the people felt for Rattlecone and his fellows nothing but the most heartfelt gratitude, since they well knew that none of them would have survived without the help of the Ents.

No-one felt much like wasting words. After Bhalacho had told quickly a little about the state of his people, he looked from Beren to Rattlecone and said, "Well, gentles, there you have it. We're not in a good way, but it could be worse, a sight worse, all things considered. What we got to think on now, though, is what to do next."

“If you are all still resolved to leave,” said Beren, “then I should do so at once, if I were you.”

“That is also my counsel,” rumbled Rattlecone.

“We are set on that,” said Bhalacho, looking around at his fellows and receiving their nods in affirmation. “We was before, already. But the hard bits are the same ones as before, and those’re the places we got to dig at. By that I mean, where to go? How can we manage any long walk, with all our old and sick? How are we to eat and drink on the way? And what about them Harrek, up in the hills? They was in the way, last we spoke, Master Beren.”

Rattlecone stirred. “No longer,” he said. “We saw to it.”

The greater party of the Ents had dispersed after the battle to all the new Orc-holds, including the one in Anach, and had pulled them down. Beren had been told of this the previous day by the eagles.

“Well, that’s good news,” said Bhalacho, “but it still leaves the other matters.”

“I and my fellows can take you over the mountains,” said Rattlecone, “the same way we carried you from the battlefield.”

Bhalacho looked greatly relieved. This bade fair to solve the major difficulty. “I... well, I don’t rightly know what to say, mister,” he stammered. “’Twould be a powerful help to we, I’ll not deny. We’m in your debt more than we can ever pay already – and that would plunge us in deeper. I’m bound to accept your offer, though, because if’n I don’t, well, I don’t know what we would do. So we accept, and we thank you, sir, from our deepest hearts.”

Rattlecone waved this away. “How soon can you be ready?” he asked.

“Well,” said Bhalacho, “in point of going, I s’pose we could more or less hop aboard nowish. But we got to know how much food and drink to take. How long would the trip last, do you suppose?”

“Two days to get over the pass,” said the Ent. “We would camp below it at the end of the first easy day, then plan to traverse the high country before the next evening. The weather is promising at present, but the longer we delay, the less certain such foresight can naturally be. We must not allow ourselves to be caught by a storm in the heights.”

Melena put up her hand, somewhat hesitantly. She at least had not quite overcome her awe at the tall Tree-shepherd. “Excuse me sir,” she said, “but I were just wondering, where are we to live when we get to the far country? And *how* are we to live? And are there Harrek there?”

“Aye,” said Gopold, and the others nodded. These were questions to which they all wanted the answers.

Beren and Rattlecone took turns to tell the Hairfeet as much about the Southlands as they felt it would be useful for them to know, and which they could absorb at one sitting. Rattlecone naturally had a much more thorough knowledge of the new lands than Beren, but the man had a far closer appreciation of the difficulties faced by a farming folk who were forced to leave their fields and stores.

“It will not be easy for you,” he said, “but remember that you are not the first folk to be displaced in this war. I hope that you will meet with understanding, since all hands need to hold fast together in a struggle which affects all. Perhaps you will find some of your own people; but if there are none, then do not hesitate to ask for help from the Big Folk, or the Elves. There are farmers in the woods to the South, also wild folk. I know the wild men well, the farmers a little; but both are kindly folk, and will help others who are distressed by war.” He saw that the Hairfeet were exchanging doubtful looks. “You must think of your children,” he went on, “and for their sakes, not hold back from asking.”

“Begging, you mean,” said Mungo with a frown.

Beren stirred uncomfortably. "It is an ugly word," he admitted, "but the circumstances merit none better. And after all, it does not greatly matter what you call it; it is only important that your children's stomachs are filled."

Melena sighed. Nobody said anything for a moment, then Gopold looked up. "And what about Harrek?" he said.

"Few as yet venture south of these mountains," replied Rattlecone, "but you should not trust that this case will long continue. The war is far from over. If you would take my advice, after you have recovered yourselves, in a year or two perhaps, you should leave this land entirely. Far to the East, perhaps four weeks' travel for such as you, there is a tall range of mountains, stretching from the inaccessible North to the remote South. I should not stop in your flight until you have reached the other side. No land westwards of those heights will stay safe for long – at least, that is what we fear."

Beren looked with sympathy at the downcast faces. "We know this is no easy road that lies before you," he said. "We urge it on you only because we believe there is no alternative. But we would not send you away from one death simply to fall into another. With courage and sense, you will come through."

Melena touched his knee timidly. "Will you come with us, Beren, and help us?" she asked.

The pain shot through him. His furrowed brow told her the answer before he spoke. "Melena," he said, and it was as though weights hung from his lips, "I cannot. I am sorry."

\* \* \* \* \*

The Ents had improved their panniers by the addition of roofs woven from reeds. When all was ready, with the People packed in under the shadow of these covers, huddled under wool and fur, the time for leave-taking was come.

It was a clear day, with a dry, cold wind blowing from the North. The Ents stood at their poles, waiting.

Bhalacho, Melena and Etty were the last to mount. Beren said to them, "Come now, let us make this quick. In delay there is only pain."

The small baker wrung his hand, then turned away, wiping his eyes. Melena was crying openly. She embraced Beren tightly, as far around as her arms would go.

"My love go with you," she hiccuped, "and may you find your heart's desire. For I know well that we are the lucky ones, Bhalacho and I."

Finally it was Etty's turn to put her arms around him. He was squatting down, and she laid her dark curls on his shoulder, her small arms tight around his neck. She let him go at last, reluctantly, and looked her friend and saviour close in the face, tears wet on her cheeks.

"We won't ever see you again, will we?" she whispered.

"Dearest," said Beren past the lump in his throat, "that is a thing I do not know." He stood then, supporting her slight weight on his arm, as he had done that first day, then carried her to the pannier. He placed her with her parents, called one more blessing on the whole company, then turned quickly away.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rattlecone came back to him on a dark day of wind-lashed rain. Beren had been wandering the land without purpose or consolation. The forest was empty; he seemed to have come to the end of things, and felt himself as if a ghost, out of place and time. The song was over, but the hero had neglected to tidy himself away.

The birds and animals seemed mostly to have departed. Only the mournful trees remained, creaking in the



wind that soaked their bare branches in a cold rain.

Rattlecone found the man huddled on the leeward side of Carver's watch-stone effigy of Nose. The formless grey clouds raced overhead, low enough to fog the tree tops as they passed.

Beren looked up as the Ent loomed over him. "The life has gone from the stone," he husked in dismay. The damp weather which ached in his bones had robbed him of his voice. "Even here! Why has everything fled? I don't understand. We won. We won!"

Rattlecone looked down at the man in his considering way. "You need fire," he said, "and food, and a hot drink. Come." Without more ado he lifted Beren in his arms and began to carry him down the hill.

The day was darkening to an early dusk before Beren was finally sitting, wrapped warmly, a bark cup of Druug brew hot in his hands, before a cheerful fire in a nook of Rattlecone's alder-garth. He sipped the brew gratefully. "I wonder you do not offer me one of your draughts," he croaked.

"Of Ent-draughts you have already drunk as much as I can safely give you," said Rattlecone patiently. "I have told you this before. Any more, and your body might begin to think it was an Ent, not a man."

Beren had not the voice to explain that he had not been serious. Instead he said, "Did the Little People come though?"

"There were three deaths," said Rattlecone, "but I think they might have died anyway. Anach was not unkind, not after the measure of Anach at any rate. We carried the People far into the South, and told the Fair Folk there of their plight. More than that we could not do."

"That was already much," said the man. "It was great-hearted of you."

"It was on our way," shrugged Rattlecone, and then stopped.

There was a moment of silence. "But... you have all returned, have you not?" asked Beren.

"Only I," said Rattlecone. His eyes rested on Beren's face, observing what was written there. "The other carriers will not come again to the North. And Tabbieneedle led his people away already, directly after the battle. They went with the Onodvisse. There is not an Ent left in the North, except me."

Again there was a silence before Beren replied. "I am sure I need not ask the obvious question," he husked at last.

"Why have I come back? I came for you," said the Ent. "I came to persuade you to leave this land, and to come with me into the South."

Beren took a drink of the hot tea. It warmed him and soothed his throat. "I wonder at that," he said, "for two reasons. Firstly, you know I cannot. This is my country. I fought for it; fought, and won. There is not an Orc left in the whole forest. That leads to the second reason. Flight is for the defeated. Why should I, as victor, flee?"

Now it was Rattlecone's turn to pause. When he spoke again, his voice was slower and deeper. "There is a measure on which you speak truth," he said, "and it is a pure and shining truth indeed. I will tell you this: you have dealt such a stroke to the Enemy as no man has before, and I can scarce believe that it could ever be equalled. You assailed a foe many times your potency, and you drove him back in confusion. This is a wonderful thing; and I will admit to you that it exceeded even my brightest hope.

"But do not deceive yourself. What you won was a skirmish. Although I might go so far as to allow that, in winning the skirmish, you also won this nine years' battle. It gives me all the less joy then to point out to you, what you surely in your heart already know, that the greater conflict is one that cannot be won. The foe is too strong. Mortal cannot best Maia. And only the Powers together can defeat Morgoth, he who is

mightiest of their order.”

Beren had been looking into the fire during this last speech, with no expression on his face. In level tones, without raising his eyes, he said, “Why, then, do we fight? We who are not Powers?”

“You know the answer to that too,” rumbled Rattlecone, “or if you do not, you should. There is more at stake than whether the peoples of Middle-earth are to live freely, or to suffer under Morgoth’s fist. Every breath we take matters, every turn in life. The point of life is to live it; each moment. Surely this must be clearest to those whose lives are shortest. Take your own case. You might live out your handful of years in peace, if you would flee to the South and East. There are kind lands there. You could find a mild climate, and fruitful gardens; and you could find love, too, if you bestirred yourself, with all that love carries with it: the home and children that you long for. You, Beren; you could do this. You could run far enough from these northern troubles that you might never need see another Orc in your whole lifespan. But what sort of a life would that be for such as you? A lowly, craven, miserable one. You know this.”

“Aye, well, I can’t gainsay you,” sighed the man.

Neither of them said anything for a time, but Beren was still thinking. “You say that none of us can defeat Morgoth,” he said now slowly, “and I am sure I could not. But we have lords of the Eldar who are as far above me in valour and power as, I guess, Morgoth is greater than Gorthaur. I have bested Gorthaur; you said yourself that you did not expect it, and the Powers know that I did not. Might not, then, a similar twist of fate be possible where Morgoth is concerned? Should you be quite so confident that he is unbeatable?”

“It grieves me to disappoint you,” said Rattlecone, “but you did not defeat Gorthaur, nor even seriously discomfort him. He received a mighty shock, because he is not used to such smarts. But it is beyond even the power of the Lords of the Eldar to bring one of Gorthaur’s order low.”

“But... but, I *saw* how he...” protested Beren. “Granted, the manner of his downfall was peculiar, but...”

“Alas, he did not die,” said Rattlecone. “Gorthaur is a shape-changer. This is an art even you have sampled, in your salmon-suit. Within certain limits, he can assume any form he wishes.”

Beren mulled over this. “I suppose in my heart I knew it was too good to be true,” he admitted at last, “even though to say so plainly is bitter on the tongue. But you have always made me face up to true things, Rattlecone, and I am the better man for it.

“Very well then: I must take your words to mean that Gorthaur will return after a time spent nursing his hurts, and that all shall then be as before. Your words about living one’s life ring also as true as a good blade. But is that not then all the more reason for me to stay here and continue the fight?”

“No,” replied the Ent. “I am no seer; the future is dark to me. But everything, everything, speaks to me that things will not go on as before. It is in the feel of the winds and the waters. Know that Gorthaur could have erased this wood and all in it at any time during the last nine years. That he has not done so suggests that he found better uses for his powers. But he is not free either; he is a servant, and a servant who has so far failed to carry out his orders. All the time of your fight in these hills has been the measure of Morgoth’s patience. In my roots and my water I know, I know, that this time has now run out. No, you have not defeated Gorthaur; but what I think you may have done is force him to his last throw. We have spoken of this; it has always been the design. Now we are there. I do not know what form that last throw will take; but whatever it is, it will be a stroke, I am sure, that you cannot abide.”

Beren was silent for a long time. “It was kind of you to come back for me,” he said at last. Rattlecone just tossed his head back slightly and made a deep sound in his throat like the grunt of an organ pipe. Beren sighed. “And of course I ache to depart, in particular now, when all sweetness seems gone from Dorthonion, and I am left alone to haunt the hollow land like some sort of disconsolate ghost. But I do not think it is yet my part to lay down the burden. Did not Silmenen tell me my way would be lonely and hard? This seems to be my fate. I must not seek to escape it.”

“But why not take up the fight somewhere else?” replied Rattlecone. “For here it is lost.”

“Not quite,” said Beren. “I am sure you are right about the coming blow, Rattlecone; you usually are. But until it comes, I shall not go. I owe my dead no less.”

Rattlecone looked at him in silence, the firelight playing in his eyes. His expression, as usual, was hard to read.

“Then all that is left for me to do,” he rumbled at last, “is to wish you good fortune.” He bowed as low as he could, then turned and went to stand in his garth in the rain.

He was gone when Beren woke in the morning. Of all the losses and farewells, this one hurt Beren the most. Rattlecone had been fast friend, mentor, and comrade since his early boyhood; to lose him now was a severe stroke at his heart. Who knew if he would ever see the wise Ent again? The world was wide, his own future in it uncertain.

The eagles had departed some days before. Now there was nobody left; only him, and the trees sighing in the empty land.

As the weeks of autumn went by, the disconsolate man wandered the land. Food was hard to come by, but he had little interest in that. He could catch perch or trout still from time to time, and there were roots in field and stream for those who knew where to find them.

He kept in his roving mostly to the South and East, away from those places which had the deepest associations for him. He found a flicker of interest in exploring the abandoned valley of the Ent-women, almost the only part of Dorthonion he did not know well. He found there fields of storm-battered stubble, and orchards of withered fruit. He saw things which must have been strange and wonderful when they had been full of life; but everything was now abandoned and desolate.

Sometimes he would don the suit of fish-scales and listlessly course along a stream or two, but the water too felt stale and tired. The vivid connection was gone; the web and pulse of life he had felt previously had faded. Orc-roads had scarred the lands, and their poison was slowly killing the larger waterways. These were noxious to approach, and with no pressing reason to endure their bitterness, Beren left them alone. Only in some of the smaller streams did the water remain alive.

The hills had been frosted white for some days when he emerged from his cave-pool one morning to find the first snow in the lower lands falling thickly about his fish-mailed head. There was no point in venturing out in such weather, so he retreated to the cave, glumly prepared for further days of brooding and fasting. He made a fire there sometimes, but in between times he simply lay in the dark, huddled in furs. The cave was always cool, but at least it grew no worse in winter.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mairon had approached the tall gates of Angband with mixed feelings. The likelihood that he would shortly be the target of Melkor's ire was high. He believed, however, from his age-long association with this Vala, that he had come to know him through and through. He was confident that, as always before, he would find means to divert the fierce outpourings of his potent chief into harmless and even useful channels. He had his plans already laid, his responses prepared.

As with other parts of the Music of Creation, there had been elements in it also of Melkor's composing that Mairon had not understood. As we have noted before, since Mairon was loth to admit any shortfall in his own vision of the world, he had always tended to assume, in such cases where understanding failed, that there was in fact little or nothing to understand. Those parts of Melkor's nature which were obscure to him he simply ascribed, with an implied pursing of lips, to the lack of order and system which was so manifest in his chief's handling of affairs.

Of this comfortable assumption he was shortly to be disabused in the most painful possible fashion.

He knew Angband well, having captained it during the long untroubled years when it had been merely a fortress on the marches, an outlier. At that time Melkor had ruled from Utumno, that great city, arsenal and fortress at the centre of his realm. Mairon thought with regret of that long peaceful period of growth in power. Might that time come soon again! He had great hope of it; but they were not there yet.

He encountered some confusion at the gates. The Mobiles on guard seemed not to be familiar with their business. There was also a mighty reek of carrion in the first court – and what was the purpose of that heap of whitening bones? (In fact the great court of his own captured island fortress offered similar stinks and sights, but one is always more sensitive to household blemishes abroad than at home.)

They bowed him finally into the vast central hall. He sighted Melkor at the end of it slouched on the iron throne, and as Mairon marched down the long central aisle, he used the moments to gauge the mood of his chief by eye, as well as via other more subtle channels. He was slightly disconcerted to find, not the titanic rage he had expected, but a kind of brooding calm. This, of all things, he had not prepared for. Well, he would just have to think on his feet a little, that was all. He had no fear that the simple nature of his master could prevail against his own subtlety and clarity of thought.

As he came closer, he marked the scars left on his chief's face by the accursed vulture, or whatever it was; lickspittle bird of that airy fool in the West<sup>25</sup>. His eyes also touched on the three gems that smouldered with sullen fire in the high iron crown. Mairon allowed himself only the most fleeting of glances, because Melkor was jealous of the jewels. It would not do to betray his own interest and desire. What he would not give to examine a Silmaril at closer hand! But away with these thoughts; today he needed to concentrate.

Melkor's dark gaze had rested on his subordinate the whole long way from the entrance. Now he did not bother with pleasantries, but went straight to the point.

"I summoned you, sometime lieutenant of mine," he began, in tones suspiciously even, "that you might account for your dereliction. What have you to say for yourself?"

Boldness seemed best suited to this mood. "Lord!" said Mairon. "Please! Such words are hardly just. You set me against a foe of equal order. It is only to be expected that the struggle should be long and bitter."

Melkor sat straighter. "Equal order?" he said, the contempt in his voice echoing faintly from the walls. "Am I to understand that you hold yourself matched in potency by a handful of miserable mortals?"

"Come, Lord," replied Mairon firmly, "let us not bandy words. The men are mere tools of the Dream-witch. It is against her that I contend."

"Nine sun-cycles it took you to tell me this?"

"With respect, Lord, we have discussed our suspicions in that direction long since," said Mairon, who continued to eye his chief carefully for pointers to his shifts in mood. "It has only lately become proven beyond a doubt."

"Tell me of these proofs," rumbled Melkor, resting his chin on his fist.

"Master," went on Mairon slowly, "if I may make so bold, I compare the hazards I have faced to your own recent adventure. Even as you, I have lately been forced in my person to swat away the buzzings of one of these puny Children. Even as you, my expected, utter and entire victory in the encounter was hindered – hindered by an agent of the same nature as in your own case; an agent external to the nominal assailant, an agent far greater in order and potency; in fact an agent of the same respective order as we, the defenders. In your own case the agent was a bird sent by your co-eval. In my case, the agent was a sword, forged by mine.

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25 He is thinking of Thorondor, the Eagle of Manwë.

“This was the proof to me. But for the blade, and but for sundry other aids which it has pleased the Witch from time to time to disburse, we had cleaned this forest land of its vermin long ago.”

“A sword,” said Melkor. His tones grew silky with menace. “How unpleasant for you. What, then, do you propose to do about this most devastating occurrence?”

The tone made Mairon uneasy. “Mobiles are useless against such power,” he replied. “Even the creatures I have been building and strengthening after my own pursuits have not prevailed. Master, we must call on those of higher order. I have none at my command; therefore I must petition you for aid. Send me a Firelord! With such mighty support, I will deliver you this land within a week.”

Melkor scowled at the suggestion. “Those cowards!” he sneered. “Know you not that they have refused to take the field? There is some dog they fear – some wayward spirit who amuses himself in the shape of a cur. I wonder that you have not heard of this.”

Mairon seized on the diversion. “I have surely heard of this Huan,” he replied smoothly. “I have also heard that he is to meet his end through the greatest wolf of the world. Master, let me assure you that I have even this matter in hand! I can reveal to you that the greatest wolf ever known has been bred on my isle. He has grown now to full power and stature, and lives at my command. Behind such shield as this which I can now provide, a Firelord should have nothing to fear.”

Again Melkor’s reaction was a surprise to Mairon: his lord sat back on his throne and laughed full-throated.

“The greatest wolf ever known!” he said. “Ha ha! You have bred him, have you?”

“Yes, my lord,” said Mairon uncertainly. “I hope I have not done ill?”

Melkor said nothing in reply, but sat glowering at his underling, chin again on fist, all laughter now quenched. Suddenly he leaned forward, and beckoned Mairon closer.

“I know I can trust you, Mairon,” he said in a low voice, his dark eyes intent.

Mairon spread his hands. “But of course, Lord.”

“Do you know how I know?” continued Melkor. “I have spies in your camp. Did you know this?”

Such candour caught Mairon off balance. In the space of a heartbeat he chose his response.

“I... have never thought of it, Lord,” he said, although of course he had; he even knew who some of the spies were. “I have nothing to fear from spies, as you know. But I suppose they are a formality which dull policy has prescribed to to you.” He guessed what the next question was going to be, and had prepared for that too.

“Do you have spies in mine?” asked Melkor.

“I have *informants*, Lord, of course,” said Mairon. “But nothing underhand is intended. They are all instructed to avow their allegiance on request.” And this was true.

Melkor grunted. “Be that as it may,” he said. “I desire you to know that my spies have turned up no plots, nothing behind the scenes. It seems that your conscience is white as new-fallen snow. This is naturally very pleasing to me.”

Mairon bowed. “I am glad to serve, Lord.”

“And in your private thoughts, Mairon,” continued Melkor. “Nothing of concern there?”

This was thinner ice. “No, Lord,” replied Mairon. “My mind, as you know, is entirely open to your view.” And in the surface layers for which this was true, he believed it.

“No thoughts hidden away, where I cannot see?”

He cannot possibly have any inkling, thought the hidden part of Mairon’s mind; while the surface layer thought: of course not. “No, Lord!” this layer replied with Mairon’s voice, and its belief rang in tones of candour.

Melkor grinned. His mouth spoke no words, but Mairon received the most severe and terrible shock of his life in Arda as he perceived his master’s voice, in his mind, coming direct from the hidden area itself: *Then what is this?*

Mairon’s mouth opened and closed, his face twisted into a rictus of terror. Melkor’s grin widened, and he rose from the throne and advanced to Mairon. He closed the distance between them in a few rapid steps and clutched his terrified minister around the throat. All that Mairon could see was the grimace on the face of his tormentor, the terrifying visage twisted into shapes of triumphal fury, the eyes stabbing him like knives.

Inside his head, in the walled-off, secret part, he heard the terrible voice go on: *So many interesting things here. All these plots and plans. Thou fool. Didst thou think to cozen me? I who am oldest and strongest? Thou miserable beetle.*

Melkor shoved his face into Mairon’s cringing one and with his voice now said, “Thou *shalt* conquer the forest in a week, but thou shalt have aid from no Firelord. Shall I unlock this riddle for thee? With thine own powers, which thou hast hoarded against me, shalt thou accomplish this.

“But first I must remedy thy independence. Too little of Melkor hast thou had in thy heart. Therefore I thrust myself in *so...*”

Mairon spasmed in the shocking agony and thrashed in his master’s fleshly grip. The hand cut off any breath he might have used for screaming; all his body could do was go purple in the face and roll its eyes up until the whites showed.

“Ahhh!” said Melkor, “that is good. Oh, do I pain you? Some word of protest? Do you speak? Nay, it seems you say no word. Shall I enter you again, beloved friend? You do not decline? Then *thus* and *thus* do we deal out our love-strokes. And *thus* so. And *thus*.”

After He who Arises in Might was sated, he released the fleshly shape of the Maia in his service to the floor and sat back on his throne. Mairon’s body writhed limply on the floor; he could not even gasp. His mind, once so neat and systematic, like a cunningly-designed and well-ordered machine, was torn into bloody shreds. The fire and fury of his master now pervaded every corner of it.

Melkor summoned his servants. “Take this thing away,” he growled to them.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beren awoke one day with a start, every hair on end. The familiar dark of the cave was before his eyes, but in his mind now he found another darkness, crouching like some foul growth. With shaking hands, Beren fetched out his ring and made a light. The leaping flames glittered as ever off crystals in the cave wall, and he felt the warmth on his face; but the flames could not warm the coldness clutching at his heart, nor pierce the inner blackness.

Although he quailed from the evil thing, he felt for it. It was in the forest. To the North. At the corner of Drûn, filled with a twisted wrongness since the coming of the Fire so many years ago, the new blackness was now lying. Even as, with mounting horror, he felt around the shape of it in his mind, he could sense the cancerous patch growing.

\* \* \* \* \*

In a tower filled with dead Mobiles, Mairon sat laughing without cease.

Terror and unreason had stopped the hearts of his underlings. They lay strewn on most of the levels, in the fortress that had once been Aegnor's; faces twisted, fangs bared in grimace, half-open eyes as dull as marbles.

Mairon's laughter was mechanical, a mere series of sounds issuing from his throat. All the time the meaningless noises continued, he was pouring out his gathered power. All the murders and betrayals, all the helpless rage he had harvested over slow years: he poured it out now, laughing, his volition battered and shoved aside by the will of his master. The hand was no longer around his throat, but the scorching talons clutched his mind still. They had burnt into his awareness like a brand. His throat made its noises, but the laughter was not his; it was Melkor's.

From its source in the Tower, the black tide flowed south over the forest. Mairon sat in the middle of a pool of nothingness, of absence. Spirits in the path of the flood were split from their bodies as a new-whetted axe splits kindling, and wandered thereafter blind and lost.

The black tide flowed out, further and further into the hapless woods.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beren's instincts united with his reason in bidding him strongly to flee this new horror, but somehow he could not immediately bring himself to do it. Was he, who had driven the warlock Mairon gibbering from the field, to run like a rabbit from some dark?

Surely it were more fitting, and perhaps even wiser, to first learn something about it. And that he could not do from this distance.

As he ran down the miles on legs which he only held firm by strength of will, so the darkness grew ahead of him. It was unlike any other darkness he had felt. This was not evil; rather it was an emptiness, a blank spot in his mind. Inside this patch there was nothing – no life, no desire, no meaning. It simply was Not. All connections were cut; past and future, dissolved into vacancy. Beren in his later life would go on to dare impossible things, but no deed of his was braver than this steady advance into the face of Unbeing. For a man may die in the body, yet that is not the end of the inner part which is his truest nature; whereas ahead of Beren now lay a swathe of utter dereliction of the self, of the inner being. Should it reach out to touch him, his body might continue to function, but his spirit would be dispersed, wailing, into the endless void. All men fear death, because death is unknown. But no part of this threatening Nothing was unknown. On the contrary, its terrible nature was only too clear.

The blind spot ahead of him grew slowly, as he came shiveringly nearer, until at last it stretched from one horizon to the other like a wall. Quite near now. A creeping boundary between everything and nothing; an absence that stretched across half the world.

Whispers were in the air about him as he went, drifting past; a lament of mournful voices on the edge of hearing. The Dark was close; he could feel it. Time to retreat. He would not learn more, and there are some things which even the stoutest heart cannot conquer. But even as he formed this decision, Beren began to feel the fog in his mind. Stealthy fingers of nothing were prying at his memories, trying to unweave his senses.

The man halted in the middle of the dying wood, despair grasping his heart, unable to recall any more what he had set out to do. He was no longer sure where he was... or even who he was. Meaning was swimming away. He was losing his way home.

What last, urgent call drove the hot blade of awareness through his numbness, he would never know. He managed somehow to find his body, and ordered it to turn and run. Run. Run! Stumbling legs obeyed the call. His loosely-floating will clutched in its terror at the straw of self; desperate to maintain the thread, to keep the body to its task.

The dissolution retreated slowly behind his heels, but it seemed to the fleeing man an age filled with horror before the tide of emptiness began to be left a little behind. Gradually Beren won into freer air, and as the effort eased of holding on and forcing his body to its will, so did his grip on it become firmer and his internal vision clearer; until finally he was sure again who and where he was, and what he wanted to do. His relief at recovering himself was almost overwhelming.

Once he had gained some miles on the creeping front of Unbeing, he collapsed gasping into a hollow. He needed some moments to recover his breath. But the blank spot behind him loomed still grotesquely large in his inner sense, and he shrank from it now with a horror made many times more intense by his own narrowest of brushes with this oblivion. Nothing mattered to him, nothing, so much as the urgent need to get further away.

This, at last, must be the final stroke which Rattlecone had warned of. Indeed, he could not abide it; he knew that now. He must leave. The time had come.

On legs that shook beyond his mastery, he made his way back to the cave. He had yet some little space of time. Over hasty fire and food, he tried to consider calmly what he ought to do.

The sword – Nixenárë. Beren had never made plans about leaving his land, thus he had never openly considered what he should do with the sword; but now the decision rose in his mind like one made and settled long before. Nixenárë should not leave Dorthonion. The sword had been given to Boromir for a purpose – loaned to him, rather – and to Beren himself for a greater one; but he knew in his heart that that time was now past. The task was achieved. It was time to give back the gift.

But where? A vision of Aeluin came to Beren's mind. That was the fitting place, no doubt about it – but Aeluin was the wrong direction. To visit there would put miles and hours between him and his escape.

Beren's desire to drop everything and run was so urgent that his legs almost twitched with the strength of his terror. But somehow he could not face the indignity. There were some things a man needed to do properly – otherwise, what was he worth?

The dry-mouthed decision made, Beren put the sword to one side, in its fine-figured sheath – Telchar's gift. He added to the pile, one by one, all the things he thought he should take. His father's sword, Dagmor. The stout bow of Finrod and thirty arrows. His heaviest furs, and some food. Gorlim's knife, Telchar's mail and belt. The salmon-skin. Almost as an afterthought he added a water-skin; and thereby saved his life, as shall be told.

Beren had a leather bag with greased seams which he could draw closed tight enough to keep water out, at least for a short space of time. He slipped into the fish-mail skin, bundled the loose items into the bag, and drew it tight. Gathering the bow and the swords, he cast a last regretful look around the cave, lit still by the dying fire. It had sheltered him well. He slipped then into the dark pool and made his way out. The day outside was darkening to a grey evening, but he had no thought of waiting for morning; the blank patch in the North from which he shrank had encroached perceptibly nearer, even while he had rested and packed.

Once he had changed the fish-skin for furs against the snow, he headed east. Snow was lying, but it was not yet thick enough to support skis, so he had left them behind. He did not plan on staying long enough to need them.

It was a cold trudge through the night. The grudging light of a clouded morning found him on the heathered ridge, looking down on Aeluin. The life seemed to be gone from the lake; the light was dull, the spirit departed.

His meant only to leave the sword and go. He changed into the fish-suit, grasped the sword, and strode into the chill waters.

Once at the island, the narrow passage through the rock was quickly traversed; but at the far end, in the small



grotto, he found what he had feared deep in his heart, and should perhaps have expected: the tree was dead, the spring dry. The Presence had departed.

Beren sat by the side of the pool and looked sadly at the tree while he wondered what to do. All his plans seemed to have been thrown at a stroke into a Nothing as deep as that which advanced steadily nearer across the miles.

Listlessly, he swam back. He struggled on the shore to extract himself from the clammy fish-hide. The cold wind bit him to his marrow before he had managed to pull the skin from his limbs and could again wrap himself in furs.

After some time shivering on a cold rock, he came to a decision; and this again was one that rose full-formed into his mind. He felt as one pacing along a path through a darkness of terror, for whom each next step was illuminated as he came to it, but no further.

What he now had in mind he could have accomplished by swimming, as before, but he could not make himself do it. Nixenárë was a matter of the upper world. She might be made of water, but her purposes were not in that sphere, but rather in the world of air and stars, of scents and leaves, of cloud and shadowed hill.

Along the shoreline, Beren looked for a boat he could use. He found one at last, sunk beneath the water, but appearing at least superficially to be whole. It was very small, almost child-sized. This coracle was deeply set in mud and heavy with water. It took him most of a morning full of curses at the waste of time to free it and to bale it until it floated and began to look more like a boat and less like a piece of flotsam. The timbers were completely waterlogged and had begun to rot, but the mud had protected the bilge planks to some extent. The seams were in poor condition and allowed water to stream in. He spent the remainder of the day in doggedly packing them with whatever he could contrive in the ruined encampment.

All the time of this labour, Beren was gnawed by a fear such as he had never known before. He felt like a man trapped in a nightmare, faced with a series of tasks that must be done, needing urgently to finish them so as to escape some choking terror. But each task completed revealed another; and that, a further one. And so on, with no hope or end in sight.

By the time he had the coracle more or less sound, the short day was waning to dusk. A stiff wind was whipping waves up on the lake, and snow like powder was stinging Beren's face. It would be folly to venture onto the lake in such a boat in such conditions. He must needs wait til morning; but he chafed in agony at the delay, for the tide of nothingness steadily advanced.

The man found little sleep, huddled behind the remains of a turf wall during the long night. He could not put terror of the blank patch out of his mind, and was aware of it even in his sleep. Several times he dozed off, only to wake shouting in suffocating horror, convinced that he was once more losing himself in the desolation of the soul which crept ever nearer.

He shook the snow from his stiff body in the morning light and looked around. The wind had softened a little. Come! It was now or never.

He made his way slowly over the lake at the cost of considerable labour in baling the water which slopped over the sides and seeped in past his hasty and inadequate caulking. Such a small boat was never meant for anything but the mildest conditions.

Beren rowed the boat right out into the middle of the loch, where the water was deepest. He had never dared come here with Glith, although she had laughed at his hesitation. He knew though that the water in the centre was very deep, because she had told him of its darkness and cold.

Was the Lady departed from the whole of the lake, forever? Could she still hear him? He had no way of telling; but there was nothing else he could do but go on as he had started.

Beren raised his sword under the light of day for the last time. He could see the scar where Mairon's blast had struck. The wound seemed to be growing; there were cracks running from it now down into the blade which had not been there before.

He had carried Nixenárë bare into the Lady's grotto, but now, after a last caress of the fine blade, he slid her into the metal sheath. It was a shame to send such work to the depths, but the sheath went with the blade, and would fit no other. And after all, all things must come to their end at last. Beren thought that Telchar would not find it unfitting.

Beren held the sword aloft – standing in that boat was not to be thought of – and in a voice that was as clear and carrying as he could make it, he cried aloud.

“Lady! Lady! Lady! If thou beest not wholly departed from this place, I beg thee hear my words, I who am Beren, Boromir's heir. I give back the gift: thy gift to my ancestor, and lately thy gift to me. Lady, thou knowest how I have used it. Thou only canst know whither it now goes. As I cast it into this lake, once hallowed by thee, so I cast it into the future.”

With that he slipped the sword into the water and let go. The icy shape of the hilt vanished as it submerged, but the scabbard remained visible. He watched it sink down, down, down into the clear water, until it faded at last from sight. So passed Nixenárë, the Frostfire of Dorthonion; and no-one now in Middle-earth can say if she will ever come again.

In like fashion, but without further words, Beren sent the suit of salmon armour, tied around a stone. The fish-mail flashed silver as it tumbled down. He watched it go with a pang. Perhaps he could have kept it; but he felt in his heart that this, too, belonged with the country.

There remained one final thing he must do. After landing the boat, he climbed the long slope to the place of his father's remains. The stones he had piled up were now moss-grown, and weeds were sprouting between their crevices.

Beren stood there and looked at the forlorn stones and tried to bring his father and his comrades sharp to mind, but they seemed gone now from this place where he stood. The memories were there, but there was a remoteness to them. All life and spirit was fleeing this land; he felt himself to be the last living presence in all Dorthonion.

Since he shrank from disturbing the stones, he dug a small pit beside the place. He half-drew his father's sword from its sheath and admired once more the glitter of light from the finely-made blade. It seemed a shame to consign such a work of hand and mind to rusty oblivion. He thought his father would not mind if Beren simply took the sword with him, but a resolve had been growing in his mind these past days, and that was: never to bear weapon again. All that was past for him now. He had been fate's plaything these last years; but whatever fate had in store for him now, supposing it was not finished with him altogether, he was determined at least to shed no more blood.

Thus he sheathed the sword again with regret and laid it in the hole he had dug, and covered it over. He stood then and looked over the wild grey landscape – what he could see of it. The lake was a sheet of dull light below; the cloud ceiling, not far overhead, sliced off the upper swells of the moors.

A chill wind whipped at the heather. Beren felt he should say something, but he felt foolish. He could feel nothing of his father remaining in this place. All that he felt within himself was emptiness, as if in echo of the vastly greater emptiness creeping steadily higher up the valleys. In the end he raised his hands helplessly. The thing was done; the last ties were cut. All he had to do now was escape.

Free. Beren savoured the intense relief, while considering his best direction of flight.

He had meant all along to run quick-foot to Anach. In normal times nobody in their senses would dare the high pass at this time of year, but the choice between the rigours of Anach on the one hand against the

terrifying inflow of nothingness on the other seemed a very easy one to Beren. He was used to pitting his body against material perils, they held no fears for him; but this vast dissolution of spirit now submerging all the land: that he feared, without bound or shame. Now, though, as he stood beside his father's mouldering grave-stones, weighing his course, he realized that the dark tide had come on quicker than he expected. He sensed the edge of blankness very close now, immediately to the North.

Beren turned his head slowly around the compass, trying to assess how things stood. To the North, all was vanished; to the West as well. To eastward lay the former forest of the Ent-wives, and here the land was still clear, still perceivable; but there was no escape there, because the mountains in that direction were impassible. The direct route south would put him on the old Dwarf road through the mountains, but as he knew well from his own uneasy memories, that had long since become a road to nothing but grisly death.

Only one choice remained: south-west, across the Dwarf-road and into the hills. He must hasten his steps in that direction and hope that he could slip past the net and somehow reach Anach.

From the beginning, he had half-expected that the high pass might be the death of him. He had viewed the prospect with stoical indifference; but now he began to wonder if he would be able to reach it at all.

An hour of running in the dull light took him first out of the hidden valley of Aeluin – with a last, regretful glance over its dying magic – and thence down. He crossed the long-abandoned and overgrown Dwarf-road. From there, his way began to climb again steeply. He made his way steadily up a great rib of hill that stretched down from the highlands. He soon found himself running through pine-woods again. The steady ascent brought him above the cloud-base, and from then on he was running in a fog which soaked him to the skin inside five minutes and restricted the extent of his view on all sides to a dozen paces. But not in a thousand years would he lose his way in that land; his pace was not slowed and his direction was sure.

The evening came on. The blowing mist had turned to powdered spicules of ice that hurt the eyes. Beren's clothes were freezing on him, becoming stiff. He had to stop and bind cloth about his face, leaving a narrow gap to see through. He was worried about frostbite, but he dared not halt and seek the shelter his body craved. He had made great runs before, but his concern in those times had been the lives of others. Now he was running to save his own.

The last wizened trees petered out into rock, and there he had to turn west, because the last ridge bounding his land lay close now on his left. Frequent snowdrifts slowed him, but he left the snowshoes tied to his back, because he could run quicker without them. As he kept on through the blizzard now whipping at his right cheek, doubt grew in him. He could sense the tide of vacancy in front. Would he have room to slip past?

He came next day to the pinch. Its first grey light found him at the very stream he had followed long ago on his first Orc-hunt with Chases Goats. The crackle of its ice beneath his running feet marked twenty-five leagues he had come since Aeluin. As he climbed the hillside following, the black certainty grew in him. Beren skidded to a halt on the ridge, looking down toward the hill where Goracc had lived. He found the emptiness stretching in front him; the whole of those further slopes was absent from his inner senses. He was cut off from Anach.

There was not much time, and no choice at all. Oblivion crept in its tide across his advance, also close behind and on his right. To the other side, to his left, reared the stark line of ridge that marked the southern border of Dorthonion.

What lay beyond? Men said it was a land of horrors – an abode of creatures of primeval Darkness. Anyone foolish enough to venture into that land could expect only a gruesome death as reward for his rashness.

As Beren tasted this prospect with his mind, he realize that he did not greatly care. His land was being torn from him, and the wound this left was a great raw place on his soul. He was not sure he could survive that wound long in any case. He was powerless against Mairon's tide of dissolution, and feared it; but he had not feared to lose a fight against cold in Anach, nor did he fear now to pit the strength of his body and mind against monsters. Indeed, he almost welcomed the opportunity to fight back against something. Something

he could take on with the aid of steely will, strong arm and stout blade! He rubbed his hands together, then stopped in sudden consternation. A blade: he had none, having just sunk the sword of ages in a lake, and buried even his father's trusty blade.

You popinjay, he thought to himself. So much for your resolve to put away arms! What then, will you fend off nightmare beasts with kisses?

Well, he would just have to do the best he could with knife and bow.

He stood there a moment, hesitating, daunted despite himself by the prospect ahead of him: the path of horror, only to be taken because all the alternatives were worse. In that moment, Willow's words came back to him, clear and urgent inside his head. *If you find yourself in that land, she had said, drink not from any stream! For in them runs not water, but madness.*

But before he could act on the thought, the first tendrils of the advancing emptiness began to feel their way into his terrified mind. The man turned and ran like a hunted deer, gasping, uphill, away from the clutching dark.

Water. What to do? He had none in the skin. The thin stream his feet thudded over was frozen. He did not know this country well, so far to the South, right near the boundary ridge. Was there any spring? He flogged his mind to remember, but no answer came. He continued to run south, up the stony slope, climbing at a stumbling run. The twisting ice-path of the stream petered away to nothing, and now there were only stones, whipped clean of snow by the scouring wind from behind.

He was almost at the ridge; only a few steps remained. Suddenly, over the howl of the wind, he heard another sound. A faint tinkle of water.

Hunting the sound with the speed of desperation, he found a tiny spring between some great stones. Curls of vapour rose from it. There were mosses growing in the crevice, and clear fingers of ice hung from its edges. Beren scrambled to find his water-skin, bent then to fill it with the sweet, warm water. Despite the terrible urgency, the private and miniature beauty of the spot struck him. It was the last instance of pleasure in his land that he ever had. In the years to come he would sometimes think back to the tender little mosses, remembering the beauty of the clear ice fingers, and the whisper of living water amid the snow.

The skin was full. He was already trotting away while tying its neck with hands that shook. Shortly after that he was at the ridge; then over.

There was shelter from the wind here, but the great flood of relief which overran Beren's heart came not because of that, but for a far greater reason of shelter. The stony watershed cut off the terrible influence to the North as cleanly as a knife. There were deep drifts of snow here, which slowed his pace to a struggling wade, but the weight of terror had left his heart.

Beren still hoped to make his way down by the pass of Anach if he could only manage it. He thought he might be able to work his way down to it on this side of the ridge-line. After some hours of increasingly desperate scrambling among the rocks, he had to give this idea up. The mountains rose toward Anach in shattered ridges of ice and rock, and each one contained death in hundreds of guises. Anach was passable not because it was the lowest pass across the southern ridge; it was simply the only one not leading to monsters. From this direction, its heights seemed to be unreachable.

On the southern side the slopes fell quickly away in a series of beetling precipices. Death lurked here too in abundance, and several times Beren barely saved himself from slipping into unknown depths.

A lesser man would have died in that icy traverse, whipped by the chill wind. Beren, with all the fire of the young world in his veins, and with the strength which had first been born to him and then grown into a knot of might through years of test and trial; even Beren was near the end of his endurance. He knew that if he did not find a way down off this mountain soon, it would be the end of him. He could not hope for rescue by

eagles a second time.

Luck led him to the only passable descent at this end of the mountains. Where the chain of peaks rose again to the heights that flanked Anach, the line of the cliffs turned to make an angle to the joints in the rock. Here he found that the cliffs on his left descended in a series of stepped and angled chimneys which might, with care, be negotiated. As the snowy light faded to the dullness of evening he managed to descend several hundred feet, but darkness caught him still far too high, still among the snow and clouds.

He crept into a crevice that wound into the rock. Here he was at least out of the wind, but his whole body was shaking from the bitter cold, which became worse as the pumping of his blood slowed from inactivity. He had no means to make a fire, and he knew in his heart that he would not survive the night without one.

He thought of Finrod's ring, and brought it out. The silver and the jewel always picked up and threw back even the faintest light. Finrod had told him the ring had many powers. He knew of two. Were there more? He paused while he assembled the words he wanted in his mind, and as he did so, a vision of Caladis came to his mind: the sharp green eyes in the round face, under a twist of ginger hair.

Shaking painful memory away, Beren addressed the ring in High-elven, as he had been taught it long ago by his aunt.

"O great Ring," he murmured. "Thou knowest my need. Thou canst make light, I know, and thou canst make fire. Canst thou make warmth?"

The great jewels flamed to life under his hand, answering his call, and his heart leapt within him. The barren crack in the rock where no living thing had ever come flamed now with the young green light of spring, as it came each year to the sweet valleys far below. A warmth spread out from the ring and soon bathed the weary man's whole body. The agony and pleasure as it diffused into his freezing limbs was exquisite. His heavy furs began to melt; the dripping water was uncomfortable, but this discomfort was as nothing compared to the dire teeth of the preceding ice.

"Thou hast saved my very life, O Ring," the man croaked. "I pray thee, continue for so long as thou art able." He lay back then, and sleep took him.

He awoke warm and dry; almost comfortable. A blue light was filtering into the crack from outside. Beren's first thought was to drink, for his throat was very dry. The water was painful on his cracked lips, but it stilled his thirst. He turned then to the ring on his finger, told it that his need for the time was over, and thanked it. The glow faded from the heart of the jewels and the sphere of gentle warmth vanished likewise, to be replaced by a steely cold. Beren stowed the ring back in his collar-pouch and wriggled his way with some difficulty backwards out of the crack.

He found himself in the middle of a vast space. The storm had gone, the sky was blue. The cliffs rose stonily above and fell away below. But towards the South, across gulfs of air, his eye was caught and held by a blinding vision.

He had known it before. It was the real country that lay spread there below him; the clean country. Neldoreth, Húrin had named it. A pure light lay over that land, and Beren's heart was smitten with love and longing, just as it had been the first time, so many years ago. He had never set foot in that country, yet he yearned for its light as if it were his home.

Beren tore his eyes from the good place and looked down, in the direction he must go. The contrast was almost shocking, like a blow. Spread below him was an ugliness, squalid and furtive. He could not make out the features of the terrain; all was shadowed beneath a curious sort of yellowed, dirty haze. It looked both ominous and unattractive.

Beren set his teeth. There was no way back. Death might wait for him below, but any death of the body was a thousand times better than the threatened death of the soul that lay behind. He had to force his reluctant

limbs to his will, but he began again slowly to descend.

He found no distinct bottom to the cliffs. Spires of rotten-looking rock rose around on all sides, blocking out the sky, but still he clambered downward. The shelves became more frequent, the slope less steep, but the danger of falling was if anything increased, on account of the mess and shingle which began to clog the steps in the rock.

At least the temperature had become much milder. Wizenen thorns began to appear, but all the ones he saw were dry and dead. And still the path wound down, deep down among the crumbling spires.

The gloom gathered deeper, and what light there was began to take on a yellowish cast. Beren could not at first make out why; but peering upward, he found that the line of sight to the sky was crossed now by innumerable skeins of dirty web, woven from side to side across the narrow gorge. As yet he could see none of the weavers, but detritus from dead insects began to appear among the trash on the path.

The webs became thicker, the light duller, and now he could make out great spiders hanging here and there above – some as large as his hand, or more. His feet stirred a constant mess of powdered wing cases and chitinous debris.

The slope became shallower. His furs now were too warm, so he stopped to take some off. The bitter insect dust caught in his throat. He took a sip of water – not too much; for he had a long way yet to go, and the skin he had filled in haste at the little spring was now only half full.

He would have taken off his thick fur boots as well, but there were too many thorns. Dead thorn bushes caught at his sleeves and scratched his legs, but his chief concern was a vicious sort of caltrop whose spines were long enough to pierce right through the leather of his boots, through the hard sole of his foot and into the quick beneath. His years in the forest had taught him a wonderful sureness of foot, but for all the hundreds of thorns he avoided, every now and then one would catch him. He dared not face them in bare feet.

Despite the pain and the nuisance, Beren smiled at himself. Heroes were not supposed to have to deal with anything so mundane as thorns in the foot!

The further he went, the dimmer grew the light, the thicker the webs, and the larger the dark shapes of the spiders. His feet were crunching now on bird bones among the trash. Strands of dirty silk began to span the path on his level. They were hard to see, but since the feeling when they caught his face or chest was loathly, Beren drew his knife and cut at them.

At least he was meeting fewer thorns now, since no plant could flourish in such gloom. This was just as well, because his feet were now so wounded that he left spots of blood behind with each step.

He could see now little, for no light could filter down any more from above. But something caught his eye in the gloom: his knife. He looked full at it, and his eyes opened wide in surprise, because along the edges he saw a faint red light flickering.

Beren stood a while and pondered, trying to work this out. This was Gorlim's knife, but made with Maegam's help. Maegam had been a Noldo. Beren knew that Noldorin blades had the property of flaming blue in the presence of goblins, and once or twice he had observed this himself. But what was this new thing?

He knew the story of the death of the Trees, and he knew that the monster Ungoliant had passed through the land in which he presently found himself. The creatures which lurked here, here in the dark, were said to be of her get. Had the Elves' rage and grief at the loss of this light also found expression in their blades?

Pointless to speculate. The thing was so; he could see the red flicker of it before his eyes. The threads hissed now and stank as he slashed them with the strangely woken knife. He crept on.

The ember-flicker of the blade was all the light he had. He could not see any spiders, but his foot kicked something in the gloom, some sort of light trash that rustled. When he crouched to see what it was, he shrank with a cry from what he found. It was the remains of a great spider with a knobbed body the size of his head, and a mess of tube legs as thick as broomsticks. Just the carapace, it was, sucked dry.

He remembered the ring. With hands that shook with horror, he fumbled for it in his pouch. He called to the ring, and its great, white light flooded the narrow path with a blinding radiance. He was not a moment too soon, for the light gleamed many-fold off clustered eyes. Two of the creatures had been creeping long-legged along their webs towards him, and hung now almost overhead. Beren thrust with the glowing knife and caught one of the monsters full on its front. Killed outright, it collapsed in a tangle of dangling web behind him, where it hung jerking. He swung to the other, but it had already shrunk back from the light. It scuttled around, but he sliced off a leg before it retreated back into the dark.

The man went on. We will not dwell any more on his minor perils. The size and malignancy of the spiders along his way became very great, but they were no match for the wrath that burned in his hand, nor the fierce light of stars which streamed from his ring.

After long hours, Beren stumbled out of the land of the spiders. He left the tangling webs behind and wandered through a hollow blackness. His feet tripped on bones now, and the stink in this place was beyond belief.

He became wary. What was in this place? He did not believe that he had passed out of danger.

The light from the ring lit up the bases of the great boulders he walked among, but outside its circle there was nothing to see in the dark. Apart from the crunch of his own steps, there was nothing to hear. The silence was so deep he could hear his own breathing.

The hours that followed were not all afterwards preserved in his memory. Gaps there were in the tale, where perhaps his mind had resisted impressions of horror too great. He remembered crouching as far back as terror could squeeze him in some noisome crack, infested by filthy insects, while a house-sized thing without any legs felt for him with a slimy trunk. Yelling and stabbing at the horrible proboscis with his knife.

He came again to his reeling mind beside a runnel of water which made the first sound he remember having heard in this place. His throat was parched with thirst, and he almost reached out a hand to the water before he remembered. Fetching his water-skin instead, he was shocked to find it nearly empty. When had he drunk that? He took a careful mouthful of what remained, and went on.

The going was easier here. The ground underfoot had become more even and there were no more bones. The boulders had likewise vanished, and he seemed to be walking across a plain in the darkness. All directions were the same in this blackness, but Beren knew the way he wanted to go. He stepped out now with something almost like a shadow of returning confidence. Surely he must be nearing the edge of this frightful land?

The strand laid across his path was not physical. He felt it cut through his heart as he walked through it. Immediately he felt that he had lost something. Some small part of him had been cut away, he was sure of it. But what? He could not remember what he had lost, because he had lost it; all that he could feel was a tiny kernel of absence. He stood rigid with horror in his tracks, too terrified at first to go on. A part of his mind screamed that it was not fair! He had fled oblivion, had left it in the hills behind him; it was not fair that in his flight he should now also find it before him.

Not for nothing, though, had the Ice-sword come to Beren, doughty Man of the First House of the Edain. He was no ordinary mortal, he who had held off the malice of a Maia for the best part of ten years. An anger woke now in Beren, and he clenched his fist. He would not flee like a terrified rabbit, to be taken apart piece by piece in his flight.

With an effort of will, he forced his foot to step forward. He made his way on, feeling ahead with each step.

When he felt the next vicious strand, poised to tug a little piece out of his soul, he stopped. He found that he could not step over it, or under it. It had location along the ground, but no height.

So be it – if he could not avoid the danger, the only other course was to tackle it directly. He turned to face the direction in which the subtle mental strand led. With a hand out to feel it, he followed it.

The darkness in his spirit increased. This was the old dark – the dark that came before the stars, that existed before the Elves. In this place, its last stronghold on Middle-earth, the younger arts of the Noldor held no sway: the light from Finrod's ring faltered and died.

Beren tucked the quelled device back in his pouch. Only the bitter rage locked in the metal of the knife he held kept its edges burning with a fierce yellow light.

He felt that he was close. But what was this? Something appeared on the ground in front of him, touched by the angry light of the knife.

It was a foot.

As Beren advanced, more of the body became visible. It had clearly been an Elf, although he could not have said how he knew. Pallid fungi patched its withered hide, revealed in the merciless light. The limbs were strangely shrunken and twisted, and Beren realized with a jolt of added horror that the corpse had been sucked of all its flesh. Only the bones and the skin remained.

The knifelight fell on dark, once-glossy hair. The bony face was turned toward the ground.

As he stepped around the body, Beren encountered suddenly another strand of the deathly web encroaching on his other side. His path was narrowing in; he must be near the centre. Peering into the dark before him, he went on.

Dark? But it was not dark. He was in Gorlim's smithy of long ago, with warm sun streaming in the window. The hammer rang on the anvil as his friend worked on a piece of red-hot steel. Beren was confused. Had he been dreaming? But no! He still held the knife in his hand, Gorlim's knife, and the blade now glowed with a white heat to rival the sun.

Gorlim turned to him. "Best dunk that piece in the oil there, Ber," the smith said, and the kind eyes of his friend were on Beren's face, and the familiar old voice was in his ear.

Beren shook his head. "No," he said. "You're not real."

It wasn't the smithy at all, it was the kitchen at home. His father sat greasing some boots. He looked up and smiled, and his eyes were filled with pride and love. "Hang that blade by the door, Son," he said, "and come and sit with us."

Beren swallowed. The illusion was very powerful. "You are not my father," he managed to croak.

It was a warm place he was in. The light was golden, but the details were fuzzy. A woman stood before him. For an instant he thought it was Andreth, the young Andreth – but then he knew it was a woman he had never seen: his mother's grandmother Adanel. She had hair that threw back the golden light, and there was wisdom in her deep blue eyes, and an urgency.

"Trust your heart!" was all that she said to him.

Then suddenly she was not Adanel at all. She was his mother, his mother as he could barely remember her from the earliest days of his youth: tall, red-braided, with milky white teeth, and laughing eyes of forget-me-not blue.

His mother held out her hand to him. "Give me the knife, Beren," she said in a quiet voice.



Beren shook his head, but he could not speak.

His mother took a step closer. She held him with her eyes. "Son, you are not well," she said. "Give it to me."

He could see each freckle on his mother's nose. He held the knife yet high at the guard, but his hand shook like that of a man with a fever.

She took a pace nearer again, and now she was only a step away. Beren stared at the beloved face over the white-hot tip of the knife. "Beren," his mother said again softly. Her hand was almost on his wrist. The glow of the knife-blade illuminated her face. Her eyes stared into his. He could see the light of the blade reflected in them. There were many clustered reflections.

Many clustered reflections.

With a great cry torn from his throat, he struck at the monster, and struck again and again. The darkness was in his eyes and in his brain; but he kept on striking, crying out in his terror and desolation.

Birdsong brought him slowly back out of the dark land in which his mind had wandered. Birdsong, and the smell of wet earth. He felt the roughness of soil beneath one cheek, and warm sunlight on the other. His eyes fluttered, before closing tight again, blinded by brightness. His hand came forward and felt the good earth he was lying on, and when he could open his eyes a little, he made out that he was lying on the bank of a little stream. Winter-bare trees spread their sprays of branches above him, the highest twigs nodding gently in a mild breeze.

With a cry of terror, he sprang up. Behind him lay the Darkness; all too close. He stumbled through the stream and ran blindly through the bushes, caring nothing for the scrapes he received; only wishing for speed, speed to put a world of distance behind him. More speed than his legs could provide. He ran on until he could run no more, then collapsed senseless in a bank of dead leaves. He cried out still in his sleep, and his legs made running motions.

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